

# Narrative

By MSgt Roger M. Emmons

THIS IS THE STORY OF ONE PART ONLY OF THE LANDING of U. S. Marines on Iwo Jima in the Volcano Islands on 19 February 1945. It deals with the invasion viewed from the Marine automatic weapons aboard the battleship *Tennessee*.

At the dawn of 16 February 1945, the

Capt. John B. Heffernan, USN

of Iwo Jima as a

battleships

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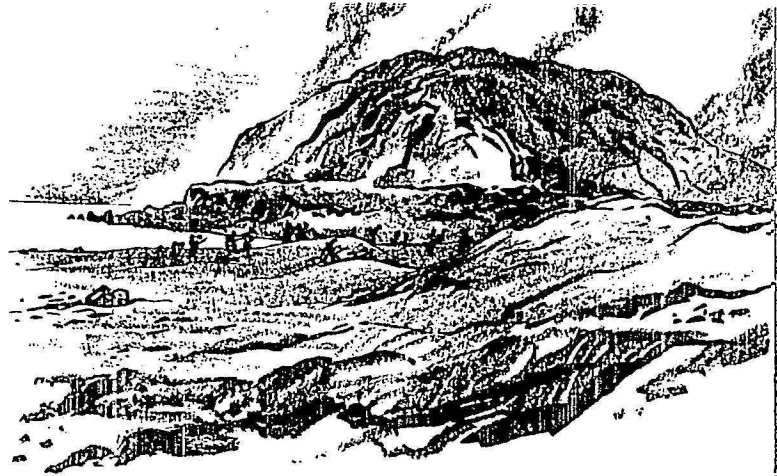
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of Iwo Jima as a

battleships

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# of Iwo Jima



...the Japanese had established  
...for bombers  
...coming operation had been  
...L. ... USMC, com-  
...In essence,

he said, ...  
The primary purpose of Iwo Jima was to obtain  
airfield. The primary purpose of Iwo Jima was to obtain  
used B-24s and fighters. The primary purpose of Iwo Jima was to obtain  
must make their own protection. The primary purpose of Iwo Jima was to obtain  
possible to provide the primary purpose of Iwo Jima was to obtain

...and we  
...Since  
30 Japanese aircraft  
based aircraft.

On D-Day, the troops  
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...end of the  
...sitting at  
...rolling  
...and about  
...good shooting we can  
...casualties to our  
...the shooting is a  
...course, be higher.

...off as a cool, squally  
...Visibility was poor.  
...warships fanned out  
...positions, and at about  
...of Iwo Jima in a  
...ships was firing from  
...and they closed in as  
...coastal defense guns

...MENT placed the *Tennessee* on a firing  
...parallel to the southeastern shoreline of Iwo Jima,  
...about 3,000 yards from the beach. Our bombardment  
...mission was the destruction of enemy installations, strip-  
...ing of camouflage, and to cover the minesweepers which  
...were operating between us and the island. The main

battery concentrated at slopes of Mt Suribachi while the secondary battery directed its fire against the high rocky cliffs at the north end of the beach.

No enemy planes molested us, but black puffs dotted the air where Jap anti-aircraft batteries sought our spotting planes. One explosion and a number of fires were observed ashore. The Japanese shore batteries returned the fire for the first time during the afternoon, but we were not hit, although the enemy's salvos kicked up columns of water around the *Tennessee*.

About 1800 the *Tennessee* ceased firing, recovered her two aircraft, and then retired for the night in company with other warships of the gunfire and covering force.

Next morning at 0700 the bombardment was resumed while the minesweepers continued their work. The initial range was over 10,000 yards. About 0830 the *Tennessee* closed in and carried out the bombardment at ranges of 3,000 to 5,000 yards. As the ship lay in very close to the beach her Marine 40mm guns were brought to bear on shore targets.

During this time we came under fire of concealed Japanese shore batteries. From time to time enemy salvos smashed tall pillars of water 'round us, but they did not register their first hit on the ship until about 0845, when six sailors were wounded by fragments of an enemy shell which struck a 5-inch mount aft. One of the men died about an hour later.

At 0940 attention was drawn to one of our cruisers about three or four miles north of us. She appeared to be hit amidships and a big fire could be seen burning in her well-deck from which rose a considerable amount of smoke. Despite this raging fire amidship, the cruiser was hotly engaging enemy shore batteries with her fore and aft turrets—an inspiring sight.

