OPERATION DOWNFALL: The Devil Was in the Details

By D. M. GIANGRECO

World War II ended with the dropping of "the bomb" on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This sudden and unanticipated conclusion to the conflict was greeted with joy by the entire Nation, not least by the 2.5 million Americans slated to invade Japan's Home Islands including Tokyo itself. The invasion forces were not only to come from the Pacific; First Army, which had pummelled its way from Normandy to the heart of Germany, and Eighth Air Force, which was based in England, were on the way. Morale was not good among veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, Guadalcanal, and other campaigns. As James Jones later wrote: "What it must have been like to some old-timer buck sergeant . . . [knowing] that he very likely had survived this far only to fall dead in the dirt of Japan's Home Islands, hardly bears thinking about."

Combat had been so bloody and prolonged that those who experienced it first hand felt little need to justify their belief that the atom bomb probably saved their lives. Their families, indeed, most Americans, understood this. Today, this sentiment is under attack by many who hold that using the bomb against Japan was cruel and unnecessary; but aside from the decades-old numbers game played by revisionist historians and veterans' groups alike, virtually no research has been produced on the invasion plans. John Ray Skates, a visiting professor at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, recently tried to fill this void in *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*. (See the review of Skates' book by H. P. Wilmott in *JFQ*, Autumn/Winter 1994–95, p. 127, which prompted this article.)

Skates examines the invasion plans, offering details on esoteric subjects such as resupply over the beach and combat air patrols against suicide aircraft. But while his book is a windfall for anyone interested in the final days of the war, a range of problems negates much of its value and makes it useful to those attempting to reengineer history. Skates states, for instance, that "the last months of the Pacific war were stirred [by] passions that drove the war into extremes of violence" with "passion, hatred, and frustration moving almost beyond rational limits." Debate over how many casualties might have resulted from an invasion has long been a preoccupation of revisionist historians, and Skates joins the fray with gusto. He uses contradictory figures ascribed to various civilian and military leaders with ostensibly self-serving motives. That they might have attempted to make the best estimates possible with the information at their disposal does not seem to occur to him. One example is a casualty estimate that General George Marshall received from General Douglas MacArthur.

The Numbers Game

MacArthur had twice come up with figures exceeding 100,000 casualties for the first three months of combat on the southern island of Kyushu which Skates contrasts with President Harry Truman's post-war statement that Marshall had said that the casualties from invading Kyushu and Honshu—including the Kanto Plain and Tokyo—could range from 250,000 to 1,000,000. Even discounting the fact that the figures represent expected losses for the entire campaign in the Home Islands, Skates claims they exceed those which Marshall received from MacArthur, asserting that "there is no substantiation beyond Truman's own memory." He adds that "a casual and informal estimate would have been out of character for Marshall, whose statements were always careful and measured." But it is possible that the President was telling the truth, and that the numbers given were indeed Marshall's "careful and measured" opinion.

