

FOR THE RISING SUN

A Novelette by

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2 March 1945 – 1030 hours – 12th day of Invasion

“Hey! Look here what I’ve found,” one Marine hollered to the other. “Look what I’ve found, this here Jap looks like he’s still alive to me.”

A Marine burial detail was searching Tabura Zaka for dead bodies, both American and Japanese. They had stumbled onto Tanaka’s position by the smell of the corporal’s body!

“Are you sure he’s still alive?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. At least, he’s breathing.”

“Well, don’t touch him until I can get a rope up to you. He’s probably booby-trapped!”

“Let’s get the rope around his legs and we’ll pull him out,” replied the second Marine.

Making a slipknot, the first Marine looped it around Tanaka’s right leg.

“All right now, pull together! Pull! Pull!”

Both Marines tugged on the end of the rope and with one final heave, drug Tanaka’s near lifeless body from the machinegun nest.

“Should we call a corpsman or do we just let nature take its course? He looks more dead than alive to me.”

“No, let’s get the corpsman. Remember, the brass wants prisoners.”

Tanaka was taken to the 5th Marines Field Hospital.

“Okay,” said the examining doctor, “let’s start a whole blood transfusion at once. He is almost out of blood. Give him morphine and when he is stabilized, we will operate.”

Ten hours later Tanaka awoke and looked up. He thought he must be dreaming. A Marine with a red beard was standing over him, looking down.

“Where is the bayonet,” Tanaka wondered. “Why am I still alive?”

Tanaka tried to arise from his hospital cot.

“Ok, young fella, you just lay back down and rest. You’ve been through a lot and are still not out of the woods, yet.”

Tanaka didn't understand a word of what the American Navy corpsman was saying, but his eye were kind and seemed to say it all . . . "you're all right, you won't be hurt."

Tanaka slipped back into sleep, remembering back to how he got here . . .

Seaman 2/c Tanaka pulled his writing table out of the canvas knapsack that he kept it in. The knapsack was the only way he could protect it from the white mold that clung to everything in the 8-inch shore gun emplacement deeply imbedded in the face of Mount Suribachi. He sat, brush in hand, looking out to sea, thinking.

This 8-inch gun emplacement was home to Seaman Tanaka and the other members of his gun crew. The gun emplacement had a limited field of fire, designed to fire in a 20-degree swing at a range of 2 miles, as were the others placed strategically around the island. These emplacements could command a quarter mile sweep of the Pacific Ocean, right or left from center.

The lowest range these guns had was 1,000 yards, the highest they could be elevated to was 10,000 yards, or just short of 2 miles. The emplacements had been embedded in the solid volcanic skin of an ancient volcano called Suribachi Yama (Cone-shaped mountain in Japanese). More than 3 months of hand digging had been expended to hollow out the 20 by 30 meter room the gun occupied.

It had taken four days of hard manual labor by the gun crew and Korean laborers, and the help of a windlass lashed to an outcropping of rock above the opening, to hoist the dismantled pieces of the 8-inch naval gun up the lava face of the mountain. The opening was no larger than the largest piece of the shore gun. One-inch thick steel was used for the doors of the aperture. Once the pieces were inside, the crew reassembled the weapon and made it ready.

Work continued, tunnels were dug, 90 degrees and then 90 degrees again. The tunnels would provide protection from the near direct blasts of attacking naval guns or bombs from aircraft overhead. The rounds for the gun, each weighing over 40 pounds, were carried by hand up the narrow path that led to the gun emplacement. Three hundred rounds were stored in the limited space.

Here also was home for Seaman Tanaka and the five-crew members that manned the gun. Water, food and the sleeping accommodations used up the rest of the room. A large earthen pot served the toilet needs of the crew. This smelly bucket was carried down the slope of Suribachi each morning and dumped in a disposal area. This job fell to Seaman Tanaka, being the lowest ranking member of the crew. Tanaka hated this job.

The room had the smell that a deep cave has; the walls always sweaty and dank. The daytime wasn't bad, but the nights were very cold because in the months between November and March it's winter in

Japan and Iwo Jima is NOT in the South Pacific. Also, the weather varied. Hurricanes visited the island several times a year and the only thing that could be counted on was that tomorrow the weather would be different.

Small fires near the aperture were allowed for cooking only. No fires for heating, as the fire would consume all the oxygen in the cave. On night watches, Seaman Tanaka wore two sets of his uniform, then wrapped himself in his thin, Navy-issue blanket. It still wasn't enough to ward off the chill that permeated the cave.

With the day's work done, and before night fell Tanaka would take out a fine-pointed brush, open his inkbottle and start to write. The letter would be to his father in Sasebo, the city where he had lived when he enlisted in the Japanese Navy in August of 1943.

He began with the day's date, February 17, 1945. The brush moved rapidly across the page. He wrote with great speed and skill, having won awards in school for his writing ability. Writing was the only diversion he had left. He knew that the letter he was writing would never be dispatched to Sasebo, but writing to his father made him feel better. It improved his morale and helped pass the time. Tanaka knew inside himself that he would not survive the invasion that was surely coming.

His writing disclosed the news that today the defenders turned back the invaders. The gun he crewed on scored a direct hit on the

forward deck of an American L.S.I. The American L.S.I. steamed out of range, but smoke and fire were seen coming from the bow of the ship as it escaped through the smoke screen one of the enemy destroyers had laid down to help mask its escape.

The naval battle was all in the defenders' favor. The American naval attack force was composed of three battleships, two heavy cruisers, and twelve destroyers. The Americans seemed to have recovered from the reeling blow dealt them by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor.

Tanaka wrote that his ears were still ringing from the noise of the gun. Even though the crew used the Japanese version of earplugs to minimize the danger of ruptured eardrums, the continuous noise and the near miss of a large projectile from one of the ships had left Tanaka with a severe headache. The ringing never went away completely. As he wrote, he thought of his training in Sasebo, after which he was to have been sent to Haha Jima.

However, during the 645-mile ocean voyage from Japan to Haha Jima the ship, carrying troops and supplies, was diverted to Iwo Jima, the largest island in the Bonin group. Tanaka had come to Iwo Jima on the same ship that brought General Kuribashi in June of 1944.

Tanaka's thoughts returned to his writing. The brush moved across the page in deft, precise strokes:

“Today we defeated the invaders and drove the enemy away from our sacred shores. Father I pray to our sacred ancestors that I will perform with courage and display my obedience to the sacred emperor when the enemy attacks. General Kuribayashi’s radio dispatch to Tokyo is a falsehood. This was not the true invasion force. I did not see any large troop ships in the armada that attacked today. It must be part of the pre-invasion bombardment. The fervor and intensity of the bombardment were surely indications that the time is near for the enemy to attack Iwo Jima.”

“We are prepared to defend the homeland to the death. The enemy forces are in full command of Saipan, Tinian and Guam. Each day our fighter aircraft go aloft to fight off the large silver devils. Many have been destroyed, but still they come. The Americans must have a limitless supply of the big silver planes. I think the Americans send the big silver planes to the mainland. The ones that fly over us are the dull green of camouflage, the ones they call B-24’s. Their aim is good, but the emplacements are bomb-proof.”

“I have lost count of the number of air raids we have had to endure; they lead to sleepless nights and physical exhaustion. Food is scarce and of poor quality. Fishing is poor off the shores of the island and we run the risk of dysentery always. The land that used to grow vegetables is scarce. The tillable land on Iwo Jima is too small an area to begin to support the mass of troops that have been coming in these last months. Our troop strength is now over 20,000.”

“The American submarines control the approaches to Iwo Jim and many supply ships have been lost to the American forces. With no vegetables in our diet, the men have a form of malnutrition called Beri Beri. Our hospital wards are full of men who have it and the dysentery. I long for the peace that was home, yet I know in my heart that I will not see it again.”

“It grows dark and cold now, Honorable Father, and I must try to sleep before my watch. My thoughts are with you and my Mother and sisters . . .”

Tanaka’s brush trailed off the page as fatigue overcame him and his had nodded. He jerked awake! Carefully, he put his writing tools away, capping his inkbottle and wiping the bristles of his brush with a small piece of cloth that he kept for this purpose. He leaned back on his hard bunk, asleep before his head hit the knapsack that also served as his pillow.

It is the 18th of February 1945. Before the first light of dawn, Seaman Tanaka and the members of the gun crew woke and ate a meager breakfast of rice and dried fish. There was little of it, but it staved off some of the ever-present hunger.

The first chore of the day was the removal of the spent shell casings from the gun emplacement. They were transported by hand to a cave that served as a storage area used to collect metal. Metal was very scarce in Japan and must be used again. On the trip back up the

narrow path that led to the emplacement, Tanaka and the gun crew carried a new shell. The weight of the shells and the steepness of the path made this work backbreaking, and the fact that it must be done in the dark didn't help as the early morning dampness made the footing slippery and dangerous.

Carrying the shells back to the gun emplacement took about 2 hours. The low-lying fog helped mask their activity. The commander of the gun told his crew that today the gun would not return fire. The gun was to remain silent unless new orders were received. All of the rounds had to be saved for the invasion that would come soon enough. If they fired they risked disclosing the location of the gun. Airplanes of the Americans had photographed the island and their commanders were plotting targets for the next bombardment. The decoy emplacements had already been hit.

Tanaka and the crew spent what seemed like a long time waiting and wondered just when all the action would begin. They really didn't have long to wait. The bombardment started as soon as the low fog lifted. The gunners of the American ships were on the job and the sound of incoming rounds told the defenders that they were facing a long day of endurance.

The gun emplacement was the safest place to be for it would take a direct hit to destroy the emplacement. The gun commander directed all of the men to move back to the far end of the corridors where it was the safest place to be. The men talked in low tones or just sat in tense

silence. They ate the rice and fish left over from their breakfast. An extra amount of food had been prepared for just this purpose. No fires were permitted now. The food was washed down with rainwater saved in a cistern from the night before.

As the shelling intensified, the men stuffed their ears with earplugs and tried to sleep. With sleep, time and danger are forgotten and alertness improved. Tanaka drifted off into a dream-filled slumber. In his dream, he was back home in Sasebo. He smelled his mother's cooking. The aroma of this favorite dish of fish and vegetables filled the air. The vegetables came from the family's garden, a small plot of ground on which his mother's tender care produced a crop beyond the normal expectation for the over-tilled soil.

Tanaka envisioned his father in his small store standing among the pottery and cooking dishes he sold. Father was exempted from working in the local aircraft factory. He had served in the Japanese army, but was mustered out after being wounded on the Manchurian front in 1942. Father Tanaka advised his son to join the Navy to avoid serving on the front lines. He had come to hate the war. He could not have known that his advice would lead to his son's involvement in what proved to be one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. It was about three hours after dark when Seaman Tanaka awoke from his dreams.

Aboard the American battleship U.S.S. New York, it was 1900 hours. In the intelligence room, deep within the bowels of the giant warship, American naval officers peered intently over the aerial photos

that had just been developed. From a close comparison with the photo taken the day before it was obvious that there was a lot of work to be done prior to tomorrow's shelling if the Marines who were scheduled to hit the beaches at 0900 the morning of 19 February 1945 were to have a chance of making it off those beaches.

