

Initial wave landing on beach with Mt. Suribachi in the background. Photo by Lou Lonerj, Leatherneck.

The Legacy and Lessons of Iwo Jima

by Maj Jon T. Hoffman, USMCR

On 17 March, D+26, Adm Chester W. Nimitz, CinCPac, issued a special communique announcing that Iwo Jima had been officially secured. Ten days and another 1,724 casualties later Iwo was finally secured. Such was the ferocity of the fighting on this tiny island, barely 8 square miles, that was to earn a special place in the Corps' illustrious history.

In the history of warfare the assault on Iwo Jima does not loom especially large. It helped hasten the end of World War II, but it was not a decisive turning point in the mold of Midway or Guadalcanal. It remains the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history in terms of total casualties, but it was not the most intense struggle even for the Corps. Tarawa was more costly based on blood spent per square mile gained, and daily casualty rates in other Pacific battles rivaled those of Iwo. The Corps' losses on that small volcanic rock pale beside those of other forces in other wars—the British Army, for instance, lost 60,000 men in one day during the 1916 Battle of the Somme. But Iwo Jima justifiably

retains a special place in the lore of the Corps and the Nation. The experience gained in that battle also remains significant today and will continue to be important as long as Marines contemplate the challenge of amphibious warfare.

Planning the Assault

The decision to seize Iwo Jima was inextricably entwined with the summer 1944 assault on the Mariana Islands. The Marianas campaign was driven largely by the desire of the Army Air Forces (AAF) to gain bases from which its long-range B-29 bombers could strike Japan. American forces took Saipan (15 June–9 July), Tinian (24 July–1 August), and Guam

(21 July–10 August), and had the first bomber fields in operation by October. The AAF launched its initial raids against Japan in November, but the unescorted bombers suffered heavy losses. (That was not a surprise, since similar operations had already met the same fate over Europe and in missions launched from China.) Aviation leaders were certain they needed Iwo Jima to make the bomber campaign succeed. In fact, the ground battle was still raging on Saipan in June when AAF and Joint Staff planners called for an operation against Iwo Jima.

Several characteristics made Iwo Jima the likely follow-on objective to the Marianas. It was situated under the direct flight path from the

Marianas to Tokyo and almost exactly equidistant (about 650 miles) between the two locations. It was also the only island in that region with sufficient size and suitable terrain to accommodate large airfields. The planners believed that a number of benefits would accrue from seizure of the island. It would deny its use to enemy aircraft for both defensive missions against our bombers and for offensive missions against the Marianas. It would provide bases for fighters, which would escort the B-29s. And the bombers could use the airfields for emergency landings or to take on fuel for special missions.

The Japanese were equally aware of the importance of Iwo Jima once they realized that they would lose the Marianas. They placed Iwo Jima under the direct control of headquarters in Tokyo and began to arrange reinforcements for the island. (One Japanese staff officer seriously suggested "sinking" the island to prevent its use by the United States.) In June 1944 the garrison consisted of 5,000 men, nearly 200 aircraft, 13 artillery pieces, 14 heavy coast defense guns, and 42 anti-aircraft guns. Men and equipment began to flow to Iwo Jima in August. By the time of the American invasion in February 1945, the Japanese force had grown to about 22,000 men armed with 361 artillery pieces, 77 medium and heavy mortars, 33 large-caliber coastal guns, nearly 300 anti-aircraft guns, 69 antitank guns, 70 rocket launchers, and 24 tanks.

A factor more important than the increase in numbers was the style of defense implemented by the garrison—one that duplicated what was first experienced at Peleliu. The Japanese would no longer try to defend the beaches and throw the invaders back into the sea with banzai charges, but instead would conduct a position defense designed to inflict maximum casualties on the attackers. Their goal was attrition, not victory. To achieve it, they concentrated on avoiding American supporting arms so that they could survive to engage the landing force. In the months after June 1944 they constructed a massive network of heavy fortifications and underground chambers, most interconnected by a system of

more than 11 miles of tunnels. Some above-ground structures boasted walls and ceilings consisting of reinforced concrete up to 10 feet thick. Command posts, aid stations, and barracks spaces were burrowed out as much as 100 feet under the surface. Indirect fire weapons were preregistered to cover likely landing beaches and key terrain features ashore. The Japanese commander even stored up a 10-week supply of food and vast quantities of ammunition to support a prolonged defense.

