

# Virginians at War

## WWII: Battle of Okinawa

### Resource Packet

Contains: Glossary, Timeline, Profile of a Soldier, Images, Discussion Questions, Additional Resources

**Program Description:** Virginians at War: Okinawa explores the experience of Virginians that fought during the critical Battle for Okinawa over three long months in 1945. The small island was a strategic point in the Pacific Theater, as it was within a short flight distance of the home islands of Japan. As such, its Japanese defenders put up a tenacious defense against the Allied sea, air, and land campaign. The result was a long and costly fight, in which over 250,000 combatants were wounded or killed. The Battle for Okinawa served as the Empire of Japan's "Last Stand" before finally surrendering to the Allies at the end of that summer.

**Copyright:** Virginia War Memorial Foundation, 2006

**Length:** 18:37

**Streaming link:** <https://vimeo.com/367110050>

#### Featured Speakers:

RADM3 Maurice Cohen, Newport News  
LTJG Paul B. Heffner, Midlothian  
SGT E. Bruce Heilman, Richmond  
CPL Sam S. Jett, Midlothian  
CAPT Earl W. Keegan, Virginia Beach  
SGT Joseph L. Perrin Jr., Richmond  
SGT Ralph G. Phipps, Richmond  
AOMC3 William D. Robertson, Virginia Beach  
MAJ Rutherford H. Spessard, Arvonnia  
PFC Howard W. Stull Jr., Fairfax  
CPO3 Porcher L. Taylor Jr., Petersburg  
CPL Sam D. Ukrop, Highland Springs  
S2 Norman N. VanWormer, Pinconning MI  
CDR John C. Washburn Jr., Roanoke  
LTJG John C. Weissler, Midlothian  
CPL John R. Williams, Richmond  
LCDR Edward C. Young, San Diego CA



# GLOSSARY

## IMPORTANT TERMS

- **20mm gun:** a 20mm caliber round, typically used in anti-aircraft cannons
- **40mm gun:** Bofors 40 mm gun; a large anti-aircraft gun used by Allied forces during WWII
- **5"/38 gun:** Mark 12 5"/38 caliber gun; a U.S. Navy anti-aircraft gun used during WWII
- **Baka bomb:** Yokosuka MXY-7 *Ohka*; a rocket-powered kamikaze plane used by the Imperial Japanese Navy to carry out suicide attacks
- **Battlewagon:** a battleship
- **Flying bridge:** an open area on top of a ship that provides an unobstructed view of all sides of the ship
- **Foxhole:** a hole in the ground used by soldiers as shelter from enemy fire
- **Kamikaze:** a Japanese plane that crashes into a target deliberately, causing destruction of both the plane and the target
- **LCVP:** Landing craft, vehicle, personnel; Higgins boat; boat used for amphibious landings during WWII (sea to land)
- **LST:** Landing Ship, Tank; the name for ships used to support amphibious operations by carrying troops, vehicles, and supplies to shore without supporting infrastructure (docks, piers, etc.)
- **Shin'yō-class motorboat:** a Japanese motorboat; during WWII, Japanese Special Attack Units loaded the hull of the motorboat with explosives, and a single driver would drive the boat into the side of Allied naval ships, killing the driver and causing significant damage to Allied ships
- **Strafing:** attacking repeatedly with bombs or machine guns from low-flying aircraft

## IMPORTANT PLACES

- **Guam:** a U.S.-controlled territory in the western Pacific Ocean; during WWII, Guam was occupied by Japan shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and was recaptured by U.S. forces in 1944
- **Naha:** the capital of Okinawa, located on the southern tip of the island
- **Okinawa:** a Japanese island in the Ryukyu island chain, just south of the Japanese mainland; site of one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific campaign of WWII
- **Shuri Castle:** an historical castle located on Okinawa;
- **Sugar Loaf Hill:** a hill on the southern end of Okinawa, near Shuri; during WWII, Japanese forces tunneled under Sugar Loaf Hill and other nearby hills, creating vantage points and making it difficult for U.S. Marines to secure the area

