



# UNDERSTANDING A DIFFERENT PEOPLE: THE OKINAWAN IDENTITY

By Courtney Short and Jacqueline Whitt October 27, 2020

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**Jacqueline Whitt:** Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Jacqueline Whitt, Editor-in-chief of War Room and I'm really happy to be back in the studio today for a podcast. We talk a lot at the Army War College about the importance of strategic and operational planning. It's sort of what we do, and on today's podcast we want to take a look at a historical episode in which strategic and operational planning was absolutely critical, but a place where that planning went well beyond calculations of traditional military factors such as logistics and supply lines and the employment of forces in combat. In the Pacific Theater of war in the Second World War as U.S. military planners thought about what an eventual assault on the Japanese home islands might look like, the island of Okinawa was a central feature to many of these plans, but it presented some unique challenges and opportunities for American military commanders and strategists to think about in terms of strategic empathy, understanding the adversary and the environment, and planning for an occupation. So, I'm here in the virtual studio today with Dr. and Lieutenant Colonel Courtney Short. Courtney is currently the Garrison Commander at Carlisle Barracks and an active duty Army Air Defense Officer, but she also has a secret identity, one that I've known for a long time, which is that she is a PhD holding historian and an author. And I've actually known Courtney for more than a decade now. She's a fellow Tarheel and we taught at West Point together. She has a recent book called "Uniquely Okinawan" which has just been published by Fordham University Press and I'm really delighted to have her here today with us at War Room. Courtney, Welcome to A Better Peace.

**Courtney Short:** Hi, thank you Dr. Whitt, happy to be here.

**JW:** Fantastic. So, I know you have a PhD in history and right now with COVID and all of that you might wish that your PhD were in public health or something of that nature given your job, but I'm going to give you the opportunity to put your historian hat back on today. I would imagine that many Americans simply think of Okinawa as part of Japan, but that view is really too simple. Can you give us the really short version of the history of Okinawa and its relationship to Japan?

CS: Sure, yeah. I'll try to keep it really short. Obviously, the relationship goes on for centuries. So, right now Okinawa is a prefecture of Japan, and a way to kind of think of that is the kind of like how are states are, but it wasn't always like that, and there's a way in which Okinawa became a part of Japan as it is today that's not a very typical path if you think of Japan's historic relationship with other Asian countries in the region. So, centuries prior to when Japan actually did invade Okinawa, which was called the Ryukyu Kingdom, that happened in 1609, the invasion, the Ryukyus was an independent kingdom and a very peaceful one with its own royalty, its own traditions. It traded with their neighbors, Korea, China and Japan, and from 1477 to 1526 they really had no conflicts. However, because of where they are geographically, you had some instability that happened in the region because of Japan that ended up affecting the Ryukyu Kingdom. So, Toyotomi Hideyoshi gained control over Japan following that period of peace that Ryukyu Kingdom enjoyed, and he made plans to forcibly expand into Korea and China. And he looked to Okinawa for assistance with this—reached out to their Kingdom for men and supplies, and the Ryukyu Kingdom said no. They had a good relationship of relative autonomy as a tributary to China, and they favored preserving that relationship. Now under Hideyoshi, there was so much that he was looking on with Korea and China and as well as in Japan that he let that slide for a bit. But following the end of his campaigns, when you had the rise of Tokagawa Ieyasu, the Japanese continued to make advances into the Ryukyu Kingdom and asking for their support in their favor to what they were doing, to which the Ryukyu Kingdom continually said, no, in favor of their Chinese loyalties. Well, Ieyasu was not as heavily involved in the other countries around in the region as Hideyoshi had been, so they looked at the insubordination that they saw coming from the Ryukyu Kingdom, and they invaded with the Satsuma clan and that was in 1609. Well, the Satsuma clan are very skilled samurai and as I mentioned before the Ryukyu Kingdom prided themselves on being very peaceful. They did not have the military skill to be able to really repel that invasion. they did put up an honest defense, but it was unsuccessful. So, the Satsuma clan came in and they took over Shuri Castle, which is the head of the Ryukyu Kingdom. They captured the King Sho Nei and they took over the Kingdom. But what's interesting about this is they did not make them into a colony. They were invaded, but they weren't forcibly subjugated. They really looked to the Kingdom as an economic resource and not as a territorial true gain, and they weren't concerned with the politics either. This allowed the Ryukyu Kingdom to retain a semblance of their own government and traditions, and Sho Nei himself, the king, was seen as a foreign dignitary from a line of warriors, so he was treated well even though he was required to stay in Edo. So, in 1611 just a couple of years he was even allowed to return back to the Ryukyu Kingdom and retain his position as King. So that means that this kind of congenial relationship that happened out of it and this kind of respect that they had for their leaders had a different impact. But at the same time, the Ryukins are ethnically Ryukin, and not Yamato Japanese, so they were treated as second class citizens and they didn't have the same political rights. They didn't have the same rights to education, housing, employment. They actually could not even represent themselves in the Japanese diet, so

