

World



How warring troops broke bread with a beach picnic

A truce that ended a bloody Pacific battle is being remembered 80 years on, **Nick Megoran** writes from Aka Island

The Aka Island truce in June 1945 is all but unknown to the world at large, and it was always a frustration to Lieutenant Colonel George Clark that no one else seemed interested.

His son, James, remembered him speaking of it as “the crown jewel of his accomplishments”. His daughter, Trudy, recalled that before his death 38 years ago, the former US Marine “tried to have this event printed in historical books but never had luck”.

Until now, it was hardly even a footnote to the Battle of Okinawa, one of the cruellest and most bloody land battles of the Second World War. But this year a group of foreigners and Japanese met on the small island of Aka in Okinawa prefecture to remember what happened that day a lifetime ago.

It is comparable to the famous Christmas truces along the Western Front of the First World War in 1914. After three months of fighting the largest land, sea and air engagement in history, US and Japanese soldiers picnicked on the beach, swapped photographs of their families, negotiated a truce, and knelt together by the seashore to pray for world peace.

Last month, 80 years to the day, a ceremony was held on that same remote beach to remember the truce negotiated with the Japanese garrison by Clark.

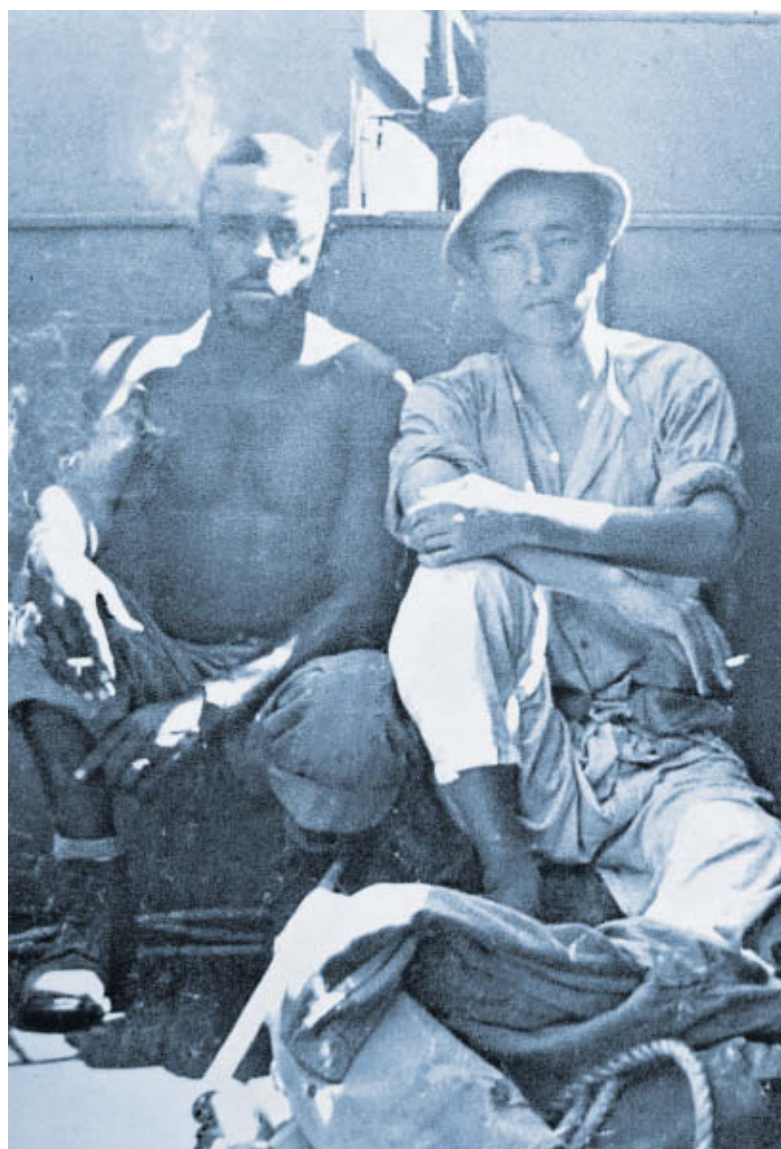
An Anglican church leader offered prayers of thanks in English and Japanese for the men of both sides who “showed us that there is a better way than war”. The mayor of Aka, Shigenobu Kuniyoshi, urged those present to “carry on the courageous actions of our ancestors 80 years ago”.

Michael Hopkins, the son of another US Marine, Lt Joseph Hopkins, who was at the truce, said that visiting the beach was intensely emotional. “I made this pilgrimage to honour my father and his colleagues on that beach, as well as the Japanese garrison,” he said. “The effort they made was extraordinary — I could feel it in that place.”

The Battle of Okinawa was the bloodiest of the 1941-45 Pacific war. The Allies saw Okinawa as a stepping stone to the invasion of mainland Japan. For the Japanese it was a desperate attempt to slow the unstoppable Allied advance. Digging 60 miles of tunnels under Okinawa’s rugged landscape, the strategy was to shelter from the Americans’ superior firepower and make them pay in blood for every inch of land in vicious close combat. More than 200,000 people died. Over half were Okinawan civilians, caught in the crossfire. Japanese soldiers executed those they suspected of disloyalty and coerced others into mass suicides. Indoctrinated to believe in the savagery of US troops, fathers killed their wives and children, and women leapt to their deaths from cliff tops clutching their babies in their arms, rather than fall into American hands.

