

IWO JIMA

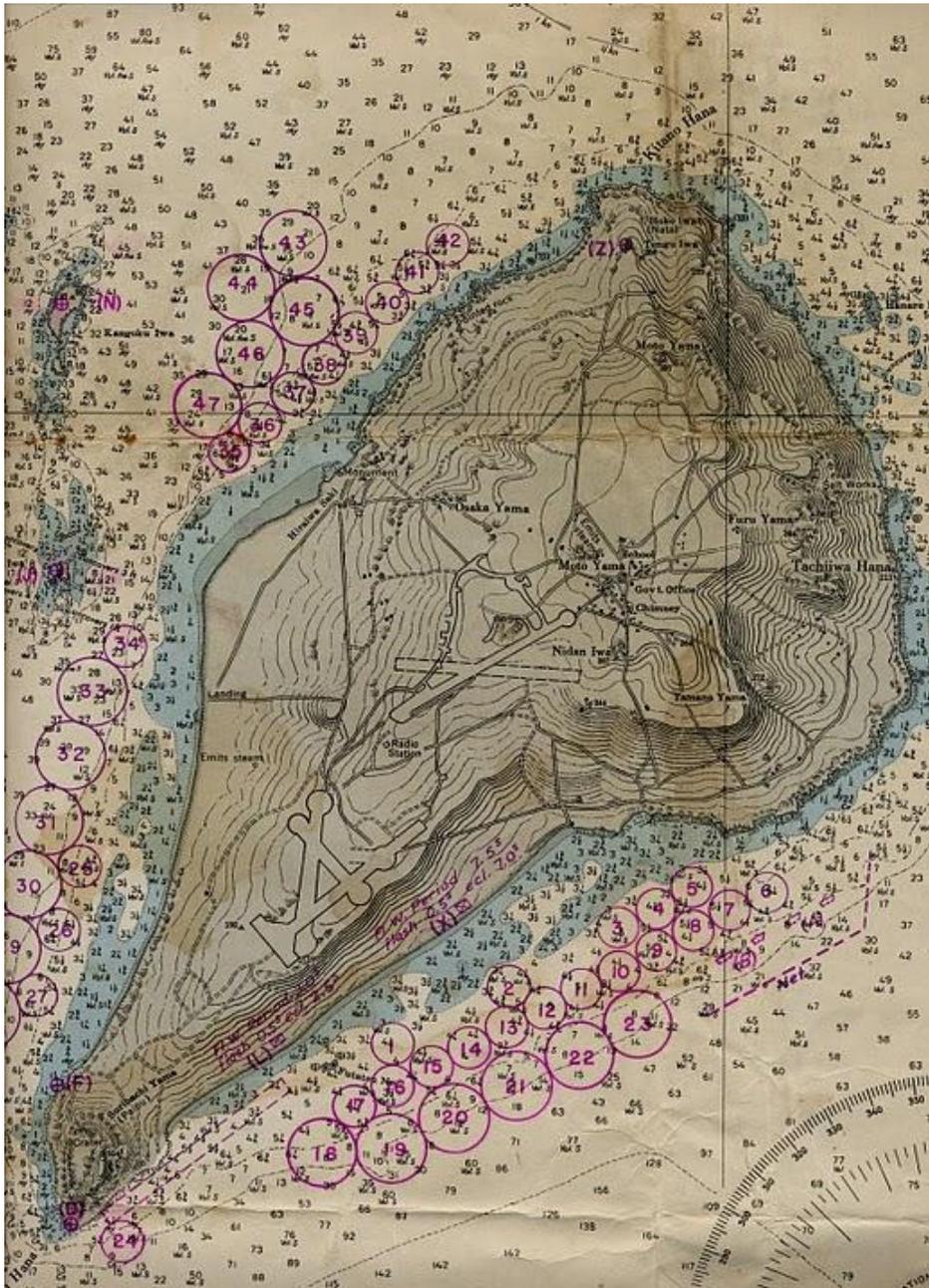
The costliest battle in American history

J. David Rogers



The Marine Corps War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Frontpiece



The invasion map of Iwo Jima, prepared in February 1945. The purple circles are anchorages for supporting vessels, such as Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) (smaller circles) and amphibious assault ships (larger circles). Iwo Jima has a land area of just under eight square miles and supported two Japanese airfields. Iwo is one of 30 Japanese islands making up the Bonin volcanic archipelago, which extend in a southerly alignment about 650 miles from Tokyo. The highest point is the volcanic cinder cone of Mt. Surabachi at the island's southwestern tip, which rises 528 feet above the sea. After the fall of the Marianna Islands in mid-1944, the uninhabited island was occupied by Japanese military forces, who spent months honeycombing the island with a network of underground bunkers and concealed artillery positions, interconnected by 11 miles of tunnels. Iwo Jima was also the only battle of the Second World War where the overall American casualties exceeded those of the Japanese.

