

In September 1944, Admirals King, Chief of Naval Operations, Nimitz, Pacific Theater Commander and Spruance, Task Force 58, met in San Francisco to map out the Navy's next phase of the Pacific War. General MacArthur had won his point with Roosevelt and for the fall of 1944, the Navy would support the Army's Philippines campaign. After New Years 1945, the Navy was free to continue its Central Pacific attack. King, known as "Admiral Adamant" favored Formosa as the next target. Liberating Formosa (today Taiwan) had political implications. Formosa had been occupied by the Japanese in 1895 and returning it to the Chinese would cement our alliance and keep them in the war on our side. Nimitz and Spruance had the job of convincing their superior that a better option existed. The Japanese had an entire Field Army defending Formosa (and a sympathetic civilian population.) Based on past battles, it was estimated that Formosa would cost 150,000 casualties – an entirely unacceptable loss. Nimitz however, had another option to offer King – a logical continuation of the Central Pacific campaign: First, Iwo Jima, the crucial emergency field for the Air Force. After Iwo, an island base for the coming invasion of southern Japan, capable of supporting multiple airfields, with anchorages for the massive invasion fleet and land enough to house troops and vast supply depots. This island stood only 375 miles from the Japanese mainland.

From antiquity, the Chinese ruled the Liu Chi'u (pronounced Loo Choo) Islands which stretch in an arc from Formosa, north to Kyushu. When Japan, an emerging world power, took control of the Liu Chi'u Islands in 1879, they renamed it Ryukyu as the Japanese are unable to pronounce the "L" consonant. In the center of the Ryukyu chain lies long, thin Okinawa, stretching roughly 60 miles from north to south, 18 miles at its widest. Most of its population inhabited the southern half of the island, avoiding the mountainous terrain of the north. Okinawa already had a number of airfields and port facilities on its east and west coasts and its 475 square-miles made it the perfect base of operations for the coming invasion of the Japanese home islands. Admiral King accepted the Iwo Jima/Okinawa option and left for Washington. Nimitz and Spruance returned to Hawaii to "get it done."

The Japanese also surmised that Okinawa was the next logical step in America's march to their homeland and further knew that Okinawa itself was the perfect venue for their newly revised land war doctrine. Japan would cede the landing beaches and lightly defend the difficult terrain in the northern two-thirds of the island. Their defense in depth would be made in the southern portion of Okinawa, whose topography was a perfect hindrance to an invading army. The entire south of Okinawa was a series of ridge lines running east to west, across the breadth of the island. No roads, natural ravines or passes ran from north to south, thus an invader would have to attack perpendicular to an endless series of ridges and hills. Japan had another factor in their favor, Okinawa's climate. Humidity there is at levels surpassing that of any Pacific battlefield yet encountered by the Allies. Torrential rains were regular, a typical Okinawan rain storm could dump eleven inches of rain in a single day, turning the landscape into a sea of mud. Okinawa's few roads, rough and narrow even in good weather, became impassible after the rains.

Defending Okinawa was Japan's 32nd Army, commanded by the affable and experienced LTG Mitsuru Ushijima. His Chief of Staff was the fiery, ultra-nationalist and fervently militarist Isamo Cho. Ushijima's Chief of Operations, Hiromichi Yahara, engineered southern Okinawa's defense in depth, with a main line of defense, from Naha in the west to Yonabaru at the east – anchored in the center at the Shuri Castle, ancient palace of the Ryukyu Kingdom. In August 1944 work commenced on the defensive cave systems stretching across each successive ridgeline. Unlike Peleliu whose caves were natural, the fortifications of Okinawa were dug out of soft coral by laborers. Shuri Castle itself contained a vast system of tunnels which could hide an entire army and served as Ushijima's HQ. An interesting twist was added to the fortifications of Okinawa, most tunnels were built with entrances on the south face of the ridgelines. As attackers moved over the crests of the ridges, defenders popped out

of these rear-facing caves to throw them back. Yahara designed every defensive measure on Okinawa to inflict on America the maximum number of casualties possible to buy time to fortify southern Japan and force the Allies to the negotiating table and abandon their goal of unconditional surrender.