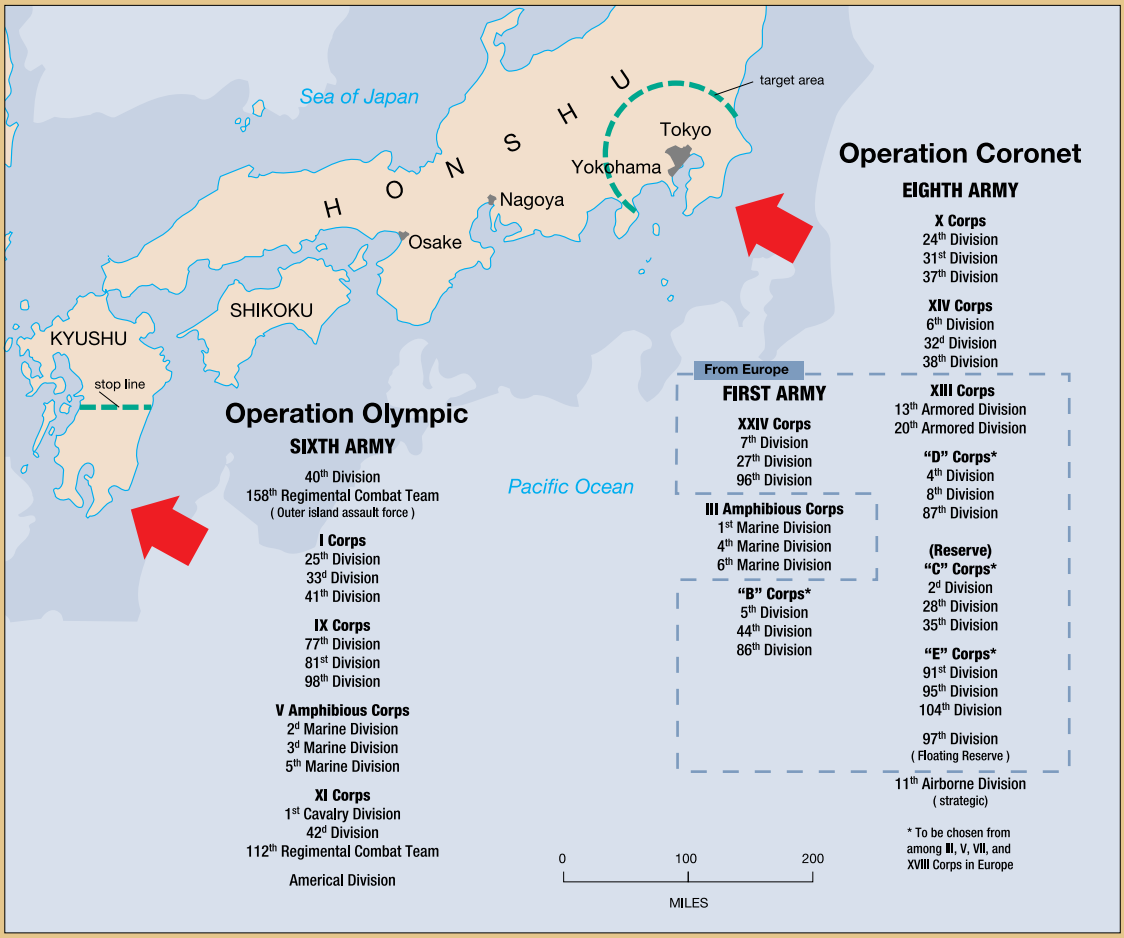
When Marshall briefed Truman prior to the session on July 25 at the Potsdam conference, he was under no obligation to portray MacArthur's casualty figures as the last word. Both men were intimately familiar with losses in the Pacific over the previous year—over 200,000 wounded, plus 10,000 American dead and missing in the Marianas, 5,500 on and around Leyte, 9,000 on Luzon, 6,800 at Iwo Jima, 12,600 at Okinawa, and 2,000 killed in the unexpectedly vicious fighting on Peleliu. Both also knew that, save for some operations around New Guinea, real casualties were routinely outpacing estimates and the gap was widening. They also knew that while America always emerged victorious, operations often were not being completed as rapidly as planned—with all the added cost in blood and treasure that such lengthy campaigns entailed.

Leyte is a perfect example. It was to the Luzon campaign what the Kyushu invasion was to the capture of Tokyo, a preliminary operation to create a huge staging area. Today, we can recall MacArthur wading ashore triumphantly in the Philippines. But what Truman and Marshall knew only too well was that MacArthur was supposed to have retaken Leyte with four divisions and have eight fighter and bomber groups striking from the island within 45 days of the initial landings. Nine divisions and 60 days into the battle, however, only a fraction of that airpower was operational because of unexpected terrain conditions (and this on an island which the United States had occupied for forty years). Nor had fighting on the ground gone as planned. The Japanese even briefly isolated Fifth Air Force headquarters and also captured much of the Burauen airfield complex.

