

First Six Days on Iwo Jima

In taking Iwo Jima the Marines had to fight a powerful Japanese garrison which had converted naturally strong terrain into a position that the Japs considered impregnable. *By an Observer*

This article is one of four accounts of the battle for Iwo Jima presented in this issue of the GAZETTE. All four articles were written while the struggle for the island was continuing, and are therefore not intended as complete, detailed accounts of the action. They do, however, present an interesting composite of the part played in the taking of Iwo Jima by infantry, tanks, artillery, and aviation. The author of "First Six Days on Iwo Jima" was recalled to Washington on D plus 5, and his account ends at that point. The other three articles were written at Iwo during the course of the battle. More detailed descriptions of this important operation will be presented in subsequent issues of the GAZETTE.

IWO JIMA is just another one of the many islands of Micronesia, unheard of before this war, and, except for its location on the road to Tokyo, completely unimportant. But it possesses sufficient fairly level ground to provide a couple of strategically located airfields, a thorn in the side of the Marianas-based B-29 squadrons as long as it remained in Japanese hands. Under our control, it would become an advanced base for interception, and an emergency field for any B-29 limping back from the Tokyo area. It is now the most expensive and probably the sorriest piece of real estate in the Pacific.

Located in the southernmost group of the Nanpo Shoto, or Southern Islands, Iwo Jima is 660 nautical miles south of Tokyo, and 625 miles north of Saipan. It is sometimes called Volcano Island or Sulphur Island, though most maps do not even condescend to show it as a dot, let alone honor it with mention by name. Nearby are two other islands, Kita-iwo-jima and Minami-iwo-jima, the three forming the Kazan Retto or Sulphur Islands group. Farallon de Pajaros, northernmost of the Marianas, is 335 miles south, and 140 miles north is Chichi Jima, main island of the Bonin group.

Physical Characteristics

Iwo Jima itself is a pear-shaped island, approximately five miles long and two and a half miles wide, with the neck of the pear to the southwest. The main body consists of an almost flat-topped volcanic dome, Moto Yama, about 360 feet high. Except to the southwest, where a narrow neck of low land connects it to Suribachi Yama, it is completely surrounded by wave-cut terraces.

These terraces terminate abruptly in cliffs, but there is another series of inland terraces above the cliffs, which give the island the usual flat-topped appearance of an island formed by raised coral reefs. Apparently there has been a recent general elevation of the area, and according to some reports the island is now rising approximately a foot a year.

Suribachi Yama, the southwestern end of the is-

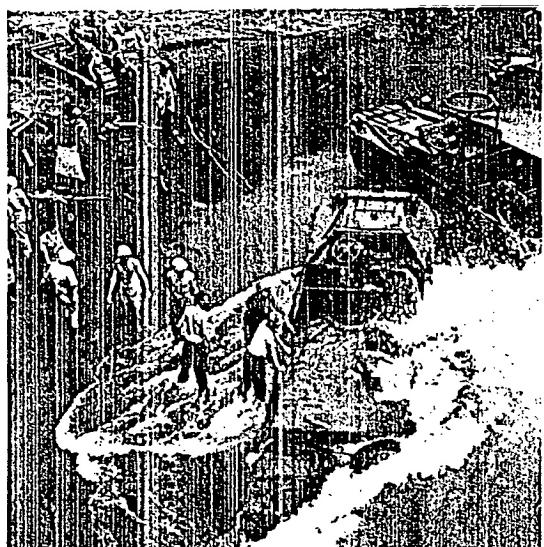
land, is an inactive volcano, very steep-sided, and topped by a funnel-shaped crater. Apparently the same wave action which formed the cliffs around Moto Yama also eroded the softer covering of Suribachi and left only the hard central core. Point Hotrocks, the summit, is about 550 feet. (Two figures given—554 and 546.)

The connecting lowland, called Chidoriga Hara, is composed mainly of volcanic sand. It is bordered on both sides by beaches, the only available landing places.

