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# WAR CRIMES AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY ON OKINAWA: GUILT ON BOTH SIDES

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*The civilian death toll during the Second World War Battle of Okinawa was very high. This was the result of sheer brutality resulting from racism and hatred, but also from unethical strategic decisions. This article chronicles decisions made on both sides – and accompanying actions – that arguably amount to crimes against humanity. In addition to the strategic decisions that contributed to the high death toll, actions such as rape, killing of surrendering soldiers, looting and mutilating the dead, and failures to protect one's own civilian population are recounted and discussed.*

KEY WORDS: Okinawa, war crimes, crimes against humanity, rape, surrender, looting, protection of civilians, strategy

## **Introduction**

War crimes and crimes against humanity are two complex issues that emerge within the field of military ethics. After briefly explaining the terms 'war crimes' and 'crimes against humanity', this article presents a detailed portrayal of battlefield atrocities during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The discussion then analyses a raft of crimes against humanity by Japanese and American authorities, and concludes that the individual battlefield war crimes on Okinawa, plus the deaths of approximately 100,000 civilians and around 75,000 troops,<sup>1</sup> were the direct result of crimes against humanity in the form of strategic decisions made by government and military authorities.

## **Crimes against Humanity**

'War crimes' and 'crimes against humanity' can both include *inter alia* 'murder, extermination, torture, rape, political, racial, or religious persecution and other inhumane acts', all of which are in breach of the four Geneva Conventions (1949), which are themselves based on the much older Hague Law. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, while 'war crime' is a generic expression to describe any of the above actions perpetrated during armed conflict, 'crimes against humanity' are:

not isolated or sporadic events, but are part either of a government policy (although the perpetrators need not identify themselves with this policy) or of a wide practice of atrocities tolerated or condoned by a government or a de facto authority.

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What made the plight of Okinawan civilians in 1945 so much more lamentable is that they suffered every bit as much – on occasions, even more – from decisions made by their own Japanese government, Japanese Imperial headquarters and the 32nd Army as they did from the Americans. While this article presents specific instances that show that American and Japanese troops were both guilty of war crimes, care is needed as the line between spontaneous strategic military action (especially for one's own survival), war crime and crime against humanity can become blurred. The answer is not always clear-cut, with some historians (e.g. Feifer) warning that in certain circumstances, 'Shooting a man who had his hands up or may have wanted to put them up wasn't *necessarily* an atrocity' (Feifer 1992: 486–496, emphasis added). Gathering specific data on war crimes and pursuing the perpetrators is often difficult, with most instances only coming to light if the perpetrators confess years later, or when survivors finally testify against their tormenters.

The Americans on Okinawa 'did not pursue a policy of torture, rape, and murder of civilians as Japanese military officials had warned' (Hein & Selden 2003: 18). In other words, battlefield crimes by US troops on Okinawa were neither American policy nor strategy, and were individual war crimes rather than crimes against humanity. In fact, the official policy was for US troops to take prisoners where possible and to protect, wherever possible, the civilian population (Hayashi 2001: 356). Most US soldiers did not want to harm civilians and 'performed acts of humanity far beyond the [Geneva] Conventions' requirements' (Feifer 1992: 495), on many occasions, even risking their own lives to save civilians. Overall, civilian prisoners were well treated, ironically often after enduring the harshest possible treatment from their own Japanese soldiers (Hayashi 2001: 356). Be that as it may, US war crimes on Okinawa were common and can be categorized into the three broad areas of rape, killing those attempting to surrender, and mistreating prisoners and the dead. Apart from the stress of battle, such behaviour from American troops was often the result of them being 'more thrilled by killing than by winning the war... [with many developing] increasingly disturbed psyches... during the campaign... [and their] view of Japanese as less than fully human' (Feifer 1992: 490–492).<sup>2</sup>

### Rape as a Weapon of War

The number of Okinawan civilians raped by American soldiers was unquestionably very high. In referring to the high – but mostly unreported – number of rapes of Okinawan women by US troops, Feifer criticizes American history as largely having ignored the issue, while Hayashi (2001: 496) suggests that 'the victims' silence kept rape another dirty secret of the campaign'. Rape by US soldiers and marines was particularly prevalent on Motubu Peninsula in the north during April and May 1945, after local men had been mobilized or had fled to the hills before the fighting became so intense:

Soon after the US Marines landed, all the women of a village on Motubu Peninsula fell into the hands of American soldiers. At the time, there were only women, children and old people in the village, as all the young men had been mobilized for the war. Soon after landing, the Marines "mopped up" the entire village, but found no signs of Japanese forces. Taking advantage of the situation, they started "hunting for women" in broad daylight and those who were hiding in the village or nearby air raid shelters were dragged out one after another. (Tanaka 2003: 111)

Claims such as these are supported by an American Military report stating that between 10 December 1945 and 24 May 1946, 1754 misdemeanour cases were investigated by the US Fleet's 9th Military Battalion, of which 30 were for rape or attempted rape<sup>3</sup> of Okinawan women (Hayashi 2001: 363). Okinawan women were terrified, alone and powerless. Given the violation that they had endured, plus their fear of their own Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) soldiers, most were unwilling to report such crimes, while those who did were usually ignored. In other words, any figures are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg, with many historians suggesting 10,000 as a useful starting point (Weber 2000: 25). Even girls fleeing from caves and those who had surrendered became the rape victims of US troops (including the Marines), and on more than one occasion when locals tried to intervene they were shot on the spot (Hayashi 2001: 357–359).

In Lacey's (2005) collection of memoirs from US troops on Okinawa, one marine recalls how a group of comrades found a local woman, filthy and ragged, hiding in a cave. They took her to their tent, washed her private parts and held her [for sex] for several days. When they 'got tired of her... they muddied her up... put her clothes back on' and handed her over to their commanding officer, claiming that she was a nurse they had just rescued a few minutes earlier (Lacey 2005: 75). However, the marine who provided the testimony claims he was misquoted and that the woman was a 'comfort woman' (or sex slave),<sup>4</sup> not a nurse. He reiterated how filthy and ragged the woman was and his disgust both at her and at the behaviour of his fellow marines.<sup>5</sup> Rape is among the most common and vile of wartime behaviour, with Weber (2000: 25) concluding that civilian rape was 'one of the most widely ignored crimes of the war... [yet so common that] most Okinawans over age 65 either know or have heard of a woman who was raped'.

