



Saipan was the battle that defined the character of the Pacific war. In the course of nearly a month of bitter combat in June and July 1944, U.S.

Marines and army troops seized from Japan an island that Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō had declared to be a "bastion of the Pacific." After the war, contemplating the 16,525 U.S. casualties, including 3,426 killed or missing, out of the 67,451 men of his command, Holland M. ("Howlin' Mad") Smith, the Marine Corps general who commanded the assault that began on June 15, 1944, declared that Saipan's seizure had made Allied victory absolute. "I have always considered Saipan the decisive battle of the Pacific offensive," he wrote.

The importance of the battle for Saipan was measured not only in the considerable human costs paid by the Americans in conquering it and the Japanese in attempting to hold it, but also in the huge psychological impact the battle exercised on the subsequent course of the war. In particular, how the events on Saipan were reported, both in the United States and in Japan, had an extraordinary influence on how the people of each country came to view both their own will and resolution and that of their adversaries. Such perceptions, combined with deliberate manipulation of facts and events by the government and the press, particularly in Japan, affected the remainder of the war in the Pacific in profound and sometimes terrible ways. For those who made decisions about how the Japanese and their leaders would act, the deaths of some 1,000 civilians—exaggerated by propaganda, indifference to individual suffering, and desperation—ultimately proved the most significant statistic of all.

The fall of Saipan had direct repercussions on Japan's war effort. First, an outpost that was supposed to be invincible and that was populated not only by soldiers but by Japanese civilian settlers had been lost. This made it clear to Japanese who had not already grasped it that the Americans were closing in on the home islands and that direct attacks from

WILLIAM DRAPER/U.S. NAVY ART COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE MYTH OF THE SAIPAN SUICIDES

The military leaders of Japan took an American dispatch about islanders who killed themselves and inflated it into a call for national self-destruction.

by Haruko Taya Cook

American bombers would only accelerate. The capture of Saipan and its neighbor Tinian made possible the large-scale bombardment of Japan from the Pacific by the new B-29 bombers, once airfields

had been cut from the coral and laid out over what had been hills and gullies.

In the political arena, the announcement that Saipan had fallen was soon followed by the news that the Tōjō cabinet

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As the main Saipan town of Garapan burns, marines advance cautiously. Many civilians were coerced into suicide by the Japanese military after they fled to the island's northern end.

gradually developed by settlers from the Japanese Empire, until the civilian population on Saipan reached a prewar peak of about 29,000. Of these, 22,000 were Japanese, the vast majority from Japan's southernmost prefecture of Okinawa, themselves deemed second-tier citizens by Japanese from the home islands. Lower still on the social scale were the 1,300 Korean subjects of Japan and 5,000 Kanaka and Chamorros peoples, whose islands the Marianas were originally.

The largest town on the island was Garapan—"the Tokyo of Saipan" to the residents—located on the coast to the west of Mount Tapotchau, the principal geographic feature of the island, forming the main spine of a very rocky central and northern part of the island. Among Garapan's schools, churches, temples, and commercial enterprises were forty-seven houses of prostitution, employing as many as 277 women. The major industries were moderate-scale production of sugarcane and sugar, tuna fishing and the processing of dried bonito, and the mining of mineral phosphates for the fertilizer that Japan increasingly needed.

Saipan was not fortified before the war and had only a light garrison—no more than 2,000 men—until the first large-scale military force, an army billeting party, arrived there and on Tinian in February 1944. Vice Admiral Chūichi Nagumo—who led the Japanese Mobile Fleet of aircraft carriers that had struck Pearl Harbor and ranged across the Pacific until devastated at Midway—found himself the overall commander of a largely notional collection of land-based aircraft and naval-base troops rather grandiosely named the Central Pacific Area Fleet. It was scattered through the Marianas, north to the Bonin Islands, and south to the Carolines, from Truk to Palau. Theoretically, all army troops in the region were also under the fleet and Nagumo, whose headquarters were on Saipan; in practice, their commander was Lieutenant General Hideyoshi Obata,

whose Thirty-first Army headquarters was on Guam, though his chief of staff, Major General Keiji Igeta, was on Saipan.

Approximately 40,000 naval and army forces defended Saipan. The largest group was Major General Yoshitsugu Saitō's 43rd Division, which had seen much of its combat strength decimated before any fighting began, during the voyage from Tokyo to Saipan through waters teeming with U.S. submarines. The 118th Regiment, for example, lost about 850 men en route; the remainder arrived less than two weeks before the invasion, without weapons or equipment.

