

Operation Downfall - The Planned Invasion of Japan in 1945

Written by Andy Owen



Europe was celebrating Victory In Europe Day on May 8th, 1945.

But, across the other side of the world, something extraordinary was being planned.

It was the invasion of mainland Japan.

It was codenamed Operation Downfall and was planned in two phases.

It would begin with Operation Olympic on Nov 1st, 1945. Once Olympic had captured the southernmost island of Kyushu, it was to be followed on March 1st 1946, by Operation Coronet - against the main Japanese island of Honshu.



American military commanders were given the task of planning for the invasion – Douglas MacArthur, Chester Nimitz, Ernest King, William Leahy, Hap Arnold and George Marshall.

MacArthur was given total control of the invasion.

It was to be an amphibious operation.

The armada was going to be over 30% larger than the D-Day landings in Europe.

Hard to even imagine, I know. But true.

What was also true, is the death toll was going to be off the scale.

In Europe, the fighting had stopped and the guns were silent. But the war with Japan in the Pacific, continued with astonishing ferocity.

It had been a bloodbath for 3 years. Now, it was going to get even worse.

For both the Americans and the Japanese.



After the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on 7th December 1941 - and Hong Kong the day after - the Japanese went on a savage and barbaric rampage and quickly dominated the Pacific region.

They launched a relentless assault that swept through the US territories of Guam, Wake Island and the Philippines, as well as British-controlled Hong Kong, Malaya and British Borneo.

They committed wicked and barbarous atrocities everywhere.

They seemed unstoppable. Two major British warships *S Repulse* and *HMS Prince of Wales* were sunk by Japanese aircraft off Malaya on 10th December 1941.

New Guinea and the Solomon Islands fell.

Thailand, with its territory already serving as a springboard for the Malayan campaign, surrendered within 24 hours of the Japanese invasion. The government of Thailand formally allied itself with Japan on 21st December.

After being driven out of Malaya, Allied forces in Singapore attempted to resist the Japanese during the **Battle of Singapore**, but surrendered to the Japanese on 15th February 1942.

130,000 Indian, British, Australian and Dutch personnel became prisoners of war. A large proportion of those, never saw home again.

Bali and Timor also fell in February.

Most of the Allied air power in South-East Asia had been neutralised - and the Japanese were making air attacks on Northern Australia, including a psychologically devastating attack on Darwin on 19th February.



The speed of their advance was frightening. Their aggression was total and their cruelty knew no bounds.

British, Australian and Dutch forces, already drained of personnel and equipment by years of war with Germany, plus the heavy commitment in the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere, were unable to provide much more than token resistance to the battle-hardened Japanese.

In late February and early March, the Japanese overran Java and Sumatra.

In March and April, a powerful Imperial Japanese Navy aircraft carrier force carried out major air raids against Ceylon and they sank the British aircraft carrier, *HMS Hermes*, as well as other Allied ships.

The Royal Navy was forced to withdraw to the western part of the Indian Ocean. This paved the way for a Japanese assault on Burma and India.

Filipino and U.S. forces bravely resisted in the Philippines until 8th May 1942, when more than 80,000 soldiers were ordered to surrender.

General Douglas MacArthur was forced to leave ignominiously to Australia, to avoid being captured.

By mid-1942, the Japanese found themselves holding a vast area from the Indian Ocean to the Central Pacific.



But, they had stretched themselves too far - and lacked the resources to defend or sustain it.

What's more, Allied codebreakers had broken their codes and discovered an attack was planned against Port Moresby. So, the carrier *USS Lexington* joined the *USS Yorktown* - and an American/ Australian task force, sailed to stop the Japanese advance.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was Japan's first defeat of the war. It was also the first time in history that two opposing carrier forces did battle with each other, using only aircraft.

The opposition ships never sighted each other.

Both sides suffered major losses, but the allied victory was hugely significant, as the US Navy had stopped a major Japanese offensive for the first time since the war started.

They then followed that up in the following month, with an even greater victory at the Battle of Midway - with US carrier aircraft dealing a devastating blow to the Japanese navy, destroying four aircraft carriers.