African American soldiers (probably from a troubled social background) appear to have gained the worst reputation, including one known as Shibarian who was feared as a persistent rapist by all local women in the village near where he was based (Hayashi 2001: 357). Also, near the isolated village of Katsuyama is a cave known as Kurombo Gama,<sup>6</sup> thus named because until recently it contained the remains of three African American soldiers who were ambushed and killed by locals and IJA soldiers for allegedly raping local women. There was also an incident in which four local women were raped and later drowned (Feifer 1992: 497).

### **Killing Surrendering Soldiers**

Refusing to accept surrender and/or murdering prisoners who had surrendered was 'widespread in some areas', with many former US soldiers reporting: 'I had no mercy for a single Jap who wanted to surrender' (Feifer 1992: 485–498). Some US officers actually condoned the killing of prisoners. Targeting civilians also occurred, the very worst of such behaviour being an incident where 'several medical corpsmen used their carbines to force a civilian family into [their own] farmhouse before setting it alight' (Feifer 1992: 498). Few actions, however, can match the group of US soldiers who enticed almost 60 civilians from their cave on the southern tip of the island on 18 June 1945 and shot every single one (Feifer 1992: 499). Notwithstanding the number of Japanese soldiers who were killed in situations other than during combat, the prisoner-to-dead ratio on Okinawa was much higher than in other battles of the Pacific. For example, in the Solomons, New Guinea, the Marshall and Admiralty Islands where the IJA troops fought to the bitter end, the final ratio of IJA prisoners to those killed averaged around 2 per cent (Hayashi 2001: 335).

On Okinawa, however, the ratio of IJA prisoners (including voluntary surrender) to dead was much higher, most prisoners being taken towards the end of the battle as Japanese military structure and discipline broke down (Hayashi 2001: 317).<sup>7</sup> Rather than necessarily suggesting a more compassionate approach towards prisoners on the part of the Americans, however, the much higher numbers more likely reflect a change in attitude by the IJA soldiers themselves. As the Americans 'island hopped' across the Pacific, IJA forces still considered victory as the only acceptable outcome, each battle contributing to the ultimate glory of Japan and the Emperor. Their determination was uppermost but, ironically, they were often as frightened of the 'white devil' Americans as the Americans were of them. Most were simply not willing to surrender through fear of being abused or slaughtered. On Okinawa, however, the IJA fighting spirit lapsed (Hayashi 2001: 337–341) as the soldiers felt far less commitment to the defence of a distant location and its people whom they considered non-Japanese. Also, as their own food and supplies ran out, they started to become aware of the *generally* fair treatment that IJA prisoners received. Many would also have realized that the Battle of Okinawa was a lost cause well before the ritual suicide of their top officers<sup>8</sup> confirmed that scenario.

As the battle progressed, Japanese soldiers began surrendering in greater numbers, with groups of 50 or more not uncommon and the total of 1,015 IJA soldiers who surrendered on 21 June being the highest tally of the battle. While offers of American food and cigarettes enticed many enlisted men to give themselves up, it was naturally far more difficult to convince officers to lay down their arms. Surprisingly, the key reason for their reluctance was not always the stinging shame of failing the samurai/bushido fighting ethic, nor devotion to the Emperor or the mother country. In the beginning at least, it was the intense fear of being brutalized or killed by their American captors (Hayashi 2001: 345–347), and propaganda about how some IJA soldiers were killed while attempting to surrender contributed to this situation. Had Japan's anti-America propaganda machine been less effective, the lives of thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of Japanese soldiers and civilians could well have been saved.

Some American soldiers clearly had no-prisoner policies, one former marine reporting 'Nobody wanted to take prisoners... we shot as many as we took' (Feifer 1992: 483), while all too often, US troops 'shot groups of Japanese who emerged after being promised safe capture' (Hayashi 2001: 488). There is ample testimony where this approach actually involved inviting IJA troops out of their caves with the promise that they would be well treated (Feifer 1992: 494), including holding out chocolates and tobacco as incentives (Feifer 1992: 344). But whatever the circumstance, 'If you saw a Jap trying to surrender, you let him have it fast', was how one US marine explained his and his friends' approach (Hayashi 2001: 358–485), while another wrote to his parents that they were 'not in favor of giving the Japs a chance to surrender' (Feifer 1992: 483). US commander Lt. Gen. Buckner's death appears to have prompted acts of revenge such as a refusal to accept surrender and shooting prisoners already in captivity (Hayashi 2001: 358), but other incidents displayed far more wilful violence, including nonchalantly shooting one member out of each surrendering group, and lining whole groups of prisoners up on the edge of a shell hole and using a grenade to blast them into their ready-made graves (Hayashi 2001: 357). Shooting prisoners and those fleeing from behind was commonplace (Hayashi 2001: 483).

It is not difficult to feel genuine sympathy for terrified US soldiers who discovered the next morning that the group of people they had gunned down during the night were in fact Okinawan civilians, including young children, wandering blindly in the dark.<sup>9</sup> Night

raids by suicide groups, IJA troops pretending to be dead, using dead bodies as decoys (Dower 1986: 64) and feigning surrender were commonplace (Hayashi 2001: 357–361) and no doubt helped make the Americans tense and frightened in their foxholes at night. One marine explained the attitude: ‘You hated them... they tried to pull so many dirty tricks with their hands up – you could never trust them... [not] worth the risk...’ (Feifer 1992: 483). The subsequent ‘trigger-happy’ approach is not, therefore, surprising and the Japanese themselves must accept some of the blame (Dower 1986: 64–65). However, many American memoirs contain almost gratuitous references to ‘roasting’ (by flamethrowers), ‘rabbit shoots’ and ‘turkey shoots’,<sup>10</sup> or in other words, the willing slaughter of hordes of dazed and wounded IJA soldiers *and civilians* fleeing from caves, many of whom were attempting to surrender, and including those who had been promised safe capture:

We used flamethrowers to clear out caves. I called it “the turkey shoot”. Our guy would shoot a burst into a cave and then run like hell, and when the Japs came out after him we’d mow them down... like a shooting gallery. Our engineers used satchel charges... we loved our flamethrower guys... they had unlimited courage. Often, instead of scrambling away from a cave he had just set on fire, he’d stand there until they came out and he’d roast them, depriving us of our “turkey shoot”.<sup>11</sup>

