

# IWO JIMA AND OKINAWA

## Death at Japan's Doorstep

(National Archives and Records Administration, WC 980.)

In 1945, US forces bounded forward in the central Pacific as combat reached ever bloodier crescendos. On Iwo Jima, Marines achieved a costly victory as they grappled with tenacious Japanese defenders dug into the island's volcanic terrain. Americans faced even worse on Okinawa, the natural springboard for an invasion of Japan's home islands. In Okinawa's craggy southern reaches, US soldiers and Marines battered a Japanese fortress as kamikaze aircraft rained down on the invasion fleet.

### THE BATTLE OF IWO JIMA

On Iwo Jima, site of a strategic air base located between the Mariana Islands and Japan, the Japanese carved out a network of underground fortifications aimed at turning the small volcanic island into a death trap for invading US Marines. When US Marine divisions invaded on February 19, 1945, planners expected a brief campaign. But for more than five weeks, Japanese forces mounted a fierce defense. The Japanese had to be rooted out of caves and other strongholds in merciless close-quarter assaults. The bloodbath horrified Allied military planners and American citizens, who feared a far greater slaughter during an invasion of Japan's home islands.

General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the Japanese commander on Iwo Jima, recognized that he could not defeat an American landing. Instead, he planned a long and costly defensive battle to shake American resolve to continue the war and invade the Japanese mainland. The general placed weapons to rain deadly fire on the beaches, but concentrated his forces in the northern part of the island within underground bunkers and gun positions linked by miles of tunnels. This deadly isolationist web of defenses exacted a terrible toll.

US Marines immortalized the bloodiest battles on Iwo Jima with names depicting the brutal combat. The battles included "The Meat Grinder," where nearly 850 Marines died capturing a Japanese stronghold, and "Bloody Gorge," where Japanese defenders made their final stand. The US landing forces suffered 6,821 killed and 19,217 wounded. Although most in the 20,000-strong Japanese garrison were draftees, they refused to surrender, fighting tenaciously until only a few hundred remained alive to be taken prisoner.

### THE FLAG RAISING

Celebration erupted when the first Marine patrol reached the summit of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima on February 23, 1945, and raised a small American flag. A short while later, another detachment returned to the peak to replace the flag with a second, larger one. Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal captured the moment on film. Although the second flag raising was hardly noticed on Iwo Jima, Rosenthal's dramatic photograph appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the country, and has become one of World War II's most iconic images and among the most reproduced photographs in history.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

[ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org)

- ▶ [William Lansford Oral History](#)
- ▶ [Iwo Jima Video](#)
- ▶ [USS \*Franklin\*: Okinawa Video](#)
- ▶ [What Would You Do? Civilians as Human Shields Video](#)
- ▶ [Death at Japan's Doorstep Map](#)
- ▶ [Landing at Iwo Jima Map](#)
- ▶ [Struggle for Okinawa Map](#)

## THE BATTLE OF OKINAWA

On April 1, 1945, more than 60,000 soldiers and US Marines of the US Tenth Army stormed ashore at Okinawa, in the final island battle before an anticipated invasion of mainland Japan. After a largely unopposed initial advance, US forces soon encountered a network of Japanese inland defenses. Savage fighting erupted at the island's southern end. Heavy rains and rugged terrain impeded easy movement, and natural defense positions covered the island. A vicious land, sea, and air battle raged for nearly three months. Like the bloodshed on Iwo Jima, Okinawa's savagery suggested a terrible death toll could follow in the anticipated invasion of Japan's home islands.

While US Marines overcame Japanese defenses in northern Okinawa by April 18, opposition in the south proved formidable. The Japanese anchored their defenses at historic Shuri Castle, supported by a series of well-defended high ridges. These defenses, and sporadic Japanese counterattacks, held up the American advance. Finally, under relentless assault by the Tenth Army, Shuri Castle fell on May 29, and US Marines seized the airfield at Naha through an amphibious assault commencing June 4, 1945.

Suicide plane attacks began during preliminary operations on March 26. Five days after the initial landing on April 1, a wave of 355 Japanese army and navy kamikaze aircraft struck the armada of Allied ships supporting the invasion, and further attacks continued into June. By the end of the campaign, Japan would launch almost 2,000 suicide attacks against the invasion fleet, including manned rocket-powered Ohka flying bombs. The attacks tested the nerves of even veteran sailors as 26 ships were sunk and another 164 damaged.

Victory at Okinawa cost more than 49,000 American casualties, including about 12,000 deaths. Among the dead was the Tenth Army's commander, Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., killed on June 18 by a sniper during the final offensive. He was the highest ranking American general killed in action during World War II. About 90,000 Japanese combatants died in the fighting, but deaths among Okinawan civilians may have reached 150,000.

*“The land looked like a section of the moon.”*

*Charles Williamson, 5th Marine Division*

**US Marines raise a second, larger flag atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, February 23, 1945.**  
*(National Archives and Records Administration, WC 1221.)*

