

Northern Mariana Islands and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Perhaps more than most other current U.S. states or territories, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) complicates the very concept of a “home front” during World War II. While many Americans may recall the decisive wartime role of Tinian—launch site for the atomic bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki—that island and the fourteen others in the northern band of the Mariana Archipelago, such as Saipan, Rota, and Pagan, were Japanese holdings between 1920 and 1944, with some continuing under Japanese rule until the end of the war.¹

At the war’s beginning, the combined Japanese and immigrant Korean and Okinawan population far outnumbered the roughly 4,000 Native Chamorros and Carolinians.² During the war, Japanese authorities relocated the Chamorro population from Tinian to Saipan and Rota, while these islands all experienced heavy and disruptive militarization. Even after American victories in the battles of Saipan and Tinian in the summer of 1944, American servicemen there experienced a home front governed by military force and riddled with scars of battle. Yet even in this context, parallels to home front developments typical of the contiguous United States existed. Residents of CNMI experienced massive construction projects, civilian internment, and diversified labor forces.

Mobilization: Military Campaigns

Saipan, the largest and most populated island of the Northern Marianas, was the launch site for Japan’s bombing of American-controlled Guåhan (Guam) just four hours after their attack on Pearl Harbor, leading to the surrender of Navy-appointed Governor McMillin three days later. Needless to say, the U.S. had a pressing interest in taking control of the Northern Marianas.³ The U.S. sent 71,000 troops to the island in 1944. The Battle of Saipan, June 15 - July 9, 1944, killed roughly 3,000 and wounded more than 10,000 Americans—a fraction of the 30,000 Japanese losses.⁴ The battle also came at a great expense to the Indigenous communities on the island, who fled to limestone caves for over three weeks with very little food or water. Key to Japan’s ouster was the Navy Seabees’ seizure of the 4,500-foot Aslito Airfield on Saipan’s southern end, which the U.S. renamed Isley Field. Army engineers soon poured some ten million square feet of pavement, producing two parallel 8,500-foot runways and almost seven miles of taxi space for B-29 bombers.⁵

Another well-known site from the Battle of Saipan looms at the north end of the island, where Japanese resistance finally gave out. The site’s official name used by Americans, Marpi Point, and that used by the Commonwealth, Laderan Bandero, both fail to capture the tragedy and desperation encompassed by its more popular local name: Suicide Cliff. Some sources estimate that more than a thousand Japanese servicemen and civilians threw themselves to their deaths in the late afternoon of July 9, 1944, to escape American troops.⁶

¹ Philip A. Crowl, *Campaign in the Marianas* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1993), 1. See also Don A. Farrell, *History of the Northern Mariana Islands* (Saipan 1991).

² Chamorros migrated to the Mariana archipelago over 3,500 years ago while Carolinians came to Saipan in the early 1800s. See “[People](#),” American Memorial Park, National Park Service.

³ “[Guam in World War II](#),” National Park Service.

⁴ [Battle of Saipan](#), American Memorial Park, National Park Service.

⁵ Erwin N. Thompson, “[Landing Beaches, Aslito/Isley Field, and Marpi Point, Saipan Island](#),” United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form (1984), 3-4.

⁶ NPS, “[Landing Beaches, Aslito/Isley Field, and Marpi Point, Saipan Island](#),” 4-5.



Aerial view of Tinian Island during the war. Credit: National Archives, War in the Pacific National Historical Park.

The Battle of Tinian, waged from July 24 - August 1, 1944, claimed more than 5,000 Japanese soldiers, while some 4,000 Japanese and Korean civilians died under gunfire or by suicide. American forces lost fewer than 400 men.⁷ Critical to the American victory was the swift capture of Ushi Point Airfield, on the island's north end, by U.S. Marines and Navy Seabees. In the hands of American engineers, the 4,700-foot airstrip at Ushi Point was transformed into North Field, likely the largest airbase in the world in 1945.⁸ They built four parallel 8,500-foot runways, 265 hardstands for B-29s, and a network of new streets. To the west, West Field soon served as the new base for the B-29

Superfortresses of the Twentieth Air Force and 58th Bombardment Wing.