Second, nobody during wartime is more entitled to safe treatment than civilians who have surrendered, who have been accepted as prisoners, and who behave compliantly with the instructions of their captors. Yet, such was not always the case, with one former US soldier later recalling that Okinawan people were ‘friendly... nice... people [but in return] we were unusually cruel to them (Lacey 2005: 75–76). Also, reports of US Air Force pilots repeatedly strafing civilians wandering aimlessly in single file (Oshiro 2008: 141) testify to the aggressive attitude of some American pilots. But Americans were generally sympathetic towards captured civilians (Oshiro 1984: 145) and there are numerous reports testifying to the fairness of the Americans inside the prisoner of war (POW) camps where prisoners were deloused, clothed and fed three times a day. However, directly contravening the Geneva Conventions, many IJA and civilian prisoners were also forced to donate blood, construct military facilities and transport ammunition (Oshiro 2008: 173). Non-violent though such activities were, they were also war crimes. Tragically, even within the camps, the rape of civilian women, including in broad daylight, became an ‘everyday occurrence’ as groups of marauding Americans conducted ‘girl hunts’ through the rows of tents. With regular food and medical care, especially after the fighting had ended, the women’s health also improved – another irony in that it also brought about a marked increase in the number of pregnancies to American soldiers (Oshiro 2008: 145–173).

The use of poison gas is another clear violation of the so-called ‘accepted practices’ of warfare. Yet, US soldiers have testified that phosphorous was also used on Okinawa:

All I saw was this big cloud of white smoke. Oh my God! It was a phosphorous [grenade] and it disintegrated a whole bunch of them [Japanese]... that is not the way I want to die. I’ve seen what it can do. We were issued phosphorous grenades.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, symptoms described by Japanese survivors sheltering in caves (e.g. intense burning on the skin made worse by dousing with water, choking white smoke) strongly suggest that phosphorous was used. Feifer (1992: 497) suggests that Japanese explosives stored in caves readily gave off poisonous gases, especially an acrid, yellow smoke from the petric acid used in their manufacture, and that this gas may have been mistaken for picric

acid. There were reports from Japan's 24th contingent referring to cyanide gas being used by the Americans when clearing caves on the island of Iwojima, shortly before Okinawa. It is not improbable, therefore, that similar weapons were used on Okinawa.

### Looting and Mutilating the Dead

Looting and mutilating dead and wounded enemy soldiers are war crimes that reflect the very worst characteristics of some soldiers. Some Americans spent a great deal of time collecting souvenirs, even 'before the enemy hit the ground' (Feifer 1992: 491). The collection of Japanese body parts, due in no small measure to the racist American notion that Japanese were 'different' (Dower 1986: 8–10), began well before Okinawa, prompting a September 1942 order for disciplinary action against such souvenir taking. However, on Okinawa it continued on a scale 'large enough to concern the Allied military authorities throughout the conflict and [was] widely reported and commented on in the American and Japanese wartime press' (Harrison 2006: 218):

In a memorandum dated June 13, 1944, the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General asserted that "such atrocious and brutal policies", in addition to being repugnant, were violations of the laws of war, and recommended the distribution to all commanders of a directive pointing out that "the maltreatment of enemy war dead was a blatant violation of the 1929 Geneva Convention on the sick and wounded, which provided that: After every engagement, the belligerent who remains in possession of the field shall take measures to search for wounded and the dead and to protect them from robbery and ill treatment". These practices were in addition also in violation of the unwritten customary rules of land warfare and could lead to the death penalty. The U.S. Navy JAG mirrored that opinion one week later, and also added that "the atrocious conduct of which some US personnel were guilty could lead to retaliation by the Japanese which would be justified under international law". (Weingartner 1992: 59)

It is a powerful statement from the Americans that they felt the Japanese would be legally justified *under international law* to retaliate against the behaviour of their US victors.

Human ears became one of the most popular souvenirs, sought after by land troops and those aboard the US fleet (Hayashi 2001: 493), probably because they were the easiest to procure and store. Skulls too were a prized collector's piece, while the other most popular items were gold teeth, pulled not infrequently before the victim was dead. One former marine explained: 'We had barbaric people too. You don't make a bracelet of Jap teeth without ripping them out of Jap heads' (Feifer 1992: 483). In fact, such was the demand that US troops often 'rushed from their foxholes at first light to yank gold teeth from the enemy infiltrators killed during the night'. To some US troops, anything was worthy of stealing as a souvenir and, while the normal flags, badges, pistols and so on were standard booty, 'dedicated collectors even removed leg wrappings from reeking corpses' (Feifer 1992: 491–493). Among the most depraved and bizarre actions were those by a US officer who 'took pleasure in urinating directly into the mouths of Japanese corpses and once pulled down a corpse's trousers so that he could shoot the head off its penis with his carbine', and a machine gun squad who carried a length of pipe about so they too could urinate into the mouths of dead Japanese (Feifer 1992: 489). It is not possible to know what psychological motivation drove these men, but it should be noted that ample testimony exists from US troops who also found their own dead buddies mutilated, including with

their penises stuffed in their mouths and their heads covered in faeces.<sup>13</sup> Sadly, the psychology of war means that a friend killed in battle is a powerful catalyst for revenge of similar or greater violence.

Even without the drive of personal revenge, the battlefield goal of some soldiers is, rather than winning the battle, to inflict the greatest possible suffering on the enemy, including innocent civilians, prisoners and the wounded. Their psyche revels in the cruelty and suffering they administer and is often simply an extension of the unethical lifestyle that they lived in peacetime. War provides the perfect excuse for them to behave as they have always done, or have always wanted to do, but potential victims are now even more plentiful and helpless, and the killing part is now legitimized. Feifer (1992: 496) also concludes that 'if a balance sheet between [American] atrocities and generosities is ever drawn up, an outsider who has never suffered the pressures of combat will not be fit to do it'. Perhaps he is right, but his warning in no way exonerates the contemptible behaviour of many American troops. Their crimes were vile, demeaning and perverted, often ruining forever the lives of their terrified victims. While often explained in terms of the need to avenge a dead comrade and through genuine fear of the enemy, their actions reflected the lowest levels of human conscience. Ripping out gold teeth from appallingly wounded but fully conscious soldiers, urinating in their mouths and cutting off body parts are difficult to understand – and far more difficult to justify. Raping civilian women and girls, however, was the most despicable act, especially *inside the promised security of POW camps*. With some notable exceptions, such as where a soldier is driven to certifiable insanity by the war situation, it is not acceptable to blithely 'blame the war' for crimes such as raping elderly women and young girls or slaughtering defenceless civilians. Such actions reflect only too clearly the character of the perpetrators.