## MEDALS

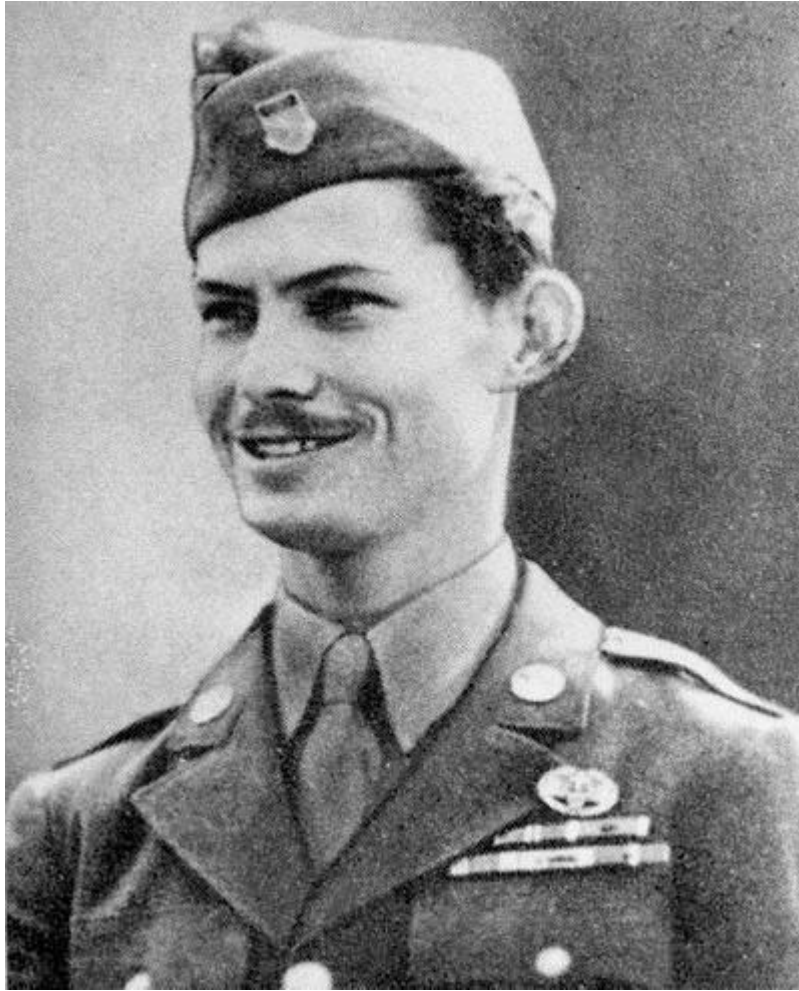
- **Medal of Honor:** the highest U.S. military decoration given for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty" – 23 Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions during the Battle of Okinawa



# OKINAWA TIMELINE

- **March 18, 1945:** preliminary bombardment of Okinawa by the U.S. Navy and Royal Navy begins
- **April 1, 1945:** the invasion of Okinawa begins; over 450,000 U.S. Army and Marine Corps soldiers land on the southwestern beaches of Okinawa; U.S. forces see little resistance and are able to capture the Yontan and Kadena airfields
- **April 6, 1945:** the Imperial Japanese Navy sends their largest battleship, the *Yamato*, towards Okinawa; over 300 Japanese aircraft participate in mass kamikaze attacks, which continue throughout the duration of the Battle of Okinawa
- **April 7, 1945:** In a series of attacks, U.S. forces destroy the *Yamato*; over 2,400 Japanese troops go down with the ship, including Admiral Seiichi Ito
- **April 12, 1945:** President Franklin D. Roosevelt dies while in office, shocking the nation; Vice President Harry S. Truman is sworn in as the 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States
- **April 20, 1945:** the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division captures the Motobu Peninsula on northern end of Okinawa
- **May 12, 1945:** the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Divisions begin an attempt to take Sugar Loaf Hill, but are driven back repeatedly by well-hidden Japanese troops in the surrounding hills; Marines continue to try to take Sugar Loaf Hill for the next seven days
- **May 18, 1945:** U.S. Marines finally capture Sugar Loaf Hill, having lost over 3,000 Marine Corps lives
- **May 31, 1945:** the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division captures the Shuri Castle
- **June 21, 1945:** the final Japanese stronghold is taken by U.S. troops; the Japanese Lieutenant General, Mitsuru Ushijima, is found dead by ritual suicide

