

Operation Olympic: the proposed invasion of Kyushu in 1945

Alan H. Smith
Military Historian

Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales¹



The Allied powers expected that World War II in the Pacific would not conclude until the Japanese mainland had been invaded. Planning for this invasion began in 1944 and was intended to proceed in two stages: the amphibious invasion of the island of Kyushu, followed by the amphibious invasion of the island of Honshu. This paper describes the planning for Operation Olympic, the proposed invasion of Kyushu, which the Allies had scheduled for November 1945.

Key words: Operation Olympic; United States; Japan; Kyushu; amphibious invasion; 1945.

In 1944-45, 73 years ago, the Allied general staffs began planning for the climactic event of World War II in the Pacific – the invasion of the Japanese homeland (Operation Downfall). Operation Downfall was to proceed in two stages: first, the amphibious invasion of the island of Kyushu (Operation Olympic), scheduled for November 1945; followed by the amphibious invasion of the island of Honshu (Operation Coronet), scheduled for March 1946. In the event, the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, rendering Operation Downfall unnecessary. This paper covers Operation Olympic and is based on the history by distinguished American historian Dennis Giangreco (Giangreco 2009). I am indebted to him for his counsel and permission to draw on his account.

The Japanese Empire, 1944

By 1944, the Japanese had been at war for eight years, beginning in China. Their armed forces in Burma were steadfastly resisting the British and Indian armies as well as insurgent Chinese military forces. Their military operations continued against the Americans in Luzon (Philippines) and Okinawa, and were soon to continue in Borneo at Balikpapan, a source of oil supplies for their armed forces. The Japanese military effort of mobilization, and training and equipping these residual outposts with armed forces, was systematic. Japanese civilian morale was high; and the militaristic Japanese leadership coterie had little trouble influencing Emperor Hirohito to involve the total population in defeating the Allied forces. As their home islands were to be the next target for the Allies, the population and their industries worked 'as one' to sustain the continuing defence measures their Emperor

and his cabinet planned for them. Production of arms of all kinds stretched their industrial base, some of which were to surprise their opponents.

Initial Allied Planning, Staff Studies and Casualty Statistics

For Allied planning staff, the topic of casualties and forces manpower statistics was never far from the surface. Two world-wide war zones, Europe and the Pacific, each provided planners with challenges, given the differences in perspective of the three major combatants, each of whom had already incurred significant casualties, and there was a conceptual 'political' casualty limit.

Based on the manpower statistics of attrition in the European theatre and casualties incurred in the two battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa, United States staff studies hypothesised worst case scenarios of 500,000 killed-in-action (KIA). Replacements required were estimated at 100,000 a month for combat-related conditions such as breakdowns, wounds, accidents and death from whatever cause. In the months of November and December 1945, estimated deaths were 72,000, wounded 880,000 and 79,000 injured. As the war zone shifted to Japan after the island-hopping battles, it was expected that the American manpower losses would far exceed earlier estimates. The Army would eventually discharge 1,225,230 soldiers from injuries, disease and non-battle casualties (psychiatric breakdowns).

The British armed services were also taking stock from the combat experiences of their three services in the theatre, including Burma. The formation of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF), first as a headquarters with planning functions for the invasion phase, noted that Australia would be able to provide one infantry division (9th) and the British two (32nd and 35th). The British were quick to put their command structure forward complete with generals, to be preferred. This aroused the ire of the then Australian Prime Minister (Mr J. B. Chifley), who advised the

¹Smith was related by marriage to Colonel Ridgeway Trimble, a senior planner of the medical evacuation and hospital aspects of the invasion. These, however, are Smith's personal views.
E-mail: ahjmsmith@bigpond.net.au.

Americans and British that Australia had able divisional commanders quite capable of fitting into a command structure.

At the highest levels of command in the United States and Great Britain, the commanders and the politicians countenanced the transfer of battle-ready soldiers, sailors and airmen to help complete the invasion force of nearly 7 million men and women. For example, 90 per cent of the Royal Navy (RN) planned strength would be deployed – 866,000 men and women could back up five fleet carriers, six battleships and 25 cruisers. In the event, the Americans decided to utilise only the RN fleet aircraft carriers. The Royal Air Force could have provided 20 Lancaster bomber squadrons and 96,000 personnel. The Canadians would send an infantry division and Britain would send ground troops from Burma, but they were not required.

