

BECAUSE MARINES NEVER FORGET Part I

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The Mariana Islands of Guam, Saipan and Tinian are littered with reminders of WW II. The rusting hulk of this Japanese T97 Chi-Ha medium tank sits outside Saipan International Airport. It is slowly giving way to a flame tree and other elements of nature.



BECAUSE MARINES NEVER FORGET

Part I

By R. R. Keene

Aside from the Marines, the overwhelming majority of Americans, when asked, not only do not know where Saipan and Tinian are, but chances are good they have never heard of either place. That's too bad, because the people who live there are our fellow Americans. Introductions are in order:

The 15 tropical islands of Marianas archipelago, in a column of file, line the precipitous Marianas Trench, which drops more than 36,000 feet below the Western Pacific Ocean.

There is a vast amount of water between the Marianas and anywhere: The island of Saipan is approximately 136 miles north of the U.S. Island Territory of Guam; 1,458 miles southeast of Tokyo; 1,654 miles due

east of Manila, Philippines; 2,947 miles north of Brisbane, Australia; 3,709 miles west of Honolulu, and 7,801 miles and 14 time zones from Washington, D.C. Great distances, but if you triangulate it properly, you'll find what is today the United States Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, or CNMI. The Northern Marianas became a commonwealth of the United States in 1978.



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USMC

Top: Retired Marines LtCol Roy Elrod and Maj Rick Spooner represented the more than 71,034 Americans of the V Amphibious Corps who took part in the Battles of Saipan and Tinian more than 67 years ago by returning to the CNMI, through Military Historical Tours to mark the anniversary of the fighting.

Above: The beaches where Marines went ashore under horrendous fire on June 15, 1944, are surprisingly similar in appearance today as then.

Sizewise, the Northern Marianas are not impressive. Saipan is about 13 miles long and six miles across at its widest. Three miles across the Saipan Channel is Tinian, 39 square miles shaped like Manhattan. (You will find New York City street names such as Broadway and 9th Avenue. However, the analogy falls apart quickly. Don't look for the Statue of Liberty in the harbor or lights of the "Great White Way.")

What you can't miss is the breathtaking views from almost any threshold or window. There are few places where the inhabitants of the Marianas are not contented with their geographic environment.

The population of the Commonwealth is

80,362. Saipan is home to 62,392 people, and Tinian is very comfortable with 3,000. By comparison, the population of Middle America's Sioux City, Iowa, with 83,262 people, is only slightly more.

Don A. Farrell, a transplanted-from-the-mainland historian, whose home is on Tinian, has become the "go-to" duty expert on the Marianas, and he helped Military Historical Tours guide visitors to Saipan and Tinian.

According to Farrell's "History of the Mariana Islands to Partition," the inhabitants are descendants of bold seafarers who navigated by the skies, knew how to replenish their food and how to build

ocean-going canoes with triangular sails to follow the winds. And they listened to their legends. Where they sailed from is uncertain, although DNA suggests a connection with Southeast Asians. Archaeologists have uncovered human artifacts radiocarbon dating back 3,500 years and speculate the first inhabitants may have possibly arrived 1,000 years earlier.

They became the Chamorros: large, handsome people who believed in the legend of *Puntan yan Fu'una*—the all-powerful, whose body created the universe.

The Chamorros found the islands bountiful and pleasant. The waters were teeming with fish, turtles, crustaceans and salt. There



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Above: The ammunition storage area for then-Aslito Airfield is an immensely well-engineered structure that withstood barrages of artillery and naval bombardment. Inside, Japanese visitors often leave incense and Buddhist prayer sticks in remembrance of the dead.

Below: The old Japanese jail is rumored to have held aviatrix Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan. Legend and locals insist that both were executed by the Japanese.



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were birds, fruit bats and lizards. Harvests were plentiful with yams, breadfruit, arrowroot, pandanus fruit, Federico nuts, coconuts and rice. An average year-round temperature of 85 degrees Fahrenheit allowed the people to live naked and comfortable until the arrival of the European, devoutly Catholic and conquering Spaniards, who stayed and ruled nearly 400 years.

There was no classifying name for the islands until the explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 dubbed them *Islas de las Velas Latinas*, the "Islands of the Lateen Sails." Later, when fighting erupted between the Chamorros and Spaniards, Magellan renamed them *Islas de los Ladrones*, the "Islands of the Thieves." It was a Jesuit priest, Diego Luis de Sanvitores, who called them *Islas Marianas* after Mariana of Austria, then the queen regent of Spain.

