

The First Phase of the Battle of Okinawa

Menuhama Beach

Menuhama Beach is the beach directly in front of Aka Village on Aka Island. (Its name means “the beach in front” in the Okinawan language.) It was here, at 8:04 on the morning of March 26, 1945, that the Third Battalion Landing Team of the 305th Regimental Combat Team of the 77th Division of the US Army came ashore, marking the first phase of the Battle of Okinawa.

According to contemporary US records, the landing force encountered only harmless “sporadic mortar and machine-gun fire” before the Japanese soldiers and Korean laborers fled into the mountains in the island’s interior. By 5:00 that same evening, the American forces had brought two-thirds of the island under control, although 300 Japanese troops and 400 civilians still remained at large.

The US military invaded the other Kerama islands in rapid succession on the same day, landing on Geruma at 8:25, Zamami at 9:00, Fukaji at 9:21 and Yakabi at 13:41. They waited a day before invading Tokashiki, which is larger and further away, at 9:11 on the 27th.

The many safe anchorages around the Keramas made them strategically attractive to the Americans. After being overrun, the Keramas became a naval base from which seaplanes could take off and where ships could be refueled and repaired.

Flight to Mt. Shiji

When the naval bombardment began on March 23, the civilian population realized that a land invasion was imminent. As a result, many of them fled inland, where they were later joined by the Japanese soldiers. They choose Mt. Shiji as their refuge because its rugged topography offered natural protection from naval and aerial bombardment.

On the mountain, the refugees built themselves huts of wood and thatch and constructed a cooking area from stones beside a stream. The rear of the Japanese forces, meanwhile, improvised a base and prepared for a long struggle. During this period, civilians and soldiers subsisted on a diet of leopard plants, mulberry leaves, and sweet-potato vines. At nighttime,

they would sneak back down into the village and forage for food to supplement their meager menu.

Conditions were so miserable that many people turned themselves in to the US forces. There were only 80 people from 20 families left on Mt. Shiji when the last of them surrendered on August 23, more than a week after Japan had officially surrendered.

Reference: U.S.ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY. (2001). Chapter II:
Invasion Of The Ryukyus. Retrieved from
<https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/okinawa/chapter2.htm>