One of the intelligence officers used his magnifying glass. He looked intently at something he spotted in the two photos.

“Hey you guys! Come look at this! One of those Jap gun emplacements is playing possum! Look here, on the 17th this emplacement was active, and in today's photos there isn't any activity.”

He marked the grid location in red and circled it.

“Let's place 'Old Possum' on a high priority basis and assign it to the 16-inch buns of the forward battery.”

In the early morning hours Seaman Tanaka tried to use the pot that served as their toilet. It was almost close to overflowing and the smell was overpowering. He postponed the call of nature for the moment and returned to his bunk. A short while later the gun commander had to use the facility and grew angry because Tanaka had not emptied the commode yet. He woke Tanaka and told him to go do it and to pick up dried fish and a bag of rice from the commissary while he was at ground level. The commander wanted to have the food cooked before the day's bombardment began.

Tanaka very carefully carried the smelly pot down the steep incline to the beach area. Near the bottom, he slipped on the wet lava, the major composition of Mount Suribachi. To keep his balance he let go of the pot and it went over the side and propelled downward with a series of crashing sounds.

The commander is going to be mad about the lost pot, though Tanaka, and he knew he better find a replacement before he returned to the emplacement. But first, he had better answer the call of nature himself before it was too late! He found a likely spot behind a small outcropping of rocks and let nature take it's course. No paper, of course, so he used the leaves from a small, scraggly plant growing wild around the base of the mountain.

Tanaka made his way to the commissary. Maybe they will have a new pot. The commissary was deep inside Mt. Suribachi and Tanaka had to wait in line as men from other emplacements are ahead of him. In a corner he spots a suitable container, a crock that was used to hold pickled fish. When he reaches the head of the line, he asks the Supply Sergeant if he can have the container. The Sergeant tells him to take it. Tanaka picks up the pot, takes his dried fish and bag of rice and starts back to his duty station.

The full rays of the early dawn and a lifting fog disclose the horizon. It is filled with the silhouettes of American warships. A great flash of fire illuminates the cold morning sky. The sound of the

incoming round and the impact of the 16” shell are only a thousandth of a second apart. Tanaka felt the earth shake. He takes a quick glance up the mountain at the point of impact and sees that it has missed his gun station by 40 meters. He whirls around, startled by the sound of shells hitting the beach near the airport. Those didn’t sound as loud, but they were landing only about a quarter of a mile away. He runs for cover in a nearby cave. The cave is the one where the empty brass shell casings are stored.

The entire mountain and the beach area are under intense bombardment. The whine of the next salvo from the U.S.S. New York causes Tanaka to take refuge behind a barrel of shell casings. The whole mountain seems to shake as if there were an earthquake.

Tanaka knows it will only be a short time before the next salvo hits. His fears of death from the American shell fire do not equal that which would have been meted out by his commander, so he leaves the security of the cave and goes outside to see if he can make it back to the gun emplacement.

It was a treacherous trip back, it seemed the whole mountain was covered with shell craters! Tanaka wondered if the gun was okay. How would it be after so much bombardment? As he approached the emplacement he could see it was still covered and the aperture to the emplacement was shut. He dropped the fish and rice but clung to the chamber pot as he ran for the path leading up the side of the mountain. His forward progress suddenly stopped. A section of the path had been

blown away. There was a chasm fifteen feet wide where the path used to be! There was no other way to reach the gun!

Tanaka's thoughts of running back down the path are interrupted by the muzzle-blast and shock waves of the next barrage. He lies down flat against the side of the path and covers his head with his arms, his face pressed against the wet lava stone.

The impact of the New York's 16" shell against the aperture of Tanaka's gun emplacement means instant death for the gun crew. The shields are blasted back against the sides of the emplacement. The entire gun and its undercarriage are slammed back against the rear wall, smashing two of the gun handlers. The rest of the gun crews' lungs are seared from the 1700-degree heat that follows the explosion and the heat from the blast sets their clothing on fire. The skin of their faces is instantly blistered and peeling away!

The rebound of the gun drives it forward and the impact smashes the opening. The barrel and its carriage are driven halfway out of the emplacement, the barrel pointing down at the base of Mt. Suribachi. The New York has scored a direct hit and the entire gun crew is dead in a millisecond!

The blast causes an avalanche of lava rock to come cascading down the sides of the ancient mountain. Tanaka's closeness to the side of the mountain saves him from the effects of the blast and the avalanche. He is up and on his feet, running back down the narrow

path. The pot he had held onto, broken when he took cover, now lies in a thousand pieces, but he is not longer concerned about that. Escape is paramount in his mind. He must make it back to the cave before the next salvo.

He hears the chilling sound of incoming rounds as he makes the base of the mountain. The round hits about 90 meters away, up and to his right. The cave is within sight as a rush of lava rock slides down the mountainside. A small, two-inch chunk of rock slams into his head, right below his left ear and his helmet is knocked off. He had forgotten to buckle the strap. A second piece of rock smacks into his right leg, just above the knee. The impact drives him to the ground and he loses consciousness from the pain. Blood is trickling down his neck and a large bruise is forming on his leg. The nearness of the next salvo showers additional debris on his inert body, nearly covering it.

Seaman Tanaka's first awareness is the sound of American airplanes overhead. The American's warplanes are dive-bombing the mountain. Tanaka turns on his back and looks up. The mountain looks like it is erupting. The smell of gunpowder is mixed with the smell of dust and napalm and burning flesh! Now he is aware of the blood on his neck. It has dried and clotted. He has been unconscious for nearly 20 minutes. His first attempt to get up is slowed by the removal of the lava covering his body. The second attempt, by the pain in his right leg. He feels it to see if it is broken. It isn't. He drags his right leg along in a half-run, half-hop as he plunges forward to the entrance of the storage

cave. His timing is good. The next salvo lands to the left of the cave, about 100 meters away.

Tanaka staggers to the back of the cave and flops down, his energy expended, his lungs gasping for air. His mouth feels like he has swallowed sand and he breaks into a cold sweat and passes out again on the cold rock floor of the cave. The dampness of the cave floor is the first thing Tanaka notices when he comes to. The next thing he is aware of is the silence. He rises painfully and limps slowly to the entrance of the cave.

From this cave he can see the vast armada of ships that form the American invasion fleet. The first wave of strange-looking water tractors (Amtraks) is less than a hundred feet from the beach. Now he knows why the American shellfire has stopped. As he watches from his hidden observation place, the first wave of American tanks lands on the shores of Iwo Jima. The tanks go as far as the first terraces, stop, and turn 90 degrees, then 90 degrees again and exit the beach.

The second wave is close to the shores. He watches intently as they hit the beach. These tanks stop and turn 90 degrees, then stop again. The rear gates of the tanks open and fall down to the sand. Men rush out and race across the wet, packed sand, headed for the first terrace. The deep sand slows and then stops their forward progress. He is overlooking what the Marines are calling “Yellow Beach One.”

The Marines landing on Yellow Beach One are from the 1st Battalion, 28th Marines. It is the beach nearest Mt. Suribachi. The landing area is about a quarter mile away from his cave, but the cave is 60 feet above the shoreline and, as yet, hidden from their view. The rocky shores will prevent any landing craft from landing in this area.

A strange calm prevails over the island. Tanaka wonders why there is no return fire from the guns hidden in Suribachi. He looks at the cheap watch on his wrist, made for Japanese naval personnel. It is 0936. A second wave of Amtraks lands and discharges their cargo of Marines. The Marines rush the sandy terraces and are soon stopped. They have run into the Marines of the first wave! The beach area is becoming too crowded and the 3rd wave is landing. In less than 6 minutes, 9,000 Marines are ashore on the black beaches of Iwo Jima.

Seaman Tanaka is overwhelmed by the obvious might of the American Marines. The horizon is filled with the flotilla of ships the Americans have committed to the battle for the ownership of this outpost of the Japanese empire. He closes his eyes and shakes his head as if to clear it. Maybe he is dreaming. He reopens his eyes, but no luck the American ships are still there.

Tanaka is still dizzy from the shock of his wounds, but now he feels the pangs of hunger. He checks out his body. He can feel that his head has a lump the size of a golf ball, but the swelling of the bruise on his leg has gone down, an effect of lying against the cold floor of the cave. What to do about his hunger? If he can get back to the

commissary, he can get food. Now he is thirsty, too. But where to get water? His mind is foggy; he can't think straight. He feels weak again and goes back into the rear of the cave, sitting down to ponder his circumstances.

Sleep steals over him but it is short-lived. He is awakened by the sound of gunfire from the gun emplacements on Suribachi. He rises and goes to the mouth of the cave again. The guns of Mt. Suribachi are pounding the beaches and the American Marines are under intense Japanese shellfire. In the north, at the rise on the end of the airstrip, he can see the telltale traces of 90 mm mortar fire smoke. The firing is directed toward the Marine assault units trapped on the beach.

Large tanks, smaller American landing craft, and the bodies of fallen Marines are littering the beaches. The tanks are sprawled topsy-turvy as if an angry child had tossed them away and gone off and left them. Tanaka is held spellbound by the unfolding panorama of the battle engulfing the beaches of Iwo Jima.

Despite the intensity of the defenders' barrage the Marines are on the move. Their mechanized equipment is stalled by the steepness of the terraces and the poor footing afforded by the deep sand. Some Marines are attempting to lay links of steel matting to form a road for the tanks up the steep terraces. Earth moving machines, bigger than anything Tanaka had ever seen before are clawing at the sand with huge blades attached to the fronts of the track-laying tractors.

The sound of incoming rounds alerts Tanaka to take cove again in the back of the cave. The rounds are coming from small amphibious tanks, firing from the sea, just about 1,000 meters from the base of Mt. Suribachi. The steepness and the rocky shoreline are preventing the Marines from landing at this point.

The persistent gnawing of hunger pangs reminds Tanaka that he hasn't eaten in over 16 hours. He searches the cave of any trace of food. There isn't any, nor is there any water. The crashing of rounds near the entrance to his cave erases all thoughts of hunger and thirst. He sits down to rest and decide what he must do next. His ingrained sense of duty tells him that he must make an attempt to contact some gun position, or make it to the command center in the bowels of the mountain. If he can get there he will be assigned to a new unit. His next worry is what the officers will think about his not being with his gun. How will he explain his absence? Will he be accused of cowardice? This fear is as real as his fears of the attacking Americans.

Tanaka decides that the safety of the cave is his best bet for the time being. He will just have to wait until dark to try and reach the command center. The hunger pangs are back and he can't ignore them. Then he suddenly remembers the rice and the dried fish he had dropped. He returns to the mouth of the cave and watches as the battle unfolds. The Marines are at the top of the terraces now and some of them are almost to the center of the island. He sees that their plan is to cut the island in half. If they separate and divide the island, Mt. Suribachi will be isolated.

Tanaka notices that elements of the attackers have made the runway of the main airstrip. He doesn't see how they can make any progress in the face of the volume of fire coming from the mountain and the mortar and artillery fire from the north. Tanaka looks around the area. He figures that the rice and fish he dropped should be about 80 meters from the cave. Should he make a run for the food? His hunger overcomes his fear and he darts for the rations, crouching low as he runs. He grabs the bag of rice and the dried fish and sprints back to the cave, falling inside winded and gasping for breath, but at least he now has food.