Code-named "Papacy" during the war, Tinian was chosen as the atomic bomb launch site. Veteran Army Corps of Engineers officer Col. Elmer E. Kirkpatrick, Jr. arrived to oversee construction of the bomb assembly building and bomb pits. The first shipment of bomb parts arrived on Memorial Day in 1945. The *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar* were loaded with "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," respectively, from special loading pits at North Field in August of 1945.⁹ Notably, North Field was already months into dispatching B-29s to bomb Pagan, as well as Chuuk and Iwo Jima. Tinian had also taken the place of China for planes embarking to fire-bomb Tokyo.¹⁰ On August 6 and 9 of 1945, American controlled Tinian played its part in the ending of the war and in the deaths of roughly 200,000 people in Japan.

Mobilization: Occupation

The presence of the Navy's Construction Battalions, or "Seabees," made a definitive mark on both Saipan and Tinian. Thousands of Seabees cleaned water cisterns, built shelters, dug latrines, and created hospitals in the wake of destructive battles. On Tinian, they brought electricity to the whole camp by repairing a Japanese electrical plant with salvaged materials. Army Nurse Corps service women were also sent to the Marianas to support the medical needs on the islands and casualties coming in from bombing missions over Japan. Both Seabees and Army Nurses received help in the form of civilian internees.¹¹

⁷ Gordon Rottman, *Saipan & Tinian 1944: Piercing the Japanese Empire* (Oxford, 2004), 88-89.

⁸ Don Farrell, *Atomic Bomb Island: Tinian, the Last Stage of the Manhattan Project, and the Dropping of the Atomic Bombs on Japan in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2021), 39. "[Tinian Landing Beaches, Ushi Point, and North Fields, Tinian Island](#)," National Park Service.

⁹ Farrell, *Atomic Bomb Island*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 578.

¹¹ Don Farrell, "[Camp Chulu: From Tragedy to Triumph](#)," University of Guam, Mangilao, Guam: Paper delivered at the 5th Annual Marianas History Conference (2021), 56-57, 60.

Civilian internment was a defining aspect of the Northern Mariana home front experience, which was fraught with challenges, appalling conditions in some cases, and restrictions on movement. After the Battle of Saipan, the American military rounded up the nearly 18,000 survivors—13,000 of whom were ethnically Japanese, the remainder being Korean laborers, Chamorros, and Carolinians. They were all placed in Camp Susupe.¹² Located in the vicinity of Lake Susupe in southwestern Saipan, Camp Susupe contained three segregated blocks surrounded by barbed wire: Chamorros and other Pacific Islanders in Area 1, Koreans in Area 2, and Japanese in Area 3. Due to its large population, Area 3 possessed an internal government with a Japanese mayor, clerks, food service staff, and police force.¹³ Shelters were rows of salvage-wood shacks and open-pit latrines, with roofs and walls made from corrugated metal taken from the old sugar mill, peppered with bullet holes.¹⁴ Chamorros in the camp resided in the sugar mill's housing area or duplexes constructed by the U.S. military.

The island of Tinian had its own camp, Camp Chulu (sometimes called Camp Churo), as a result of the Americans' victory in the Battle of Tinian. Camp Chulu housed more than 11,000 people, all Japanese and Korean. On the whole, this group reportedly enjoyed better conditions than Camp Susupe's inhabitants. Tinian had a larger contingent of Japanese-speaking American soldiers, leading to greater cultural considerations. Camp life was less segregated, and work was more democratic. Buildings were largely built of salvaged materials, but residents had greater freedom in building homes of their choice. The camp may have fared better because the Battle of Tinian demolished less island infrastructure.¹⁵

Life on the Home Front

Civilian and military personnel worked hard to make life on the home front more bearable. The U.S. rationed meat, fish, vegetables, beans, and 300,000 pounds of rice per month but malnutrition was rampant in the beginning.¹⁶ Later, some civilian internees were allowed to farm and fish outside of the camp confines, which supplemented the rations. Medical care fell short of demand, as refugees faced a range of serious health issues from dengue fever, dysentery, pneumonia, malnutrition, tetanus, intestinal parasites, and other ailments. Girls from Camp Chulu volunteered to work at the dispensary and hospital and received nursing training.¹⁷ Each day, civilian men were transported from the camp to work in newly erected warehouses, loading material for the bombing campaign against Japan, while women were taken to wash the GIs' laundry. Those who worked received wages from the U.S. Navy and many small businesses, including the production of handicraft to sell to GIs, popped up.¹⁸

