As 8 May 1945 dawned on the charred cities of Europe, the hopes of half the world were realized as news broke that Germany had surrendered. Victorious American troops in Europe were at first exultant but soon apprehension set in as they began to realize that few had enough "points" (time overseas and decorations) to be discharged. War still raged in China and the Philippines and dispatches from bloody Okinawa hinted at what they would face in the invasion of Japan, now widely expected.

On Okinawa, the month of May brought rain. Constant, soaking, miserable rain that turned everything into mud and stopped the supply lines cold. Nothing moved except for that carried by men through knee-deep mud. The Japanese were relatively warm and dry in their caves but Americans lived in water-filled foxholes, exposed to the deluge. Eugene Sledge, who had survived the hell of Peleliu, was now living in a foxhole on a formation called The Horseshoe at the head of the Wana Draw, a narrow valley leading east to Shuri Castle. Sledge's 1st Marine Division were in a 10 day stalemate, unable to advance eastward due to the weather. Sledge vividly described the conditions in his book, not to disgust his readers but to describe the realities of war to future generations. Japanese artillery impacted around them constantly - to venture out of their holes was to alert enemy spotters and bring even more shelling. Unburied corpses, covered in maggots, were strewn about emitting the permeating odor of corruption which mixed with the odor of feces from hundreds of men afflicted with dysentery. Eating, even breathing were close to impossible. Sledge fought daily to bail filthy water from his foxhole and keep his 60mm mortar from sinking into the muck with the recoil from each shot. Men fought both the Japanese and creeping insanity (Okinawa had the most Battle Fatigue cases of any Pacific battle) in a basic survival struggle to eat, sleep - and fight – in these unimaginable conditions.

Ahead of Sledge, to the east, the Army battered the Shuri Line frontally. On the east coast, they faced a mountain called Conical Hill - another well-fortified obstacle whose defenders only yielded a scant few yards daily. To Sledge's rear, the 6th Marine Division encountered a 50 foot, oblong hill on their path to Naha, called Sugarloaf. The Japanese had heavily fortified Sugarloaf and it's nearby hills. The first few attempts to take Sugarloaf left the 6th Marines reeling as numerous attacks were slowed by withering machine gun fire from the front and then repelled by a hail of grenades and gunfire from Japanese emerging from the rear face of the hill. Companies of 250 attacked, perhaps 70 were able to retreat. Sugarloaf, like Conical Hill, fell only after numerous attacks and the valorous actions of individual infantrymen charging Japanese positions, sacrificing their lives to permit further advance.

Such was the valor and sacrifice of the American soldier and marine throughout the Pacific. Sometimes recognized by the posthumous award of a Medal of Honor – more often forgotten in the heat of action – a single feat "above and beyond the call of duty" allowed a larger unit to move up and continue the attack. Bob Leckie described such valor as a reverse of the early Japanese strategy – a resolute American Spirit, powerful enough to overcome concentrated Japanese firepower.

On 22 May, the Shuri Line yielded and General Ushijima evacuated to caves on Okinawa's southern shore. The 1st Marine Div. raised a flag over Shuri Castle on 29 May. Co. A, 5th Marines fought their way down the Wana Draw and exploited an opportunity to storm Shuri 2 days ahead of the Army. (The flag was the Stars and Bars, in honor of Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner's father who fought for the Confederacy. It was replaced two days later by the American flag that flew over Guadalcanal – tribute to the 1st Marine Division's first and last campaigns of the Pacific War.) The final amphibious landing of the Pacific War deployed the 6th Marine Division to the Oroku Peninsula south of Naha on 4 June 1945, to flank the city and reduce a naval force garrisoning Naha. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, 10th Army commander, traveled to a forward position to observe the 8th Marines, recently attached to reinforce the 1st Marine Div. As he commented on their effectiveness, a Japanese artillery shell impacted nearby, mortally wounding him. Okinawa would be the only battle in which the commanders

of both opposing armies would not survive. With American forces less than 100 feet from his bunker in southern Okinawa, General Mitsuru Ushijima plunged a knife into his abdomen immediately before his aide beheaded him with a sword. His chief of staff, General Isamu Cho died similarly. Col Hiromichi Yahara, architect of the Okinawa defense which took the lives of approximately 14,000, perhaps as many as 20,000 Americans and cost the lives of perhaps 110,000 Japanese (and at least that many Okinawan civilians) was not permitted to commit Seppuku by General Ushijima. Yahara was to return to Japan to use his experience to defend the homeland but he was captured. Later repatriated, he wrote a definitive account of Okinawa. Col Yahara died in 1981. Eugene Sledge did occupation duty in Peking and became a biology professor – and lived with severe PTSD until his death in 2000.

Organized resistance ended on Okinawa on 21 June 1944. This essay is in no way intended to faithfully portray every phase of the battle, nor do I touch on Japanese atrocities against the Okinawan people which were widespread and unforgivable. My intentions for these essays are to give a sense of the suffering that humankind must never again willingly bring upon ourselves.

A carnage such as Okinawa always begs the question: Was it necessary? Bob Leckie, at the time of the Battle of Okinawa was recuperating in a stateside VA hospital from severe wounds suffered on Peleliu. In his comprehensive book on Okinawa written in 1990, Leckie concluded that Okinawa, more than "the bomb," more than the Russian entry into the Pacific war, resulted in the Japanese surrender less than two months later. Prior to Okinawa, Japan was, in every measure, defeated. Their supply lines were severed, leaving no ability to import oil and raw materials. Constant bombing left their war making industries in tatters. When the battle of Okinawa began, no one in Japan and few in America (not even Truman) had any idea that the Atomic Age was about to dawn on the world. Thus, both America and Japan expected an invasion of the Japanese homeland. Japan was still ruled by a Military Junta whose rabid militarism fueled the delusion that Japan could not be defeated in the defense of their sacred soil and their view was sustained by the Emperor. Japan had every intention of fighting and winning this epic, final struggle - with Okinawa as a dress-rehearsal to prove tactics. The fall of Okinawa was the clearest indicator possible of the futility of continuing the war to those in Japan whose powers of reason were not obscured by fanaticism. The Emperor, now realizing the failed defense of Okinawa was a portent of the Battle of Japan, finally gave his approval to Baron Kantaro Suzuki to begin to form a peace-bloc in the Diet to replace the militarists and work towards surrender.

I don't fully share Leckie's analysis on all his points, however in his general conclusion of the importance of Okinawa to the final defeat of Japan, I agree wholeheartedly. Had the American conquest of Okinawa been unsuccessful, the Emperor's tacit approval of a peace movement would never have been granted and even after the horrific demonstrations of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the million Allied casualties predicted in the battle of Tokyo, expected in late 1946, might have occurred. Postwar Japan would have likely been partitioned into U. S., Russian and Chinese sectors – a dangerous Cold War flash-point. Thus, in the light of history, the soldiers of both Japan and America who sacrificed their lives on Okinawa to save their respective countries, succeeded in their missions. At the Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japanese warriors rest and in the Western concept of Paradise, those sacrificed on the altar of Okinawa rest in a spiritual equality of eternal honor and in the peace they deserve by ensuring the postwar security and prosperity of their homelands.

On 31 October 2019, the Okinawan People learned that a fire had heavily damaged sections of the Shuri Castle, rebuilt postwar. Fortunately, the fire did not touch the original ruins which are a UNESCO World Heritage Site and volunteers began reconstruction in February, 2020. Its restoration is assured because the people of the Ryuku Prefecture are no strangers to destruction. They, along with the other peoples of the Pacific, have a 75 year history of rising from the ashes to true greatness.