you end up with this relationship between the Okinawans and the Japanese, where they are subjects of the emperor, yet they are really treated in a very unequal manner.

**JW:** And so that relationship continues, obviously for centuries, and I think for Americans, it's so hard to imagine. Our own country's history is quite short in comparison, but this centuries' long relationship, how aware of it and how did American planners, military officers, did they understand this relationship? Did they understand this history and how did they use that in planning and strategic considerations for the Pacific War?

**CS:** Oh, absolutely, and great question, because surprisingly, the American military planners had a lot more awareness of the complexity of that relationship than you would think. Brigadier General William Crist was the deputy commander for military government, and he said that the most vital question in planning the invasion of Okinawa was figuring out what the population would do with the arrival of American troops on their soil. So, there was 463,000 Okinawans on the island of Okinawa, but with unknown loyalties, the American military planners could not confidently discern what their reaction would be, and the only way to delve into any sort of a guess as to what the reaction of the Okinawans would be to an invading force was to really delve deeply into the history, the culture, the complexity of the ethnicities that were interacting there. So, they did that through cultural studies, through intel studies and all of that because really, 463,000 people are they either going to fight because they're subjects of the emperor and this is a foreign invader, or are they going to see this as a chance to get their independence back? That's a big force if they're going to fight, make a huge impact on the military operation.

**JW:** Or even if they're just ambivalent, right? That might be even a third option. But all of those are plausible, right? And so, they've got to figure out this this question. So, you said they did this sophisticated analysis about race and identity. How does it eventually factor into American military planning?

**CS:** Well, so in looking at all of that and trying to answer that question of what will they do or not do in this situation is they reach the conclusion that they couldn't actually fully answer the question. And I know that's not a very satisfying answer, but it played into their plans by the directives that they gave the actual soldiers and Marines on the ground. So, the guidance written in a document called the GOPER of the guidance, the directive from 10th army in charge of the whole operation said that, well, we don't know with positivity what the reaction is going to be of this big group of people. So, the wise thing is to be cautious that they might fight against you, but because we don't know, you are at liberty to reassess what you encounter on the ground. If that does not look like they're going to react like an enemy, then we're not going to treat them that way. If they take up arms against us, then we will. That was the Army guidance. That was what was given to the soldiers. I emphasize soldiers. There was parallel planning happening with the Marines who published Annex Able and that annex was their directives here related to the

military government and they reached the same conclusions: we don't know with certainty what they're going to do, but they instructed the Marines to treat them as enemy out of caution, without telling them to reassess or giving them the permission I guess I'd say to reassess what they actually encountered on the ground.

**JW:** So, that's a pretty interesting situation where you have almost a natural experiment going on with the Army and the Marine Corps making a similar assessment, taking a different approach. Do we do we see differences in the approach that Army soldiers take versus Marine Corps Marines?

**CS:** So, how they actually interacted on the ground in the battle?

**JW:** Yes.

**CS:** Yes. So, as you have soldiers hit the beaches and Marines hitting the beaches, you'll notice that the encounters that the Army units, as they encounter the civilians, they come into it wary, but then they start to notice that the Okinawans are reacting. They're being cooperative, they're paying attention to instruction. They're not rising up in the numbers of 463,000. There is, of course, the caveat to that. There were Okinawans that did fight actual units. The Okinawan Home Garden with Japanese units, but as far as your everyday civilian who's caught in the crossfire, it was not there en masse. So, in reaction to that, these soldiers on the ground would loosen the restrictions of some of these military government camps. They would offer opportunities, informal opportunities for leadership for those that were in the military government camps. At a certain point, before the battle is even over, some of them are having tea ceremonies together. So, there's this, oh, this is different. We're reassessing them. This is not a threat, and with that that's so interesting then, is they are differentiating between Okinawans are different from the Japanese. Which is a very interesting mental break there.