This battle was a turning point in the war, as it allowed US forces to take the offensive for the first time. As a result of Midway, Japan abandoned its plan to expand its reach in the Pacific and would remain on the defensive for the remainder of World War II.

The battle also injected U.S. forces with confidence and badly affected Japanese morale, turning the tide of war in the Pacific strongly in favour of the Allies.

The Allies soon set their sights on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and on New Guinea - and during the next two and a half years, US forces captured the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands and the Marianas.

Saipan, Peleliu and Iwo Jima were also taken back but involved brutal hand-to-hand combat, which saw terrible losses incurred on both sides.



But, with each island taken from the Japanese, the United States moved closer to Japan.

Okinawa was the final major island to take.

Taking Okinawa would provide Allied forces with an airbase from which bombers could strike Japan and also an advanced anchorage for Allied fleets.

From Okinawa, US forces could increase air strikes against Japan and blockade important logistical routes, denying the home islands of vital commodities.

Code-named Operation Iceberg, the invasion of Okinawa and other islands in the Ryukyus began on April 1st 1945.

1,300 ships - including ten battleships and nine cruisers, (some from the British Pacific Fleet) started the assault, firing 13,000 shells into the Japanese positions.

The fighter-bombers made 3,000 bombing runs.

But, as was found with the defence of the other Pacific islands, the Japanese had prepared well. The defending forces of 77,000 troops (and 20,000 Okinawan militia) largely hid in the caves during the bombardment.

When the Americans landed, the Japanese were ready.

Their morale was high. Their defensive positions were set.



The Japanese staged a furious defence, which included close to 2,000 suicide attacks against the invasion fleet. The Americans lost 36 ships.

The Americans landed four US divisions on Okinawa - and the fighting became a war of attrition that lasted almost three months - for an island only 485 square miles in size.

By the time Okinawa was secured by American forces on June 22nd 1945, the United States had sustained over 49,000 casualties, including more than 12,500 men killed or missing.

Okinawans caught in the fighting, suffered greatly, with an estimate as high as 150,000 civilians killed.

Of the Japanese defending the island, an estimated 119,000 died.

The stepping-stone to mainland Japan was now in US hands.

From there, U.S. B-29 bombers could reach Tokyo and important targets in Japan and rain firebombs and high explosives on the fragile wood and paper architecture of Japan.



On a visit to Guam in June 1945, Gen. Hap Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, expressed his belief that the B-29 campaign would "*enable our infantrymen to walk ashore on Japan with their rifles slung*".

Nothing was further from the truth.

In the summer of 1945, **the Japanese had almost seven million troops** remaining and were nowhere near ready to quit.

They also had up to **30 million armed civilians and others**, fighting from defensive positions in their home territory.



The Japanese high command had created a home defence force that included virtually every man, woman and child capable of holding a weapon of any kind.



They all received military training from the army on whatever weapons were available, notably bamboo spears and hand grenades.

Ingrained with the code of Bushido - "the way of the warrior" - they were expected to strap explosives to their bodies and throw themselves under advancing U.S. tanks.

And they would have done, too.

Surrender under any circumstances was considered dishonourable. Suicide was expected of commanders who had been defeated in battle. Soldiers who surrendered were not deemed worthy of regard or respect.

In fact, during the entire Pacific War, it's an incredible fact, that only one organised Japanese unit ever surrendered - and that was a 23-man "independent mixed battalion" in New Guinea in May 1945.

On Kwajalein, the fatality rate for the Japanese force was 98.4 percent. On Saipan, almost 30,000 - 97 percent of the garrison, fought to the death. Of 23,000 Japanese troops on Iwo Jima, only 216 surrendered. On Okinawa, 92,000 - 80 percent of the total Japanese force—were killed in action.

Both phases of Operation Downfall were predicted to deliver astonishing human carnage. Numbers that stagger the mind...

In late July 1945, the US War Department provided an estimate that the entire Downfall operations would cause between **1.7 to 4 million U.S. casualties, including 400-800,000 U.S. dead.**



500,000 Purple Hearts were produced for the invasion of Japan. That was the first order for the invasion at Kyushu.