Even after the horrible defeats of the Marianas Turkey Shoot and the Battle of Leyte Gulf, Japan still clung to the hope of the decisive sea victory over its enemies. In its 3,000 year history, no invading army had ever successfully occupied Japanese soil. Twice attempted in 1274 and 1281 by Kublai Khan, the Mongol invading fleets were sunk by the fortunate occurrence of two devastating typhoons which the Japanese called, Divine Wind – Kamikaze. As the threat of Allied invasion loomed in 1945 Japan, a modern Divine Wind was summoned in hopes of a similar outcome. Special Attack Squadrons using older, barely flyable aircraft, stripped of instruments and flown by volunteer suicide pilots were readying on Kyushu to take on the vast American fleet they knew would soon attack Okinawa.

The 1,600 Allied ships of this American fleet, Task Force 58, carried 575,000 American G. I.'s and Marines distances up to 7,300 miles to attack Okinawa and surrounding islands – numbers surpassing the cross-channel Normandy invasion of June, 1944. Ships of the Royal Navy joined the fleet because by spring 1945, the European war was going well enough to allow these ships to be detached from duty in the Atlantic. The fleet carried the Tenth United States Army, commanded by Army LTG Simon Bolivar Buckner. 10th Army's 184,000 assault troops were divided into two corps. Army MG John R. Hodge commanded the XXIV Corps composed of the Army's 7th, 77th, 96th and 27th Infantry Divisions. The III Amphibious Corps was commanded by Marine MG Roy Geiger and consisted of the 1st, 2nd and 6th Marine Divisions and a number of Underwater Demolition Teams. (UDT's cleared obstacles and mines and provided crucial pre-invasion intelligence. Post-war, the UDT's evolved into today's Navy SEALs.) Although both marines and soldiers made up the 10th Army, the size of the Okinawan land mass dictated that the U. S. Army would be the primary combat force.

Although inter-service rivalry was still commonplace even this late in the war, army infantry doctrine had evolved during the Pacific War and their tactics had grown much closer to those of the Marine Corps, easing the enmity between the services. The 27th Infantry division was widely criticized during the Saipan operation because army tactics made their advance much slower than the marines on either of their flanks, creating a dangerous salient. Now, the 27th was fully retrained and as effective as marines who by 1945, were no longer attracting the qualified volunteers they did earlier in the war. The Marine Corps began filling their ranks with draftees who were less motivated than "the Old Breed" and coupled with training shortcuts to get men into the field, the quality of USMC replacements on Okinawa declined. The veteran marines had another gripe: The landing fleet was again commanded by ADM Richmond K. Turner who abandoned them on Guadalcanal in 1942.

On Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945, the ramps of the landing craft fell open and the assault troops set their boots on Okinawa. Doctors prepared for thousands of casualties but as the first troops emerged from landing craft, not a single enemy soldier was seen. Later waves walked ashore erect. In two days, the 1st Marine Division, the most experienced combat unit in the American military, crossed the island at its waist and split Japanese forces in the north and south – an operation that was supposed to take weeks and produce staggering casualties. The marines of the III Amphibious Corps turned north to clear the small enemy garrison stationed at the Motobu Peninsula. Soldiers of the XXIV Corps prepared a frontal attack against the first of southern Okinawa's east-west ridgelines, the Kakazu Ridge. The situation was quiet, the soldiers enjoyed barbecues and a sense of "this is gonna be easy" began to set in. General Buckner wondered if his opposing general Ushijima was as good as he was supposed to be, given the ease of the conquest so far. Veterans at staff level and in the ranks were still uneasy. The only thing wrong in Okinawa during the first days of the operation was that nothing was wrong!