



## LEFT FLANK AT IWO



IN THE HISTORY OF WARFARE, HILLS and ridges appear again and again as focal points of combat. Such names as Bunker Hill and Bloody Ridge stand on the pages of our own national history. Perhaps the best known to living Americans is Mt. Suribachi because of its connection with the famous flag raising picture. Most people know that Marines took Suribachi; most Marines know that the 28th Marines of the 5th Mar Div did the dirty work. Few know, however, that one of the toughest tasks that the 28th faced was a hill called 362 and the defensive maze facing the 5th Mar

Div on 1 March 1945.


Hill 362 was the key feature on the right of the main Japanese cross-island defensive position at Iwo Jima. A nightmarish piece of terrain to attack, this area cost the 28th an average of 240 casualties per day in three successive days of severe fighting, whereas Suribachi had exacted an average of 213 per day over the period D-day through D+3. But that's getting ahead of our story.

The major aspects of the Iwo as-

**By Maj Fred E. Haynes**

sault have been dealt with at great length elsewhere. Let it suffice here to state that by evening of D+9 (28 Feb) the V Amphibious Corps had ploughed into the northern defenses, with the 3d Mar Div making the main effort in the center (Figure 1). At this time the 27th Marines (elements of the 26th attached) was in line on the left flank south of 362, where the 28th was to effect relief the next morning.

This brings us then to the main point under consideration, the attack upon Hill 362 and the surrounding terrain. In analyzing this operation we will examine briefly the troops in-



## The courage and initiative of small units made it possible to take Hill 362—backbone of the enemy defense on Iwo

In developing the combat team, primary effort was put into small unit training. The colonel's idea of training was based on the philosophy that if you had eighty-one good rifle squads you had the makings of a top notch regiment. This is not to say that other phases of training were neglected, but the emphasis was on small unit training. This paid off handsomely, because Iwo was a battle in which the lower units did most of the maneuvering. In fact, maneuver was largely limited to the company and below. That certainly was the case with respect to Hill 362.

At any rate, by D-day the 28th had a year's training under its belt and was in excellent shape for its first (and last) battle. However, this picture was somewhat changed by the time the regiment hit northern Iwo. Going into the line on D+10 (1 Mar 45) percentages of original strength were as follows:

1st Bn: 38% officers, 68% enlisted.  
2d Bn: 62% officers, 64% enlisted.  
3d Bn: 59% officers, 61% enlisted.  
(Approximately three officers and ninety enlisted replacements were received by each battalion 27-28 Feb)

☛ WHILE THIS STRENGTH situation was not too gloomy, it should be borne in mind that many platoon, squad, and fire team leaders had been removed from action and that only half of the original company commanders were effective. However, morale in the unit was high. All hands had had a few days respite from heavy fighting and there was a general feeling of pride in having taken Suribachi. Therefore, all things considered, the 28th was fairly well prepared for the show going on in the northern half of the island.

Northern Iwo was a treeless wilderness of cave-studded, jagged, frequently ill-defined compartments radiating from a central plateau toward the coastal cliffs. The terrain with which we are most concerned, that around

Hill 362, constituted the right (west) one-third of the main cross-island position. It dominated the western side of the island south to Suribachi (see Figure 2). To the immediate front of the 28th's line of departure was a ridge-line dominated by Hill 362 on the right and descending toward the west coast where it dropped to the sea. The right half of the feature was the more rugged, being cut transversely in several spots and characterized by rocky outcrops. This ridge formed the southern boundary of a major terrain compartment, 180 to 200 yards wide from the north base of Hill 362 to ragged Nishi Ridge which formed the northern boundary of the compartment. Beyond, and running parallel to the compartment just described, was a second compartment almost as rugged and providing considerable depth to the Japanese position.

The floor of the first compartment was cut by an antitank ditch running north from Hill 362 and ending at the base of the opposite cliff line. Covering the ditch and the approaches around the sides of the hill were a heavy covered emplacement to the right of the far end of the ditch and a considerable number of caves in the south face of Nishi Ridge and the north face of Hill 362.