Skates records incredulously that a figure of up to one million casualties far exceeded those sustained in Europe. But while the naval side of the Pacific War displayed the broad, sweeping moves so loved by historians, land combat had little in common with the maneuver warfare that went a long way toward keeping casualties comparatively low in northwest Europe. The closest commanders came after D-Day to corps-level combat which was the stock and trade of Army and Marine divisions in the Pacific was the prolonged fighting in Normandy's hedgerows and Huertgen Forest—close-in, infantry-intensive slugfests that produced many dead on both sides.

D.M. Giangreco serves on the editorial staff of *Military Review*. Among his publications are *Airbridge to Berlin: The Berlin Crisis of 1948* and *Stealth Fighter Pilot*.

Provisional Order of Battle for Invasion of Japan (August 1945)



Source: General Headquarters, U.S. Forces in the Pacific, Operation Coronet Staff Study.

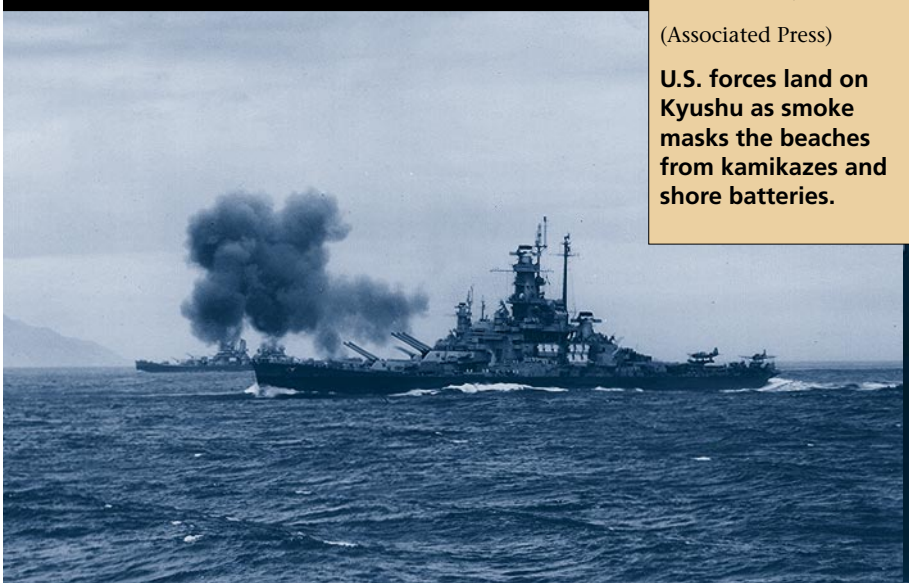
DATELINE:

MAINLAND JAPAN

December 8, 1945.

(Associated Press)

U.S. forces land on Kyushu as smoke masks the beaches from kamikazes and shore batteries.



It is also important to note that when they met in Potsdam, Truman and Marshall knew that total U.S. casualties were approaching the 1,230,000 mark that Skates finds unfathomable, the bulk having occurred in just the previous year.

Marshall had MacArthur's figures on July 25, 1945, and had seen countless other well-intentioned estimates. He also appreciated that at some point the President—as any commander in chief might do—was going to ask him a question that would rely not only on the numbers in hand, but on his intuition and experience as a soldier. An artillery commander from the Meuse-Argonne battles of World War I would ask a man who had walked over the same bloody fields, "But general, what do you really think?"

A Time to Invade

There were plenty of estimates that confidently asserted that strategic bombing, blockades, or both—even the invasion of Kyushu alone—would bring Japan to its senses, but no one could provide a convincing explanation on how long that would take. The millions of Americans poised to take part in the largest invasion in history, as well as those supporting them, could only stay poised for so long. Leaders in both Washington and Tokyo knew this just as well as the theater commanders in the Pacific. After learning of the bomb, MacArthur ignored it save for considering how to integrate the new weapon into plans for tactical operations at Kyushu and Honshu if Tokyo was not forced to the surrender table. Nimitz was of a similar mind. On being told that the bomb would become available in August, he reputedly remarked, "In the meantime I have a war to fight."

