

Virginians at War

WWII: Battle of Okinawa

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific Theater. After three and a half years of fighting in the Pacific, the United States and her allies had island-hopped over 6,000 miles north to Okinawa, which lay only 350 miles south of the mainland of Japan. The fight here proved to be the bloodiest of the Pacific campaign, with over 250,000 killed or wounded. The ferocity of this 82-day land, sea, and air battle was quickly overshadowed by events leading to the unconditional surrender of Japan, ending World War II.

OKINAWA

WILLIAMS: When I went up on deck that morning, way off in the distance, I could see the flashes in the sky. Looked like a big storm, off in the distance. But it was those battle wagons, firing at the island.

PERRIN: The General of the Japanese Army knew he had to defend the southern part of the island, because that was their last stand. We were 800 miles from Japan.

They wanted that island for an airstrip, to land their planes and refuel and go to Japan. We wanted the same thing, so we fought for it and we got it.

INVASION

JETT: The invasion was scheduled the next morning. April 1st, Easter Sunday morning. The most spectacular thing, I think, was watching the planes come in. They would come in in waves. First wave, for instance, would come in and drop bombs on the beach. The second wave would blaze right behind them and fire rockets. And the third wave would, with machine guns, strafe the beach. And then they would repeat the whole thing again.

PHIPPS: I was very fortunate, again. I was in the assault waves. Our battalion was designated to be in the first wave on Okinawa. They expected a hot beach on Okinawa, and it wasn't. We landed there on Easter Sunday, April of 1945. And it wasn't a hot beach.

UKROP: A cakewalk. And it was just like an exercise, a practice. No fire, no casualties. It was a beautiful morning, and nothing happened, which we weren't exactly sorry for.

SPESSARD: And on Okinawa, we went out on a place in Okinawa where the Japs' were not thinking we were going in. And there wasn't a shot fired. When we went in, there wasn't a shot fired at us until the second day.

JETT: As I said, without any opposition, we cut right straight across the island. Cut it in half. When we cut across those mountains, we had no way for the supply trucks to keep up with us. So, there were days when we actually had nothing to eat. My foxhole buddy and I caught a chicken. And we dressed it down and built a little fire, and proceeded to roast the chicken. Well, the Japanese artillery had other ideas. They saw the smoke and began to zero in on us, and we had to put the fire out. The chicken was really less than half done, but we ate it anyway. We were hungry enough to do that. But, I guess when you're hungry, you'll eat just about anything.

HEILMAN: And then, we moved on into the area, Okinawa area, where the kamikazes were coming down. We had literally hundreds, almost thousands, of ships in that area. You couldn't see anything but ships. But the troops, as we moved in – of course, we were more vulnerable, almost, by that time, on the ship than we would be on the shore – so we wanted to go ashore.

KAMIKAZE

WILLIAMS: Every evening, we could see those kamikazes come in there, and drop right down into those ships. I believe we lost over 5,000 sailors. When the kamikazes came in, every ship in that harbor would open fire on them. And that sky was black with shell burst, and you'd wonder how any plane would ever get through it. And they'd get through it.

WEISSLER: They'd come in loaded with, you know, armed torpedoes, munitions, and try to crash the ship. So it was pretty hairy. I was on the flying bridge, at the machine gun control, and a kamikaze came in and they tried to hit the bridge. Hit the after repair party hold. The aft end of the ship was in flames. There were no survivors.

ROBERTSON: When we got up around Okinawa, that was when the suicide planes really were getting... coming pretty fast and furious. And when the 5 inch 38 gun started firing, we knew that was when the planes were in the area. But when the 40 millimeter started going off, that would get your attention. You'd say, "Well, they're close by." And when the 20 millimeter started chattering, then you said, "You'd better brace yourself, 'cause here, it's coming your way then."

KEEGAN: Well, the Japanese were really desperate by this time, and they would send these aircraft down with, what looked like, a fat torpedo strapped underneath these aircraft. They could only carry one, and it was known in our language as a "Baka bomb," B-A-K-A bomb. And then there was the Japanese, lying prone to guide this thing, and he was on a suicide mission. Those Japanese would attempt to steer this bomb into one of the ships. Blow the ship, blow himself up.

TAYLOR: They had motorboats. Now, you talk about the kamikaze aircraft – they had motorboats that did the same thing. They would load them up with ammunition, and just ram right into your ship, in the hold. They were ready. They were ready to die to the last person.

WASHBURN: So of course, they're coming in alone. And the fleet just opened up and fired on him, because... and shot him down. We knew that was probably our plane, but the Japanese, by that point, had gotten to where they would – any plane that was shot down over their land, they'd rebuild it and bring it in, use it as a kamikaze plane. So you never knew what it was. But... if a guy gets lost from his group when he's on an attack, he's in trouble.

VANWORMER: I was just standing on the deck, with my back towards the fan tail, and I heard a plane. And I looked up, and here he was, right smack above us coming down. "Whambo," a bullet hit right beside me. When we got hit, it was just... the plane hit the deck, blew him out into the ocean, and he was just a kid. He didn't look but like a 14-year-old kid to me. So anyway, then when it hit, the ship list, the bomb went down to the armored deck and blew out the side of the ship. And that's how it got flooded so bad. Hit right in front of the bridge, and went right down through the officer's quarters and through the sick bay, and killed everybody.

