

WORLD WAR II:  
70 YEARS AGO



# Okinawa, 1945

## The Bloodstained Heights of Shuri

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USMC photos

*"[Shuri] is one of the most magnificent castle sites to be found anywhere in the world for it commands the countryside below for miles and looks toward distant sea horizons on every side."*

—Historian George H. Kerr

### Okinawa, Summer 1944

Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima was a realist. Newly appointed as commander of the 120,000 man-strong 32nd Imperial Japanese Army and charged with defending Okinawa from an American attack that was seen as inevitable, Ushijima knew that the assets he had were all he would have. He could not be reinforced.

He could not be resupplied; his adversary, however, could count on abundant additional manpower and firepower from the sea.

Could he hold the island faced with those conditions? Probably not. What he saw as his only realistic course of action was to exact such a cost in blood from the attackers that the American government

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**This Christian church provided Japanese snipers an ideal view of Marines advancing on Shuri, but it also provided the Marines with an ideal marker of the Japanese snipers' positions.**

would see a negotiated end to the war as preferable to continuing the fight. If there were to be any hope of avoiding an American invasion of the Japanese home islands, it lay in forcing the United States to fight an exorbitantly costly battle of attrition on Okinawa.

Where to bring that about? The more LTG Ushijima pondered that question,

the more he became convinced that the Shuri heights held the answer. No terrain on Okinawa offered a better possibility of forcing the Americans to fight on Japanese terms. Resting solidly on hills to the east and west, the heights dominated everything in front of them.

To build his defense system, Ushijima called upon the man he had personally selected to be his operations officer, Colonel Hiromichi Yahara. Yahara was the operations officer every commander dreams of, one who was able to "think in step" with his commander. Few were equal to him in understanding the commander's intent and concept of operations and bringing them to life. An exceptional tactician, Yahara possessed an uncommon ability to analyze terrain and use it to maximum advantage.

#### **Okinawa, May 1945**

Since walking ashore unopposed on the Hagushi beaches on L-Day, April 1, 1945, the Marines of LtGen Roy S. Geiger's III Amphibious Corps (III AC) had enjoyed a relatively easy campaign. The First Marine Division, led by Major General Pedro A. del Valle, quickly had seized all assigned objectives, cutting completely across the narrowest part of Okinawa, the Ishikawa Neck. Since then, the division had been engaged in extensive patrolling, encountering only scattered Japanese resistance. MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr.'s 6thMarDiv had turned left and begun eliminating more determined Japanese resistance in northern Okinawa and the Motobu Peninsula. Remaining afloat as corps reserve was MajGen LeRoy P. Hunt's 2dMarDiv.

It didn't take Marines ashore very long to accept that the month of April was only an interlude. Each passing day brought increasing evidence that the major fight on Okinawa would be to the south where U.S. Army forces of MG John R. Hodge's XXIV Corps were encountering the out-post positions of COL Yahara's Shuri Line. The distant rumble of battle, a rumble that became more pronounced every 24 hours, was a constant background to everything Marines farther north did. Soon enough they, too, would be going "down south."

On April 30, elements of the 1stMarDiv began relieving units of the 27th Infantry Div on the extreme right flank of XXIV Corps in the vicinity of Yafuso-Machinato. When fully relieved, the 27th Infantry

Div, which had sustained nearly 3,000 crippling casualties breaching the Shuri outer defenses, would be shifted north, releasing the 6thMarDiv to join the fight in the south. With the two fresh divisions of III AC anchoring the right of his line, LTG Simon B. Buckner, USA would have the major combat power of his 10th Army to throw against the Shuri Line.

As the 1stMarDiv was moving to the south, significant elements of LTG Ushijima's 32nd Army were moving northward. After persistent urging by his firebrand chief of staff, MG Isamu Cho, LTG Ushijima had agreed to launch a major counter-attack against the 10th Army. Only COL Yahara had argued against the attack, summarizing his objection concisely: "To take the offensive with inferior forces against absolutely superior enemy forces is reckless and would only lead to certain defeat." He was overruled. Events would prove him right.

