

Witness To Valor

A Marine Remembers Iwo Jima

A War Story by

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REFLECTIONS ON IWO JIMA, 43 YEARS LATER

As I write this story about my experiences on Iwo Jima, it is with a certain amount of reluctance that I have had to resort to telling it in the first party narrative.

This is done, not from vanity, but because it is the only way I could do it. I have only my own recollections to fall back on. Many of my comrades of that period have passed on in the intervening years. I wish I could tell every Marines story, and every Marine surely had one, but since that would be an impossible task, I am telling mine . . . for all the Marines on Iwo Jima who can't tell their own stories.

I am using history to analyze what could have been done to minimize the tremendous losses that occurred in the last stages of the siege on Iwo Jima. Bear in mind that this kind of retrospection is about as effective as looking up a horse's ass to see why he died. Hindsight always has 20/20 vision.

A review of the battlefield losses in the so-called “mop up” stages reveals some startling information. This mop up was really the continuation of the final push to conquer Iwo Jima.

You can’t call the loss of 1,071 Marines’ lives a part of a “mop up” operation. For the 2,587 Marines who were wounded in the last 15 days, this so-called “mop up” was very much a part of a very real WAR. As much as the landings were.

The time period was from March 11th to March 26th, 1945 fifteen of the most costly days on Iwo Jima for the 5th Marine Division. The 5th had already taken the brunt of the casualties, suffering 4,292 killed or wounded in the “big push up the middle”, as the middle phase of the battle was termed. The “middle” lasted from February 25th to March 10th, 1945.

The following is a list of losses, by division, in the last 15 days on Iwo Jima:

<u>DIVISION</u>	<u>KIA OR POW</u>	<u>WOUNDED</u>	<u>FATIGUE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Fifth	638	1,640	122	2,400
Third	207	505	53	765
Fourth	226	442	52	720
<u>TOTALS</u>	<u>1,071</u>	<u>2,595</u>	<u>227</u>	<u>4,112</u>

The Fifth Marine Division suffered six hundred thirty-eight killed or died of wounds. The 1,640 wounded Marines in the 5th Division exceeded the combined totals of the other two divisions by some 693 Marines. One hundred twenty-two Marines suffered from combat fatigue; again 100% more than the combined totals of its two brother divisions.

The losses, in part, can be attributed to the furious and stubborn defense put up by the trapped Japanese defenders, the near impassable terrain after Kita, and the infamous bloody gorge. The real blame for losses to the 5th Division of this magnitude has to be attributed to the “missing regiment.” The high command’s Admiral Turner, and his staff must have had their heads in their Asses on this one.

On the 5th of March, after spending 14 days aboard a transport, in floating reserve, they ordered a fresh regiment of over three thousand Marines back to guard duty on Guam. This regiment was composed of battle-trained veterans of Guam and Saipan. This criticism is in no way directed toward the fighting men of the 3rd Marine Regiment. They had already earned their battle stripes.

Repeated requests for additional troops, by General Harry Schmidt fell on deaf ears. The three division generals, Rockey, Erskin and Cates, supported the request for use of this regiment. This didn’t carry any water with Admiral Turner. No one knows to this day what his thinking was for this refusal. (One report is that the Admiral felt that there were too many men on Iwo Jima.

This was not true on the front lines. A review of the casualty reports would have given the lie to this report.)

The result of this refusal on the Admiral's part was the 5th Marine Division had to fight some of the worst battles of Iwo Jima with Marines weary from more than 20 days of continuous combat. Devoid of leadership from the loss of company officers, the replacements left the command of units to corporals and Pfc.s that were as weary of war as men could be. The replacements helped, but there was a shortage of trained combat Marines on Iwo Jima.

This was an unnecessary situation in light of the fact that the Marine Corps had 3,000 trained and rested combat Marines that could have substantially reduced the severe losses incurred during the "mop up". Use of these men could have helped end the siege of Iwo Jima at a lesser cost. The 3rd Regiment had fresh officers, fresh Marines and new weapons. They still had their full physical strength.

The use of these fresh Marines, in relief would have given time for the other regiments to rest, regroup and re-arm to regain their full combat potential. Two or three days out of combat would have done wonders for the embattled veterans. A shower and a hot meal or two can invigorate any Marine. But, this didn't happen. They sent the 3rd Marine Regiment back to Guam. No one will ever know the number of Marine lives that could have been saved had the 3rd Regiment been committed to battle on Iwo Jima.