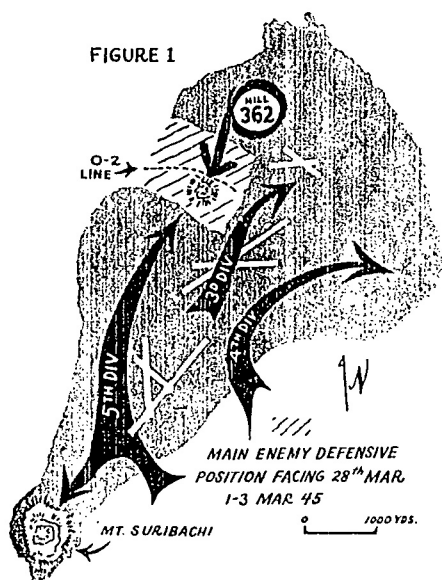
The overall effects of terrain and defenses were that: (a) the 28th would have to attack over two rugged cross-compartments with extensive defenses on forward and reverse slopes; (b) naval gunfire, air, and artillery support were of limited utility; and (c) tanks could not easily be maneuvered into advantageous support positions.

The battle map gave an erroneous (and much happier) picture of this terrain, and aerial photos were mostly small scale and of pre-invasion vintage. Further, ground reconnaissance beyond the front line was impossible. Thus a terrain estimate was difficult. Likewise, little was known of the defending force, for prisoners were few and useless. It is my opinion that

involved, the terrain and enemy defenses, and the operation itself.

The 28th had been formed officially on 8 February 1944, one year and eleven days before hitting Green Beach at Iwo. Officers and men were a mixture of paratroopers, Marine Corps Schools personnel, and just plain Marines. Many were combat veterans. The regimental commander (Col H. B. Liversedge), the ExO (LtCol R. H. Williams), two of the three battalion COs, eight of the company COs, and about fifty per cent of the principal staff officers had fought in earlier actions throughout the Pacific.

FIGURE 1



about a thousand Japanese held the position.

The fight through this intricate arrangement of terrain and defense positions was a slow, methodical, sometimes heartbreaking proposition. To describe the action in detail would be to belabor this point. Therefore we shall examine only the major aspects of the operation. (See Figure 3.)

The assault echelon consisted of all three battalions, 1st (LtCol J. B. Butterfield) on the right, 2d (LtCol Cheney Johnson) in the center, 3d (LtCol C. E. Shepard) on the left. The 2d Bn, 13th Marines was in direct support. A 37mm AT platoon and an engineer platoon were attached to each battalion throughout. The rocket detachment was with the 1st Bn on 1 March, with the 2d on 2 March. The 75mm halftracks were retained under regimental control and employed wherever opportunities appeared. Tank support was provided alternately by all three companies of the 5th Tank Bn.

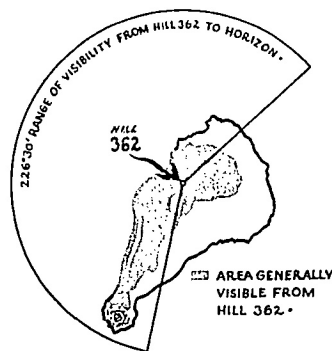
On 1 March the 28th moved through the 27th Marines under cover of a forty-five minute pre-King hour bombardment toward the first objective—362 and its ridgeline. By 1000, assault companies were well up the southern slopes and enemy rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire was increasing. (Here it should be stated that the previous attacks of the 26th and 27th Marines had eliminated much resist-

ance to the immediate front of the 28th. I Co, 3/27 had almost gained the crest of 362 the afternoon of D+9, but had been withdrawn for security reasons.)

By 1230, the 1st and 2d Bns gained the crest of 362 and the ridgeline, while the 3d methodically reduced the coastal cliff positions. Withering fire emanated from Nishi Ridge and the Japanese positions beyond. At this stage of the fight it was discovered that the north and northwest face of 362 was a sheer ninety-foot cliff dotted with caves and impossible to scale under the circumstances. (See Figure 4.) It was then determined that the only feasible method of reducing the hill would be by a double envelopment, the right thrust coming from the 1st Bn, the left from the 2d.