American planners assumed from the first that Iwo Jima would be a very tough objective. The initial study conducted in August 1944 concluded that three divisions would be required for the assault. The V Amphibious Corps (VAC—composed of the 3d, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions) formally received the mission in October, with D-day ultimately fixed for 19 February 1945. The nature of the island itself left few options to the landing force. The coastline around the northern and southern ends consisted of steep terrain rising directly from a rocky shore. The only possible landing sites were the beaches on either side of the narrow waist of the island, though these were washed by a very heavy surf that would impede the operation of most landing craft. Planners looked at the possibility of seizing one or more outlying islets as artillery bases to support the main landing, but the small size, rough terrain, and low elevation of these rock outcrops rendered that option largely impractical. Based on prevailing winds, VAC ultimately decided to land two divisions abreast on the southeastern beaches. The left-flank regiment would turn south to seize Suribachi while the remaining forces advanced westward to split the island in two and then shifted their attack to the north. The third division would remain afloat as the reserve.

Air and Naval Gunfire Preparation

Efforts to soften up Iwo Jima began in June 1944, before it was even formally adopted as an amphibious objective. A force of seven fast carriers hit the island early that month and a second time 2 weeks later. Be-

fore the Navy pilots were through they had shot down more than 100 planes and destroyed dozens more on the ground. The day after the second raid, a naval surface force shelled the island and destroyed the last four operational planes located there. Land-based medium bombers (AAF B-24s and Marine B-25s) began hitting Iwo Jima in August and struck it every day after 7 December. In the final 3 weeks before D-day, there were at least 30 sorties per day.

The aerial attacks had comparatively little effect on the defenders, however. First, they were primarily directed at Iwo's two operational airfields, which were still being used as a staging base for Japanese air raids against the Marianas. The Japanese quickly became adept at filling in the cratered runways, usually completing the task within a few hours. The American bombers also dropped mostly 100-pound bombs, fragmentation bombs, and napalm. The explosives were too small to destroy the strong fortifications, while the napalm did not achieve its purpose of burning off camouflage, for there was little vegetation on the island in the first place. An early February bomb-damage assessment reached a sober conclusion:

These strikes have apparently not prevented the enemy from improving his defensive positions and, as of 24 January 1945, his installations of all categories had notably increased in number. The island is now far more heavily defended by gun positions and field fortifications than it was on 15 October 1944, when initial heavy bombing strikes were initiated.

Marine planners asked repeatedly for at least 10 days of preinvasion bombardment by seven battleships and nine cruisers, but the Navy decided it could not provide that level of support. Instead, a force of six old battleships and five cruisers would hit the island for the 3 days prior to the assault—a fire support plan similar to that used against Saipan and Peleliu. Both of those operations had been extremely bloody affairs for the assault forces. Navy leaders advanced several reasons for their obstinance.



Officers of the 5th Marine Division direct the operation of their unit from a sandbagged position on Iwo Jima. They are, left to right, in the foreground: BGen Leo D. Hermle, assistant division commander; MajGen Keller E. Rockey (with phone), division commander; Col James F. Shaw, operations officer; and Col Ray Robinson, chief of staff.

They believed that any longer bombardment would forfeit tactical surprise and leave the fleet vulnerable to air attack. They cited the ongoing Philippines campaign and the scheduled 1 April operation against Okinawa that limited the availability of ships. They argued that the lengthy aerial campaign decreased the need for naval gunfire. There also was a limited supply of ammunition aboard each ship and difficulties in transferring resupplies at sea. Finally, Navy planners wanted the bombardment to coincide with a 2-day carrier strike against Tokyo (the first since the 1942 Doolittle raid), which would divert Japanese attention. (Regrettably, the air raid also diverted the carriers and their companion new battleships from striking Iwo, a role they otherwise would have performed. Eleven small escort carriers provided the bulk of air support for the preinvasion preparation.)