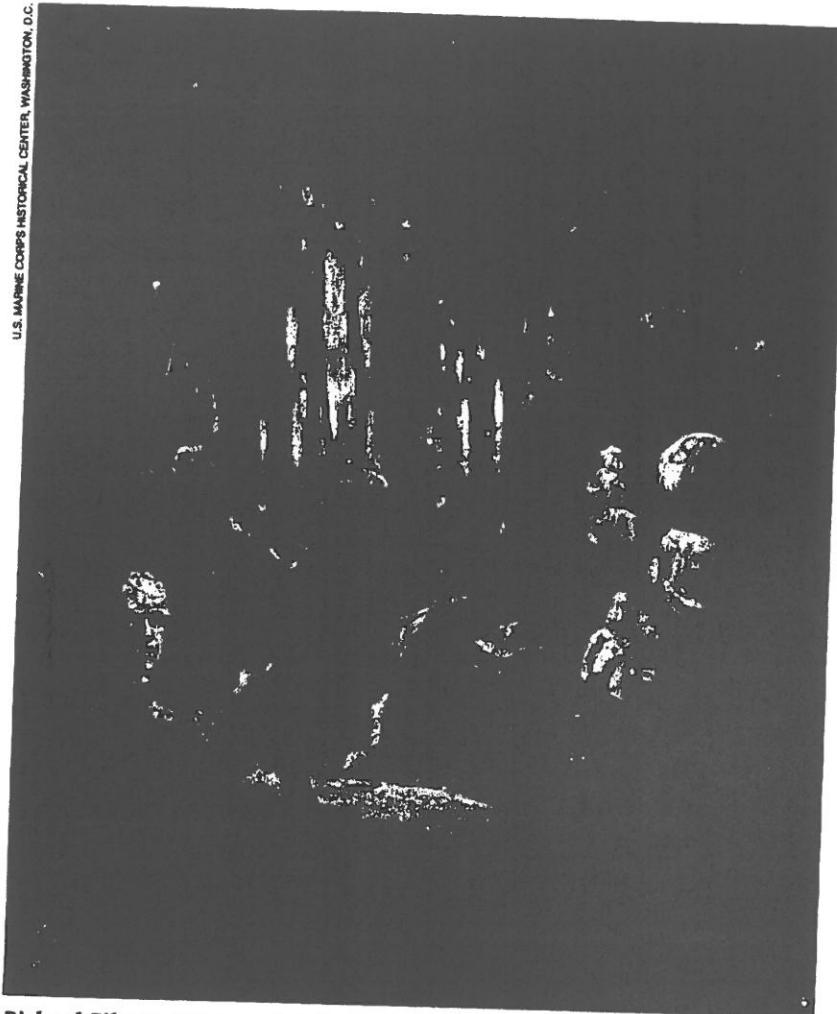
The island itself seemed hardly ready in the late spring of 1944 to meet an invasion. "The impression I had when I landed," one survivor, Takeo Yamauchi, told me in an interview, "was that they had made no preparations for defense at all. Along the coastline there were only a few partially dug trenches, like earthworms laid out on the sand. I noticed no concrete gun emplacements. I did hear some noise coming from high above in the mountains, and was told that they were constructing heavy-artillery positions."

Moreover, the squad Yamauchi led were all recent call-ups, most of them close to thirty years old. Yet the total number of men was large, and—though badly armed, inadequately trained, and very poorly integrated into a single command—the defenders of Saipan for the most part acquitted themselves in the tradition of the imperial armed forces: obeying orders that meant almost certain death and clinging for days to positions in the face of overwhelming American air, sea, and land strength.

The battle for Saipan began with several days of air and naval bombardment before a dawn assault on June 15 by a force that consisted primarily of the 2nd and 4th marine divisions, as well as other marines, soldiers, and artillery units. In the face of what Americans described as withering fire, U.S. forces poured onto the beach from what one Japanese defender said was "like a large city that had suddenly appeared offshore." By the end of D-Day on Saipan, despite the difficulties that the new tracked landing craft had in negotiating the beach, the Ameri-

had been forced from office and replaced by one led by General Kuniaki Koiso as prime minister, with Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai as navy minister and virtual deputy prime minister. The collapse of the government that had led Japan from October 1941 was a sign that the war had entered a new phase. At the same time, the Japanese people were soon to be subjected to a new barrage of propaganda about the nature of the war, which eventually developed into a massive call for final mobilization and culminated in the notion that Japanese must be prepared for a battle to the death, to be fought by all—perhaps even on the home islands.

