

From 19 February to 28 March 1945, 70,000 United States Marines fought on Iwo Jima. Supporting each marine was over 1,300 pounds of equipment. Not only firearms, ammunition and fuel but the more mundane requirements of life and death: Plasma, holy water, socks, typewriters, toilet paper and dog food. Thirty thousand gallons of water, 100 million cigarettes and enough food, according to James Bradley's book, to feed Atlanta for a month. Fortunes were being made selling this equipment to the military but unknown to the men fighting in the Pacific and European theaters, the Treasury Department was beginning fear running out of funds to continue paying for the war. The well was beginning to run dry and no rain was in sight. The Roosevelt administration paid for World War II, not through the confiscation of money in the form of new taxes but by asking Americans to loan their life savings to the Treasury by voluntarily purchasing War Bonds. Each serviceman had \$6.25 deducted from his pay monthly, \$18.75 bought one \$25 bond every three months. Huge bond drives featuring Hollywood stars persuaded civilians to "help our boys" through the purchase of war bonds. By 1945 however, Americans had lost the sense of urgency and bond sales softened. The Treasury needed tens of billions in the next bond drive because the previous 3 together didn't raise the amount needed.

Americans were tiring of rationing and bond drives and becoming more and more sensitive to the number of Gold Stars appearing in windows all over the country. Eighteen months earlier, the American public was shocked by the horrible loss of life in 4 days of fighting on Tarawa. The first week of fighting on Iwo Jima had already surpassed that toll. As the unvarnished story of the carnage on Iwo Jima began appearing in the papers, our political leaders feared that America's goal to completely crush Japan might have to be reevaluated under public pressure – precisely what General Kuribayashi was sacrificing his entire garrison to accomplish. One photo was about to change all that.

Although other photos on Joe Rosenthal's waterlogged roll of film were ruined, "The Photograph" survived and was selected for the AP Wire service which sent it to newspapers throughout the country. However, no information as to what the photo depicted accompanied it. Americans picked up their papers on Sunday, 25 February 1945 and were astonished by the image of six marines struggling to raise the flag atop Iwo Jima. "The Photo" was so dramatic that editors simply invented their own fictitious stories about it. The six flag-raisers fought a vicious battle up the slopes of Suribachi (they walked up unopposed) and erected the flag under furious fire (the defenders of Suribachi had ceased resistance and begun killing themselves.) "The Photo" showed the battle won, although 5 weeks of intense fighting remained. The fiction "The Photo" generated was about to be weaponized.

To the American public who only knew what they read in the papers, "The Photograph" represented victory on Iwo Jima and suggested ultimate victory over Japan. They drew hope from it, that with a bit more sacrifice, a bit more hard work, we could do it. War plant workers like Norma Jean Baker (her later stage-name, Marilyn Monroe) resolved to work harder and ordinary Americans were ready to open their pockets – if we asked. The Treasury Department asked. They directed the Marine Corps to bring the marines in the picture to Washington to be the lead attraction for the next major war bond drive. The six men in the photo ran a phone line up the mountain and erected a replacement flag so the original could be placed in the Battalion's safe. Now they were to be paraded before the American public as the "Heroes of Iwo Jima" to persuade Americans to pay for the war. But who were they?

Nobody remembered the second flag going up and "The Photo" didn't show faces. Of the names that came up, 3 were dead. Of the survivors, only Ira Hayes, the Pima Indian could be recognized. We now know that the Navy Corpsman, PM2 John Bradley and PFC Rene Gagnon, who joined Hayes on the bond tour were substituting for another two who preferred anonymity. Few veterans of Iwo Jima ever spoke of the carnage after the war and none considered themselves "heroes." Now the Treasury Department wanted three "Heroes of Iwo Jima" to tour the country to raise money just as they had done

with John Basilone. Although Basilone died on Iwo Jima escaping the publicity he loathed, many marines were angered about the “fringe benefits” he enjoyed on the bond tour (and with actress Virginia Grey) just for “doing what everybody did on the Canal.” After what the actual flag-raisers endured on Iwo Jima, they reserved the term “hero” only for those who died. Still, two “live bodies” were needed and in my opinion, Gagnon and Bradley were best suited for the role and got tagged. Helping marines came naturally to Bradley who selflessly aided dozens of wounded in his platoon. He won the Navy Cross rescuing a wounded marine under intense fire and later suffered severe shrapnel wounds aiding another. Gagnon, the runner who carried the replacement flag up the mountain, hoped the bond drive publicity would result in gainful employment after the war.

At great cost to their post-war lives, the 3 “Flag Raisers” performed their fiction brilliantly, raising a fortune in war bond sales while protecting the two that wished to remain anonymous. Ira Hayes could not cope with the publicity and eventually succumbed to alcoholism. Rene Gagnon never got a job offer and died a janitor. John Bradley raised his family shunning publicity, tortured by nightmares of the maimed marines he aided and the memory of finding the mutilated body of his best friend in a cave - the Japanese had placed his severed penis in his mouth. It is the ultimate irony of Iwo Jima that Joe Rosenthal’s hastily composed picture restored America’s faith in victory through the fiction that was created to explain what it represented. Because the war bond tour based on “The Photograph” raised enough cash to continue the war, it can be argued that three men, a photo and a tall tale, contributed as much to the defeat of Japan as any weapon YET to be used in the Pacific War.

The actual heroes of Iwo Jima, who appeared in “The Photograph” were Sgt Mike Strank 25, Franklin Borough PA (born in Czechoslovakia,) KIA by friendly fire 1 March 1945. CPL Harlon Block 20, Weslaco TX, KIA by machine gun fire 1 March 1945. PFC Franklin Sousley 19, Hill Top KY, KIA by a sniper on 21 March 1945 – after Iwo Jima was declared secure. They rest in eternal honor with nearly 7,000 other marines killed in action in the horrific battle. 16,000 marines were wounded in the campaign making it the only battle in which American casualties exceeded Japanese losses. 34 medals of honor were awarded, the most of any single battle of the war – testament to its ferocity.

The American public and the 7,000 Gold Star Mothers of Iwo Jima would soon learn that the sacrifice of their sons was indeed necessary. In early March, as the battle still raged in the killing grounds in the hills north of Motoyama Airfield, a crippled B-29 called, “Dinah Might” made the first of 2500 emergency landings on Iwo Jima. By war’s end, Iwo Jima’s emergency field saved the lives of some 27,000 airmen.

The American victory on Iwo Jima eliminated nearly the entire Japanese garrison, approximately 22,000 Japanese perished. The last surviving Japanese emerged from the tunnels and surrendered in 1949. General Tadamichi Kuribayashi committed suicide by leading a final Banzai charge – his body was never found. Also never found was combat cameraman SGT William Genaust USMC who stood next to Joe Rosenthal and took the color movie film of the flag replacement. Genaust, like all marines, was first a rifleman and put down his camera to help clear a cave. He entered the cave to “mop up” but never emerged, later the cave entrance was sealed shut with explosives, the location was forgotten.

The last time the three “Flag Raisers” of the bond tour got together was the dedication of the Marine Corps Memorial on 10 November 1954. Felix de Weldon’s moving sculpture of Rosenthal’s image and Horace W. Peaslee’s base immortalize the Iwo Jima victory and the undying dedication of all who earn the Globe and Anchor of the U. S. Marine Corps. On 10 March 1945, some 100,000 citizens of Tokyo died in a horrific fire raid – more than would be killed by the A-Bombs. But Japan, it’s people starving, it’s machines lacking fuel, with some of it’s soil already occupied, still believed victory was at hand.