Accordingly, LtCol Butterfield committed A Co around the right to destroy positions in the north cliff line, while LtCol Johnson ordered D Co to work its way around the west and northwest cliffs, reducing the caves one by one. Covering fire from artillery and the other troops along the front was thrown on Nishi Ridge across the compartment.

A Co moved out about 1330 and



was met by severe small-arms fire. Wilkins, last original company commander of the 1st Bn, was killed. Nevertheless, the company succeeded in finishing off several positions and continued to work forward along the cliffs until a local counterattack of about a hundred Japanese against the 1st's right put a temporary halt to proceedings.

D Co was likewise hit by the concentrated fire from across the compartment, also from the caves in the northwest face of 362. Attempts to bring tanks into effective firing positions were thwarted by difficult terrain and the AT ditch extending north from the hill. Assault teams tried to cross the open ground, only to be hit. Casualties piled up and the fire became so hot that they could not easily be removed. Finally night approached and the attack had to be called to a halt in order to tie in the lines to ward off the usual nocturnal infiltration attempts.

AFTER DARK, dead and wounded were sneaked out from around the hill; and, as the regiment licked its wounds in the light of the Navy's illuminating shells, thoughts of the morrow were none too encouraging. Losses had been heavy, 200 in the 1st and 2d Bns combined, and twenty-five in the 3d.

Next morning the attack rolled at 0800 with twenty-five minutes of preparation fires. The first object was to polish off Hill 362 proper, then to move on to Nishi Ridge. On the extreme flanks the advance commenced without too much concentrated enemy resistance. In the center, however, the story was not the same. The enemy had

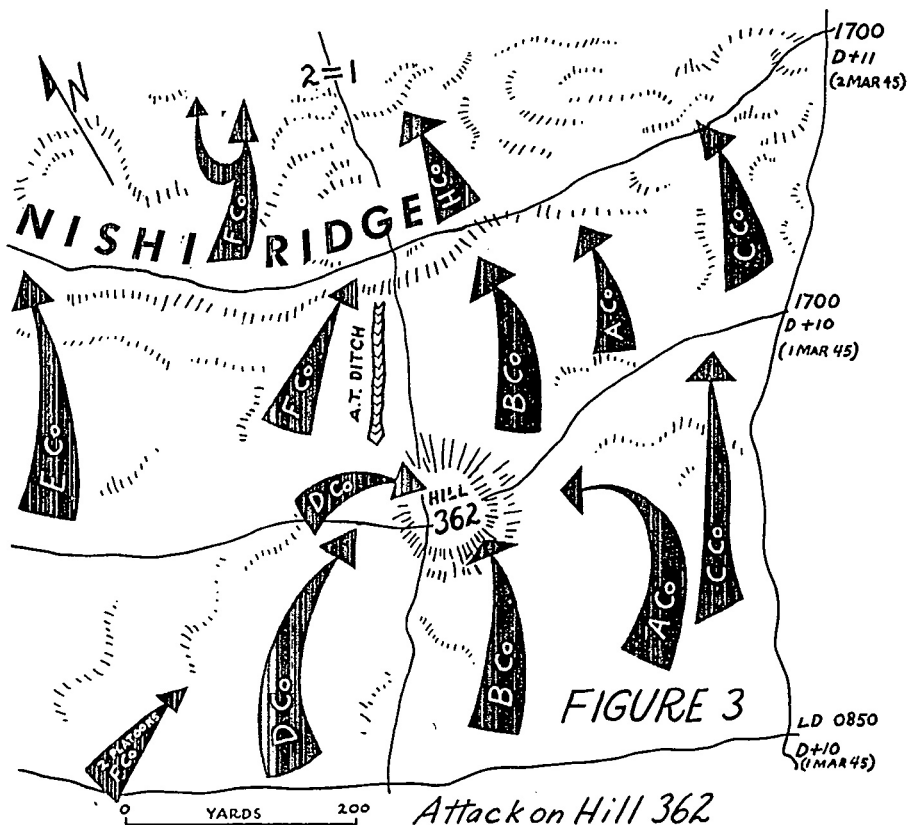


FIGURE 2

*Southwesterly View from atop Hill 362.*

remained in his positions around 362 apparently intent on holding to the last man. In the 2d Bn zone, F Co had relieved D Co in assault; E was still on the left. Both companies moved forward slowly, destroying small cave entrances, trying to work into the draw and across. Casualties mounted. The attached 37mm platoon brought up three caliber-50 machine guns and gave their support to F Co. This helped, but not enough. Tanks were the only answer. To get the tanks in, a path had to be prepared and the AT ditch rendered negotiable. An armored bulldozer came up and went to work. While this work was going on, LtCol Johnson was killed, command of the 2d being assumed by Maj Thomas Pierce.