An article of faith among some critics of the bomb is that Truman and his advisors knew that Japan was on the ropes and would soon surrender. The reality in 1945 was vastly different and leaders at all levels worked under the assumption that the United States would go all the way to Tokyo the hard way. Construction of the massive prefabricated components of a portable harbor to support forces invading Honshu had a priority second only to the Manhattan Project which had produced the bomb. Stateside hospitals were readied for a flood of wounded.

Skates takes Truman and his contemporaries to task for considering casualty figures that "were without basis in contemporary planning" but asks readers to feel comfortable with his own estimate of a "tolerable" total of no more than 20,000 while confidently asserting that the Japanese would have surrendered posthaste before the invasion of Honshu. He makes much of a postwar report by Colonel Riley Ennis of the Operations Division of the War Department on how the war might have progressed absent the bomb. Ennis, a newly-promoted colonel, was tasked to produce this brief analysis, clearly put together in a hurry by someone whose heart was not in it. In a way, though, it actually does not differ much from numerous other documents produced after the war in that it was not based on original research and analysis but patched together from various sources that tended to be liberally salted with hindsight unavailable six months earlier.

Ennis guessed the number of casualties that would have resulted from invading Kyushu by essentially lifting MacArthur's original estimates and merging them with post-war sources such as a Sixth Army report on "Japanese Plans for the Defense of Kyushu." When reading this and other analyses, it is difficult not to notice that they follow the tendency to build scenarios or conclusions around the Japanese defensive strength of mid-August when pitted against U.S. offensive strength amassed in November. As with other such reports, a slight whiff of overoptimism is discernable. It concludes that casualties would have ranged from 75,000 to 100,000 for the Kyushu operation. But Skates then takes this figure, quips that his "study of the record leads to similar conclusions," and proceeds to reduce it to 60,000 to 75,000 without giving the reader a clue on how he did it.

The attempt by Skates to build a what-did-Truman-know-and-when-did-he-know-it case is all the more disingenuous when one learns that the author is aware that four days after Marshall's briefing came the July 29 change to an earlier report on enemy strength on Kyushu. This update set alarm bells ringing in MacArthur's headquarters as well as Washington because it stated bluntly that the Japanese were rapidly reinforcing Kyushu and had increased troop strength from 80,000 to 206,000 men "with no end in sight." Finally, it warned that Japanese efforts were "changing the tactical and strategic situation sharply." While the dramatic no end in sight claim turned out to be wrong, the confirmed figures were ominous enough for Marshall to ponder scrapping the Kyushu operation altogether even though MacArthur maintained that it was still the best option available. With this in mind, the ratcheting down of potential casualties on Kyushu is all the more puzzling.

So what can be learned from *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb?* The author's remarkably low casualty estimate seems to derive from the well-documented weakness of Japanese forces as they existed 75 days—and, as will be seen, actually 105 to 120 days—from the invasion of Kyushu; an incomplete understanding of how Japanese defensive operations were conducted; an uneven application of logic on estimates of Japanese combat strength after a defeat on Kyushu; and an eager willingness to select and shape facts that support the thesis that U.S. forces would have suffered relatively few casualties in an invasion, and that Tokyo was ready to throw in the towel.

Naming the Day

The Joint Chiefs originally set the date for the invasion of Kyushu (Operation Olympic) as December 1, 1945, and for Honshu (Operation Coronet) as March 1, 1946. To lessen casualties the launch of Coronet would await the arrival of two armored divisions from Europe to sweep up the Kanto Plain before the valleys turned into vast pools of rice, muck, and water crisscrossed by elevated roads and dominated by rugged, well-defended foothills.

