

THE LAST DAYS OF



By Yoshitaka Horie

Picture taken Oct '42, in Canton while Gen Kuribayashi was Chief of Staff of the Army in South China

'I am working hard with many difficulties . . . under the present war situation I have been placed under serious uncertainty and tension . . . the enemy will surely invade this Iwo Jima. . . .'
So wrote the General, as he saw the handwriting on the wall

GENERAL KURIBAYASHI

✦ SINCE THE END OF WORLD WAR II, I was anxious to know the hidden details of the Iwo Jima battle, particularly about the last moment of General Kuribayashi.

I met some survivors who were captured by the American forces during the battle and were sent back to Japan after the end of war; and officers and men who left there just before the American forces landed.

Also, I was interested very much in the General's personal letters sent to his family from Iwo Jima. So I borrowed all the letters from Mrs Kuribayashi and translated them word for word into English.

It should be my great pleasure if this article would be read by the American Marines who fought on Iwo Jima.

The last moment of Gen Kuribayashi

From 2100 to 2130, on the 14th of March 1945, Song of Iwo Jima, composed by the fighting men of Iwo Jima before the American forces landed, was broadcast to the still-fighting officers and men from Tokyo. General Kuribayashi sent his thankful message to all Japanese.

On the 15th of March he informed Tokyo through Chichi Jima radio station as follows:

"I am determined to make 'Banzai' charges against the enemy at midnight on the 17th. Now I say good-bye to all senior and friend officers everlastingly." He added in this telegram his three farewell songs.

At 2300, 17 March, all officers changed their uniform into soldier's

or sailor's uniform and at midnight Gen Kuribayashi; RAdm Ichimaru; Col Takaishi, chief of staff; LtCol Nakane, operations staff and about 200 men, Army and Navy, went out of the Div Headquarters cave, leaving 50 or 60 men who had received severe wounds there, with one hand-grenade for each man for their suicide, and moved to a new cave about 150 meters northwest. During their movement under darkness, Gen Kuribayashi was wounded on his right thigh by an enemy shell splinter. One sergeant shouldered him and bound up his wound after they reached the new cave.

All survivors of the 145 Inf Regt, Tamanayama, Northern, Eastern and Western Districts gathered in the cave, totaling about 450. Among them about 150 men had been wounded.

The enemy besieged the cave, approaching it by firing and flame of tanks. On the 21st March the enemy started their advice for surrender by Nisei boys' voices through the loud-speaker.

The survivors continued fighting mainly by sniping. There was no food, no water for 5 days. The situation of the cave was very miserable. It was full of bleeding, groaning, weeping for friends' last moment, water-wanting for his last, mother-calling by some insane soldiers, suicide-committing and so on.

General Kuribayashi, sitting in the middle of the cave with Adm Ichimaru, had been encouraging the fighting men.

At the midnight of the 22nd

March, he asked LtCol Nakane how he can listen to Japanese voice in homeland once again in his life. LtCol Nakane looked around the cave and he assembled one small radio, infantry radio No. 5, turned switch.

All surviving and mobile officers and men except guards at all entrances surrounded the radio, concentrating their eyes upon Gen Kuribayashi. In Tokyo, at that time, they were announcing "Rokyoku," a sort of tragic story song.

General Kuribayashi who was listening to radio started weeping. Tears fell one after another on his face. Everybody was moved by emotion and wept. General Kuribayashi expressed in his tears his thankfulness to all officers and men for their faith, and apologized to them that he had ordered prohibition of having any pleasure and had forced them to fulfill the defense plan only. Also he apologized to them that he forced them to continue their fighting, instead of taking counterattack.

Around 0330, 23 March he took tearful leave of his officers and men, and he told them to conduct freely from now on, behaving themselves manly. He walked with cripple-legs, out the cave under darkness. Then LtCol Nakane and three men followed him. He could fortunately reach an enemy's sentry near by the loudspeaker without any fight. Several American soldiers gathered there. He talked with one of them in English, probably about the surrender of surviving members. Of



course the enemy did not know who he was.

