

*LVT(A)-4 armored amphibious assault vehicles from Company A, 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion, in the assault on Okinawa, 1 April 1945.*

## Okinawa

by LtGen Louis Metzger, USMC(Ret)

*A battalion commander recalls the battle for Okinawa that began 50 years ago this month.*

The voyage to Okinawa was the usual precombat experience. Briefings, checking and rechecking of weapons and vehicles, studying intelligence and landing plans, letters home (and one special one just in case you didn't make it), sleepless nights, religious services, and finally the landing.

Although the seas were rough as we plowed toward Okinawa on our tank landing ships (LSTs), L-day was sunny and clear. Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945 for those who could sleep, started early. The usual prelanding breakfast of steak and eggs and then we went on deck to see the "show." It was a great sight, some 1,200 ships, although from our low-riding LST we could only see a small portion of them. It pleased us that

battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, reinforced by airstrikes, were pouring thousands of tons of high explosive on the enemy beaches. The 6th Marine Division was on the left flank of the Tenth Army (Figure 1) and planned to land two infantry regiments in the assault, the 22d Marines on the left from beaches Green One and Two and the 4th Marines on the right on beaches Red One, Two, and Three. My battalion, the 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion, was to lead the attack, following the LCI(G)s (landing craft, infantry) (gun) which were to fire onto the beaches with guns and rockets, then at about 500 yards from the beach turn away and let us complete the assault. It was quite a sight, 75 armored tracked landing vehicles, LVT(A)-4s in a line, moving to

the attack.

The division commander, MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., later Commandant of the Marine Corps, gave me explicit orders not to allow the Navy wave guides to land us on the wrong beaches, as had occurred in the past. These orders were passed on to the company commanders and platoon leaders, along with orders that once the attack was launched we would never turn away, no matter what occurred.

An unfortunate incident occurred while we were watching the bombardment. A cruiser hoisted an observation seaplane over the side, and it took off over the LST areas. The Navy commodore broadcast over the TBS (talk between ship) radio network, "DO NOT, REPEAT, DO

NOT FIRE ON THAT AIR-PLANE." The aircraft just got airborne when it flew over the LSTs at an altitude of several hundred feet. In spite of the order not to fire, a machinegun opened fire, soon to be followed by dozens of other guns. The plane fell in flames and crashed almost alongside our ship. The commodore came on the air and said, "YOU HAVE JUST KILLED TWO AMERICANS. I HOPE YOU ARE SATISFIED." The incident resulted from the tense nerves that are present just before a landing, too many uncontrolled guns mounted at random on the decks of LSTs for additional antiaircraft protection, and the lack of a workable fire control system.

On the flagship just before the landing, it was reported by Navy UDT (underwater demolition team) that there were no Japanese defenders or emplacements on the landing beaches. The Navy frogmen reported they had walked on the beaches, and they were positive they were not defended. This was countered in a report by a Marine warrant officer observer in a boat off the landing beaches who had sighted enemy on the beaches. Following the tried-and-true military maxim, "Give the Enemy his Worst Capability," the landing proceeded with the expectation that the beaches were defended.

The order finally came to man our vehicles, and I left the bridge and went to the tank deck. I must admit I wondered if, on this third operation, my luck had run out; my legs did not seem to want to carry me to my command vehicle. On this operation we had been issued protective cream to guard against flash burn and individual flak suits (lightweight and easily removed), which had been designed for B-29 crews. After smearing my face and getting into my gear I looked around and found that the tank commanders and gunners were looking at me. This was the time to show utter unconcern, so I lit a cigar (strictly illegal) and gave them a big wave. It seemed to relax everyone; we were ready to go. Shortly after, we launched down the ramps and were waterborne and moving to the line of departure.