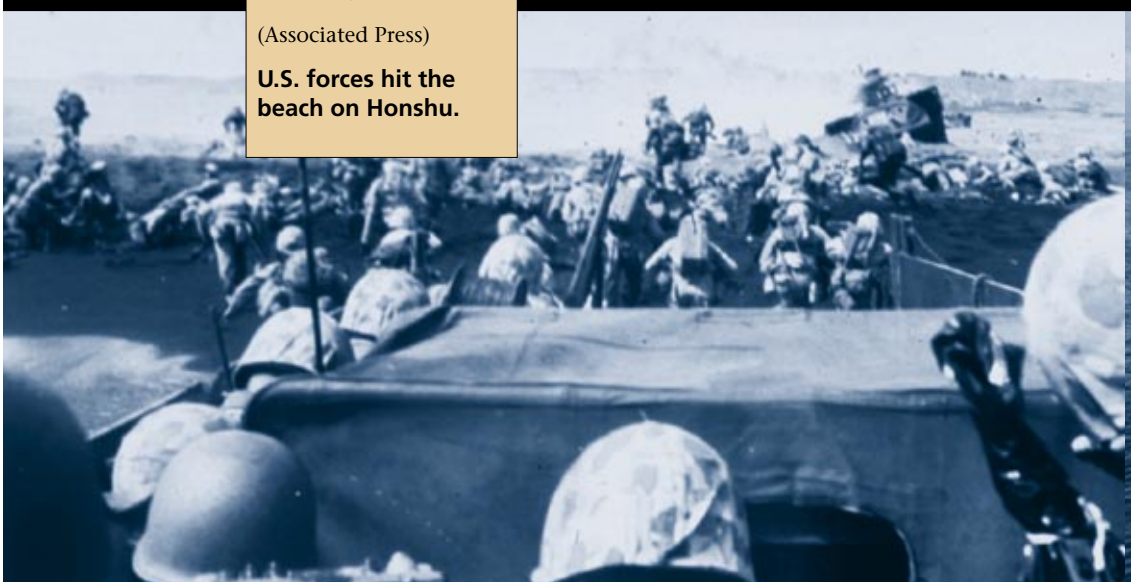
DATELINE:

MAINLAND JAPAN

March 1, 1946.

(Associated Press)

U.S. forces hit the beach on Honshu.



AT SEA

March 24, 1946.

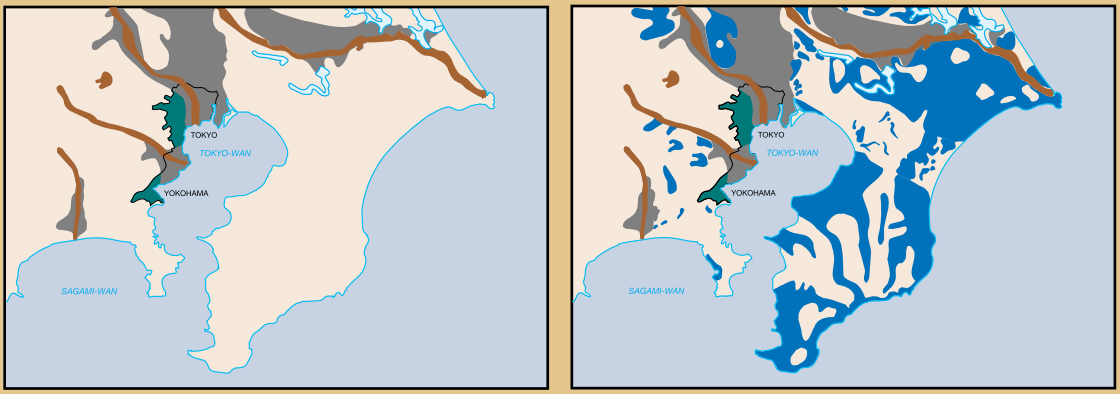
Fires swept *USS Antietam* after Japanese suicide pilot crashes into planes being refueled near the stern.

