



THE IWO JIMA MEMORIAL

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The largest bronze statue ever made occupies a serene knoll across the Potomac, almost directly in line with the Capitol Mall. This is the Marine Corps War Memorial, more commonly known as the “Iwo Jima Memorial” to everyone around Washington. It commemorates the combat valor of the U.S. Marine Corps in our nation’s history. Few realize that the Marine Corps is actually a part of the Department of the Navy, intended as the Nation’s premier amphibious-capable attack force. Marines used to be billeted aboard ships to provide for their defense, and Marines always manned the forward starboard gun of every U.S. capital ship, up through re-commissioning of the Iowa Class battleships in the late 1980s (this practice was discontinued in 1989).

The tiny volcanic island of Iwo Jima lies a little over 650 miles southeast of Japan, about halfway between Tokyo and the American airfields on Guam, Saipan and Tinian in the Mariana Islands. Prior to World War II, the largest island, Guam, was a U.S. protectorate, and the Navy had a communications station there. Nearby Saipan and Tinian were Japanese colonies (as were Korea and Taiwan). American forces invaded the Marianas in mid 1944 and immediately began construction of what came to be the world’s largest aerodrome for the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers of the U.S. 20th Air Force. The B-29s had previously been stationed in mainland China, but supplying them with adequate fuel was a logistic nightmare. The Marianas were seized to stage airborne strategic bombing of the Japanese homeland, about 1,500 miles distant. The B-29 was the only aircraft then in existence which had pressurized cabins, a cruising

altitude of 28,000 feet, and could deliver bombs to targets with a 3,000+ miles roundtrip. The B-29s began flying missions to Japan, referred to by the crews as “*The Empire.*”



The Boeing B-29 Superfortress represented a quantum leap in technology over other combat aircraft in the Second World War, and was the only aircraft capable of delivering an atomic weapon from any meaningful distance when the war ended.

The B-29 was a quantum leap in technology for its time, weighing 140,000 pounds carrying 16,000 pound bomb load with a combat radius of 2,050 miles. It was powered by the world’s largest reciprocating engines, Wright R-3350 Cyclones. Two radial rings of nine cylinders each displaced a total of 3,350 cubic inches per engine and weighing 2,800 pounds. The B-29 was powered by four of these behemoths, which carried 6,988 gallons of high octane aviation fuel (9,548 gallons using ferry tanks in one of the bomb bays) . The engines were plagued by teething problems and tended to catch fire, causing a 35% failure rate during 1944. More B-29s were lost to engine failure than to enemy action. During late 1944 2000 design changes were made to the troubled engines, 500 of which required retooling.

By early 1945 the teething problems of the B-29 were being worked out and the Americans were assembling massive raids on Japan, with 300 to 900 B-29s per raid. For the airmen flying the 12 to 16 hour missions, there was nowhere between their home bases and Japan to drop down and land, should the slightest of problems arise. Air-sea rescue operations were being overtaxed covering the 1,500+ mile distance between Tokyo and Guam/Saipan/Tinian.

Only one island capable of supporting an all-weather airfield lay in the bomber’s path: Iwo Jima. It was decided to take the island to build an emergency divert airfield as well as bases for protective fighter aircraft, which using drop tanks, could be used to escort the bombers over Japan. The attack was to fall upon units of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions, under the overall command of Marine Lt. General Holland Smith. It would be the costliest battle in the history of the Marine Corps.

The attack on Iwo Jima commenced at dawn on February 19, 1945. 30,000 men of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions landed on a linear strand of beach on the island's southeast side. Unlike previous American invasions in the Pacific, our attack would not be a surprise. It was preceded by 10 weeks of round-the-clock bombardment by aircraft and three days by the Navy. The Marines had requested 13 days of pre-invasion bombardment by the Navy, but this was denied because of MacArthur's continuing need for shore bombardment in his Philippine campaign, which was going slower than hoped.

