

Remembering Iwo Jima

Commemoration and controversies 80 years later

by Dr. Robert S. Burrell

Remarkably, the Marine Corps only identified three of the six flag raisers in the most famous photo in the world correctly, a fact not fully reconciled until 2019! Despite this controversy, Iwo Jima remains extremely important to the narrative of World War II, not just in the popular iconography but in appreciating the horrific combat itself. Examining this battle eighty years later continues to elevate important lessons about the war, the Marine Corps, and ourselves.

Iwo Jima is a small, desolate, nearly uninhabited island six hundred miles from the Japanese mainland. It is one of more than 30 islands in the Bonin Islands chain. Today, these small and rocky islands ostensibly serve little value—other than for vacationing or conducting research. However, these

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same islands took on strategic importance eighty years ago during the titanic clash between the United States and Japan in the Pacific War. When the U.S. Pacific Fleet invaded Iwo Jima in 1945, the American public grew very concerned over the excessive casualties

reported on a distant island no one had ever heard of before.

From 19 February to 26 March, the United States suffered 28,686 casualties in comparison with 18,300 Japanese—a very concerning ratio indicative of the brutal combat that took place there.² Nonetheless, these ardent protests over the dead and wounded gradually transformed into patriotic euphoria when *Time* magazine published the now-famous flag-raising photo atop Mount Suribachi, which nearly everyone would recognize today. In the words of one historian, this picture is “an unsurpassed and unsurpassable masterpiece—immortal, emotional, fervent. The ultimate expression of American patriotism.”³ The impressive scene of six Marines working in unison to raise an American flag over enemy soil strengthened the conviction of a war-torn public in their just cause. However, in recent years, both the battle and its revered icon have received considerable historical debate.

The smoke on Iwo Jima had barely cleared in March of 1945 when the U.S. government requested the prompt return of those six mysterious Marines in the photo to the United States—with

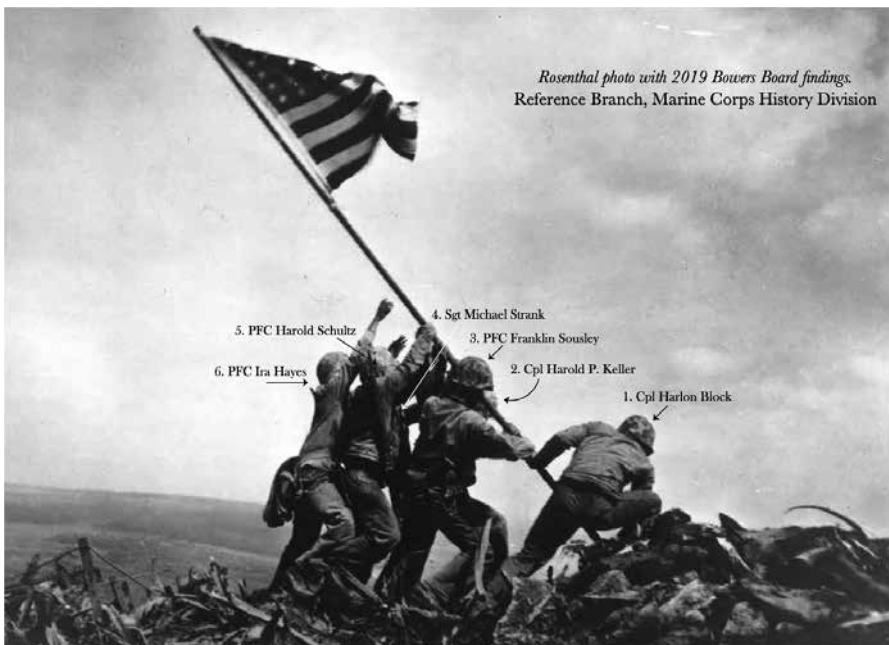


Photo of corrected flag-raisers from Marine Corps History Division, 2019.¹ (Photo: Marine Corps History Division.)

personnel transfers to the Treasury Department for fundraising purposes. Joseph Auslander published a poem in 1946 that eloquently expressed the feelings of most Iwo Jima veterans at the time.⁴ In their glorification of the *Pulitzer Prize-winning* photo, the American public got the story of Iwo Jima all wrong. As Auslander vividly portrays, the magnificent picture completely distorted the gruesome and tragic realities of death, toil, and pain endured on Sulphur Island. This sentiment by veterans was compounded by the fact that the famous photo was actually of the second flag raised over the volcano in order to replace and safeguard the first one. In other words, while the first flag-raising may have contributed to U.S. morale during the struggle with the Japanese, replacing it with a second larger flag was not of much consequence.