In the Guam landing (*MCG*, Jul94, pp. 92-95) I had not been able to observe or control the battalion during the assault phase of the beaches from my amtrac set low in the water. This time I had arranged to tie my command LVT(A)4 to the stern of one of the LCI(G)s and ride the initial part of the movement to the beach on that ship. Bad idea! Again the smoke and dust blowing offshore from the naval gunfire and airstrikes, combined with the smoke and exhaust from the rockets of the LCI(G), kept me from seeing anything. I must admit also that the roar of the rockets being fired from the ship was unnerving. I was glad when I was informed that the ship was turning away so I could climb back into my command vehicle and get moving toward the beach. We touched down on Okinawa at 0837.

During the movement to the beach my command vehicle radio operator sent a series of messages on the division command radio net stating that "no enemy could be observed on the beaches," and once we were ashore that "there were no enemy present." The messages were received by the division headquarters aboard the flagship, but there was one problem. The division staff wondered who "Armorplate" was that was sending all this important information. Unfortunately, we were using my battalion call sign, and not the call sign assigned by the division. So much for timely information!

Once ashore we quickly found egresses from the beach and began to support the attacking infantry by direct fire with our 75mm howitzer guns, although with no enemy resistance we were soon released to assume our artillery role. It worked like a charm. The 75mm howitzer firing batteries (platoons) were surveyed in, registered by the forward observers and the infantry had artillery support within 30 minutes after we touched down on the beach. Several hours later the regular artillery was ashore, and we were tied into their fire control nets. By sunset the division forward elements had seized Yontan airfield and had even seized control of areas the operation plan had assumed

would not be taken until the third day. Some scattered shots were fired by Japanese stragglers. Dummy positions, decoy aircraft, a few defensive positions, and ammunition dumps were overrun.

Except for some random light mortar and artillery fire, it was quiet on the beach. We were delighted at our easy landing and the beauty of Okinawa—green countryside, dotted with stone tombs, wild lilies growing in profusion, and best of all—no enemy. With adequate security established, we settled in for the night and waited for the next day's operation. One unfortunate Marine from another unit was found dead the next morning. He had been hit by either mortar or artillery fire, and although he had put on a tourniquet, it was below his wound and he had bled to death.

The next day the attack continued toward the east coast as the Marines attempted to cut Okinawa in half. A company from the 4th Marines was pinned down in a ravine by fierce enemy small arms fire. The mouth of the ravine was blocked by a rice paddy, and land tanks could not go to their rescue. I was asked to see if our armored amtracs could traverse the paddy and went forward along the side of the ravine. The enemy kept up small arms fire, and it was necessary to move rapidly from cover to cover. Unfortunately, the paddy did not have enough water to float our vehicles, and the mud and muck would have bellied us up. We could not help.

From our battalion command post (CP) in the area of Green Beach we could observe enemy aircraft in the kamikaze attacks on the offshore shipping. Except for a few indirect fire missions, it was a quiet few days for us; we didn't know of the real battle that lay ahead.

Prior to departing Guadalcanal I had been informed that a U.S. Army colonel from the Joint Chiefs of Staff would be "attached" to my battalion as an observer. It turned out that he was a West Pointer, a former Japanese language student, third-generation U.S. Army, and this late in the war had not seen combat. I believed he

had worked a "deal" just to get combat on his record. Having a full colonel in my battalion, while I was a temporary lieutenant colonel, was difficult. The colonel stated, quite sincerely, that he wanted to be the assistant operations officer. The problem was the battalion operations officer was a first lieutenant and he couldn't have a colonel work for him. I was really put out, literally, when our senior observer/guest was assigned a cabin on our LST, while I got a bunk (without his presence I would have had the cabin). Nevertheless, he was a very pleasant man, and we enjoyed having him with us. After the landing, we were concerned when he went to scout caves and burial tombs and shouted in Japanese trying, unsuccessfully, to get Japanese soldiers to surrender. Fortunately, there were no enemy soldiers present, or he would not have survived. Several days later he got himself transferred to the 1st Marine Division, and much later managed to get himself blown off a bridge by enemy fire. I went to visit him in an Army hospital and found him on a cot, unwashed and neglected. When I approached the Army doctor running the hospital, a lieutenant colonel, and complained about the treatment of our colonel, the doctor told me he was angry at the Marines because they had stolen a lot of his supplies and equipment as it had landed (no doubt true). Once I explained that he was an Army colonel, but wearing Marine utilities, he was well looked after. After the battle I recommended him for a Bronze Star, for effort (not results), which probably didn't hurt his career. In 1964 I met him again on a ship returning from the Far East. He was a major general.