The compressed timeframe of the bombardment proved to be a serious error. Cloud cover on the first day hampered the work of spotter planes controlling the naval guns and few assigned missions were fired. Of 158

carrier air sorties flown on D-3, only a handful were directed at targets on the ground, and many of those were strafing runs on the empty airfields. The sole flight of AAF bombers returned to base without dropping bombs because of the thick overcast. The weather cleared the next day and the bombardment was much more effective, but the enemy also bared his teeth. Japanese shore batteries scored hits on the battleship *Tennessee*, the cruiser *Pensacola*, the destroyer *Leutze*, and all 12 of the gunboats supporting the work of underwater demolition teams. Smoke screens used to cover the withdrawal of the gunboats also obscured the targets for a time. The escort carriers launched 226 strike sorties, and 42 AAF bombers dropped their loads.

The third day turned out much like the first, with cloud cover and rain again disrupting operations. Only a few air sorties hit ground targets, while the fire support ships were forced to concentrate on the defenses immediately overlooking the landing beaches. Even in this area, results were mixed at the end of the day. Many of the major-caliber guns near the

beaches were knocked out, but more than half the pillboxes housing smaller pieces and machineguns remained undamaged. Defensive positions in the rest of the island were also largely intact.

The Assault

The fast carrier task forces and the new battleships returned from the Tokyo strikes in time to add their weight to the final bombardment on the morning of D-day. For 2 hours and 20 minutes planes and naval guns alternated in lashing the island with shells, bombs, and rockets. These fireworks were impressive, but probably inflicted little harm on the enemy, since it was area fire designed to neutralize rather than destroy. The leading assault waves had a few minutes of grace after first reaching the shore, but the enemy's own indirect-fire weapons soon went into action. As Marines advanced across the island through heavy fire, they were amazed by the large number of defensive positions that remained "completely unscathed."

The Japanese found easy targets as succeeding waves of tractors and landing craft methodically dumped men and equipment on the beach. The rush to get ashore came partly from a Marine desire to rapidly build up combat power in anticipation of a counterattack. The Navy gladly obliged, since quicker unloading served its desire to get the amphibious ships out of harm's way and also free them for the upcoming invasion of Okinawa. The congestion was heightened by a steep gradient and extremely loose sand which hampered the movement inland of men and vehicles. The heavy surf also broached many craft and piled the wreckage at the water's edge. By nightfall of D-day the 30,000 Americans onshore outnumbered the Japanese garrison, but the 6 regiments, 6 artillery battalions, 2 tank battalions, and their associated command posts, aid stations, and supply dumps were crowded into a beachhead no more than 1,200 yards deep and 4,000 yards wide. During the course of the day assault units suffered heavy casualties: 566 killed and missing, 1,775 wounded, and 99 cases of combat fatigue.

The battle for Iwo Jima never got any easier. It took 4 days to reach the summit of Mount Suribachi, and progress was even slower against the main enemy defenses in the waist of the island. By D+2 VAC had to begin committing elements of its reserve, the 3d Marine Division, to maintain its offensive strength. It would take 35 days of bitter, close-quarters fighting to reach the northern end of the island and clear out the last organized pockets of resistance. Even then, a significant number of Japanese troops remained alive in their deep dugouts, occasionally surfacing to harass the garrison forces. Final U.S. casualties for the operation exceeded those of the enemy, and far surpassed even the pessimistic predictions of Marine leaders. Of the 6,821 dead and 19,217 wounded, the vast majority were Marines. In further testimony to the severe strains of the battle, there were also 2,648 cases of combat fatigue.

Refighting the Fight

Two significant debates arose almost immediately over the tactics used by American forces. The first centered on the Navy's decision to limit the prelanding bombardment. The official Marine Corps history of World War II noted that the "dispute still simmers more than 25 years after the event." Although the historians pointed out that it would "serve no useful purpose to rekindle the barely submerged passions that have occasionally popped to the surface regarding this subject," they then proceeded to detail the opposing points of view.