### Failing to Protect One's Own Population

While some US soldiers embraced this unethical mentality on Okinawa, an even more complex aspect of battle ethics during the struggle is the number of IJA troops who visited similar levels of suffering on their own civilian population. Let us look at some examples:

As a whole, the Japanese military did not provide protection to Okinawan citizens, and in many cases even victimized them in order to defend themselves. (Hayashi 2005: 50)

Members of the 32nd Army robbed food, refuge and life from tens of thousands of Okinawans, chiefly women and children, whom they had supposedly come to protect. Their actions included bayoneting, poisoning, choking, drowning, injecting babies to silence them, tossing hand grenades into caves where civilian occupants had decided to surrender. (Feifer 1992: 457)

It is common knowledge in Okinawa that these types of events – the victimization of the island as a whole in order to protect the mainland, the ill-treatment of Okinawan civilians, and the killing of civilians by the Japanese military – took place during the battle. (Hayashi 2005: 50)

The above accounts from Hayashi and Feifer give fair warning that war crimes against the Okinawan population were not uniquely an American activity. In reality, significant numbers of IJA soldiers were frequent abusers of the civilian population. In fact, in that

most US troops had no interest in harming the civilian population, it is arguable that the greatest *deliberately* inflicted suffering that the civilians faced was from their own military.

The long-standing attitude of mainland Japanese towards Okinawans was that they were 'unreliable and capable of treacherous activities directed against the Japanese state... [they were] not Japanese' (Allen 2002: 38). Many IJA soldiers sent to Okinawa harboured similar feelings of resentment towards the island and its people. In spite of their Japanese nationality, Okinawans were regarded as 'not genuinely Japanese' and many IJA troops felt no compunction in handing out some of the very worst of unethical wartime treatment to civilians (Feifer 1992: 449–463). In fact, the initial distrust that many mainland troops harboured towards Okinawan locals may well have been one the greatest catalysts of battlefield crimes against civilians (Hayashi 2001: 315). Civilians drafted into the island's *boetai* (self-defence force) were regularly assigned the most dangerous tasks such as guard duty at cave entrances, carrying supplies and scavenging for food, all work that meant being out in the open and exposed to enemy fire (Hayashi 2005: 53).

Memoirs<sup>14</sup> bear overwhelming witness to how civilians were powerless as they found themselves totally at the mercy of what often amounted to little better than gangs of violent bullies and armed thugs in the IJA. 'Even now, I still feel so sorry for them', is what a former member of Japan's 32nd Army expressed when recalling how he and his platoon stole civilians' food at every opportunity (Kunimori 2008: 99). In addition to food, however, IJA soldiers took over local homes and purloined everything the owners possessed, including animals and chattels. One IJA member lamented years later that 'the people of Okinawa helped us, but all we did was steal their food'. Another explained how he and his fellow soldiers formed raiding parties to steal anything they could get their hands on from the locals: 'We were just a pack of highway thieves' (Kunimori 2008: 100). Civilians who showed the least reluctance to hand over their last scraps of food were often shot, or at the very least, savagely beaten. After robbing locals of everything they possessed, IJA troops then sealed their fate by driving them out of their caves and shelters and into the face of withering American fire (Hayashi 2005). Many were families caring for their elderly, sick and very young, and 'there was no way civilians in the south could stay alive once they [were ejected from their shelters and] mingled with the troops' (Feifer 1992: 449). In other words, by their actions of theft and rejection, Japan's own IJA soldiers condemned thousands of civilians to certain death through gunfire or starvation.

Rape as a war crime is perhaps the most appalling gesture of victorious soldiers celebrating their enemy's total subjugation. But when visited upon one's own civilian women, it is arguably even more despicable, and Huber (2003: 118) describes the rape of Okinawan women by their own IJA soldiers as a common occurrence. His conclusion is supported by a Japanese military communication in July 1944 that such behaviour took away a Japanese soldier's honour, that offences were currently numerous, that they were being committed by 'top officers right down to enlisted men' and that they were to cease (Kunimori 2008: 98). The reputation for brutality and rape that IJA soldiers had earlier gained in China, some of whom were now part of the 32nd Army, meant that they brought an abusive 'victors' mentality' with them to Okinawa (Oshiro 2008: 172). Very few Japanese soldiers gave any consideration to the post-rape circumstances of their victims, with those who discovered that their violation had resulted in pregnancy never considering any form of support. Many simply claimed arrogantly that Okinawan women should consider it an honour to bear the baby of a 'real Japanese soldier' (Kunimori 2008: 94–97). The poor

physical condition of most Okinawan women, however, helps explain the lack of post-war memoirs with references to pregnancy to IJA soldiers.

Apart from stealing their food and denying them shelter, IJA soldiers who were holed up in caves frequently refused to allow civilians to surrender and even fired at US troops waiting outside. Such action always drew immediate and violent retaliatory action from the Americans, often resulting in the deaths of the hapless civilians as well as the IJA soldiers concerned.<sup>15</sup> On other occasions, Japanese soldiers choked crying babies to death (Oshiro 2008: 139), or forced them and their mothers outside to ensure silence as American soldiers drew near (Hayashi 2005).

Extensive evidence also exists of Japanese soldiers who shot their own men and civilians who were moving forwards to surrender.<sup>16</sup> Feifer (1992: 457) cites evidence of IJA soldiers ‘tossing hand grenades at natives, including hundreds of women and children whom they had detected moving towards American lines with the apparent intention of surrendering’. Civilian surrender became increasingly common, especially on the south coast at the end of the conflict. With nowhere else to go, more and more civilians (and IJA troops) took to the water and made their way, as directed, towards waiting vessels of the US fleet. In spite of having been told of the horrendous consequences of capture, they soon realized that they would more likely receive better treatment in an American POW camp than they would (and had already received) from the Japanese military (Hayashi 2005). Although under the protection of US forces, incidents continued to occur involving Japanese soldiers raiding groups of civilians, deliberately maiming and killing children and adults, executing village elders with their samurai swords, and throwing hand grenades into houses containing civilians (Hayashi 2001: 356). Clearly, the treatment the civilians received from some Japanese soldiers, including the large number of deaths that resulted from that abuse, is substantial. In 1982, however, the Japanese Ministry of Education attempted to delete any mention of such treatment from its textbooks and only backed down in the face of outrage from many Okinawan protest groups.