[U.S. Navy photo]

Before the British experienced the tragedy of pushing XXX Corps up a single road through the Dutch lowlands to Arnhem, U.S. planners were aware of the costs that would be incurred if the Kanto Plain was not secured for mobile warfare and airfield construction prior to the wet season. Intensive hydrological and weather studies begun in 1943 made it clear that an invasion in early March offered the best chance of success, with the situation deteriorating as the month progressed.

With good luck, relatively free movement across the plain might even be possible well into April. Unfortunately, this assumed that the snow run-off from the mountains would not be severe, or that the Japanese would not flood the fields. While subsequent post-war prisoner interrogations did not reveal any plans to systematically deluge low-lying areas, a quick thrust up the Kanto Plain would not have been as speedy as Skates suggests. First, there were no bridges in the area capable of taking vehicles over 12 tons. Every tank, self-propelled gun, and prime mover would have to cross bridges erected for the event. Next, logistical considerations and the sequence of follow-up units would require that armored divisions not land until Y+10. This would provide time for the defenders to observe that the U.S. infantry's generic tank support was severely hampered by already flooded rice fields and would certainly suggest ways to make things worse for the invaders.

The Inundation of the Tokyo Plain—Areas of natural flooding in the wet season (shaded brown) and temporary artificial flooding (gray) are shown at left; combined areas of paddy fields (blue) and flooding form obstacles at right which indicate full impact of both natural and man-made barriers.



Source: Military Intelligence Section, General Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces in the Pacific.

A late start on Honshu would leave American forces to fight their way up flood plains that were only dry during certain times of the year but that could be suddenly inundated by the enemy. If the timetable slipped, U.S. soldiers and marines would risk fighting in terrain similar to that later encountered in Vietnam, less the helicopters, where convoys moved on roads above paddy fields. Unfortunately, foul weather would have delayed base development on Kyushu and spelled a late start for the operation.

Engineer planning for Coronet envisioned the construction of 11 airfields on Kyushu for the 31 air groups that would soften up Honshu. Bomb and fuel storage, roads, wharves, and base facilities would be needed to support those air groups plus Sixth Army holding a 110-mile "stop line" one third of the way up the island. All plans centered on construction of the minimum essential operating facilities, but that minimum grew. The 31 air groups increased to 40, then to 51—all for an island on which there was considerably less terrain information than was erroneously collected about Leyte. Many airfields would come on line early to support ground operations on Kyushu, but lengthy strips and support facilities for Honshu-bound medium and heavy bombers would only start to become available 45 days into the operation. Most were not projected to be ready until 90 to 105 days after the initial landings on Kyushu in spite of a massive effort .

The constraints on the air campaign were so clear that when the Joint Chiefs set the target dates of the Kyushu and the Honshu invasions for December 1, 1945 and March 1, 1946, respectively, it was apparent that the three-month period between X-Day (Olympic) and Y-Day (Coronet) would not be sufficient. Weather ultimately determined which operation to reschedule because Coronet could not be moved back without risking serious restrictions on the ground campaign from flooded fields and the air campaign from cloud cover that almost doubles from early March to early April. MacArthur proposed moving the Kyushu invasion ahead by a month, Nimitz concurred, and JCS agreed. Olympic was set for November 1, which also gave the Japanese less time to dig in.

Yet these best-laid plans would not have unfolded as expected even if the atomic bomb had not been dropped and the Soviet entry into the Pacific War had not frustrated Tokyo's last hope of reaching a settlement short of unconditional surrender (a Versailles-type outcome was unacceptable to Truman and many of his contemporaries because it was seen as an incomplete victory that would require the next generation to refight the war). The end result would have been a bloody campaign in which pre-invasion casualty estimates rapidly became meaningless because of something that the defenders could not achieve on their own: knocking the detailed U.S. timetable off balance.