Saipan was the jewel in the crown of the Japanese South Sea Mandated Territories at the start of the Pacific war. The Mariana Islands, former German colonies awarded to Japan after World War I as League of Nations mandates, were



Richard Gibney, who served at the battle for Saipan, painted this scene of jungle warfare: A marine rifleman brings down a Japanese sniper from his hiding place in the high branches.

cans were firmly established on the beaches above the town of Charan Kanoa, had occupied the town itself, and were moving north toward now-deserted Garapan and southeast to Aslito Airfield. Their initial objectives had not yet been secured when General Saitō ordered a counteroffensive by the 43rd Division and other ground forces on the night of June 16. Japanese soldiers burst from their "spider holes," only to be mowed down by concentrated American fire.

But resistance did not collapse. The fighting continued for three weeks, with the Americans trying to force the Japanese from the caves where they had taken shelter, from their few prepared positions in the hills, and from the shell holes and pits where many simply cow-

ered. For the Japanese, it was a struggle for mere survival, and it lasted until their commanders ordered a "final attack."

The true conditions on Saipan in early July were known to Imperial General Headquarters. General Igeta, whom many credit with operational command of army troops on Saipan, had been reporting to Tokyo since the invasion of what Tokyo was calling a "bastion" began. His assessments of the army were so negative that the General Staff (and many war historians since) have either downplayed his role or completely shifted the blame for Saipan's disastrous outcome to him. The records of the Imperial General Headquarters Confidential War Diary for June 23 incorporate most of Igeta's criticisms, in a report made only

eight days after the landings; it was also only three days after the Battle of the Philippine Sea and the destruction of Japan's naval air forces, which doomed the now-isolated defenders of Saipan.

Igeta's cable of June 26 identified American control of the air and sea as decisive, rendering movement by day impossible, while "night attack using soldiers who have not received good training means increased losses or a simple scattering of our forces." He noted that communications had been severed by "aircraft flying arrogantly low" and severe naval gunfire from all directions, and that frontline and rear forces were losing any strength to fight.

Igeta reported to Tokyo the "unique points of the Saipan battle," especially that some 11,000 of the defenders had arrived only in late May and early June, many of them survivors of ships that had been sunk, so they were completely disorganized and had no clear chain of command. Further, American bombardments had destroyed all known sources of water, limiting possible defensive positions to wherever the Japanese could find ponds. This also produced "great pain at how to deal with Japanese [civilians] on the island numbering some 20,000."

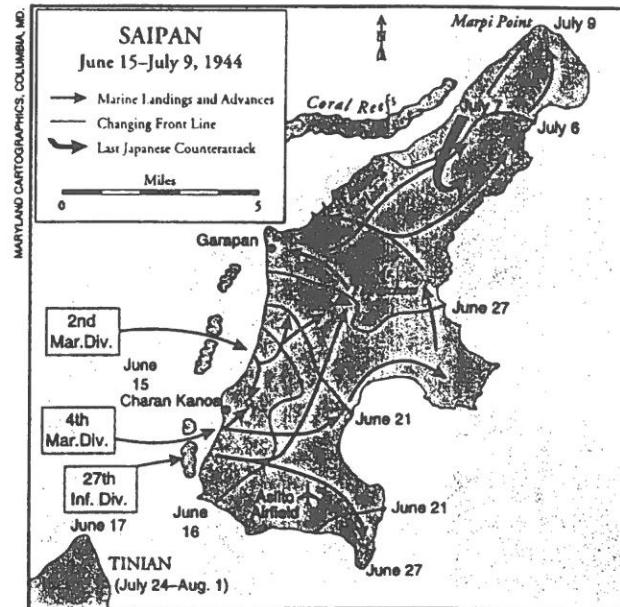
Nagumo, Saitō, and Igeta met for the last time on July 5. Faced with the choice of either withdrawal to the northernmost part of the island and continued resistance or an all-out final attack, these commanders issued the order for a total assault, and then they took their lives before it began in the early morning of July 7. Before killing himself, Igeta sent a final radio message repeating many of the same criticisms he had noted earlier. He admonished Imperial General Headquarters, "There can be no victory without control of the air. I strongly hope [you] will increase aircraft production," and chastised them with these final words: "The success or failure of the forces depend on the commanding officers. Please pay great attention to the men above the rank of battalion commander. Before ending, I pray for the prosperity of the imperial forces and say Banzai to the emperor."