It is hardly surprising that some historians have summed up the situation with comments such as: ‘The Japanese military who called the Americans “beasts”, were themselves more beastly’ (Feifer 1992: 463). Moreover, just as Feifer suggests that we should bear in mind a range of factors when drawing conclusions about American war crimes on Okinawa, Hayashi (2001: 323) also points out that there are arguable humanitarian differences between (for example) IJA soldiers who forced civilians out of the caves for military advantage, and those who did so to protect themselves. However, apart from the deaths and injuries they sustained, for many civilians, the deepest scars of the battle were the psychological effects of the treatment that they received from their own soldiers and the associated feelings of betrayal (Oshiro 2008: 174). One final memoir illustrates most clearly – but tragically – how both sides so willingly and wilfully engaged in the types of behaviour that, in any discussion, amount to nothing less than battlefield war crimes:

In early April, a [M]arine fire team had used cigarettes to burn the letters USMC on the chest of a dazed Japanese soldier they’d captured, then broke his leg by [deliberately] dropping the stretcher they were carrying him on to the rear as ordered by their officer. The group had found the “son of a bitch” next to two murdered children and a woman he’d raped before slitting her throat. (Feifer 1992: 487)

## Unethical Strategic Decisions

Unethical in the extreme though they are, individual battlefield atrocities including soldier-against-soldier and soldier-against-civilian are, sadly, a component of almost every armed conflict. Any discussion on military ethics *apropos* of the Battle of Okinawa, however, must also examine the ethics of the political and military strategies that saw the battle unfold as it did, especially as the hapless civilians were more mistreated by their own government and soldiers than by the American enemy. In this concluding section, I will examine a number of unethical decisions taken by the US military, the Japanese Emperor, Japan's Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo and the Imperial Japanese 32nd Army garrison stationed on Okinawa. In keeping with the definition that crimes against humanity are 'part either of a government policy... or tolerated and condoned by a government or de facto authority' a plethora of irrefutably unethical decisions by Japanese and American authorities during the Okinawa campaign were nothing less than crimes against humanity.<sup>17</sup>

The fall of Saipan, a year before the Okinawa campaign began, had put Japan's home islands within reach of America's long-range B-29 bombers. Moreover, it had made the Japanese aware that America would eventually attack either Taiwan or Okinawa. Strategic decisions for Okinawa by the Japanese government and military, however, were not designed to defend the island and protect its people, but rather to sacrifice both. In this regard, Okinawa can be compared with the sacrificial stone (*sute-ishi*) in the Japanese board game *Go*, where one piece is deliberately sacrificed for the greater good. Two key lines of thought lay behind Japan's decision to sacrifice Okinawa. One reason was to delay an American landing on Japan's main islands for as long as possible while defensive facilities such as airfields were being prepared; the other was to show America the fanatical level of resistance awaiting them if they were to invade the main islands. Both reasons would hopefully strengthen Japan's hopes for a settlement, a process that the nation had already put in motion by asking the Russians to intervene on their behalf. Russia had not entered the war against Japan at that stage, and Emperor Hirohito would not have been aware that the Russians were in fact poised to attack Japan<sup>18</sup> with the aim of gaining Japanese territorial concessions. The Americans, however, were aware that Japan had already approached Russia to broker peace terms and, although the situation was complex, including the fact that overall Japanese military control was at odds with the factions seeking to negotiate a settlement, knowing that peace was on the Japanese agenda makes the American offensive on Okinawa even more questionable.

Actual crimes against humanity by the US on Okinawa were essentially limited to the opening and closing phases of the battle. On 10 October 1944, six months before the April invasion of mainland Okinawa, five separate waves of carrier-based American planes bombed the harbour city of Naha. While the attack targeted ships, airfields and ammunition stores in Naha, 90 per cent of the entire city, including most of the residential housing and several thousand civilians, was also obliterated. Then, during the last weeks of the battle, the level of American ordnance fired into the southern area of Okinawa did not abate. Because the Americans constantly used observation aircraft (nicknamed 'dragonflies' by the locals) throughout the campaign, they were unquestionably aware of the tens of thousands of Okinawan civilians caught up in the fighting as they fled south with the 32nd Army after its withdrawal from Shuri. US aircraft and naval batteries continued firing into that melee day and night, unquestionably aware of the civilians caught up in the chaos.

Even if these processes did not originate at governmental level, the US military was a 'delegated authority' of the government and culpable, therefore, of crimes against humanity during the fight for Okinawa.

The Japanese role in crimes against humanity on Okinawa was greater and far more cynical than that of the Americans, however, and blame can be apportioned to three principal government organizations: the Emperor, Imperial General Headquarters and the Imperial Japanese 32nd Army. The Emperor himself was implicated in that it was he who urged the philosophical dynamic of *ichioku gyokusai* (suicide of all Japanese for Japan and the Emperor: literally 'one hundred millions shattered jewels') that resulted in the deaths of so many civilians throughout the final year of the Pacific Campaign. During the battle for Saipan, for example, he sent a message urging civilians to commit suicide and authorizing the commander on Saipan to promise them the same spiritual afterlife as was already assured for Japanese soldiers killed in combat. In response, over 1,000 Japanese civilians on Saipan followed the *ichioku gyokusai* mantra and committed suicide in the last days of that battle, mainly by jumping off cliffs or by hand grenades. The same mantra was again invoked on Okinawa (Dower 1986: 45), where many civilians and soldiers fulfilled their obligations to the Emperor and the notion of *ichioku gyokusai* by taking their own lives rather than be captured.

Among the decisions that fit seamlessly into the category of crimes against humanity by Japan's Imperial General Headquarters, this article now analyses four such unethical processes. They were unethical in that they were implemented in the full knowledge of, and/or total disregard for, the fact that the deaths of large numbers of innocent civilians would be the likely outcome.