# PROFILE OF A SOLDIER: DESMOND T. DOSS



Desmond T. Doss prior to being awarded the  
Medal of Honor, 1945

(U.S. Army)

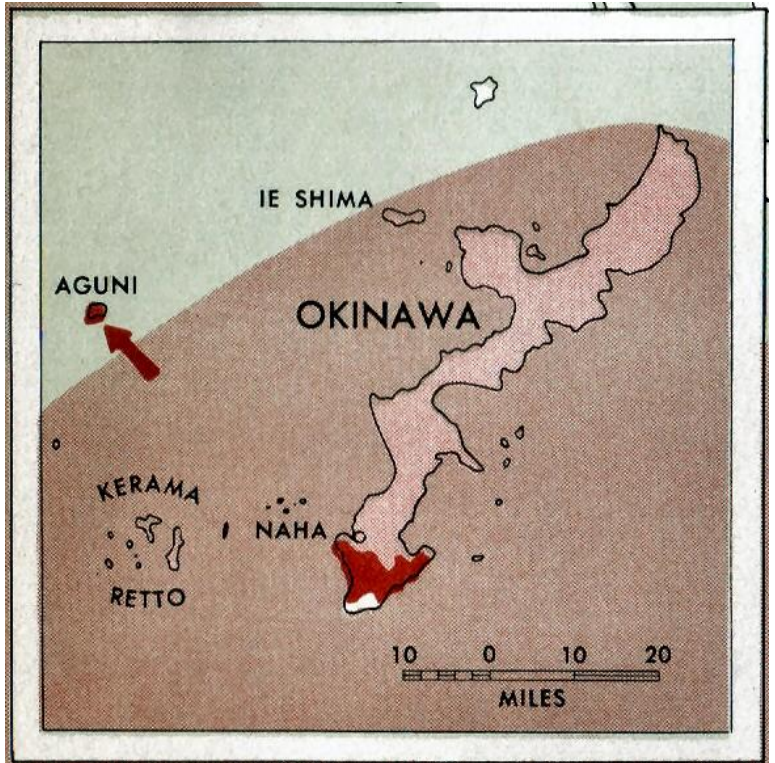
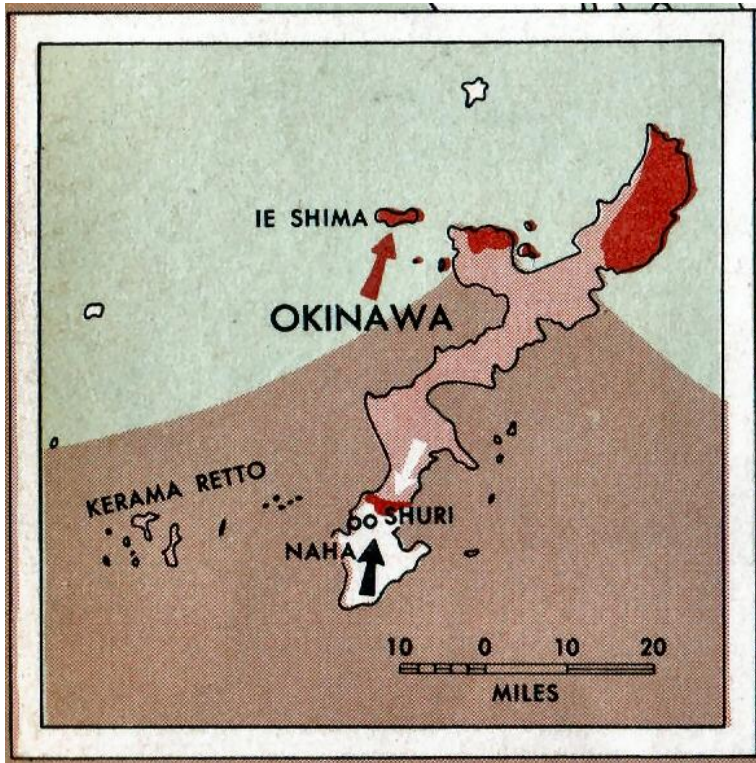
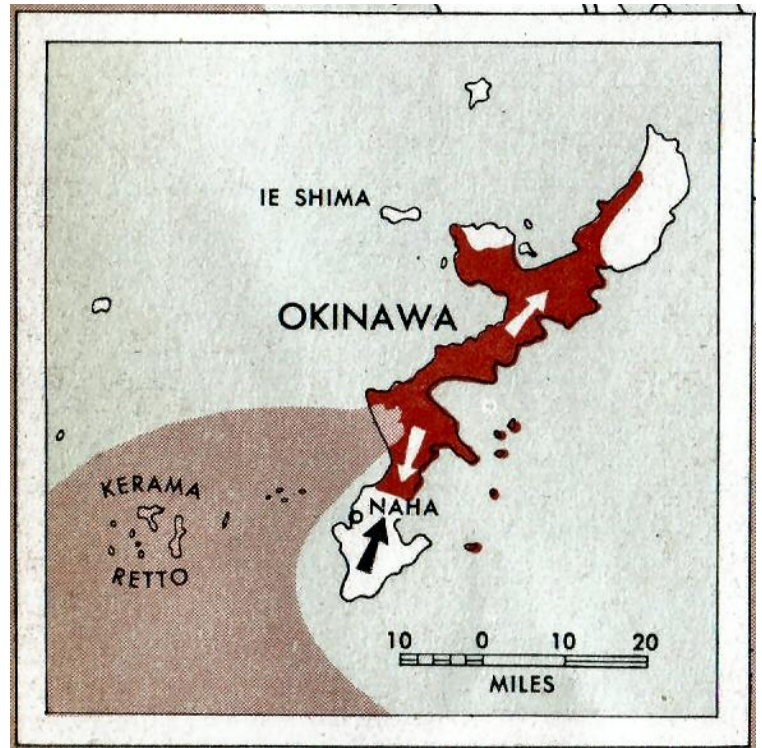
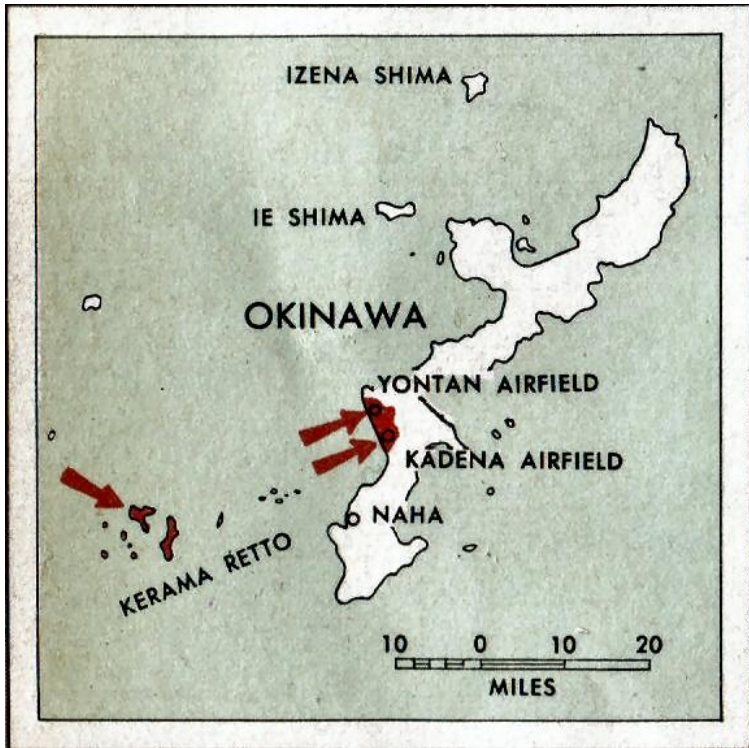
# PROFILE OF A SOLDIER: DESMOND T. DOSS

**Rank:** Private First Class, U.S. Army. **Birthdate:** February 7, 1919. **Birthplace:** Lynchburg, VA.  
**Unit:** 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Medical Detachment, 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry. **Date of Action:** April 29 – May 21, 1945. **Awards:** Medal of Honor, Bronze Star (2), Purple Heart (3).

