

Tears for the Dead

In early 1945, the Japanese army had some 200 suicide attack boats concealed on the Kerama Islands in the hope that they could help delay the American invasion of Okinawa. It was, however, the Americans who caught the Japanese by surprise when they launched a heavy naval bombardment of the Keramas on March 23, destroying suicide attack boats and the bunkers in which they were hidden. The Americans landed on the Zamami group of islands on March 26 and on Tokashiki on March 27, eventually using the Keramas as supply bases for the push into Okinawa itself.

The Japanese suicide attack squad and the local people fled the bombardment and went deep into the mountains. Panicked and with nowhere to hide, they ended up on Mt. Nishiyama in the north. On March 28, following orders they formed into groups to take their own lives. People with access to grenades, rifles, sickles, hoes or cutthroat razors were considered lucky; anyone without a weapon or blade of some kind just had to strangle themselves with improvised ropes or fling themselves into the burning forest.

The Shiratama no To (literally, “White Pearl Tower,” which is possibly a reference to tears) War Memorial was unveiled exactly six years later, on March 28, 1951. It commemorates 383 island residents, 81 Japanese soldiers, 92 civilian employees of the military, and 42 members of the defense corps. It originally stood at the actual mass suicide site on Mt. Nishiyama (where the National Okinawa Youth Friendship Center is now), but was moved here to Mt. Kizuyama in 1962 after the Americans expropriated Nishiyama for military purposes in 1960.

Every year, descendants of the people remembered here come to attend a memorial service on March 28, the island’s official Memorial Day. Look at the monument carefully. Even those who cannot read a word of Japanese will see from the way the same characters recur over and over that entire families perished.