

The Battle for Iwo Jima

(From Heros by Marc Cerasini)

"In the next fight [Iwo Jima], the Americans would suffer almost as many casualties as the Japanese in the bloodiest fighting of the war-all to capture a black, stinking little piece of hell on earth called Iwo Jima."

-Marc Cerasini

About Iwo Jima

- Iwo Jima literally means "sulfur Isle" because the island gives off bursts of steam and is pervaded by a smell of rotten eggs.
- Iwo Jima is only 5 miles long, and shaped like a pork chop.
- Beaches are ankle deep in volcanic ash.
- Noxious clouds hung over its 'lunar' desolate landscape.
- No freshwater is found on the island.
- The northern side of the island (Motoyama Plateau) has cliffs and ridges that the Japanese riddled with gun emplacements, camouflaged artillery sites, and miles of interconnected caves and tunnels.
- Mount Suribachi is at the southern end and is an extinct volcano that rises in a steep cone.
- The Japanese considered it "the gateway to Japan."
- Japanese airstrips were built in the relatively flat plain in between the north and south ends of the island.

About the Battle for Iwo Jima

- D-Day was 19 Feb, 1945.
- It was the largest amphibious assault of all time-up to that point.
- Iwo Jima was defended by 25,000 Japanese troops, 361 artillery pieces, and 22 tanks.
- Motoyama Plateau is where the heaviest fighting would take place because of the well-fortified Japanese positions.

The Japanese considered defending Iwo Jima as 'suicidal. The Japanese commanding general realized that he and his men were doomed; American airpower ruled the skies, the Japanese homeland was being pummeled by bombers, and the US Navy had command of the seas. Once the invasion started, there was no hope of victory, of reinforcement, or of retreat. But he refused to go down without a fight. He would defend Iwo Jima smartly, making the Marines pay for every inch of this forsaken chunk of rock.

D-Day

At 0630, 19 Feb, 1945, 482 amtracs approached the beach under rolling barrages of supporting cannon fire from US navy warships. The ankle-deep volcanic ash nearly immobilized all of their vehicles. Friendly fighter planes strafed the Japanese on the beaches, but they could not penetrate the Japanese bunkers.

The beach's sand embankment was steep, rising 15 feet. It blocked the Marines' field of fire but did nothing to protect them from the accurate and rehearsed enemy mortar fire. Marines hastily dug fighting positions, but they filled with ash and silt as soon as they were dug. It was like "digging a hole in a barrel of wheat." 8 battalions landed and were bogged down on the shoreline facing slow annihilation.

At 1000, the first American tanks arrived, but moved into the Japanese minefield where they soon turned into burning metal hulks littering the beach zone and the armored assault sputtered and died.

At 1200 when the beaches were packed with Americans and equipment, the Japanese executed a deliberate counterattack. All over the island, hatches popped open and Japanese soldiers emerged to take up fighting positions. Cannon muzzles swung into action from hidden emplacements. Machine gunners sighted in on the mass of humanity mired on the black sand beach with no where to withdraw to. The results were devastating. It was the worst bombardment the Marine Corps had ever experienced.

By the end of the first day, 30,000 Marines were ashore, and Mount Suribachi was surrounded and isolated, over 500 Marines were dead and 2,000 critically wounded.



Motoyama Plateau



Mt. Suribachi

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Raising the Flag

After a horrendous four-day contest to secure the extinct volcano and the cliffs, tunnels, minefields, and booby trapped landscape around it, the flag was raised on Friday, February 23rd 1945 at 1230. The photo was taken by Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press. This was staged after the raising of a smaller flag, but nonetheless came to symbolize American determination, military might, and nobility of spirit in the middle of the twentieth century. When the Navy Secretary, James Forrestal saw the first flag raising on Mt Suribachi and knowing the cost in blood to get it there he said to Marine commander, Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith "the raising of that flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years."

By 26 March, 1945, 5,885 Marines were killed and 17,000 wounded. This represented 1/3 of all Marines killed during WWII. Many of the survivors would be handicapped for life. Another 2,648 Marines would succumb to "combat fatigue" or PTSD. 738 Navy doctors and corpsman were killed or wounded. Of the 25,000 Japanese troops, less than 1,500 were captured. The rest preferred death to dishonor.

22 Medals of Honor were awarded to Marines for actions on Iwo Jima; 13 of which were post-humous. This is over 25% of the 82 Medals of Honor awarded to Marines during the entirety of WWII. 4 Medals of Honor were awarded to US Navy Corpsmen.

Fleet Admiral (5-Star) Chester Nimitz honored the Marines by declaring "Among the men who fought on Iwo Jima, uncommon valor was a common virtue." The tribute "Uncommon valor was a common virtue" would later be chiseled into the base of the Marine Corps Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery.



Issues for discussion

- 1) **What were the Japanese tactical advantages?** *The Japanese were dug into the terrain with cover and concealment, they were familiar with the terrain, they had established killing fields where they rehearsed their direct and indirect fire targeting, and they had established minefields.*
- 2) **What were some of the Marines' sources of friction on Iwo Jima that made it difficult to fight?** *Volcanic ash mud on the beach was difficult to maneuver in or dig into. There was no safe cover. The Japanese denied us heavy firepower from tanks. There was extreme violence, trauma, danger, death, fear, fatigue, chaos, and uncertainty.*
- 3) **What does the battle of Iwo Jima teach you about leadership?** *War is hell. Fighting in ideal conditions is difficult enough. Combat friction may make the difficult seem impossible. While survival isn't guaranteed, a leader should set their followers up for success through tough, realistic training which includes sources of friction that require the Marines to learn how to cope and reinforces a tough resilient warrior mindset.*