In the early hours of May 4, Japanese ground forces attacked in strength at all points on the 10th Army front. The primary Japanese attack was made by the Japanese 24th Div, supported by its own divisional artillery and all the guns of MG Kosuke Wada's 5th Artillery Command. The 77th Infantry Div bore the brunt of the attack, and despite suffering severe casualties, the 77th held its positions.

The newly arrived 1stMarDiv was the objective of an unusual shore-to-shore envelopment attempted by Naha-based Japanese units. Shortly after 1 a.m. on May 4, landing craft carrying the Japanese 26th Shipping Engineer Regiment made for what they believed was the unguarded 1stMarDiv rear in the vicinity of Oyama. Supporting the attack were personnel of the 26th, 28th and 29th Sea Raiding squadrons who had waded offshore under cover of darkness. The mission of the entire Japanese force was to attack targets in the 1stMarDiv's rear areas.

The attackers had become seriously disoriented, however. Instead of going ashore at Oyama, their objective, the landing craft and the waders made landfall near Kuwan, directly into the beach defenses of Col Kenneth B. Chappell's First Marine Regiment. Fire from the Marine lines tore into them like a scythe as Marines poured in fire from every available weapon.

Sergeant E.P. Warren remembered, "We caught them completely in the open, without any cover at all. They didn't have a

chance.” The Japanese attempt to envelop the 1stMarDiv’s seaward flank ended in a bloodbath.

The main Japanese attack, which fell on the 77th Infantry Div, fared no better. Raw courage, and the Japanese suffered from no shortage of that, could not overcome the fires of 43 battalions of Marine and Army artillery that combined with the naval gunfire support of 19 battleships and 34 cruisers. Adding to the carnage were air strikes by more than 700 Marine Corps and Navy aircraft.

By nightfall on May 4, it was over. The Japanese 24th Div had ceased to exist, but the Americans also paid a heavy price. Among units of the 10th Army, the 77th Infantry Div counted more than 700 combat casualties. In cleaning up the remaining Japanese pockets in its zone of action, the 1stMarDiv sustained losses of 649 front-line Marines. The Japanese losses, however, were permanent. Americans put out of action could be replaced; not so, the Japanese. COL Yahara’s prediction had proved correct.

Very little of combat is easy. In light of what was to come, the repulse of the Japanese attack might have been thought of as almost a respite. Badly bloodied, but far from beaten, the Japanese were back in their fortified positions. Defended by men determined to fight for as long as they drew breath, each one of those positions would have to be blasted and burned into submission. It all would be infinitely harder.

On May 6, LTG Buckner issued Operation Order 7-45 to all subordinate units of 10th Army. The entire 10th Army was to assume the offensive, the objective of which was the destruction of Japanese forces in the Shuri bastion and breaking out to the south. The attack would be made by two divisions, the 7th and 77th Infantry divisions of XXIV Corps on the left (east), and III AC, also with two divisions, 1stMarDiv and 6thMarDiv, on the right (west).

They would have to attack against more than a dozen carefully selected strongpoints, each of which had been sited to bring maximum defensive fires to bear, while at the same time providing covering fires for adjacent strongpoints. Soldiers and Marines would not be able to attack any one position without being brought under fire by at least two other positions. Making the task even more formidable, the American attacks would require going forward over ground which had been meticulously surveyed and registered for the fires of supporting artillery. To make the American offensive even more chal-

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lenging, it would have to be done under the observation of sharp-eyed Japanese forward artillery observers who saw everything and missed nothing from their vantage point at Shuri.

It got worse. The spring rains began. Marines who fought on Okinawa in that spring of 1945 remembered May as the month when it rained every day. While not exactly true, a man could be excused for thinking that it seemed that way. Worse,



**Army LTG Simon B. Buckner, left, would be killed by Japanese artillery fire June 18, 1945, on Okinawa. Marine MajGen Roy S. Geiger, right, who commanded III AC, assumed command of 10th Army and became the only Marine officer to ever command a field army.**

the rain that fell was cold, driven by an ugly wind that made raindrops feel like ice pellets. For Marines only recently arrived from tropical climes just below the equator, who were soaked to the skin, with their teeth chattering, the wind-driven rain was a particularly miserable torment.

