The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 437
"Where Do We Go from Here?"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The defenders of Saipan were isolated and badly outnumbered, but determined to make the Americans pay a dear price for victory.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 437. Where Do We Go from Here?

Last week, I told you about the US invasion of Saipan, in the Mariana Islands, which began on June 15, 1944, just nine days after the Normandy landings in Europe. The American island-hopping strategy was working well for them, but as we've seen, Admiral Toyoda, commander-in-chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy, anticipated that eventually the US fleet would have to venture into the Philippine Sea, where it would lack ground-based air cover because there were no island chains in the Philippine Sea.

Once that happened—when the Americans struck in the Philippines or Western New Guinea or Taiwan or the Mariana Islands, they would be within reach of Japanese ground-based planes, but would have no ground-based aircraft of their own to counter them. In this way, the Japanese could overcome the American advantage in aircraft carriers and deliver at last the decisive blow the Japanese had been yearning to land for over two years now.

When the Americans struck, they struck at Saipan, because they wanted an airbase from which their new B-29 bombers could reach Japanese cities. Japan's main battle fleet moved to intercept the Americans, which led to the Battle of the Philippine Sea, a defeat that cost Japan almost 90% of its carrier air force.

But I ended last week without finishing the story of what happened on the ground on Saipan, so that's the thread I want to pick up today. I described the initial landings, which went pretty well, but the Japanese fought back with their usual "death before surrender" ferocity, which slowed the American advance to a crawl.

The invasion force at Saipan did not reach its objectives on D-day. That night, the Japanese began a fierce counterattack meant to throw the Americans back into the water. They attacked with everything they had, including the island's arsenal of tanks. The counterattack began well, but was broken up by American air power and naval gunfire. The small Japanese tanks were vulnerable to American bazookas.

In a cave on a hillside overlooking the site of the tank attack, an 18-year-old tomboyish Japanese woman named Miura Shizuko watched the battle. Her brother was in one of the tanks. She watched as the Americans blew the Japanese tanks into bits of flaming wreckage in a matter of minutes and felt sick in her stomach as the thought sank in that she had just watched her big brother die.

Shizuko ran off to a site where Japanese civilians fleeing the combat waited in line as soldiers handed out hunks of hardtack. There she found her sister and brother-in-law. They embraced and Shizuko told them what she had seen, and that she was headed to the north end of the island, where the Army kept its field hospital. She would volunteer to be a nurse. Her brother-in-law tried to talk her out of it. He said it would be dangerous. She thought to herself that if he had seen what the Americans did to those tanks, he would understand that it would be more dangerous to remain here.

In the days that followed, the Americans advanced by day and the Japanese counterattacked at night, despite the futility. On June 18, the Americans reached the far shore of the island, cutting it in two. The Battle of the Philippine Sea took place over the next two days; the American victory meant there would be no relief or reinforcement for the Japanese Army on Saipan. The General Staff in Tokyo sent a message to the defenders on Saipan, reminding them that the fate of the Empire depended on them and ordering them to "destroy the enemy gallantly and persistently, thus assuaging the anxiety of our Emperor."

Tokyo's insistence that they keep fighting led to a rumor that reinforcements were on the way, which encouraged the Japanese soldiers, although it was not true.

Miura Shizuko found the field hospital, where hundreds of wounded Japanese soldiers were laid in rows in an open field. She found an officer and told him she wanted to be a nurse. He told her this was an Army installation and no place for a civilian, especially a woman. Shizuko did not give up. She followed the officer around, begging to be allowed to help, until the officer flagged down a doctor and referred her to him. The doctor took off his Red Cross armband and put it on her arm. The officer put a helmet on her head and told her, "This is the Army…Obey your commander's orders…Many painful and sad things are going to take place. Don't give up and do your best."

Those words would prove prophetic. Shizuko helped pull pieces of shrapnel out of soldiers' bodies. She assisted in field amputations and open-air surgery.

The Americans now had three divisions on Saipan, two Marine divisions and one Army division. The Army division attacked south, to clear out the last of the Japanese defenders trapped in the southern part of the island. The two Marine divisions attacked north.

Saipan is about five miles east-to-west and twelve miles north-to-south. For you metric people, that's about nine kilometers by 20 kilometers. The southern half of the island is mostly flat, apart from some mountains in the middle. Here is where most of the population lives; here is where the Japanese managed their sugar cane plantations. The northern part of the island is much more rugged. Rocky peaks honeycombed with caves rise sharply from the ocean forming steep cliffs.

