

Using *Victory in the Pacific* in High School and College History Survey Courses

By Aaron Pickering

Victory in the Pacific

HOSTED BY DAN RATHER AND GENERAL H. NORMAN SCHWARZKOPF

PBS AND CBS NEWS, 1995

120 MINUTES, DVD, COLOR



Dan Rather and General H. Norman Schwarzkopf. Source: All screen captures are from *Victory in the Pacific*.

The irony of a student complaining that a video is too old in a history classroom never ceases to amuse. But there is at least one thing that a nonletterboxed, standard-definition video can provide that the newest feature film cannot: eyewitness accounts of World War II in the Pacific. *Victory in the Pacific*, a CBS News television documentary that premiered in 1995, is a distinctive and useful classroom resource primarily because it features dozens of interviews with eyewitnesses in their twilight years. In addition to appearances by high-profile American former military, such as George H. W. Bush, the

Dan Rather and General H. Norman Schwarzkopf-hosted documentary chronicles the experiences of military and civilians from both nations, as well as people from Imperial Japanese Army-occupied territories throughout the Pacific theater. With an episodic format that makes it easy for instructors to show shorter clips as best fits their plans, *Victory in the Pacific* will enthrall skeptical students with a fast-moving narrative that shows ample war footage interlaced with deeply revealing interviews with the people who lived it.

Although the full documentary does a comprehensive job of covering the entire war, it is most use-

ful for illustrating the lesser-known events that rarely make it into general textbook coverage. The combination of original footage and eyewitness accounts paints a realistic picture of war, but does not excessively glorify the American cause. Even the most skeptical students will be both shocked and moved by the firsthand accounts of American Marines that stormed the beaches at Tarawa, desperate Japanese soldiers and civilians fleeing American forces during the fall of Saipan, and Filipino civilians recalling the horrors of urban warfare in Manila. Life on both

home fronts also receives ample attention, portrayed in interviews with formerly interned Japanese-Americans and resource-starved Japanese civilians facing an invasion of the home islands. President Harry S. Truman's decision to deploy nuclear weapons is contextualized by an account of the horrors during the amphibious assault on Okinawa from both American Marines and Japanese civilians. Instructors can choose from

among any number of these vignettes to convey the deeply human themes alongside narrative coverage of the war.

In a stark contrast with typical documentary coverage of Operation Overlord and the landings in Normandy, *Victory in the Pacific* presents a far grittier perspective on the horrors of amphibious assaults. The assault on Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands in November 1943 (approximate time code 35:00) exposes students to what is arguably the fiercest battle in the history of the United States Marine Corps. The battle for Tarawa is told



Newspapers after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941.



Building the new B-29s.



Soldiers shipping out.

FDR's funeral on April 15, 1945.



Truman being sworn in as President on April 12, 1945.





Burning ships in Pearl Harbor.



through a series of remembrances of three Navy and Marine veterans intermixed with newsreel commentary. From the moment it became clear invasion planners had misjudged the tide, the quarter-mile trek from the grounded landing craft on the reef to the beach is vividly described by Tarawa veteran Stanley Holloway: “you’d hear a thump and turn around to look, and some guy that was right beside you would just be sinking, done.” After chronicling the horrors of the losses taking a beachhead, the documentary establishes how difficult the coming island-hopping



campaign would be in a description of the overwhelmed but recalcitrant Japanese resistance. Marine William Berhow explains how difficult it was to defeat the Japanese defenders even after the Americans had clearly won the battle: “The reason it was bad was that it was fortified, and they didn’t give up ... They fought to the end, period. Out of some 5,000 Japanese that were on Tarawa, we only captured seventeen prisoners of war.” The documentary’s coverage of Tarawa helps explain the subsequent US–Pacific amphibious island battles fought against a determined and entrenched enemy. Students who watch similar clips in the series will get a real sense of the intensity and horrors of these events.

Eddie Albert was a World War II veteran and also had a long career in film and television, such as the lead role on the sitcom *Green Acres*.

The perspective of Japanese soldiers and civilians takes center stage in the documentary’s coverage of the summer 1944 American assault on Saipan in the Mariana Islands (approximate time code 45:00). In addition to the American accounts of these bloody amphibious battles, and the triumphs of American pilots in what Schwarzkopf describes as “the greatest air battle that had ever been fought or will ever be fought,” Japanese veterans and civilians are highlighted in this segment. Japanese soldier Gunpachero Kondo recalls, “All



we thought was that we were going into battle every day to die; our mission was just to sacrifice ourselves ... We really felt like we were animals being hunted.” Again, in a quote that will stick with students, Stanley Holloway describes the Japanese banzai attacks: “they didn’t care about dying, but I cared about living.” Saipan was the first island where a significant number of Japanese civilians were caught up in the fighting. The documentary chronicles the challenges that civilians faced hiding in caverns as Japanese officers insisted upon absolute silence and even



General H. Norman Schwarzkopf.