Justification for attacking Iwo Jima

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. In the fall of 1944 B-29s began flying bombing missions to the Japanese home islands.



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 weighed 2,800 pounds. The B-29 was powered by four of these behemoths, which consumed 6,988 gallons of high octane aviation fuel (or 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. By the war's end, 419 B-29s were lost, of which, only 135 were combat-related, the remainder being engine failures and fires. During late 1944 more than 2000 design changes were made to the troubled engines, 500 of which required retooling.

By early 1945 the teething problems of the Wright Cyclone engines 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.



The massive Wright 3350 Cyclone engines that powered the B-29 bomber represented the zenith of 1940s piston engine technology. Each engine weighed 2,800 pounds and employed 18 cylinders, displacing 3,350 cubic inches. The B-29 consumed about four times as much fuel as a B-17 or B-24 bomber.

Only one island in Bonin Islands chain was capable of supporting an all-weather airfield lay in the bomber's path: Iwo Jima. American planners decided to seize the island to build an outsized airfield capable of accepting damaged B-29s, and serve as a home field for protective fighter aircraft, which, using drop tanks, could escort the bombers over Japan. The capture of Iwo Jima would eliminate these problems and provide a staging airfield for the eventual invasion of the Japanese mainland.

The Marines land on Iwo Jima

For months preceding the American landings the Japanese were busy excavating a complex defensive scheme, which revolved around an interconnected array of tunnels and bunkers. Their plan was to allow the Americans to overrun their entrenchments, and employ "reverse slope defense," a radical departure from their previous defensive tactics. The attack commenced at dawn on February 19, 1945, with units of the 3rd, 4th and 5th

Marine Divisions landing, under the overall command of Marine Lt. General Holland Smith. No one imagined that it would evolve into the costliest battle in the history of the Marine Corps. The first day the Marines landed on a linear strand of beach on the island's southeast side, below Mt. Surabachi. 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 of intense shelling 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 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 despondency, because they would feel their cause was hopeless against such overwhelming odds. Intelligence sources were confident that Iwo Jima would fall to the Americans within three to seven days, employing a superior force of 27,000 Marines against the Japanese garrison guessed to be around 7,000. In actuality, the Japanese defense was comprised of 22,000 soldiers, all of whom were well concealed. The Americans believed that casualties would be heavy, with as many as 2500 killed and possibly 9500 wounded. Elements of the 3rd Marine Division were initially held in reserve, in case the Japanese succeeded in reinforcing their garrison. It was a colossal intelligence gaffe, based solely on aerial photo interpretation and radio communications intelligence.

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

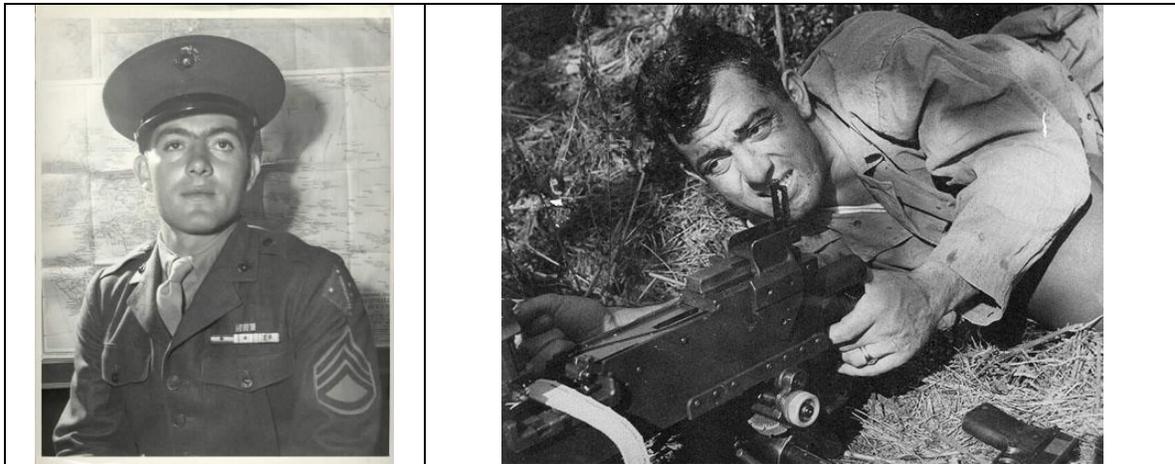


Marine riflemen under fire, hunkered down. Most of the 60,000 Marines who fought on Iwo Jima never saw the Japanese soldiers they were fighting, because they concealed themselves below ground, and only ventured out of their redoubts when it was to their advantage, usually after dark.