Operational Plans

The American senior commanders formulated plans for the invasion of Japan using their experience gained fighting the Japanese from the Solomons (Guadalcanal/Bougainville) and subsequent island hopping northwards. All four services had gained much experience in fighting the Japanese, and they put it to good use in creating and structuring a force more than equal to invading Japan's mainland islands. The intelligence picture of the Japanese mainland armies' strengths was predicated on what they were able to deduce from reconnaissance and cryptography.

The planners timed the assault on Kyushu for 1 November 1945 (X Day), well clear of the typhoon season. Operation Olympic would involve two naval task groups (3rd and 5th Fleets). Admiral Spruance's 5th Fleet of 3000 vessels would carry the invasion force. It was expected that confronting the ships would be 2412 Shinyo suicide watercraft, each with 250kg of explosive in the bow, and these would be augmented by 393 midget submarines and 177 Kaiten human torpedos.

The X Day landings would be made on the southern end of Kyushu island (Map 1). There would be three separate and concurrent assaults, with one assault from each of the west, the south and the east. Each assault would be made by a corps of three infantry (or equivalent) divisions.

There would be two preliminary operations on X-4 conducted by the 40th Infantry Division and the 158th Regimental Combat Team. They would secure several small islands on the left flank of the western landing beaches and a small island 28 miles south of the southern landing beaches, from which they would provide radar coverage and on which they would establish a warning centre.

There would be a deception manoeuvre on X-2 to X Day. IX Corps afloat, comprising 81st and 98th Infantry Divisions, would demonstrate towards Shikoku and would then become the Reserve Afloat.

For the invasion of Kyushu on X Day, the invasion zone would be divided among the three assault forces.



Map 1: The assault plan for Operation Olympic
[Source: Giangreco 2009: Map 7]

- The Western Assault Force, the V Amphibious Corps, comprising the 2nd, 3rd and 5th Marine Divisions², would land on the western side of Kyushu at Kushikino on beaches codenamed Pontiac, Reo, Rolls Royce, Saxon, Star, and Studebaker. It was then to send half its landing force to Sendai and the other half to Kagoshima.
- The Southern Assault Force, XI Corps, comprising the 1st Cavalry Division, 43rd Infantry Division and Americal Division, would land at Ariake Bay on beaches codenamed De Soto, Dusenber, Essex, Ford and Franklin. Its objectives were Shibushi airfield, and Kanoya and its airfield.
- The Eastern Assault Force, I Corps, comprising the 25th, 33rd and 41st Infantry Divisions, would assault near the town of Miyazaki on beaches codenamed Austin, Buick, Cadillac and Ford. Its objective was an inland airfield.

On X+4, the Reserve Force Afloat, IX Corps, comprising the 81st and 98th Infantry Divisions, together with the Follow-up Force, consisting of the 77th Infantry

²Map 1 shows these as 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions. The map is incorrect. The 4th Marine Division was reserved for Operation Coronet.

Division and the 11th Airborne Division, if not already employed, would occupy beaches in the island's south near Kawabe and codenamed Lincoln, La Salle, Hupmobile, Moon, Mercedes, Maxwell, Overland, Oldsmobile, Packard and Plymouth.

In addition to the existing airfields sized during the initial invasion, the planners factored in building landing strips to take land-based fighters. Ten strips would be needed in the first 30 days.

The planning staff anticipated it would take four months for the landed force to achieve its objectives on Kyushu. If all went according to plan, Operation Coronet would be launched with as many as 28 divisions to capture Honshu. The planners looked to calling upon United States Forces in Europe if more manpower were needed.

The allies expected to be confronted by a Japanese Army of 3.5 million. Extrapolations based on previous experience on Saipan indicated the Japanese could anticipate a casualty count of more than 500,000.

The Kyushu Terrain and Defences

The 6th United States Army intelligence estimate of the southern Kyushu terrain (Giangreco 2009: 194) where the landings would take place, was: "The principal low lying areas of the Miyazaki, Ariake and Kushikino plains are not flat areas, but badly dissected alluvial terraces and river flats, many of which are near the landing beaches. The serrated edges are almost cliff-like in places, from 25 to 250 feet above the valley floors ... The country is a mass of narrow, deep gullies and ravines ... unlimited opportunities for the construction of cave and underground fortifications ... many immune from air or naval bombardment."