The American attack plan assumed that such a devastating softening up of the Japanese positions would cripple their defensive network and injure enemy morale to the point of sheer despondency, because they knew their cause was hopeless against such overwhelming odds. The Americans would take the island in three days, using a superior force of 27,000 Marines against the Japanese garrison guessed to be around 7,000 instead of the actual 22,000 that were actually there, well concealed. The Americans believed that casualties would be heavy, with as many as 2500 killed and possibly 9500 wounded. The 3rd Marine Division would be held in reserve, just in case the Japanese succeeded in reinforcing their garrison. It was a colossal intelligence gaffe, based solely on aerial photo interpretation.

What the Americans didn't appreciate was that the entirety of the volcanic archipelago had been honeycombed with hardened underground entrenchments, which were immune from the 10 weeks of near constant bombardment. Within a maze of bunkers tunnels the Japanese had artillery and mortar pieces safely covered which could be brought forward to specially camouflaged firing ports when the need arose. Their artillery spotters were hidden in the heights with specially configured maps which allowed them to call in accurate artillery fire.

The initial Japanese defensive strategy centered on the high backshore cliff in soft volcanic cinder and pumice. They realized that fully-laden landings troops would have a difficult time ascending this steep slope, so they developed a plan that would encourage as many Marines as possible to crowd the beachhead before calling down artillery fire on them.

When the Marines finally landed they met no resistance on the beaches. Just as the Japanese had hoped, the beachhead became clogged along the backshore slope as the Marines found it difficult to ascend the mushy cliffs. The few natural breaks in slope (ravines) became bottlenecked with burning Amtracs, which fell victim to an array of well-placed antitank mines. The Americans waited for a Japanese counter-attack that never materialized. At 9:15 AM the Japanese opened up with a furious mortar barrage which caught the Marines milling about the beachhead with nowhere to hide. The American casualties were 2,400 men the first day. The plan for taking Iwo Jima in three days seemed to be evaporating before everyone's eyes.

At the southern tip of the island was Mt. Suribachi, the volcano responsible for Iwo Jima, about 600 vertical feet above the Marines. It afforded a commanding view of the

American beachhead for Japanese artillery spotters, who could call in fire on troop or equipment concentrations with devastating effect. It soon became apparent that Mt. Surabachi had to be neutralized or the Marines would never get off the beach. On the morning of D+5 (February 24th) the attack on Surabachi commenced. The easiest way up Suribachi was along its northeast flank, and in the early morning hours this task was given to Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment. The Company's executive



This image by Leatherneck magazine photographer Lou Lowery shows the first flag planted atop Mt. Surabachi around 10 AM by members of Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment. This flag measured 28 by 54 inches. Sergeant Henry O. Hansen is the soldier in the foreground, holding the M-1 carbine. Of the 40-man patrol led by First Lieutenant Harold G. Schrier that morning, thirty-six were killed or wounded in later fighting, including Sgt. Hansen and Lt. Schrier.

officer was First Lieutenant Harold G. Schrier. He was given a small American flag to place on the summit by the battalion commander, Lt. Colonel Chandler W. Johnson (killed on March 2nd). Neither man imagined the history which would soon be made.

Easy Company's ascent of the crater was difficult, mostly on hands and knees, crawling. But, the Japanese did not offer stiff resistance until the Marines reached the crater's crest, at which time they had to systematically be flushed out of their bunkers. The Marines began reaching Suribachi's crest around 10 AM. Members of Schrier's patrol found a discarded pipe and attached the small flag to it, then raised it at 10:20. This first raising was documented by Leatherneck Magazine photographer, Sergeant Lou Lowery. A few

minutes later an enraged Japanese officer emerged from his dugout and tried to cut down the flag with his Samauri sword.

The appearance of the American flag atop Suribachi's barren summit was a tremendous morale booster to the beleaguered troops. At the moment the flag appeared, a landing craft carrying General Smith and Navy Secretary James Forrestal was coming ashore to inspect the stalled beachhead. The unexpected sight of the small American flag on the peak amidst the gunfire and smoke caused great emotions to flow. Forrestal summed up his thoughts by stating "*the raising of the flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years*". Like Washington Crossing the Delaware, it was soon to become an immortal image of American History.