One of the Marines identified in the photo was Ira Hayes, a Native American of the Pima Tribe who survived all 36 days of the fighting. After Hayes received the news about returning stateside for the purposes of fanfare, he requested two things: he did not want to be identified as a participant in the photo and that the Marine Corps properly credit Harlon Block as the Marine planting the flag into the ground, who was incorrectly identified as Hank Hanson (both had died in battle). Both of Hayes' appeals were denied. Ever faithful, Ira Hayes later hitched-hiked across the country from Arizona to Texas in 1946 to tell Block's mother and father the truth. After receiving the subsequent appeals from the Block family, Headquarters Marine Corps made their first correction to the list of six flag-raisers in 1947.

But the story did not end there. In 2016, the Marine Corps admitted to misidentifying another of the flag-raisers—making national headlines.⁵ It disclosed that Harold Schultz had raised the flag in the photo and that Navy corpsman John Bradley was not in the shot. John Bradley's son, James Bradley, had published his best-selling book *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000) just ten years earlier (a story primarily based on the actions of his father), which made the news all the more scandalous.⁶ This



The west side of the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington County, VA.⁷ (Photo: Wiki Commons.)

newly identified Marine hero, Harold Schultz, had survived the battle, worked for the U.S. Postal Service after the war, and died in 1995—all without one word of protest over his proper recognition.

The significant amount of press this information received in 2016 highlights just how important the Iwo Jima icon remains but also how much the battle has been misunderstood. In fact, Eric Hammel would go on to write an entire book about the first and second flag raisings in a volume titled *Two Flags Over Iwo Jima* (2019).⁸ Unfortunately, Hammel's book, despite all its excellent detail, would also remain flawed.⁹ The Marine Corps announced another correction in late 2019 that grizzled veteran Harold Keller had raised the flag in the photo and that Rene Gagnon had not.¹⁰ Harold Keller died in 1979 and, like Harold Shultz, remained contently quiet throughout his lifetime.¹¹ This news likewise made a national stir.¹²

The implications of these two revelations in 2016 and 2019 are staggering. Although heroes in their own rights, Rene Gagnon and John Bradley embarked on the most successful national bond tour of the war in 1945—a huge affair conducted around the country with many flag-raising veneration—as pretenders.¹³ Of the three veterans in

the tour, only Ira Hayes was actually in the photo (although Gagnon and Bradley likely participated in the first and less-well-known flag raising). Apparently, the other two surviving flag-raisers, Harold Keller and Harold Shultz, willingly deferred to the imitators of Gagnon and Bradley—thereby escaping the hoopla. Deeply embittered and surly during the war bond tour (where he had been forced to participate despite his protests), Hayes would drink himself to death ten years later in 1955—only a few short months after the unveiling of the enormous Iwo Jima flag-raising monument in Washington DC.

The dramatic and shifting story of Iwo Jima iconography gives equal merit to the strategic and cultural arguments I made during the years 2004 to 2007 to more appropriately reflect the battle's strategic context. In 2019, Hammel forecasted in his book that “all of what has transpired with respect to the Iwo Jima flag-raisers over more than seven decades proves what every serious historian has learned the hard way: there is no such thing as settled history.”¹⁴ If the Marine Corps only correctly identified three of six flag-raisers in the most recognized photo in history, how much more about Iwo Jima's narrative needed review? In a sense, reconsideration of

the flag-raising events in addition to the larger aspects of the battle complement one another. They both demonstrate how badly Iwo Jima has been misunderstood and how important it remains to the people of the United States and the value of reconsideration.