He unwraps the fish from its waxed cover and bites into the center of the dried fish. He almost gags; his mouth is so dry. Slowly his saliva attacks the fish and he is able to gulp down his first bite of food in 17 hours. He eats a complete fish, wishing he had some water to wash it down and overcome the dryness in his mouth. The rice is worthless without water to cook it. No water or fire eliminates the rice as a source of food for the time being. The fish makes him feel better, but the dryness gives him the hiccups. What to do now? He decides his best bet is to stay in the cave to wait for nightfall or until he regains his strength. Searching around he finds an old ammo box to sit on while he ponders his situation.

Tanaka knows he stands a better chance of survival if he can rejoin a unit. At least he would have water and food. He decides he will make his move from the cave when darkness falls. Lack of sleep

overcomes him and he drifts off into a restless slumber, waking again in the late afternoon, about 1640 hours. He limps to the opening of the cave to check the progress of the battle.

The Americans have severed the island. He is acutely aware of the intensity of the shelling of Mt. Suribachi. The scream of American shells sends chills up and down his spine. He looks down and sees that his hands are shaking. He clasps them together to stop the tremors. For the first time, Tanaka realizes that he is really alone and he is afraid for his life. His thoughts take him back to this father's house and how nice it was to be under the protection of his parents.

Now he wishes he had written to his parents more often. He knows that the last letter he wrote will never reach them. It's still in the burned-out gun emplacement. It makes him sad that his family may never know what happened to him. Taking inventory of his pockets, he produces one small knife and a few coins. Not much encouragement or help there. He has his wristwatch. Miraculously it wasn't damaged when he was buried in the lava rock. This cheap little timepiece is still functioning! Tanaka thinks the same about himself . . . still functioning, but just barely.

Tanaka's main concern now is his thirst. His mouth is very dry. Then he remembers the cisterns on the south side of Suribachi. They are chiseled into the lava and are used to catch rainwater. When it is fully dark, he will try to reach one of them to see if there is still any water in them. From the entrance of the cave he sees that the Marines

have stopped their attack. They seem to be setting up night fighting positions.

With nothing left to do but wait for nightfall, Tanaka decides to search the cave to see if he can find anything to help him survive. His search only yields a large piece of canvas about four meters square and some copper, electrical wire about 8 feet long. In a flash of inspiration that only comes to men in times of peril, Tanaka decides to cut the canvas to make a water bag. Using his pocketknife, he cuts a square meter section out of the canvas. Next, he strips the insulation off the copper wire and breaks it into two pieces about a meter long each by bending the wire back and forth until it snaps.

From the floor of the cave he picks up four small pebbles and places one of them in each corner of the canvas, folding the canvas over the pebbles. His next move is to take one of the lengths of copper wire and wind it around the canvas and pebble, twisting each end tightly. He repeats the procedure on the remaining three corners, creating a crude bail to carry his canvas water bag with. Checking it over, he is pleased with his makeshift arrangement.

To test the water bag Tanaka places a large rock in the bottom of the bag. One problem, how will he keep the water in the bag while it's being carried? Another flash of inspiration . . . he breaks off a shorter piece of copper wire and uses it to tie the canvas just below the line where the lower loops of the canvas meet. He smiles to himself, pleased with his handiwork. His hopes rise slightly.

Going to the entrance of the cave, Tanaka peers into the darkness. The sound of a naval shell coming in scares him. Suddenly the sky is filled with an eerie flickering light. The incoming round was a parachute flare. More parachute flares explode and the entire island is bathed in a weird, surrealistic type of illumination. Tanaka was not aware that the American ships had this type of shell. Now his plan to seek water is in jeopardy. He was counting on the cover of darkness to shield him. He retreats to the rear of the cave to ponder this new development.

The American Marines set up for the night in a position that is more than a kilometer away. He can hear spasmodic machinegun fire in the distance. Both sides are in a defensive position now. Tanaka decides to wait until after midnight to venture from the cave. He wraps the rest of the canvas around his body to ward off the chill of the cave and its dampness. This newfound warmth lulls him to sleep.

When he awakens, Tanaka goes to the mouth of the cave to check his watch in the flares' light. 0300 hours. His thirst tells him it's now or never. He picks up his crude canvas bucket and starts to head out of the cave. A second thought makes him hesitate and he returns to pick up his canvas cover, draping it around his shoulders like a shawl. Cautiously he ventures out of the cave that has been his sanctuary throughout this long, hellish day.

Tanaka knows this area like the back of his hand. Moving quickly from rock to rock, stopping when the parachute flares are their brightest, remaining motionless with the canvas gathered around his body, he waits until the flare shell flickers down before moving to the next position. The distance to the cisterns is about a quarter of a kilometer. The first one is dry. He has better luck at the next one; it is half full. Using his hands as a cup, he drinks his fill of the fresh, sweet water.

Then, lowering his canvas bucket, he tries to fill it with water. But it wants to float! He shoves the canvas deep into the water, raising the bucket quickly, trapping the maximum amount of water. Taking the extra copper wire, he ties it securely around the ears of the canvas, sealing in the water. He twists the wire as tight as he can with his hands. The journey back to the cave is without incident, just a matter of timing his movements to correspond with the darkness between the light provided by the American flares.

Once back in the cave, he ties the canvas bucket to a protruding rock so the vital fluid will not spill. The extra long swigs of cool water he had taken have helped to alleviate dehydration. Tanaka's morale improves. Now he takes some time to see to himself. Using some of the water, he cleans his neck wound. He is afraid to look at his leg, but finally takes off his leggings and rolls up the trouser leg to inspect it. The swelling has receded, but the leg is still giving him pain.

His immediate needs taken care of he now has time to think about his predicament. What can he do to join up with his own forces again? He knows that any movement by night is risky and that he would be more likely to get killed by his own troops than by the American Marines. The obvious decision is to just stay in the cave until morning and see what the daylight would bring. Wrapping the canvas tight around his body, Tanaka drifts off to sleep.

Invasion Plus 1 – 20 February 1945

The rattle of machinegun fire wakes Tanaka at 0645. It's off to the left of the cave. First it was the sound of the Nambu .25 caliber machinegun. The return fire had a sound that Tanaka had never heard before; the sound of a .30 caliber Browning, firing 250 rounds per minute! The firefight lasted less than 45 seconds and the island went still again. Peering out of the cave, Tanaka observes the ocean. The waves are much higher than yesterday; the weather has taken a turn for the worse. Not quite knowing what to do next, Tanaka goes back into his cave to wait.

Hunger is the next thing on his mind. He consumes one of the dried fish. This time it is better, he has water to wash it down. Next he notices the discarded bag of rice. Suddenly an idea forms. He takes out his pocketknife and cuts a square of canvas about a half meter long. Folding the square in half, he takes the edge of one end and folds it over twice, making a seam. Then using the smallest blade of his knife, Tanaka punches a series of small holes about ten centimeters apart.

Next, using a piece of copper wire as a needle, he threads it through the small holes made with his knife. Bending the ends down 90 degrees to keep the wire from pulling out, he repeats this processed on the other end of the canvas, creating a second water bag.

Pouring some of the precious water into the newly created bag proves disastrous! Unable to keep the sides together, the water spills out at once. Tanaka uses more of the wire to form little clips to hold the open side of the bag together. With this done, he cuts a string from the bag of rice and pours rice into the water bag. Adding water to the bag will allow the rice to soak and soften. More wire is used to hang the bag from the cave wall.

Its 0730 and the American naval bombardment starts up again. The American ships are using their full firepower to soften Mt. Suribachi, after which their planes attack in wave after wave, bombing and strafing. From the smoke filtering into the cave Tanaka knows they are dropping the feared napalm bombs. He can only huddle at the rear of the cave, his main fear being that one of the American shells or bombs would cause an avalanche that would seal off the entrance to his cave and trap him inside.

Through the din of shelling Tanaka could her the attack of the Marines against the defenders of Suribachi. Realizing that nothing could be gained by watching the battle, he retreated to the rear of the cave. In his mind he began to formulate a plan to escape the cave and rejoin his unit.

In his off-duty hours Tanaka had examined every inch of the cone-shaped mountain called Suribachi. The south side of the mountain had a rugged shoreline and no beach. Over the years, paths had been made to circle the backside of the mountain. These paths were used to get to the water cisterns. Under cover of darkness he would leave the cave, circle the south side of the island and attempt to swim to the northern part of the island to find his comrades.

Tanaka was a strong swimmer. Swimming had been his favorite sport in school. He knew that the strong currents and undertow that prevailed on the western side of the island would be difficult to overcome, not to mention the coldness of the water. Somehow, he believed it could be done.

Each time a shell struck the volcano, it shook and more of its lava hide came cascading down like small avalanches. Between 0730 and 0830 he counted over 400 direct hits. How could any of the guns survive this heavy bombardment? He knew he was safe as long as he stayed inside the cave, but his military training told him he must make an effort to join up with a unit of some type. Fear now was his constant companion.

When the bombardment stopped Tanaka became aware of the Marines full fury attack! He could tell this from the sounds of machinegun and rifle fire. Hand grenades and demolition explosions filled the air. Even the wind carried the smell of battle into that cave.

The most notable smell was cordite and napalm fumes. He was tempted to go to the mouth of the cave to see what was going on, but thought better of it and stayed at the rear.

In an effort to pass time and take his mind off his situation, Tanaka began stacking the scattered shell casings into a barricade he could stay behind. He figured the barricade would offer additional protection if a shell should strike near the entrance to his hidden home. The effort of making a wall of shell casing sapped his energy, so he sat down behind the barricade and watched a large rat attack his bag of rice. He threw a small shell casing at it, but missed. The rat ran away to the safety of its hole. To protect the last of the dried fish, he cut a piece of his canvas and wrapped the fish in it, using string from the rice sack to tie it tightly. Then he poured some of the rice in a small pile to divert the rats' attention from his main food supply.

The copper wire had come in handy. A small piece of it secured the neck of the rice sack. He found a large shell casing in which he stored the fish and rice. A smaller shell casing served as a plug for the end of the larger one holding his food. Protecting his meager food supply was of vital importance. He had no idea when he would be able to replenish it.

Tanaka's new worry was the rat. He hated rats. He feared that when he went to sleep the rat would come out and bite him. The rat began to worry him so much that he decided he would have to kill it in

order to achieve any peace of mind at all. But how could this be accomplished?

Stoning the rat was out of the question. None of the rocks in the cave were big enough. The cave contained no boards or items that could be used for a club. So he surmised he must trap the rat. But what to use as a trap? He let his mind ponder this question. By listening to the sound of the battle raging outside, he knew that some of the guns on Suribachi were still in operation. The sounds of the mortars being fired from Suribachi were distinctly different than those of incoming shells.

If he could reach the commissary, everything would be all right. He could be reassigned to another unit. The commissary was less than three quarters of a kilometer away. The problem was in order to reach it he would have to cross an open area of about 200 meters. The open area was along the base of the mountain and provided no cover of any kind. Surely the Marines would see him or he would be mistaken for the enemy and killed by his fellow defenders. But at night it would be different. So that was it, he decided. Under cover of darkness he would have to leave the safety of his cave and attempt to make his way to the commissary.