Within the hour additional Marines began moving up Surabachi's slope, one of whom was given a larger 4 x 8 foot flag that had been rushed ashore from one of the landing ships who witnessed the first flag raising, LST-779. As these reinforcements moved up the slope they were accompanied by three photographers.

Upon reaching the summit each of the photographers shot images of the smaller flag placed by Easy Company, including a young near-sighted Associated Press photographer from San Francisco named Joe Rosenthal. As Rosenthal scrambled up the steep slope with the team carrying the "second flag", Sgt. Lowery was on his way down, and he informed Rosenthal that he had already taken photos of the flag being raised. Nevertheless, Rosenthal trudged on.

Once they ascended the summit, the larger flag was attached to a longer piece of pipe, and the smaller flag pole was lowered. Rosenthal busied himself stacking rocks to build a pedestal so he could be in position to photograph the second flag raising from a near-equal elevation. His poor eyesight prevented him from being able to accurately focus the camera, instead he just guessed at the distance and dialed it into the lens of his Speed Graphic camera. Around 2 PM five Marines and a Navy corpsman of Easy Company re-staged the original flag raising with the larger flag and pole. This time newsreel cameras rolled and Rosenthal snapped a few new shots of the larger flag being raised.



The most famous photo of World War II was taken by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal on Mt. Surabachi's summit around 2 PM on February 24, 1945. This was the second flag raising, using a larger 56 by 96 inch American flag. The image seemed to convey the teamwork and sacrifice of so many American soldiers, actively engaged in combat on three continents and across the Pacific. Of the six soldiers, five were Marines and one was a Navy corpsman. Three of the six died in combat in the ensuing days.

When his film was processed aboard ship that evening Rosenthal was as shocked as everyone else when one of the frames revealed a dramatic action-filled photo that conveyed the spirit of triumph in a way that was almost ethereal. In the ensuing days, the photo was carried on more newspaper front pages than any news photo in history up to that point. It stirred a sense of pride in Americans everywhere, who had been absorbed in the suffering appurtenant to a world war for more than three years since the attack on Pearl Harbor. The photo came to epitomize the gallantry of the American fighting man.



A less known photo shot by Joe Rosenthal around 2:50 PM shows some other Marines lowering the first, smaller flag while the larger one was being anchored in place (seen in the background).

The Iwo Jima battle droned on for 6 weeks and an additional 40,000 Marines and sailors (mostly Seabees) were deployed before the island was declared secure on March 21st. It was the first conflict in the Pacific where many of the Marines never saw a Japanese the entire time they were engaged in combat. This is because the Japanese strategy focused on effective cover and concealment, entrenching themselves within 16 miles of tunnels, excavated into resistant volcanic rock. The Japanese also employed reverse slope defensive measures, whereby advancing enemy forces were allowed to pass over and through concealed entrenchments on the far side of an advancing force, out of view of artillery spotters. The advancing force's attention was usually drawn to their front, leaving rear areas unguarded and easy prey for isolated ambushed and attacks, especially at night under cover of darkness. Japanese soldiers increased the impact of these tactics by capturing sleeping Marines and taking them back down into their bunkers where they could be mercilessly tortured, with the screams carrying to the sleeping Marines up on the ground via small diameter vent holes. The Marine's worst nightmare was to simply be picked off by an unknown sniper while waiting on the beach to evacuate. Some 600 were killed by sniper bullets, most from unseen sources.



One of the first B-29s to make emergency landing on Iwo Jima was Flak Alley Sally, shown here on Motoyama Field on March 17, 1945.

The first B-29s began making emergency landings as early as March 4th. Only 1,083 Japanese prisoners were taken captive, out of the garrison of 22,000. It cost the Marines 19,217 wounded, and 6,821 dead, nearly a third of all the Marines killed in the Pacific War. Three of the six men who raised the second flag atop Mt. Surabachi died in the fighting. It was the highest American casualty rate of any combat engagement in the 20th Century (41% of the men engaged were either killed or wounded). The unit which raised both flags on Mt. Surabachi (E Co./2 Bn/28th Marine Regiment) had 84% casualties. 27 Medals of Honor were awarded, one quarter of all awarded to Marines during World War II (and more than were awarded to sailors or marines in any other battle in American history).

