

The Taking of Omiya Jima

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WORLD WAR II
70 YEARS AGO



USMC

They found it 31 July 1944 in the ruins of the Plaza de Espana, terribly tattered and torn; nonetheless, these leathernecks of the 3dMarDiv strung the remnants of the Stars and Stripes across the entrance to the ruined Catholic cathedral at Agana.

The Taking of Omiya Jima

By R. R. Keene

Guam had been a U.S. Navy communications center since 1899, and in the late 1930s, military planners had pointed out to Congress a need to fortify the island. Congress refused, and from then on, everyone in the Pacific understood that in the event of hostilities, Guam would be sacrificed.

The U.S. military forces there prior to World War II consisted of 37 Navy and Marine officers, five Navy nurses, six warrant officers, and 256 members of Insular Police armed with obsolete rifles. The island's Marine garrison, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William K. McNulty, was made up of 153 leathernecks and the 80-man Insular Guard, consisting of native Chamorros, led by Marine non-

commissioned officers. Their weaponry included nothing heavier than four .30-caliber water-cooled machine guns.

On the morning of 8 Dec. 1941, Japanese airplanes from Saipan flew 135 miles south and bombed Guam, the minesweeper *USS Penguin* (AM-33), an old tanker and two patrol craft. They followed up with two days of bombing and strafing of the Marine Barracks at Sumay.

The Japanese returned 10 Dec. with more than 400 infantry-equipped sailors under the protection of a heavy cruiser and splashed ashore across Dungcas Beach above the capital of Agana, today called Hagåtña, and made for the town. They stormed the plaza where they ran into the rifle and machine-gun fire of native troops commanded by Marine First Lieutenant Charles S. Todd. Although outnumbered

and outgunned, Todd's forces threw back the surprised enemy twice. It was obvious to Todd that he couldn't keep this up for long. There would be no reinforcements.

While fighting continued in the plaza, 5,500 Japanese soldiers landed unopposed on Guam's southern extremity and on the east coast.

The Marines fought brief skirmishes. In all, 19 of Guam's military garrison were killed and 42 wounded—including four Marines killed and 12 wounded. Guam's naval governor, U.S. Navy Captain George J. McMillin, realized the situation was futile and ordered a cease-fire. The American colors were dropped. It would be 2½ years before the Marines would return. On 10 Dec. 1941, Guam became the first U.S. territory to fall to Japan.

As stepping stones across the Pacific for

luxury clippers of Pan American World Airways and fueling stations for ships on their voyages to Asia, the islands of Midway, Wake and Guam were early targets of the Japanese.

Guam, at 228 square miles, is the largest and southernmost of 15 tropical islands of the Marianas archipelago and is today a U.S. Island Territory. It is a place of sheer cliffs, immense and dense tropical forests, rugged outcroppings and hills that rise up to 1,334 feet at Mount Lamlam of the Chachao-Alutom-Tenjo massif overlooking the mangrove swamps on the shores of Apra Harbor. It is a formidably rugged land, but it has beautiful beaches and a beneficent climate that seldom varies from the average temperature of 87 degrees.

The Chamorros, large, handsome people, are believed to have come to Guam from Southeast Asia 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. The Spaniards arrived in 1541 and remained until the Americans took possession during the 1898 Spanish-American War. It was an amicable relationship which became even closer after World War I when the Versailles Treaty gave Japan mandate over all the Marianas except Guam.

It should be noted that the late, former U.S. Representative from Guam, retired Marine Brigadier General Vincente T. Blaz, wrote in 1952 when he was a second lieutenant that the word "Chamorro" is considered obsolete at the present: "Guamanian is considered the official designate of the peoples of Guam and is preferred by the natives of the island."

Thus, it was an insult to the Guamanians when their new landlords, the Japanese, renamed Guam "Omiya Jima," or "Great Shrine City," and Agana became "Akashi" or "Red or Bright Stone." Relations with the Japanese went downhill, but life for the easygoing 20,000 Guamanians still was tolerable.

The Americans, however, wanted Guam back to be used again as a stepping stone across the Pacific, mainly by four-engine B-29 Superfortress heavy bombers of the 20th Air Force that could fly their payloads for 1,200 nautical miles to Honshu and return for another 10,000-pound load of bombs. And the Marines, aside from wanting to strike a blow against Japan and end the war, needed to settle a score for the Japanese capture of the barracks at Sumay.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, oversaw the strategy, and Major General Roy S. Geiger would command the Southern troops and landing force of the III Marine Amphibious Corps in the recapture of Guam.