The final "banzai charge," three weeks after the Americans first came ashore,

soon began to take on mythic proportions. According to the *New York Times*, describing the battle nearly a year after the fact, Japanese poured through a gap in the lines of the 27th Division "like crowds swarming onto a field after a football game. Some were armed only with bayonets lashed to bamboo sticks, some were unarmed, but all were screaming 'Banzai!' and 'Shichisei Hokoku!' ("Seven Lives for the Fatherland!"). Two artillery batteries of the 3rd Battalion, 10th Marine Regiment, were overrun near the village of Tanapag. One American said, "These Japs just kept coming and coming and didn't stop. It didn't make any difference if you shot one, five more would take his place." The 27th was a National Guard division whose commander, Major General Ralph Smith, had been dismissed on June 24 by Howlin' Mad Smith (no relation) and whose men the latter had virtually accused of cowardice. This only made the losses during the Japanese charge a more bitter experience in the years to come.

The "human storm" the Americans experienced that morning looked very different from the other side. The number of Japanese who took part has never been accurately determined, but it was probably about 3,000, a ragtag collection of units and remnants of units from the 43rd Division, as well as field hospital and headquarters sections, mountain artillery troops, supply men, and assorted naval-base and maintenance personnel. One man who survived to describe the event was Mitsuharu Noda, a navy enlisted man who was a paymaster for Admiral Nagumo's headquarters, in charge of cash for troops throughout the Central Pacific, and who was stranded on Saipan when the Americans landed.

Our last stand was at "Jigoku Dani," the Valley of Hell. Headquarters sent out its final message and then destroyed the radio. The telegram included those famous lines of Admiral Nagumo: "Whether we attack or whether we stay where we are there is only death. But realizing that in death there is life, let us take this opportunity to exalt Japanese manhood. I shall advance upon the Americans to deliver still another blow and leave my bones upon Saipan as a bulwark of the Pacific. . . ."



The U.S. 2nd and 4th Marine divisions and the army's 27th Infantry Division moved steadily across the island and northward. On July 7, remaining enemy forces launched a suicidal "banzai charge," overrunning American positions before being killed. Many of the civilian deaths later exaggerated by both sides took place at Marpi Point.

About twenty members of the headquarters participated in the final battle. We drank the best Japanese whiskey—Suntory Square Bottle, we'd saved it to the last minute. We smoked our last tobacco—Hikari brand. We were even able to smile. Maybe because we were still together as a group. I even had feelings of superiority, for we were doing something we had to do.

On July 7 at 4 A.M., shouting all together we headed toward the enemy camp. Navy men were along the sea side. We may have advanced 500 meters [about a third of a mile]. We are not going to attack enemies. We were ordered to go there to be killed. Some probably may have gone drunk, just to overcome fear, but that last taste of Suntory whiskey was wonderful. It was a kind of suicide. We didn't crawl on the ground, though bullets were coming toward us. We advanced standing up.

We had hardly any arms. Some had only shovels, others had sticks. I had a pistol. I think I was shot at the second line of defense. Hit by a machine gun, two bullets in my stomach, one passing through, one lodging in me. I didn't suffer pain. None at all. But I couldn't stand, either. I was lying on my back. I could see the tracer and bullets passing over. This is it, I thought.

Then I saw a group of four or five men, Japanese, crawling toward each other on their hands and knees. Their heads were now all close together. One of them held a grenade upward in his right hand and called out an invitation to me: "Hey, sailor there! Won't you

come with us?" I said, "I have a grenade. Please go ahead."

I heard "Long live the emperor!" and the explosion of a hand grenade at the same instant. Several men were blown away, dismembered at once into bits of flesh. I held my breath at this appalling sight. Their heads were all cracked open and smoke was coming out. It was a horrific way to die. Those were my thoughts as I lost consciousness.

American soldiers were there looking for their own wounded. But when a Japanese corpse turned out to be alive, they helped the man. I woke up when they kicked me and they took me to the field hospital. It was July 7. There had been about fifty men in naval headquarters; all died but me.

Postwar figures for Japanese casualties on Saipan vary considerably. U.S. sources speak of identifying 23,811 "enemy buried" and 1,780 captured, including 838 Koreans, along with some 14,560 civilians taken into custody. One Japanese source claims that out of a total of 43,682 defenders from all units on the island, 41,244 died between June 15 and July 9, when the Americans reached the northern end of the island; however, the actual figures are much closer to the American totals.