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

When the Marines landed they met no resistance on the beaches. The beachhead became clogged along the backshore as the supporting vehicles found it difficult to ascend the mushy cliffs. The few natural breaks in slope (ravines) soon became bottlenecked with burning tanks and Amtracs, which fell victim to an array of 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 with nowhere to hide. This resulted in American casualties of 2,400 men the first day. The plan for taking Iwo Jima in three days seemed to be evaporating before everyone's eyes.

One of the Marine's greatest heroes was Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, who had received the Medal of Honor for heroically resisting repeated Japanese attacks on Guadalcanal in October 1942. After numerous war bond tours and marriage to a female Marine sergeant, Basilone requested to be returned to combat, and eventually found himself leading a group from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion of the 27th Marines in the 5th Marine Division, who were in the vanguard of the force that landed on Red Beach II on the day of the invasion.



Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone was one of the first Marines awarded the Medal of Honor during the Pacific War, after commanding a 15-man machine gun battery that held off 3,000 Japanese attackers on Guadalcanal in October 1942 (he was one of only three survivors). He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for gallantry in leading his troops off Red Beach on the first day of the Iwo Jima operations.

Basilone soon found his unit hopelessly pinned down, with the fire coming from hardened concrete blockhouses that were well concealed. Basilone outflanked the Japanese positions, working his way up on top of the first blockhouse, where he used a satchel charge and hand grenades to destroy the important strongpoint and the 50-odd

soldiers occupying it. He then led his troops towards Airfield No. 1, where they came to the aid of a Marine tank trapped in a minefield, under intense attack. After guiding the tank to safety, Basilone was mortally wounded by mortar rounds aimed at the tank he saved. He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross, the highest decoration for bravery that the Navy Department can award. The Medal of Honor is bestowed by the President in the name of Congress on members of the United States Armed Forces who *“distinguish themselves through conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States.”* Basilone was the only Marine to ever receive the Navy Cross and the Medal of Honor for separate events. Every Marine Corps base or camp in the world has at least one street named after Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone.

Raising of the flag on Mt. Surabachi

At the southern tip of the island was Mt. Suribachi, the volcano responsible for Iwo Jima, rising 528 vertical feet above the ocean. Surabachi afforded a commanding view of the American beachhead for Japanese artillery spotters, who called 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 take the island. On the morning of D+4 (February 23rd) the attack on Surabachi commenced. The easiest way up the volcano was along its northeast flank, and in the early morning hours this task fell upon Easy Company, 2nd Battalion of the 28th Marine Regiment, 5th Marine Division. The Company's executive 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.



Marines tending to their wounded a short distance above the congested landing beach, with Mt. Surabachi looming in the background. Japanese artillery spotters on Surabachi's slopes were able to call in accurate artillery and mortar fire on the beleaguered Marines.

Easy Company's ascent of the crater was difficult, mostly on hands and knees, crawling. The Japanese did not offer stiff resistance until the Marines reached the crest of the crater, around 10 AM. These defenders had to be flushed out of their bunkers, which took 15 to 18 minutes. Members of Schrier's patrol found a discarded pipe and attached the American flag to it, raising 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 Samurai sword, only to be shot down within a few yards of the flag.

The appearance of the American flag atop Suribachi's barren summit was a tremendous morale booster to the 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 more 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 soldiers moved up the slope they were accompanied by three photographers.



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 Marines. 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.



Left - A less known image shot by Joe Rosenthal shows other Marines lowering the smaller flag while the larger, more famous one was being anchored in place (in the background). Right – Joe Rosenthal on the summit of Mt. Surabachi a few days later, after the famous image had appeared in thousands of newspapers.