First, whereas most fighting forces can expect to be supplied with at least a minimum level of field rations, the 32nd Army on Okinawa was ordered to be self-sufficient for food in the field. This was standard practice within the Japanese military, but the very limited food available on Okinawa meant that locals would soon have to go without. While stored rice and canned food was initially available, the soldiers soon became responsible for keeping themselves fed at the expense of the civilians who were immediately banned from eating their own crops. Under threat of death, they had to hand all food over to local soldiers and in many cases their livestock were also slaughtered. Civilians were deliberately starved in order to prolong the fighting capability of the 32nd Army.

Second, the best unit within the 32nd Army, the 9th Infantry Division, was removed from Okinawa and sent to Taiwan to lead the defence of that island. No decision at Imperial General Headquarters illustrated the callous *sute-ishi* mentality towards Okinawa more clearly than this. The 9th Infantry Division was battle-hardened and experienced from fighting in China, whereas the 32nd Army had been quickly formed especially for the forthcoming Okinawa theatre. Without the elite 9th Infantry Division, the Okinawa garrison was never going to be able to put up anything more than the token performance that General Headquarters had clearly already decided was to be its role. The fate of the island was irrefutably sealed as soon as the decision was made to send the 9th Infantry Division to Taiwan, with barely a thought for the fate of the Okinawan civilians.

Third, military leaders forced and tricked substantial numbers of Korean men and women to Okinawa, a process known as *kyōseirenkō* (forced relocation as labourers). The men became *gunpu* (military labourers), while the women were forced into the appalling role of *jūgunianfu* (sex slaves, the so-called 'comfort women'). One former IJA soldier recalls that the first thing his commanding officer did when they moved into a small village was

to approach the mayor and demand a private dwelling be set aside and that a comfort station be set up immediately (Kunimori 2008: 95–98). In fact, no fewer than 47 of the 114<sup>19</sup> comfort stations on Okinawa were set up, under protest, in private dwellings (Hicks 1995: 253). The reason for the facility being such a priority may have been to protect the local women, but the rape of comfort women was also common (Hicks 1995: 167). Around 670,000 Koreans were forcibly relocated to Japan during the war (Dower 1986: 47), although numbers sent to Okinawa are difficult to ascertain as records were not always kept and many were callously listed simply as ‘military items’. Any records that had existed were destroyed either in battle or on purpose, while most of the hapless Koreans were killed or died. Forced to accommodate dozens of soldiers each day in the most unsanitary conditions and to endure brutal treatment, sexual diseases and abuse from their ‘clients’, most of the women who survived were too ashamed to speak out once their ordeal was over.<sup>20</sup> Korean men were given the most dangerous tasks such as digging shelters, carrying ammunition, keeping guard outside shelters and foraging for food, all the while exposed to relentless enemy shelling. The irrefutably unethical decision to support the Japanese Army by forcing Korean women to Okinawa as slaves and men to undertake work involving almost certain death was a crime against humanity.

Fourth, the evacuation of civilians from Okinawa had almost nothing to do with concern for their well-being. Rather, it was to remove those who could not contribute to the cause by digging tunnels and fortifications. Lieutenant General Isamu Cho, Chief of Staff of Japan’s 32nd Army, stated unequivocally that those who could not contribute to the battle should relocate, while those who remained were expected to die for the cause (Hayashi 2010: 62). He also decreed that 100,000 civilians should be evacuated, not for their own safety, but in order to make way for the same number of troops in the 32nd Imperial Japanese garrison. Tragically, all evacuation involved transporting people across the surrounding seas, which were bristling with American submarines. In a two-way ‘ferry’ service, ships would bring soldiers to Okinawa and set off again for the mainland laden with civilians. Well aware of the danger of American submarines, but keeping the issue secret, the government ordered the *Tsushima Maru*, laden with evacuees, to put to sea in August 1944. Predictably, it was torpedoed and sunk with the loss of 1,375 lives, including 777 children. The government tried to keep this incident secret as well, lest it interfere with future operations, and, as result, more ships suffered the same inevitable fate. In the end, around 4,500 civilians were killed at sea as a direct result of the government’s reckless evacuation plans. In fact, if any further warning about the danger to evacuation ships was needed, a month before the *Tsushima Maru* was sunk, the troopship *Toyama Maru* had also been torpedoed in the very same stretch of water with the loss of over 5,000 Japanese soldiers.

So, at the very highest level, namely the Emperor himself, a number of strategies were created and implemented that would deliberately, or knowingly, or uncaringly, result in the deaths of thousands of civilians. These strategies were ‘part of a government policy’ and as such were crimes against humanity. At one level below the Imperial General Headquarters, however, in command of Japan’s 32nd Army on Okinawa was General Mitsuru Ushijima, assisted by Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Isamu Cho and Senior Staff Officer Colonel Hiromichi Yahara. Many of their specific decisions and strategies for the way that the Battle of Okinawa was to pan out were equally and deliberately dismissive of civilian lives. I will now analyse a number of strategic decisions from the island’s commanders, which, like those in the preceding paragraphs, were unethical in their

concept and implementation. In brief, the overall battle plan on Okinawa was to be one of attrition, with the fighting drawn out for as long as possible. Cho and Yahara argued over this point with Ushijima finally agreeing with Yahara on the attrition strategy. What this meant was that Okinawa's sacrificial *sute ishi* role, which had already been decided by the Emperor and Imperial General Headquarters, was now confirmed and implemented as the official military strategy for the island by Ushijima, Cho and Yahara.

