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Bill Sloan, *The Ultimate Battle: Okinawa 1945—The Last Epic Struggle of World War II*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. Pp. x, 405. ISBN 978-0-7432-9246-7.

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As “America’s Greatest Generation” recedes into memory, a rush of books attempts to record its combat stories. Among these, Bill Sloan’s *The Ultimate Battle* is not a traditional military history that focuses on operational movement and command decision-making; nor is it a “new” military history that relates war to a variety of social, political, and economic factors. Instead, this is war as told from the prospective of the foxhole, a cumulative oral history of the individual soldiers or sailors who participated in the Okinawa campaign.<sup>1</sup>

Academic historians generally leave this type of writing to amateur historians or members of the fourth estate less concerned with *why* things happened than with painting a vivid picture of *what* happened. The target audience here is non-academics interested in a good story well-written, not in the trappings of scholarly analysis. Sloan, a former *Dallas Times Herald* reporter and the author of two other works on the Marines in World War II,<sup>2</sup> has again captured the heroism, fear, and grime of war. He interviewed some seventy veterans of the battle of Okinawa as well as mining several dozen other transcribed or filmed oral histories. The result is a series of very vivid vignettes covering the three-month campaign that cost nearly 50,000 American casualties.

The title “The Ultimate Battle” reflects the author’s view that modern “pushbutton warfare and weapons of incalculable destructive power have rendered many of the military concepts and tactics employed at Okinawa ... as obsolete on the battlefield as spears, arrows and stone catapults” (7). While one may quibble with this conclusion and argue that operations in Korea had many of the same attributes as fighting at Okinawa, there clearly was a primal quality about individual American and Japanese soldiers fighting to the death among the caves and rocks of Okinawa. The island’s geography and topography precluded any strategic or tactical alternative to a slow, steady slugging match in which success was counted a pillbox or cave at a time. It was an individual infantryman’s war, with all of mid-twentieth-century technology of air power and armor on the sidelines. This is not to say that battles such as Iwo Jima were any less primal, only that Okinawa was the last.

Within this context the reader is left with two vivid impressions: first, the ability of human beings to endure unimaginable suffering. Whether it was adrenalin, fear, anger, loyalty, a combination of all, or something else, again and again soldiers and marines functioned under conditions or with wounds that amaze the reader. The second impression is of the unfortunate situation of the civilian population of Okinawa. Told by the Japanese that the Americans would rape, torture, and kill them, civilians committed suicide in

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<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of the status of military history, see “American Military History: A Round Table,” *Journal of American History*, 93 (2007) 1116–62.

<sup>2</sup> *Given Up for Dead: America’s Heroic Stand at Wake Island* (NY: Bantam, 2003), and *Brotherhood of Heroes: The Marines at Peleliu 1944—The Bloodiest Battle of the Pacific War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

large numbers. Civilians who sought to surrender and were captured by the Japanese Army were routinely executed as traitors. Given that many civilians were trapped in a virtual free-fire zone, the result was thousands of dead noncombatants. This catastrophe is largely neglected in the official histories of the battle.<sup>3</sup>

As well-written and graphic as this book is, there are some flaws that need to be addressed. It is not intended for those interested in the strategic and tactical issues associated with the battle. Although a portion of the first chapter clearly lays out the strategic setting, the descriptions of small-unit operations are frequently confusing. I often needed my copies of the official U.S. Army and Marine Corps' histories of the battle (see note 3) on the table next to me as I read to see an overview of what was happening. Not only is the text sometimes confusing as to what unit was engaged when and where in the battle, but the maps, too, are not very helpful. This is the one great drawback of foxhole history: it often, perhaps necessarily, takes the same myopic view of the battlefield as that of the participants. On one level, this conveys a sense of the confusion of the battlefield, but that same confusion can be disconcerting to non-specialist readers trying to understand the bigger picture. A further consequence of Sloan's narrow battlefield focus is that important and controversial issues, like 10<sup>th</sup> Army Commander, General Simon Bolivar Buckner's strategy during the battle are discussed only in passing.