By June 25, the southern end of the island was under American control and the Army division joined the two Marine divisions on the drive north. The Japanese had a mere 1,200 able-bodied soldiers left to defend against an American force 40 times their number. Drinking water was scarce and some soldiers had nothing to eat but leaves and snails.

Tokyo continued to demand that every Japanese soldier fight to the death. The Army commander on Saipan replied, "Please apologize to the Emperor that we cannot do better than we are doing…Praying for the good health of the Emperor, we all cry 'Banzai!'"

Most of the civilian Japanese population fled north with the Army to avoid capture. It was well known how Americans treated their prisoners: rape, torture, mutilation, and finally a slow and agonizing death. Anything was better than that.

The Army encouraged civilian volunteers to help fight off the Americans, although they could offer no weapons more sophisticated than sharpened sticks of bamboo. Apart from civilians armed with bamboo spears, the only advantage left to the Japanese defenders was Saipan's terrain. The rugged hills were a defender's dream, and the many caves offered hundreds of opportunities to ambush the enemy.

Marine General Holland Smith grew frustrated with the slow pace of the American advance, which he blamed on the Army. This wasn't entirely fair; when the Army division joined the line, Smith had assigned them the center, which meant the Marines were advancing along the shores of the island, while the Army had gotten stuck with the worst of the terrain: the rocky hills, where the advance was made slow by the many Japanese ambushes. Soldiers had to stop at every cave opening and treat it as a potential threat. They threw grenades inside or blasted the cave with a flamethrower. Alas, some of these caves were sheltering civilian families.

After two weeks of vicious combat, the Americans were poised to overrun the final Japanese position at the northern tip of the island. The Japanese organized a final suicide attack on the morning of July 7, composed of some 3,000 combatants, Army, Navy, and civilian. They struck where reconnaissance patrols had indicated weak spots in the American line. The Japanese attackers overran and destroyed two Army battalions amounting to around 1000 soldiers, then

advanced and overran a Marine artillery unit. By the end of the day, though, the Americans had rebuilt their line and picked off the attackers one by one.

Over the next two days, the Americans advanced to the northern tip of the island. Organized resistance was gone, but to the Americans' horror, hundreds of civilians were committing suicide by jumping off the steep cliffs into the sharp rocks and ocean below. American interpreters and Japanese civilians who had already been captured pleaded with them over bullhorns and PA equipment, begging them to surrender. They were promised safety, food, and shelter. Lists of the names of civilians who had already surrendered were read out.

It did no good. Fathers threw their own children off the cliffs and then jumped after them. Mothers leapt into the ocean with their babies on their backs. The waters teemed with floating bodies, to the point that American boats and landing craft could not pass without bumping into them.

Not everyone jumped voluntarily. American soldiers reported numerous instances of Japanese soldiers shooting civilians who had lost their nerve at the last moment.

At the field hospital, Miura Shizuko woke up that morning in a foxhole. By the gray light of dawn, she saw dark faces peering down at her from a hillside above. In her terror and confusion, she took them to be gorillas and fled to where the medical staff had gathered. The doctors and Army officers were facing north, toward the Imperial Palace, to bow to the Emperor before committing *seppuku*.

The air filled with a strange music blaring from unseen loudspeakers. It was wild and raucous and disorienting. The presence of the music gave Shizuko a strange feeling of detachment, as if this were all a dream.

The music was American jazz.

The chief surgeon whom Shizuko had assisted these past three weeks ordered her to surrender to the Americans. He handed her a white handkerchief she could wave. Then he pressed the barrel of a pistol to his throat and pulled the trigger. Another officer used a knife to slit his own throat.

The figures she had seen earlier had climbed down the hillside and were advancing toward her. She saw now that these were Black American soldiers, which meant the rumors were true. The Americans were indeed using Black soldiers, said to be the cruelest and most savage of them all.

That made the decision for her. She took a hand grenade, pulled the pin, hit it against a rock to ignite the fuze, then dropped it to the ground and threw herself on top of it.

Miuma Shizuko awoke in a bed. She tried to sit up. A voice in the room told her, "You are wounded. Don't move."

She looked around. She was in the bedroom of an abandoned home. The other person in the room was an American soldier, an officer, a captain. Her mind reeled. She had never thought until this moment that there might be such a thing as a white person who spoke Japanese. It was the second major shock she experienced in just a few seconds. The first had been that she was still alive.

She asked for water, but the American told her he didn't have any. He poured some kind of red liquid out of a can into a cup and gave it to her. She took a sip and spit it out. It was vile. The American advised her to drink it anyway, and she did. It was tomato juice.