Some traces of volcanic activity still remain. There are about 20 vents or fissures, some of which still emit steam and sulphurous vapor. Off the northeast coast there is reported an active submarine volcano.

The island has only scrub growth, no trees of any size, and is without permanent water.

The Japanese had developed two airfields on



The heavy, grinding surf at Iwo provided still another hazard for landing parties.

Iwo, and were working on a third. The island was evidently a staging point for flights to the Marianas and Carolinas. After the fall of the Marianas, Iwo became the major outpost for defense of the Empire in that area, and was accordingly strongly fortified. Coast defense, antiaircraft, and mobile artillery were integrated into a defensive system thoroughly covering the island. The naturally strong terrain features were well used, and augmented by blockhouses and pillboxes covering the possible landing beaches. The final result was an exceptionally strong position, and one impossible to outflank. A balanced force of from 13,000 to 14,000 troops, both Army and Navy, made up the garrison.

It was estimated that the Japs would man prepared defenses with approximately half their infantry, and maintain the remainder as a centrally located mobile reserve.

Our scheme of attack was to land with two divisions abreast, cross the narrow part of the island, then swing one regiment to the south to isolate Suribachi and reduce it, while the remainder pivoted on the right flank, then swept northeast to clear the island.

We Begin the Softening Up

After the fall of Saipan it was evident that Iwo would eventually have to be dealt with. Occasional raids on the Marianas were made from there, and

in exchange our forces occasionally bombed the strips on Iwo. Naval bombardments by cruisers and destroyers on December 24 and 27 and again on January 24 destroyed planes and did superficial damage to installations near the airfield, but did no appreciable damage to the ground defenses.

Beginning in early December, the air forces in the Marianas made daily runs on the island, dropping a total of over 5000 tons of bombs in seventy consecutive days. Photo reconnaissance at the end of this period showed more ground defenses than at the beginning.

Apparently the Nips were just letting our bombs dig the holes, then they finished converting them to pillboxes. Air forces reported consistently heavy and accurate flak, a good indication of the resistance to be faced by the landing force.

The Naval Bombardment

On February 16, 1945, preliminary bombardment and minesweeping began. Participating were several of the old battleships, veterans of Pearl Harbor, and now repaying another installment. Poor visibility hampered the naval gunfire to a slight extent, but the minesweeping was successfully completed. The scheduled strike by land-based air was called off on account of weather.

The day before carrier-based air had hit Chicka and Haha in the Bonins, and this day the famous Task Force 58 hit the Tokyo area.

Artillery on Iwo

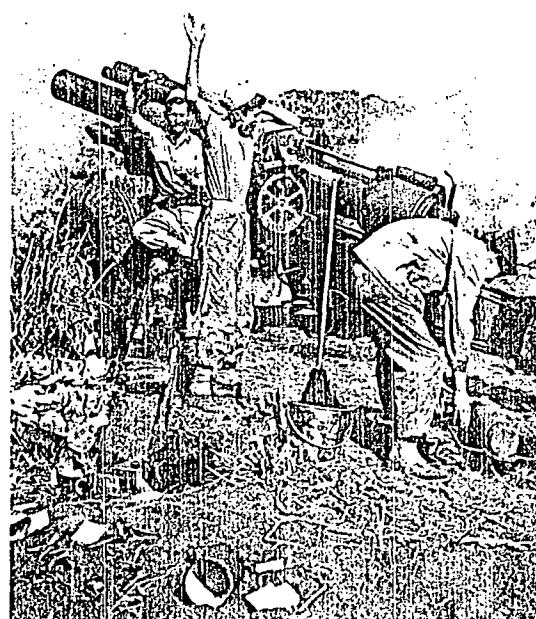
*By S/Sgt. Allen Sommers**

In the first 20 days of fighting on Iwo Jima, the 5th Marine Division's field artillery regiment, the 13th Marines, poured 103,776 shells into Jap positions.