Between 1200 and 1300 the dozer had cleared the way and several tanks moved in for the kill. As the tanks brought their weapons to bear, F Co rushed across the draw. This gallant move broke the back of the defense, for although the unit suffered heavily from frontal and flanking fire as well as fire from the rear, it managed to hang on to the opposite ridge and enable D Co to swing around to the right and reduce the west and north face of 362 to impotence. (See Figure 5.) As this critical action was progressing, 1st Bn with the aid of tanks was well on its way to domination of the east section of Nishi Ridge through the sliced-up terrain in its zone, while on

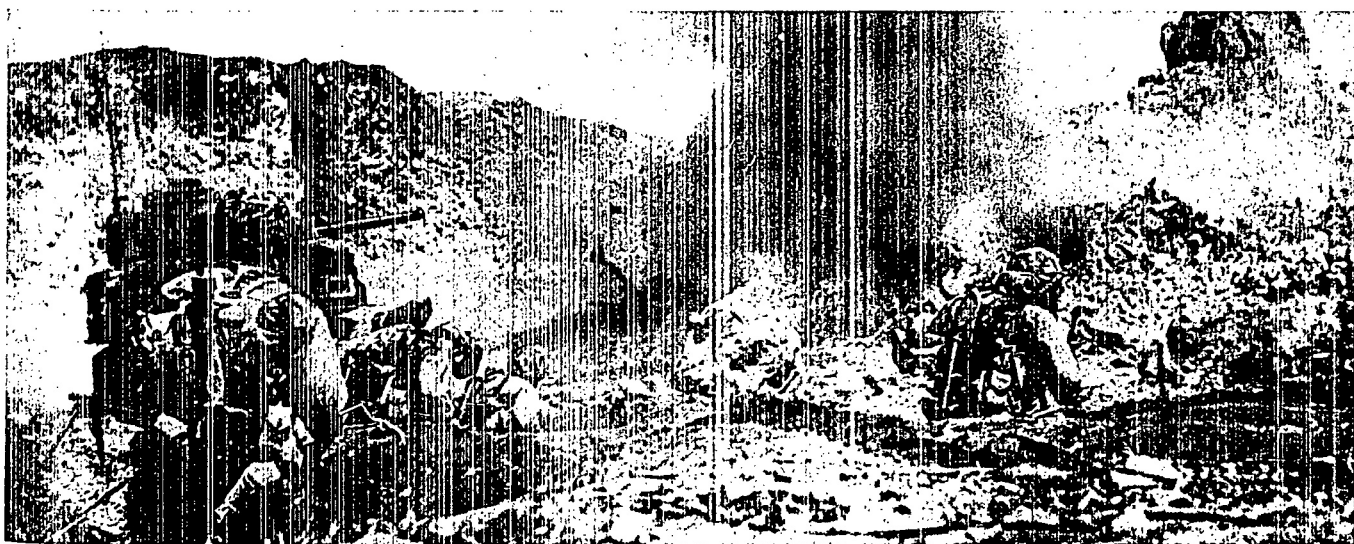


the west the 3d Bn continued to press forward.

Nine hours after the attack had commenced, Hill 362 and most of Nishi Ridge were in Marine hands. The backbone of this defense sector had been thoroughly cracked; crush-

ing a few more ribs would collapse the structure.

Casualties had been heavier than on the day before—a total of 250 in the three battalions. It was a very thin line that held the front on the night of March 2d. If there was ever



Tanks brought their guns to bear — Fox Co closed in

a time for a banzai against the 28th Marines, that was it; but none came. However, to provide for such an eventuality, H Co was withdrawn from the 3d Bn and stationed behind the right center.<sup>1</sup>

The task for 3 March was a simple "continue the attack." The first objective was to finish off Nishi Ridge, then push on to the next ridgeline, gradually swinging the attack to the northwest. There is little to be gained by examining this day's fighting in detail, although it should be stated that resistance was more evenly distributed along the front and not quite so severe, considering the ground gained.