His plan of escape established, Tanaka turned his attention to the problem of the rat, again. The rat must go. He would not share his cave with this intruder. But how to make a rat trap? A shell casing lying at his feet provided the answer. He selected a medium sized shell casing for the strap. A small piece of fish was taken from its storage

shell to be used as bait. The shell casing was laid on its side near the rat's hole and rice from the pile Tanaka had provided the rat as a "food decoy" was laid out in a line from the rat's hole to the open end of the casing. Last, but not least, Tanaka placed a piece of dried fish inside the shell casing. Using another piece of copper wire, Tanaka fashioned a hook he placed over the open end of the shell casing. With the wire in hand, he set up a vigil.

More than an hour passed and he had lost interest in the rat's pursuit. The noise of battle from outside the cave intensified and curiosity finally got the best of him. He proceeded to the cave's entrance to observe the battle's progress. From this lookout point Tanaka could see that the Americans had made little progress. The Japanese defenders were holding the Marines in a trap. The Marines were under fire from Suribachi's defenders and heavy mortar and artillery fire from the north that appeared to be coming from the rise at the end of the first airstrip.

Tanaka's view from the cave was excellent. While at the base of the mountain, it was elevated about 400 meters above the area where the battle was taking place. To his left, he could see that the Marines were attacking along the western sector of the island. This was the area to the left of the airport and on the Pacific Ocean. The landing beaches were a graveyard of wrecked landing craft and were still under heavy bombardment. This wasn't stopping the American Navy from landing supplies in ever-increasing numbers, though.

To his right, Tanaka could see the hellish battle. The horizon was filled with the mighty American armada. He could not believe there that many ships in the world! It was at this point he knew the battle to defend Iwo Jima was lost. This thought only strengthened his resolve to rejoin his own forces. He must, as a good Japanese sailor, fight to the death defending his country.

A barrage of artillery fire from the American attackers drove Tanaka back into the safety of his cave. He knew that only a direct hit by the Marine artillery could harm him in his burrow. Once back inside the cave, he checked his rattrap. The dried fish he had used for bait was gone, but the rat had beaten him at the game.

“All the better”, Tanaka thought, “I will get him this time.”

So, the trap was baited again with the dried fish and Tanaka took up his vigil over the trap. The growling in his stomach signaled his hunger. Time to check on the soaking rice. The water had softened the rice enough so he could chew it. The rice had no taste, so he supplemented it with a piece of dried fish. Then he drank the water the rice had soaked in. It tasted like the canvas smelled. He allowed himself a swallow or two of his dwindling water supply.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he observed the rat approaching the trap. Moving slowly he took hold of the wire hook and sat motionless. The rat advanced cautiously toward the smell of the dried fish. After looking in both directions several times, the rat went

for the bait. Once the rat was inside the shell casing Tanaka pulled the wire and tipped the shell casing upright with the rat inside!

Tanaka quickly sprang over and covered the shell casing's opening with his hand. He had that rat! The rat was thrashing about inside the shell casing, attempting in vain to escape his new prison. Tanaka was afraid he would be bitten if he kept his hand over the casing opening, so he took a smaller casing and stuck it down inside the larger opening. The trap was closed! At least one of his enemies had been vanquished! *"We are both in a trap and soon will be dead unless we can both escape our prisons,"* Tanaka thought to himself. *"Tonight I will try to make my escape."*

No human being is exempt from fear. Tanaka was for the first time in his life, alone and afraid. He wondered how the gods had put him in such a position. He wished he had been with his gun crew when the American shell destroyed the emplacement. He would have died in the line of duty, a Japanese hero. He would have died for the emperor. He would not be in heaven and his parents would be proud of him. He would have pleased his ancestors.

Would he now be thought a coward because he was lucky and not in the gun cave when that shell hit? Should he commit hara kari to save face? Tanaka decided it wasn't possible. In spite of all the regulations and military training, he wanted more than anything to live. If he stayed in the cave, the advancing Marines would kill him. To save face, he must rejoin a fighting unit of some kind.

Checking the rattrap , Tanaka found the rat had given up trashing about in the shell casing. He raised the casing he was using for a lid and adjusted it to allow some air into the trap. Now he wanted that rat to live, too. After all, they were both in a trap. That would have to last the rat for a while.

“Better this rat died of starvation, than me,” he thought.

The sounds of battle reminded Tanaka of his situation and he decided he would sleep for a while to save his strength for his escape. Laying the canvas out on the floor of the cave, he rolled up in it, using part of it as a blanket to cover his body.

Sleep comes easily when you are afraid. It is a way of running away from things you can't handle. Tanaka thought that perhaps he might dream of home while he slept . . . it was springtime in Japan and Tanaka could see his parents house, and smell his mother's cooking . . . it was his favorite dish, fish with fresh vegetables from her garden . . . drifting off to sleep Tanaka felt he was home, his war was over.

The cave was dark and sounds of battle were sporadic at 1730 when Tanaka awoke. He thought the Americans must be going into their nighttime defense positions. Tanaka walked to the entrance to his cave to determine how far they had advanced while he slept. It appeared the Marines had made only a few hundred yards during the day's battle. Tanaka busied himself taking raw rice from the sack and

putting it in the smaller water bag to soak. He took several swallows from his water bag. The water was almost gone and there was only one fish left. He must make it out of the cave tonight.

Tanaka decided the best time to try his escape would be about 0300 hours. The Marine sentries, as well as the Japanese defenders, would have tired by then and wouldn't be as alert. Yes, that would give him time to make it to the western sector of the island before daybreak. It was completely dark now and the only light Tanaka had was from the parachute flare shells. Their flickering light caused weird light patterns to dance on the walls of the cave. There was just enough light to see the dial of his wristwatch. It was now 1130 hours.

Time passed slowly. He went over the escape plan in his mind again. At 0300 hours he would take his meager food supply and his canvas and leave the safety of the cave. The canvas would be his night-time camouflage. Taking out his pocketknife and locating the center of the canvas, Tanaka cut a slit about 200 mm long. Just enough to get his head through. When he left the cave he put the canvas over his head and used it to ward off the chill of the night air on Iwo Jima. By sitting still and bunching the canvas around his body, Tanaka would blend into landscape and become just another rock. He looked at his watch again, the time was going so slowly.

And then it was 0245, time to get ready. Tanaka put the canvas over his head, retrieved the last fish from the shell casing and took the small bag with the soaking rice, attempting to eat it. The rice hadn't soaked long enough though, and was hard to chew. By taking a

mouthful of water, he was able to chew the rice into a gruel, which could be swallowed. It wasn't as good as if it had been cooked, but rice was rice. It has as much food value uncooked as cooked, reasoned Tanaka.

Slowly he ate half of the last fish, then wrapped the remainder in a piece of canvas and placed it in the side pocket of his uniform. Just as he was ready to leave the cave, Tanaka thought of the rat. As a good luck charm he released the rat its shell casing prison and watched it scurry quickly to its hole. Before leaving, Tanaka took one final look at his cave home. Was he making a mistake leaving the security of his lair? Only time would tell.

When the last flare shell flickered and burned out, Tanaka left the cave. Running low and fast, he made it to a small ridge and stopped just as a new flare shell exploded over Mt. Suribachi, fully illuminating his position as if it were daylight. He froze in a squatting position, tucking his helmet down against his body. In this configuration, he was almost invisible. As the light from the flare died, he was on the run again, sprinting to a small pile of coral. The next flare had just exploded and was on its flickering flight to earth.

Tanaka could hear sporadic machinegun fire off in the distance. It sounded like the Americans. It was quite a way off and didn't concern him. His concern was for the next run. This would be the most dangerous part. It was more than 100 meters and on the path that ran along the base of the volcano. He would have to make it in one run. He

hoped his leg was up to the task. He had timed the flares. There was an interval of about 11 seconds between firings.

As soon as the last flare dimmed, he made a run for it. When he was halfway there his leg gave out, but he continued to run, dragging his bad leg along behind. His destination was a small shrine. He laid down behind his concrete base to rest his leg and get his wind back. Tanaka now realized that he was really in a weakened state. That last run had sapped his strength. He was now at the most easterly point of the volcano. Out to sea he caught the faint glow of the muzzle blast of the American ship firing the flare shells. There were no Americans in this sector.

Off to his left was the Pacific Ocean. The wind was picking up and he could hear the tinkling of the wind chimes on the shrine. He prayed to his ancestors that he would make it to safety. What that safety would be, he didn't know, he just prayed. Tanaka knew the terrain of the mountain so well that he felt comfortable pursuing his course. He wondered how well this section of the island was defended by his countrymen.

Tanaka's next destination was a steep path that led down from the base of Suribachi to the ocean. He walked slowly, crouching with the canvas gathered around his body. He stopped every 15 meters and stood motionless for a few seconds, listening. The island was surprisingly quiet now. Arriving at the top of the path, he walked down its steep incline. This put his body out of sight. The mist from the ocean

had made the path slippery and he had to hold onto an outcropping of lava to keep from sliding down. He was hoping to make it to the cisterns where he had retrieved the fresh water the previous night.

All this running and the fact his adrenalin was working overtime made his mouth dry. The extra adrenalin made his heart beat faster and the pupils of his eyes were fully dilated. His hearing was intensified, like a trapped animal; he was ready for flight or to fight! It even dulled the pain in his leg. The only sound he heard was the crashing of waves against the coral about 20 meters below.

Thoughts of fresh water were the spur he needed to get going again. As he climbed back to the level of the path, his foot slipped and dislodged a large chunk of lava rock. The night air was shattered by the sound of rock tumbling down the path toward the ocean. The next sound was the rat-a-tat-tat of a Nambu machinegun firing at the area where rock had fallen.

Tanaka hit the ground and rolled over to the base of the volcano. It was just in time. The bullets from the machinegun were peppering the area near the path where he had just been. He knew as long as he was near the volcano's base the machinegun fire couldn't hit him. All he had to worry about were the splinters from the lava hitting him in the face. He covered his face with his arms and lay perfectly still.

The next flare shell was faint, but apparently the Japanese gunners were only firing at the sound they had heard. Tanaka, under

his canvas shawl looked like part of the landscape. The machinegun quit firing almost as soon as it had started. Prolonged firing would only have given away their position. The only thing Tanaka could think of was making it back to the safety of his cave. He began to crawl back on his hands and knees, staying as close to the base of the mountain as possible. In this fashion he made it back to the shrine, and offered a mental prayer before continuing on. He now felt safe enough to run crouched over, all the way back to the cave, sprinting about 30 meters at a time.

Back at the cave Tanaka was so relieved to have made it safely, he felt tears of joy running down his cheeks. He didn't believe this to be manly, but at this point didn't care any longer. He was happy to be back and out of harm's way, at least for the present. In his weakened condition, the only thing he could do was stagger to the back of the cave and fall asleep.