MajGen Geiger was the fifth Marine



Above: Landing craft get ready to cross the reef and push ashore and across the beaches of Guam, 21 July 1944. Japanese boat guns scored hits on a number of landing vehicles carrying Marines. Mines, machine-gun and mortar fire knocked out 24 LVTs. (Photo by TSgt James A. Mundell)

Below: Once ashore, the Marines faced hidden pillboxes and interlocking fields of fire. The Marines countered with flamethrowers to incinerate those Japanese who refused to surrender. (USMC photo)



to be designated as a naval aviator and flew combat missions in World War I France. In the Corps, every Marine is an infantryman, and MajGen Geiger and other aviators were educated in ground strategy and tactics.

In 1943, the commander of I Marine Amphibious Corps, MajGen Charles D. Barnett, died unexpectedly. MajGen Geiger, then Director of Aviation, received his marching orders and left Washington,

D.C., to become the first Marine aviator to command a large ground combat unit: the Southern Troops and Landing Force, and I MAC (which had been redesignated III Amphibious Corps). A proven leader, MajGen Geiger was one of two Marines to be awarded the Navy Cross in each World War.

His commanders in the attack on Guam were WW I combat veterans: MajGen Allen H. Turnage had commanded the

5th Machine Gun Battalion in France and now commanded the Third Marine Division; Army MG Andrew D. Bruce, whose experience in WW I was with the Marines' 5th Machine Gun Bn, commanded the 77th Infantry Division; and the future 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps, then-Brigadier General Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., who had been wounded twice at Belleau Wood, fought in the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives, where he was wounded a third time, now commanded the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade.

The Guam landing force for Operation Forager totaled 54,000 Marines, soldiers and sailors.

Private First Class Cyril J. O'Brien, a diminutive but tenacious Marine combat correspondent of Irish descent, later would recall eating the traditional pre-landing steak and eggs served Marines at "zero-dark thirty" 21 July 1944 before going over the side of his landing ship, tank (LST). He carefully made his way under his 40-pound pack, M1 rifle, cartridge belts and bandoleers of ammunition down the cargo nets to bobbing landing craft, eventually getting on line and churning, uncomfortably exposed, to the beaches.

A Marine M4 medium tank traverses the fire-swept "no man's land" blasting a Japanese position. The tanks provided firepower and cover from sniper fire for Marine infantrymen. (USMC photo)

By all accounts, the attack was prefaced with an impressive naval barrage. Tons of sand, dirt, coral and vegetation mixed with shrapnel erupted in geysers that filled and shattered the air across the beaches between two "Devil's Horns," Adelup Point and Asan Point, and the beaches of Agat along the island's east coast. One Japanese soldier wrote in his diary: "No matter where one goes, the shells follow." Indeed, the Navy took 13 days to "prep" and soften suspected and hardened defensive positions.

The numbers are impressive. An armada of warships from Task Force 58 fired 6,258 shells from 16- and 4-inch guns of battleships and cruisers; 3,862 rounds of 8-inch; 2,430 6-inch and 16,214 rounds of 5-inch combined battery fire from rockets, with air support from torpedo bombers and B-25s of the Air Force to deliver the most "devastating preliminary bombardment in the history of the war," wrote Marine historian Colonel Robert Debs Heil Jr. in his *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962*.

Veterans of earlier Pacific landings were not impressed. They knew the Japanese were masters of creating defensive posi-

tions. Members of the 3d MarDiv crossing the beach did take some humor and heart in seeing a large "Welcome Marines" sign left by Navy Underwater Demolition Teams. The UDT sailors had blown up 940 separate Japanese-planted beach obstacles. The bombardment had been effective.

According to Japanese accounts, all coast defense guns in the open, half of those in caves, and about half of all defensive installations inshore of landing beaches, had been destroyed. Additionally, Japanese army COL Hideyuki Takeda noted: "There were scattered outbreaks of serious loss of spirit."

Still, there were more than enough Japanese of the Kwantung army, with plenty of spirit and tenacity, to give the Marines and soldiers mean resistance. The Japanese garrison, with the 29th Division, the major army unit commanded by LTG Takeshi Takashina, and naval and defense forces totaled approximately 19,000 well-organized defenders. Like the Marine defenders in 1941, however, the Japanese defenders were squeezed, thanks to American submarines, by a lack of resupply and had to improvise with what they had. There would be no resupply or reinforcements.



Undaunted and determined, MG Kiyoshi Shigematsu, who commanded 5,100 men of the 6th Expeditionary Force, ordered his command to "seek certain victory at the beginning of the battle ... to utterly destroy the landing enemy at the water's edge."