The evening of 3 March saw the main northwestern Japanese defense sector broken. Although the 28th Marines remained on the left flank for twenty-three more days, the enemy defense effort to the west and northwest side of the island never again approached that encountered during the period 1-3 March.

The first point which comes to

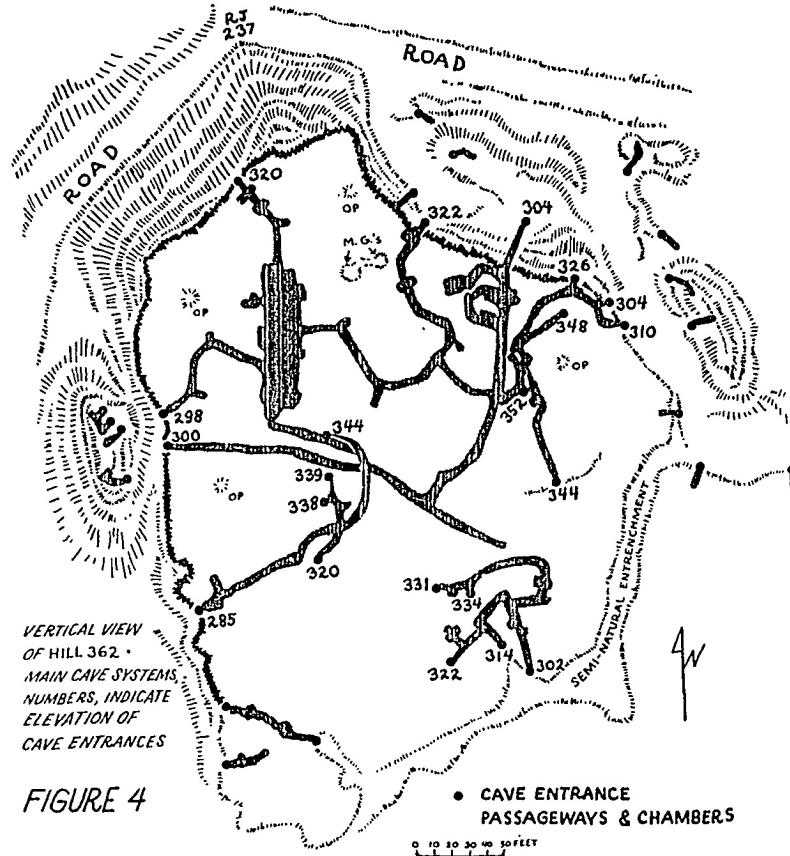


FIGURE 4

mind is that of reconnaissance. Was there any way of providing more terrain and defense information than the 28th had prior to the attack? The answer is affirmative. Tactical air observers could have been asked to take a close look, or better still they could have reported voluntarily on such features as Hill 362. Certainly a helicopter would have been a handy vehicle for reconnaissance in a situation of this sort. In addition to visual aerial reconnaissance, up-to-date low-level obliques and verticals of the area would have been valuable.<sup>2</sup>

Would this additional information have caused a change in plan of attack? The answer here is a qualified negative. The general plan would have remained about the same, although the provision for a local envelopment of 362 could have been made in advance of K-hour, 1 March.

It appears, however, that it would have been more sensible to attack down the compartments toward the sea thus turning them from cross-compartments into corridors. This would likely have been a more rapid

method. This contention is partly upheld by the fact that when the 4th Mar Div on the corps' right flank came into position parallel to the east coast, it swept to the sea. It must be said in fairness to the other side of the question, however, that several hundred Japanese had given their lives in a strong infiltration attempt against the 4th shortly before that division's push to the sea, thus contributing to the ease with which the move was made.

Lack of additional troops made it impossible to conduct one or more "sweeping" operations down the corridors toward the sea. This situation came about because of the rapid extension of the corps' line by the 3d Div's northern penetration. More and more units had to be put in action to maintain coverage of the front. And maintenance of a line was unquestionably essential. Had the 28th concentrated to attack from the eastern end of the terrain compartments toward the sea, little force, except temporarily exhausted units of the other regiments, could have remained with which to secure the corps' extreme left flank.