Invasion Plus 2 - 21 February 1945

The scream of the American dive-bombers blasting Suribachi was the sound that greeted Seaman Tanaka when he awoke on the third morning of the invasion. The next sound he heard was the shrill screech a 16" naval gun shell makes coming in. Each shell's impact against the mountain volcano's crusty hide shoot it and made it shudder in pain, or so it seemed to Tanaka. The American bombardment lasted for the better part of an hour. To him it seemed like an eternity. Prayers to his

ancestors helped to fight back the feat that this would be the day the invaders would overcome his position.

When the dive-bombing and naval shelling stopped the sounds of battle changed. Artillery shelling makes a different sound. Machineguns, mortars and rifle fire are different, too. All the sounds began to blend together to become one horrifying orchestration to Tanaka's ears. Like a symphony of death. His feeling of hopelessness added to his loneliness. Now he really understood that he was alone with no change of help and no way of rejoining any unit. His thoughts were of what he should do when the Americans finally overran his cave. Should he kill himself; take his own life to save face? He had heard terrifying stories about the American barbarians.

Desperate men often see clearly what must be done. The path he would take was like a blueprint in the young sailor's mind. If the American's overcame his position, he would attack them with his pocketknife and rocks. Maybe he could kill at least one of them before he fell in battle. If their advance was halted before nightfall he would make a final attempt to reach the northern end of the island. There he would join a fighting unit of some kind and fight with them until the battle was won or lost.

With his plans firmly established, Tanaka's thoughts went to his stomach. All that was left to eat was a portion of the last fish. He knew he must build his strength for whatever was to come. The remains of his last fish he carefully divided in half. Eating slowly and using some of his dwindling water, the fish was consumed. It wasn't enough to still

his hunger, but he knew that the last of the fish must be saved for later. He would eat it just before leaving the cave . . . if he made it through the day.

Tanaka also realized that today was just possibly his last day on earth. The thought failed to add additional fear to his mind. His main concern was to act in a manner that would not disgrace his father or his ancestors. The sounds of battle increased. He went to the mouth of the cave to determine how close the Americans were to his position. The advance was less than he had thought it would be. He was pleased that his countrymen were holding the attackers at bay. He searched the cave again for anything possible to help his escape. The empty shell casings had no value. A half-full can of grease used to lubricate the shore guns didn't hold any promise either . . . or did it?

Newsreels of Gertrude Ederle's attempts to swim the English Channel played back in Tanaka's mind. He remembered reading her story in the newspapers before the call to duty had taken him away from home. Yes! That was it! The American woman had used a heavy grease coating on her body to help ward off the numbing cold of the frigid waters of the English Channel! Tanaka decided he would have to coat his body with grease, too, if he expected to make good his attempt to swim to safety. High tide would occur at 0400 hours. Tanaka knew this from having fished these waters around the base of Suribachi, as well as the western beaches.

Sailors assigned to man the shore guns fished in their spare time, not as a sport, but as a way of improving their meager diets. The beaches along the western shoreline were excellent for shore netting, the method of fishing favored by the Japanese sailors. Extra fish from their catch was sold to other island personnel. If the catch was bountiful, fish were sent to the officers' mess. This gesture insured that extra time would be found for fishing. It was important that the fish be distributed at once. Refrigeration was not available to preserve the catch.

During the day of February 21, 1945 Seaman Tanaka had worked on preparations for his escape. He made a loincloth out of his dwindling canvas supply. He stripped down to try it for size. At first he tried to hold the loincloth around his waist with some of the wire he had left. It wasn't satisfactory, so he took the cotton belt from his uniform trousers and tried that. It worked very well. The wire was cut into small lengths and used to tie around the cuffs of his trousers. He wrapped the wire as tight as he could get it. His trousers would become a crude form of water wings. Tanaka had been taught this trick in his early Naval Training School days. It was part of an abandon ship survival course.

What to do with his wristwatch was his next concern. This was a real puzzle. The watch was cheap and not waterproof. Nevertheless, it had its value to the young sailor.

The watch and his small pocketknife were the only personal belongings Tanaka had left in the world. He had almost given up hope of saving the watch when an idea came to him. Why not coat the watch in a wad of the heavy grease he intended to use on his body? Yes, why not?

The watch was submerged into the can of grease and enough of the grease was taken out of the can to form a small ball around the watch. The canvas came to good use again. A small square cut from it was enough to wrap around the ball of grease. The four ends were brought together and tied with yet another piece of the copper wire. The saltwater might penetrate the canvas, but the shield of grease would protect the watch.

Tanaka's naval shoes were the next items to receive his attention. The shoes were a combination of leather soles and bottoms with canvas tops. Tanaka removed the laces and used his knife to cut the canvas tops away from their bottoms. With the knife he cut a series of holes into the sides of his shoes. Cumbersome as the shoes might be to his swimming, he knew he must wear something on his feet to protect them from the coral reefs he would encounter. Without some protection, the coral would cut his feet to ribbons. He relaced the shoes and put them on his feet. The extra length of the laces were wrapped around his ankles and tied snugly, but not tight enough to cut off the circulation to his feet. This would keep his shoes from being sucked off by the current while swimming in the ocean.

As he looked to his right, he could see the rat again. The rat cocked his head as if to say, "*What are you doing now?*"

Tanaka thought to himself, "*Yes, Mr. Rat, I'm the one who's trapped, and you are free! This is where you live. This cave is your home.*"

To me it's a prison. I am the rat that is trapped, not you! You have few enemies; I have thousands of them just outside this cave!"

Tanaka and the rat stared at each other for a time until the rat became tired of looking and scampered away into a crack in the wall of the cave. An old Japanese proverb came to Tanaka's mind, the one that says "*a rat, when trapped, will fight.*"

"Well, I will fight!" Tanaka thought. *"I will escape my prison and I will fight. Tonight will be the night. It has to be tonight. The Americans will take this sector of the island by tomorrow, so it has to be tonight or never!"*

The sounds of battle outside his prison had increased, interrupting his preparations. He went to the entrance of the cave to view the battle's progress. He was now amazed at the progress of the Americans. They were less than a quarter of a kilometer away from his cave. He prayed and hoped they would not overrun his position before nightfall. He feared capture. He had heard stories of the atrocities of the American Marines at Guadalcanal, Saipan and other Pacific islands. They were barbarians, like wolves or other wild animals. Less than human. He remembered hearing how Marines treated captured Japanese prisoners. They made them talk and then cut off their ears or testicles while the captives were still alive! He resolved that before he would allow himself to be captured, he would take his own life.

Custom in Japan was an important part of daily life. One's death at one's own hands was preferable to a loss of face. It wasn't considered suicide as known in the western world. It was a matter of honor to the Japanese.

Tanaka decided to rest while time dragged by. At the back of the cave he laid down, wrapping the canvas around his body to keep warm. He was soon fast asleep. In his sleep he dreamed of being in his father's house again. It was summertime and he was a small boy asleep on a mat. He could once again smell his mother's cooking . . . then his dream became a nightmare! A Marine with a red beard held a bayonet at his throat. He was flat on his back, with the Marine's foot on his chest. Tanaka could see his own hands wrapped around the blade of the bayonet, blood running down both his arms. He screamed . . . "*Stop, stop!*" and then jerked awake. He was pleased and relieved as one is when waking from a nightmare to find it has all been a bad dream. But his body was drenched in sweat.

Wondering what time it was he started to look at his watch, only to remember that it was already packed away. Going to the mouth of the cave to check on the battle, he realized what had awakened him. A strange stillness prevailed over the battlefield. For the moment everybody had stopped firing. The Marine front lines were not only about 700 meters from his cave. It appeared they were making preparations for night defense of their position. From this vantage point Tanaka could see the Marine artillery dug in at the end of the main airfield. That must be where all the heavy artillery fire had been

coming from. Some of the guns were pointed at Mt. Suribachi and the rest were directed toward the northern end of the island.

The invasion beach on the eastern side was filled with water tractor tanks, small landing craft and ships that had their bows on the beach. The strange looking ships had bow doors that opened and were discharging cargo of all types. The trips of the smaller ships from the mother ships laying offshore were slowed by high waves crashing against the shore.

Hiding in his café they way he had, Tanaka hadn't noticed the weather taking a turn for the worse. The eastern beach was littered with the wrecks of boats of all sizes and mechanical vehicles and water tractors of every type and size. Most were vehicles that Tanaka had never seen before. Was the wreckage from the guns or the ferocity of the ocean? Tanaka decided it was both, but the military might of the Americans amazed him.

The change in weather didn't look good for his chances of swimming to safety. Waves were running eight to ten feet. Along the western beach and to the left of the main airfield he could see a line of Marines stretching all the way across the sector. Three kilometers in front of the Marines stood Tabaru Zaka (named after a famous Japanese battlefield of the 1877 civil war). This landmark was the highest point of land in the western sector. Tanaka made a mental note to use this mountain as a reference point, knowing he would have to make it that far to insure he would be friendly territory.

Tanaka felt helpless again. The battle was so near, yet so far. Fear made his mouth dry and he was tempted to drink the last of his good water. He put that thought out of his mind. The water must be saved until he ate the last of his fish. Time passed slowly. He used it to review his escape plans. As he waited for darkness, he prayed to his ancestors for their help and protection.

Eerie shadows flickering on the walls of the cave told him it was dark outside. The dancing light was caused by the parachute flares. This time he noticed that the flares were different. They weren't being fired from the American ships. They were being fired from mortars . . . Japanese mortars based on and around Mt. Suribachi!

The closeness of the Marines to the base of the mountain required extra vigilance. The light from the flares would help keep the Americans under observation during the night. Little help was forthcoming from the northern end of the island. The defenders of Mt. Suribachi would have to fight their own battle.

After what seemed an eternity, Tanaka decided it was time to try and make his escape. He didn't really know what time it was, he was just tired of waiting. The last of the fish was unwrapped and he ate it slowly, washing it down with the last of his good water. He put his watch in a jacket pocket where he kept his knife and buttoned the pocket. Now he decided he couldn't swim with the jacket on, so off it came. Care was taken to wrap it into a neat square, as small as possible.

What was left of the copper wire was used to tie it up. The jacket was placed up the leg of the trousers to his uniform. Next he placed the legs of his trousers around his neck and tied them together. The last thing was to place the canvas over his head. He was as ready to go as he ever would be.

Halfway to the entrance of the cave Tanaka remembered the can of grease. He went back for it. At the cave's mouth he took a few minutes to look around to determine if the way was clear. He traced his way along the same route he had used on the other nights, stopping and crouching down when a flare shell went off. By running in the dark, between flares, he was soon at the shrine. He paused to catch his breath. The pain in his leg had returned. He tried to ignore it.

Everything was going according to his plan. As he advanced around the mountain's southern end, the flares were no longer a problem. There was just enough moonlight for Tanaka to find his way. He had used the path on many occasions while exploring the island. His next objective was the water cisterns. When he got there the water was almost gone. By laying down on his stomach he was able to drink his fill of fresh water. He wanted to drink more of the water, but his good sense told him he must be careful not to overfill his stomach. It would affect his swimming ability.

For a while he laid on his stomach listening intently for any type of sound. Deciding the way was clear, he was up and running again, first sprinting and then stopping to listen. He made his way around the back of Mt. Suribachi, a distance of about one kilometer. Once on the

western side of the mountain, his movements were of a shorter distance and he listened longer. At the point where the mountain met the western beach he stopped and looked for the path that led down to the ocean. When he found the path he followed it down to the ocean, keeping close to the edge of the lava cliffs. He removed the canvas from his body and laid it aside.