A Season for Kamikazes

The "divine wind" (kamikaze) of a powerful typhoon destroyed a foreign invasion force heading for Japan in 1281, and it was for this storm that Japanese suicide aircraft of World War II were

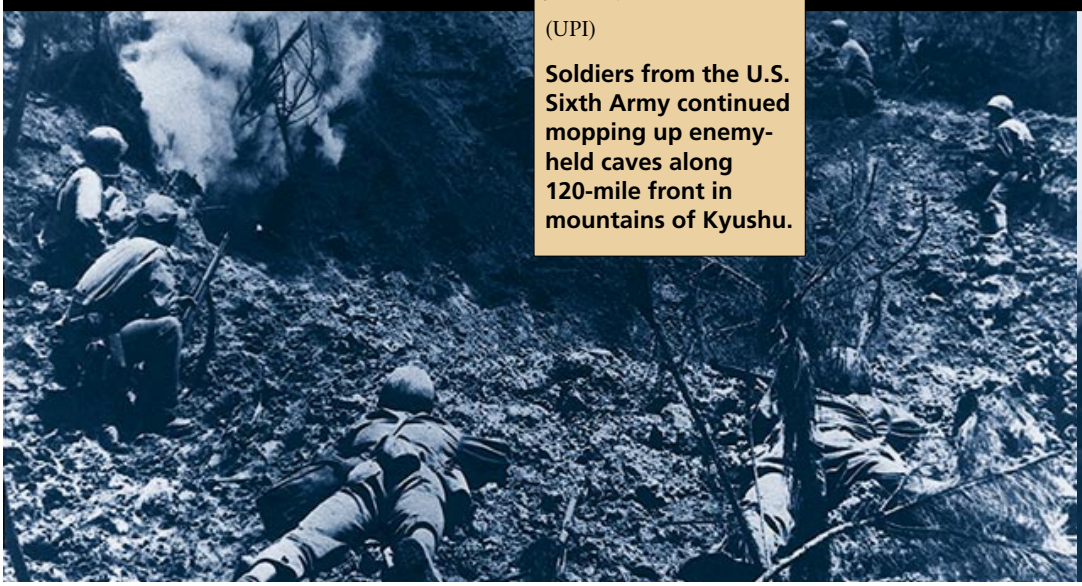
DATELINE:

KAGOSHIMA, JAPAN

June 1, 1946.

(UPI)

Soldiers from the U.S. Sixth Army continued mopping up enemy-held caves along 120-mile front in mountains of Kyushu.



named. On October 9, 1945, a similar typhoon packing 140-mile per hour winds struck the American staging area on Okinawa that would have been expanded to capacity by that time. Skates relates in a matter-of-fact way that U.S. analysts estimated that the storm would have caused up to a 45-day delay in the invasion of Kyushu—well beyond the initial date of December 1. The point that goes begging, however, is that while these reports from the Pacific were correct in themselves, they did not take account of what such a delay in base construction on Kyushu would mean for the Honshu invasion, which could have been pushed back as far as mid-April 1946.

If there had been no atomic bomb and Tokyo also had attempted to hold out for an extended time—a possibility that even bombing advocates grant—the Japanese would have appreciated the impact of the storm in the waters around Okinawa. Moreover, they would know what it meant for the follow-up invasion of Honshu which they predicted as accurately as the invasion of Kyushu. Even with the storm delay and friction of combat on Kyushu, the Coronet schedule would have led U.S. engineers to perform virtual miracles to make up for lost time and implement Y-Day as early in April as possible. But the "divine winds" packed a one-two punch.

On April 4, 1946, another typhoon raged in the Pacific, this one striking the northernmost Philippine island of Luzon on the following day, inflicting only moderate damage before moving toward Taiwan. Coming almost a year after the war, it was of no particular concern. But if Japan had held out, this storm would have had profound effects. It would have been the closest watched weather cell in history. Would it move to the west after hitting Luzon, where the Army was preparing to invade Honshu, or would it take the normal spiraling turn to the north, and then northeast as the October typhoon? Would slow, shallow-draft landing craft be caught at sea or in the Philippines where loading operations would be put on hold? If they were already on their way to Japan, would they reach Kyushu's sheltered bay? And what about the caissons for the artificial harbor? This precious towed cargo could not fall victim to the storm and be scattered at sea.

