

**Rodney Earl Walton.** *Big Guns, Brave Men: Mobile Artillery Observers and the Battle for Okinawa.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-130-6.

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Rodney Earl Walton's *Big Guns, Brave Men* examines the experiences and contribution of US Army artillery observers during the Battle of Okinawa in the spring of 1945, the last year of World War II, in the Pacific theater. Walton, a lawyer who received a PhD from Florida International University, emphasizes the role of artillery in the battle as well as the contribution of the US Army, which he feels has been sidelined by the US Marine Corps. Walton's father served as an observer and the book is based on eighteen oral history interviews and archival research.

An introductory chapter focuses on the US Army's interwar development of centralized fire control for artillery battalions directed by forward observers equipped with mobile radios. Walton focuses on the 361st Field Artillery Battalion (his father's unit) in the 96th Infantry Division, which landed on Okinawa on the first day of the invasion. Okinawa would serve as the logistical staging ground for the planned invasion of Japan in the fall of 1945. In contrast to their full defense of smaller Pacific islands, the Japanese only defended the southern third of Okinawa. When the American units ran into these prepared lines of Japanese defenses, artillery proved key to enabling the small advances that characterized the fighting.

Walton's narrative traces the experiences of the 361st Field Artillery Battalion during the battle, relying heavily on oral history accounts to provide a personal touch. The work emphasizes the unique position occupied by artillery observers. Observer teams, often consisting of one officer and one or two enlisted soldiers, spent most of their time physically separated from their parent artillery units. They were attached to infantry formations, typically companies, to call down artillery fire support. Their reputation with the infantry depended on their ability to effectively provide artillery fire on demand. This relationship also depended on the attitude of the observers, specifically becoming angry with rear area artillery units when friendly artillery rounds fell short of their intended target. Artillery proved effective at breaking up Japanese counterattacks but less useful when the two front lines became intermingled. Furthermore, the nature of the Japanese defenses—caves, bunkers, and underground tunnels—made effective use of artillery against these positions difficult given the technology available at the time.

The narrative pauses in the middle of the work to consider the daily life of artillery observers and liaison teams. Life in the field tended to break down the hierarchical barriers between officers

and enlisted men in observer teams. American units, backed by heavy artillery support, usually attacked during daylight hours to maximize visibility. At night, US Army practice was for the infantry to stay in their foxholes and shoot at anything that moved. To support this practice, observers would call down pre-sighted artillery fire in a defensive curtain throughout the night in front of US positions. Interrogations of Japanese prisoners of war on Okinawa revealed that US artillery prevented the Japanese from moving during daylight and played havoc with Japanese communications.

Walton notes that although artillery units took care to avoid firing on Okinawan civilians, the civilian population suffered greatly during the battle. Thousands of civilians were wounded or killed as combat operations raged throughout southern Okinawa as a result.

A chapter toward the end of the narrative examines special topics, such as airborne observers, Japanese artillery observers, friendly fire, and the wisdom of American reliance on artillery on Okinawa. Walton ultimately concludes that the army's heavy use of artillery played an important role in the American victory in the battle.

This book provides a previously unknown perspective on the US Army's role in the Pacific theater. Artillery observers have received little attention in the scholarly literature. While Walton focuses in detail only on Okinawa, he traces the development of artillery observer from the First World War to the Second World War. The extensive use of oral histories adds detail and color to the work. This book is recommended for undergraduate surveys as well as general readers.

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