On 6 April we received orders to move to Motobu Peninsula to support the 6th Marine Division in its operations in northern Okinawa. The next 2 days we moved the entire battalion by road and LST up the Ishikawa Isthmus. The LSTs shuttled the amphibian vehicles up to Yabu, a small village just to the west of Nago, the largest settlement in the area. The road was a narrow, native track that skirted the ocean, barely ade-

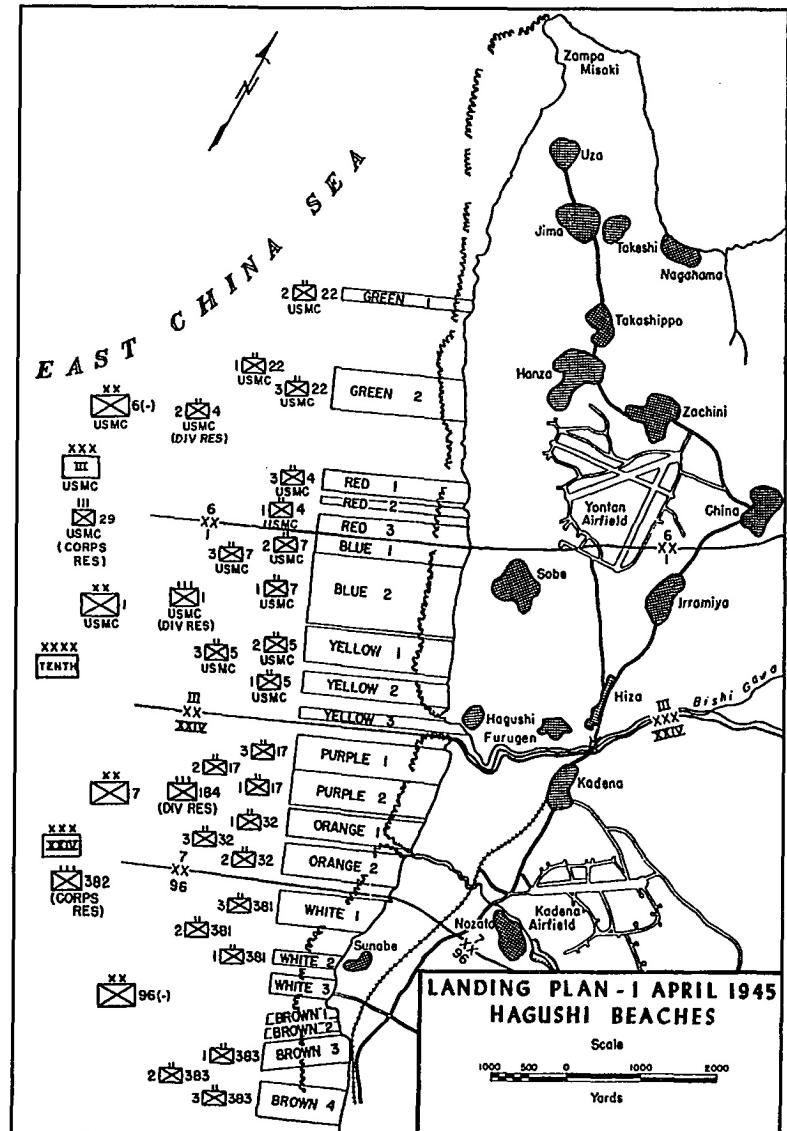


Figure 1

quate for military vehicles. As I drove north I saw the body of a young Japanese/Okinawan woman laying at the water's edge. She was naked and her long black hair floated in the water. (I noted that William Manchester in his book *Goodbye Darkness* reported the same scene.) I never knew whether she had been killed by Japanese, Americans, or died by her own hand.

