

Downfall: The Invasion that Never Was

WAYNE A. SILKETT

© 1994 Wayne A. Silkett

It would have been the greatest amphibious invasion in history, followed potentially by the most gruesome land operations of all time. Fortunately for hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers and sailors and for millions of Japanese, atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki 6 and 9 August 1945 convinced the Japanese government to surrender, and Strategic Plan Downfall passed mercifully into history without implementation.

The earliest high-level American mention of a conceivable invasion of Japan dates from May 1942.¹ Even then, however, some American planners seriously doubted that invasion would ever be necessary.

Long before the war, American naval strategists in general believed that should war come, Japan could be defeated by air and sea power alone. Among them were Admirals Ernest King, William Leahy, and Chester Nimitz.² Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s in countless war games at the Naval War College, hypothetical war with Japan almost always resulted in Japan giving up without invasion: strangled by naval blockade.³

As Army Air Corps strategy gradually developed, focused by the airpower visions of Giulio Douhet and Billy Mitchell, many air strategists, too, believed war with Japan could be won without an invasion. As war in the Pacific unfolded, more and more navy and air proponents concluded invasion might well be unnecessary.

But while most Army and Marine Corps strategists hoped invasion could be avoided, by 1944 and 1945 few had much faith it would be. For them, Japanese surrender would be forced only by massive amphibious invasion and consequent ground operations.

Basic service beliefs aside, in June 1944, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) adopted the invasion of Japan as an American strategic goal. By spring 1945, most senior American planners were fundamentally opposed to any but American participation in any invasion of the Japanese home islands. The

most outspoken of these were General Douglas MacArthur, General “Hap” Arnold of the Army Air Forces, and Admiral Ernest King.⁴ Of the three, General MacArthur was most convinced of the surety of an invasion to compel Japan’s surrender. Nevertheless, should one be necessary, there was very limited American military desire for a combined operation.

Gradually, however, political considerations prevailed and a summer 1945 British offer for a role in the anticipated invasion met with “agreement in principle” at Potsdam.⁵ Admiral King, however, remained steadfastly and unalterably opposed. The American Joint Chiefs were unenthusiastic about similar French and Dutch bids to participate and brushed them aside as impractical.⁶

Although the invasion was intended as the final significant military operation of World War II, the planning for Downfall would not include unity of command. That should not be surprising. Throughout the Pacific War, there had never been a single supreme commander. In fact, throughout the entire war Asia and the Pacific were divided into three distinct area commands: Southeast Asia Command (Admiral Louis Mountbatten, British Royal Navy), Southwest Pacific Area (General MacArthur), and Pacific Ocean Areas (Admiral Nimitz).

The “long-smoldering question of Pacific command” complicated Downfall planning from the beginning.⁷ On 17 December 1944, General MacArthur cautioned General Marshall that “Naval forces should serve under Naval Command and that the Army should serve under Army command.”⁸ Fundamentally, while top Army and Navy commanders saw nothing amiss about exercising command over counterpart forces, none were willing to accept being commanded by the other. Accordingly, when the US Navy recommended that Fleet Admiral Nimitz be the overall commander, the Army strenuously objected.

By early 1945, the tug of war between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz over South Pacific service troop employment and misunderstandings over Philippine base development “seemed ample proof” to the Army that Army forces could not be most effectively used if *any* were under command other than MacArthur’s.⁹ Shortly afterward, MacArthur criticized Nimitz’s handling of the Okinawa Campaign and the “awful way” he had squandered thousands of American casualties to take the whole island when, in MacArthur’s view, only the airfields were necessary.¹⁰

The Army alternative, eventually adopted, called for Nimitz to command naval forces and operations, MacArthur to command ground forces

Lieutenant Colonel Wayne A. Silkett, USA Ret., served before his recent retirement as Associate Director of Military Strategy in the Department of Corresponding Studies at the US Army War College. His previous assignments included service in Vietnam, in Berlin, at SHAPE in Belgium, and on the faculty of the US Air Force Academy. He is a graduate of San Jose State University; holds master’s degrees from Boston University, the University of Southern California, and George Mason University; and has done doctoral work in international relations at the University of Denver.

and operations, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to direct the strategic bombing effort (Twentieth Air Force's B-29s). As General Arnold explained after the war, he could not give the B-29s to General MacArthur nor to Admiral Nimitz as this would give the recipient the capability to "be out in front of the other."¹¹ The JCS—if not the President—would resolve any conflicts among the services. Although overruled, Admiral King continued to insist on unified command—under Admiral Nimitz.