With the rain came mud. The terrain before Shuri dissolved into a bog of mud,

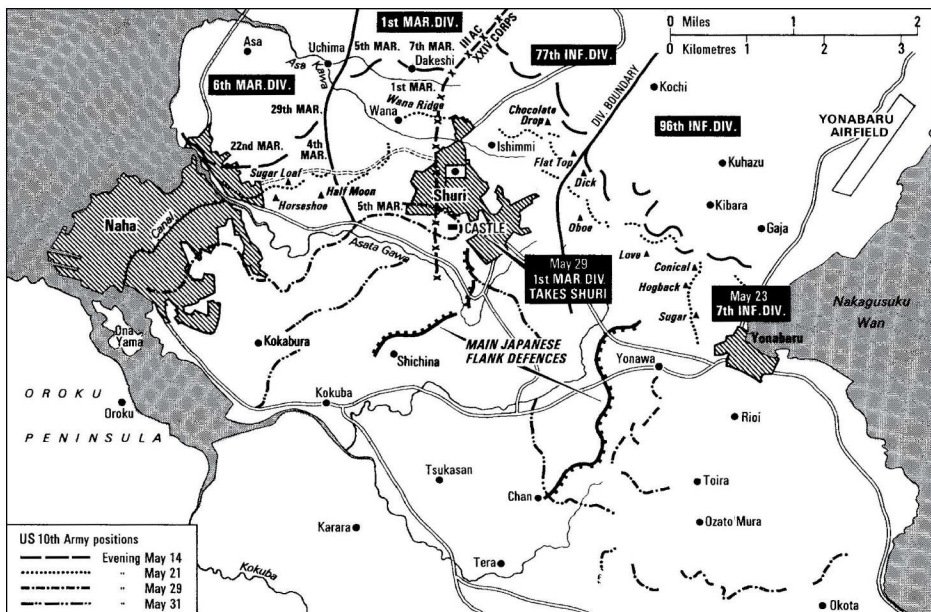
liquid mud, thick, viscous glue-like mud, ankle-deep, shin-deep, knee-deep, thigh-deep mud, through which mud-caked men floundered in slow motion. The Okinawan road system, little more than dirt tracks, collapsed in rivers of foot-sucking mud in which even tracked vehicles struggled. The supply system staggered to a crawl. Only through a near superhuman effort was ammunition for the attack dragged and man-handled forward by mud-plastered, rain-drenched men who were near malnourishment. Rations were somewhere back in the rear, stuck in an ocean of mud.

Before the all-out attack on the Shuri Line could take place, the last of the Japanese outer defenses had to be overcome. For the 1stMarDiv, that in itself would be a major undertaking faced as it was by a jumble of low hills and ridges in the Dakeshi-Awacha hill complex. Each one of those had been transformed into a fortified position by Japanese engineers. It was a brutal slug match which cost the 1stMarDiv 1,409 combat casualties in six days of constant fighting.

At the same time it was fighting, the division was shifting, maintaining contact with XXIV Corps on the left while shortening its front in order for the 6thMarDiv to take up position on the right. Once in position, both divisions of LtGen Roy Geiger’s III AC would be faced with two of the strongest positions of the Japanese main line of resistance. Before the 1stMarDiv lay the Wana Ridge-Wana Draw terrain, while the 6thMarDiv would be confronted by the Sugar Loaf, Half Moon and Horseshoe hill complex, the westward anchor of the entire Shuri Line. Marines might not have encountered two more murderous pieces of real estate on the same island in the war in the Pacific.

