

Iwo Jima and Okinawa in World War II: Home Front

By February 1945, the United States had turned back the Japanese advance in the Pacific and had re-taken a sweeping arc of islands that surrounded the enemy nation. For all these gains, however, two small islands remained crucial to an invasion of Japan: Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Located to the southeast and south of Japan, they were only 750 miles from major military and political targets. Their capture would bring even the city of Tokyo within the range of American B-29 bombers.

Iwo Jima was attacked first. On 19 February, marines landed at the southeastern end of the island and began working their way toward Mt. Suribachi, a 550 foot dead volcano that the Japanese had turned into an island fortress. For two months preceding the attack, American bombers had blasted the Japanese defenses. But the almost daily attacks had forced the Japanese to just dig-in deeper. In addition to their concrete bunkers, they dug caves into the mountain linked by an intricate web of tunnels.

Against these defenses, the US marines now had to advance. Subject to relentless gunfire and shelling from the artillery planted in the mountainside, they moved by the inch not the mile. It took four days to advance 1000 yards, scale the volcano, and plant the flag captured in the iconic photograph. But this was hardly the end of the battle. The marines still had to root out Japanese defenses stretched across the rest of the four-mile long island. American planes, dropping bombs and napalm, tried to force the Japanese from their concrete bunkers. Yet they clung tenaciously to their positions. In fact, they had been ordered not to mount suicidal banzai charges that secured their honor but exposed them to deadly fire. Instead, they stuck to their positions, forcing the Americans to roust them out bunker by bunker.

The island was not fully secured until the end of March. Almost 7000 Americans were killed; another 18,000 were wounded. But the Japanese casualties were horrific. Only 200 of the 21,000 soldiers deployed survived to be taken prisoner.

Next came Okinawa. It presented a far more serious challenge. The island was within range of the land-based planes in southern Japan but beyond range of American planes launched from the Philippines. The American landing would, therefore, have to be covered by carrier-launched fighters—carriers that would then be vulnerable to attack. The Japanese had also deployed more than three times the force on Okinawa than they had committed to Iwo Jima.

On 1 April, American units landed along the central western coast of the island. Marines were sent to the north; the army was sent to the south. The marines encountered little resistance and were able to secure this portion of the island by the middle of April. But the army found the going more tough to the south where the Japanese had constructed more intricate defenses. Three well-fortified lines crossed the southern tip of the island—when the American troops managed to take the first line; the Japanese fell back to the second. This second line proved particularly difficult, but then, rather foolishly, the Japanese abandoned their defensive position in an attempt to drive back the Americans. The attack was repelled and, even more critically, cost the Japanese valuable reserves. Soon after the ill-advised attack, American forces were able to overrun the second and third lines. In late June, thousands of Japanese soldiers committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner.

Suicidal warfare, in fact, became Japan's last hope. Japanese Admiral Seiichi Ito piloted his massive 80,000 ton battleship—the Yamato—toward Okinawa without enough fuel for the return trip. He would not need it. Half way to Okinawa, the ship was sunk by American fighters launched from American carriers well beyond the range of the Yamato's guns. The kamikazes—that had made their first appearance during the Battle of Leyte Gulf—also showed up in Okinawa in force. Close to 2000 Japanese pilots flew a final mission for the emperor. But most of the damage they inflicted (about 35 ships) was on the radar ships sent to provide advance warning of the

kamikazes' arrival and smaller ships sent to draw the kamikazes' attention away from the more valuable carriers.

The Americans paid a large price for Okinawa: 12,000 Allied dead and another 38,000 wounded. But the Japanese lost more than 100,000 men and an island critical to the defense of Japan. The end of the battle and, perhaps more graphically, the tactics used by the Japanese during the battle, left little doubt that the end of the war was near.