Pundits have criticized the taking of Iwo Jima because it was the only battle where the American casualties (28,686 killed, wounded and battle fatigued) outnumbered the Japanese (21,000 killed), although the comparison in actual deaths was 6,821 American versus 21,000 Japanese. They assert that Iwo Jima was not worth the cost. This charge is balanced by the fact that 2,400 B-29s diverted to Iwo Jima to avoid ditching in the ocean, not to mention the protective fighters that were based there. Each B-29 carried a crew of 10 men. Of immeasurable advantage was the island's support of fighter aircraft over Japan, to protect our bombers and the proximity of this way point for staging air-sea rescue operations for those crews who were obliged to ditch or bail out over the 1,500 to 2,000 miles of ocean between Japanese targets and our bomber bases in the Marianas.



Commemorative stamp (left), 7th War Bond campaign poster (middle), and Hollywood movie bill (right) all made use of Rosenthal's dramatic image in 1945.

Rosenthal's photo was used as a poster for a War Loan campaign, placed on a postage stamp commemorating the Marines in 1945, and many other purposes. Every Marine or Army soldier who took the slightest rise in the Okinawa campaign a few months later seemed to be carrying an American flag, bent on raising it at every opportunity (there were over 200 such "flag raisings" recorded on Okinawa).

The image of gallant Marines raising the flag on Mt. Suribachi became the model for the magnificent bronze statue now seen in Rosslyn, at the edge of the Arlington National Cemetery (at Arlington Boulevard and North Meade St.). The statue was unveiled in 1954. The height of the original men was multiplied by five, to 32 feet, while the height of the flag pole was increased to 60 feet. The figures are the largest bronze castings in the world.

The memorial is my personal favorite in Washington, D.C. because I began my military career as a Marine, working my way up through the ranks to that coveted position of platoon leader (2nd Lieutenant). Marines are inculcated in a tradition of honor and sacrifice. They are trained to be selfless in giving up their lives to save others, whenever the need arises. They are trained to be morally clean. No greater epitaph can be given a Marine than to have died bravely to save a comrade. There are no stars in the Marine Corps, only team players.

The men of this mighty statue are nameless, they represent the courage of countless young Americans who have been asked to risk their lives by our Nation's leaders in the unending struggle to preserve world peace. There is nothing a Nation can really do to compensate the loved ones for the death of a son, husband, or father; but that Nation can express their gratitude and give honor to its fallen heroes.



Joe Rosenthal being interviewed about the Iwo Jima flag raising in the early 1990s.

In mid-October 1986 I attended San Francisco's annual Fleet Week Luncheon at the Marines Memorial Auditorium. An elderly gentleman sitting at my table introduced himself as Joe, a retired news photographer for the San Francisco Chronicle who lived by himself in an apartment near Golden Gate Park. He was a short, quiet, and humble fellow, not given to braggadocio or war stories, and seemed to enjoy just being there hearing the various tales those of us in uniform had to offer about our latest exploits. After lunch the emcee introduced a number of guests and dropped the name Joe Rosenthal, the man who took the famous photo of the Marines raising the flag on the Iwo Jima back in 1945. Mr. Rosenthal sheepishly rose as the room exploded in a crescendo of clapping, then, just as quickly, sat back down and finished his modest desert. As soon as he was seated the young officers at our table began asking questions. Mr. Rosenthal summed up his famous image by stating "I was in the right place, at the right time, and I just got lucky. You shoot enough pictures, sometimes you're gonna catch the essence of a moment in time, even at 1/400th of a second." I thought to myself, wow, he's just an everyday guy like you or me. Joe Rosenthal's place in the history of photo journalism is nothing short of immortal.