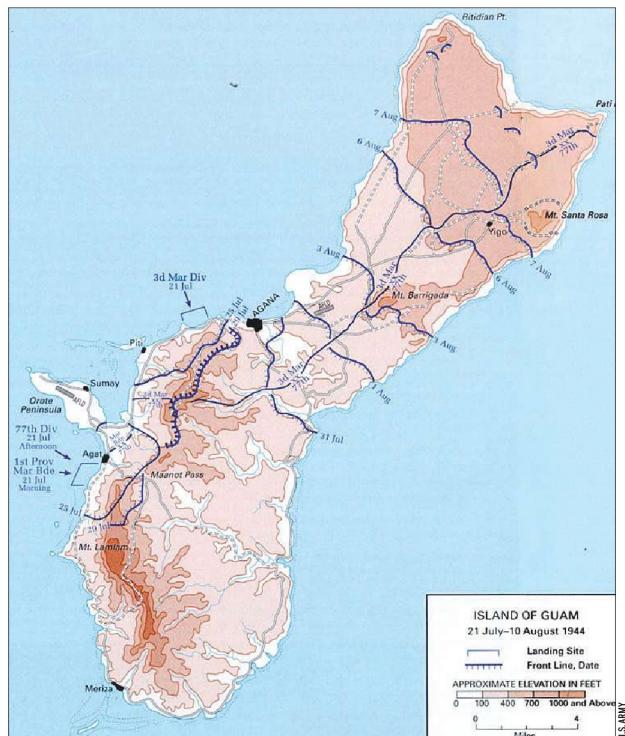
Three infantry regiments of the 3d MarDiv came in along 2,500 yards of beach between the Devil's Horns. The leathernecks crossed the beaches taking sporadic mortar fire, which became heavy shelling as they advanced more than a mile inland. The landing at Agat beaches was another story. Two Japanese boat guns proved devastating opposition, and 24 tracked landing vehicles (LVTs) were hit or blown up by mines. Two Marine regiments were under machine-gun and mortar fire at the beach. By nightfall, the Marines had gained the beaches and then some, but at a cost of 350 casualties. Then came the inevitable banzai counterattack.

The Japanese 38th Infantry Regiment, with tanks, spent itself in three assaults against the Marines. They came with bayonets fixed, grenades sparked by hitting their helmets, bravado reinforced by alcohol, and willingness to die for the emperor. They ran headlong into a fusillade of fire that cut them down without mercy. At dawn, the 38th Infantry was no more.

PFC Luther Skaggs Jr., a squad leader with a mortar section with 3d Bn, 3d Marines (3/3), took command of his section when his leader was hit. He moved the section to a position that would provide effective mortar fire and coverage for Marines assaulting a cliff. His section came under a series of counterattacks. A grenade landed in his foxhole and went off, shattering the lower part of his leg. Skaggs applied his own tourniquet and returned fire with fire and tossed grenades for eight hours. He then crawled unassisted to the rear.

He was still on crutches when President Harry S. Truman presented him the Medal of Honor on 15 June 1945.

About the same time, PFC Leonard F. Mason, a Browning Automatic Rifleman with 2/3, came under fire from two enemy machine guns not more than 15 yards away. Alone, he climbed out of a gully and made a one-man assault against the enemy position. He came under a volley of accurate rifle fire that tore through his arm and shoulder, continued to move forward and was hit again with a burst of machine-gun fire. He nonetheless persevered, killing five Japanese and wounding another. Mason died of his wounds the next day and posthumously was awarded the Medal of Honor. In 1946, the destroyer USS *Leonard F. Mason* (DD-852) was named in his honor.



By 24 July, the fighting had shifted to Guam's Orote Peninsula. Situated between the two landing sites, it drew attention when the Japanese attempted to escape the peninsula via landing barges that were spotted and sunk by artillery and naval gunfire.

Late that night, it rained and the Japanese came storming out of the swamps at the Fourth and 22d Marine regiments. Artillery from the Army's 77th Infantry Division decimated but did not stop them. Vulgar and bloody mano-a-mano brawls to the death ensued using rifle butts, bayonets and entrenching tools. When it was over, BG Shepherd wrote: "At daylight over 400 enemy dead lay in front of our lines. I personally counted them (as best I could) myself. Within the lines there were many instances where I observed Japanese and Marines laying side by side, which was mute evidence of the violence of the last assault."

What was it like? Employees of the Library of Congress had supplied several units with metal disc recording machines. One recording was made by an unidentified

Marine: "I'd like to describe this foxhole to you. It is typical of hundreds on this island.