Others came. Even before the Spanish, the Carolinians, open-ocean navigators, explorers and traders, sailed 1,500 miles north from the Caroline Islands. Over the years their population in the islands dramatically increased, and the cultures, similar in many ways to that of the Chamorros, intertwined.

When the Spanish-American War of 1898 ended, so too did Spain's administration of the islands. Guam became an American possession in 1899; Germany ruled the Marianas until World War I. In 1922, under a mandate from the League of Nations, the Empire of Japan made its entrance. Unlike other countries that fell under what, by 1940, became known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japan's administration and governance of Saipan and the Marianas was reasonable, amiable and prosperous. Fishing and sugar industries developed, but so, too, did the Japanese garrisons.

By 1944, there were 30,000 troops fortifying the island with elaborate and hardened defensive positions. Saipan's population of 30,000 included 25,000 Japanese settlers, many of them from Okinawa.

Then came World War II and the Americans—specifically, the U.S. Marines and the 27th Army Infantry Division. And for 32 days starting June 15, 1944, the world learned about the Marianas, particularly Saipan and Tinian.

For the invasion, there were more than 535 U.S. warships—far more than the 290 the U.S. Navy mans today—visible from Saipan's highest point, the 1,554-foot Mount Tapotchau. More than 127,570 Marines, soldiers and sailors crammed into those warships. Some 71,034 Marines and soldiers of the V Amphibious Corps would eventually fight their way ashore in the face of withering fire as part of the Second and Fourth Marine divisions along



with the Army's 27th Infantry Division.

In the leatherneck ranks were young men such as Captain Roy Elrod, Capt Irving Schecter, Capt Carl W. Hoffman, Lieutenant Mickey McGuire, Sergeant Major Gilbert L. Martin, Gunnery Sergeant Robert H. McCard, GySgt John Benkovich, Platoon Sergeant John Rachitsky, Sergeant Grant F. Timmerman, Sgt John H. Fritts, Corporal Alfred J. Daigle, Private First Class Lee Marvin, PFC Guy L. Gabaldon, PFC Richard T. Spooner, PFC Orville H. Showers, PFC Federico Claveria, PFC Robert Fleischauer, PFC Robert L. Wilson, Private Joseph W. Ozbourn and others.

The war was turning in their favor. A victory on Saipan and Tinian would bring the Japanese home islands in range of the new powerful heavy-lift U.S. Army Air Forces' B-29 Superfortress bombers, giving some hope the Americans would see

their homes again. Maybe. The Japanese army and *rikusentai*, Special Landing Forces, saw these islands, housing Japanese civilians, as the threshold of the empire—their mission, stop the Americans at the water's edge and halt their momentum onto the homeland.

Today, the Military Sealift Command's Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Three has five ships anchored on the Philippine Sea side of Saipan in what were once the landing lanes for the amphibian tractors and landing craft of the 2dMarDiv.

Farther south, the Pacific Islands Club, an upscale hotel with manicured lawns, posh restaurants, shops, tennis courts and a large pool with a waterslide where guests splash with their children, anchors the site where once the 4thMarDiv stormed ashore. All totaled there were more than

900 landing vehicles with 8,000 Marines churning through gaps in the fringe coral reef at approximately 0900 and moving agonizingly slow toward the coastal town of Chalan Kanoa. Then the Japanese started shooting.

In late June 2011, 92-year-old retired Lieutenant Colonel Roy Elrod and 86-year-old retired Major Richard "Rick" Spooner once again stood on the beach at roughly 0900. They had just left their hotel and stood on a fishing pier, trying to remember. It was 67 years ago, and of all those men who risked everything fighting there, only a few are left. Two were all Military Historical Tours could muster for this trip. The remaining four members were either individuals who had relatives involved in various aspects of what was called Operation Forager, or students of history eager to learn from at least two survivors.



Hand grenades and Molotov cocktails were used as standoff weapons when Marines and Japanese fought at close quarters. The fighting cost the Japanese at least 30,000 dead, while 2,949 Americans lost their lives.