Once assembled in Yabu we had a fine area. The ground was covered with greenery, and a small stream bordered the area providing additional security. In the center was a large

rock pile which served as a shelter for the battalion headquarters. Security was established, additional machine-guns were mounted to cover our position, camouflage nets were hoisted over the vehicles, and we tied our LVT(A)4 firing batteries into the division artillery radio net. In the next valley to the west was an artillery battalion, and to our east, in Nago, was the division headquarters.

Our first Sunday ashore most of us attended church services in a rice mill converted into a place of worship. Screens had been rigged to make an altar, which was banked by



Figure 2

wild lilies. Our chaplain, a Catholic priest, led us in giving thanks for the light casualties we had sustained so far.

Although the infantry regiments were soon locked in combat with Japanese forces dug into strong positions on Mount Yae Take that dominated Motobu Peninsula, other than for firing missions we settled down to a routine. We even were able to establish a makeshift messhall and serve hot meals. Two events broke the quiet. The first occurred when the Japanese forces attacked the artillery battalion position just to the west of our location. It was a brisk engagement, which forced the artillery personnel out of their position, but they quickly recaptured it. That action caused me to request a rifle company be moved into our area since I did not know how strong the enemy force was. The infantry was with us only one night. We fed them our hot meal and made do with field rations.

The second occurrence was when three men from our battalion left the area (against orders) and walked into the hills to our north looking for souvenirs. They were jumped by a Japanese force with a Nambu machinegun. One escaped and returned to the battalion for help. We quickly took a small group of Marines and several machineguns and returned to the area. After firing into the area where we thought the Nambu had been located, we descended into the valley and found only some blood and a button off a Marine utility uniform—the two Marines were never recovered.

All this while, a fierce battle had been going on for Mount Yae Take (Figure 2), the commanding terrain on Motobu Peninsula. The infantry regiments had swept around the flanks of this commanding ground and were planning to attack to the southwest—toward our position and the division headquarters. This caused

a fire support problem because the artillery was masked (unable to bring indirect fire) from their positions in support of the infantry. The waters around Motobu Peninsula were thought to be mined so naval gunfire was not possible, and the bridges on the road leading to suitable positions for the artillery were destroyed. On 14 April a company of armored amphibians was ordered to support the infantry by indirect fire. They moved by water to a location from which they could support the attacking infantry. It worked well and again demonstrated the utility of this secondary mission for LVT(A)4s. Once Motobu Peninsula was secured, this company returned to the battalion area. While the capture of Mount Yae Take did not spell an end to the fighting in the area, it was the last major engagement on northern Okinawa.

There was a series of small islands off the peninsula and a company from the 1st Armored Amphibian

Battalion, together with the Division Reconnaissance Company, landed on several to ensure there were no Japanese on them. I made the landing on Yagachi Shima Island and, being a normal Marine, looked through the area for souvenirs. No souvenirs or Japanese forces were found. When I returned to Motobu Peninsula I was asked how I liked the leper colony. I spent a lot of time washing my hands for the next few days. A second landing on Sesoko Shima Island also failed to reveal any Japanese forces, but the beach and nearby caves contained Japanese attack boats. A strange event occurred the night before one of these landings. A young Marine, in the company of an old Okinawan woman, appeared in the light of our campfire. He was a straggler from the 22d Marines and was obviously confused and disoriented. The Marine was carrying a cake tin that, when opened, contained flesh (human?). He was turned over to the military police.