She asked him what had happened to the others at the field hospital. They had all died except for her, he explained. He told her he had studied at a Japanese university before the war, which was how he knew the language. He felt no animosity toward Japanese people; he only wanted to help them. When she felt ready to move, he would take her to an internment camp where the Americans kept Japanese civilians.

The American officer secured the use of a truck and drove her south along the edge of the cliffs to the camp. Along the way, he told her of the Japanese bodies floating in the sea and she said she wanted to see them. The captain stopped the truck and two Black American soldiers helped her to the cliff's edge. She looked down at the bodies. Among them she noticed the bodies of two small children tied together to that of a woman, presumably their mother.

"Why do the Japanese kill themselves like this?" the captain asked in a plaintive voice, as if begging her to explain it to him. But how do you explain such a thing to a foreigner?

She confessed her fear of American soldiers, and especially the Black ones. The captain told her it was a squad of Black soldiers who had saved her life.

[music: Bach, Fugue in B minor.]

Over 90% of the Japanese military personnel on Saipan died in the course of the American invasion. A small number survived to be taken prisoner; in this case as before, most of the prisoners were conscript laborers from Korea.

Almost half of the Japanese civilian population of Saipan died in the fighting, about 10,000 people altogether. Most of them died because they got caught in the crossfire of bullets, artillery, bombings, and naval bombardment. The number who died by suicide is estimated at around one thousand.

On the American side, the invasion force of about 70,000 suffered 3,000 killed and 13,000 wounded, casualty figures comparable in percentage terms to American losses on Tarawa, but since the landing force here was more than four times the size of the force that landed on Tarawa, in absolute terms casualties were much higher. It was becoming clear that the Japanese couldn't stop the Americans, but they could make the Americans pay dearly for every victory.

The casualty ratio on Saipan, about one American killed and four wounded for every seven Japanese soldiers killed, was used by US military planners to calculate anticipated losses in future battles against the Japanese.

In the history books, the invasion of Saipan is often overshadowed by the Normandy landings, which took barely a week earlier, but the fall of Saipan was as clear a sign that Japan would soon lose the war as the Normandy invasions were a sign that Germany was on the cusp of defeat. And more important even than that, it was a clear sign of the capabilities of a fully mobilized United States. The US had landed three divisions on Saipan just nine days after landing three divisions in Normandy, on the other side of the world. No other military in history, before or since, achieved anything comparable.

The Americans declared Saipan secured on July 9, and by that time US Navy construction battalions, known as Seabees, were already at work repairing and expanding the Japanese air base on the island, preparing it for use by B-29 bombers. The airfield was renamed Isely Field after US Navy Commander Robert Isely, who had commanded a squadron of torpedo bombers based on USS *Lexington* and was shot down and killed by Japanese antiaircraft fire while leading a bomber attack on that very field on June 13, two days before the amphibious landings.

A number of Japanese, military and civilian, remained in hiding in the caves on Saipan long after the date the island was declared secured. One force of about fifty Japanese soldiers and civilian men, commanded by Army Captain Oba Sakae, continued to wage guerilla warfare against the American occupation force for the next sixteen months. They finally surrendered in December 1945, three months after the Japanese government did.

The victory at Saipan boosted morale among Americans fighting in the Pacific. A bitter slogan among some Marines declared, “Golden Gate in ’48,” meaning they didn’t expect to see home again until 1948. After Saipan, a more optimistic saying emerged: “Home Alive in ’45.”

In Japan, military and civilian leadership were more shaken by this defeat than any previous one. Saipan had been designated a part of Japan’s final defensive line, but the Americans had broken right through it. Everyone up to and including the Emperor understood that the loss of Saipan meant they could expect to see American bombers over Tokyo in the not-too-distant future.

Japanese Prime Minister Tojo Hideki was indisputably the most powerful premier Japan had seen since the Meiji Constitution came into effect fifty years ago. In the West, Allied propaganda painted Tojo as another dictator in the mold of Mussolini or Hitler, and even in Japan, that accusation was heard with increasing frequency.

Beginning after the Battle of Midway, Tojo’s government refused to admit defeat, refused to acknowledge that, step by step, the Americans were getting closer to the Home Islands. Japan’s factories continued to churn out arms and equipment for the military, but only at the expense of the civilian economy, which was increasingly being commandeered for wartime production.

Seven-day work weeks became the norm. Women were brought into the work force, then teenage boys and girls. School hours were reduced. Some schools were closed and converted into warehouses storing military supplies. Consumer goods were impossible to find, food was rationed, and you needed a police permit to travel more than 100 kilometers from your home.

The harsh demands the government made of the Japanese population, combined with the growing sense that Japan's military situation was far more precarious than the government would admit, led to widespread popular dissatisfaction with the government, and with Tojo in particular, the powerful PM who was its face.