Whatever stage of employment U.S. forces were in during those first days of April, a delay of some sort—certainly no less than a week—was going to occur, one that First and Eighth Army could ill afford and that Japanese militarists would see as another sign that they were right after all. This is critical. Skates notes that much of the land today contains built-up areas not there in 1946, but appears blissfully unaware that anyone treading this same flat, dry "tank country" in 1946 would, in reality, have been up to their calves in muck and rice shoots by the time the invasion took place.

There is also the claim made by Skates of an "overrated" kamikaze threat. While it is not possible to discuss that subject here, one aspect is worth emphasizing: U.S. intelligence turned out to be seriously wrong about the number of Japanese planes available to defend the Home Islands. Estimates that 6,700 could be made available in stages by the final invasion grew to only 7,200 by the time of the surrender, but turned out to be

short by some 3,300 in light of the armada of 10,500 planes which the enemy planned to use in opening phases of both operations. The number actually available turned out to be over 12,700.

To bolster his case, Skates gives unusual weight to some reports. But all documents are not created equal. Thus when he uses a quick and dirty estimate by Ennis to refute the statements of Truman and Marshall, his argument appears to be rather shallow at first blush then turn disingenuous as it becomes clear that he is cloaking the report in terms that imply the existence of multiple sources: "The postwar analysts were certainly correct in their estimate that Coronet would not have been necessary." That sort of overstatement occurs with unnerving frequency, although the unwary reader likely accepts this documentation at face value because, while the basic outlines of invasion plans are understood, few have grasped their fundamental details.

Skates makes occasional obligatory acknowledgments to just how fierce the fighting would have been but is convinced it would have been brief with "tolerable" casualties only "in the range of Okinawa." Even if one appeals to the remarkably low casualty estimate that the author snatches from the air, it is reasonable to assume that if Truman had not done exactly what he did to end the war, many of the same people who today decry dropping the bomb might well be condemning him for needlessly expending thousands of American lives in an unnecessary invasion.

Military professionals will pick up on the strengths as well as the weaknesses of this book. There is a fine chapter on the redeployment of First Army from Europe, a decent section on Pastel deception operations, and a sensitive account of plans for the possible use of poison gas during the invasion. Anyone with an ax to grind on the strategic, political, and moral questions surrounding the bomb, however, will find its flawed conclusions providential for conducting their private wars. Skates has said exactly what some might want to hear, but the fact remains that Truman was under no obligation to accept a figure of 200,000 (or "just" 20,000) American dead to assuage the guilt of the revisionists. **JFQ**

The photographs reproduced in this article depict the following actual events of the World War II: page 88, *USS Indiana* firing salvo at Imperial Japanese Iron Works in Kamaishi (U.S. Navy) and under a protective smoke screen American forces make a landing somewhere in the South Pacific, 1944 (U.S. Army); page 89, Marines landing in Japan (U.S. Navy); page 90, Marines invade Iwo Jima (U.S. Marine Corps/Neil Gillespie) and cleaning up on *USS Nashville* after kamikaze attack (U.S. Army); page 91, a flame-throwing tank of the U.S. 10th Army pouring it on a Japanese entrenchment on Okinawa (U.S. Army); page 92, enemy-held cave on Okinawa (U.S. Marine Corps/Thomas D. Barnett, Jr.) and flight deck of *USS Nassau* (U.S. Navy); page 93, Coast Guardsmen and troops filling sandbags for gun emplacement on Leyte Island (U.S. Coast Guard); page 94, discharged Japanese soldiers on board train (U.S. Navy/Wayne Miller) and members of the 151st Infantry Regiment advancing under enemy fire on Carabao in the Philippines (U.S. Army).

DATELINE:

KOBE

September 18, 1946.

Japanese soldiers captured by the 86th Infantry Division in Hyogo Province en-route to POW camp.

[U.S. Army Signal Corps photo]