The Okinawan people in the area were farmers and very poor. When the Marines approached the area they released their insane from the local asylum, which caused a security problem. Although I heard no report of violent behavior, these insane people would shout and create noise near our positions, causing concern to the Marines on watch. By both loud-speaker and leaflets the Okinawan people were encouraged to come into our lines, but *only by daylight*. Too many nights our security would hear something in front of their position, open fire, only to find women and children lying there the next morning.

The 22d Marines made a major capture—a geisha house, complete with geishas or “comfort girls” whom the Japanese Army always enjoyed. The regiment handled it very well with the first sergeants issuing “liberty passes” to deserving Marines—until a chaplain discovered what was going on.

While on Motobu Peninsula we heard word that the war in Europe had ended. I banged a large “Shinto bell” we had liberated with a shovel and ordered medicinal brandy—one

small bottle per two Marines—be issued in celebration. The information was in error; it was not until days later that the real armistice was announced.

By the end of April information of the heavy combat in central Okinawa had reached us. The Japanese defenders had carefully conserved their forces and had constructed a series of major defense lines, the main position between Naha, Shuri, and Yonabaru. A network of tunnels had been constructed in a series of hills behind the Asa Kawa River with exits on both the forward and reverse slopes. The defenders would fight from the forward openings, then withdraw into shelter when American forces moved close, only to counterattack from the reverse slope exits to regain the hill. It was a bloody and stubborn defense.

U.S. forces were taking heavy casualties and additional combat power was needed. First the Marine III Corps artillery was sent south. Then the 1st Marine Division, which relieved the 27th Army Division (the same division which had done so poorly on Saipan) moved north to relieve our division in what was now almost a secure area. On 2 May the 6th Marine Division commenced moving south. Few niceties were exchanged between the Marines and the ragged members of the 27th Army Division. Commencing on 4 May we again moved by LST and road to take up our new positions along the beach by Machinato airfield.

On 7 May heavy rains commenced that lasted for several days. The unpaved native roads, churned by heavy military vehicles, became masses of waist-deep mud. The countryside was filled with rivulets that also became mud—all this occurring under direct enemy observation from the commanding ground of the Japanese main battle position. The 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion took up position to defend the beaches in the division area against expected Japanese counterlandings from the south. The 3d Armored Amphibian Battalion was to our north, and an Army amphibian tank battalion was further north of them. The latter two units were under my operational

control, but given the extent of the beach area we were defending, it was difficult to exercise it. One Japanese counterlanding was attempted and the Japanese attackers were cut down on the reefs by the 3d Armored Amphibian crews.

It was, at this time, announced that President Roosevelt had died. The Japanese were quick to take advantage of the fact and fired propaganda leaflets into our lines telling us the President had died because he was so distressed over the fleet losses off Okinawa. As we knew how the battle was going, we had a good laugh at this unsophisticated attempt at propaganda.

My luck held. One day as I was turning off the “main road” to reach the battalion CP, my jeep was cut off by an Army 2 1/2-ton truck. I was annoyed, but he was larger. No sooner had he started down the track toward the beach when he hit a mine. The truck disintegrated, and I saw two bodies fly into the air.

Large sections of the beach were backed by sea walls. In order to gain protection from incoming enemy rocket and artillery fire, our vehicles were positioned tightly against the walls facing the sea whenever possible. From caves on the high ground behind the beaches the Japanese troops would fire at our vehicles and their crew. Our returned fire of 75mm howitzers and machineguns had a salutatory effect.

In late May we received orders to get ready for a landing on Chichi Jima, a large island to the north of Okinawa. I made two trips to the supply depot, still located on Green Beach, miles to the north over mud-bogged roads—first to requisition the supplies and equipment, then to get the depot commander’s attention. At the same time an Army ordnance battalion was to assist us in repairing our battle-worn LVT(A)4s. The Army “experts” had to be shown how to start our vehicle engines, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Not knowing anything about the vehicles, they accepted our evaluation and issued us the necessary replacement vehicles. The depot was another matter. The colonel in com-

mand, in line with the long-cherished Marine Corps supply policy of keeping everything on the shelves, informed me that he could provide us nothing. After many days of combat, I exploded and told him to put that in writing so the general would know who to court-martial. We got our needed supplies and equipment.