**Medal of Honor Citation:** He was a company aidman when the 1st Battalion assaulted a jagged escarpment 400 feet high. As our troops gained the summit, a heavy concentration of artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire crashed into them, inflicting approximately 75 casualties and driving the others back. Pfc. Doss refused to seek cover and remained in the fire-swept area with the many stricken, carrying them 1 by 1 to the edge of the escarpment and there lowering them on a rope-supported litter down the face of a cliff to friendly hands. On 2 May, he exposed himself to heavy rifle and mortar fire in rescuing a wounded man 200 yards forward of the lines on the same escarpment; and 2 days later he treated 4 men who had been cut down while assaulting a strongly defended cave, advancing through a shower of grenades to within 8 yards of enemy forces in a cave's mouth, where he dressed his comrades' wounds before making 4 separate trips under fire to evacuate them to safety. On 5 May, he unhesitatingly braved enemy shelling and small arms fire to assist an artillery officer. He applied bandages, moved his patient to a spot that offered protection from small arms fire and, while artillery and mortar shells fell close by, painstakingly administered plasma. Later that day, when an American was severely wounded by fire from a cave, Pfc. Doss crawled to him where he had fallen 25 feet from the enemy position, rendered aid, and carried him 100 yards to safety while continually exposed to enemy fire. On 21 May, in a night attack on high ground near Shuri, he remained in exposed territory while the rest of his company took cover, fearlessly risking the chance that he would be mistaken for an infiltrating Japanese and giving aid to the injured until he was himself seriously wounded in the legs by the explosion of a grenade. Rather than call another aid man from cover, he cared for his own injuries and waited 5 hours before litter bearers reached him and started carrying him to cover. The trio was caught in an enemy tank attack and Pfc. Doss, seeing a more critically wounded man nearby, crawled off the litter; and directed the bearers to give their first attention to the other man. Awaiting the litter bearers' return, he was again struck, this time suffering a compound fracture of 1 arm. With magnificent fortitude he bound a rifle stock to his shattered arm as a splint and then crawled 300 yards over rough terrain to the aid station. Through his outstanding bravery and unflinching determination in the face of desperately dangerous conditions Pfc. Doss saved the lives of many soldiers. His name became a symbol throughout the 77th Infantry Division for outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty.







Progression of U.S. Armed Forces across Okinawa from April 1, 1945 to June 15, 1945

(U.S. Army)







U.S. Marines fighting near Naha, May 1945

(U.S. Department of Defense)



U.S. aircraft carrier Bunker Hill after being hit by a kamikaze plane near Okinawa,  
May 11, 1945

(National Archives)





Japanese battleship *Yamato* in 1941

(U.S. Naval Historical Center)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Japanese and Americans fight so fiercely for control of Okinawa?
2. Why were American ships so vulnerable during the invasion of Okinawa?
3. What impact do you think the Japanese suicide attacks had on the American soldiers?
4. Do you think that the people of Okinawa were victims of the Japanese?
5. Considering the difficulties faced by American GIs in Okinawa, what impact did it likely have on both soldiers themselves and the home front with regards to how they saw the Japanese theater of the Second World War?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about the experiences of Virginians in World War II, view *Virginians at War: Battle of the Bulge* and other films at [vawarmemorial.org](http://vawarmemorial.org). Looking to do more research? Check out the links below.

- <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Features/Story/Article/2130718/remembering-the-battle-of-okinawa/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Okinawa>
- <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa.html>
- <https://www.usni.org/battle-okinawa>
- <https://mohmuseum.org/okinawa/>
- [https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/bio.php?b=Doss Desmond Thomas](https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/bio.php?b=Doss%20Desmond%20Thomas)
- <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/okinawa-invasion-sugar-loaf-hill>
- [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/npswapa/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003135-00/sec5a.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/npswapa/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003135-00/sec5a.htm)