Imperial Japanese Army personnel marching through Manila, Philippines, 1944.



killed children to remain hidden. Saipan veteran William Berhow recounts those Japanese civilians “were told that if you gave up to a Marine, you are going to be killed ... They were told that to be a Marine, you had to kill your parents, so consequently the civilians on Saipan didn’t want to give up to us.” The segment concludes with a chilling set of visuals illustrating instances of civilians committing suicide by stepping off beachside cliffs rather than surrendering to the Americans.



The most resonate interviews of the documentary come from the soldiers and civilians involved in the liberation of the Philippines, particularly the urban warfare of the Battle of Manila (approximate time code 1:05:00). Despite General Douglas MacArthur’s initial ease landing on Leyte, the documentary chronicles the intense five months of fighting before the Philippines are taken. When liberating two Japanese prison camps outside of Manila, the horrors of living as a detainee or prisoner of war become clear. US Army veteran Stanley Frankel describes the prisoners they found as “gaunt, emaciated men who actually had, I’d say, death in their eyes.” The scenes from the liberation of the camps are reminiscent of scenes students have undoubtedly seen of the Nazi concentration camps in Europe and serves to remind them that there is far more to war than the fighting. The scenes of civilians caught in the crossfire of urban fighting are similarly shocking and vivid. Filipino civilian Gaby Tabunlar recalls that “the Japanese conducted a scorched-earth policy; they set fire to buildings, depots, everything.” He goes on to cite atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers on the civilians. Japanese veteran Koichi Kayashima explains that

General Douglas MacArthur.





American soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima.



Dan and Norman on Iwo Jima.

“the Filipino civilians were siding with the enemy, so when we saw them, we would shoot at them.” Manila resident Vicky Quirino Delgado describes fleeing her home after it was shelled only to be confronted by a Japanese sentry who started firing at her family, resulting in her mother and her infant sister falling to the ground. When the infant started to cry, Delgado says that “the sentry came over and picked her up, threw her in the air, and caught her with a bayonet.” Tabunar recalls civilians being herded into churches and massacred, and claims that “this was not a whimsical act by

one Japanese squad or one Japanese officer; this was a premeditated, barbaric act by the Japanese.” In counterpoint, Koichi says, “I’ve heard that people say that, but it’s not true. I was there, and I know. In fact, it’s actually the Filipinos that were butchering us.” As the scenes of destruction and suffering are shown, it becomes apparent to students that the horrors of urban warfare and civilian suffering were not limited to the cities of Europe.

Students are challenged to grapple with the seemingly contradictory testimonies and recognize the difficulties in characterizing such a complex network of events.

Finally, while the documentary does an outstanding job chronicling the circumstances of the American choice to use nuclear weapons, the preamble to this section and context most students lack is the coverage of the invasion of Okinawa (approximate time code 1:30:00). To establish a staging ground for a potential invasion of the Japanese home islands, the Americans

launched the largest amphibious landing of the entire Pacific campaign. The documentary recalls the desperation of the defenders of Okinawa and the increasingly problematic role of kamikaze attacks. Japanese Pacific War veteran Hisao Sawada recalls, “I was ordered to volunteer as a kamikaze ... They would shoot us out on a catapult in a glider ... I thought they were crazy.” The toll of the kamikaze on supporting American Navy ships is heavy and bogged-down. American Army forces on the island must push through the mud and



Joe Rosenthal, the photographer who took the photo of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima.



Landing craft heading for Peleliu.





muck to take Japanese defensive positions. The desperation of both the Japanese civilians and soldiers is recalled by a Japanese soldier: “People were so debilitated by sickness and malnutrition. I remember their faces; some of them were so afraid.” After Dan Rather rattles off the incredible casualty figures of the Okinawa invasion, he notes that commanders were keenly aware that more of this was to come if the home islands were invaded. American soldier Eugene Sledge recalls, “They told us, ‘You’re going to have to get used to killing women and children.’” This short but vivid segment on Okinawa establishes

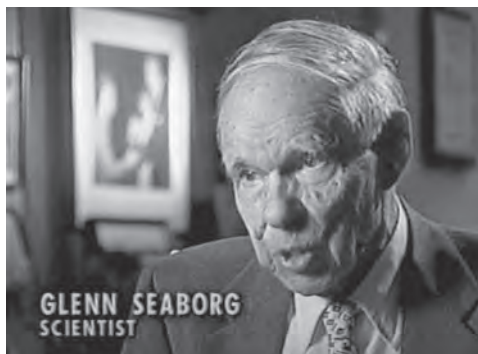
the moral complexities of Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons.

Despite its age, *Victory in the Pacific* is an ideal tool for instructors hoping to expose their students to the lesser-known elements of World War II in the Pacific. Its highly episodic organization makes it very easy

to pick and choose individual segments without creating continuity issues. These segments, particularly given the eyewitness accounts, can serve as outstanding supplements to other lesson activities and instruction. While there are undoubtedly newer and flashier documentaries and feature films, *Victory in the Pacific* offers a versatile format for instructors who wish to cover the less well-known elements of the Pacific War and expose their students to the eyewitness accounts of both sides’ military personnel and the civilians that were caught up in the fighting.



The pilot of the plane that dropped the bomb on Nagasaki.



The scientist who opposed the use of the bombs on Japan.



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