The intelligence estimate was that the Imperial Japanese Army positions along the coast were organised into fortified zones (Giangreco 2009: 208). "Positions along the coast are for beach fighting, and will take full advantage of terrain to fight flexibly ... The positions will be organised mainly for anti-tank warfare and fields of fire will be short. Positions will be underground fortresses capable of close range actions in which flame throwers are used. Dummy positions for deception and attracting enemy fire must be set up."

Relative Strengths

When the battle for Okinawa was concluding, it enabled the American planners to make more realistic projections of numbers of aircraft and personnel likely to be required. They reckoned there were only 5500 to 7000 planes available to the Japanese and all their best pilots had been killed. They were wrong. There were 12,700 to 18,000 pilots available, of whom 4200 were suitable for night combat. The Japanese misled the American and British forces by not responding to naval shore bombardments and only weakly to the B29 raids on mainland targets. Japanese naval aircraft strength was further enhanced by having several thousand wood and fabric trainers that were 'invisible' to American

radar. These aircraft would be used to ram American bombers. The Japanese Army's beach defences were constituted by one-third of each formation; the remaining two-thirds of the formation were held back in 'reserve' or in 'depth' positions.

The American landing site, Kyushu, had been correctly forecast by the senior Japanese. Two Japanese forces, Ketsu-Go No. 6 and Ketsu-Go No. 3, defended the landing areas. Fourteen Japanese divisions on Kyushu would confront the Americans. Post the Allied planning phase, the Japanese divisions were strongly reinforced with artillery. They were less mobile than the Americans would be, as the latter would be optimized for the assault (or 'shock troops') role.

The Japanese did not need sizeable airfields for their Kamikaze (suicide) aircraft, and their dispersal was a real worry for the planners, who would come to rely on the radar picket destroyers in their critical role of defence of the land areas. The Japanese aircraft, if they avoided the combat air patrols, would make the naval air defence craft a primary target – the first seen and dived upon by inexperienced pilots. The Americans remembered their Okinawa experience – 132 of 400 American warships were hit by Kamikaze aircraft (32 sunk, 40 heavily damaged and 60 needing repairs). It would doubtless be replicated unless air defences were beefed up.

In mid 1945, the Japanese planners amalgamated the army and navy Kamikaze fleets, converting all obsolete aircraft into Kamikaze aircraft. The combined Kamikaze fleet comprised 10,440 aircraft, included 3230 fighters and reconnaissance planes, 1810 trainers and 5400 others. There were also available 2300 of the most modern fighters and a further 600 were available from Formosa. They also could operate from the Home Islands, where 125 airfields had been identified, but literally hundreds more were hidden.

The United States Navy in the Pacific would have as many as 25 fleet and light fleet carriers with 1912 aircraft as well as 10 Royal Navy carriers with a strength of 550 aircraft from each of two task groups. The Royal Navy contribution was to be the only non-American force in the whole operation. It was able to be deployed as reinforcements for the United States fleet. Combined, they could provide 670 aircraft for dawn to dusk protection over the beaches, naval gunfire spotting and fleet protection. Planners estimated that 136 aircraft from the carriers and 32 land-based fighters would be required over the beaches at all times, similar to Okinawa, from whence some of the sorties would originate. One study envisaged a primary landing force at Kyushu of 15 divisions and followed up with another 25. The upshot of all the studies, critiques, plans and modifications was that the invasion was to be a wholly American enterprise, except for Royal Navy units attached to United States Navy task groups as noted above.

The Medical Plan

The American soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen had during their training been aware of the importance their hierarchies attached to the treatment of the injured and wounded. Each of the previous Pacific battle areas produced their own structures and procedures. The wounded expected the best medical attention – no less. Staff studies for Operation Downfall produced an architecture of strict timetables, envisaging evacuation after first treatment to hospitals ‘stateside’ (*i.e.* on the United States mainland). The upshot was evacuation to 11 ‘metropolitan’ hospitals; and refrigerated blood supplies would be ‘the norm’. In all the forces ‘working up’ for the invasion, refrigeration was **the** key, including the production of huge quantities of dry ice.