The Navy's arguments remain unconvincing. The short prelanding bombardment may have reduced the exposure of the ships prior to D-day, but it prolonged the land battle and thus kept those same ships at risk for a much longer period after D-day. (As it turned out, the only significant attack on the ships occurred on D+2, when a 50-plane kamikaze raid sank an escort carrier and damaged a large carrier, an escort carrier, and 2 other ships.) The Navy's contention that it

was too heavily committed elsewhere also rings hollow. Although technically true, too many of its ships were involved in hunting down the powerless remnants of the Imperial fleet or in launching airstrikes against industrial targets on the Japanese mainland. The tactical capabilities of the carriers and their escorting battleships and heavy cruisers would have been better employed against Iwo Jima, an objective that once secured would facilitate the operations of the AAF's more efficient strategic air campaign. A longer and heavier preparation would not have made Iwo Jima a cakewalk, but there were many above-ground fortifications (724 had been previously identified in aerial photos) that would have succumbed to a prolonged, deliberate bombardment directed by slow-moving, low-flying spotter

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The official Marine histories of both the battle and the war ignored the other major controversy, initiated when the Hearst newspaper chain argued in print that Marine Corps tactics resulted in unnecessary bloodshed. Although other elements of the press supported the Corps, senior Marines again were forced to quell the anxiety of political leaders and the public regarding amphibious assaults against well-defended islands. (Controversy also had followed the heavy losses at Tarawa and the firing of an Army division commander during the costly operation on Saipan.)

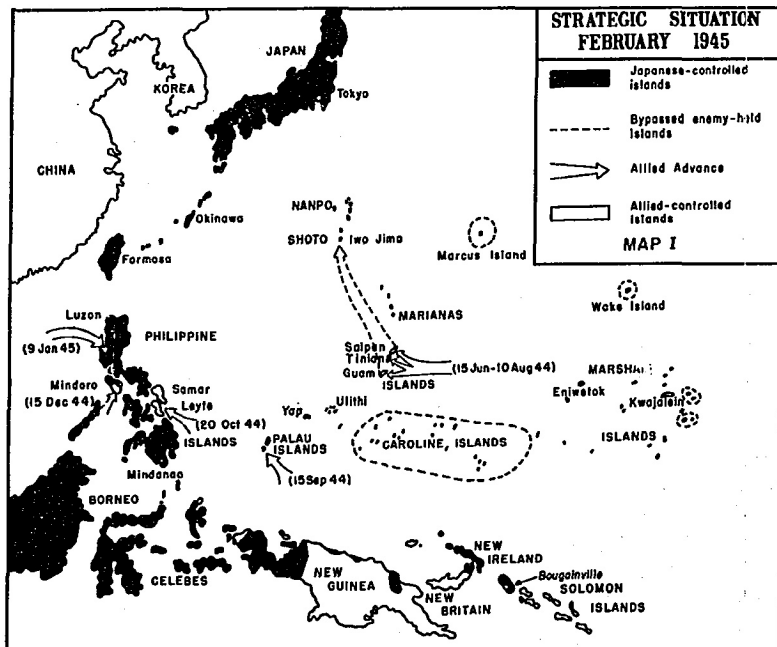
The criticism was not entirely unwarranted. Iwo Jima's terrain and defenses did largely dictate a scheme of maneuver relying heavily on frontal assaults at all but the lowest tactical level. However, Marine leaders often seemed to lack imagination and flexibility when it came to planning and

conducting this type of straight-ahead campaign. Throughout most of the battle, corps and division headquarters issued orders for attacks to begin at roughly the same time each morning. And in each case, the preparation fires generally followed a set routine, often closing out with a brief rocket barrage. At the designated time of attack, fires lifted outward in a rolling barrage reminiscent of World War I. The enemy responded in much the same way defenders had in the prior war, by remaining underground and coming to the surface when the bombardment lifted, just in time to greet the exposed assault units.

The official history of the battle made one telling observation on the lack of tactical imagination. After detailing a failed attack in which units had to withdraw to their original start line after suffering heavy casualties, the author laconically noted: "The 4th Division continued the attack [the next day] with no change in formation or plan." It was only toward the end of the third week of the campaign that elements of the divisions experimented by

moving forward prior to dawn with no preparation fires whatsoever. Results were uneven, but generally better than normal.

