

“...to smash it as an evil thing”

The Second World War was one of the most racially driven wars in human history. Even from the start with the onslaught of Poland, Adolf Hitler spoke of “living space” and eventually the Final Solution regarding ethnic populations. What sometimes goes unnoticed however, are the racial implications in the War of the Pacific. This theatre of war saw the deaths of hundreds of thousands of military combatants along with hundreds of thousands of civilians as well. Though fought with the same intentions as the war in Europe, to destroy the enemy with every technological means of modern warfare by air, land, and sea, the Pacific War was fought in a very different manner. Looking at the behavior of United States Military personnel in the Pacific theatre compared to that of the European theatre, it can be noted that in the Pacific, US troops were far more violent, cruel, and savage towards the Japanese than the US troops in Europe were towards the Germans. The lasting imagery of US Marines mutilating Japanese corpses and methodically looting the bodies of everything to the gold teeth in their mouths²⁹, provides the representation of the true viciousness and unethical practices exhibited by the United States Military towards the Japanese. Why was this war fought in such a manner unseen in American Military history? In trying to pinpoint a rationale or motivation behind such violent acts, one tends to look at racial implications. The true horrors of race infused violence can be seen on the Eastern Front of the European theatre, so it is a somewhat logical assumption that violence is connected to racial attitudes and that American violence towards the Japanese was racially fuelled. This notion, however, is contradicted by looking at primary accounts from US Marines, Air Force personnel, and Navy seamen. In these sources it is suggested that the fighting in the Pacific was *not* particularly influenced by ideas and attitudes about race, causing the character of the war to be different from that of the European conflict. Rather, the nature of the fighting had to do with three distinct, though heavily connected factors: Japanese military ideology, an Allied spiritual foundation that morally justified behavior, and the realization, by US Marines in particular, that the only way to defeat the Japanese was to match their level of devotion, ruthlessness, and perceived unethical military practices.

The brutal, cunning, and daring nature of the Japanese Military provided Japan with some strategic victories at the outset of the Pacific conflict, though its eventual reliance on fight-to-the-last-man and suicide tactics as the war progressed, proved to have a tremendous impact on the fighting style of US troops. This notion can be exemplified through an excerpt from Robert Leckie of the First Marine Division fighting in Guadalcanal, “They attacked us, some one hundred of them against our force of some twelve hundred, and, but for the five prisoners, we had annihilated them.”³⁰ This bit of context provides some explanation to the massive levels of death and destruction the Japanese endured at the hands of the Marines. What needs to be clearly noted is that in many cases, involving combat at least, the massive casualty figures associated with the savage nature of the fighting was essentially self-inflicted in accordance to Japanese Military ideology. The willingness of the Japanese to fight to the death meant that Marines had no choice but to kill every Japanese soldier refusing to surrender. This proved to be one of the most

²⁹ Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee, *The World In Flames: A World War II Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2011) 154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 155

stressful aspects of the Pacific War and is what heavily differentiated it from the war in Europe.³¹ The utter annihilation of the Japanese Military, though clearly self-inflicted as the war turned against Japan, was conducted in a brutal and ruthless manner by the US Military, which has led to questions regarding the necessity and morality of the behavior. This is where many like to assume race played a role in the fighting, however primary sources suggest US troops were acting more out of retribution than they were out of racist ideology.