Wana Ridge was sited perfectly to block the only good axis of attack against Shuri itself. Before the 1stMarDiv could even reach a jumping-off point from which to launch an attack, the Japanese forces in the Awacha Pocket and Dakeshi Ridge had to be eliminated. That effort would take bitter fighting through a hotly contested system of mutually supporting strongpoints, all the while under deadly accurate mortar and artillery concentrations. It would take the best efforts of two regiments, first the 5th Marines, then the 7th Marines, an entire week of white-hot fighting to wrest those bits of terrain from the Japanese defenders of the 44th Independent Mixed Brigade.

To the right, the 6thMarDiv faced equal difficulties overcoming the screening



It was a particularly slow and dogged slugfest over Okinawa's rugged terrain. Japanese forces begrudgingly gave only inches at a time. Here, 6thMarDiv demolitions experts detonate charges at a Japanese-held cave.



positions that shielded the division's primary objective, Sugar Loaf Hill, and its two satellites, Half Moon and Horseshoe. Those three low hills that anchored the western end of COL Yahara's Shuri Line could not have been better sited to hold that line and to beat back attacks against them.

None of the three hills was that high. While the kingpin, Sugar Loaf, showed on maps as 235 feet in elevation, the 300-yard-long east-west running hill rose scarcely more than 50 feet above the surrounding landscape. While Sugar Loaf was barely high enough to show on a map as a hill at all, its steep and precipitous sides dominated the level terrain all about. The presence of Horseshoe to the south and Half Moon to the southeast ensured that an attack against any one of the three from any direction would be taken under fire by all three.

On Saturday, May 12, four separate attempts to wrest Sugar Loaf from the Japanese of COL Seiko Mita's 15th Independent Mixed Regt met the same fate. The first of those, carried out by Captain Owen Stebbins' Company G, 2d Battalion, 22d Marines, literally was shot to pieces by the time it reached the base of Sugar Loaf. Although wounded himself, the company's sole remaining effective officer, First Lieutenant Dale W. Bair, led a handful of Marines to the crest of Sugar Loaf. Raked and minced by fire from Horseshoe and Half Moon, along with artillery fire from Shuri itself, which reduced them to an even smaller handful, the Marines dragged their wounded down the hill while friendly artillery did its best

to screen their withdrawal with smoke.

Despite air strikes, naval gunfire support and the fires of the 6thMarDiv's total artillery assets, none of the other attempts to carry Sugar Loaf that day fared any better. While an attack might gain the summit, once it did, there were not enough able-bodied Marines left to stay there. Of the 230 members of G/2/22 who made the initial attack, 73 answered roll call that evening.

The next day saw yet another series of attempts to wrest Sugar Loaf from its

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defenders. None was successful. Sugar Loaf could be taken, but it could not be held. It was the same story each time. For every three Marines to gain the crest of Sugar Loaf, two were wounded or killed.

Monday, May 14, dawned with a downpour of rain that never let up. Late in the afternoon, Major Henry A. Courtney, executive officer of 2/22, led yet another attempt against Sugar Loaf over ground that lacked very little to become a swamp, reaching the top by sheer determination. There, amid a storm of Japanese fire that Browning Automatic Rifleman Lester Brandt later described as "the worst hell

I experienced in combat," Maj Courtney fell when a Japanese mortar shell burst at his feet. The Medal of Honor would be presented to his next of kin.

Corporal James L. "Jim" Day, a 19-year-old machine-gun squad leader, also would receive the nation's highest award for military valor at Sugar Loaf. Fighting from a shell crater on Sugar Loaf's north face for three days, Jim Day and his small squad beat back every Japanese attempt to overrun them until only Cpl Day and Private First Class Dale Bertolli remained, having accounted for 142 Japanese. The original recommendation for Jim Day's award was lost for years. It wasn't until 1998 that the President of the United States would place the blue ribbon of the Medal of Honor around the neck of MajGen James L. Day, USMC (Ret).

No less difficult than Sugar Loaf was for the 6thMarDiv, Wana posed an equally harrowing test for the 1stMarDiv. Like Sugar Loaf, the Wana position was east-west oriented. Also in common with Sugar Loaf, Wana was perfectly sited to block an attack on Shuri. As the 1stMarDiv's Special Action Report summed up the situation, in constructing their defensive positions, the Japanese had "taken advantage of every feature of a terrain so difficult it could not have been better designed if the enemy himself had the power to do so."