We were pulled off the line and on 1 June embarked in some LSTs in preparation for our movement and attack on Chichi Jima. We enjoyed the hot food and showers, but the ships never got underway. Several days later we were ordered back to shore and rejoined the 6th Marine Division—the operation had been canceled. The rest was appreciated, but the return to combat so soon had a downside; however, it was better than another combat landing.

As the battle moved south we supported it by both direct and indirect fire. The intense fighting had required the artillery to expend huge quantities of 105mm ammunition, which soon was in limited supply. Fortunately, there was a large supply of 75mm ammunition; as a result, our battalion was called upon to provide more and more artillery support missions; we fired over 19,000 rounds as artillery.

Yard by yard the American lines advanced, but at a terrible cost in casualties. The Asa Kawa River was crossed, and Naha, the capitol city of Okinawa, lay ahead. Offshore the Navy was under heavy attack from Kamikaze aircraft—nightly the sky was lit up with tracers and shells from the ships. On occasion an unexploded shell would scream down on our positions, every bit as deadly as enemy fire. Frequently, the beaches and waters offshore were filled with floating Japanese bodies, some of them women and children. The stench of dead was ever present, as were billions of flies from the dead that littered the island.

About this time I was ordered from the battalion to the staff of the 6th Marine Division to be the assistant operations officer. That lasted only a few days until the commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, LtGen Holland M. Smith, in-

formed the division commander I was not under division administrative command and was to be returned to my battalion.

One of the company commanders reported his map case, which contained the classified tactical "shackle code," was missing. This code was used in connection with a "grid map" to identify locations on the terrain. It provided us only limited security; however, in the hands of the Japanese it would have been disastrous. With a captured shackle code the Japanese could read our radio messages and exactly identify our positions. I debated reporting it to higher headquarters. I assumed that it had just been lost and that its compromise meant that all air, ground, and naval units in the Okinawa operation would have to change their shackle code. I decided I had to make the report and did so, causing hundreds of units to use a new code. We were fortunate that I did—several days later a Japanese soldier was shot and killed, and he had the missing map case with him.

By 29 May Naha had been taken by the division reconnaissance company and infantry units. The 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion's CP was established in a city that had been leveled, and from the odor it was obvious many bodies were in the rubble. I was tempted to take the lighthouse as my CP, but remembering the danger of being in an obvious landmark and thus an inviting target, chose instead a partially standing building further back from the harbor. Wise choice—the next morning the lighthouse had been blown away. The line companies had moved south and were once again supporting the attack with both direct and indirect (artillery) fire. The Japanese responded with artillery and rocket fire from Oroku Peninsula just to the south. The rockets were crude affairs, fired from wooden troughs. They were unstable and tumbled through the air causing a weird, unnerving noise, but little damage.

Along with artillery missions and beach defense, the battalion had the mission of securing Ono Yama Island in Naha Harbor and ringing the

beach along the harbor to prevent Japanese troops from escaping the pincer movement executed by the 1st and 6th Marine Divisions. Years later I was to learn that enemy forces caught in the trap were naval forces, fighting as infantry. Most of the Japanese trying to escape the land battle were gunned down in the water. With hindsight, some could probably have been taken prisoner. Mercy was not the mode of the day.

The main financial bank on Okinawa was located in Naha. I came by when some Marines, having blown open the safes, were throwing Japanese money in the air, lighting cigarettes off it, and scattering it about. I stopped to pick up several banknotes for souvenirs and went on. Later, when I participated in the occupation and surrender of Japan, I found it was still legal currency and realized that I had passed up a real financial bonanza.