The record shows that the 13th Marines' guns were the only ones landed on Iwo Jima on D-day before late afternoon, coming in under conditions considered unsuitable for artillery. "G" Battery, 3rd Battalion, registered its first shot at 1410, five minutes after the first 105-mm howitzer had been unloaded. At 1420 the entire battery was firing after registering on a base point on Suribachi.

The 2nd Battalion, 13th Marines, came in less than an hour later under intense Jap fire, moving up to its selected positions on top of the eastern slope. Two of their guns were left helpless on the scorched beach in blasted amphibious trucks (DUKWs).

The 75-mm Pack Howitzer 1st Battalion started in later in the afternoon, two of its three batteries setting up after dusk under a hail of Jap mortars. The 4th Battalion moved



This 155-howitzer helps pave the way for the drive on the north of Iwo Jima.

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February 17 was bright and clear, and naval bombardment got down to the serious business of destroying Jap installations. Major attention was, of course, given to coast defense guns, and all those located were destroyed or silenced. As the guns were silenced the ships closed in for more accurate work, and were able to do better. Rocket gunboats closed to extremely short ranges, drawing fire from dual purpose and small automatic weapons. The Japs evidently thought this was a landing attempt, and that night Radio Tokyo broadcast the news that a landing had been repulsed.

This day the air strike came in full force, and literally plastered their target area from relatively low altitude. However, and the air experts might bear this in mind, photo interpreters found very little actual damage to installations.

Carrier planes made intermittent strikes throughout the three days of bombardment, paying particular attention to AA guns and defiladed emplacements.

The following day battleships and destroyers stood in to within 1800 yards of the beach and curried the whole area, destroying practically every visible installation. The Nips would restore some of it during the night, and much of the remainder of the island had been barely scratched, but the ships had done the best they could to pave the way. The foot troops always have to finish the job.

its guns in, but didn't fire until the next day.

The night of D-day the 13th Marines gave direct support to the hard-slugging infantry.

Towards Suribachi Yama the 3rd Battalion howitzers poured shell after shell. On the northern front, our 1st and 2nd Battalions threw their weight. Then came the expected — and feared — counterattack. At 0245 the 27th Marines reported that a full battalion of Jap infantry was moving towards its lines. The 1600-pound howitzers of the 1st Battalion took a few seconds to get a bead on the 250-yard front, and then every piece in the outfit burst into angry flames.

According to Lt. Colonel John S. Oldfield, battalion commander, his howitzers fired 1500 rounds of ammunition in one hour and 50 minutes. The 2nd Battalion, under Major Carl W. Hjerpe, supported its sister battalion with more than 600 rounds of 105-mm ammunition. The first large-scale Jap counterattack of this bloody campaign was stopped dead by the howitzers of the 13th Marines.

On the second day, when Jap fire grew more intense and accurate, Colonel Waller brought the full power of his weapons to bear. Despite loss in officers, men, and materiel, the 13th was in full swing.

On the fifth day of the battle, after Suri-

On February 19 the transports carrying the assault troops arrived in the transport area. Ships seemed to cover the whole ocean, from horizon to horizon. If the Japs had mistaken our group of LCIs for the landing force, what a shock this force must have been. More than 800 ships were involved.

The Attack

Pre-H-hour bombardment started with first light and continued to H-hour, at times blanketing the whole landing beach with smoke and dust. Three separate carrier air strikes and one land-based air strike added to the drenching the Nips were receiving.

The weather was clear and the sea calm, a perfect day for a landing. By 0730 the LSTs carrying the first waves were in position and started discharging their LVTs. Waves formed and crossed the line of departure as if on a well-organized rehearsal. As the first wave approached the beach the naval gunfire lifted to the rear areas and continued to blanket Mt. Suribachi and the rough ground to the right of the beach.

The actual landing was not opposed, but resistance developed in about 15 minutes. The Fourth Division reported heavy resistance, the Fifth Division moderate. On both fronts it consisted mostly of mortar and artillery fire, the naval and air bombardment having apparently neutralized the Jap infantry. Biggest obstacle was not the enemy, but the

baichi Yama was secured, the 3rd Battalion, under Lt. Colonel Henry T. Waller, turned its strength to the north.