Getting to a point where it was possible to launch an attack on Wana had been costly. To attack Wana, it had first been necessary to eliminate the Japanese holding the Dakeshi-Awacha positions. That had cost Col Edward W. Snedeker's 7th Marines nearly 1,300 casualties. There were a dismaying number of non-battle casualties in the bargain. Cases of dysentery reached near-epidemic proportions. There were no light-duty chits. Marines afflicted with that vile scourge gritted their teeth and "toughed it out."

With Marines living in mud and water around the clock day after day, an affliction never before encountered in the Pacific began to appear. More and more cases of immersion foot were reported. And there was a sharp rise in the incidence of combat fatigue, men simply worn out and exhausted by endless days of constant action in a natural environment that can be described only as atrocious. Most Marines so afflicted would be fine after a few days of a precious commodity that had been denied them: simple rest.

Every assault on Wana was an excruciating and costly affair. Diabolical is a word that goes a long way toward describing the design of the defenses held by the Japanese 62nd Div. Perfectly protected from almost anything short of a direct



While Americans celebrated VE Day on May 8, 1945, Marines on Okinawa were moving men and supplies to the front by slogging through a morass of mud caused by incessant rain. Without letting up on the enemy, the Marines pushed on to Naha.



Supporting a Marine infantry unit, a flame-throwing tank of the 713th Armored Flamethrower Bn burns out a Japanese position.

hit, each individual position covered by the fires of two or more others, there was no such thing as absolute cover for Marines attempting to come to grips with the defenders.

Tank-infantry teams, flame throwers, demolition charges, white-phosphorus shells and grenades were the weapons of choice. While all of these were effective, they required getting in close by Marines who were under constant fire from the Japanese.

Everything in the line of supporting arms was thrown at the Wana position. Marine and Navy aircraft hammered at Wana and Shuri. The 105 mm and 155 mm guns of the 1stMarDiv's artillery, the 11th Marines, pounded targets in the Wana complex relentlessly. For three days the battleship USS *Mississippi* (BB-41) rained 14-inch projectiles on Shuri, reducing the ancient home of the rulers of the Ryukyu Kingdom to rubble. Still, it was the Marines of the 1stMarDiv who had to get in close and finish the job there.

That was the way it went day after day. And the miserable rain never let up. De-

spite all that, new Japanese positions were discovered constantly, while old positions that had been neutralized were reconstructed and camouflaged again each night.

Finally, after great effort, it all paid off. On Friday, May 18, a three-pronged simultaneous attack on Sugar Loaf, Horseshoe and Half Moon by 29th Marines caught the Japanese completely off guard. The western anchor of the Shuri Line had fallen. Three days later the 7th Infantry Div, operating on the left flank of 10th Army, penetrated far enough down Okinawa's east coast to allow the Japanese strongpoint of Conical Hill to be taken from the rear. The Shuri Line was untenable.

The opportunity to completely destroy the 32nd Army was there, but a rain-soaked battlefield that was now a sea of mud, broken only by the raging torrents of overflowing watercourses, saved it from annihilation. At midnight on May 22, Japanese forces began a slow evacuation of the Shuri defenses. At 10:15 a.m., May 24, a patrol from Co A, 1st Bn, 5th Marines entered the ruins of Shuri Castle.

One member of that patrol, Cpl Irvin R. "Dick" Stone remembered, "I was too damn tired, soaking wet and hungry to think much about it."

There would be more fighting on Okinawa, but from that point on, the Japanese position was hopeless. In the end, more than 110,000 Japanese soldiers would die on Okinawa. LTG Buckner's X Army would suffer nearly 50,000 in dead, wounded and missing.

*Author's note: Pounded to rubble in 1945, Shuri Castle has been magnificently rebuilt, and it is well-worth visiting. While you are there, spare a moment or two to think of the price paid by the Marines of 1945 for you to be where you are standing.*

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