More would have been needed for the landings on Honshu near Tokyo.

That clearly shows that the US High Command had no illusions about a million or more casualties.

The Japanese were facing losses of probably 5 times the US number - more than 10 million people.

But, they were confident and believed they could win.

Admiral Takijiro Onishi, Vice Chief of the Naval General Staff, was not alone in the astounding proposition that, *"If we are prepared to sacrifice 20 million Japanese lives in a special attack effort, victory will be ours!"*

British general William Slim, one of the best fighting leaders of the war, expected the Allies to face tenacious defenders.

"There can be no question of the supreme courage and hardihood of the Japanese soldiers," he wrote. *"I know of no army that could have equalled them."*

The mountainous terrain of the entire country would have favoured a cave and tunnels defence, a tactic the Japanese had perfected.



But of course, due to the greater allied firepower and resources, Japan's brave people would have been eventually annihilated.

There is absolutely no doubt that it would have been a bloodbath of horrific proportions, with deaths and casualties at a frightening level.

In addition to the invasion casualties, it was known that 400,000 allied POW's in Japan, were to be executed the moment an allied boot landed on mainland Japan.



The camps were already starting to practice how the executions would happen, so the guards would be free to join the defence of their homeland.

And, on top of all of this, Japan's infrastructure and culture would have been shattered, which would have taken more than two generations to rebuild - if at all - and, at an astronomical cost.

On August 6th, 1945, a modified B-29 bomber - Enola Gay - dropped the world's first deployed atomic bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima.

The bomb was dropped by parachute at 08:15 in the morning, and it exploded 2,000 feet above the city.

It destroyed five square miles of the city and immediately killed an estimated 80,000 people, with over 30,000 dying later of radiation exposure.

Three days later, another B-29 dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, immediately killing an estimated 40,000 people, with 20,000 more dying later.



It was a more powerful bomb than the one used at Hiroshima, but the topography of Nagasaki, nestled in narrow valleys between mountains, reduced the bomb's effect, limiting the destruction to 2.6 square miles.

Nagasaki was not the primary target for the second bomb. It was originally targeted at the city of Kokura, but dense cloud cover over the city, meant the pilot had to divert to the secondary target, Nagasaki.

Japan did not respond immediately to the dropping of the two atomic bombs.

The Japanese militarists still resisted - and a Japanese newspaper stated, *"Even if we chew grass and eat dirt and crow on the ground, we're going to continue fighting the war."*

The day after Nagasaki was bombed, the Japanese Prime Minister appealed to the Emperor himself.

Hirohito had seen Tokyo burn to the gates of his palace. He wanted no more destruction and death - and made the decision to surrender, but major internal disagreements and heated arguments took place for two days.

The military wanted to fight on. In fact, a military coup and an attempt on Hirohito's life was made, but failed.

Hirohito broadcast the unconditional surrender on August 15th.

There was a flurry of revolt within the army, with War Minister Gen Korechika Anami committing ritual suicide. He was opposed to surrender but would not challenge the Emperor.

The formal instrument of surrender was signed on September 2nd aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.



Peter Kuznick, director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University, wrote of President Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons:

"He knew he was beginning the process of the annihilation of the species."

Kuznick said the atomic bombing of Japan *"was not just a war crime; it was a crime against humanity."*

A lot of people still agree with that.

But a lot do not.

My own personal view, for what its worth, is probably a contentious and unfashionable one these days.

But, I hold it all the same.

Truman's decision to drop the bombs to shorten the war was the correct one.

The two bombs probably killed or maimed half a million Japanese people.

If Operation Downfall had taken place and Japan was taken by force in an amphibious assault - it is almost certain that between 6 and 12 million people on both sides, would have been either killed or wounded.

Millions of families around the world would have been affected.

In Japan, generations of families would have been completely wiped out.

And the country would have been left in pieces - from which they would probably have never recovered.



A Japanese city after B29 firebombing in WW2, only recently declassified