Corps headquarters also simultaneously drove the attack home at all points along the line, with supporting assets generally being parceled out equally to all. There was little hint of the focus of effort that modern Marines would associate with maneuver warfare theory. On those few occasions when headquarters shifted the operations of corps and division artillery or tanks to support one division, commanders sometimes failed to coordinate these assets properly or react flexibly. On D+5, for instance, following a preparation by air, artillery, and naval guns, the tanks of all three divisions were thrown into a single attack across the second airfield. Mines and antitank fire brought the armor to an abrupt halt, but the infantry continued the assault unaided. This failure



to respond to a changed situation resulted in little gain and heavy casualties. Later that day VAC did better. It had engineers clear a path forward and then supported a fresh attack with every artillery piece on the island. This time the tanks and infantry were able to advance together across the open airfield and seize defensible terrain on the far side.

Tactical shortcomings were probably the result of several factors. Many of the senior leaders of the Corps had cut their teeth on the battlefields of World War I, where rolling barrages and human-wave assaults were the order of the day for American forces even in 1918 (long after others had adopted better tactics). During the interwar period, Marine officers had done much to advance the state of doctrine in the fields of amphibious operations and small wars, almost certainly to the detriment of work on other aspects of land combat. (That was still a better doctrinal record than the Army's, though.) The Corps also undoubtedly suffered from its huge expansion during the course of the war—from 17,000 officers and men in 1940 to almost 500,000 just 4 years later. As a result, officers at all levels frequently received too little formal military education and advanced too rapidly to higher levels of responsibility.

Leaders who had never been exposed to anything bigger than battalions and regiments suddenly found themselves dealing with the challenges of corps and even field armies. In spite of these handicaps, the Corps did show flashes of tactical and operational brilliance during the war (e.g., Tinian), and just as important, it produced uniformly well-prepared units with the esprit needed to win under even the most trying conditions.

The Lessons

To a certain extent, the problems that arose at Iwo Jima are still with us today. The Unit Deployment Program and Marine expeditionary unit operations cause us to focus heavily on the battalion and squadron level. The Corps has been doing better these past few years at exercising the higher level commands, and I MEF certainly performed well in DESERT STORM (perhaps, in part, because there was a lot of time to prepare). However, there is probably much room for improvement in both our training and our outlook. Division-sized wars don't come along very often, but the consequences of failure in such situations are too great to ignore.

We have dramatically improved our relationship with the Navy in recent years; "gator" sailors and mine

warfare specialists are no longer all red-headed stepchildren within the Navy. But we cannot let "... From the Sea" and "Forward ... From the Sea" lull us into complacency. If amphibious operations are to remain a viable option into the next century, Marines need to fight for better support from the Navy. There is no accepted solution on the horizon for the surface fire support requirement, the number of amphibious ships is reaching a critical low (the Jan 95 *Gazette* carried a news item about the Navy opting for FFGs vice LSTs), and admirals need to realize that the V-22 is at least as important to them as the new generation attack submarine. The Corps must become a completely equal partner within the Department of the Navy or future Marines may find themselves struggling across another sandy beach with inadequate support from the sea.

Iwo Jima provides a number of lessons applicable to maneuver warfare theory. Perhaps the most significant involves the timing of the assault. The Joint Chiefs were aware of the probable value of the island by early 1944 when they made the decision to seize the Marianas as a base for a strategic bombing campaign against Japan. Yet they moved much too slowly to arrange the logical next step of securing Iwo Jima as a vital supporting installation. That critique comes not just from the benefit of 50 years of hindsight—one joint planning team argued in June 1944 that the United States should divert the forces scheduled for the invasion of Guam to an immediate assault on Iwo Jima.

