

On 7 December 1941, Japanese aircraft delivered the first shots of America's Pacific War. As it turned out, American aircraft would deliver the last. At the outset of the Pacific War, neither side possessed the capability to launch heavy bombers against their opponent's home territory and carrier-based aircraft became essential to early conquests. In their opening attack on America, Japan failed to destroy the carriers of America's Pacific Fleet which formed the nucleus of the massive U. S. Navy that by the dawn of 1945, would rule the Pacific. One surviving carrier, the Hornet, launched the Doolittle Raid in 1942 which did minor damage but dispelled any notions that Japan was safe from air attack. After Pearl Harbor, Japan attacked eastward in a three pronged offensive in an attempt to establish a chain of "Unsinkable Aircraft Carriers" - airfields on various Pacific Islands, each facilitating the conquest of the next island, to culminate with the capture of the American mainland. Japanese thrusts to the Aleutians and Midway Island were stopped by U. S. Naval aviators in June, 1942 in the battle of Midway but the southeastward thrust through the Solomon Islands continued unabated. The construction of a crucial Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal which threatened the shipping route between Hawaii and Australia, was the impetus for America's first ground action against the Japanese Army. At Guadalcanal, the tenacity of the United States Marine Corps secured America's first victory, denying Japan this crucial airfield. As America's war-production ramped up, our naval and aviation strength grew and new pilots trained by skilled veterans dealt severe losses to Japanese aviation in the Solomons from which Japan would never recover.

After the four-month battle on Guadalcanal, America retook Japanese conquests in the Pacific along two axes, one through the Solomons, New Guinea and the Philippines - MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Theater. The other, Halsey's Central Pacific Theater, ousted the Japanese from Tarawa through the Marshall Islands to the Marianas. Each battle of this two-prong advance established airfields to be used to support the next battle - the Japanese strategy in reverse. As 1945 dawned, America was in possession of the crucial heavy bomber bases on Guam, Tinian and Saipan in the Marianas which could launch a substantial bomber fleet to destroy war production on the Japanese mainland and reduce it's defenses for the coming invasion which the majority of military leaders deemed inevitable. Even the few who were aware of the goings-on at Los Alamos, felt invasion the only way to end the war. The strategic bombing of Japan would become even more urgent as the battles of Biak and Peleliu revealed new Japanese infantry tactics that would make each subsequent land battle deadlier. The expected death-toll for the invasion of Japan staggered most military minds and brought increasing political pressure to bring the Pacific War to a conclusion. It was hoped that vast fleets of heavy bombers, pounding Japan unceasingly, might force them to capitulate without invasion.

In 1945, Curtis LeMay was ready to launch his bombers against Japan. American industry gave him a giant force of B-29 bombers and the sacrifice of American Marines and Soldiers gave him airfields in the Marianas, well in range of Tokyo. Even before the mass-bombings began it was anticipated that each mission would result in significant numbers of aircraft damaged by interceptors and anti-aircraft fire or incurring mechanical failures. With 1,600 miles of ocean separating the Marianas from Japan, crews of damaged B-29's had no emergency field in American hands - few options were available to crippled aircraft beyond ditching at sea. As early as June, 1944, it was decided that an emergency field, nearer to Japan was crucial to the bombing effort. At the precise geographical midpoint between Guam and Japan lie the Volcano Islands. Mountainous Chichi Jima had an early warning radar station which made it a regular target for naval aviators like George H. W. Bush who was fortunate to have been rescued after being shot down there on 2 September 1944. A sister island, Sulfur Island - Iwo Jima in Japanese - sported two ready-made airfields and a third under construction. Thus, as fighting on the Marianas still raged, Iwo Jima had been identified as a crucial American objective to provide an alternate landing field for damaged bombers and a forward base for fighter escort over Japan.

Japan's ace pilot, Saburo Sakai had recovered from grievous wounds suffered during the battle of the Solomons and was stationed on Iwo Jima during the battles of the Marianas. His superior combat skills had not been dulled despite the loss of one eye and he took on an entire squadron of American Hellcats, surviving unscathed. Sakai participated in three major air battles launched from Iwo Jima and was credited with 5 victories, though these were Pyrrhic in nature as 70 percent of Iwo Jima's aircraft were destroyed in these actions. Sakai, and any Japanese officer that could read a map, knew the crucial strategic significance of Iwo Jima and was dumbfounded when America failed to attack the island in Summer, 1944 after the fall of the Marianas. He wrote after the war that during the Marianas battles, only a small garrison defended Iwo Jima and that a single battalion of U. S. Marines could have captured it in two weeks - if the U. S. Navy had not been diverted south to support MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines. Sakai, like many American officers, considered the Philippines an objective of dubious military value - in Sakai's opinion, America's greatest mistake of the war.

Japanese military brass were also aware of the significance of Sulphur Island and dispatched a superb commander, LTG Tadamichi Kuribayashi to organize the defense of the island while the U. S. Navy and Army were occupied with taking the Philippines. Kuribayashi had been a Japanese military attache to the United States and traveled the country widely. Here he learned American culture and sensitivities and that the American public had little tolerance for mass-casualties. It has been suggested that the Iwo Jima command, considered to be a suicide mission, was punishment for Kuribayashi's known opposition to war with America. Although Kuribayashi was painfully aware that Tarawa, Saipan, Biak and Peleliu were taken despite increasingly grievous American casualty rates, he still set out to prepare a defense that would inflict the maximum number of casualties on the American invaders, in hopes that we would abandon the conquest of Iwo as not worth the loss of life required to take it. It is believed that Kuribayashi and the over 20,000 man garrison he would eventually command knew that the defense of Iwo Jima would result, as it did, in their own deaths. None however, would shirk their duties. Although the capture of Iwo Jima resulted in nearly the entire garrison killed in action, the U. S. Marine Corps who would be tasked to take the island, would suffer more casualties than the Japanese - this because "the Japanese were not ON Iwo Jima, they were IN Iwo Jima."

Kuribayashi honed his men to a fearless defensive force, employing the newer and more effective doctrine perfected on Biak and Peleliu, never to retreat, never leave their fighting positions and never cede a single inch of territory as long they were alive. Kuribayashi forbade the Banzai Charge proven counterproductive in previous actions. He also ordered the landing beaches ceded to the first waves and would wait nearly one hour before opening fire with artillery and machine guns for maximum effectiveness against a beach crowded with marines and equipment.

American reconnaissance photos revealed few structures and even fewer fighting positions on Iwo which gave American planners a false bravado that the Island would fall rapidly. This was part of Kuribayashi's plan. The general brought in civil and mining engineers to fashion a subterranean fortress beneath the island's surface. Comprising up to 8 levels, a sprawling tunnel complex offered billets, messing facilities, storage, a 400 bed hospital and access to countless mutually-supporting fighting positions. Particularly concentrated in the hilly north and central Iwo Jima, machine gun nests, with interlocking fields of fire and numerous protected mortar and artillery emplacements were interconnected by the tunnels so that fallen defenders could be rapidly replaced. From Iwo's highest peak, Mt. Suribachi at the island's southern tip, artillery spotters could observe the entire island and direct all artillery fire. LTG Kuribayashi's defensive preparation was in place and operational as the American fleet sailed for Iwo Jima in February of 1945. Aboard these ships, the battle-ready marines of the V Amphibious Corps hoped that this barren, two-mile island was as lightly defended as they were led to believe. The veterans among them weren't buying it.