When this second group gained the summit each photographer shot images of the smaller flag placed by Easy Company, including a near-sighted Associated Press photographer from San Francisco named Joe Rosenthal, who was 33 at the time. As Rosenthal scrambled up the steep slope with the team carrying the “second flag,” Sgt. Lowery was on his way down. He informed Rosenthal that he had already taken photos of the American flag being raised. Undeterred, the diminutive Rosenthal (he was only 5’-4” tall) trudged on.

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

When his film was processed in Guam that evening Rosenthal was as shocked as everyone else when one of the images, sent by wire, 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 conflict, which had impacted the lives of every American since the attack on Pearl Harbor. The photo came to epitomize the gallantry of the American fighting man.



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 from LST 779. The image seemed to convey the teamwork and sacrifice of so many American soldiers, engaged in combat on three continents and across the Pacific. The six men were Sgt Michael Strank, Cpl Harlon Block, PFC Franklin Sousley, PFC Rene Gagnon, PFC Ira Hayes, and PM2 John Bradley (a Navy corpsman). Strank, Sousley, and Block were killed in the ensuing days.

Acts of heroism

While the men of Lieutenant Schrier's Company were scaling the slopes of Mt. Surabachi, Corporal Hershel W. Williams of the Headquarters Company assigned to the 1st Battalion, 21st Marines, of the 3rd Marine Division was fighting for his life down below, battling concrete pillboxes in an attempt to open a lane for tanks advancing across the island. Williams volunteered to venture forward alone, carrying a 70-lb flamethrower, covered by two riflemen with M-1's and two using Browning Automatic Rifles (BAR). He methodically probed the enemy bunker's fields of fire, his flame thrower tanks being pelted repeatedly by enemy bullets, without impacting its operation. In this manner he was able to keep himself concealed just enough to avoid being killed. Williams worked

his way around the flanks of the first bunker and succeeded in neutralizing it using his flame thrower, followed up with a demolition charge he tossed into one of the gun ports.



Left – Fully loaded Marine flame throwers weighed 70 pounds, but proved to be the most effective weapons against a well entrenched enemy on Iwo Jima. Right – Corporal Hershel W. Williams receiving his Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman at The White House on October 5, 1945.

The Marine flame throwers were filled with a homespun mixture of 130 octane aviation gas and diesel fuel, mixed in a 55 gallon drum at the beach. A fully-charged flame thrower was only capable to firing for 70 seconds, using four-second bursts. Williams expended his entire tank destroying the first bunker. After destroying each enemy bunker, he would have to carefully work his way back to the marine lines to re-arm himself with another set of tanks and more satchel charges. In this manner he returned six times and over a four-hour period, succeeded in taking out seven enemy bunkers. Each time Williams advanced on the next adjacent Japanese bunker he would probe its “blind spots,” slowly positioning himself to get within lethal range of his flame thrower. Much of this time he was out of sight of his supporting riflemen, who had to guess his position as well as they could, using suppressing fire to keep the Japanese inside their bunkers. Two of these riflemen were killed. During one reconnaissance he discovered the bunker’s main ventilation pipe and was able to insert the nozzle of flame thrower down the pipe, killing its occupants. At one point in his single-handed assault, about five Japanese soldiers ventured out from their bunker and rushed him. Williams destroyed them with his flame thrower before they got a shot off at him. Williams’ cunning display of bravery, and his willingness to come back, re-arm, and re-enter the deadly fray, earned him the respect and admiration of his fellow Marines. He continued fighting on Iwo Jima for another five weeks, and was wounded by mortar fire on March 6th, but returned to combat a short time later.

Williams’ selfless actions were typical of the bravery exhibited by countless Marines on Iwo Jima, which resulted in 27 Medals of Honor being awarded for extraordinary heroism, more than any other battle of World War II. Williams received the Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman at The White House on October 5, 1945.

The battle concludes

The Iwo Jima battle droned on for six weeks and 60,000 Marines and 10,000 Sailors and 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 soldier the entire time they were engaged in combat. This is because the Japanese strategy focused on effective cover and concealment, entrenching themselves within 11 miles of tunnels, excavated in the 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. More than 600 Marines and Navy Seabees were killed in this manner by sniper bullets, most from unseen sources.

Controversy over the terrible price that was paid

The first B-29s began making emergency landings as early as March 4th. Only 1,083 Japanese prisoners were taken captive, out of the military 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 price American forces ever paid in any combat engagement involving more than a division (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) suffered 84% casualties. 27 Medals of Honor were awarded (13 posthumously), more than a quarter of all awarded to Marines during World War II.