Just after this interlude an incident occurred which will probably always be remembered as the central event of the whole day. A procession of gunboats, and a number of small craft, preceded by minesweepers, moved slowly with care very close to the beaches on the southeast coast. Their mission was to reconnoiter and eliminate obstacles that might impede the landing of the assault troops.

As the vessels probed the island at close quarters the Japanese shore batteries suddenly opened up at almost point blank range and they found themselves under a violent and accurate fire. The water about them was being torn up by the hail of projectiles. Hits on the vessels multiplied. There were casualties. One gunboat was sunk and another was set afire. The gunboats returned the fire, but the odds in such a duel were in favor of the shore batteries, so that they had to withdraw.

Three of these gunboats came alongside the *Tennessee* and all their wounded were brought on board and accommodated in sick bay, and then our sail-maker furnished them with heavy canvas to wrap their dead for burial at sea. This was about 1145.

The remainder of the day was uneventful.

THE AMERICAN warships and planes continued the bombardment of Iwo Jima on 18 February 1945 in preparation for Marines landing on the morrow. Again the *Tennessee's* main battery was brought to bear on the slopes of Mt Suribachi while the secondary battery hammered away at concrete casemated artillery positions on the high ground sited to the right flank overlooking the landing beach and beach approaches. It was carried out at ranges of 2,200 to 6,000 yards, during which the Marine 40mm battery found targets on cliffs flanking north end of the beach and in hulls of several Jap ships imbedded in sand near the shore.

Several large and small fires were started ashore. There was a spectacular explosion when hits were registered on a large ammunition dump which went up with a cascade of sparks and burned radiantly with intermittent explosions for several hours. The eastern side of the airfield was littered with wrecked Jap planes and looked like a junk yard. Area from the water's edge to the airfield was pockmarked by vast craters caused by American shells and bombs. Anti-aircraft and shore battery fire from the island was still encountered when the *Tennessee* retired for the night.

In the pre-dawn darkness of D-day or Monday, 19 February, 1945, the transports, tank landing ships, landing craft, and vessels of the V Amphibious Corps arrived off the east coast of Iwo Jima. At daybreak the transports halted about eight miles offshore and put their Higgins boats in the water. Then the troops were sent over the side into the boats and the landing boats circled, circled, circled near the transports, waiting for the signal to make the run for the line of departure.

The tank landing ships detached themselves from the transports and moved up about three miles from the shore where they opened their wide bows and disgorged a host of amphibious landing vehicles carrying the assault troops.

Meanwhile, along with other battleships, cruisers and destroyers, the *Tennessee* had taken up her position sev-

eral thousand yards offshore to deliver the preparatory bombardment for the landing. The bombardment commenced at about 0645, and followed a familiar pattern. Starting along the beaches the big guns ranged far and wide pouring shells into the slopes and heights which presumably concealed emplacements. For more than two hours the landing area took an awful going over. Fighter planes and bombers joined in the attack.

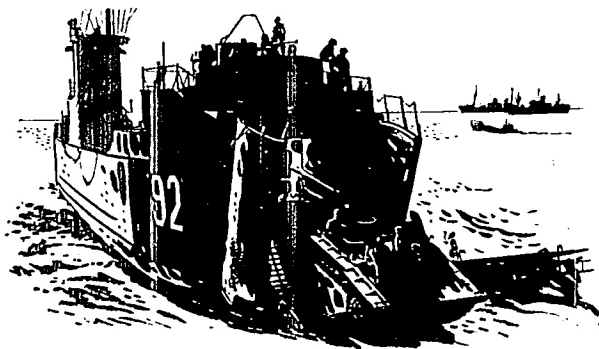
While the bombardment was at its peak the leading wave of amphibious vehicles had taken station about 200 yards to the seaward of the warships. Behind them the rest of the amphibious vehicles followed by the Higgins boats proceeded to form in parallel lines. In van was an escort vessel which directed the movement by means of a loud-speaker. The speaker blared, "Attention, *Tennessee*. You are on the line of departure." The ship at this time was lying broadside to the island, her starboard side engaged. An unofficial voice floated across from our quarter-deck, "What do you expect us to do? Push this big crate sideways?"

About 0835 the first wave of amphibious vehicles shoved off on their long trip to the beach. The rest of the assault waves followed in lines timed down to the second.

Then every warship on the bombardment line increased the tempo of its shelling and bombers dropped load after load of high explosives on enemy prepared positions facing the beach. The noise was incredible. At the same time a dozen gunboats moved in to fire numerous salvos of rockets into strong-points at very close range. Then fast planes laid a smokescreen behind the beach to block off the Jap's view. Very soon the shoreline and whole side of Mt Suribachi were completely obscured by flame and smoke.