Tanaka's next move was to open the can of grease and taking big handfuls, he applied the grease over his entire body, head to toes, everything was covered! Satisfied that his body was completely covered, he walked into the surf up to his knees. There he stopped and untied his trousers from around his neck. The trousers were submerged in the waters of the Pacific and allowed to soak for a few minutes. When he was satisfied they were completely soaked, he raised them above his head and swung them down with as much force as possible. This movement was designed to catch as much air as possible. With the legs inflated, he submerged the trousers in the water again – instant water wings!

Before entering the cold water all the way, Tanaka splashed water under his armpits. This would help him adapt to the coldness of the ocean. When the water was up to his armpits he jumped onto the water wings and started swimming out through the surf. The young Japanese sailor swam out about 300 meters. Just enough distance to be beyond the breakers. The water was numbing at first, but with the grease and the kicking of his feet and paddling of his arms, he was able to maintain his momentum and overcome the water's cold bite.

In order to overcome the current that was trying to take him back to shore, Tanaka had to go farther out. At 500 meters he was well beyond the severe undertow that had kept trying to pull him ashore. Looking to his right as he paddled through the ocean, Tanaka could see the island bathed in the eerie flickering light of the parachute flares as they descended to earth. He could see no movement. He wondered if anyone could see him. Once he looked back at Mt. Suribachi. He saw it plainly, silhouetted against the dark sky. AT this time his thoughts were that he had made the right decision. Too late to worry about it now, anyway, he told himself.

He worried he might be going out too far. Was he caught in a current that would take him to open ocean? He knew the currents flowed different ways when they got close to shore on an open island like Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima had no natural harbor, no breakwaters to control the ebb and flow of the fast-running currents. The young sailor had to use all of his power and energy swimming toward the western shore. So much so, that his forward progress was nil. In fact, he felt like he was going backward.

The water was getting warmer now, indicating that he had encountered a new current. This current was taking him in the opposite direction, back to shore! This new current was in his favor and he liked that, but feared that it might take him into the beach where the Marines were entrenched.

The cold water presented a new danger. His bad leg was cramping. By holding his leg straight, he was able to get rid of the cramp. This meant that he could only float and paddle with his arms. In spite of his best efforts, he was getting closer and closer to shore. When he could see the whitecaps of the waves, he knew he was in the breakers and unable to combat the undertow. Once caught in the breakers he was washed ashore.

The waves became violent, like they were crashing against some underwater obstacle. Tanaka was flipped end over end. The water was acting like a magnet, sucking him under like he was caught in a whirlpool, a constant vortex that seemed to have no bottom and no end. His lungs were ready to burst for lack of air when the ocean seemed to spit him upwards to the surface. Gasping for air and spitting out salt water, he did his best to stay on the surface. He looked back in time to see a monster wave coming after him. The wave lifted him high in the air and dropped him in a trough. The next one caught him at the bottom of the trough. It slammed him against the coral encrusted bottom, the ocean floor! The undertow dragged his body back and held him at the bottom for what must have been the better part of a minute. The last thing the young sailor remembered was hitting his head against the coral bottom.

Luck was running Tanaka's way that night. The next wave picked up his unconscious body and with the force that only Mother Nature can muster, lifted it high on the peak of a wave, slamming it

through the surf to deposit the nearly drowned sailor on the wet black sand of the beach.

Invasion Plus 4 – 22 February 1945 0548

A beach patrol led by Sergeant Ieto Kasuta found Tanaka's body, or what he thought was just a body at 0548 on the morning of the 4th day of the invasion. At first it didn't resemble a body, it looked like flotsam. Tanaka's body was completely covered with sand that had stuck to the grease he had coated it with. It didn't resemble a body so much as a log pushed ashore on the beach by the relentless waves. Had he not moved his arm, the patrol surely would have passed him by.

Sgt. Kasuta had two privates drag Tanaka's body off the beach to a sheltered area protected by a ridge that ran almost to the shoreline of the Pacific. Tanaka was still breathing. Kasuta didn't know if he was unconscious from the blow on his head or if he was nearly drowned. He had one of the privates apply artificial respiration. This took some time, but when the salt water had been expelled from his lungs, Tanaka's breathing became normal. The two privates removed their uniform jackets and wrapped Tanaka's body to try to get it warm. One of them was dispatched to get a stretcher. When the private returned with the stretcher, Tanaka was lifted gently onto it. They were raising the stretcher to carry it when Tanaka lifted his head and spoke, startling them all,

“Get my trousers! Get my clothing, please!”

“What’s he talking about?” Sgt. Kasuta asked.

“Something about his clothing,” answered the first private.

“Well, I don’t see any clothing, do you?”

“Yes, Sergeant, there is a pair of trousers with knots in the legs down near where we found him.”

“Just forget it, he won’t need them. Let’s get going.”

The privates lifted the stretcher and started to walk. Tanaka suddenly sat upright and was trying to get off the stretcher. Kasuta pushed him back down.

“Please, my clothing! Please! My watch is in my clothing. Please find my trousers!” Tanaka pleaded with the sergeant.

“All right,” the sergeant said, “go back to the beach and get his clothing. It must be very important to him.”

The trousers were a tangled mess and half-covered with sand, but the second private dug them out and shook most of the sand off. He returned to where the rest of the patrol was waiting and tossed the trousers on top of the stretcher. Tanaka reached for them, wrapped his

arms around them and promptly passed out again. The men lifted Tanaka and the patrol made it's way down the beach.

TABURA ZAKA

Deep inside Tabura Zaka was a room, roughly 30 by 40 meters, which served as the hospital ward for the unit assigned to defend the mountain. The room had been hollowed out of solid volcanic rock and was about 30 meters below the surface of the earth. No bomb could penetrate to this depth.

When Sgt. Kasuta's men brought Tanaka in, the doctor on duty said, "What have we here?"

The first private replied, "This man is a sailor we found on the beach, he was nearly dead. We resuscitated him, but he stills looks pretty bad. He has a deep cut on his head and he is scraped and cut all over his entire body from tumbling about on the coral. He must have swum here from Mt. Suribachi to get to where we found him. And it looks like he coated his body with some sort of grease to protect himself from the cold water. The grease had sand stuck to it all over."

"Is he bleeding now?" the doctor asked.

"No, not now."

"All right, then let's do this, take two blankets and wrap him up. It will keep him warm until we can get to him. I have severely wounded

men to attend to right now. This sailor will just have to wait till we can get to him. The warm blankets will prevent shock. We won't let him die. We will need all of our men when the American's come to Tabura Zaka."

The warmth of the blankets engulfed Tanaka's body. It made him feel better and his circulation improved. Soon his shaking stopped. Sleep is one of nature's ways of healing and Tanaka was soon fast asleep. More than two hours had gone by before the doctor had time to look at him again. He had an orderly remove the blankets so he could inspect Tanaka's body. From somewhere in his deep sleep, Tanaka muttered a protest at the loss of his warm covers, but did not wake yet.

The doctor started giving orders to his medical assistant.

"Remove the loincloth. Remove the grease so we can see how bad he is. Keep him covered as best you can so he won't go into shock and call me when you have this done."

It took the young medic the better part of an hour to clean the young sailor's body. The attention to his wounds finally penetrated the fog of sleep and Tanaka woke up with a start. The first thing he asked for was water.

"Please get me water, my mouth is so dry," Tanaka pleaded.

The medic turned his head and asked the doctor if he could give Tanaka some water.

“Only a few small sips for now, then he can have a damp rag to keep his mouth moist. I will examine him shortly.”

Tanaka was fully awake when the doctor came to check on his condition. First he looked at the cut on his head. He swabbed it with a field antiseptic. Tanaka winced from the stinging pain, but didn't cry out. The head wound was easy to see because Tanaka wore his hair very short in the Japanese naval fashion. The doctor remarked that he wished his little hospital had an x-ray machine. He would like to have been able to check for fractures.

“How do you feel, sailor?” asked the doctor.

“Not so good, sir. My head is banging as if a dozen small cannons were going off inside it, but I am pleased to be alive. The gods must have been with me last night.”

“What possessed you to leave your position, sailor?”

“My gun emplacement was destroyed on the first morning of the invasion, while I was outside going to our rations. I hid out till the Americans were almost to my cave and then I swam here. I want to join a fighting unit again and be of service.”

“That was a brave thing to do. You are, indeed, lucky to be alive.” The doctor held up his hand and asked Tanaka how many fingers he saw.

“Three, sir.”

“Close your left eye and tell me how many fingers you see now.”

“Two, sir.”

“Now the right eye.”

“Five, sir.”

“That’s good, very good. At least your head has not suffered a concussion.”

There was a growling noise and Tanaka’s face reddened with embarrassment.

“Do you think I could have something to eat, sir? I’m afraid, as you can hear, that it has been some time since my stomach had any food in it.”

“You can have some rice and fish soup to start with, but not until I finish dressing your wounds. We must make sure you do not take on any infection from the pounding you took on that coral.”

When the doctor had finished, the medic gave Tanaka his soup and a pain shot. The shot did its work quickly. In his exhausted condition, Tanaka was knocked out for the next 12 hours.

When he awoke, Tanaka was somewhat disoriented. He didn't know what time it was or even what day. The hospital room was well lighted. The medic on duty noticed that he was awake and brought him a small glass of water. Tanaka tried to raise himself, but found that he was too stiff and sore, so the medic brought him a piece of sterile transfusion tubing to act as a straw so he could drink lying down.

Tanaka wanted more water but the medic said,

“No, that's all you get for now. You must take it slowly.”

Then the young sailor remembered his clothing and asked,

“Where are my trousers?”

“We threw them away, they were shredded to pieces!”

“Oh no!” Tanaka cried, “I need my clothing, my watch and my knife were in the pockets!”

Smiling, the medic said, “Look on the box by your bed, sailor. We searched your clothing and found your watch and knife. I cleaned them

up for you. The grease you put on your watch saved it. It is keeping perfect time.”

Tanaka picked up his watch. The time was 2030 hours. It had been 15 hours since his rescue from the beach. It was still the fourth day of the invasion. The next two days were spent resting and recovering from his ordeal. Most of the cuts and abrasions on his body were healing rapidly, thanks to his youth and good physical condition. The one on his head would take a little longer. The doctor had put several stitches in that one. The food was not good, but it was filling and there was plenty of water. Tanaka was on the mend.

25 February 1945

On the sixth day of the invasion, a captain of infantry came to the hospital. His company had lost many men and the captain wanted replacements. His only source was to gather up the walking wounded from the hospitals. There were no other replacements on Iwo Jima. He told the doctor he needed anyone who could be returned to duty.

The doctor, while in sympathy with the captain’s needs, didn’t have any wounded he could release for duty. The captain became very angry and screamed,

“No one?! No one! How can that be? There must be some who are recovered enough to man a gun or carry ammunition, to be a

lookout if nothing else. You must have someone, doctor, I need men at once!”

The doctor replied, “I have no one at this time.”