One of the main weapons for the attacking forces in a siege is time. Time and starvation. Waiting the enemy out until the run out of food and water

can take the place of bombardment and assault. You have the enemy trapped, escape cut off, no chance of reinforcements. This is exactly the position the Marine attackers had the Japanese defenders in.

Time can be your ally in a siege. You just wait the enemy out, compress him in your trap, and keep up the pressure. Set up a ring of steel around him. Point all of your big weapons right down his throat and just wait him out. Thirst and hunger will do the rest. That's what was done on Guadalcanal. The Marines set up a defense perimeter and just kept the Japanese in the area until they ran out of food and water and ammunition.

As an armchair strategist, with the benefit of hindsight, I would have set up a defense perimeter at the March 10th line and defended it until the Japs ran out of everything. This line would have left an area large enough to shell and strafe. The risk of Japanese shellfire would have been minimal. Most of their artillery was already neutralized. This is the right way to conduct a siege.

The Japanese defenders would have gone to Banzai attacks, but with the correct defenses, they wouldn't have stood a "Chinaman's chance." Sickness and loss of morale would have done the rest. The loss of Marines would have been reduced at least 80% with this siege tactics, which was a standard, a classic.

The pre-D-Day Navy bombardment left a lot to be desired. How much is too much? How much is enough? Additional bombardment could have been used to good effect against the inland fortifications. I hope the Navy admiral in command of Task Force 58, who went off the shell Tokyo, had had

dreams of dead Marines all the days he had left on earth. Advance planning fell short. Official estimates of the Japanese troop strength and the timetables for conquering Iwo Jima proved to be grossly incorrect.

Iwo Jima was planned as a 72-hour invasion. The estimates of 5,000 Japanese defenders proved to be off base by a country mile. The counted Japanese dead exceeded 20,000 and over 1,000 prisoners were taken. The timetable was wrong by 32 days. The siege took 35 days of the toughest fighting in the history of warfare. The Japanese put up a defense that will never be matched nor forgotten. They made Marines pay a bloody toll for every yard gained.

I am sure that the Japanese history books will tell that Iwo Jima was defended with courage and valor. The history books will be right.

WAS IWO WORTH IT?

Over the forty-eight years since the conquest of Iwo Jima, I have often been asked was capture of Iwo Jima worth the lives it cost to conquer it. For a long time I didn't know. At the Iwo Jima veterans reunion in Mobile, Alabama in February of 1989 I found a good answer to this question. Robert J. Hagopian, an attorney and a former Air Corps Officer made an hour-long slide presentation on Iwo Jima. Captain Hagopian is the world's foremost authority and historian on the history of air operations at Iwo Jima following its conquest. His fascinating slide presentation titled Iwo Jima After The Battle clearly showed that the prize was worth the cost.

This presentation with slides and commentary was dramatic and impressive. The presentation showed the transformation of Iwo from a smoldering battleground into a giant U.S. air base that became a springboard for the air attack of Japan. Captain Hagopian was the officer in charge of the statistical control center for the 20th Air Force Combat Staging Center at Iwo. As a statistician he was able to collect and present the facts supporting his contention that the sacrifices were not in vain. According to Captain Hagopian more than 30,000 B29 Superforts landed on Iwo from March 9th when the first B29 skidded to a halt on the semi-finished runway of Motoyama #1, to the unconditional surrender of Japan.

Captain Hagopian explained that the B29s landing on Iwo were not all damaged aircraft, but were primarily aircraft landing to re-fuel. Iwo Jima became a "giant gas station", a refueling point for the Superforts so they

could carry larger bomb loads. The Silver Devils as the Japanese called the Superforts, took off from the Marianas and flew the 700 miles to Iwo Jima where they landed and took on additional fuel, which added 700 miles to the aircrafts range and allowed the B29s to penetrate deeper and strike into the heartland of Japan. Targets previously out of range were subjected to the same devastation that had leveled Tokyo.