The *Tennessee* was stationed on the left flank of the bombardment line, directly opposite Mt Suribachi, and under 3,000 yards from the shore line in which position it was our special duty to maintain neutralization of Suribachi.

The hundreds of landing craft came up on our port side in a score of boat waves, each some 80 boats 25 yards interval apart, disposed at distances of about 300 yards between waves. Then, they shaped a course which



passed the *Tennessee's* stern or bow—some passing the bow and some the stern. They cased-in so close aboard we felt as though we could reach out on either side of the ship and touch them.

Soon the expanse of water between the warships and the island was filled with a procession of landing craft churning shoreward. When the leading wave was about 300 yards from the beach the warships lifted their fire inland, and our fighter planes commenced strafing the landing area.

During the final approach to the beach there was light mortar and artillery opposition, but the first waves got in almost untouched. The initial landings were effected at 0859 on the beach stretching approximately 3,500 yards north from Mt Suribachi—the 5th Marine Division on the left near the volcano, the 4th Marine Division on the right near the high rocky cliffs at the north end of the beach.

On the beach, the first wave of troops quickly established a line behind the water-cut terrace at the water's edge. The terrace, five or six feet high, and about 25 feet from the shore offered cover. Inland from the terrace the beach rose gradually to a central plateau where the island's biggest airfield is located, and this airstrip was the initial objective.

Within a few minutes after the landing small groups of Marines could be seen advancing up the open slopes east of the airfield, burning out pillboxes with flame throwers. Machine guns rattled from the high ground. The softening up of the island by shells and bombs had by no means eliminated the numerous pillboxes, trenches, rifle pits, and machine gun positions which defended the routes inland from the beaches. Three of our tanks

behind the terrace on the beachhead waiting to advance, started inland towards the airfield.

But as the second assault units began moving across the open space, resistance stiffened. The Japs poured mortar, rocket, and artillery fire on the entire area between the water's edge and the airfield. This fire was murderous. The range of every object on the beach had been "zeroed in" by the Japs in advance of D-day. This hostile fire was coming from Mt Suribachi on the left and the northern plateau on the right. The "rolling barrage" from the *Tennessee's* guns was immediately discontinued and our firing was shifted to the caves along the beach at the foot of Mt Suribachi and to the enemy batteries on the north flank.

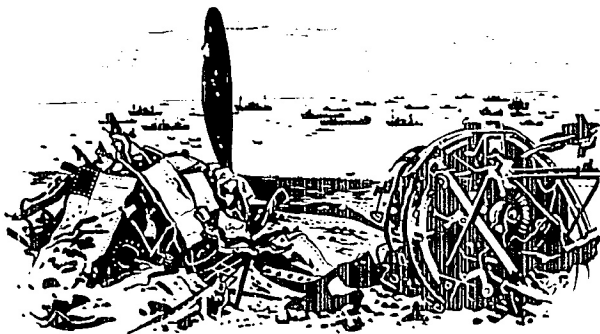


Jap mortars erupted in the groups of men along the shore and among the thin lines of Marines edging up the sandy incline toward the airfield, and they suffered casualties. An enemy battery was belching death straight down the length of the beach. A land mine exploded now and then, knocking out a tank or amphibious tractor. A tank was just starting to thread its way between the beach and the airfield when it was knocked out by a Jap shell. Other tanks bogged down and tipped half over in the soft volcanic sand where they became helpless targets of Jap gunners.

☛ PUFFS OF SMOKE and dust rose from mortar blasts creeping up and down the beach, while offshore shells splashed among the boats. Landing craft were blown up in the water. The beach was littered with our dead and wounded and with our wrecked tanks, tractors and landing craft. Overhead the *Tennessee's* spotting plane was shot down by gunfire. The projectile cut off the plane's tail and it crashed into the water off Tachiwa Point.

In spite of enemy fire our landing craft got more men, more guns, more tanks ashore, navigating between the shell and mortar geysers. Supplies and equipment were landed. Meanwhile our assault forces continued to move from the beach, through the deadly hail of enemy fire, to the airfield, and the story of the Battle for Iwo Jima which followed is now familiar to every American.

US ☛ MC



arrived on the scene to assist in dislodging the Japs from their pillboxes and other strong points.

Meanwhile the first contingent of assault troops pushed up the slopes of black volcanic sand, now under shell and mortar fire from the Japanese, and disappeared over the skyline at the southeast end of the airfield, where they established a defense on the O-1 line designated in the operation order. After this objective had been reached by the assault troops, larger units that had been crouched