On July 19, bold headlines in the morning newspapers told the Japanese public of another major battle fought and lost: ALL MEMBERS OF OUR FORCES ON



The myriad of caves on Saipan provided shelter but little safety for Japanese soldiers and civilians. In another Gibney painting, marines use flamethrowers to kill those occupants who refuse to surrender.

SAIPAN MEET HEROIC DEATH / REMAINING JAPANESE CIVILIANS APPEAR TO SHARE FATE. The official announcement from Imperial General Headquarters, issued at five o'clock the previous afternoon, compressed the most recent news from Saipan into an "acknowledgment" that Japanese forces had made a "last attack" on July 7, and added that some troops had fought on until as late as July 16 before they finally "attained heroic death." A second paragraph described the fate of nonmilitary personnel: "It appears that the remaining civilian Japanese on Saipan Island always cooperated with the military, and those who were able to fight participated bravely in combat and shared the fate of officers and soldiers."

Few of those reading the story at home, or hearing the news whispered between neighbors, could have appreciated

fully the consequences that awaited them. But the fact that Japan had lost a key outpost in its Mandate territories, only 1,500 miles southeast of Tokyo itself, was confirmation for most Japanese that the war had entered a new stage. The home islands themselves were now exposed to attack.

The fall of Saipan had not come suddenly, however, but after a long series of reversals that followed the successes of the early stages of the war. For two years, since Midway, the Japanese people had heard little good news from the front. Increasingly, many greeted failure and defeat with resignation and even lassitude. This was an astounding change from the public attitude of even a year earlier, when Attu, a Japanese outpost in the Aleutians, had fallen and the whole country seemed galvanized by the tragedy.

One month after the official news of the fall of Saipan, the battle was suddenly in the news again—an unprecedented event. On August 19, the *Asahi Shimbun* ran large block-character newspaper headlines that were riveting: THE HEROIC LAST MOMENTS OF OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMEN ON SAIPAN / SUBLIMELY WOMEN TOO COMMIT SUICIDE ON ROCKS IN FRONT OF THE GREAT SUN FLAG / PATRIOTIC ESSENCE ASTOUNDS THE WORLD. The following day, the *Mainichi* proclaimed that Japanese women had CHANGED INTO THEIR BEST APPAREL, PRAYED TO THE IMPERIAL PALACE, SUBLIMELY COMMIT SUICIDE IN FRONT OF THE AMERICAN DEVILS / SACRIFICE THEMSELVES FOR THE NATIONAL EXCITEMENT TOGETHER WITH THE BRAVE MEN.

Why were these stories appearing more than a month after the battle on Saipan had died down, Tōjō had been replaced, and the next battles in the Pacific

were in the offing? Unlikely as it may seem, they stemmed from a one-page article by an American reporter, Robert Sherrod, published in *Time* magazine on August 7. "The Nature of the Enemy," though understandably partisan and at times maudlin, was one of the most stunning pieces of reportage of the entire Pacific war. Filled with graphic, unforgettable images, it raised powerful questions in its investigation of the extraordinary stories Sherrod said he had heard of suicides among some of Saipan's approximately 20,000 civilians—of whom the Americans had subsequently interned some 10,000.

Massaged and replayed by the government and editors, stories by Japanese overseas correspondents based on Sherrod's account now became the fuel for an unprecedented orgy of glorification of death splashed across the front pages of all the major dailies in Japan. The national spiritual mobilization campaigns they fostered established new levels of commitment among Japan's civilians despite the grim wartime conditions they confronted in the late summer of 1944.

"It has been reported that noncombatants, women, and children have chosen death rather than to be captured alive and shamed by the demonlike American forces," ran an August 17 story in the *Asahi Shimbun*, credited to a Japanese correspondent in neutral Stockholm. "The world has been astounded by the strength of the fighting spirit and patriotism of the entire people of Japan."

Most of the information in this story and the ones that followed was lifted from Sherrod's *Time* article—except for anything that might conflict with the notion that civilians would willingly die rather than surrender or submit to their enemies. The edited versions did not cite Sherrod's description of a schoolboy struggling in vain to stay afloat after the instinct for life overcame his resolve to drown, or of an officer who hacked at his men's necks to kill them, or of a sniper who mercilessly "drilled" a couple who had led their children to the edge of the sea, only to falter and begin to turn back.