Even some senior officers in the military were decorating their offices with signs that said "Tojo must go." The military knew better than civilians how grave Japan's position had become; Japanese military planners now saw no plausible path to a Japanese victory, or a German one, for that matter. The military leadership blamed Tojo for this state of affairs, and he'd brought that blame upon himself by concentrating so much power into his own hands. Behind the open dissent, some military officers plotted in secret to remove Tojo by assassination, which seemed to them the only alternative left.

Tojo consulted with the Lord Privy Seal, Kido Kōichi, the man who had recommended Tojo for the post of prime minister back in 1941. If he was looking for support, or even sympathy, he didn't get it. Kido expressed his own disapproval of how Tojo had aggregated so much power and then dropped the bombshell: "the Emperor himself is extremely annoyed." Tojo offered to reshuffle the Cabinet but refused to give up any of his own posts. Kido was not impressed with the offer.

Next the prime minister attempted to placate his critics by dismissing Admiral Shimada, his friend and associate to whom he'd assigned the posts of Navy Minister and Naval Chief of Staff. Naval officers had never approved of this arrangement. They dismissed Shimada as Tojo's "briefcase carrier." Shimada accepted his dismissal with equanimity; he understood and accepted that Tojo was sacrificing him to save his own position.

Shimada's resignation was announced on July 17. Encouraged, former PM Prince Konoe Fumimaro met with the Lord Privy Seal and pressed him to suggest to the Emperor that His Majesty dismiss Tojo. Kido told Konoe it was not his place to get involved in political matters, then suggested that if this was a consensus recommendation from the *jushin*, Japan's former prime ministers, he could pass that along.

Konoe met with some of the former prime ministers and together they drafted a joint statement advising that Japan needed a change, and not merely a Cabinet reshuffle, but a wholesale change of leadership.

Meanwhile, Tojo asked one of these former PMs, Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa, to join his government. When Yonai flat-out refused, Tojo realized the end of his premiership had come.

On July 18, he met with the Cabinet and told them he was resigning because of the fall of Saipan. And if Japan lost the war, the *jushin*, the former prime ministers who were forcing him out of office, must accept responsibility for the consequences of their decision.

Tojo delivered his own resignation letter and those of his Cabinet to the Lord Privy Seal, who asked Tojo whom he would recommend to the Emperor as his successor. A bitter Tojo replied that he supposed the *jushin* had already made that choice themselves. Mrs. Tojo, by contrast, was relieved to hear of her husband's resignation. She feared assassination, and as if to underscore her fears came the news that Adolf Hitler had narrowly avoided assassination. More about that in a future episode.

In fact, the *jushin* had not chosen a successor—not yet, but they were working on it. After an inconclusive discussion, they decided to recommend three candidates for the Emperor to choose among. The leading candidate was an Army general named Terauchi Hisaichi, but he was in command of the Southern Expeditionary Army, which meant he oversaw the force that was engaged with the British in Burma and with MacArthur's forces on New Guinea. When the Emperor consulted Tojo, he expressed the view that it would be unwise to shake up the command of the Southern Expeditionary Army at this critical time.

So the winner, if that's the right word, was another general, the 64-year-old Koiso Kuniaki, the Governor-General of Korea, who was seen both as capable and religiously devout.

During this same period, US General Douglas MacArthur had taken the next step of his advance toward the Philippines by invading the island of Biak, off the northwestern coast of New Guinea. The Japanese Army had built an airfield on the island and was using it to support Japanese operations on New Guinea. MacArthur planned to take the island and use it to support the Allied advance on the Philippines.

The Allies invaded Biak on May 27, expecting a quick campaign with their invasion force of 12,000 soldiers easily overwhelming the island's 2,000 or so Japanese defenders. In fact, Allied intelligence had badly underestimated the Japanese garrison on Biak; it was around 11,000, almost as large as the attacking force.

The Japanese tried a different strategy this time; instead of meeting the enemy on the beach, they hunkered down in the jungle of the island's interior and waited for the Americans to come to them. After ten days of combat, the Americans captured the Japanese airfield, but Japanese guerilla attacks from the jungle made it impossible for them to use it.

Meanwhile, Japanese naval commanders, who were at this time still looking for ways to draw the US Navy into that decisive battle they always yearned for, considered that they might use the fighting on Biak to trigger the confrontation. The Japanese put together a convoy to resupply and reinforce their soldiers on Biak, and among the convoy's escorts were the two largest battleships in the Japanese fleet—or in the world for that matter—*Yamato* and *Musashi*.