In August 2020, *World Media Rights* interviewed me for the *Netflix* series *Road to Victory*. Near the end of the interview, I was surprised by the ques-

etheless, the island certainly had value to very long-range bomber operations.

Soon after the release of my book, I received a letter from a veteran who thanked me for correcting the context of *his* true story. This letter exemplified what the veterans of Iwo Jima knew very well—that the popular flag-raising icon did not represent their tragic struggle in over thirty days of fighting—assaulting head-on against one fortified position to

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tions about Iwo Jima being a *mistake* and if it had *any* value. In contrast to the period when I first published my book *Ghosts of Iwo Jima* in 2006, I find myself today arguing for the many reasons Iwo Jima assisted in the B-29 Superfortress campaign. Instead of the historical narrative correcting to a middle ground following my arguments, ideas about the strategic necessity of the battle have nearly reversed—labeling it unnecessary.

Most of us like to bin every decision in simplistic terms as either a success or failure, but in war, those simple descriptions are very rare. Iwo Jima was indeed a late change in strategy proposed by the Navy and the Army Air Force to bypass the long-planned objective of Formosa. Consequently, Iwo Jima was not inevitable as previous historians had suggested. In fact, the Bonins had been considered by planners previously in 1943 who determined the cost would outweigh its gain. Additionally, the 6,821 Americans killed in action are not justified by the number of B-29 crewmen saved in emergency landings on its airfield, as the Army Air Force attempted to infer during and after the war with questionable statistics. And, to be fair, no one, including the Marine Corps, believed the losses would be so high and the fighting take so long when the decision was made to seize it. Nev-

the next and, in so doing, losing friend, after friend, after friend. For these veterans returning home, the American public held a misconstrued perception of events that took place on a distant, small, volcanic island, in the middle of nowhere. This is the reason why the three surviving flag raisers, particularly Ira Hayes, sought to avoid the fanfare about the photo. Far from glamorous, fighting on Iwo Jima demonstrated the determination of common Marines to overcome deeply entrenched Japanese diehards—not with overwhelming firepower or superior tactics but with rifles, hand grenades, and bayonets. While many veterans of the conflict believed the flag-raising photo distorted the realities that they suffered, ironically it is only through that powerful iconography of six Marines planting Old Glory on Mount Suribachi that the American public remembers their sacrifices today.

Notes

1. Keil R. Gentry, “‘In Fairness to All Parties’: The Marine Corps Corrects the Historical Record,” *Investigating Iwo: The Flag Raisings in Myth, Memory, and Esprit de Corps* (Marine Corps History Division: Quantico, VA).

2. For information on a corrected view of Iwo Jima casualties, see my book: Robert S. Burrell,

Ghosts of Iwo Jima (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

3. Eric Hammel, *Two Flags Over Iwo Jima* (Havertown: Casemate Publishers, 2019).

4. Joseph Auslander, “Postscript to Iwo,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 30, No. 5 (1946).

5. Justin Worland, “Marines Say They Were Wrong About Man in Iwo Jima Photo,” *Time.Com*, June 2016, <https://time.com/4379572/marines-iwo-jima-photo-identity>; Michael S. Schmidt, “Man in Photo Of Iwo Jima Misidentified, Marines Say,” *New York Times* 165, No. 57273, (2016); Mary H. Reinwald, “Seventy Years Later—Was a Mistake Made?” *Marine Corps Gazette* 100, No. 8, (2016); Charlotte Alter, “Author of ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ Now Suspects His Dad Was Not in Iwo Jima Photo,” *Time.Com*, May 2016; <https://time.com/4317261/iwo-jima-flags-of-our-fathers>; Brendan Manley, “Marines Misidentified Iwo Jima Flag Raiser,” *Military History* 33, No. 4, (2016); Lindsay Kimble, “Marines Say They Misidentified Soldier in Iconic World War II Iwo Jima Flag-Raising Photo,” *People.Com*, June 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/marines-misidentified-soldier-iconic-world-210108121.html>; Paul Wiseman, “Marines Confirm Mistaken Identities in Iconic 1945 Photo,” *World War II* 31, No. 3, (2016); Michael S. Schmidt, “A Hero, a Son and Doubts on a Famed Photo,” *New York Times* 165, No. 57222, (2016); Mary Bowerman, “Marine Corps Investigating Claims about Iconic Iwo Jima Photo,” *USA Today*, May 3, 2016; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/05/03/marine-corps-investigation-iconic-iwo-jima-flag-raising-photo-mistaken-identity/83867626>; Jim Michaels, et al., “Marines Misidentified One Man in Iconic 1945 Iwo Jima Photo,” *USA Today*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/06/23/flag-raiser-marine-iwo-jima-photo/86254440>; and Christina Beck Staff, “Who Was the Mysterious Sixth Marine in the Famous Iwo Jima Photo?” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2016/0623/Who-was-the-mysterious-sixth-Marine-in-the-iconic-Iwo-Jima-photo>.