Sherrod's article culminated in questions that are essential for any student of the Pacific war to confront in order to

understand both the U.S. and Japanese visions of the orgy of death and destruction that was to follow in the year after Saipan. When we compare how Sherrod wrote them with how they were "translated" and used in Japan, we can better understand what an opportunity Saipan afforded Japan's "statesmen" in their efforts to use the battle to save themselves.

Under the heading "Death for 80,000,000?" his last paragraph begins:

What did all this self-destruction mean? Did it mean that the Japanese on Saipan believed their own propaganda which told them that Americans are beasts and would murder them all? Many a Jap civilian did beg our people to put him to death immediately rather than to suffer the torture which he expected. But many who chose suicide could see other civilians who had surrendered walking unmolested in the internment camps.

The paragraph ends:

Saipan is the first invaded Jap territory populated with more than a handful of civilians. Do the suicides of Saipan mean that the whole Japanese race will choose death before surrender? Perhaps that is what the Japanese and their strange propagandists would like us to believe.

Indeed, that was exactly what the Japanese high command not only wanted Americans to ask, but also wanted the Japanese people to believe. Naturally, the last section of Sherrod's article was not quoted in Japan exactly as written. Instead of Sherrod's heading, the *Asahi* substituted the large headline PREFER DEATH TO SURRENDER over their version of the article, which covered more than half the front page of the August 19 issue. "Self-destruction" was translated at *gyokusai*, and "their own propaganda" was dropped. The third sentence was rendered, "Many Japanese civilians preferred death, rather than capture and torture, and resolutely killed themselves." The last two sentences of the above-quoted paragraph were completely excised, and the "translation" ended:

Saipan is the first invaded Japanese territory populated with many civilians. Thus, the suc-

cess of Japanese noncombatants on the islands shows that "Japanese, the whole race, choose death before surrender."

The readers of *Time* and of *Life* magazine—a version was published there later that month, accompanied by photographs "documenting" Sherrod's "eyewitness" statements—were being prepared for the actions American forces would "have to take" that could lead to the destruction of the Japanese people as a whole. By implication, Sherrod's questions force the reader to that conclusion. "If the Japanese do not distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, why should we?" he seemed to ask, even though he knew very well that the overwhelming majority of Japanese civilians and many in the military had surrendered and that large numbers of Japanese were killed by their own side.

Naturally, the Japanese accounts based on Sherrod's article omitted any suggestion that Japanese civilians had surrendered; in fact, at least 10,000 civilians were being held on Saipan. The official line in Japan, however, was the glory of self-sacrifice. The poet Ryū Saitō, for example, turned to history for parallels with the women on Saipan who chose to die. The *Nihongi*, an ancient Japanese chronicle, told of Obako, a woman whose husband and son were killed in Korea in A.D. 562 by an enemy of Yamato [the ancient name for Japan]. Taken captive, she took her own life. The women of Saipan stood on the cliffs above the Pacific and waved their sleeves, praying to the mother country before death, just as she had fourteen centuries earlier. Moreover, they "held their children firmly in their arms and died together." The poet concludes by urging all Japanese women to be prepared for "a beautiful death" as the enemy nears the main islands of Japan.

Commentators filled newspapers with praise of such acts as "the true nature of Japan," and they repeatedly emphasized that the women of Saipan were ordinary people, not members of samurai families. Moreover, in the *Mainichi*, a young woman poet declared:

I swear to the sisters of Saipan that we will fight to the end [italics added] with the pride

of the women who fought to the last in a sea of blood. With the encouragement of death, we will battle on beside the spirits of these women who fell beside soldiers.

Privately, of course, not all Japanese accepted these notions uncritically. "Japanese can neither objectively write articles nor read them," the critic and foreign-policy expert Kiyoshi Kiyosawa wrote in his diary on August 20. He denounced the intellectuals' accounts of the deaths of women on Saipan as "feudalism—the influence of ancient warriors—in the time of the airplane, a great admiration for *hara-kiri!*" Yet neither Kiyosawa nor any other leading figures publicly questioned the message—implicit in the articles about the Saipan *gyokusai* (as the victims' putative heroism was now known)—that all Japanese civilians were henceforth expected to be ready for this kind of death.

