



Okinawa, 1945. A Marine 155 howitzer fires a shell at Japanese artillery somewhere over the horizon.

Bring up the subject of Victory Over Japan Day (August 14), and you're sure to start a discussion about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What is often overlooked in discussing how World War II ended was how the war appeared to American soldiers preparing for an invasion of mainland Japan. Unaware of any atomic super-weapon, they were dreading the future.

Americans—both soldiers and civilians—were expecting a long, bloody campaign. A *Post* editorial from August observed—

“If you ask the average American how long he thinks the war in the Pacific will last, he is likely to reply, “If you're asking me, my opinion is that we'd better get ready for a long war out there. All of us pay lip service to the idea that the country faces at least a year, and maybe more, of fighting before Japan accepts unconditional surrender.”

Our soldiers hadn't been told that military planners were predicting the price of a successful invasion could be as high as a million casualties. However, they had all heard of what happened at Okinawa. There, between April and June, over 250,000 soldiers and civilians had died in a fierce, unrelenting firefight.

In his article, “What Japan Has Waiting For Us” [July 28, 1945], William McGaffin reported on the new tactics the Japanese army had developed.*

Because of its implications for the coming big show on the mainland of Japan, this duel of ours with disappearing cannon was closely watched by military strategists on our side and theirs too.

We did not ever have an easy time of it ... It was a much tougher problem when the enemy opened up with several dozen [cannons] at once—mass firing. This is an American specialty.

The Jap was not supposed to know how to do it. He never had done it before. He does not do it now as well as we, but too well, at that. The effect of two dozen shells exploding almost simultaneously in a single area—mass firing—is exceedingly more disastrous than two dozen shells arriving one by one over a period of time.

He kept his guns alive to harass us in spite of our overwhelming strength. He kept them alive by taking them into thousands of caves prepared against the day of invasion—caves like those presumably ready in the rugged regions of China and Japan.

The Japs are good at camouflage. Many a cave had a deceptively painted trap door. Sometimes it was impossible to detect such a gun position unless you had your glasses right on it when the trap door flopped open and the gun was rolled out.

Groupment Henderson, a mixed Marine and Army outfit specializing in counterbattery fire, made a rich haul one afternoon by accident. The air observer spotted a group of camouflaged light anti-aircraft guns. Marine Lt. Col. F. P. Henderson, who commands the groupment, began giving the enemy pieces the treatment he had found most effective. Before going for “destruction,” with the 200-pound shells of his 8-inch howitzers, he ordered his Long Toms to ‘walk’ volleys of their 100-pounders around in the area.

This knocks off camouflage, opens up a target and gains a by-product of personnel casualties. The results, however, never were so astonishing as on this day. For when the camouflage was knocked off, seven more guns were laid bare—seven formidable 150-mms. The light anti-aircraft guns, insignificant game in comparison, were there to protect the precious 150’s. The colonel’s 8-inchers proceeded to knock off the seven big guns.

Each night new positions would be fixed. They were not always new guns. Often they were old ones moved to new places. Moving around was the only way the Jap could keep his guns alive. In the end, upward of an estimated 500 Japanese guns were knocked out on Okinawa. It took weeks to get them all.

The strain on troop morale was another new factor we had not encountered before. Our divisions on Okinawa never had been under shelling by heavy artillery. They stood up well, considering their greenness to this type of ordeal, but a percentage of battle neuroses—‘shell shocks’ we called them in the last war—inevitably developed. Many had to be evacuated.

On Okinawa, these now-you-see-’em-now-you-don’t guns proved to be a definite new threat to an American invading force. It was defeated eventually. But thoughtful strategists are wondering: If he could do what he did on Okinawa, what must he have waiting for us in Japan or China?

He has tipped his hand now, showing us that he has large-caliber guns, that he knows how to mass-fire them and how to keep them alive indefinitely in caves.

And, though his air force and his fleet have been whittled down from their dangerous proportions, his big guns have hardly suffered at all. For he did not bring them out until

Okinawa. It would seem a logical deduction that he has plenty waiting for us when we come into his homeland for the big show.

Military chroniclers of the future, perhaps, will see in Okinawa a sort of final testing ground of the Pacific, where new weapons and new ways of using them were tried and perfected for the great battles ahead. We shall need every bit of the experience we have gained here.

Okinawa proved to be a different sort of testing ground. We tested how well their defenses held up in the home islands and found them more deadly than we had expected.

Thankfully, we can only imagine how much more intense the fighting would have been had we invaded mainland Japan. On August 6 and 9 we dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and the war, and the Japanese government surrendered. Because the invasion was cancelled, hundreds of thousands of GIs would return home. The cost to Japan was over 200,000 civilian deaths—a number that would probably have been small compared to the carnage of a lengthy invasion.

* Note: McGaffin uses the diminutive title “Japs” to indicate the soldiers of Imperial Japan. It was a term that was widely and thoughtlessly used in America before the war. It would have been hard, I suppose, for a reporter to write of the Pacific war without using a hateful term for the enemy. So I’ve decided to retain the term in historical context.