After the division had lodged on Oroku Peninsula, the battalion continued to support their advance. (See Figure 3 on p. 69 for a depiction of forces in the south.) On 9 June an LVT(A)4 hit a "horned mine" just offshore; the vehicle was blown apart by the powerful explosive. The driver was killed and the crewmembers wounded. On 14 June one of our companies, together with units of the 4th Marines and recon Marines, landed on Senaga Shima, an island just off the coast.

The fighting dragged on, with American forces now firmly in control and the end of the battle in sight. But several stiff engagements were still ahead. Three steep and defended ridges lay between the Marines and the south end of Okinawa.

On 17 June I was standing with the commanding officer of the 22d Marines, south of the town of Ito-man. A volley of mortar shells rained down on us, and I dove under a tank that was standing nearby. Shortly after, I could hear the buzz of bullets flying over our head and dropped down. The regimental commander remained standing and I suggested he also "hit the deck." He remarked, "They are not shooting at us." I replied, "Well the bullets are certainly

going over our heads and don't know the difference." We could see the Marines fighting their way up Mezado Ridge and the Japanese defenders running along the crest.

The 18th of June was to prove a monumental day. We were on top of the ridge. The battalion CP, the front-lines, and the regimental commander were all on the same bit of high ground. I had taken one of my company commanders and radio team to effect liaison so we could support the advance by firing from the sea into caves on the reverse slope of the ridge. There were groups of Japanese troops in the immediate area. One of the radio operators killed two as they ran past our location. I joined the regimental commander on a knoll and told him what we could do to support his regiment. At about that time, Japanese knee mortar shells hit near us. The regimental commander commented to me, "Maybe you don't belong here!" My liaison completed, I left the area and climbed down the hill to where my jeep was located. When I got to the bottom, a Japanese gun commenced firing on some tanks and cargo LVTs parked in an open area. Armed with only a pistol, I did the prudent thing—slipped under a large rock and waited for the firing to cease. The Japanese gunners were very good, hitting a lot of our vehicles. Evidently, our fire was brought on the enemy, and the firing stopped.

I got in my jeep and started back to our battalion. Just as I departed, Lt-Gen Simon A. Buckner, Jr., USA, Commanding General, Tenth Army, came past me in a jeep and headed for the same area that I had just left. I was tempted to warn him of the enemy gun firing in the area but reconsidered, as I thought he would object. I proceeded down the road and within minutes heard the commanding officer of the 6th Tank Battalion send a message in the clear that both the commanding officer of the 22d Marines and Buckner were dead—the Marine colonel killed by a sniper, Buckner by the Japanese gun that had just been firing.

Three days later, on 21 June, I stood on the open slope facing the



*LtGen Simon B. Buckner, Jr., USA, CG, Tenth Army (on right), observes the fighting on Okinawa alongside MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr. and BGen William T. Clement, the CG and assistant division commander, 6th Marine Division.*

cliffs on the southern tip of Okinawa. Standing in the stunted palm trees and rocks were groups of Okinawan women and children and Japanese soldiers. On our side, using loud-speakers, Okinawans and Japanese (both prisoners and linguists) were telling them to surrender, that they would be well and honorably treated. Some tried to come toward us but were stopped by soldiers. Women would comb their hair and then kill themselves. Some would take a Japanese hand grenade, bang it on a rock to set off the fuse, and hold it to their chest. A little "pop" would be heard and their body would jerk and fall down. Others took their children in their arms and jumped off the cliff into the sea.

So ended the battle of Okinawa. Over 125,000 Japanese were estimated killed. American casualties were 7,374 killed and 31,807 wounded and 239 missing. These figures do not include the heavy losses suffered by the Navy. To those awful figures must be added over 100,000 Okinawan civilians.



*<LtGen Metzger retired from the Marine Corps in 1973. He continues to write articles for the Gazette as part of its commemoration of the 50th anniversary of WW II.*