Roy Elrod, still strong, impressively clear-minded and with an eye for detail, leaned on his cane and noted that the beach looked remarkably similar—tree line and all. The morning was nearly the same as in 1944. He looked inland to where he got his bearing while under fire on the beach. “It was a sugar cane mill smoke stack. It’s not there anymore, but it was important at the time, and I remember exactly where it was.”

Spooner, who had the good fortune of having his son, Richard W., accompany him on this return to the island, recalled being dropped at the water’s edge. “They [the Japanese] really had us zeroed in with

artillery and mortar fire. ... We crawled on all fours. You could feel things in the air above us. I was trembling and silently prayed.”

Elrod and Spooner remembered the Japanese fire was as merciless as it was accurate. Small arms, automatic weapons, antiaircraft guns, mortars and artillery previously registered sent deadly fire across the reef and beach. Around the troop carriers, explosions, geysers of water, the ping of bullets off the landing craft and the hiss of shrapnel were all at once and everywhere. Amphibian tractors were exploding and the men in them were being killed. But the Marines kept coming. Some companies were commanded by corporals. By nightfall, 2,000 casualties later, 20,000 Marines were ashore and moving inland.

Today, Beach Road runs along the western shore of southern Saipan. It is edged with pine, palm, banyan and brilliantly

colored flame trees that shade hotels, strip malls, restaurants and businesses. No such landmarks in 1944 interfered with the Marines fighting their way inland. Natural obstacles such as Lake Susupe, a freshwater body, remain.

In 1944, leathernecks of Company A, 1st Battalion, 29th Marine Regiment waded waist-deep through the muck of the swamps lining the lake and came under sniper fire that hit 80 Marines. A platoon sergeant named John Rachitsky organized an assault on the sniper positions and posthumously earned the Silver Star.

Up the coast, Garapan, the capital of Saipan, and then home to 10,000 people, came under heavy bombardment from Marine artillery and naval gunfire, which nearly leveled the town. The Battle for Saipan was the first time in World War II that Marines fought house to house.

Marines who cleared the Japanese jail heard stories of the American aviatrix Amelia Earhart, who had disappeared with her navigator, Fred Noonan, in their Lockheed Electra 10E over the Pacific during her 1937 flight to circumnavigate the globe. The people of Garapan spoke of a Western man and woman held by the Japanese, who eventually led the pair into a cane field where they were executed. There are many myths concerning Amelia Earhart and much speculation; the Saipan story is only one of them.

Today Garapan is a tourist attraction and the center of Saipan’s nightlife with hotels that offer dinner shows, island dancers, cocktail lounges with views, piano bars, restaurants and nightclubs.

Nightlife on Saipan in 1944 consisted of star cluster flares, tracer rounds and the rumble from big engines and tank treads. First Bn, 6th Marines took the brunt of 40 medium Japanese tanks with supporting infantry. GySgt Robert H. McCard had his own tank and drove it to the Japanese lines under heavy-caliber antitank fire that knocked out his vehicle. Swarms of Japanese charged. “Gunny” McCard fended them off by hurling grenades and triggering his machine gun while his crewmen escaped. He died at his gun and was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

Sugar King Park still displays an engine from the sugar cane railroad that ran through most of the battle area. At the train tracks, the Japanese tank attack was stymied. For the Japanese, the attack was a disaster; the Marines held and turned the tanks into coffins with the Japanese dead lying in trace.

In reality, the Japanese garrison was already doomed. The hope of victory and survival depended on reinforcements and resupply. Down the San Bernardino and Surigao straits of the Philippines came the

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Richard W. Spooner (above) leads the way up the last knoll to the top of Mount Tapotchau, Saipan's highest peak, which in 1944 was heavily contested: Whoever held Tapotchau commanded a view of all Saipan. It was of tactical importance then. Today the view (below) is still breathtakingly beautiful with Tinian visible in the distance.



Japanese Mobile Fleet. The U.S. Navy's Task Force 58 and its air arm found the Japanese ships, and the results are known to this day as "The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." There would be no rescue of the garrison.

The caves of Saipan still contain the remains of many Japanese soldiers who refused to surrender. The caves were sealed with their defenders inside and still alive. Jungle growth and erosion by tropical rain keep their exact locations hidden among the rocky cliffs. Captain Sakeo Oba was one of those who refused to surrender. With 46 men, he waged a guerrilla war until Dec. 1, 1945, when he finally surrendered his sword to American forces. In 1952, a few stragglers came out of the mountains to surrender, unaware the war had been over for years.

