AWESOME stories

Eugene Sledge - Battle of Okinawa

Eugene Sledge and his fellow Marines endured the vicious Battle of Okinawa, during the spring of 1945. The high casualties of this fight, at least in part, prompted President Truman to use the atomic bomb against Japan in order to finally end the war.

Advised that casualties sustained during an invasion of Japan's home islands could be as high as a million Americans, the commander-in-chief hoped that the new weapon would avoid the anguish of another Okinawa.

The Battle of Okinawa was long, vicious and deadly for both sides. In this clip of battle footage from the U.S. National Archives, online courtesy of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Sledge describes what it was like for him and his fellow Marines to endure the 82-day campaign. He also tells us why it became such a bloodbath:

> *The Japanese ferociously defended every yard of ground and conserved their strength to inflict maximum losses on the American forces. The tactics turned Okinawa into a bloodbath.* (Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, page 231.)

The totality of the fight at Okinawa was nearly unbearable, even for vets hardened by prior battles. The constant shelling caused many men to develop psychological problems:

> *Some of the concussion cases could walk and were helped and led (some seemed to have no sure sense of direction) to the rear like men walking in their sleep. Some wore wild-eyed expressions of shock and fear. Others whom I knew well, though could barely recognize, wore expressions of idiots or simpletons knocked too witless to be afraid anymore. The blast of a shell had literally jolted them into a different state of awareness from the rest of us. Some of those who didn't return probably never recovered but were doomed to remain in mental limbo and spend their futures in a veteran's hospital as "living dead."*
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> *. . . From my experience, of all the hardships and hazards the troops had to suffer, prolonged shell fire was more apt to break a man psychologically than anything else.* (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, pages 264-5.)

Because the battle for Okinawa lasted so long, many men were exhausted and sick with malaria and other ailments. Fighting by day, and fending-off Japanese infiltrators by night, they did the best they could amidst the rain, the mud and the maggots:

> *The mud was knee deep in some places, probably deeper in others if one dared venture there. For several feet around every corpse* [and there were thousands of those]*, maggots crawled about in the muck and then were washed away by the runoff of the rain. . .The scene was nothing but mud; shell fire; flooded craters with their silent, pathetic, rotting occupants; knocked-out tanks and amtracs; and discarded equipment - utter desolation.*
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> *The stench of death was overpowering. The only way I could bear the monstrous horror of it all was to look upward away from the earthly reality surrounding us, watch the leaden gray clouds go skudding over, and repeat over and over to myself that the situation was unreal - just a nightmare - that I would soon awake and find myself somewhere else.*
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> *I existed from moment to moment, sometimes thinking death would have been preferable. We were in the depths of the abyss, the ultimate horror of war. . . Men struggled and fought and bled in an environment so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool.* (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, page 253.)

Total casualties at Okinawa - for both sides - were extremely high. Sledge describes those, as well:

> *Very few familiar faces were left. Only twenty-six Peleliu veterans who had landed with the company on 1 April* [when the Okinawa battle began] *remained. And I doubt there were even ten of the old hands who had escaped being wounded at one time or another on Peleliu or Okinawa.*
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> *Total American casualties were 7,613 killed and missing and 31,807 wounded in action. Neuropsychiatric, "non-battle" casualties amounted to 26,221 - probably higher than in any other previous Pacific Theater battle. This latter high figure is attributed to two causes: The Japanese poured onto U.S. troops the heaviest concentrations of artillery and mortar fire experienced in the Pacific, and the prolonged, close-in fighting with a fanatical enemy.*
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> *Marines and attached Naval medical personnel* [most of the corpsmen, whom the Marines affectionately called "docs," were Navy men] *suffered total casualties of 20,020 killed, wounded and missing.*
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> *Kamikaze attacks, on U.S. Navy ships, were prominent during the Battle of Okinawa. "Suicide boats" also played a role in causing death and damage.*

What about Japanese losses? They were staggering:

> *Japanese casualty figures are hazy. However, 107,539 enemy dead were counted on Okinawa. Approximately 10,000 enemy troops surrendered, and about 20,000 were either sealed in caves or buried by the Japanese themselves. Even lacking an exact accounting, in the final analysis the enemy garrison was, with rare exceptions, annihilated.*

The people of Okinawa, many of whom lived in villages on the island, experienced great suffering and death as a result of the battle:

> *Unfortunately, approximately 42,000 Okinawan civilians, caught between the two opposing armies, perished from artillery fire and bombing.* (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, pages 311-12.)

The long, vicious Battle of Okinawa finally ended on June 21, 1945.

See, also:

Snafu Shelton - Image and Brief Bio

Eugene Sledge - Video Biography (Part 1)

Video: Eugene Sledge - Keeping Notes at Peleliu

Video: Eugene Sledge - End of Battle at Peleliu

Video: Eugene Sledge - Life After the War

Video: Eugene (Sledgehammer) Sledge Describes Peleliu

Image: Capt. Andrew ("Ack Ack") Haldane - K/3/5 Skipper

John Basilone - Videos and Images

Robert Leckie - Videos and Images

Lena Riggi Basilone - Bio and Images

Credits:

Clip from "Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine," by Lou Reda Productions. Online, courtesy National Museum of the Marine Corps.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Eugene-Sledge-Battle-of-Okinawa0

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