Japan's nationalist ideology and self-proclaimed racial uniqueness – dominant tenets in Japanese thinking since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 – had little respect for outsiders and 'marginals'. Accordingly, when the 32nd Army began arriving on Okinawa, many of the soldiers resented having been sent to fight for a place and people whom many of them despised as 'non-Japanese'. Soldiers on Okinawa often referred to themselves as 'real Japanese' (*yamato*), a psychological gap that widened when they discovered that they could not understand the Okinawan dialect. On 9 April 1945, Cho officially ordered his troops to regard any Okinawans speaking their own dialect as spies. Official warnings were also issued that all civilians who had surrendered were spies and that any who attempted to surrender were to be immediately shot (Oshiro 2008: 139). Oshiro (2008: 160–164) presents the graphic details of no fewer than 25 incidents where almost 200 civilians were executed, many with ceremonial swords, supposedly for 'spying'. One typical instance involved 40 women under American protection who were washing US uniforms near to where they were interned. Although the event occurred when the Battle for Okinawa was almost over, a group of IJA soldiers in hiding herded the women away and forced them to form a circle into which hand grenades were thrown. Many were killed instantly; others hideously wounded. Civilians caught speaking a foreign language, especially English (Oshiro 2008: 161–163), or even their own Okinawan dialect, those seen with US surrender leaflets, those who attempted to surrender or who were merely found wandering about were deemed to be spies and often summarily executed. Starving locals who had accepted food from US soldiers or US airdrops were also executed as spies (Hayashi 2005: 49–58). Japanese records from one small area alone show that no fewer than 100 executions for spying were carried out 'all without trial [and yet] no evidence of actual espionage is known' (Feifer 1992: 456).

One of the most notorious spying incidents occurred on Kume, a small, isolated island off the west coast of Naha. Kayama, the commanding officer of Kume's small (35-men) garrison drew up a 'blacklist' of suspected 'spies' for detection and execution. His victims included entire families and captured locals who had been sent back to inform Kayama that the Battle for Okinawa was over and that local cooperation would ensure a bloodless US occupation of Kume. All were immediately accused of spying and were executed. Many of the executions took place even after Kayama was aware of Japan's unconditional surrender, including a Kume-born boy sent back from a US prison camp with the surrender news. Kayama ordered the boy to be tied to a tree and bayoneted, together with a village chief and five others for 'failing to report a spy', while a local family (including five children under 13) were herded into a house where they were stabbed to death and cremated. An entire Korean family were executed for having eaten rations that the USA had airdropped onto the island for the starving locals (Allen 2002: 38–50). There were no accusations of spying against the Korean family, but Kayama had already banned the islanders from eating American food, on pain of death. True justice was only served when locals banded together, tracked down the soldiers responsible and handed them over to US troops occupying the island. In a bizarre twist, even a member of Kayama's own

Japanese garrison was executed for 'failing to carry out orders' when two members of his squad were killed while raiding a US encampment (Allen 2002: 29).

Like all Japanese, Okinawan civilians had been fed a constant stream of anti-American propaganda that, by 1944, left them so afraid of the Americans that the appalling treatment that they suffered from their own soldiers was often deemed preferable to what they believed would happen if they were captured. This indoctrination process was a deliberate ruse to terrify the locals into putting their shoulders to the military wheel and, should all else fail, to take their own lives as part of the glorious dynamic of *ichioku gyokusai*.

Second, commanders of the island garrison forced over 22,000 locals into home guard units (*boeitai*). As local men in their twenties had already been conscripted, the *boeitai* units consisted mainly of teenagers and those in their thirties and forties, many married with families. Initially, their job was to supplement regular troops by constructing airfields, roads and shelters, plus carrying supplies, rations and ammunition. Tragically, however, they soon found themselves assigned as front-line combatants. With little or no combat training and very poorly equipped, they were deliberately used as the last line of defence, especially on the invasion beaches, and were even ordered on suicide missions to rush enemy tanks, armed with satchel charges. Like their Korean *gunpu* counterparts, *boeitai* members suffered serious discrimination and ill treatment by the Japanese soldiers, and both groups suffered among the highest non-civilian casualty rates on Okinawa.

Third, Ushijima's order at the end of May to pull out of Shuri and retreat south had the most appalling, but predictable consequences. Ushijima knew from Imperial General Headquarters that reinforcements would not be sent to help Okinawa. Had he decided to hold the line at Shuri, a bloody battle would have ensued, but that would have ended the fighting and saved the lives of uncountable civilians (and indeed soldiers). Continuing with the decision to draw out the fight for as long as possible, however, Ushijima chose a process of gradual withdrawal south from Shuri, with the intention of making a last stand at Kyan. By this stage, however, the 32nd Army was in total disarray and no 'final stand' at Kyan was ever possible. The fleeing soldiers and civilians simply poured southwards until they reached the coast at Mabuni on the southern tip of Okinawa and could go no further. Ushijima's decision had simply sealed the fate of the tens of thousands of civilians who had earlier fled south to escape the fighting and who now found themselves out in the open and caught between the advancing Americans and the withdrawing 32nd Army. Indeed, this most desperate period witnessed the greatest number of civilian deaths of the entire campaign as American ships and aircraft pounded the retreating 32nd Army day and night. Civilian misery was constantly exacerbated by 32nd Army troops who regularly ordered terrified locals out of caves and shelters and into the maelstrom, while the soldiers used the shelters for themselves. Aiming to give mainland Japan more time to prepare its defences, as a military strategy, the gradual withdrawal from Shuri achieved only two weeks and, because of the appalling – and entirely predictable – casualties that resulted, was yet another crime against humanity on Okinawa.

Fourth, in the months leading up to the American landings, army control on Okinawa had cancelled school lessons and established the girls' Nurse Corps and the boy's Blood and Iron Corps.<sup>21</sup> The innocent and naive schoolgirls began basic training to help with the most elementary nursing duties, but quickly found themselves in the hell of the field surgical shelters. There they worked for up to 24 hours a day holding amputees' limbs as surgeons removed them without anaesthetic, disposing of limbs, coping with mentally

deranged and violent soldiers, and changing the bandages on thousands of pus-filled and maggot-ridden wounds, day after day, night after night. The boys were put into uniform, given the rank of second-class private and sent away to help build shelters and undertake 'fetch-and-carry' tasks for the army. By the end of the fighting, they were also being ordered out on unwinnable *kirikomi* missions (suicide charges), sometimes with only the basic training they had received at school where they had practised with sharpened bamboo spears. However, what turned the students' participation into the ultimate nightmare was the 32nd Army's dissolution order on 19 June 1945 – a command that unilaterally disbanded the school auxiliary units and ordered their members to leave the shelters and fend for themselves out in the open. Naturally, the moment they set foot outside they were also caught up in the chaos (including the remnants of the retreating 32nd Army), many of them perishing in the *typhoon of steel*. A humanitarian case may be made for 'releasing' these children from the impossible tasks that they had been allocated, but the inevitable consequences of sending them outside – the boys still in army uniforms, which made them 'legitimate' targets to the Americans – would surely not have escaped the attention of the 32nd Army high command. If indeed it *had* escaped their notice, such ignorance of the obvious consequences was as unethical as it was deplorable.