Using Iwo as it's operational base the Air Corps was also able to mine the harbors and waterways of the home islands. Control of Iwo also made it possible to have fighter escort for the B29s. Iwo based P51 fighters flew cover for the Superforts all the way to Japan and back, using fuel drop tanks to increase their range. The P51s from Iwo were able to provide continuous support to the B29s. This support was essential to the success of the bombing campaign.

Iwo also became a home for long-range air-sea rescue planes. These aircraft ranged far and wide, answering MAYDAY calls from Superforts that had ditched in the sea between Japan and the Marianas. On learning of a downed B29, Iwo based aircraft were usually airborne in minutes, thus saving precious time in reaching the endangered airmen.

The greatest fire in history was one caused by a single raid by B29s. This was in March of 1945. Five hundred B29s bombed Tokyo in a single attack. Forty square miles were burned to the ground. The magnesium incendiary strip bombs caused the greatest known conflagration in the history of mankind. The fire swept along by forty mile per hour winds, was more

damaging than the fire that leveled ancient Rome. Lives lost in this raid actually exceeded the losses at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Iwo Jima was to play a role in the introduction of the Atomic age. Sitting at Iwo Jima was a back-up B29 for the Enola Gay; it was never necessary to launch the back up.

Early in July of 1945 part of the air base was sealed off to all personnel. A secret group of engineers and technicians arrived, their job was to construct a secret underground installation to receive a large bomb. The purpose of this installation became apparent on August 6, 1945 when the first news of the bombing of Hiroshima crackled over the airwaves. Iwo Jima radio operators intercepted a message intended for Air Corps Headquarters in the Marianas. The intercepted message electrified the world: "DIMPLES 12 PROCEEDING ON COURSE, MINUS 1 ATOMIC BOMB." This cryptic message had little effect on the radio operators at Iwo, few people at that time knew of the existence of an Atomic device that could explode the Earth's own atmosphere.

The sudden, unconditional surrender of Japan thrilled the world. I never heard anyone, particularly any Marine say that the bomb should not have been used. Had it been necessary to invade Japan, an estimated 1,000,000 American and 3,000,000 Japanese lives would have perished. The looming invasion would have been catastrophic.

Captain Hagopian's role in World War II didn't end with the surrender of Japan. His talents as a lawyer were put to the test after the war ended at the

Japanese war crimes trials, where the Captain served two years in the judge advocate's office, and traveled extensively throughout Japan.

Upon his return to civilian life he could not forget Iwo Jima and the sacrifices made by its conquerors. To recognize this extraordinary event in the history of World War II, he and others organized an annual observation of the landing at Iwo. This first event was held in the state of (_____), house in (______). Bob and his staff read all the 6,800 names of the fallen. It took over (_____) hours.

At the first event, one of the original flag raisers, Rene Gagnon was invited to be the guest of honor. His financial circumstance would not permit his attending, so Bob generously provided the needed travel funds. Captain Hagopian never forgot what the Marines accomplished at Iwo Jima.

EPILOGUE

What happened to the Marines from the 27th Marine Regiment on and after the battle at Iwo Jima?

Major John Antonelli, U.S.M.C.

Major Antonelli recovered from the wounds he received at Iwo Jima. For his heroic actions and leadership of the 2nd Battalion of the 27th Regiment at Iwo Jima the nation awarded him the Navy Cross. Major Antonelli remained in the United States Marine Corps, serving in Korea. He was a Brigadier General when he retired. He now operates the family business in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Pfc. George (Van) Van Conkelburge, U.S.M.C.R.

Hometown: Taft, California

Van recovered from wounds suffered at Iwo Jima. After recuperation, he rejoined "B" Company. Van received the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. Before going on occupation duty in Japan, he was promoted to the rank of Corporal and became the leader of the Second Section, Second Squad of

the machine gun platoon (the same unit he was a member of before Iwo Jima). After his discharge Van became a professional gambler and owned and operated his own card room and nightclub in his hometown of Taft, California. He died of cancer in 1987.

Pfc. Clifford (Steve) Evanson

Hometown: Everett, Washington

Steve died the night of March 28, 1945 from wounds received during the battle for Hill 362A. He was buried in the Forth Division's cemetery. Later his body was removed and re-buried in the National Cemetery of the Pacific. Steve's parents went to their graves never knowing how their son died. Steve was 17 years old when he lost his life on Iwo Jima. His parents received his Purple Heart medal.