The Invasion Plan

In early April 1945 the JCS issued directives for an air and sea blockade to reduce Japanese air and naval strength prior to and in support of an invasion.¹² On 28 May 1945, General Headquarters, US Army Forces in the Pacific, circulated Strategic Plan Downfall to senior Army and Navy commanders. Downfall was not a lengthy document, only 13 pages without annexes. Its purpose was to serve "as a general guide covering the larger phases of allocation of means and of coordination in order to facilitate planning and implementation."¹³

Downfall was to incorporate two principal phases of operations. The first, Operation Olympic, envisioned the invasion of Kyushu, southernmost of Japan's four main islands. From there, land-based air forces would support the second phase, Operation Coronet, the knockout blow to the enemy heartland, the Tokyo area on Honshu. With major ground operations scheduled to begin on X-Day, 1 November 1945, Downfall was expected to last 18 months, or until May 1947. A few months later, at the Potsdam Conference, the Combined Chiefs of Staff (the supreme Anglo-American military staff), approved 15 November 1946 as the anticipated date for the end of organized Japanese resistance.¹⁴

To carry out and support the invasion, planners foresaw the participation of 4.5 million Allied military personnel. Japanese defenders, some four million in number, would be spread throughout China and the last remnants of the empire, with just over half of them in the home islands.

Operation Downfall would involve four US field armies, the Sixth in Olympic and the Eighth, Tenth, and First in Coronet. The invasion of Japan would require all 21 US Army and six Marine Corps divisions in the Pacific, with no less than two to five armored and 13 infantry divisions to be transferred from Europe. By war's end, Coronet plans also included a British Commonwealth corps of three to five divisions, to operate under American command.

Operation Olympic would begin with the US Navy Fifth Fleet under Admiral Raymond Spruance launching a three-pronged attack on southern Kyushu. Preliminary assault lift for Olympic, sufficient "to float" 12 divisions—up from the original eight—configured at 33,000 personnel and 50,750 dead-weight tons each (figures included corps and army troops and equipment), ran to more than 1300 ships. Estimates called for 20 amphibious force flagships, 210 attack transports, 12 transports, 84 attack cargo ships, 92 high speed transports,