Although 2,400 B-29s diverted to Iwo Jima for various reasons, probably less than 25% of these would actually have been forced to ditch in the ocean (and each B-29 carried a crew of 10 men). Pundits have criticized the Iwo Jima campaign for being an unnecessary sacrifice of America's premier fighting forces, noting it was the only battle where the American casualties (28,686 killed, wounded, and battle fatigued) outnumbered the Japanese (21,000 killed). They assert that Iwo Jima was not worth the cost because the island was never used as a staging base for B-29s, only for escorting fighter aircraft, and the Japanese ceased deploying their home defense fighter aircraft against the B-29s in mid-1945, choosing to hoard these aircraft for later use as kamakazes against American forces expected to invade the home islands.

But, the validity of such criticism arises in large measure from the "premature end" of the Pacific War in early August 1945, after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No one on either side of the conflict had expected the war to

conclude that quickly, without armed invasions of the Japanese home islands, beginning with Kyushu in October 1945, and, then, against Honshu in April 1946. From this vantage point, Iwo Jima and Okinawa would have served pivotal roles as staging bases for those planned invasions, which never occurred.



This B-29 Superfortress from the 497th Bomb Group crash landed on the beach at Iwo Jima before the airfield was taken by the Marines, testifying to the importance of the island to the bombing campaign.



B-29s parked on the transient ramp at Iwo Jima on June 5, 1945. These were part of the 2,400 Superfortresses that made forced landings on Iwo Jima, potentially saving aircraft and crews.

The Marine Corps War Memorial

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. During the Okinawa campaign a few months later (which witnessed more than 50,000 casualties) there were over 200 "flag raisings" recorded, on just about every hill of the island.

The image of gallant Marines raising the flag on Mt. Suribachi became the model for the Marine Corps War Memorial, more commonly referred to as the "Two Jima Memorial" because of the scene it depicts. The statue sits on a serene knoll in Rosslyn, Virginia, at the north end of the Arlington National Cemetery. From it one can view the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, as well as the nation's Capitol, across the Potomac River. 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, fashioned by Felix de Weldon.



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

The stately memorial commemorates the combat valor of the U.S. Marine Corps in our nation's history. The Marine Corps serves as our nation's premier amphibious-capable attack force, a part of the Department of the Navy. Marines used to be billeted aboard ships to provide for their defense, and Marines used to man the forward starboard gun of every U.S. warship up through re-commissioning of the Iowa Class battleships in the late 1980s (this practice was discontinued in 1989).

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, sacrifice, and above all else, faithfulness. The Marine motto is *Semper Fidelis*, which means "Always faithful:" trained to do their duty, even if that means sacrificing their lives. There are no super stars in the Marine Corps, only "team players."

Although 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 our peace and freedom. 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.

Postscript



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

In 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 photographer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who lived by in an apartment near Golden Gate Park. He appeared to be a quiet fellow, and seemed to enjoy listening to the various tales those of us in uniform had to offer about our latest exploits. After lunch, the luncheon emcee introduced the honored guests and dropped the name Joe Rosenthal, the man who took the famous photo of the Marines raising the flag on the Iwo Jima 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 desert. As soon as he was seated the officers at our table began pelting him with questions. Mr. Rosenthal summed up his famous image by stating "*I took the picture, the Marines took Iwo Jima.*" I thought to myself, wow, he's just an everyday guy like you or me. On April 13, 1996, Rosenthal was named an honorary Marine by then Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak, in Washington, DC. Joe Rosenthal passed away ten years later, on August 20, 2006, at the age of 94.

About the author



J. David Rogers matriculated through the Marine Corps Platoon Leader Corps officer training program in 1974-76. After completing his masters and doctorate degrees in civil engineering at U.C. Berkeley in 1982, he transferred to the Navy as a reserve intelligence officer. During his subsequent career he visited nearly every combat site in the Pacific Theater, including Iwo Jima, and served as the Navy's representative at all five 50th anniversary symposiums commemorating the Pacific War, between 1991-95. He has taught at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey and the University of California, Berkeley. Since 2001 he has held the Karl F. Hasselmann Chair in Geological Engineering at the Missouri University of Science & Technology in Rolla, MO.

Guest Speaker



Hershel "Woody" Williams is the only living Medal of Honor recipient of the Battle of Iwo Jima. Williams struggled with the after-effects of combat stress until 1962, when he gave his life to Jesus Christ. He went on to serve as chaplain of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society for 35 years.





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