According to Clark’s son, it was to avoid such bloodshed on Aka, 15 miles west of the main Okinawa island, that his father sought to negotiate a truce. He said: “The thing that I remember that’s remarkable about my father is that he had a garrison of troops that were available to him to overrun the enemy, but he was much more interested in accomplishing a peaceful surrender.”

This was a tall order for Clark, whose job was to mop up the 200-strong Japanese garrison on Aka. Although organised resistance on Okinawa was collapsing, surrender remained



A US soldier and Major Umezawa on Aka, where opposing troops picnicked and prayed on the beach for peace. Colonel George Clark, below, set up the truce



unthinkable. Before ritually disembowelling himself, the Japanese commander General Mitsuru Ushijima issued a final order to every soldier in Okinawa: “Do not suffer the shame of being taken prisoner. You will live for eternity.”

Clark assembled a small team of American officers and Japanese POWs who had been persuaded to co-operate in the interests of avoiding bloodshed. They spent a week circumnavigating Aka with portable loudspeakers mounted on boats, broadcasting appeals to surrender. Eventually, the garrison commander, Major Noda, indicated that he would be willing to speak to the Americans but only via a comrade, Major Umezawa, who had been injured and captured, and whose benign treatment by the Americans persuaded him that fighting to the death in an unwinnable war was futile.

“My dad got very close to him while they were there,” Clark’s daughter, Trudy, said, and the two of them did “a lot of soul-searching” about how to approach Noda.

The team returned to Aka with Umezawa on June 26 and landed on

the shore in an atmosphere of tension. Heavily armed Japanese soldiers fanned out in the hills around the beach, alarming the Americans who feared that they were planning an ambush. Eventually, however, Noda appeared, the two commanders saluted, set aside their weapons and began talking as Umezawa tried to persuade Noda of the futility of suicidal resistance.

Negotiations dragged on, so Clark instructed his support crew to bring a roast pork lunch ashore to share with the Japanese. In his official report Clark described “white folks, black folks, yellow folks, a general melee if ever there was one”, picnicking and fraternising across the beaches and sand dunes. It was, he added, “the most amazing spectacle it has been my lot to behold”.

The Japanese promised to give an answer the next day. When the Americans returned, they said, regretfully, they could not surrender without the emperor’s permission. Nonetheless the two sides agreed a truce.

In an extraordinary conclusion before US troops departed, Clark asked the Japanese if they “would like to join the group in a prayer to the supreme being of all faiths for international understanding and peace” led by the US chaplain. They agreed, and this poignant moment was captured in a photograph of US and Japanese soldiers kneeling together on the beach.

The truce held until the Japanese surrender in August. Amid the surrounding carnage, there was no further loss of life on Aka.

Memories of the truce stayed with Clark for the rest of his life, his conscience pained by rumours that Umezawa had been executed for treason. However, in 1987 a Japanese journalist visited his North Carolina home and reassured him that Umezawa and Noda were both alive, and remained proud of how they had saved lives. “That’s the only time I ever saw my dad cry,” Trudy recounted. “He used to say, ‘I think we, as a team, did the world some good.’”

Minister faces trial over car tycoon’s €900k fee

France Rachida Dati, the culture minister, and Carlos Ghosn, the fugitive car tycoon, have been sent for trial over an alleged €900,000 corruption pact. The move will cast a shadow over Dati’s campaign to become mayor of Paris next year and add to the legal woes besetting Ghosn, the former chief executive of Renault and Nissan who fled to Lebanon in 2019 after being charged with financial misconduct in Japan. Both deny wrongdoing.

The prosecution alleges that when Ghosn, 71, led the Renault-Nissan alliance, he paid Dati, 59, who was then an MEP, €900,000 for lobbying work on the companies’ behalf in the European parliament from 2010 to 2012. MEPs are not allowed to engage in such work. Dati and Ghosn say the payments were consultancy fees to help the group expand in the Middle East and north Africa, which was legal. But the indictment says that no trace of Dati’s activities could be found. She is charged with corruption, influence peddling, breach of trust and receiving the proceeds of abuse of power. Ghosn is accused of breach of trust, abuse of power, corruption and influence peddling. A trial is expected next year.

‘Nazi’ hikers cross Alps

Switzerland Dozens of hikers were questioned after crossing the Wildhorn massif dressed as Nazis. The group, from the US and several European countries, were stopped in the Alps by the local police and told to remove their jackets to avoid “possible clashes with third parties”. The Swiss government wants to ban the wearing of Nazi uniforms and symbols, such as swastikas and the Sieg Heil salute.

Stranded F-35 takes off

India An RAF warplane grounded for more than five weeks has taken off, the British High Commission said. The F-35 landed in bad weather on June 14 at Thiruvananthapuram International Airport, in Kerala. The jet, from HMS Prince of Wales, had a technical issue, which a team from the aircraft carrier could not solve. A second team was then sent out. The jet has flown to Australia.

AI loses out in maths

Australia Despite Google and OpenAI’s top algorithms reaching gold-level scores for the first time at the International Mathematical Olympiad, neither scored full marks, unlike five youngsters at the prestigious annual contest for under-20s. Google said that an advanced version of its Gemini chatbot solved five of the six problems at the Olympiad, held in Queensland. About 10 per cent of human contestants won gold.

Peacock heist at hotel

United States A flock of several dozen peacocks were stolen from a historic California hotel. Guests saw two men “shoving” the birds into cages and loading them on a truck at the art deco Ryde hotel, built in 1926 during Prohibition and famed for its basement speakeasy. “Catching a peacock is no easy feat,” David Nielsen, the manager, told the Los Angeles Times. “It’s highly unusual that so many of them were grabbed.”