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EXPECT A SLAUGHTER

Virgil Gilliam

We had been told "to expect a slaughter on the beach," remembers Virgil Gilliam, a member of the First Marine Division. This was in preparation for the landing on Okinawa, the latest in the series of island strongholds to be retaken from the Japanese. Gilliam was a twenty year old replacement who had joined the First after its epic conquest of Guadalcanal.

The Japanese had changed policy at Okinawa, however, and the landings were made with relative ease. The new Imperial battle strategy was to let the troops land, but stiffen resistance as they moved inland and tried to secure the island. In the meantime, their fleet was to cut off all supplies and reinforcement, as well as air support, by destroying the American Pacific Fleet in the area. At that point, they could easily defeat the Americans who would then be isolated in every way. Obviously the plan failed for several reasons, including the inability of the Japanese navy to accomplish its mission, and the underestimation by the enemy command of the tenacity, determination, and courage of the American fighting man.

Okinawa was finally secured, but it was at a cost of some 50,000 US casualties. In that respect, the Japanese plan was successful. They were well entrenched in caves, tombs, and other similar locations. Even their heavy artillery was mounted on rails inside caves. Further success, from the Japanese viewpoint, was the sinking of some thirty-five American vessels, including at least one hospital ship. Most of these were sunk by kamikaze pilots. Many other ships were damaged the same way.

The strategic value of Okinawa was that it supported several airports on its 700 square miles of land, but, more importantly, it was only about 350 miles from Japan. In the planning for the final assault on Japan, and without knowledge of the atomic bomb, such considerations made Okinawa very important to the US as well as to the enemy. To this end, Japan had committed over 100,000 troops to the island; before the battle was finally over, there were more than 300,000 Americans on the island.

It was some five days after the landings were effected before there was much fighting. One of the war's most ferocious encounters began, with Japanese troops, aircraft, kamakazes, and the fleet all engaged in trying to defeat the Americans and preserve Okinawa. After almost three months of fighting, Okinawa was secured, at a cost of some 12,000 US dead and over 110,000 Japanese dead.

A macabre occasion was entering a Japanese-occupied cave, expecting the worst; instead, finding the body of an enemy officer with a caption on the cave wall: "Killroy was here!"

Gilliam recalls the taking of Shuri Castle, a historical monument antedating both the Chinese and Japanese occupation of Okinawa. "When it was time to raise the flag, we couldn't find one large enough; someone had a big Confederate flag, which we flew over Shuri until we got a big US flag, a few hours later."

Another pleasant memory which Gilliam has is of meeting famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle just a few days before he was killed by an enemy sniper.

The editors were provided memorabilia (correspondence, clippings, pictures, scrapbooks, etc.) on loan; this article is drawn from that information and from conversations with the author.