**JW:** And then how is it different from the Marines that we see?

**CS:** Oh yes. So, ironically, when the Marines landed first, they're giving the civilians a ton of freedom because they didn't have a lot of resources to really corral them properly, but that is more neglect freedom than any sort of assessing their safety. But when they get them in military government camp as is the program to do it, they have harsh restrictions as you would imagine a prisoner of war camp would have, and those are maintained. So, you have you have a reaction here where the Marines keep with a harsh protocol despite some of the reactions of the actual Okinawans to the situation that's happening amongst them.

**JW:** I think that makes sense, and it's really interesting to see how different approaches at a command level really can affect the situation on the ground at a tactical level. I'm thinking a little

bit now about how the Okinawans responded. So, you sort of talk in your book about this cultivation of an Okinawan identity. Can you talk to us a little bit about how the Okinawans responded and how this experience of the American invasion and occupation, and then eventually integration back with Japan shapes the Okinawans sense of identity and who they are?

**CS:** Oh, absolutely, and I think what's interesting about this is, you don't only see this in the documents coming from the Okinawans themselves, but you can also see this in the American reports coming back when they are talking about their reaction to the Okinawans as they are picking up on some of these identity things, although they don't know what they're seeing as there documenting it if that makes sense.

**JW:** So, in some ways that's the best for a historian because when people are too self-aware it can mess up the historical record in strange ways.

**CS:** Oh yes, right. So, Japan had a program as they brought in Okinawa as a prefecture when it was the end of the feudal system and turns into the prefectures of Japan and Okinawa becomes one of that. And part of that is indoctrination. I mentioned before that they saw themselves as subjects of the emperor, even though they were aware of the inequalities and what they did not have similar to Japanese on the mainland. So, before the battle starts, you have the National Mobilization Act of 1944, when the Japanese are seeing the writing on the wall as American forces are getting closer to the mainland and they're foreseeing that there would be a reason to put more Japanese troop presence on Okinawa. So, they do that and with that, they rally all the citizens to defend their nation, and as a part of that, there is a Japanese identity that the Okinawans have. And really, I kind of see there are three groups here: how the children process things, how the adults process things, and then those who are the fighting soldiers who are in the Okinawan Home Guard or the Japanese units as well. So, before the battle starts, children being very naive and trusting, they have these great relationships with these Japanese military units and these soldiers are exciting and interesting and brave, and they're right next to their farms and their dad feeds them sweet potatoes and they build these bonds and relationships and they also are taught in school that, you will die for the emperor and your country. The adults have a more realistic viewpoint, seeing the longer game of how long, knowing the history a little better, being more aware, less naive, but they still see themselves as Japanese and Japanese citizens here. And then your soldiers have a similar brothers in arms reaction at this point, but as the battle erupts on the island, the children go to seek comfort with Japanese units as they're trying to survive in this war-torn area. And they get very, very shocked by the treatment that they receive from the Japanese units, who in some instances committed horrific things to children, euthanizing them in caves, kicking them out, denying them food and water. So, these children that looked up to these Japanese soldiers are now trying to fight for their survival and where they're going for comfort, they're getting very much pushed out and harmed. With that, in their efforts for survival, they start redefining who they are. Where is my point of safety? And that isn't instantly thought to be