Similarly, the author seems to want to justify the use of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by stressing the number of American casualties sustained at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and extrapolating to losses that would have been sustained in an invasion of the Japanese home islands. While this is a perfectly defensible position on a topic that historians are still debating, Sloan does not take a firm stand. I suspect the reason for avoiding this and other controversies of historical evaluation is two-fold: first, the discussion of such larger issues would detract from his concentration on the individual soldier. Second, aside from interviews of survivors of the battle, the book is sparsely researched, citing only a handful of secondary sources, some of them outdated. The general bibliography does not even include the final volume of the *History of the U.S. Marine Corp Operations in World War II*, which covers Okinawa.<sup>4</sup> I am not criticizing Sloan for failing to exhaustively research the atomic bomb decision or any other controversial issue. A writer is entitled to pick and chose his focus. But in raising contentious historical issues, one must at least briefly lay out the arguments and counterarguments presented in the literature. Historical evaluation requires great familiarity with a wide range of current secondary sources. But that is not the purpose of this book.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Neither the official histories of the battle by the U.S Army and the U.S. Marine Corps nor the Marine Corps' monograph on Okinawa focuses very heavily on how the battle affected the civilian population. See Roy E. Appleman, et al., *Okinawa: The Last Battle* (1948; rpt. Washington, DC: Ctr of Mil Hist, U.S. Army, 2005); Charles S. Nichols, Jr. & Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *Okinawa: Victory in the Pacific* (1955; rpt. Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1965); Frank M. Bemis & Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *History of the U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, vol. 5: *Victory and Occupation* (Washington, DC: Hist Branch, G-3 Div, HQ, U.S. Marine Corps, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> See note 3 supra.

<sup>5</sup> Sloan primarily relies on Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 14: *Victory in the Pacific* (1960; rpt. Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 2002); George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* (NY: Tickner & Fields, 1992); and Thomas B. Allan & Norman Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995). While I understand that, at some point, a writer has to stop researching, Sloan should have mentioned under his

A collateral problem is the lack of footnotes. While there is a list of the sources consulted for each chapter at the end of the book, aside from the oral interviews there are references only to a few general secondary sources. Indeed, quotations often lack specific citations. For example, we read that historian Robert L. Sherrod “calculated that the U.S. Tenth Army gained an average of 133 yards per day during the period from April 7 through May 31” (255), but find only Sherrod’s *History of Marine Aviation in World War II* included in the general list of sources consulted.<sup>6</sup> Later on the same page there is a quotation attributed only to “one historian.” Again, I suspect that Sloan’s target audience will not be bothered by such omissions.

The final flaw is an almost ethnocentric telling of the story from the American point of view. Although Sloan does acknowledge the terrible plight of the civilian population, given that, unlike most Pacific battles, a large number (some 10,000) Japanese survivors at Okinawa became POWs, and given that works reflecting the Japanese perspective, such as *Letters from Iwo Jima*,<sup>7</sup> have received such wide praise, one would have expected Sloan to give the Japanese viewpoint more attention. While the absence of English translations could be a partial explanation, there are in fact relevant works in English such as Thomas Huber’s concise yet detailed study of the Japanese Army’s approach to the battle.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, my recommendation as to whether one should read this book depends entirely on what one wants to take from it. If you are looking for a well-written story of courage and sacrifice, or you are one of those readers who have a deep fascination with anything associated with the Pacific campaign, this is a book worth exploring. If you are looking for new historical insights into the Battle for Okinawa, or just a clear overview of the conflict, then I do not recommend it. Finally, instructors should be aware of the difficulties the book will pose for their students.

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sources the following works, all published at least two years before *The Ultimate Battle*: Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2005); J. Samuel Walker, “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground,” *Diplomatic History*, 29.2 (2005) 311-34; J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bombs against Japan* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1997; rev. 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Washington, DC: Combat Forces Pr, 1952; quotation from p. 395.

<sup>7</sup> 2006, dir. Clint Eastwood. See also Kumiko Kakehashi, *So Sad to Fall in Battle: An Account of War Based on General Tadamichi Kuribayashi’s Letters from Iwo Jima* (NY: Ballantine, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas M. Huber, *Japan’s Battle of Okinawa, April-June 1945* (1990; rpt. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2004).