"This foxhole is about two feet deep. Now, I would like to be able to speak louder and with more clarity, but unfortunately, the slightest noise, the slightest rustle, will draw fire not only from the Japanese, who are someplace, perhaps, in the dense foliage around us or up on the ridge, but from our own Marines who are huddled nearby in foxholes like this one.

"I don't know how they [the Japanese] do it. We can lie here absolutely breathless listening to the slightest sounds and not see anything—in fact, not hear anything—and then we wake up and find that they're all around us. And it's a very tough and tedious job to root them out, [inaudible] them and exterminate them. We lost quite a few people in our unit. A very popular captain was killed."

Marine combat correspondent PFC O'Brien filed this report from the field: "An infantry squad led by Second Lieutenant James A. Gallo ... approached within ten yards of the tip. The crest bloomed with

machine gun fire. In the face of it, the Marine company tried its first assault. The company was thrown back before it advanced forty yards.

"For fifty hours the company remained on the naked slope, trying again and again to storm the Jap entrenchments hardly one hundred yards away. Battered almost to annihilation, the tenacious Marines finally saw another company take the ridge from the rear. . . .

"Under the cover of dusk the company commander led a second attack. As the Marines rose, machine gun fire swept into them.

"The commander and three Marines reached the crest. The last fifty feet were almost vertical. The attackers grasped roots and dug their feet into the soft earth to keep from falling down the incline.

"The commander went over the ridge. He never came back. The three remaining Marines were ripped by cross fire. . . .

"Lieutenant Gallo led an assault . . . but he was thrown back. Sergeant Charles V. Bomar . . . with nine Marines attempted to take the right ground of the slope. Five

were killed as they left the ravine. The sergeant and three others reached the top.

"The Japs again rolled grenades down the incline. One exploded under the chest of a Marine nearby, blowing off his head. Another grenade bounced off the helmet of the sergeant. It was a dud.

"The Marines charged into the Jap entrenchment. The sergeant killed a Jap machine gunner with the butt of his carbine. The assistant gunner exploded a grenade against his body. The blast threw the Marines out of the hole. . . . A lieutenant who had come to join them was shot between the eyes by a sniper. The sergeant killed the sniper with his carbine."

According to historian Heinl, in the predawn of 26 July, the Japanese sent a battalion swarming on the 21st Marines.

They shouted: " 'Wake up and die, Marine! (to which one rifleman shouted back, 'Come on in, you bastards, and we'll see who dies!')."

LtCol Robert E. "Bob" Cushman Jr. was the 29-year-old commander of 2/9. He was ordered to seize and hold an enemy strong point. It was a series of attack and

then repel counterattacks. Through it all, Cushman—in an effort to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation—stood up front defying enemy attempts to kill him. He personally led a platoon that repelled a larger Japanese force. It earned him the Navy Cross. He became the 25th CMC in 1972 and was followed as CMC by one of his company commanders on Guam.

On the slopes of the Fonte Plateau, riflemen were down to two eight-round clips per man and six rounds per mortar tube. It was as close as anyone wants to come to giving his all, but it was then that the tide of battle turned almost imperceptibly when tank platoon arrived with tanks piled with ammunition. A jug-eared captain who spoke with a Mississippi drawl and who would later become the 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Louis H. Wilson Jr., took command.

Wilson brought his rifle company from 2/9 through rugged open terrain and through 300 yards of withering rifle and machine-gun fire. He consolidated the forces already embattled on the hill and set up night defensive positions. The Japa-

A wounded Marine receives a swig of water while awaiting treatment and evacuation from Guam. It was another costly Pacific campaign. There were 7,800 American casualties of whom 6,964 were Marines; 1,350 would be listed as KIA. (USMC photo)



nese responded with heavy fire throughout the darkness, wounding Wilson three times. Nonetheless, Wilson continually reorganized and repositioned his men before getting any medical attention.

The Japanese assaulted, and Wilson repeatedly exposed himself dashing 50 yards through scathing chest-high fire to carry a wounded Marine to safety. It was another 10 hours of hand-to-hand combat to doggedly hold his line and throw back fanatical Japanese counterassaults.

The captain then cobbled together a 17-Marine patrol to advance against a key slope—defying intense mortar, machine-gun and rifle fire that toppled 13 Marines. Wilson, and the few Marines left, drove relentlessly forward and seized the high ground. In the process, they annihilated 350 Japanese soldiers. His determined and decisive action earned Capt Wilson the Medal of Honor.