the Americans because there was a heck of a lot of propaganda that just laid out these awful things that the Americans were going to do—drive you under our tanks, we're going to eat you, etc. So, it wasn't like, oh well, we'll go to the other guys, not instant by any means. But in their struggle for survival in this environment, they saw that the safety was not with the Japanese troops and when they would get caught up with the American troops, they were surprised to find that the safety was there. Their reaction then was to build an Okinawan identity, to separate themselves from the enemy and endear themselves to the Americans, but not an American identity. Their own Okinawan, we are not like the Japanese. We are different. We are not your enemy and they found that that would give them favor in the military government camps, and that's where you see in the American viewpoints when they say oh wow, look the Okinawans are so obedient and cooperative. Yes, on purpose. They're doing something very purposely here and in how they do that. And you'll see it with the adults too, although the adults did not have the huge level of betrayal and shock because they weren't as naive and wrapped up in the glory of this neighborhood soldier, and sometimes when they see some extreme things—food getting stolen, these people getting killed and stuff—they weren't as shocked or surprised with it. They understood that Okinawans were not as equal as Japanese. You have a lot more maturity there. They were very focused on preserving their family most of all. But at the same time, at the end of the day, when they're getting swept up into these military government camps, it was in their best efforts towards survival if they could separate themselves from the Japanese identity and claim a different one, of which that becomes, they're going back to their Okinawan one. And they manifested this in a lot of ways by how they would talk about the Japanese, by the traditions they would reference of their own culture, the ways that they would try to show that they had some similarities with the Americans, which is probably one of the interesting things when you look at the Americans who write about these experiences that they're having as military government officers, and they'll say things like wow, Okinawans have really similar ideas about our politics. Well, okay, not really, but they're trying to draw those similarities between it. And then with the soldiers, your soldiers would be your last group that after fighting side by side with the Japanese, and then committing some of these things that will happen in war, violent crimes and things that'll happen in war, when they were brought into their POW camps as combatants, they were separated from the Japanese. And then there were just the Okinawans in the separate POW camp away from Japanese in theirs. And it was a way in which they were forging an Okinawan identity to separate themselves from the Japanese and to mentally grapple with some of the atrocities that they had committed. And it was, I didn't do that, they made me do that. I'm not Japanese. I'm Okinawan.

**JW:** Right. So, this idea that identity is something that is actively shaped, that it's not just something that is given or granted or static, I think is really important, and it comes through so strongly that identity is just as purposeful in some cases. It's utilitarian in a way. How does this Okinawan identity continue to play out in the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**CS:** It definitely is still at play even today. In fact, how I even came to this and became interested in this topic is because I would go visit my husband who was stationed at Okinawa and you could even see it playing out even then in the early 2000s. It still does today. Today, the major issue that they are still dealing with is what to do with Futenma Air Base and the fact that Okinawa has 75% of U.S. bases for Japan are all in Okinawa—75%, most of them are there. Okinawans are upset about that. They don't want additional bases built. They don't want to be moved to areas that should be environmentally preserved. And then of course, there's the interesting piece where Japan, the government, has to file with Okinawa to get approval to do ground improvement work and the national government can sue Okinawa. So even now we talk, in World War II, 1945, Okinawa has continually shaped their identity to align with—because there are three players out there still: the U.S., Japan and Okinawa. And the Okinawans still will form their identity in a way that will provide them the route to survival.

**JW:** Yeah, they are still triangulating between the Americans and the Japanese strategically in terms of identity.

**CS:** Absolutely. And I know in the 90s they were very much aligning more towards Japan because of misbehavior with U.S. troops. And more in World War II it was the other way. And there's that tension now, it just continues.

**JW:** So, Courtney as we wrap up, and it's always amazing to me how fast time goes by, what do you think, from your historical work, if we now translate that into practical or real world advice for military officers, for advisors, for commanders, what are the what are the lessons or the takeaways from your work on Okinawa and the occupation for policymakers and commanders and strategists?

**CS:** Sure. I would say that careful analytical and open considerations of race and ethnicity and identity are just as important as the practical military considerations that you always think of when you're doing planning and executing of military operations. Ultimately, warfare is people coming together in violent ways and if you will not have the full scope of what the situation may be or is, if it hasn't been delved in on all of those levels, and I think that that has relevance going forward as well as looking at things historically.

**JW:** Yeah, there was a moment when the United States was most heavily involved in Iraq and Afghanistan that we heard a lot about culture, about strategic empathy and understanding, the deep context of the places Americans were fighting in. And as we have seen a shift toward thinking about Great Power Competition and near-peer competitors and all of the language around that, culture seems to have dropped out of some of our vocabulary and some of our education, and I think this is an interesting counterpoint because you have a conventional war, literally a World War, with peer or near-peer competitors and culture absolutely matters on the

ground and it matters in decision-making. So, I would commend your book and your work to many folks. I think it's beautifully written, really well conceived, and I think it has lots of lessons for us even today. So, Courtney thank you so much for joining me virtually to do a War Room podcast. I've really enjoyed it and I'm always looking for reasons to read books. So, thank you for that. Is there anything else? I'll let you have the last word if you'd like.

**CS:** Just thank you so much for having me. This is a great opportunity and been really great. Thank you.

**JW:** Fantastic. So with that, this is Jackie Whitt. I am signing off for War Room. We hope you will listen, comment and subscribe, and of course catch us online or on social media.