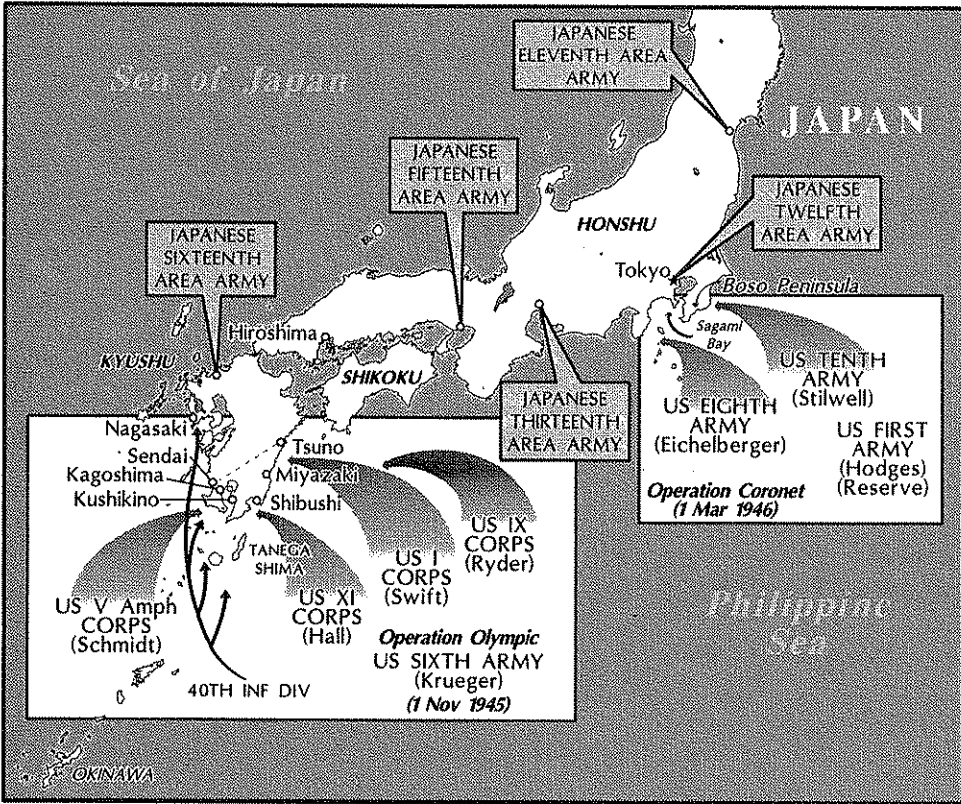


Figure 1. Concept for Operation Downfall

three transports configured for evacuation of wounded, 515 landing ships tank, 16 landing ships dock, 360 landing ships medium, and six landing ships vehicle.

Naval air support from more than 1900 planes would come from 22 US Navy fleet, large, and medium aircraft carriers plus ten carriers from the British Royal Navy. Included were eight escort carriers carrying Marine Corps ground support aircraft. General George Kenney's Far Eastern Air Force (5th, 7th, and 13th Air Forces plus the 2d Marine Air Wing), operating from the Ryukyus, would also support the landings and subsequent operations. His total of more than 2800 aircraft included 40 ground-based Army and Marine air groups. Naval gunfire ships were to be designated by CINCPAC,¹⁵ providing Spruance with amphibious and covering forces of more than 2700 vessels.

The B-29 strategic bomber force (20th Air Force, Lieutenant General Nathan Twining) would continue to bomb strategic targets but would be prepared to operate in direct support of Olympic if so ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Operation Olympic

Between X-75 and X-8, Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet, a powerful mobile striking force including 17 aircraft carriers, eight fast battle-

ships, 20 cruisers, and 75 destroyers, would hit Japanese targets throughout the home islands, then move away from the Kyushu area and continue against other Japanese targets.

On 27 and 28 October 1945, in a preliminary operation, the 40th Infantry Division would assault six islands west and southwest of Kyushu. Additionally, the 158th Regimental Combat Team (separate) would be prepared to land on the largest island off Kyushu, Tanega Shima, also on the 27th, if required. Seizure of these islands would clear sea lanes west of Kyushu and provide vital sites for early warning radars and fighter direction facilities for contending with anticipated kamikaze attacks.

Three days later, General Walter F. Krueger's Sixth Army would begin Operation Olympic by conducting amphibious landings on Kyushu proper, defended by the Japanese Sixteenth Army, which consisted of 14 infantry divisions and two armored brigades. It would have been the first time in the war that American forces faced a Japanese field army.

In addition to the Japanese Sixteenth Army, Olympic planners anticipated furious resistance by up to 9000 kamikazes, the suicide planes first encountered in the Philippines, which had figured so prominently in the Fifth Fleet's loss of 36 vessels sunk and 368 damaged at Okinawa. Naval planners also expected fierce assaults by midget submarines, suicide boats, and human torpedoes, plus suicidal attacks by the Imperial Japanese Navy's few remaining submarines and destroyers.

The X-Day (1 November 1945) and follow-on missions of the major elements of Krueger's Sixth Army are summarized below. The US V Marine Amphibious Corps, 2d, 3d, and 5th Marine Divisions under Major General Harry Schmidt, would assault the west side of Kyushu, south of Kushikino, to seize the port of Kagoshima and prevent enemy movement along the west coast. Intelligence estimated they would encounter two infantry divisions, possibly reinforced by two more.

East of V Marine Amphibious Corps, the XI Corps, 1st Cavalry, 43d Infantry, and the 23d (Americal) Divisions under Lieutenant General Charles P. Hall, would land at Ariake Bay, south of Shibushi, and seize an airfield. Intelligence estimated initial Japanese opposition at one infantry division. XI Corps would then advance inland to link up with I Corps, landed north of it.

I Corps, 25th, 33d, and 41st Infantry Divisions under Major General Innis P. Swift, would land near Miyazaki to seize airfields and block movement south along the east coast. Intelligence assessed they would encounter three infantry divisions and a tank brigade. Once linked with the XI Corps, both would advance north on the eastern side of Kyushu, with the V Marine Amphibious Corps advancing north on the western side.

The IX Corps, 77th, 81st, and 98th Infantry Divisions, would conduct feints towards Shikoku between 30 October and 1 November to divert

enemy attention, then revert to Sixth Army reserve. IX Corps was to be prepared for actual commitment to action on or about X+3.