On July 29th, two years and 230 days after the Rising Sun flag of Japan went up over Guam, members of the 22d Marines presented arms as the Stars and Stripes was run up the flagstaff at Marine Barracks Sumay.

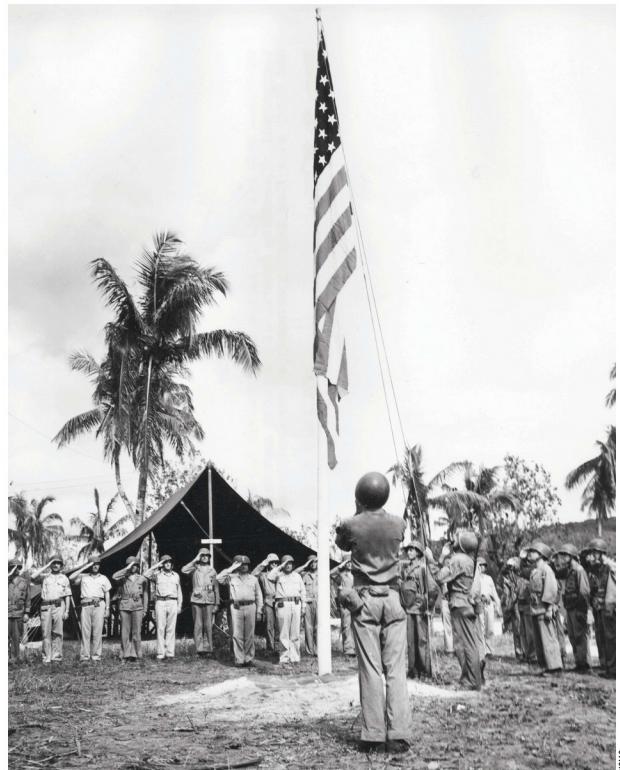
But, there was still an island to be secured. Akashi was liberated by 3/3 and again became Agana, and Omiya Jima was soon to be again known as Guam.

The failure of mass counterattacks at Fonte tightened the Marine stranglehold. Such tactics cost the Japanese an estimated 3,200 men. LTG Takashima had lost nearly all his officers including MG Shigematsu, who was killed in a hail of tank machine-gun fire trying to lead his depleted and desperate men off the Fonte Plateau.

The 3dMarDiv and the 77th Infantry Div then pushed north to sweep out pockets of determined resistance. On 3 Aug., PFC Frank P. Witek was with 1/9, working its way carefully through Finegayan, when his rifle platoon took heavy fire from a well-concealed enemy stronghold. Everybody ducked, except Witek, who standing, and at point-blank range, let loose a burst from his 20-round BAR magazine. He killed eight Japanese soldiers.

As his fellow Marines fell back to consolidate their lines, Witek guarded a wounded leatherneck by returning fire until stretcher bearers arrived. He held his ground, providing covering fire for the bearers. He was the last back into his own lines.

Under fire again, his platoon was pinned down by machine guns. PFC Witek went forward throwing grenades and firing as he forced his way to within five to 10 yards of the Japanese, close enough to knock out the gun emplacement and kill more Japanese. He didn't get them all; a Japanese rifleman shot Witek down, and



MajGen Roy S. Geiger, center, background, and his III Amphibious Corps staff salute as Old Glory is raised over a Marine camp on Guam. The fighting and mopping up on the island went on sporadically for years.

his next of kin received his posthumous Medal of Honor.

The Japanese melted into the hills, jungle and caves. Reports say that there was sporadic fighting until 8 Dec. 1945, when three Marines were ambushed and killed. Stories still persist of "Screaming Willie" thought to be a Japanese leftover, who frightened Marines standing guard until the late 1940s. Rumor has it he would approach closely at night, than shatter the darkness with screaming and howling before disappearing.

That aside, the casualties on Guam were high as usual in the Pacific. American casualties are listed as 1,350 killed in action and 6,450 wounded—all totaled 7,800, of whom 6,964 were Marines.

The Japanese losses were fearsome. By 15 Aug., Marines counted 10,971 dead Japanese; 8,500 more were killed and captured on Guam between 1944 and V-J Day in August 1945.

The fighting on Guam did not end in a massive attack on a last Japanese stronghold or with white flags of formal surrender. It ground down to a stream and then trickle of hatred and blind obedience to a lost cause. Two Japanese soldiers on Guam yielded in May 1960. On 24 Jan. 1972, Sergeant Shiochi Yokoi was discovered by hunters. He had lived alone in a cave for almost 28 years. He had no idea the war was over and had no intention of surrendering.

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Leatherneck—On the Web

To see more photographs from the Battle of Guam, go to www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/guam