The term *gyokusai*—made up from two ideograms literally meaning "jewel" and "smashed"—derived from a Chinese classic telling of the morally superior man who would rather destroy his most precious possession than compromise his principles. During the Pacific war, it was first used in May 1943, after U.S.

forces retook Attu in the Aleutians, seized by Japan a year earlier. The final charge under Colonel Yasuyo Yamazaki was transformed from the meaningless obliteration of a garrison overwhelmed by superior numbers and firepower into an act of heroic self-sacrifice dignified by the name *Attu gyokusai*. The poetically resonant euphemism soon caught on.

The most important fact about the "Saipan *gyokusai*" is that it did not happen. Despite numerous horrible scenes of suicide and murder, fear and misery, desperation and despair on Saipan—especially at Marpi Point and what the tourist trade now calls "Banzai Cliff"—the stories of the mass death of the civilians, all supposedly ready to die rather than surrender, are distortions and exaggerations exploited for policy ends.

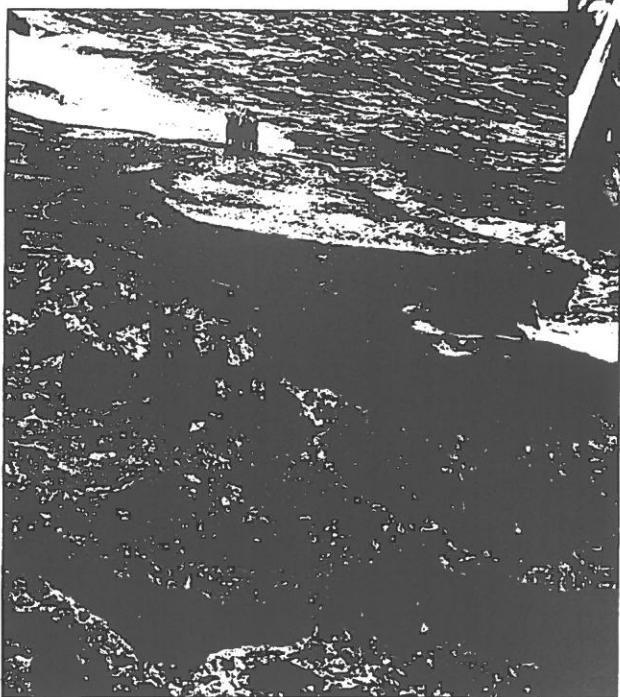
The fact is that the idea that Saipan's garrison—and, ultimately, the island's entire population—should destroy itself originated directly with military policy at the highest level. The Imperial General Headquarters Army Section Confidential War Diary for June 24, 1944, contains the following entry, along with the detailed discussion of why operations on Saipan had not gone as hoped: "The Saipan defense force should carry out *gyokusai*. It is not possible to conduct

the hoped-for direction of the battle. The only thing left is to wait for the enemy to abandon their will to fight because of the '*Gyokusai* of the One Hundred Million.'

Somewhere between 16,000 and 20,000 civilians (including settlers, natives, and military employees) were on Saipan the day the U.S. V Amphibious Corps stormed ashore; the precise number is extremely difficult to determine accurately. Large-scale evacuation efforts had begun in March 1944, but three of the big transport ships were sunk during the five-day passage to Japan, deterring many others from attempting it. In addition, able-bodied males between elementary-school age and sixty years old were forbidden to leave.

Frightened out of Garapan by the early bombings, civilians found themselves exposed to firepower from both sides. Some surrendered on encountering American forces, then had to endure life in camps, which, at least at first, were little better than enclosed wastelands. Others, along with the remaining Japa-

LEFT: THE REPORTS OF GENERAL MACARTHUR, ED BY CHARLES A. WILLOUGHBY (WASHINGTON, D.C.: U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE, 1948).



A Japanese artist, Fujita Tsuguiji, painted the officially approved version (far left) of a last stand on Saipan in which young women willingly jump to their deaths while others stoically wait their turn. In the W. Eugene Smith photograph at left, members of a family huddle indecisively on the rocks at Marpi Point. Moments later, they were killed—by a Japanese sniper. Thousands more, however, were coaxed into safety, like the family above.

nese troops, were driven to the northern end, where nearly 4,000 civilians were eventually cornered. It was here, around Marpi Point, that most of the civilian suicides and killing by Japanese forces and American assaults took place. A third group of noncombatants wandered around the mountains scavenging for food and hiding anywhere they could.