He came back to the entrance of his cave and he had a violent argument there with LtCol Nakane. It seemed to other following men to be the argument concerning the surrender of the survivors, and a key-point of the argument was whether it was more important the living for history-making or dying for honor-keeping.

After about three minutes they looked to come to the conclusion. It was indeed in the grey of the morning of 23 March 1945. Then LtCol Nakane told other men to go back to the cave. General Kuribayashi sat down facing towards Tokyo and bowed three times, speaking some solemnly. Then he undressed until he could see his stomach and cut it by his knife, when LtCol Nakane who was standing to assist his "Harakiri" behind him, cut off Gen-

eral's neck by his sword. (This assistance for "Harakiri" was a custom of Japanese old soldiers.) He buried the General's corpse, went in to the cave, talked with Col Takaishi a few words, and then he took leave of Adm Ichimaru and went out of the cave. Lieutenant Colonel Nakane's corpse was found 10 minutes after he left the cave at just same place where Gen Kuribayashi died. He had shot his head by his pistol.

One sergeant assigned to the Signal Corps of the 109th Div walked out of the cave with Adm Ichimaru. Both of them had about 10 hand-grenades with them and advanced towards the enemy. There were many crowds of the enemy, but nobody noticed them and they walked and walked unconsciously through the enemy's crowds. The place where they went might be "Minamiburaku." There were many American vehicles. They threw the

hand grenades against the vehicles, causing some damages. It was the afternoon of the 23rd of March that the sergeant became awake and found his wounded body under the condition of receiving the medical treatment by the American Marine Corps.

Chief of Staff, Col Takaishi, kept the death of Gen Kuribayashi secret, ordered the radio men to communicate all latest battle news, ordered them to break the wireless after they communicated the latest words, "To all friends of Chichi Jima, Good-bye," and killed himself, shooting his head by his pistol in the afternoon of the 23rd of March 1945.

Letters from Gen Kuribayashi to his family

(The italicized interjections are those of Maj. Horie. Ed.)

Letters to wife dated 2 Aug 1944

I am glad to write you a letter, although I have no serious business today. I guess all members of my family are strongly living under the greatest war we ever had. Tako-chan (*second daughter, 8 years old*) would have gone to Hiaku (*130 miles west of Tokyo*), Nagano Prefecture, for school girl dispersion to avoid the enemy's air raids. I am afraid she might be sad, parting from her parents. On the other hand Taro (*first son, 19 years old*) and Yoko (*first daughter, 17 years old*), might be able to live by themselves under any difficulties.

I am working hard with many difficulties on Iwo Jima. Under the present war situation, I have been placed under serious uncertainty and tension. The enemy which captured Saipan and are now attacking Guam will surely invade this Iwo Jima enroute to the mainland of Japan, and the time of their assault will be very soon. There is a big difference between this island and Raboul where Gen Imamura stays now as Commanding General and already was by-passed by the enemy. He will be able to out-live there. We would never have any chance to escape death. I have heard that Mr Yanagida (*a friend of Gen Kuribayashi when he was Chief of Staff of the Japanese Army in Canton, Southern China*) told you that the enemy's air raid was not so dangerous. It was true in Canton when we stayed there, but the American bombardment over here is absolutely different. You will not be able to understand the true situation by hearing somebody's story. I believe you heard from LtCol

Personal history of General Kuribayashi

Personal History of General Kuribayashi

1891 Born as second son of Tsurujiro Kuribayashi, old soldier's family, Nagano-Prefecture
1911 Graduated from the Nagano High School
1914 Graduated from the Military Academy
1914 2nd Lt, Cavalry officer, assigned to the 15th Cav Regt
1916 Graduated from the Cavalry Officer's School
1918 1st Lt, assigned to the 15th Cav Regt
1920 Entered the War College
1923 Captain
1923 Graduated from the War College. Awarded a sword by the Emperor Taisho due to excellent marks
1923 Company commander of the 15th Cav Regt
1925 Assigned to the Military Education Department
1928 Sent to the United States for study of the military
1930 Major
1930 Came back to Japan from the United States through Siberia. Assigned to War Department

