

ON THE BOOKSHELF

"Their Backs Against the Sea: The Battle of Saipan and the Largest Banzai Attack of World War II"

by Bill Sloan (DaCapo Press)

For Veterans' Day reading, pick up this gripping account of Marines and soldiers taking on the fanatical Japanese warriors on Saipan.

It was one of the most brutal battles of the war in the Pacific: almost 30,000 Japanese soldiers; about 20,000 Saipan civilians; and 3400 US Marines and American soldiers died. We also suffered 16,000 wounded. From 15 June to 9 July, Saipan was bitterly contested, and would go down in history as one of the key operations of the Pacific war, enabling America's air power to be unleashed on the home island of Japan.

The Japanese had been building up Saipan for the coming onslaught, but the Americans kept sinking the Japanese transport ships with troops and building materials. However, the Japanese determination to fight to the last man never wavered. They were "committed to destroying the enemy" force as it landed on the beach, if possible at the water's edge. All their artillery and machine guns were sighted-in that target.

The casualties among the first Marines were tremendous. The Amtracks and amphibian tanks were under-armored and underpowered. The destruction of one-third of them within hours made the mess worse. But the Marines were equally determined and fought back ferociously. The second night of the battle, the Japanese decided to die trying to root out the Marines and came in massive waves. The Americans fired until they ran out of bullets, grabbed more from dead companions and keep shooting. The bodies of Japanese soldiers piled up in front of the Marines and soldiers. "Saipan had been an artillery fight, punctuated by brutal, close-in fighting and more and larger banzai wounds than veterans in the Pacific had ever experienced."

The early morning of 7 July, between 3 and 4 thousand Japanese troops threw themselves against the American lines. It was a slaughter. Meanwhile, the Japanese women were throwing their children off the cliffs and following them, having been told by the Japanese authorities that Americans would eat them! One pint-sized Marine, a Mexican-American who grew up in a Japanese family in East LA, convinced 1500 refugees and soldiers to surrender. Many more did not.

When the island was in American hands, the airport was enlarged to accommodate the B-29s which carried massive bombing to Tokyo and other major Japanese cities. The addition of Tinian and Okinawa allowed us to launch air strikes from closer and closer locations, bringing the war to an end in August. The stories told in this remarkable book came from personal interviews with the surviving veterans of this epic battle of WWII.