YOUNG: I heard the 20 millimeters going off. I ran down the passageway, into my repair locker. I think what may have saved my life was, I went... I walked or ran through there, I pulled the water-tight door shut behind me. Well, the plane hit just a few feet on the other side of that door. I couldn't see it, of course, but it came straight down. About 50-some were killed, and most of them were in sick bay.

VANWORMER: We buried 27 out at sea, on the way to Guam. You know how they do that, they slip them off, and the Taps...

SUGAR LOAF HILL

JETT: And my division turned north, and our job was to secure the northern end of the island. And we had very little resistance. And then, they shipped us south. The

resistance was pretty heavy there. We did an all-out attack on Sugar Loaf Hill. Sugar Loaf was just a big pile of dirt, it looked like. It's about 300 yards long and about 50 feet high. Sugar Loaf itself was just catacomb with tunnels, and there were about 50 people on the surface of the ground. So you did not see the enemy at all. The terrain in front of the Sugar Loaf was wide open. We lost just about all but two officers right away. Battle for Sugar Loaf raged on for about ten days, and there were over 7,000 casualties on the part of Marine casualties. On the afternoon of May 12th, G Company hit Sugar Loaf Hill, and they were chewed up pretty bad. I don't know, I think they were down to about, maybe a dozen men out of something like 151.

WILLIAMS: It rained for 16 straight days on that island. A typhoon hit us, while we were there. And nothing could move.

JETT: Some time, when it's raining, a pretty steady rain outside, just picture yourself laying in a hole in that rain, and you're wet to the bone. Cold. Miserable. You can't go to sleep, because if you do, your enemy will come after you. You just lay there and suffer. There's nothing warm to drink, no food to eat, a lot of times even the rations didn't catch up with us. And it's a pretty miserable thing. You have no dry clothes to put on, no way of drying out. And everything was just a sea of mud and, of course, rain. And with no clothes to get into, we wore those things until they just dried on your back. Nothing romantic about war at all.

UKROP: My buddy and I hopped on this, almost like a mound. We could get good visibility, but you could also see us pretty good. And that morning, we had a little bit of a shell-in. We had an artillery shell landed between us, but it didn't go off. But we vacated that mound. We weren't going to wait for it. And all of a sudden, it felt like somebody hit me with a sledgehammer. And I said, "Uh oh!" And I'd been hit. And I had one go through my side, and one stuck. So they pulled it out. Now I kept that thing and somewhere or another, it was in my pack. Somebody stole my pack. That would have been a great souvenir. That finished me. They flew me to Guam. Of all the things, they sent me to an Army hospital. Only Marine in an Army hospital!

PERRIN: My greatest horror was Sugar Loaf Hill on Okinawa. I started up that hill with 252 men. In two days, it was only 50 of us left. And I was one of the 50 that was still living. We had no water, we had been cut off with communication. Our telephones had been cut. We had little ammunition. I took a picture of my wife, my girlfriend then, I took that out of my pocket and I held it, and I said, "Mabel, I love you so much. Goodbye." I knew that we were going to die.

JETT: That was... turned out to be, as I understand it, the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history, single battle. The Battle of Sugar Loaf Hill.

THE LAST BATTLE

STULL: When we cornered most of the Japanese Army, on the south end of Okinawa, we had one platoon, assigned a job of getting the Japanese soldiers and the civilians out of the caves. The Japanese soldiers took all the civilians and put them in caves to keep them from talking to us, because we had cornered actually, I think it was somewhere around 2,500 Japanese soldiers. At that time we were unable to save 250 of those Japanese soldiers, right then, committed suicide, jumped off the cliffs. Those cliffs were 300 feet down, and there were coral reefs down there, and water and things. But they... it must have been embedded in their mind that they were to die for their country. It was an honor for me to die for my country, but not by my own hand.

COHEN: The worst part of the war – you ever ask about the worst part of the war? – is never feeling that it's going to be over with, and you don't know whether you're gonna get back and see your family again. I would say that's worse than being scared, because it seems like it's going on and on. I never thought it would ever end. I really didn't. But we were fighting, and fighting, and fighting.

JETT: A quarter of a million people killed in 83 days... the reason we don't hear too much about Okinawa is, it's sort of overshadowed by President Roosevelt's death, the dropping of the A-bomb, and the surrender of Japan. Plus the fact that by then, the Americans were pretty tired of war and didn't want to hear any more about it. But it was really the bloodiest battle in the Pacific.

HEFFNER: Okinawa was a big test, and this was, in all likelihood, the preliminary or the preview for Japan itself.

PERRIN: She was always saying how much she missed me. And I thought, well, I got to go back to the United States. The United States is a great country. They say "God Bless America," and I do too.

Interested in learning more? Join us at vawarmemorial.org/learn for more films and resources! Contact education@vawarmemorial.org with any questions or if you have a correction for this film's transcript.