Once initial objectives were taken and all corps were advancing northward, engineers from all services would work on airfields, ports, and other installations to support the second phase of Downfall, invasion of the Tokyo Plain.

Operation Coronet

Assuming satisfactory progress and establishment of air bases for support of subsequent operations, Operation Coronet would tentatively commence on Y-Day, 1 March 1946. Less fully developed than Olympic, plans for the Honshu operation nevertheless recognized the vital importance of the Tokyo Plain to the Japanese war effort.

Covering some 5500 square miles, the Tokyo Plain was the seat of the Japanese government and the communications center for the home islands, had the best port facilities in Japan, and contained half of Japan's defense industry. In addition, the area offered numerous suitable landing beaches and, for the first time in the Pacific War, afforded maneuver room for American mechanized and armored forces.

Coronet called for the US Eighth Army under Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger to attack through Sagami Bay. Eighth Army was to have X Corps (three infantry divisions), Major General Franklin C. Sibert; XIV Corps (three infantry divisions), Lieutenant General Oscar W. Griswold; and XIII Corps (13th and 20th Armored Divisions from Europe), Lieutenant General Alvan C. Gillem.

US Tenth Army under General Joseph W. Stilwell would simultaneously attack east of Tokyo Bay along the Boso Peninsula. Tenth Army would consist of III Marine Amphibious Corps (1st, 4th, and 6th Marine Divisions), Lieutenant General Roy Geiger and XXIV Corps (three infantry divisions), Lieutenant General J. R. Hodges.

Both field armies would concentrate on isolating and taking Tokyo. US First Army (one airborne and ten infantry divisions), General Courtney H. Hodges, would be in floating reserve. Additional American divisions were to be available and transported from the United States or Europe as needed, on the basis of four per month. Eventually, a Commonwealth Corps of at least one Canadian, one Indian, and one Australian division would be assigned to Tenth Army. Thus, no less than 28 allied divisions, including two armored, were earmarked for Coronet, along with 3500 warships, and 7000 land and carrier-based aircraft. Coronet would constitute the largest amphibious operation of all time.

Japanese defenders on Honshu were expected to include the Eleventh, Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fifteenth Armies, totaling over 40 infantry and armored divisions plus naval and air personnel organized to fight as ground

forces. Intelligence analysts anticipated Japanese air assets, orthodox combat aircraft and kamikazes, would have been largely expended defending against Olympic, and for Coronet would probably not exceed 2000.

Senior US ground planners were confident that taking Tokyo would compel unconditional surrender. But in the event the Japanese continued to resist, the Joint Chiefs of Staff planned for up to 22 divisions to deal with defenders west and north of Tokyo, operations to begin on or about 1 July 1946.

Expectations of Fierce Fighting

Bitter as all fighting in the Pacific Theater had been, no one expected the tempo to diminish with the invasion of the home islands. Unlike the invasion of Germany, which had seen, at least in the West, tens of thousands of Germans surrender rather than fight to the last, American planners expected the invasion of Japan to result in desperate, unparalleled ferocity.

In November 1943, the Second Marine Division suffered 3381 casualties in 76 hours on Tarawa. Of the 4836-man Japanese garrison, all but 17 died.¹⁶ Ten months later, the First Marine Division suffered 6526 casualties and the Army's 81st Infantry Division another 1393 taking Peleliu. Except for 19 Japanese taken prisoner, all in the 10,900 man garrison were killed.¹⁷

In the Philippines, the US Sixth Army during the Luzon Campaign suffered almost 41,000 casualties; in the Visayan-Southern Islands Campaign, the US Eighth Army endured 12,000.¹⁸ At Iwo Jima, Fifth Amphibious Corps took 25,000 killed and wounded while Tenth Army on Okinawa suffered almost 40,000.¹⁹

Japanese losses were even more staggering: 242,000 killed in the Philippines; over 21,000 on Iwo Jima; over 110,000 on Okinawa. Although essentially a World War I army with medieval overtones, the Japanese again and again proved themselves capable of spellbinding resistance, the rank and file stubbornly, almost exclusively, preferring death to capture. Thus, prisoner counts in early operations were negligible, such as the 17 on Tarawa. By the end of 1943, Japanese prisoners of war in American control amounted to barely 600.