The captain looked all around the hospital room. The patients were now looking at him from their beds. Tanaka was just sitting up on the corner of his cot when the captain looked his way.

“Well, what do we have here, doctor? This man looks perfectly well and fit to me. He’s not missing an arm or a leg. You there, stand up and let me look at you!” the captain commanded.

Tanaka shakily stood up and tried to come to attention. The captain walked over to him, then around him, looking him up and down.

“Doctor, this man appears to be recovered. Release him to me at once! I demand it! What unit is he from?”

The doctor replied, “Captain, this man is a sailor from a naval shore gun unit that was on Mt. Suribachi. When his gun was knocked out and the crew killed, he escaped by swimming from the southern end of the island.”

“Escaped! Escaped!” the captain’s voice rose to a high-pitched scream. “You don’t mean escaped, you mean deserted don’ you doctor?”

This man is a deserter. Why didn't he die fighting at his gun like the rest of his crew did? It is because of cowards like this one that the flag of the Americans now flies over Mt. Suribachi!"

"Why aren't you dead, please tell me that," the captain hollered at Tanaka.

In his still weakened condition, fear rose in Tanaka's heart. His whole body quivered. The captain turned back to him quickly and hit him alongside his head with his open hand. The blow knocked Tanaka to the floor, flat on his back. The angry infantry captain drew his saber and placed his foot on Tanaka's chest to keep him from moving. The blade of the sword was at the center of his chest.

"I will show you how the Japanese Imperial Army deals with traitors and cowards!"

The captain placed both hands around the hilt of his sword. At the top of his lungs he hollered,

"Death to all traitors to the emperor!"

Then, before he could plunge the sword down and end Tanaka's life, the doctor stepped in front of the captain, pushing him back with a force the captain did not expect. It caught him off guard and he stumbled back away from Tanaka.

“Stop it, stop it, you fool! You will kill no patients of mine in my hospital! My job is to heal the wounded, not to allow a madman like you to kill them!”

The captain looked at the doctor coldly.

“Stand aside, doctor. Don’t interfere with military affairs. I will deal with this man in the Japanese military manner. Cowards and deserters deserve to die.”

But the doctor stood his ground in front of the captain.

“Captain, please let me remind you that I’m in command of this facility. I am a Major in the Japanese Imperial Army and I outrank you! If you value your own life, you will leave this hospital! At once!”
The doctor-major had his service revolver pointed at the captain’s stomach. “If you disobey me, I will shoot you for refusing a direct order from a superior officer.”

The captain stepped back and stared coldly at the doctor. Then with ill grace, he sheathed his sword, saluted smartly and turned and strode out of the hospital. The doctor reached down and took Tanaka’s hand and gave him a lift up.

“Better get back to your bed, sailor, you look faint to me.”

Tanaka remembered the nightmare about the Marine who was going to kill him. It was then that he realized that danger could come from unexpected sources. He hoped that he'd seen the last of that captain. The captain was a man who would not forget.

27 February 1945 – Early morning

Tanaka was feeling much better by the eighth day of the invasion. His head was healing well. He had begun to help around the hospital. The doctor took notice of this and was pleased. In his ill-fitting army uniform, Tanaka didn't look much like a soldier of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The army uniform was the only clothing that could be found for him and it had come from men who had died. His naval uniform had been shredded by the swim with the coral.

From the number of wounded coming into the hospital, Tanaka knew the battle was going to the Americans. He had given up his bed to accommodate the newly wounded. The doctor-major was working around the clock to tend the deluge of injured men coming in. When a patient didn't make it, which was often, the doctor grieved in his heart, but never let it show on his face. Sometimes the doctor wondered if the war would ever end. He knew that this would be his last battle.

No one in his outfit knew that the doctor had a 16-year old son. If the war ended soon, his son might avoid conscription into the arm and could go on to medical school in Tokyo as his father had. Having a son

just a few years younger than Tanaka accounted for his interest in the welfare of the young sailor.

Dr. Shigeta considered himself a non-combatant. In the 12 years he had served in the Imperial Army he had never killed anyone. His skills as a doctor had saved a lot of men's lives on the Manchurian front and in Burma. A disagreement with a superior officer over the quality of care to the wounded in Burma had got him reassigned to Iwo Jima.

Dr. Shigeta had resigned himself to the thought he would not survive this assignment. He thought of how best to prepare his family for life without him. In his last letter home, he had told his wife to be prepared to make a life for herself and their children without him. He told her that if the Americans attacked Iwo Jima, and they surely would, that he would fall with the men.

He said that he did not fear death, it had been his constant companion for the last 12 years, but that in his career as a surgeon he saw many brave and good men die and when it came to his time he would try to follow their examples. He told his wife he didn't want to die because of her and their son.

“As a surgeon, beloved wife, I could continue to be of service to my people. Japan will need all of her professionals to make a new Japan after this war had ended.”

Dr. Shigeta went on to tell his wife that he thought Japan had already lost the war. Not because of a lack of will or spirit or fighting skill, but because the Americans had vast industrial capacity and resources beyond anything Japan could ever muster. In the letter's closing he asked his wife to see to their son's education. Affectionately he told her to bundle up warmly against the cruel winter and that he truly loved her more than life itself and was happy about the time they had been man and wife.

27 February 1945 – Late Afternoon

Late in the afternoon of February 27 the Dr. Shigeta called Tanaka to the screened off corner of the hospital room that served as his office.

“Young sailor, I see you are fully recovered from your wounds and exposure. As a military doctor I have the obligation to send men who have recovered back to duty. To avoid having the army captain get his hands on you I am releasing you to an officer who is a friend of mine, Lt. Tobushi, commander of a weapons company assigned to defend Tabura Zaka. He will treat you fairly. You won't disappoint me at your new station, will you sailor?”

“No, sir, I won't sir,” Tanaka replied, “I will not disgrace you or our empire. And I wish to thank you for all you have done for me, sir.”

“All right, sailor. Now go report to Lt. Tobushi. You will find him on the first level of this underground complex.”

Fortifications were built on four levels. Each position had interconnecting tunnels and access to each level. Every position had a clear field of fire and the movements of the American Marines and others could be clearly observed at all times.

Tanaka saluted Dr. Shigeta and took his leave. Making his way from the basement level of the underground complex where the hospital room was concealed to the first level, he stepped into Lt. Tobushi’s small office area.

“Seaman Tanaka reporting for duty, sir.”

“Yes, yes, you’re the sailor Dr. Shigeta said he would send me. Very good. I will need all the men I can get before this battle is over.”

Then calling his orderly, Lt. Tobushi said, “Take this man to Cpl. Obeato. He is assigned to his machine gun squad.” Looking up at Tanaka he said, “Dismissed!”

Tanaka and the orderly saluted and left Lt. Tobushi to his work.

The orderly took Tanaka to Cpl. Obeato’s position on the second level of the Tabura Zaka fortification.

“This is your new man, corporal. Lt. Tobushi said he is to be in your squad. His name is Tanaka and he is a sailor,” the orderly reported.

Looking Tanaka over, Cpl. Obeato inquired,

“Do you have any experience with machine guns?”

“No, corporal, I was a loader on a naval gun at Mt. Suribachi,” Tanaka replied.

“A naval gun loader? How did you end up here in the army?”

“My gun emplacement was destroyed on the first day and I couldn’t find a unit to join up with. I hid out in a cave until I had the chance to swim from Suribachi to Tabura Zaka to find a unit to join up with,” Tanaka said explaining his escape from the Americans.

“You arrived just in time, the Americans are just a day away from making it to Tabura Zaka. That’s when the decisive battle will start. When they attack we will kill every one of the heathen pigs, and then the big banzai attack will come. We will recapture Mt. Suribachi and plant the Rising Sun where the American flag now stands. We will drive the Americans back into the ocean and they will drown in their own blood! The Imperial Japanese Army will be victorious again!” Corporal Obeato exclaimed.

“If we are doing so well,” Tanaka asked, “how have the Americans managed to come so far? They must have more than half the island captured by now.”

“Ah, my young sailor, I’m glad you asked me that question because I have the answer. We are letting the Americans advance into our trap. We have not retreated, we have only moved back to stronger positions. The snare of the trap grows tighter and tighter. We are like hunters, smart hunters. We are very cunning. The Americans are only prey. We, like lazy hunters, need only wait and the prey will come to us! We will have caught our game and we will win! Our leader, General Kuribayashi, is a military genius. For Iwo Jima he has designed a fortress that no enemy can strike without being struck down and killed! The General has fought our country’s enemies in China and Manchuria. He is a true Samurai. Under his guidance, we will defeat the Americans!” Cpl. Obeato answered.

Tabura Zaka was a major defense line for General Kuribayashi’s troops on Iwo Jima. Its elevation of 362 feet gave the defenders the advantage of high ground. The western sector of the island was fairly flat until one reached Tabura Zaka. The American Marines attacking Tabura Zaka had no idea of how well it was fortified. The hill had over 300 defensive positions implanted in its rockbound hide. General Kuribayashi commanded all of the Japanese forces on Iwo Jima. He was the mastermind of the defenses and issued orders to defend Tabura Zaka to the last man. He declared that no one should fall back from

this position for the Japanese loss of Tabura Zaka meant the battle for Iwo Jima was over.

Corporal Obeato was a man of stocky stature, with piercing black eyes; he weighted 160 pounds and stood a little over 5 feet 3 inches. He had thick, muscular legs, which resulted in a funny way of walking that resembled a bandmaster strutting around without his band. He threw out his chest and held his head back as if he was trying to appear taller. Only a baton was needed to complete this picture.

At 27 years of age Cpl. Obeato had been in the army for eight years and had risen to the rank of Sergeant, but was demoted for drinking sake on the post! Tanaka thought to himself that the corporal seemed as though he knew a lot about warfare. He asked Cpl. Obeato whether he had fought in previous battles.

“No, I haven’t. Defending Iwo Jima is my first combat, but I have talked to a lot of men who served in Manchuria and they have told me what to expect.”

“How is it you have been in the army for so long without being in a battle?” Tanaka inquired.

“I have been unlucky. I was transferred to another unit before my unit left for combat, but I have had a lot of training.”

“Well, all right young sailor Tanaka, you must begin your training to become a machine gunner. You must learn all about the machine gun.”

In a teacher-like voice Cpl. Obeato went over the drill.

“What we have here is the *Nambu* light machine gun, firing rate: 150 rounds per minute. The caliber is 25 mm. Here is how to disassemble the weapon.”

And so it went, hour after hour. The corporal had Tanaka disassemble the *Nambu*, then reassemble it over again. He practiced dry-firing the weapon until Tanaka thought he would go crazy!

The corporal had good reason for his insistence on perfection. He knew the attack by the Americans would come soon and it was a good way to pass the time while preparing for the attack. The only break they took was to eat.

The food was of poor quality and was not to Tanaka’s taste, but he knew he must eat to keep his strength up. The water was rationed and none was available to bathe in. At night the defenders slept in cubicles cut into the walls of the passageways. A straw mat served as a mattress and only a light blanket was supplied by the army for cover against the cold. Tanaka slept in his uniform, just as he had on Mt. Suribachi.