The Japanese organization of this



"Continue the attack"

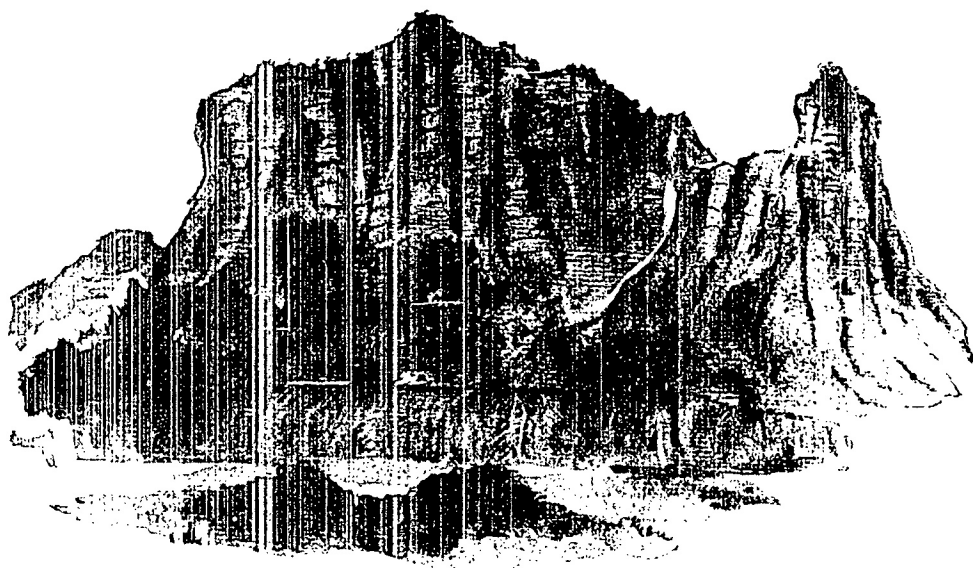
<sup>1</sup>3d Bn, 27th Marines was attached to the 28th, but could not be committed to the attack without specific permission of the division commander. It would, however, have been used to stem a banzai attack.

<sup>2</sup>The problem of providing current aerial photo coverage to assault units was of course not peculiar to this regiment or operation.

defense sector was excellent. The cave system here was not nearly as vulnerable to naval gunfire, artillery, and air as it was in the Suribachi area. Tanks were by far the best supporting weapons. But the defense was in a sense static; and even though it be in great depth and tenaciously conducted, a static defense is a losing proposition in the long run.

Another point worthy of comment is that realistic, aggressive, small unit training is the best insurance a unit can have for winning a closely contested fight wherein major supporting weapons are of little immediate value. Although casualties in the companies of the 28th were running well above fifty per cent by the evening of 1 March, the training and esprit of the still-effective men and junior officers carried them through. Initiative shown was remarkable, to say the least. In this connection it is worth noting that

Casualties — 240 per day



**FIGURE 5**

### *HILL 362 · Looking East*

the Marine Corps has always maintained this view of moving forward even when supporting arms are relatively ineffective, so long as the mission requires it. For the past few years, however, more and more emphasis has been placed on coordinated use of supporting weapons. This emphasis is correct and is essential doctrine for the conduct of the assault operation. But there is a distinct and increasing danger that U. S. forces may become too dependent on heavy support. It is one thing to be "support-conscious" and utilize supporting weapons to the fullest practical extent, entirely another to become "support-dependent" and be reluctant to attack simply because support is at times ineffective. We must never forget that.

Here then in the long history of battle is another instance which illustrates that courage and initiative are the prime qualities of the soldier. To the rifleman, battle is more than a long march and tactical maneuvers climaxed by the assault from close quarter. It is rather a matter of survival and the will to move forward. And in the last analysis the bulk of the credit for making the Marine Corps what it is today belongs not to the press agent (as some outsiders seem to believe) or the amphibious theorist, but to our indomitable body of infantry that has for 177 years met the enemy on grounds of his own choice and never failed. US & MC