That bold move clearly would have been superior to the eventual course of action. Although there was some moral value to regaining Guam (former U.S. territory), that island was nowhere near as critical to the war effort; its 19,500 defenders could have been bypassed for the moment in summer 1944. There was as yet little information available on Iwo Jima, but the carrier strikes in June demonstrated that the Navy could safely operate in those waters. The Battle of the Philippine Sea had already finished off the Imperial Navy's airpower, and most of the Japanese surface fleet was

concentrated near the Philippines and out of position to protect Iwo Jima. Although the preliminary studies in August 1944 dictated a need for three divisions to take the island, that estimate never changed even though the Japanese garrison greatly increased its strength during the next 6 months. The division and brigade of Marines and the division of soldiers employed on Guam would have been more than sufficient for Iwo Jima in June or July 1944. The cost of wresting the island from a garrison of 5,000 men with relatively weak fixed defenses would have been dramatically lower, and the AAF would not have had to endure several months of unescorted missions over Japan. MacArthur had achieved much in New Guinea by similar rapidity of movement, and later in 1944 the Joint Chiefs would make an even bolder decision to advance the invasion of the Philippines by 2 months. Iwo Jima was an ideal candidate for equally aggressive decisionmaking that would have placed American forces in motion while the Japanese were still contemplating their response to events in the Marianas.

Iwo Jima also demonstrates the folly of directly taking on the enemy's strength. The Japanese specifically sought a battle of attrition in which they could maximize the cost to American manpower, and U.S. forces obliged them in a number of ways. In addition to not moving against the objective quickly enough, senior leaders essentially adopted a policy that substituted men for firepower. In direct response to the Navy's decision for a 3-day bombardment, VAC changed the plan to provide for the earlier employment of reserve forces, and the 3d Marine Division ultimately joined the fight when it had barely begun. Throughout the entire course of the battle, Marine ground forces were stuck in a slow-moving advance that made them easy prey for the enemy's supporting arms. If the Japanese had chosen to use chemical weapons, the results would have been disastrous. As it was, we suffered more total casualties than they did for the first time since the early defeats of the war. Tactically, we had little chance to avoid that meatgrinder once commit-

ted, but there remains a question whether seizing Iwo Jima was the best operational choice in the first place.

The cost of Iwo Jima has been traditionally rationalized by citing the number of B-29 bombers that landed there and the number of crewmen thus saved (2,251 and 24,761 respectively). Of course, not all of those planes had to land at Iwo Jima; undoubtedly many did so because that was a safer alternative than continuing on to the Marianas. For those that definitely were incapable of completing the entire return flight, there were other options. Navy vessels routinely picked up their own fliers during missions against land targets, and similar arrangements could have been made to support the AAF with predesignated rescue zones at sea. Some crewmen might not have survived ditching or bailing out, but certainly the losses would have been far lower than those sustained in seizing the island. The aircraft would have been lost, but the United States could more easily replace material than manpower. Navy fighters flying off carriers also could have provided escorts for the bomber missions. Although kamikazes were a threat, the flattops were much less vulnerable while on the move rather than defending a fixed site (such as Iwo Jima). In any case, not long after Iwo Jima fell, the AAF switched to night bombing missions and no longer relied on fighter escort.

It is not clear that the types of naval support suggested here would have been a better option in 1945 than seizing Iwo Jima. Nor could planners foresee the eventual course of the war—without the atom bomb, thousands of additional B-29s might have had to make emergency landings. But modern leaders certainly need to investigate all alternatives fully before ordering ground troops into direct combat against a committed enemy. The Japanese were dangerous foes not because they had great technology or superb doctrine, but primarily because they were highly motivated and willing to die in great numbers for their cause. They were capable of creating the first guided cruise missile by having a man act as the guidance system. Nor have they been the only

tough warriors the United States has faced. Vietnamese communists, Arab suicide bombers, and Somali clansmen have all successfully matched their disregard for human life against the material superiority of the United States. Our Nation appears unwilling today to accept the level of casualties that it once was prepared, however reluctantly, to sustain to achieve victory.

When considering the future of amphibious warfare, we need to look beyond mere technical solutions and consider the outcome they promise to provide. If the weapons only allow us to achieve costly successes like those on Iwo Jima or Tarawa, then perhaps the Marine Corps will not really have won at all, even if we do hold the ground at the end of the battle. The Nation certainly would not have considered the advance to Kuwait City a triumph if I MEF had lost 6,000 dead and 19,000 wounded along the way. We don't necessarily have to remove the "force" from forcible entry, but if Marines want the Corps to last for the remainder of Forrestal's 500 years, we had better be certain that the human cost of making our doctrine work is well within the Nation's tolerance.

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