Bloody and bitter skirmishes continued at places aptly dubbed: Death Valley, Dead Man's Gulch, Poison Ridge, Back-Break Hill and Hell's Pocket. Somewhere in the fighting, PFC Lee Marvin, a scout-sniper with the 4thMarDiv, saw most of his platoon killed. He was wounded when machine-gun fire severed his sciatic nerve, earning him an evacuation to the States. He went on to become an Academy Award-winning actor.

On the eastern side of the island, Cross Island Road curves around the base of Mt. Tapotchau. It intersects what once was called Death Valley. Spooner and others in the Military Historical Tours group admired the view from the balcony of a home that stands on what once was called Purple Heart Ridge. It was spectacular: the thick, lush, emerald jungle below and the crags and rugged beauty of Tapotchau in the distance. "This would be a great place to live, wouldn't it?" someone said to Rick Spooner, who answered: "It is a great view, but remembering all the men who died in that valley, I could never enjoy it."

In the valley, Roy Elrod looked for the site where he was wounded. He got his bearings. He picked out the recognizable terrain features, seeing through the modern changes that have taken place since. It took about two hours, but Elrod said, "I knew we were awfully close, because I suddenly broke out in goose bumps. My body said this is it. I couldn't have been more than a stone's throw away." He stood right off the road. "We got caught by an artillery barrage, and the second round was the one that hit me." The explosion also took off the top of a nearby Marine's head. Elrod was riddled with shrapnel. He was evacuated, and for him the Battle of Saipan was over.

Early on the morning of June 25, PFC Harold G. Epperson, a machine-gunner with Co C, 1st Bn, 6th Marines, 2dMarDiv,

and his fellow gunners, poured steady and deadly fire into the attacking Japanese, leaving bodies strewn all around their position. One Japanese soldier, who had been feigning death, leapt up and tossed a grenade into the gun pit. Epperson jumped on the grenade and posthumously earned the Medal of Honor.

Mount Tapotchau is an intimidating fusion of razor-blade-sharp cliffs, coral heads and limestone crags with cutting edges on every rock knob. Yet, it is easy to see why it was the key to Saipan. At the summit, there is no part of the island that cannot be seen.

Today a winding road takes visitors almost to the top. The remaining distance is a somewhat treacherous hike over slippery rocks of long dead coral. At the summit, Spooner struck the coral, which seemed to mock his kick: "Imagine trying to dig into that." It had taken the coral millions of years to be forced up from the sea floor, and it still remains stubbornly tenacious.

On the same day PFC Epperson died, a battalion of 8th Marines clawed up the eastern slope of Mt. Tapotchau while 1st Bn, 29th Marines gained the peak under a screen of smoke. The Japanese were not about to give up such valuable real estate. Earlier a reconnaissance patrol from 25th Marines, commanded by SgtMaj Gilbert L.

Morton, had reached the top and fought to nearly the last man, protecting their wounded until reinforcements arrived. Reinforcements were ordered to "Dig in!" Picks and entrenching tools were useless tools for digging coral harder than concrete.

Meanwhile, the Japanese clawed their way back up the cliffs, and in a series of counterattacks made a fight of it. It lasted the afternoon and resulted in 40 Japanese dead and the loss of three Marines. But when it ended, one Marine said that for many dreadful days the Japanese had "been able to look down our throats. Now, we could look down theirs."

The Battle for Saipan was in its final stages. Somewhere in the northwest portion of the island, Lieutenant General Yoshitsugo Saito, who commanded the Imperial forces, sent a message of apology to the Emperor and then disemboweled himself.

The bloodshed was far from over. On July 7, more than 4,000 Japanese troops chanting *banzai* and armed with grenades, fixed bayonets and swords charged like so many lemmings into the night toward the American lines south of Tanapag down what is now Marpi Road, past what is now the zoo and industrial area warehouses, hoping to push through to Garapan and down to Chalan Kanoa where the Marines

had come ashore. It was the largest *banzai* attack of the war, and the American lines buckled back more than 800 yards. Two battalions of the 105th U.S. Infantry suffered 650 killed or wounded.

