When Soldiers Kill Civilians: The Battle for Saipan, 1944

The American soldiers who fought their way through the islands of the Pacific during the Second World War encountered fierce Japanese resistance but few local people. That all changed with the invasion of the Mariana Islands, says Matthew Hughes.

When United States marines landed on Saipan, the second largest of the Pacific chain of Mariana Islands, on June 15th, 1944, they faced a challenge beyond defeating the Japanese garrison of 30,000 men: how to deal with the island's 25-30,000 civilians. The minority – around 4,500 – was local 'native' Chamorros and Carolinians; the majority was Japanese and Korean settlers, all of whom would now be caught up in the battle that would rage until July 9th when US forces declared the island secured. The Japanese civilians were mainly poor peasant migrants from the southern Japanese island of Okinawa who worked Saipan's sugar-cane plantations. They were looked down upon by mainland Japanese as second-class subjects. A contemporary US military observer, Frank Hough, noted that these civilians were a 'novel feature', as hitherto US troops in combat had only encountered 'scattered handfuls' of local peoples, 'semi-savages who had no special stake' in the outcome of the war.Now, on Saipan, the US had to deal with civilians, an 'unknown quantity'whose reactions to invasion 'no one could predict'. 'At best, if they remained entirely passive, they would still present a problem utterly alien to our experience to date.'

Moreover, the Pacific war was what the US historian John Dower has aptly described as 'war without mercy', one supercharged with racism, a savage theatre of combat which could preclude decent treatment of an enemy that the US portrayed as fanatical, alien, verminous and simian-like.How would US marines, hardened by the bloody battles of Guadalcanal (1942) and Tarawa (1943), during which they took very few Japanese soldiers prisoner, react to large numbers of civilians, most of whom were 'enemy' and who were physically indistinguishable from Japanese soldiers? Some of the civilians were in paramilitary units and many Japanese soldiers were dressed in a mix of military clothing. On Guadalcanal, when marines had encountered 'small, scrawny, scared' construction workers on the island during the initial landings in August 1942 – most of whom were unarmed Korean labourers – they called them 'termites' and shot many of them out-of-hand: 'the troops killed every Asian they could root out of the brush.'

War without preparation

As the American troops approached Saipan, US civil affairs officers lectured them about the peoples of the island. The civil affairs officers organised armbands to give to civilians – red for Japanese, red and white for Koreans and white for 'others' – and prepared to land on June 17th to manage civilians. But as a post-battle marine report recognised: ‘There was little of the civil affairs operation on Saipan of which the Americans could be proud.’ This was a view shared by Dorothy Richard,who wrote the official account of the military administrative services in occupied enemy territory in the Pacific.While pointing to the boxes taken ashore with questionnaires, the registration forms and the identifying armbands, he wrote that no provision was made for the erection of shelters for civilians, or for their medical care: ‘Military government was still a relatively new concept and it was difficult to secure the proper support … As a result, the experience of military government on Saipan was not a pleasant one.’ The marine report concluded, rightly, that there was a ‘natural difference of viewpoint between the forces trying to conquer or annihilate enemy personnel and destroy all property which might be used by the enemy and forces trying to conserve property which might be beneficial to the alien enemy civilian population’. This was a ‘war without preparation’when it came to the care of civilians.

Contemporary American accounts of the Saipan battle and subsequent official and semi-official histories, usually written by former servicemen, skate over the issue of the civilians’ experience of conflict, preferring to focus on the glory and heroism of the unfolding battle, understandable considering the authors and the audience for which they were writing. Civilians appear tangentially in a sanitised form with US marines and soldiers giving children sweets through the wire of a stockade or handing down a baby to safety. The exception is the mass suicide of Japanese civilians who jumped off Marpi Point on the northern end of Saipan at the end of the battle or who were shot there by Japanese soldiers and whose gruesome end was recorded and presented as proof of an avoidable tragedy perpetrated by a fanatical, suicidal opponent. Civilian deaths were either unavoidable, suicides or attributable to the Japanese killing their own people.

Is this true? Though a part of the small staff of the American civil affairs did land on June 17th, it was some days before all the unit was ashore and even then there were never enough of them and they never had sufficient equipment. Moreover, they were in the rear areas, chasing the battle up the island, leaving the initial contact with civilians to the fighting troops. The marines from the 2nd and 4th divisions, and the soldiers from the 27th Infantry Division who joined the battle later, initially concentrated civilians in the beach area: it was dangerous, unsanitary and without shade, but it was the only place available. Once troops pushed inland, the Americans set up a permanent camp, known as Camp Susupe, where the friendly Chamorros and Carolinians were divided from the Koreans and Japanese. The latter were all repatriated in 1946. Conditions in the camp were, at first, bad. Considering the exigencies of war and the Americans’ lack of experience of handling civilians in the Pacific battles, the US forces did what they could for the noncombatants who were fleeing the fighting. But, inevitably, the Americans focused on combat and were largely indifferent to the care of the mass of civilians on Saipan. The passage of the civilians from the war zone to Camp Susupe provides an explanation for why so many civilians perished on Saipan.

