Okinawa Suicides and Japan's Army: Burying the Truth?

By JAMES BROOKE

ITOMAN, Okinawa, June 17 — Clutching a hand grenade issued by the Japanese Imperial Army and driven by tales of what American soldiers would do with a pretty young woman, Sumie Oshiro recalled on Friday, she fled into the forests of Okinawa during the World War II battle known here as the "typhoon of steel."

"At one place, we sat together and hit the grenade on the ground, but it did not explode," she recalled of her flight with friends after Japanese soldiers told them to kill themselves rather than be taken captive. "We tried to kill ourselves many times, trying to explode the grenade we were given from Japanese Army."

The three-month battle for Okinawa took more than 200,000 lives - 12,526 Americans, 34,136 Japanese soldiers, and 84,000 Okinawan civilians, about one-quarter of the prewar population. Lt. Gen. Robert Blackman, commander of the United States Marine forces in Japan, led a low-profile memorial ceremony on Friday, attended largely by American war veterans and relatives.

This Thursday, the 60th anniversary of the battle here, the last major one of World War II, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is to attend Japan's tribute here. [On Sunday he led a memorial service in two Jima, a Japanese island where fighting ended in late March 1945, just as the invasion here began.]

Okinawa's trauma over what happened here after 345,000 American troops attacked this small archipelago is still deep. People here on Japan's southernmost islands want more recognition from Japanese society for their suffering. But that wish collides with a growing nationalist effort to airbrush the past. After winning battles to play down Japan's war-era history of forcing Asian women to work in military-run brothels and Asian men to work in Japanese factories and mines, Nobu- katu Fujiioka, a nationalist educator, started campaigning two weeks ago to delete from Japanese schoolbooks the accounts of orders from Japanese soldiers to civilians here to choose suicide or surrender.

Okinawa's anguish over the widespread civilian suicides has been sharpened by the deep belief here that soldiers from Japan's main islands encouraged Okinawan civilians to choose suicide or surrender to the Americans. In a display at the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum, a spotlight highlights a glistening banzai box held by a fierce-looking Japanese soldier who stands over an Okinawan family huddled in a cave, the mother trying to soothe her baby's cries. "At the hands of Japanese soldiers, civilians were massacred, forced to kill themselves and each other," reads the caption. Nearby, a life-size wall photo shows the grisly aftermath of a family killed by a hand grenade.

Soldiers seeking refuge from the naval shelling forced civilians out of limestone caves and, during the fighting, out of the island's turtle-back shaped tombs, according to wall captions. About two weeks into the battle, the Japanese military commander sought to suppress spying by banning the speaking of Okinawan dialect, a version of Japanese often unintelligible to nonresidents. Armed with this order, Japanese soldiers killed about 1,000 Okinawans, according to local historians.

Two mainstream Japanese history textbooks from the 1990's that talk of Japanese soldiers "coercing" civilians to kill themselves are on display. Now, Okinawans fear that this history will be dropped from the national consciousness.

"In many cases, hand grenades, which were in extreme shortage, were distributed to residents," Masa- hide Ota, an Okinawan who fought here with the Japanese Army in a unit called the Blood and Iron Student Corps, said in an interview on Friday. "I heard people say they were told by the military to commit suicide using the grenades rather than becoming captives."

Mr. Ota, who surrendered four months after the fighting ended here, went on to become a leading local historian, then Okinawa's governor, from 1999 to 2000. Now, at age 80, he represents the prefecture in Japan's upper house of Parliament.

Okinawans fear that the lack of a written suicide order by Japanese military commanders will prompt editors of Japanese history textbooks to drop all mention of the military indoctrination that, as a wartime slogan put it, "soldiers and civilians had to live and die together."

On Guam Island, Takejuro Nakamura was one such civilian, a 15-year-old student when the American invasion started. "For a long time, the Japanese Imperial Army announced that, on other islands, the women had been raped and killed, and the men were tied at the wrists and tanks were driven over them," said Mr. Nakamura, now a guide at a museum housed in a traditional dwelling that bears bullet holes from the American attack. As Japanese defenses crumbled on the island in late March 1945, 58 of the 130 residents committed suicide, he said. Fleering with family and neighbors, he said, he passed one cave where 18 villagers had killed themselves.

"I heard my sister calling out, 'Kill me now, hurry,' " Mr. Nakamura said, recalling how his 35-year-old sister panicked at the approach of American soldiers. His mother took a rope and strangled his sister.

"I tried to also strangle myself with a rope," he recalled, lifting his now weather-beaten hands to his neck. "But I kept breathing. It is really tough to kill yourself."

Minutes later, the Americans took them captive.

"The U.S. soldier touched me to check if I had any weapons," he recalled. "Then he gave us candy and cigarettes. That was my first experience on coming out of the cave."

His mother lived into her 80's. "We talked about the war," said Mr. Nakamura, who became a village leader. "But to the end, she never once talked about killing her daughter."