28 February 1945 – Ninth day of the Invasion

Tanaka was eating his meager breakfast with Corporal Obeato on the morning of the ninth day of the invasion, when the first volley of American artillery shells hit Tabura Zaka's southern face. This began the day's bombardment.

The Americans intended to pulverize Tabura Zaka to reduce it to rubble. The artillery attack was assisted by American naval gun ships, shelling at close range. The next thing Tanaka heard was the roar of airplane engines overhead and he felt the impact of 500pound aerial bombs as they struck Tabura Zaka's outer surface. The Americans concentrated land, sea and air attack continued for nearly an hour.

At first Tanaka was terrified by the shelling, but Cpl. Obeato told him not to worry.

"We have 30 meters of steel, concrete and earth above our head for protection. The American's attack will hardly affect our camouflage but, you may get a headache!"

At times the fortress trembled and shook like it was ready to fall at any moment, but the fortress in Tabura Zaka held. When the shelling stopped Cpl. Obeato told Tanaka they must take up their defense positions. They were in the mess hall on the third level, and their machine gun position was on the second level, so they made their way there though a labyrinth of tunnels and passageways.

Cpl. Obeato's machinegun emplacement was located about 150 meters above sea level, about one third of the way up the side of Tabura Zaka. It overlooked the entire western sector.

"Tanaka, look down below us and you will see the American Marine's 5th Division," remarked Cpl. Obeato.

"How do you know that?" Tanaka asked.

"We captured some American equipment and clothing. They were clearly marked with their division numbers. We assess they have about three regiments left: the 26th, 27th and 28th. The Marines who are attacking us today are from the 27th regiment. That means the others are in reserve."

"And just how do you know all this?" Tanaka inquired.

"Well, I don't really know it, but it's what the lieutenant said. The intelligence section has mapped the Americans movements since the first day. Besides, it doesn't matter which ones they are."

"Why is that?" Tanaka asked.

"Because it won't be long before they are all dead and then there will be no American Marine 5th Division!"

Tanaka was surprised by the closeness of the Marines to the small mountain fortress. They were less than a third of a kilometer away! They were attacking in full fury. The defenders were bombarding the Americans with artillery and mortars and the Americans were taking cover to avoid the intense shelling.

On the ocean level, the Marines were facing a defensive line of Japanese pillboxes that stretched clear across the western sector. Tanaka asked Cpl. Obeato why they were not currently firing at the Americans.

“No, not yet. They are too far away and besides the Americans are not yet in our trap. We must hold our firing until the order is given. We must not reveal our position until the very last minute. That’s the beauty of a trap.”

Tanaka could plainly see the Americans. He wondered how any person could survive the shelling those Marines were receiving. The young sailor was amazed at the panorama of the battle that was unfolding right before his eyes. The Marines forward progress was slowed by the breadth of the Japanese defenses. Each pillbox had to be destroyed before advancing to the next. Slowly the Japanese ground defenses gave way to the assault of the American troops. As each pillbox came under attack, the Japanese defenders moved farther back through tunnels to the next pillbox and defended their new positions.

Then the Marines suddenly stopped their attack. The reason was a new barrage of artillery fire against Tabura Zaka. Tanaka and Cpl. Obeato retreated to the sanctuary of the inner part of the fortress to wait out the artillery attack. Tanaka noticed that many of the American shells went over the mountain. When he asked the corporal why, Obeato responded,

“You don’t know much about warfare, do you Tanaka? The Americans are trying to hit our artillery and mortar positions in the Kita area.”

The American shelling stopped as quickly as it had begun. The Marine advance was again underway, inching forward a bastion at a time. For the first time Tanaka saw the Marines using the dreaded flamethrower. They had a system; first they would single out a position for attack. Using machine guns and rifle fire, they would concentrate their firepower on that bunker. Other Marine units would direct their fire at supporting Japanese positions, effectively closing them up.

Next a Marine would run to the position under attack and place an explosive device on top. The explosive device when detonated would blast a hole in the top of the position. While the firing continued, the next Marine would run to the position, dropping an explosive charge down the hole created by the first device. This charge contained ten pounds of high explosives called composition C-2. It was generally enough to blow the pillbox to hell and back.

While still under the protective fire of the machine guns and rifles, a Marine with a flamethrower would advance, shooting its deadly squirt of liquid fire into the aperture of the pillbox. If any defenders escaped the blast, the flamethrower would finish them off. If a flamethrower wasn't available, they would finish off the bunkers with hand grenades.

Japanese troops defending from a bunker knew when to leave an attacked position. Through the interconnecting tunnels and corridors the defenders fled to the safety of their next position. The tunnels had been designed with a series of 90-degree turns, first right and then left, to prevent the blasts and flames from pervading through the tunnel system.

The 27th Marines advance carried them nearly to the base of Tabura Zaka. At 1815 hours the Marines began their preparations for night defense. Tanaka observed their digging in, shaping of machine gun emplacements, and the construction of 2-man foxholes. One of the last preparations they made was the stringing of coils of barbed wire in front of their lines. When Tanaka asked Cpl. Obeato why the Marines were putting up wire, he said this was to prevent cutting-in tactics or infiltration. The wire would also prevent banzai attacks as the Marines were not yet convinced the Japanese had given up this type of counterattack. General Kuribayashi had ruled out this type of attack on Iwo Jima as a waste of manpower, but the Americans didn't know it.

Throughout the long night of February 28 and into the morning of February 29 Tanaka took turns standing guard at the machine gun emplacement. Several shifts were rotated throughout the night. Sunrise was at 0645 the morning of the 29th. Tanaka was on watch. He could see the sun's rays shining on top of Mt. Suribachi. The misty clouds surround the cone of the extinct volcano made it look like it was emerging from the ocean, just as it had a million or so years before. The lower part of the island was still cloaked in a low ground fog that helped mask the early morning activities of the Americans.

Corporal Obeato checked Tanaka's position and remarked,

"This will be the day the Americans will attack Tabura Zaka, and this will be the day they will all die."

"What about us?" Tanaka asked.

"Don't worry, Tanaka. Our Bushido code commands us to fight like warriors of the past. Death is not an unexpected companion to warriors. We must not falter. Today we have our chance to die for the glory of our sacred emperor and the Japanese empire. If we die today, we will go to the land of our ancestors as heroes. What else could we ask for, my sailor friend?"

Tanaka didn't have an answer to the corporal's question. The corporal took his arm.

“We must go inside. The American bombardment will start soon.”

29 February 1945 – 10th day of the Invasion

At precisely 0730 the 13th Marine Artillery Regiment fired the first volley of shells at Tabura Zaka. Five minutes later the naval bombardment began. Tabura Zaka was to receive over 400 direct hits in the next 30 minutes! Wave after wave of American Marine and Navy aircraft assaulted the scabby surface of Fortress Tabura Zaka with aerial bombs and napalm. The Japanese defenders sat in their hardened positions, waiting out the barrage.

From hidden emplacements near and around the former village of Kita, Japanese mortars returned fire. The closeness of the Americans to the face of Tabura Zaka precluded the use of Japanese artillery. Since mortars are a high trajectory weapon, this was their perfect use.

The American bombardment stopped at 0830. The Marines began their advance up the rocky slopes of the fortress. Cpl. Obeato and Tanaka were at their gun as soon as the bombardment stopped. Tanaka could see the Marines advancing, running from rock to rock, and seeking cover wherever they could. Tanaka and Cpl. Obeato kept their heads down. The eyes of the Americans searched in vain for targets.

“When can we start firing?” Tanaka whispered to Cpl. Obeato.

“As soon as they are in our range. We must not fire prematurely and give our position away. Please have patience. The Marines will come into our trap sooner than you think.”

Off to the right of Tanaka’s position there was heaving American firing. The sound of a *Nambu* machine gun gave notice the Japanese defenders were returning fire, bullet for bullet.

The ruggedness of the terrain slowed the American advance, but on they came. Tanaka could see them being hit by return fire. Japanese snipers were taking a deadly toll. The Marines spread out so as not to present a large target.

Tanaka and Cpl. Obeato’s position was well camouflaged as a small tree grew right in front of it. Directly in front of that was a small plateau, about 20 or 30 meters wide. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the Americans continued their relentless assault against Tabura Zaka. Their advance was halted by a sustained Japanese mortar attack. “*Surely no Americans could survive this,*” Tanaka thought to himself.

Still, slowly but surely the Americans advanced, blasting the Japanese position after position. The weapons were hand grenades, high explosives, and flamethrowers. The Marines were denied the use of their artillery and mortars as it was down to man-to-man combat now. The battle seesawed back and forth, but the Americans continued to progress.

By about 1200 hours the Marines had the lower half of Tabura Zaka under their control. Intense Japanese mortar fire soon drove them back down the side of the mountain, but as soon As the mortars stopped, their advance continued. Cpl. Obeato advised Tanaka,

“Look at that! The Americans are coming into our trap.”

Tanaka could see first one Marine and then another, running from rock to rock, darting first one way and then another, trying to advance with as much safety and shielding the terrain could provide.

“Let’s fire now!” exclaimed Tanaka.

“No, not yet. We don’t use the machine guns against single targets. Let the snipers have them.”

To Tanaka’s right a Japanese machine gun opened fire against a cluster of Marines. A Marine sergeant yelled to his machine gun squad leader:

“Hey! See the Jap machine gun nest up ahead, to the right of that break in the hill?”

“I see it Sarge!”

“Okay, get into action on that next!”

The squad leader gave a quick hand signal to his gunner, pointing toward the target. Tanaka observed the machine gunner and his assistant running from behind their rock onto the open flat ground of the plateau, just about 25 meters in front of their position.

From behind another rock came an ammunition carrier, running with a box of ammo. The gunner slung his tripod onto the ground and the assistant gunner ran up and placed the machine gun onto the tripod. In less than 10 seconds the Marines were firing at their target!

“Now is the time!” Corporal Obeato shouted to Tanaka as he let go the first burst of machine gun fire at the advancing Marines. His first burst hit the gunner in the back and the second the assistant gunner, hit in the stomach. Both Marines lay motionless.

Turning to look at Tanaka, Corporal Obeato smiled and then turned back to observe the fallen Marines. Out of the corner of his eye, Corporal Obeato saw a Marine running toward the stilled machine gun. He tried to duck behind the parapet of his position, but he was too late. The Marine grabbed the machine gun out of its tripod and was firing it from his hip, using a handle attached to the barrel to control its direction. A hail of bullets hit the corporal in the chest and he fell to the ground, mortally wounded.

Tanaka pushed Cpl. Obeato aside and took control of the gun. It was only for a second. The American Marine continued to fire at

Tanaka's position. Tanaka's body was driven to the floor by the first bullets, which struck his right arm. As he got up to try to man the gun again, he was struck in his chest. The last thing he remembered was the hot sting in his chest. He realized the American had already stopped firing. He had run out of bullets.

2 March 1945 – 1030 hours – 12th day of Invasion

Tanaka's next conscious thought was when he awoke to the red bearded Marine standing over him. He thought his nightmare was about to come true when the Marine began to speak in gentle, reassuring tones. He didn't understand a word of what the Navy corpsman said, but his kind eyes seemed to say it all. Tanaka drifted back to sleep. He was again home in his father's house. His war was over.