An alien force

While Chamorros and Carolinians were usually willing to surrender to the advancing Americans and did so early in the battle in the southern part of the island, Japanese civilians were convinced that the Americans would rape and abuse them,‘punch out their eyes, cut off their noses and pull off their legs and arms’. Fearful Japanese civilians fell back with their fighting troops as they retreated north up the island, one tale told being that black American ‘negro’ troops would abuse Japanese women. The Japanese were told that to join the US marines a recruit had first to kill his mother and father. The Americans were an alien, unknown force. David Sablan, a Chamorro, recalled in interview with this author that he was told as a boy that the Americans would be eight feet tall and would be wearing pressed pants and white stockings.

Japanese soldiers killed their own people. Even without soldiers present, Japanese parents would kill their own children and their spouses, often cutting their throats; children would be bayoneted. The problem for one of the few Japanese soldiers who surrendered was escaping his comrades rather than the reaction of the Americans. He was among a mixed group, including a young girl who had survived her parents’ attempt to poison her, when he heard American troops calling out:

Their Japanese was a little shaky … but I feared that if I surrendered within sight of our own men during daylight I might be shot in the back … I couldn’t actively say, ‘Let’s surrender’, because I was worried about what that young man might do … The American Army was only a little way off. ‘When I’m spotted by them,’ I thought, ‘I only have to raise my hands immediately’… I was making my way through the jungle when I heard, ‘Halt!’ An American soldier was pointing his rifle at me. I thought, ‘I’m saved!’ I looked back. Trailing me were that young woman and the middle-aged couple. I was questioned. ‘Are you a soldier?’ Yes, I said. An American sergeant ordered me to sit down …. I was the sevenhundred- fifty-seventh military prisoner-of-war taken on Saipan. I surrendered on July 14. The American soldiers had been demons on the battlefield, ready to kill me in an instant. Now, here they were, right in front of my eyes. Relaxed. Sprawled on top of Jeeps, shouting, ‘Hey!’ Joking with each other. At that moment, Japanese forces fired at us from the mountains. The Americans started to fire back. I threw myself flat, in an instant. The women just stayed sitting where they were. Indifferent. Seemingly lost.

Japanese authorities were not prepared for the US invasion of Saipan. They portrayed the invading US forces as brutal; they encouraged civilians to retreat with the battle; and they killed many civilians who refused to kill themselves. But civilians were not 'forced' to retreat with their troops. Surrounded by the appalling carnage of the battle, the civilians were genuinely scared of the Americans. This can be forgotten when the civilian experience is reduced to the suicides at Marpi Point. Also at Marpi Point, a Japanese sniper shot a woman who, while holding her baby, was running frantically to and from the precipice, undecided. At the same place, Japanese soldiers had children in circles throw live grenades like balls. All of this was made easier by Japanese notions of honour relating to surrender that civilians as well as soldiers seem to have imbibed. In the end some 10-12,000 of the 25-30,000 civilians on the island died, including almost 1,000 Chamorros and Carolinians. How many committed suicide as opposed to dying as 'collateral damage' – to use an awful euphemism – in the battle is not clear but the suicides at Marpi Point, while dramatic and recorded by US film crews, probably did not claim that many lives.

This is the traditional story of the tragedy of the civilians of Saipan, buttressed by accounts of honourable marines and army soldiers trying to avoid needless suffering and who were horrified by the carnage not just at Marpi Point but at the many caves that they came across, full of suicides, as they pressed north up Saipan. But the Americans were also responsible for civilian deaths, if inadvertently.

Firstly, there is the issue of the tactical systems employed by American forces on the battlefield. As the marines and soldiers pushed forward, they pressed up against an enemy who, to save itself from the Americans' overwhelming firepower, dug down and sought sanctuary in dugouts and Saipan's many caves. From these positions some hid and hoped; many fought back. To overcome such opposition the Americans used grenades, explosive charges, gasoline and, above all, the flamethrower, the weapon that epitomises the savagery of the Pacific war. Indeed, after the battle for Tarawa in 1943, one of the tactical lessons learned was the need to distribute more flamethrowers to the fighting troops. The appalling jellied petroleum weapon 'napalm' was also used for the first time on Saipan – not, as is often reported, on July 23rd on the neighbouring island of Tinian.