Regular blood donations within units were to start 12 days before X Day. Blood transfusion supplies from the United States were to be staged through Guam by a special LST(H)³, which would stock four to six day’s supplies.

Medical evacuation from the beaches was to be by DUKWs⁴. Before the battle for Okinawa, one designated hospital ship (SS *Arhemar*) took a hit from a Kamikaze and it was two days before all the wounded could be evacuated from it. It was anticipated that a 2-day interval would have to be allowed for such an eventuality if the system were to operate as planned.

The Japanese armed services activities before the invasion enabled the American genius of organisation to get the medical logistics right, all the way to the United States. The Americans Medical planners gave much thought to the possible casualty scenario and organised the medical evacuation plans of moving the wounded to hospital ships. It would be a huge operation and a vital component of the battle fleet. The sheer magnitude of the medical evacuation plan is evident from its two main drivers: ‘first treatment’, minimising the length of time from ‘hurt’; and the seriousness of the hurt in terms of ‘assessment and classification’ – where, when and how best to manage the soldier’s second treatment – ‘in theatre’ (*i.e.* in the Japan area), Hawaii or ‘stateside’.

The final touches to medical evacuation plans from theatre by air and sea, treatment plans, and resources required from a ‘first treatment’ scenario of medical cases to the more serious wounds requiring plasma, evacuation and transport, derived the need for the following resources: 25 evacuation hospitals; 61 general hospitals; 33 station hospitals (each of 250 beds); 1 auxiliary hospital; 1 convalescent hospital; and 21 collecting and clearing companies; and a medical professional group. This totalled 292 facilities, equivalent to 150,000 fixed beds.

The medical staff was acutely aware of how serious the position would become if the Japanese air threat

were to disrupt their plans. The use of plasma and its consumption for treating the wounded meant the Medical Corps had to stockpile plasma along the medical evacuation chain. Quite apart from the utility of floating hospital ships were also several vessels (converted LSTs and other craft) that were holding ‘stock’ that was ‘donated’ by the citizens of the United States, servicemen ‘in theatre’ and the millions of servicemen in the invasion fleet. The medical ‘fleet’ comprised a significant tonnage of the off-shore fleet of LST-sized vessels, as well as their extended United States bases/facilities on Pacific Ocean islands, on Hawaii and in ‘stateside’ west coast cities, if necessary.

Logistics

The logistics process earmarked the force that would be assembled for the greatest invasion the world had ever seen or was likely to see.

If there ever were a manifestation of the resources of the American war-time economy that was girding itself for the (hopefully) final phases of the war, it was to be found in the production of every single item that would equip and arm its armed forces. The planners from the three armed services specialising in the war against Japan looked to the invasion of France on D Day, 6 June 1944, as a start point.

One vital lesson was that of ship-to-shore transfer of stores and equipment, the answer being the blockship, with caissons forming a mechanised loading/unloading platform, complete with its own anti-aircraft defence. The American answer for Japan was Ironhorse, a \$50 million investment. It was a reinforced cement structure 500 feet long and designed to defy 20-foot high waves and be towed across the Pacific. It had its own anti-aircraft guns and barrage-balloon defences. Its designed capacity was 40,000 tons per day, predicted to support over a million soldiers, sailors and airmen ashore and afloat (Giangreco 2009: 240-241).

While the battles of Luzon and Iwo Jima continued, the usable American stores and equipment which had littered several Pacific islands during the advance to Japan, were transferred to appropriate destinations around the Pacific. Specifically, this included current equipments that could be modified and improved with the latest ‘technology’. One example arose from the relative merits of anti-aircraft fire from shipboard Oerlikon and Pom-Pom anti-aircraft weapons against Kamikaze attacks.

Admiral Kelly Turner had under his command three amphibious forces (3rd, 5th and 7th). Each was structured to protect and land a corps-sized ground force. There were 12 different (functional) transports and watercraft flotillas whose combined strength was 2700 of a total 3600 vessels. The legendary DUKW was not included in this total!