Using forward observers and aerial observers to spot targets, Jap guns, mortars, fuel and ammunition dumps, pillboxes, caves, machineguns, vehicles, rocket launchers, and counterattacks were destroyed almost daily.

But, even in their "rear" positions the artillery wasn't safe. Up until the twentieth night of the battle Jap fire fell in the 13th Marines' positions. Fire direction centers, set up in blockhouses or other evacuated shelters, continued to direct the firing of howitzers at all hours of the night and day.

Casualties for this Marine field artillery unit were moderate, considering exposed conditions and congestion. Twelve per cent of the officers were either killed or wounded, with 7 per cent of the enlisted personnel on the casualty lists up to the twentieth day. Fourteen of the 24 trained forward observers, the eyes of the artillery, were incapacitated.

The 13th Marines replaced all their weapons destroyed by enemy fire, keeping up to full strength to help other artillery units pave the way for the infantry. At any time every howitzer in the 13th could be brought to bear on any one point on the island.

terrain. Steep terraces behind the beach limited the LVTs to a few yards, and the heavy sand bogged all forms of transportation.

By noon the Fourth Division had advanced roughly 400 yards, uphill all the way. Heavy fire from the right flank hindered the movement, and as naval gunfire lifted, the Japs on the ridge came back into action. The 4th Tank Battalion, landing less than two hours after the initial waves, were soon in action and assisting the advance.

By 1800 the front had been advanced almost to Airstrip No. 1 on the left flank, and extending around to the East Boat Basin on the right. Units were tied in, and dug in for the night.

The Fifth Division, against lighter resistance and less steep terrain, advanced more rapidly. By 1220 it had crossed the neck of the island, and by 1555 was across the southern end of the airfield, having advanced a maximum of 1400 yards. The left regiment (28th) had pivoted on its left flank and established a line across the narrowest part of the neck, completely isolating Mt. Suribachi.

Following reorganization it launched an attack toward Mt. Suribachi at 1545. This attack made about 100 yards, then positions were consolidated for the night.

The 5th Tank Battalion, landing closely behind the assault waves, had had better terrain, and by



The bleak terrain of the volcanic island was pitted with caves dug by the enemy.

1800 had been able to place all its tanks ashore.

By dark the 13th Marines had three battalions ashore, with one registered, and with sufficient ammunition for the night. The 14th, with a more restricted area, had one battalion and part of another ashore.

The situation could have been better, but considering the resistance it wasn't too bad. Air and naval gunfire support throughout the day had been excellent. Casualties had been moderate to heavy. Biggest problem appeared that of getting supplies off the beach.

The Nips Counterattack

Everyone got set for an early morning counterattack. Support ships and planes furnished illumination. The ships fired harassing fire, and were ready to blanket any counterattacks.

Shortly before midnight the Japs attempted an infiltration by landing barge in the Fifth Division area. This was quickly repulsed by the 28th Marines, and the barge sunk.

At about 0400 an unknown but small number of Nips counterattacked across No. 1 airstrip, but were repulsed by the Marines, aided by approximately 20,000 rounds from support vessels. As counterattacks go it was rather picayune, and quiet was soon restored.

D plus One Day

A beautiful air strike, naval gunfire, and artillery prepared the way for the attack on D plus 1. Divisions jumped off on schedule, and met the same dogged resistance of the first day. The right flank of the Fourth Division was able to advance only about 200 yards against the strongly entrenched Japs. The left flank made considerably more progress, and by afternoon all of Airfield No. 1 was in our hands. On the western side of the island the Fifth Division had advanced north about 800 yards, to give us a continuous line across the island just north of the airstrip.

On the south the 28th Marines resumed their attack on Mt. Suribachi, across ground literally studded with pillboxes. By the evening of D plus 2 the base of the mountain was reached, but the lines for the night were withdrawn slightly, as the Nips had exhibited an annoying habit of rolling grenades down the sides of the mountain.