The naval force at MacArthur's disposal was far more modest: just a handful of American and Australian cruisers and a collection of destroyers. The appearance of those big battleships with their big guns plus Japanese land-based aircraft in the region would threaten the Americans' ability to supply and reinforce Biak and would likely force them to send in a substantial force of battleships and carriers from the Central Pacific, which could then in turn be ambushed by the Mobile Fleet lurking in the Philippines.

As you know from last time, *Yamato* and *Musashi* had already begun their mission to Biak when the Americans under Nimitz landed on Saipan, which forced the Japanese into a change of plans. *Yamato* and *Musashi* were recalled and sent into the Battle of the Philippine Sea. The two big Japanese battleships came out of that action unscathed; on the other hand, they hadn't contributed much, either. They might have been far more dangerous if they'd engaged Allied naval forces around Biak; it was lucky for MacArthur that the Japanese changed their plan.

It took two more months of tough fighting to secure Biak. The Americans lost some 400 killed and 2,400 wounded. The entire Japanese garrison force was wiped out, either killed in action or lost to disease and starvation. About 600 forced laborers from India and Java, brought to the island to build and maintain the airfields, were freed.

MacArthur began preparing the next stages of his advance: a landing on Mindanao, in the Philippines, and once airbases were established there, a larger force to land on the island of Leyte. But the American success at Saipan encouraged the Joint Chiefs in Washington to make a bolder proposal: perhaps they should bypass the Philippines as MacArthur had bypassed Rabaul and Nimitz had bypassed Truk, and strike directly at the island of Formosa.

You can probably guess what MacArthur thought of that idea. He'd already loudly and publicly declared he was returning to the Philippines, and once he succeeded, it would make him the most famous commander in the Pacific, perhaps in the war. Now the Chiefs were proposing to rob him of that glory.

You can't say that to your bosses, though, so MacArthur appealed to them in the name of the Philippine people, whom, he argued, remained loyal to America even as they suffered terribly from a cruel Japanese occupation. America had a "national obligation"—his words—to come to their rescue. To avoid fighting for the Philippines would confirm the claims of Japanese propaganda, that Americans were unwilling to shed their own blood for the sake of Filipinos, and it would discredit America in Asian eyes for a generation.

George Marshall replied to MacArthur with a warning not to allow his personal feelings to affect his command judgment.

But Marshall would not have the last word. In late July, just after the Democratic National Convention nominated Franklin Roosevelt for an unprecedented fourth term as President, Roosevelt traveled to Hawaii to meet with MacArthur and Nimitz and discuss the Pacific War.

The meeting was partly intended to show off Roosevelt in his role as commander-in-chief of the Army and the Navy, and a hands-on one at that. The Army and Navy chiefs were not invited.

The President began with dinner with the two commanders, during which he pointed to Mindanao on a map and asked MacArthur "Where do we go from here?" MacArthur spoke at length on the reasons to proceed from Mindanao to Leyte to Luzon, and why that approach was preferable to leaping straight toward Formosa. Nimitz said nothing.

The following day, at the formal meeting, MacArthur again made his case for Luzon. This time, Nimitz pushed back, advocating for his own force to strike at Formosa. After a long discussion mediated by Roosevelt, Nimitz conceded MacArthur's point that American honor demanded giving the liberation of the Philippines top priority.

In Tokyo, Japan's top Army and Navy commanders had reached the same conclusion: the Americans would certainly strike at the Philippines, and strike soon. Here Japanese forces would make one final, desperate bid for that decisive battle that kept eluding them.

But when it came to the Philippines, the Japanese were now facing the same problem the Americans faced three years ago: how to organize the defense of a huge archipelago of more than 7,000 islands. One Army commander suggested attacking the Americans as soon as they landed, but that was an impossible strategy. The Army didn't have enough soldiers to garrison every beach on every island.

Senior commanders settled on an all-out defense of Luzon, the largest, most populous, and most developed of the islands. Here would be where Japan would make its last stand.

They drew up a plan and gave it an optimistic name: Sho-go, that is, Operation Victory.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Cooper for his kind donation, and thank you to Mike for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Cooper and Mike help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the Japanese offensive in China. That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In our time, many of the sites of combat on Saipan have been designated historic places, including the American landing beaches and Isley Field. The American Memorial Park was established after the war as a memorial to American military personnel who fought at Saipan and to the people of Saipan who were killed in the fighting.

The two cliffs used by most of the Japanese who jumped to their deaths are today known as Suicide Cliff and Banzai Cliff, and they are also designated historic places, along with some surviving Japanese fortifications. At the top of Suicide Cliff stand a large number of Japanese memorials to the people who died there.

[music: Closing War Theme]