Invasion Plans Confirmed

When the final plans were settled with America’s

³LST (H): Landing Ship, Tank (Hospital)

⁴DUKW: amphibious truck

senior service chiefs, the Joint Chiefs of Staff – General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Chester Nimitz, General ‘Hap’ Arnold – took their plans to President Harry Truman and explained the choices and rationale. Invasion advocates were faced with a dilemma – whereas simply destroying cities from the air leaves the enemy’s armed forces intact, would prolonged blockade, instead of invasion, bring about surrender? He approved of their invasion plans on 24 July 1945.

On 26 July, the United Nations considered the Potsdam Declaration, offering the Japanese unconditional surrender or face abject ruin. The Japanese took no notice.

The next three months was the ‘typhoon season’. There were continuous Japanese operations against the Allied forces, mainly marine and air warfare. Allied units were brought up to operational standard through subsidiary operations.

After campaigning in the Pacific for three years, the Americans wanted the war well and truly over, if only for the fact that the 1945 ‘draft’ would involve a lowering of the standard of fitness required of new inductees.

Japanese War Plans and Resources

The Japanese had assembled an ‘order of battle’ for the defence of the homeland from all their resources, which were prodigious. Their overarching objective was to defeat the Allied landing forces by inflicting massive casualties, which would incline them towards accepting a ‘peace treaty’. They reckoned without the United States resolve to extirpate the ruling military caste, once and for all.

The Japanese thought they would exhaust the Allies, whose intelligence noted that the Japanese had no more than 2500 aircraft, 300 of which would be ‘suicide attacks’. In fact, they had 5651 army and 7074 navy aircraft of all types, which Allied aerial surveillance did not reveal. Their scientists were developing a rocket-propelled bomb flown by a pilot. Their defence planning was thorough and their resources were prodigious with more than 2500 pilots and 835 suicide aircraft, the latter assigned to engage Allied shipping. Japanese planners contended that American naval pilots would be “crippled by fatigue, gun crews would be exhausted, but the Kamikaze would continue on this scale for 10 days” (Giangreco 2009: 102, 104, 493). Even the Japanese Navy resources were significant – 49 submarines with their ‘Long Lance’ torpedoes, 23 destroyers and two cruisers.

The Japanese Army fortified the islands where their intelligence suggested the landing beaches would be. What the Americans did not know was that “One hundred million will die for the Emperor and Nation” (Giangreco 2009: 7-10, 28). Women and men were given the role within the infantry to bring the battle to the Americans, not with rifle or grenade, but by a woman

armed with a spear, whose objective was to kill or wound an infantryman or marine. Twenty-eight million Japanese formed the National Volunteer Combat Force who could wield ancient rifles, mines, satchel charges, and ‘one shot’ black powder mortars. They would also operate at night using more primitive methods of killing and/or maiming. Day or night attacks would be the norm.

In the interim, the United States Army Air Force attacked 125 air bases, hoping to destroy the infrastructure necessary for their role. Later on, the Americans discovered there were another 100 unidentified airfields in use. Suicide Kamikaze aircraft were an ever-present hazard, but those for use as suicide craft – ram the bomber or fighter – were flown by young pilots (men and women) with just enough training to fly ‘straight and level’.

Conclusion

It is now well-known that, by the time President Harry Truman consulted his service chiefs, the atomic bomb offered a way to defeat Japan without incurring any American casualties. He knew war from his own wartime experience as an artillery battery commander in Europe in 1918. One of his options was to order the invasion to commence. His other option was the atomic bomb. Three of these munitions had already been manufactured, and they offered Truman an alternative of knocking Japan out of the war, thus saving the lives of an estimated five million of his fellow citizens. Given the option of authorising the use of atomic weapons (bombs) for the first time in modern history, he chose to use this option instead of saying ‘go’ to his senior service commanders. His order to his service chiefs to drop two bombs, one on each of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was verbal – there was no written record.

The Author: Alan H. Smith ED is a former industrial chemist and senior executive with The Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited. He joined the Citizen Military Forces in 1951 and subsequently served with the 21st Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, and later, 2nd Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment, Headquarters Communications Zone and Headquarters 8th Brigade, before retiring as a major in 1968. He also saw service with the Royal Artillery in London and the Royal Canadian Artillery in Toronto. Now a military historian, he is the author of four books on the battle history of Australian artillery, and was assistant editor and then editor of *Cannonball*, the Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company, for 19 years. [Photo of Major Smith: Big Sky Publishing]

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