

For months before the 19 February 1945 landings, air raids pounded Iwo Jima. Reconnaissance revealed numerous prepared fighting positions but few structures could be discerned, leaving American planners with the impression that the island had a small garrison and Iwo Jima's defense would be cracked easily. Nothing was known about the vast subterranean fortifications which concealed 21,000 Japanese defenders. Despite the impressive preparations put in place before the invasion, the Japanese knew that Iwo Jima was on its own - no reinforcements, no naval or air support was forthcoming. This American Baby-Boomer cannot hope to imagine what thoughts were held by the individual Japanese soldier as the American fleet appeared offshore. Japanese soldiers called themselves ISSEN-GORIN - one yen, five rin, the postage on the card that they received notifying them that they were drafted. Each knew his duty was to destroy 10 American invaders before his own life was inevitably forfeited. Each knew, that Iwo Jima was to be their grave. Many were given a belt containing 1,000 stitches by a wife or mother who stood in the street and asked other women to place a stitch in the belt - an ancient good luck charm for Japanese warriors. The ISSEN-GORIN strapped on their 1,000 stitch belts, manned their fighting positions - and prepared to die in battle.

General Holland M. Smith, USMC, commanding the amphibious force tasked to take Iwo Jima requested the Navy provide him with 10 days preparatory bombardment. Three days were offered because the Naval Task Force supporting the Marines was eager for their next mission - a highly visible carrier raid on the Japanese Home Islands. Even worse for the Marines, the shelling did not last the entirety of the three days. Naval procedure required every target on shore to be spotted by an observer from the warships. Poor visibility and bad weather just prior to the landings made it difficult for observers to identify targets and shelling was limited to only portions of the allotted three days.

On 19 February, the U. S. Marines became the first invaders to touch Japanese Soil in its 3,000 year history - Iwo Jima itself was part of Tokyo and governed by its mayor. Little defensive fire met the marines initially - the "Sands of Iwo Jima" themselves were the heaviest resistance faced. A fifteen foot wall of loose, black volcanic sand made it nearly impossible for the first waves of marines to exit the beach - tracked and wheeled vehicles were stopped until exit lanes could be excavated. Marines and their gear piled up on the beach and made slow inland progress. One hour after the first marines landed, in accordance with General Tadamichi Kuribayashi's defensive plan, the Japanese opened fire.

The most accomplished war correspondents of the day were astonished to the point of being unable to find the words to describe the volume of incoming enemy fire coming when the Japanese opened up. Marines had walked right over concealed firing positions which popped open behind them exposing them to machine gun fire from all points of the compass. Carefully registered artillery and mortar shells fell among the marines who were unable to dig foxholes in the loose sand. Heavy casualties initially ensued as the marines emerged from their initial shock and rallied to methodically reduce Japanese positions with grenades and flame-throwers. As soon as a position was cleared, other Japanese reoccupied it through the tunnels, requiring that each opening be sealed shut with explosives. The Japanese fought day and night, no marine position was safe from infiltration. The marines employed the merciless, methodical extermination of the enemy that they learned on Peleliu.

Landing at the southernmost of the invasion beaches, practically at the base of Mount Suribachi, was the Fifth Marine Division's 28th Marine Regiment, who's job it was to pivot left and take Suribachi, Iwo Jima's highest ground. For the first five days of battle, the 28th marines advanced inch by inch against vicious Japanese resistance, sustaining heavy casualties as each position was cleared. On 23 February, the 28th Marines had crossed the Island at its narrowest point at the base of Suribachi, effectively cutting the mountain off. Recognizing the futility of further fighting, the few remaining Japanese defenders of Suribachi took their own lives with grenades. The marines nearby heard the

explosions from inside the mountain but did not know what was happening. Company E of the Second Battalion, 28th Marines was ordered to take a patrol up the mountain to set up an observation post. Lt. Schrier, commanding the patrol was given a flag to erect “if they made it to the top.” The patrol encountered no resistance climbing the north face of Suribachi. A short fire fight erupted on reaching the summit, several Japanese were dispatched. The marines set up their observation post and then put up the flag using a water pipe they found. Moments later, cheers from the perimeter below the mountain could be heard and as word spread, all eyes on the island and offshore focused on the small flag atop Suribachi. Combat photographer Louis R. Lowery posed a photo of the marines who raised the flag but this photo would not be seen until 1947. For a brief moment, marines on Iwo cheered and ship horns sounded - then it was back to the business of killing the enemy – and being killed.

When Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal landed on Iwo that day, he saw the flag and exclaimed, “I want that flag,” convinced that the flag would ensure funding for the USMC for 500 years. Col. Chandler Johnson of the 2nd battalion, hearing about Forrestal’s request, would have no part of it. According to Johnson, that flag was the property of the battalion and Forrestal wasn’t going to get it. He sent a second patrol up the mountain to run telephone wire for the new observation post (WWII radios were unreliable, field phones worked best.) With them, he sent his runner with a larger flag (which was salvaged from a ship sunk at Pearl Harbor) to replace the original for safekeeping. Earlier that day, AP photograher Joe Rosenthal fell in the drink as he returned to Iwo, drenching his camera. Having missed the actual flag-raising, he tagged along with this second patrol, in order to get some shots of Iwo from the heights of Suribachi. So Rosenthal, Marine Combat Motion Picture Cameraman Bill Genaust, the runner with the replacement flag, a Pima Indian, farmers from Tennessee and Texas and an immigrant sergeant among other marines exhausted from 5 days of intense fighting, climbed Mount Suribachi a few hours after the flag was raised and wired in their phones.

Then they informed LT Shrier about the replacement flag and Shrier ordered original team that put it up 3 hours earlier to take it down – I’m sure their reaction was punctuated with some classic Marine language. Another heavy length of pipe was rigged with the larger flag. Moments later, six members of the second patrol joined together in typical marine teamwork and raised the second flag and secured it into place. That’s all that happened... Except that Bill Genaust noticed the flag being replaced and began filming. Joe Rosenthal, standing next to Genaust, was photographing the island when Genaust told him about the second flag going up. Joe spun around and snapped a picture without aiming through the viewfinder – it happened that quickly. The resulting exposure was 1/400th of a second of the 5th day of 6 weeks of intense carnage. It documented 4 seconds of labor by 6 marines on a work-detail and would gain immortality. “The Photograph” soon reinvigorated an America tired of war, tired of sacrifice and dubious of victory. More about “The Photograph” in Part III.

On Iwo, the flag raising faded from memory and none of the marines noticed the second flag going up – the Combat Action Report for the day mentions the flag-raising but not the replacement. Rosenthal’s film was flown to Guam and processed – fortunately “The Photograph” was not among the exposures ruined when his camera fell into the water. It was distributed to Stateside newspapers that soon began to spin epic yarns to accompany it – few of which were true. What was true was that worst of the fighting occurred in the four weeks after Suribachi fell, in central and northern Iwo Jima.

As “The Photograph” spawned a new legend, another legend ended on Iwo Jima. After Raritan NJ’s John Basilone won the medal of honor on Guadalcanal, the Marine Corps sent him home to sell war bonds. Frustrated after a year of being hailed the “Hero of Guadalcanal,” Basilone wanted to get back in the war. The Corps granted his wish. Basilone trained marines bound for Iwo, then re-enlisted to lead them in combat. GySgt John Basilone USMC was killed in action on the first day of battle.