The brutality of the Japanese military in the early years of the War in the Pacific provided the premise for the Allied understanding of their enemy as a truly “evil thing”. The infamous Rape of Nanking during Japan’s invasion of China, and the unforgettable peacetime attack on the US Naval base at Pearl Harbor, surely resonated with the Allies and contributed to an urge for revenge. Similar to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese occupation of the US-held Philippines and the horrendous Bataan death march also added to this notion. This can be clearly understood through the words of William E. Dyess, commander of the Twenty-First Pursuit Squadron in the Philippines, who was held as a POW by the Japanese. “Our Jap guards now threw off all restraint. They beat and slugged prisoners, robbing them of watches, fountain pens, money, and toiletry articles. Now, as never before, I wanted to kill Japs for the pleasure of it.”³² When the tide of war had turned and US troops began inflicting massive casualties amongst the Japanese, an unfamiliar trend started to emerge within the US Military: brutality. What is important to note is that this brutality was accompanied by a feeling of indifference, or even satisfaction amongst American soldiers. Eugene Sledge, who fought with the First Marine Division on Peleliu, describes how he felt as he participated in the ruthless destruction of Japanese Military forces, “They tumbled onto the hot coral in a forlorn tangle of bare legs, falling rifles, and rolling helmets. We felt no pity for them but exulted over their fate. We had been shot at and shelled too much and had lost too many friends to have compassion for the enemy when we had him cornered.”³³ This excerpt is significant in that it suggest that the Japanese casualty figures, and lack of prisoners, were not solely a result of Japanese Military ideology, but also due to a devaluing of Japanese life amongst US Marines. These unethical military practices happened and continued to happen in the Pacific theatre because the Allies felt as if they were morally justified to act in such a manner. This idea of having a spiritual foundation, or a just-cause for war, is best explained by British General Sir William Slim. “We had this (a spiritual foundation); and we had the advantage over our enemies that ours was based on real, not false, spiritual values. If ever an army fought in a just cause we did....So our object became not to stop the Japanese advance, but to destroy the Japanese army, to smash it as an evil thing.”³⁴ Though fighting in Burma, a somewhat different context than the other primary sources, Slim’s account can be used in explaining the savage nature and brutality of Allied troops as they encountered Japanese soldiers in combat. In these excerpts it is understood that the lasting impression of a more ruthless and violent style of fighting in the Pacific, compared to that in Western Europe, was a result of Allied, mainly US, troops acting out of

³¹ Ibid., 226

³² Ibid., 208

³³ Ibid., 224

³⁴ Ibid., 215

retribution with a morally justified spiritual foundation. Ideas and attitudes about race were not mentioned nor appear to have any connection with the character of the war.

As hinted at previously, one of the contributing factors to the staggeringly high and appalling Japanese death tolls, which provide the interpretation of the War in the Pacific as being fought in a much different manner than in Europe, was the US Marines' ability to match the intensity of the Japanese. Japanese Military strategy made it very evident that the war needed to be fought in a very different manner than any other war the US had been fought. It is quite a challenging task to remain "ethical" when your enemy insists on fighting to the last man. In many cases Marines were essentially forced to kill Japanese soldiers to the last man in order to attain victory. This required adopting an entirely different outlook to fighting for US Marines. Drawing back on Robert Leckie's account on Guadalcanal after a Japanese suicide mission, this attitude can be expressed, "Were they brave or fanatical? What had they hoped to gain?...Why had he (the Japanese commander) not turned around and marched his men home again?...I cannot answer. I can only wonder about this fierce mysterious enemy – so cruel and yet so courageous – a foe who could make me in his utmost futility, fanaticism, if you will, call upon the best of myself to defend against him." As Leckie remarks that Japanese intensity and ferocity provoked fanaticism of his own, Marines all across the Pacific theatre were having similar experiences. For example, Eugene Sledge on Peleliu stated: "I learned realism, too. To defeat an enemy as tough as the Japanese, we had to be just as tough. We had to be just as dedicated to America as they were to their Emperor. I think this was the essence of Marine Corps doctrine in World War II, and that history vindicates that doctrine."³⁵ As Leckie and Sledge claim that it was the Japanese themselves that attributed to the Marines' conduct of fighting, it can be understood that race did not play a crucial role in making the character of the Pacific theatre so much different from that of the European.

The ruthless and daring nature of Japanese Military operations at the start of the war proved to leave a lasting impression on the Allied forces in the Pacific. The savagery and brutality conducted by the Japanese provided a sense of polarity in comparison to Allied war aims and allowed a spiritual foundation to take form. This foundation proved instrumental in morally justifying the perceived unethical military practices exhibited by US Marines and other combatants fighting the Japanese. Some of these unethical practices however, have been discovered as somewhat necessary as the only means possible to wage war against Japan and its military ideology. In conclusion, the fighting in the Pacific does not appear to have been particularly influenced by ideas and attitudes about race, rather by a multitude of reasons previously stated. One of the best explanations of how and why the War in the Pacific was so characteristically more violent and deadly than in Europe can be seen through an excerpt from the war diary of Navy Seaman James Fahey, "These suicide, or Kamikaze pilots wanted to destroy us, our ships, and themselves. This gives you an idea what kind of enemy we were fighting. The air attacks in Europe are tame compared to what you run up against out here against the Japs. The Germans will come in so far, do their job and take off but not the Japs.... You do not discourage the Japs, they never give up, you have to kill them."³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 225

³⁶ Ibid., 227