But by October 1944, American forces had accounted for 4435 Japanese prisoners.²⁰ Ten thousand more Japanese were captured in the Philippines (of 252,000); 212 on Iwo Jima (out of almost 22,000); and 7400 on Okinawa (out of 118,000).²¹ Despite this evidence of an apparent willingness of some Japanese to surrender, few American planners and no assault troops were optimistic that invasion of Japan would result in wholesale Japanese surrender.

In April 1945, basing their work on seven amphibious campaigns, Joint Chiefs of Staff planners calculated that the casualty rate in the Pacific Theater was 7.45 per thousand per day while in Europe it was 2.16.²² Optimists argued that the sheer size of the Japanese home islands compared with

the generally much smaller island objectives throughout the Pacific war would keep casualties down by permitting greater maneuver and the massing of artillery and air power to reduce the stiffest defenses.

Pessimists, however, simply pointed out that as the war had progressed, so had the ferocity of the Japanese defenders, despite ever-increasing numbers of Japanese who surrendered. Troops in assault units could expect only the worst. American casualties at Iwo Jima had been 30 percent, including 19 out of 27 infantry battalion commanders. But sound as the April 1945 JCS study was, it did not incorporate data from the 83-day Okinawa campaign.

Bitter as every Pacific battle had been, none was more fierce, and nowhere else were US losses as high, as on Okinawa. There casualties were 35 percent. The 29th Marine Regiment alone suffered 80 percent killed and wounded, the highest American regimental loss rate since the Civil War.²³ And Kyushu, planners soon learned, had terrain strikingly similar to that of Okinawa.

By far the most speculative feature of *Downfall* has always been the expected casualties. In June 1945, President Truman told the JCS he wanted to avoid another Okinawa “from one end of Japan to the other.” Olympic planners initially estimated a minimum of 36,000 hospital beds would be needed in the objective area.²⁴ Admiral King confidently and optimistically predicted Olympic casualties would equate to those experienced on Luzon and Okinawa—about 40,000. Few ground force planners, however, shared King’s faith. In July, General Marshall suggested that Allied losses could easily reach 500,000; after the war, Omar Bradley said as high as one million—more men than were earmarked for the invasion in the first place.

To be sure, the most hardened Japanese advocates of fighting to the last counted on the 2,350,000 Japanese forces in the home islands supplemented by 4,000,000 army and navy civilian employees, and a civilian militia of 28,000,000, to be armed with muzzle-loading rifles, bamboo spears, and bows and arrows, all to give good account of themselves.

Had Operation *Downfall* been implemented, Japan could have counted on no reinforcements from the Asian mainland. True to their Yalta Conference commitment to enter the war against Japan 90 days after Germany’s surrender, Soviet forces smashed into the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria on 8 August. But even if they hadn’t, US Navy submarines would have continued their inexorable pressure on the home islands through attacks on such shipping assets as the Japanese still possessed.

Then Came the Surrender

Until the first atomic bomb was tested, 16 July 1945, and the first one detonated over Hiroshima on 6 August, US planners could only draw up conventional operations and prepare accordingly. Thus, by the first week of

August, 28 American divisions—17 in the Philippines, five in the Ryukyus, three in the Marianas, and three in Hawaii—were staging for Downfall. Among their number was the 86th Infantry Division, the first of no less than 15 to 18 divisions scheduled to arrive from the European Theater.²⁵

But with the atomic bomb came hope that invasion might not be necessary. Nevertheless, there was no guarantee that even the atomic bomb would compel surrender. Although unimaginably destructive, atomic bombs were incredibly costly to make and available in very small numbers: only two for operations in August 1945. Had they failed to force Japanese surrender, General Marshall envisioned using up to nine more nuclear weapons, if they could be made available in time, to support Olympic.²⁶

Since Downfall was never implemented, comparisons with the reigning largest amphibious invasion—Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy in June 1944—while they may be invidious, are also inevitable. Downfall would have involved more men, ships, and aircraft than Overlord, all transported over vastly greater distances. Overlord's strategic surprise, magnified immeasurably by the Allied gamble in the face of dubious weather, would probably not have been repeated. Nor would Downfall have had Overlord's advantage of facing a determined foe in an operational environment that was at best friendly, at worst neutral.