In all, at least 15,000 civilians survived the battle. Despite the dramatic coverage in American and Japanese publications, only about 1,000 civilians killed themselves or were killed in the desperate final moments of the battle; several thousand more had died during the preceding month. Terrible as those numbers are, they do not amount to *gyokusai*. However, they gave the military leaders in Japan an excuse to glorify the destruction of many lives—while bestowing on it a sense of tragedy and encouraging righteous indignation among those at home.

Long after the capture of Saipan, wounded and starving soldiers still wandered through the mountains until they were killed or fell into American hands; thousands of noncombatants also remained in hiding for weeks—some until the end of the war. But back in Japan, everyone on the island was viewed as the “heroic dead.” After the war was over, about 1,000 survivors were repatriated to the home islands and 10,000 more to Okinawa. On his return home, Mitsu-haru Noda, the sailor who described being wounded and captured in the banzai charge on July 7, found that his parents in Japan had set up a grave marker for him and removed his name from the family registration. The survivors of the battle on Saipan became living ghosts; erased from public memory, they remain “missing” in most accounts to this day.

The story of Saipan *gyokusai* was much more than mere sensationalism. There is strong evidence many Japanese leaders—members of the so-called peace group as well as the military—were willing to steer the Japanese public toward self-destruction rather than surrender control of the war and their grip on national and political leadership.

At home, while the toll in human lives mounted on Saipan, political struggles

triggered by military defeat intensified. Another battle, for political leadership in Japan, was fought behind the doors of the Imperial Palace and government chambers as Emperor Hirohito's senior statesmen and Tōjō's cabinet debated in secret who should take responsibility for defeat and how blame could be kept away from the emperor, in whose name the war was being fought.

In the view of many politicians, the easiest solution was to “blame Tōjō for everything.” On July 2, even before the final charge on Saipan, Prince Fumimaro Konoe (who had been prime minister during much of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–41) sized up the situation. “The army and navy have both concluded that defeat is unavoidable. But today they are at the stage where they don't have courage to say so publicly.” He then argued that “the enemy was making Tōjō the ringleader of the war, parallel to Hitler, and were focusing their attacks on him. Thus, he should be kept in his position in order to avoid responsibility for the war being placed on the Imperial House.” As early as June 25, he had shown a willingness to consider an interim cabinet, to pave the way for one that could actually seek peace. “The end is almost in sight,” he wrote, “but it is still necessary for the people to resign themselves to the point where they will accept that as unavoidable.”

Konoe's words reflect the true concerns of many of Japan's leaders in early July 1944. It is difficult to say whether the deaths of noncombatants on the islands of the Marianas had any impact on them. They seemed to view enemy bombings of Japan's cities and civilians—even an enemy invasion of the mainland—as a prerequisite for acceptance by the Japanese people of Japan's forthcoming defeat. When that happened, these leaders intended to come forward as the peacemakers, thus saving Japan—and, more important, the Imperial House—from the consequences of their own earlier decisions.

Saipan was seized on as the ideal tool to mobilize the Japanese public in the direction of the “peace process”—which could take more than a year to implement. If the people's minds could be di-

rected toward death, they might be prepared for several months of struggle. In turn, a willingness to fight to the last would be the bargaining chip the “statesmen” hoped to use to convince the Allies to abandon their demand for unconditional surrender, which threatened the position of the Imperial House.

It is vital to remember that the vast majority of the million Japanese civilian casualties of the war, and perhaps over half of the more than 2 million military deaths, occurred in the last year. Between July 1944 and August 1945, as Japan's leaders sought to protect themselves and the institutions they claimed to serve, the people of Japan were sacrificed under a national slogan that was eventually refined into “One Hundred Million Die Together”—an extension of the cynically exaggerated image of Saipan's civilians and soldiers embracing death together in service to their emperor.

In the year after Saipan's fall in July 1944, and in the subsequent half century, portrayals and interpretations of the battle for Saipan have helped define the ways in which history described and justified American strategy and victory, Japanese resistance and defeat, and the horrors of the last year of the Pacific war. For both sides, Saipan—the battle and the myth—helped forge an unholy alliance of national stereotypes and self-justification. The conviction that took root in the United States—that demanding unconditional surrender and exacting the highest possible toll in enemy lives, military or civilian, provided the only guarantee of final victory—guided American policy through the firebombing of Japanese cities, the invasion of Okinawa, and the atomic devastation wrought on two Japanese cities that averted an invasion of the home islands. The strategy in Japan that exploited the image of Saipan amounted to a threat of national self-destruction, embraced by Japan's leadership to stave off abject surrender and acceptance of American demands at any cost.

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