The Weather Joins the Nips

The weather, till now almost perfect, shifted in the afternoon, visibility dropped, and a bit of rain fell. Worse, the wind picked up and started kicking up a bad surf. The beach, difficult before, became more congested. Nip artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire also hindered the unloading and cost us several vehicles and a couple of dumps. Air support was making every effort to locate and eliminate enemy batteries, and these were gradually being brought under control.

D plus Two Day

The attack continued to the north at 0810 on D plus 2, preceded by naval gunfire and a big air strike. The night had been relatively quiet, with a couple of small probing counterattacks which were easily repulsed. Advance was slow, being delayed by extensive minefields well covered by machine-gun and artillery fire. By 1300 the 27th Marines, on the left flank, had reached the 0-1 line, and by 1800 the 25th Marines had pushed to the 0-1 line at one point. The 23rd, meeting the heaviest resistance, gained an average of 100 yards for the day, leaving our line sagging in the middle below Airstrip No. 2.

D plus Three Day

Minor counterattacks and infiltrating attempts occurred during the night, and were repulsed. The nearest approach to a serious counterattack occurred at about 0400 when an estimated 800 Japs were spotted on Airstrip No. 2. Prompt use of artillery and naval gunfire broke up this attempt before it became serious.

Apparently in conjunction with this the Japs also tried a counterlanding in the zone of the 26th Marines, but the force, estimated at 200, was wiped out. By 0700 all enemy attempts had been repulsed and the lines were intact.

At 0835 the 21st Marines, now attached to the Fourth Division, passed through the 23rd, and both divisions resumed the attack. The going was just about as rough as it had been the day before, and at night fall the 21st had gained about 250 yards. On the right the 25th had pushed its right flank forward about 150 yards, and on the left the 26th, passing through the 27th, made 350 to 400 yards.

On the Suribachi front, the 28th penetrated around the eastern side and reached the southern tip of the island at 1400. On the western side progress was slower, and it was impossible to reduce the position that day.

Routes up the mountain were reconnoitered, but naval gunfire had destroyed all old trails.

On the supply front, the beach was slowly being improved, but the surf still seriously hindered unloading. LVTs were the only practical method of hauling supplies, and most units had not established dumps, but were hauling direct from the beach. Supplies were sufficient, but no surplus was being built up.

D plus Four Day

The night was generally quiet, with enough enemy swimmers infiltrating along the western beaches to require extensive mopping up. At 0730 the attack continued, with the 24th passing through the 25th on the right and gaining about 350 yards. The 21st, in the center, was able to make only about 100 yards against the toughest resistance yet



A front line sniper detail digs in for action in an area blasted by shellfire.

encountered. This area dominated the zone of the 5th Division and prevented any great advance on the left.

The high point of the day, and of the campaign so far, came at 1035 when a forty-man patrol, using scaling ladders, reached the top of Mt. Suribachi and raised the American flag. The word was all over the island and the fleet in a few minutes. Immediately everything looked one hundred per cent better.

However, there was still work to do on Suribachi, and the whole 28th Marines were still cleaning out pillboxes and blockhouses on the sides and in the crater. By 1215 the 1st and 2nd battalions had met surrounding the lip of the crater, and the mountain was ours.

Mopping up, however, continued for several days.

The story of Suribachi is an epic in itself, and can't be given justice here. It is to be hoped that some participant will soon write the story as it should be written.

D plus Five Day

It was becoming increasingly important to advance the center of the line and take Airfield No. 2. This was dominating ground, and as long as it was in enemy hands, we could not further advance the flanks nor use Airstrip No. 1. All operative tanks including those of the 3rd Tank Battalion, recently landed, were used in a determined effort to erase the Jap salient. All available air, naval gunfire, and artillery participated in the preparation, and at 0915, both divisions attacked. The 21st reached the southeast edge of No. 2 Airfield at 1130, erasing most of the bulge. At 1330, after another artillery barrage, all units resumed the attack. Mines and AT guns again took their toll.