6. James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000).

7. Famartin, *The West Side of the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington County, Virginia*, October 31, 2018, online photograph, 4032x3,024, Wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018-10-31_15_25_21_The_west_side_of_the_Marine_Corps_War

Memorial_in_Arlington_County,_Virginia.jpg.

8. *Two Flags Over Iwo Jima*.

9. Hammel, who died in September 2020, should not have regretted getting the last flag-raiser correction wrong in his book. The Marine Corps conducted a thorough investigation into the flag-raisers in 2016. The Huly Panel consisted of LtGen Jan C. Huly (Ret), BGen Jason Bohm, SgtMaj Justin D. Lehew, Col Keil R. Gentry, SgtMaj David L. Maddux, Dr. Breanne Robertson, Dr. Charles P. Neimeyer, Col Mary H. Reinwald (Ret), SgtMaj Major Richard A. Hawkins (Ret), and Dr. Randy Papadopoulos. This panel, founded by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, concluded that Rene Gagnon was a flag-raiser. Hammel utilized, and heavily weighted, the Huly Panel results in his own investigation. See Mary H. Reinwald, "Correcting the Record: The Huly Panel Looks at the Iwo Jima Flag Raisings," *Investigating Iwo: The Flag Raisings in Myth, Memory, and Esprit de Corps*, (Quantico: Marine Corps History Division, 2019).

10. The Marine Corps launched a new investigation into the flag-raising participants in 2019. The Bower Board (led by BGen William J. Bowers) worked with the F.B.I. to examine photographic evidence. It determined that Harold Keller, and not Rene Gagnon, was in the photo. See Gentry.

11. Remarkably, Keller seems to have mentioned to no one, including his children, that he raised the flag on Iwo. There is some evidence, however, that Keller attempted to correct the historical record, or at least address it with the Marine Corps. In a letter from the family archive, MajGen P.H. Torrey wrote a stinging reply to Keller in September of 1945, which states, "any unproved and malicious gossip about any member of our Marine Corps is a direct reflection on you as a member or former member of our Corps. Nothing is more malicious and indecent than the tearing down of characters and lives through the spreading of untruths." See "In Fairness to All Parties': The Marine Corps Corrects the Historical Record."

12. Corky Siemasko, "Warrior in Iconic Iwo Jima Flag-Raising Photo Was Misidentified, Marine Corps Acknowledges," *NBC News*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/warrior-iconic-iwo-jima-flag-raising-photo-was-misidentified-marines-n1064766>. Also see Staff, "Marines: Another Iwo Jima Flag Raiser Misidentified," *Military History* 36, No. 6, (2020); and Staff, "Marines: 2 Men Misidentified as Having Raised 1st Iwo Jima Flag," *Daily Beast*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/marines-2-men-misidentified-as-having-raised-1st-iwo-jima-flag/?via=mobile&social=Reddit>.

13. For further information on the 7th War Bond tour, see Austin Porter, "Raising Flags, Raising Funds: Promoting the 'Mighty Seventh' War Loan," *Investigating Iwo: The Flag Raisings in Myth, Memory, and Esprit de Corps* (Quantico: Marine Corps History Division, 2019).

14. *Two Flags Over Iwo Jima*.