Just north of Garapan the artillerymen of 10th Marines shortened their fuzes down to four-tenths of a second, leveled their 105 mm howitzer tubes and fired point-blank. The resulting carnage was devastating. "The whole area seemed to be a mass of stinking bodies, spilled guts and brains," wrote one correspondent.

Artillerymen from 10th and 14th Marines then fought with entrenching tools, bayonets and hand to hand—many dying next to their guns, but they held.

When dawn broke, PFC Harold C. Agerholm, a cannoncocker with 4th Bn, 10th Marines, commandeered a field ambulance and began retrieving wounded Marines. He drove through "an unholy gauntlet of fire" for three hours, saving 45 wounded men. He was cut down as he tried to rescue two more Marines lying in an exposed field. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

The fight lasted 15 hours and resulted in 4,300 dead Japanese.

As the Americans continued to push north, Sgt Grant F. Timmerman with Co B, 2d Tank Bn, 2dMarDiv, worked his me-

Banzai Cliff is where civilians and Japanese soldiers jumped to their deaths in the rocky surf below. Its natural beauty, now marked with monuments, is marred by the events and emotions that permeated the site 67 years ago.
(Photo by Pamela Flynn)



dium tank in close with infantrymen of 6th Marines. The tank's hatch was open when a Japanese soldier lobbed a grenade. Timmerman heard it hit and saw it. He also knew his entire crew was in mortal danger. He covered the grenade with the hatch cover. His chest took the blast. He posthumously was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Then there was PFC Guy L. Gabaldon, a Mexican-American feather merchant from Los Angeles. He'd learned Japanese culture, customs and language from a Japanese-American family.

Consequently, he was able to talk soldiers who had been drilled to never surrender into doing just that. He started bringing in prisoners. The very first day he arrived on Saipan with the 2dMarDiv, he brought in two, then a few more, and then 50.

He worked alone, and on July 8, Gabaldon convinced a Japanese officer with more than 800 soldiers and civilians to give it up. He became known as the "Pied Piper of Saipan."

Gabaldon continued to bring in more Japanese soldiers until he was wounded in an ambush. He was credited with the capture of 1,500 men, earning the Silver Star, which was eventually upgraded to the Navy Cross.

The final horror of Saipan took place at Marpi Point. The remaining Japanese troops with hundreds of civilians had fled to the very northern edges of the island. Japanese military had long told the population that American forces, and Marines, in particular, were mercenaries released from prisons with a lust to kill, butcher, rape, plunder and torture. Prodded by Japanese rifles and bayonets, many families jumped from the cliffs to their death.

Don Farrell explained that as the American forces pushed closer to the Japanese homeland, there would be other "suicide cliffs" such as those on Tinian and Okinawa, but the first such tragedy took place on Saipan. Farrell said there are actually two cliffs: Suicide and Banzai.

The view from Suicide Cliff is hauntingly beautiful. A precipice rising approximately 820 feet, it overlooks what was once Marpi Field and Banzai Cliff, which towers more than 100 feet above the wave-battered rocks below. Today Suicide Cliff overlooks the lush grazing fields of a cattle farm and waste management plant. There also are monuments to the thousands who perished off both cliffs. Flying overhead and riding thermals below are red-tailed tropicbirds. A poignant, but mythical story says the birds came only after the suicides.

Marines who saw the suicides tried in



Marines (above) following in trace behind an M4 tank sweep across northern Saipan in 1944. Below is the same area, today called Suicide Cliff. The cliff is about 820 feet high, and, like Banzai Cliff, was a site from which thousands jumped to their deaths. (Above photo: USMC; below photo by R. R. Keene)



vain to stop them, even launching a boat with loudspeakers, begging people to reconsider. Farrell said although the deaths at Banzai Cliff were frustrating to watch, those at Suicide Cliff were incredibly horrible. Many did not fall to instant death. They fell into trees, outcroppings and rocks below. Broken and in indescribable pain, they often lived for days, dying slowly of thirst and massive multiple injuries. It is estimated that anywhere from scores to thousands committed suicide.

It was a sad ending to an already sad

and gruesome battle. In the end, almost the entire Japanese command—at least 30,000—died. It was the most costly battle to date in the Pacific: 2,949 Americans were killed and 10,364 wounded.

Editor's note: The spelling of some locations use Chamorro terms rather than the Japanese names.

Read Part II, the Battle of Tinian, in next month's Leatherneck.