Fifth, while Imperial General Headquarters initiated its own self-serving strategies for civilian evacuation, some groups within the 32nd Army willingly played a similarly inhumane role. For example, in the Yaeyama Islands in the Ryukyu chain to the south of Okinawa, one IJA garrison forced the hapless residents of Haterumajima to relocate to the neighbouring island of Iriomote, despite the fact that it was known to be infested with malaria. The evacuation was implemented because Haterumajima had not been targeted by the Americans and the soldiers saw relocating its residents as the easiest way to access the island's food supply. Pretending to the locals that the Americans would eat all their animals and be able to fight for longer (Miyara 2004: 41), the IJS soldiers forced the slaughter of hundreds of goats, horses, pigs and cows, only to keep the meat for their *own* food supplies (Oshiro 2008: 168). In spite of field hospitals being quickly set up once the Americans eventually arrived, one third of the Haterumajima civilian population died from malaria and/or starvation after being forcibly relocated to areas known to be infected with malaria. In all, over half of the total civilian population of approximately 30,000 on the Yaeyama Islands contracted malaria through forced relocation, of whom almost one quarter died from the disease (Oshiro 1984: 167). This tragic loss of life was the direct result of agents of the Imperial Japanese Army's callous disregard for the welfare of Okinawa's civilian population.

## Conclusion

During the Battle of Okinawa, approximately 100,000 civilians and 110,000 Japanese soldiers were killed. The fact that only one quarter of the Okinawans who perished were actually armed participants in the fighting raises an obvious, albeit unpalatable, question, namely, why was the civilian death rate so high? Clearly, racism and hatred motivated many of the Americans to kill as many Japanese as they could, but that alone fails to explain the overall civilian casualty rate. The answer is, in fact, that those who perished were the victims of a series of strategic – but entirely unethical – decisions implemented as part of sacrificing Okinawa and its civilian population for the overall protection of Japan's main islands. This article has argued that multiple unethical decisions made on both sides

of the conflict on Okinawa, in particular at three separate levels within the Japanese regime, were nothing less than crimes against humanity. Stealing civilians' food supplies and denying them access to shelter from the *typhoon of steel*, executing them as spies for speaking their own language, forcing them to relocate to areas known to be infected with malaria, and continued shelling of areas where thousands of civilians were known to be present were all 'part either of a government policy... or of a wide practice of atrocities tolerated or condoned by a government or a de facto authority' (from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court). No less excusable were the decisions to force locals and kidnapped Koreans into the most dangerous tasks near military shelters, to use schoolchildren in unimaginable situations before 'releasing' them into the worst part of the maelstrom, and instructing soldiers and civilians alike to take their own lives rather than to surrender. While the comfort women issue remains contentious between Japan and Korea, the Japanese government has never paid compensation to the families of the victims of malaria and until very recently continued to seek the removal of unpalatable references to the Battle of Okinawa from national textbooks. Moreover, in spite of all that Okinawans suffered during the war, Tokyo's lack of concern for the area and its people continues today. In spite of local demands that American forces should abandon their main base at Futenma, Tokyo remains unwilling to put Okinawan interests to the fore by pressuring the US to take heed of local opinion. However, the legacy of the civilian victims of the Battle of Okinawa is most clearly spelled out in the tragic stories of those who survived (see Ealey & McLauchlan 2014) and the appalling numbers of those who were killed in just three months.

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### NOTES

1. The Japanese lost approximately 60,000 troops and approximately 100,000 civilians on Okinawa. A total of 12,513 American troops were killed and over 60,000 wounded, of whom several thousand subsequently died.
2. See Dower (1986) for an excellent treatise on the racist component of the Pacific War.
3. See *Report of Military Government Activities for Period 1 April 1945 to 1 July 1946* (US Navy 1946: 72). The number of men stationed at the time was 717; in other words, almost 2.5 misdemeanours per man.
4. This is not necessarily so either. She may have been Japanese or Korean, a comfort woman or a terrified civilian.
5. Personal communication with author (February 2011) from Bill Pierce, Weapons Company 29th Marines, 6th Marine Division.
6. Literally 'black men's cave'.

7. Imperial Japanese Army military communications on 17 and 24 May express clear concern about deteriorating military discipline.
8. Ushijima and Cho committed ritual suicide on 21 June 1945.
9. See Feifer (1992: 498) and Lacey (2005: 75) for especially harrowing descriptions of such events.
10. See also Feifer (1992: 488): 'Once you kill somebody, the first one, it's much easier after that. When they come out of the caves, it's like target practice, like a turkey shoot.'
11. Personal communication with author (October 2010) from Joseph A. Drago, Ico 3rd Battalion 22nd Marines, 6th Marine Division.
12. Personal communication with author (October 2010) from Joseph A. Drago, Ico 3rd Bn 22nd Marines, 6th Marine Division.
13. Personal communication with author (October 2010) from Bill Pierce, Weapons Company, 29th Marines, 6th Division.
14. In particular, *Okinawa Prefectural History*, Volume 9, 'Documents of the Battle of Okinawa Part 1' (1971) and Volume 10, 'Documents of the Battle of Okinawa Part 2' (1974) contain such testimony from several hundred Okinawans.
15. The attack on the Ihara Surgery Cave is perhaps the best-known tragedy, probably involving phosphorous grenades.
16. In the first week of the campaign, 12,661 civilians were in custody. By 22 April 1945, there were more than 100,000 (Hayashi 2010: 121).
17. Material supporting the civilian experiences hereafter mentioned can be found in *Senka wo Horu*, the testimony of Okinawan civilian survivors published by the *Ryukyu Shimpo* in 1983 and 1984 (for full English translations, together with academic annotations and an introduction by Masahide Ota, see Ealey & McLauchlan 2014).
18. Under the terms of the Yalta Conference (4–11 February 1945), Russia agreed to join the war against Japan within 90 days of Germany's surrender in return for Japanese territory concessions.
19. For several reasons, this number varies between 112 and 120.
20. Some local Okinawan women were also taken to work in the comfort stations.
21. Approximately 2000 school students joined the Nurse Corps and Blood and Iron Corps.

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