The atomic bomb unquestionably nullified the need for Downfall by hastening Japan to unconditional surrender. As the historic record was later to demonstrate, the Japanese had amassed a formidable array of defenses. In addition, the devastating typhoon of October 1945 would have wrought havoc upon the Fifth and Third Fleets, certainly disrupting if not postponing Olympic. Five months later, heavy snowfall on Honshu would have slowed down Coronet, especially for troops unaccustomed to cold-weather operations.

Few things are more fascinating yet less satisfying than asking “what if?” and speculating about an invasion of Japan is no exception. However, it seems clear that without the atomic bomb and the Soviet Union in the war, nothing short of invasion would have compelled Japan to surrender.

On 2 September 1945, elements of the United States Navy sailed into Tokyo Harbor for the formal surrender ceremony. Although the US Army and Navy each wanted to take the Japanese surrender, true to the arrangement that would have carried out the invasion that never was, the surrender spectacle was a compromise: General MacArthur signed for the Allied Powers; Admiral Nimitz for the United States of America—aboard the United States Navy battleship *Missouri*.²⁷

The war had not been without serious miscalculations and botched operations; the invasion of Japan would not have been without such flaws either. To the hundreds of thousands of American troops who didn't have to endure that invasion, the way the war did end was the least of their worries.

William Manchester was in a San Diego naval hospital recovering from having been severely wounded on Okinawa when a nurse informed him of the Japanese surrender. "Thank you," he said. "I meant it. I was really very grateful, though why, and for what, I didn't tell."²⁸

NOTES

1. Joint War Plans Committee 15, "Strategic Plan for the Defeat of Japan" in Paul Kesaris, ed., *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part I: 1942-1945, The Pacific Theater* (Frederick, Md.: Univ. Publications of America, 1981).
2. Ernest J. King and Walter M. Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1952), p. 598.
3. Thomas B. Allen, *War Games* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), pp. 121, 127.
4. Grace Person Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: The War Against Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), pp. 714-16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 716.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 717. France had offered no less than two divisions.
7. Robert Coakley and Richard Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943-1945* (Washington: Office of Chief of Military History, 1968), p. 578.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.* Army-Navy misperceptions, misunderstandings, and suspicions were mutual and frequently reached ludicrous levels. By 1944, many Army commanders in the Pacific were convinced the Navy was diverting materiel from wartime Army needs to construction projects designed less to hasten the end of the war than to prepare Navy installations for the postwar era.
10. D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), II, 733.
11. Henry H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949), p. 348.
12. William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), p. 245.
13. Cover letter from GHQ, US Army Forces in the Pacific, dated 28 May 1945, in "Downfall" *Strategic Plan*, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
14. Hayes, p. 714.
15. All figures from Strategic Plan Downfall, "Estimate of Forces Required," p. 9. The JCS designated Admiral Nimitz Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) and General MacArthur Commander, US Army Forces, Pacific (AFPAC) on 3 April 1945. Coakley and Leighton, p. 581.
16. Robert D. Heintz, *Soldiers of the Sea* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute, 1962), p. 414.
17. E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1981), p. 155.
18. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 1190-91.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 1191, 1195.
20. George G. Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army, 1776-1945* (Washington: US Army, 1982), p. 247.
21. *Ibid.* Distinctions, however, must be drawn between total prisoners and those who actually surrendered. Prisoner totals counted badly wounded as well as the normally small number who physically capitulated.
22. Hayes, p. 702.
23. Heintz, pp. 491-92. At Gettysburg, 2 July 1863, the 1st Minnesota Infantry took 82 percent casualties.
24. General Headquarters, Southwest Pacific Area, *Basic Plan for Olympic Operation*, no date, Annex 4, p. 9.
25. In July 1945, the 2d, 4th, 5th, 8th, 44th, 95th, and 104th Infantry Divisions deployed from Europe to the United States for transit to the Pacific. These were followed in August by the 28th Infantry and 20th Armored divisions. Although the end of the war altered subsequent arrangements, the 13th Armored and 35th, 83d, 87th, 91st, and 97th Infantry divisions were slated for Downfall action. The 97th Division did deploy to Japan in October for brief occupation duty, becoming only the second American division to see service in both major theaters of war. See Gordon R. Young, *The Army Almanac* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1959), pp. 651-690.
26. Geoffrey Perret, *There's A War to be Won* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 530.
27. For a fascinating treatment of the MacArthur mystique, especially his selection to preside over the Japanese surrender, see "MacArthur," in Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), particularly p. 351.
28. William Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 385.