Reinstating Catholic mass in Camp Susupe helped many Indigenous refugees navigate the loss of loved ones and their homes. About half of the civilians interned on the islands were children and many lived in camp orphanages. Within Area 3's school at Camp Susupe, Japanese children were only allowed to be taught in English in line with Americanization policies. Chamorro children received classes in English and Finu' Chamorro.¹⁹ Camp Chulu's school was overseen by two American

¹² "[Army & Navy - Occupation: At Camp Susupe](#)," *Time Magazine*, October 30, 1944.

¹³ John F. Embree and Arthur C. Huston, Jr., "Military Government in Saipan and Tinian: A Report on the Organization of Susupe and Churo," *Applied Anthropology* 5. no. 1 (Winter 1946), 5.

¹⁴ Norman Meller, *Saipan's Camp Susupe*, Occasional Paper 42, Center for Pacific Islands Studies, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1999), 3-4.

¹⁵ Embree and Huston, "Military Government in Saipan and Tinian," 11, 19, 22-30. Rottman, *Saipan & Tinian*, 11.

¹⁶ Embree and Huston, "Military Government in Saipan and Tinian," 7.

¹⁷ Farrell, "Camp Chulu," 59.

¹⁸ Meller, *Camp Susupe*, 5-6.

¹⁹ Embree and Huston, "Military Government in Saipan and Tinian," 11, 19.

graduates of the Navy's language school in Boulder, Colorado, who could fluently communicate with staff and students. The camp even had its own Girl and Boy Scout troops.

After the War

When World War II ended on September 2, 1945, the Indigenous civilians of the Northern Marianas were not released from internment. The U.S. government provided a range of reasons, including safety, negotiations with Japan, and the fate of the strategic island. In January 1946, the government began repatriating Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean civilians but continued to intern Chamorro and Carolinian civilians. It was not until the [Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands](#) made the U.S. a ruling power over the Northern Mariana Islands that Indigenous civilians were free to leave the camps. The day was July 4, 1946 and is known as Liberation Day.

After the Northern Mariana Islands became a trust territory in 1946, residents voted to establish closer ties with the U.S., achieving self-government in 1978. In 1986, the Northern Mariana Islands officially became a U.S. commonwealth, and residents were granted U.S. citizenship. While Tinian was depopulated after the war, families eventually returned and reestablished farming communities and local traditions. Saipan eventually transitioned to a tourism-based economy. Both islands have had to adapt to an ongoing U.S. military presence. Today, the people of Saipan and Tinian celebrate Liberation Day with great fanfare, a way to commemorate their release from the camps.

In the face of cultural touchstones like the “*Enola Gay*,” it is all too easy to forget that the affiliated Northern Mariana Islands were far more than launch sites, but places with their own history and culture that were deeply impacted by and important to World War II. The 932 Chamorro and Carolinian civilians who died in the battles of Saipan and Tinian were finally added in 2019 to a memorial at Saipan's American Memorial Park.²⁰ This acknowledgement represents a small step toward addressing the complexity of an American “home front” existing on top of a Native people's enduring homelands.

Places of World War II History

- **Municipality of Tinian & Aguiguan, Northern Mariana Islands:** The CNMI's designated WWII Heritage City is best known for the U.S. Navy-built North Field, one of the world's largest airfields at the time. The airbase was the assembly and launch site for the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. Today, many Tinian WWII sites are part of the [Tinian Landing Beaches, Ushi Point, and North Field National Historic Landmark District](#).
- **Camp Susupe:** A large American civilian internment camp on Saipan that housed over 18,000 civilians, including Japanese, Korean, Chamorros, and Carolinian populations. Conditions were originally crude, with structures built from salvaged materials. Today, you can learn more about this history at [War in the Pacific National Historical Park](#) and [American Memorial Park](#).

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²⁰ Erwin Encinares, “[932 Chamorros, Carolinians perished during WWII](#),” *SaipanTribune.com*, June 7, 2019. “[The List of Names at the Marianas Memorial and the Court of Honor](#),” American Memorial Park, National Park Service.