

After landing on Okinawa on 1 April 1945, soldiers of the XXIV Corps and marines of the III Amphibious Corps advanced toward separate objectives in opposite directions. The marines, veterans of the most brutal of Pacific War fighting, were rewarded with the less lethal task of clearing the lightly-defended north of Okinawa which they completed by the end of April. Four days after landing, the 96<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions of the U. S. Army arrayed themselves across the breadth of Okinawa and began their southward advance against the Shuri defensive complex. Each step the soldiers took southward brought increasing Japanese resistance. As Japan's first main line of resistance, the Kakazu Ridge, presented itself, any notions of this being an easy operation were soon dispelled.

In Europe, Germany successfully employed the modern doctrine of Maneuver Warfare (which replaced the WWI tactic of mass frontal assaults) in their rapid advance to the English Channel. In the Pacific, MacArthur conquered New Guinea and the Philippines with minimal casualties because their large area allowed for maneuver. Tragically, the unique terrain of Okinawa presented no avenues for maneuver, forcing the Army to mount costly frontal attacks against ingeniously defended natural barriers running the width of the island. General Ushijima refined the tactics of Tarawa, Peleliu, and Iwo Jima, forging the deadliest defense in depth yet to be faced by America. The Army would come to learn the hard truths the Marines who fought these earlier, bitter battles had learned – that only the extreme valor of individual infantrymen with handheld weapons could defeat this concealed and tenacious enemy who would leave their posts only in death. The Kakazu Ridge that faced the Army was defended with a carefully constructed network of purpose-built tunnels connecting mutually-supporting, extremely well-camouflaged firing positions. The approaches to each were pre-registered for artillery and mortars and a natural ravine in front of the ridge line formed an effective barrier against armor. Were the frontal defenses not enough, Ushijima concealed most of his troops in caves facing the southern side of the ridge, away from the attackers frontal fire, poised to mount deadly counterattacks. Classic Army doctrine of sustained preparatory artillery bombardment prior to an attack proved useless as artillery is most effective against exposed soldiers. In an attack against defended caves, only the Americans were exposed, and many fell to accurate Japanese defensive artillery fire. Experience taught the marines that preparatory artillery barrages only delayed offensive operations and pinpointed their objectives.

Kakazu Ridge reeled under American attack on 9 April 1945. The attack rapidly bogged down against the unseen enemy. The Japanese, after stopping the initial American movement, counterattacked from their rear-slope positions. They ran through their own defensive mortar fire to push the American attackers back to their original lines within a few days. Now a debate began in Ushijima's tunnel headquarters beneath Shuri Castle. Chief of Staff, General Isamu Cho, the Bushido-inspired zealot, was convinced that American forces were seriously depleted and began pressing for a general counterattack on 12 April to retake the airfields. Cargo ships seen departing the area, (returning to reload) and warships offshore obscured by rain and fog, convinced Cho that the fleet had abandoned the beachhead after crippling losses by Kamikazes. Ushijima's Operations Officer, Col Hiromichi Yahara, who designed Okinawa's defense, did not interpret events as optimistically as Cho and advised Japanese troops would be more effective remaining in their concealed positions, avoiding unnecessary exposure to enemy fire. Ushijima, in possession of intelligence indicating that Marine Corsairs would soon begin operations from Yontan and Kadena airfields (the attack's main objectives) came down on the side of his Chief of Staff. The attack was mounted by troops based south of Naha who marched to the front by night and slept by day in the rain to avoid detection. They would infiltrate American lines at night, hide during the next day and that evening, attack the rear areas, to rout the support troops and possibly retake the airfields. Defensive artillery fire was not a concern, they expected the Americans would not call down artillery on their own rear areas. Cho held the common Bushido belief that weak-willed Americans would panic and run at the sight of "flashing Samurai sabers." American troops however, did not act according to Cho's expectations and mounted a valiant defense that broke the

counterattack with a loss of some 1,500 Japanese troops. Japanese losses would have been far worse if Col. Yahara had not committed an act of rank insubordination. Yahara, realizing the folly of Cho's plan, quietly persuaded a number of Battalion Commanders to disobey orders and attack with only 2 of three companies, thus saving many Japanese to prolong the battle in keeping with the original strategy.

The U. S. Army now reinforced its lines with the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and readied a second all out frontal attack at the Kakazu ridge system for 19 April. The largest artillery barrage of the Pacific War preceded the attack which, as the marines predicted, resulted in very few enemy casualties. The American attack again failed but set the stage for a later successful breach of the line in all sectors except for the Kakazu Ridge itself. When a late-April attack on Kakazu was mounted, only enemy bodies were found on the ridge – General Ushijima had ordered a retreat to the next line of defense, the Urasoe-Mura Escarpment with its infamous Maeda Escarpment, "Hacksaw Ridge." The Urasoe-Mura defensive line was a more formidable natural barrier with high, sheer cliffs facing American troops. Again a see-saw battle ensued with key positions changing hands many times over a period of days. By the first week of May, the Army cracked this line and had reached the inner Shuri defenses - but not without staggering losses. Clearly, additional reinforcements and a refinement of tactics was needed.

One of the most controversial decisions of the Battle of Okinawa was General Buckner's refusal to mount a seaborne attack behind enemy lines in the south. Lying offshore as floating reserve was the Second Marine Division, veterans of Tulagi, Tarawa, Saipan and Tinian. A plan was devised to land the division at Minatoga, on Okinawa's southeast coast. The attack would in effect, open a second front, drawing a portion of Ushijima's troops off the Shuri line to counter this new threat. General Buckner refused to authorize the landing, citing the inability to provide supplies to the beachhead. (General MacArthur ordered what the Navy considered an unnecessary offensive in the southern Philippines which tied up a sizable chunk of naval resources at this critical time.) The Second Marine Division argued that their transports already carried enough supplies to sustain their attack for two months and remaining offshore simply made them targets for the Kamikaze. Military academies will debate General Buckner's rejection of the plan for many generations and as we will learn, General Buckner did not live to explain his decision. The slow progress of the grueling land battles of April again ignited inter-service rivalry, angering Admirals Nimitz and Spruance who, as they had during most previous operations, decried the fleet having to remain offshore for logistics and fire support, exposed to the Kamikazes who were killing sailors with each successive strike.

On 28 April, General Buckner ordered the Shuri Line reinforced by the III Amphibious Corps to rest the badly mauled 27<sup>th</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division would face the extreme right flank, their objective was the port of Naha. Along their path, an unassuming mound of earth which would symbolize the carnage of Okinawa - Sugarloaf. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Div. relieved the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Div. west of Shuri and the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry relieved the 96<sup>th</sup> against Shuri Castle itself. On the east coast, the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Div. would face the heavily-defended Conical Hill. This then was the order of battle for the May offensive against the main Shuri Line. The entire month of April and thousands of casualties were the price to advance the front two miles from Kakazu, to the inner Shuri line. It would take another month and thousands more casualties to break the Shuri defensive line. The Shuri offensive began on 7 May – just as the monsoon began in Okinawa. The battlefield and vital supply routes to the front were turned to mud. The Japanese remained dry in their caves but American troops had no shelter, no hot food and couldn't find a dry match or a dry cigarette. One indispensable item did more than anything else to sustain the troops – a steel canteen cup of hot coffee. They consumed this tonic early in the evening and it warmed them just enough allow a few precious hours of sleep to restore themselves for another day of hell on the Shuri Line. On 8 May, the outside world reveled in the best tidings since the war began. For the troops on Okinawa, the monsoon, the misery and the carnage continued.