Such weapons and tactics precluded discrimination; anyone hidden from view was a target and within many caves there was a mix of soldiers and civilians. Chamorros and Carolinians built underground bunkers buttressed with coconut logs to protect themselves and their families that would have been indistinguishable to advancing US troops from Japanese defensive positions. The Americans employed massive, sea, air and land firepower, smashing to pieces Saipan's capital city of Garapan, firing at anything that moved or was used at the fighting front to provide close support for American troops. This further precluded any discrimination between soldier and civilian.Nor was this helped by the tendency of civilians to wander into the US lines at night, provoking the reaction from nervous US troops fearful of night attacks who fired first and found out only later what had been hit.

Secondly, the language barrier between the invading Americans and Saipan's civilians made verbal communication difficult, especially between Americans and Japanese and Korean civilians. Some Chamorros spoke Spanish as Saipan was once a Spanish colony and there were Spanish Catholic priests and nuns on the island. The Chamorros had also learnt Japanese at school on Saipan. Most of the civilians spoke nothing but Japanese (the Koreans and Okinawans had learnt Japanese at school). US forces had attached Japanese-speaking language officers and these men had fitted up loudspeaker systems for use at the front and had printed surrender leaflets in Japanese. But the Americans were on Saipan to fight a battle not to take surrenders. To pay for the loudspeakers to be used to reach civilians in inaccessible areas, one marine language officer had to raid military recreational funds. As he later recalled: ‘The whole idea at the time seemed outlandish to most marines, as everyone was convinced that no Japanese would ever surrender.’

Appealing to the enemy

The US serviceman, up against a hidden enemy in fluid battlefield situations, was alone with whatever language skills he possessed,which included some basic taught Japanese phonetic phrases such as ‘come out’, ‘put your hands up’, ‘don’t be afraid’, ‘we have water’ and ‘throw away your rifle’. This favoured the Chamorros as US servicemen of Hispanic origin often spoke Spanish. One exceptional marine,Guy Gabaldon, spoke Japanese and he secured many prisoners as he appealed to the enemy in their language. Gabaldon had learnt Japanese as a boy in California when living with a Japanese-American family and on Saipan he told Japanese civilians that their families back home would not be told that they had surrendered, thus preserving their honour. But Gabaldon’s remarkable story is atypical: most US servicemen spoke nothing but English and had little or no interest in, or understanding of, Japanese cultural traditions.

US troops approaching a cave complex had the choice of going in to find out who was hidden inside, trying to talk the occupants into surrendering, or getting a flamethrower or satchel charge to deal with the problem before moving on to the next minor battle. Many marines and soldiers, especially after July 9th when tempers calmed, did use verbal persuasion, but without their speaking Japanese there was no way that the civilians would know what was being said to them. Verbal persuasion was also time-consuming. And, of course, understanding a language is not the same as believing what soldiers from an invading army are saying about surrender and good treatment. A US serviceman had to choose between risking his life going into a cave, leaving the cave which could be full of soldiers who could later emerge and attack the Americans in the back, or use blunt force and kill everyone inside. Unsurprisingly, the preferred tactical method was to ‘seal’ the cave, another euphemism that meant death for those inside.

American troops’ behaviour could be kind or it could be cruel. More often, it was casual and indifferent. One marine recounted to a mobile field recording unit during the battle how he and his comrades had seen a woman go into a cave. Their response was to throw in a smoke grenade and a couple of concussion grenades, the latter designed for maximum impact in a closed environment. There was no interpreter present so they threw in some more grenades, a method unlikely to encourage the occupants of the cave to come out. Then, bizarrely, the sergeant of the unit said ‘come on out’ (in what language we do not know) whereupon scores of civilians emerged, though not all, as some remained in the cave. An interpreter arrived who discovered that the civilians were a mixed group of Japanese, Koreans and Chamorros. The whole process was chaotic, personally driven but, in this instance, ultimately rewarding. Once the civilians were in the open, the marines helped them and treated them humanely, sending them back to safety.

During the battle for Saipan, US forces focused on combat and destroying Japanese military forces. The Japanese did not make any real provision for their civilians after June 15th, but in bitter combat on a small island one wonders what either side could have done short of not invading or surrendering en masse.

Battlefield callousness, poor operational preparation, intense combat on a small island and the fact that both sides saw the ‘other’ in ideological, racial terms led to the deaths of thousands of Saipan’s civilians. Both instrumental and ideological factors were responsible: the two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Japanese national ideology, culture and notions of honour explain why many civilians chose to kill themselves and why Japanese soldiers helped them to commit suicide, before killing themselves. The Americans also saw their enemy in ideological terms, one of the reasons why they paid such little attention to civil affairs on Saipan in 1944.

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Further reading

- Harold Goldberg, *D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan* (Indiana University Press, 2007)
- Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War: World War Two and the Japanese, 1931-45* (Random House USA, 1978)
- William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (Birlinn, 2001)
- Lin Poyer, Suzanne Falgout and Laurence Marshall Carruci (eds), *The Typhoon of War: Micronesian Experiences of War* (University of Hawaii Press, 2001)
- John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Faber, 1986)

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