1931 Sent to Canada as the first Military Attache
1933 Lieutenant Colonel
1933 Came back to Japan from Canada. Worked at War Department
1936 Regimental Commander of the 7th Cav Regt in Hokkaido
1937 Colonel
Chief of the Horse Administration Section, War Department
1940 Major General
Brigade Commander of 2nd Cav Brig
1940 Had operations in Northern China, commanding the second Cav Brig in 1940 and 1941
1941 Chief of Staff, Japanese Army in the Southern China
1943 Lieutenant General
Commanding General of the Tokyo Division
1944 Commanding General of the 109th Division
Sent to Iwo Jima
1945 General as of 17 March 1945
Died on Iwo Jima on 23rd of March 1945

Nishi (Baron, and was Olympic champion of the equestrian steeplechase. On Iwo Jima, commander of the 26th Tank Regt. He went to Tokyo by air to get tanks at the end of July 1944 because all of his tanks were sunk by the American submarine attack near Chichi Jima at the beginning of July 1944, and LtCol Nishi was picked up by an escort destroyer and he stayed one night at my bedroom at Chichi Jima) who went to Tokyo for a while the other day about the enemy's air raids on Iwo Jima, but it is no exaggeration to say that he might not be able to tell you the real situation.

I have heard that the people's daily life in Tokyo looks like begger's life because of shortage of commodities, but even that in Tokyo will be level of some aristocracy of wealth when compared with our life.

We have to save water here very urgently because we have no well and no brook and only way to get water is to save rain in bottles or pots. Every morning I get some water in a rice bowl from a bottle and wash my face. After I wash my face, Lt Fujita, 2nd Adjutant-general washes, then my orderly washes. As soon as all of us finish face-washing, I get the water in a small can and keep it for our toilet. Even this way can not be had by general soldiers or sailors. After my front-line inspection finishes every day I, with sweaty body, heartily want to get a cup of cool water, but of course I can't do it.

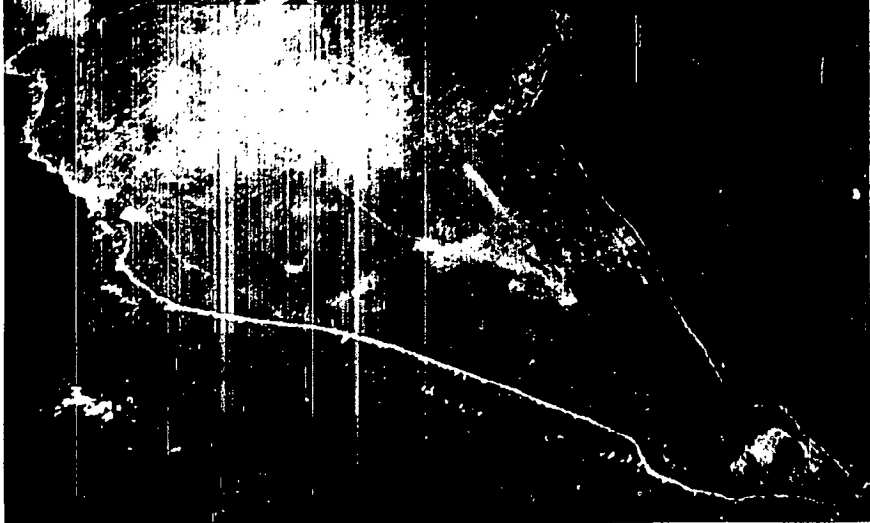
There are many flies and small ants. The flies come into my eyes or mouth and hundreds of ants climb up my body. Also many grotesque and dirty worms are here. We call them "cockroach." However, it is fortunate for us that there is no snake and no venomous insect.

There were some wild papaws and bananas on this island, but no more now. Iwo Jima is new volcano island, therefore this island produces few vegetables.

There were some residents before I came here at the end of June 1944, but now no more civilians, and too many soldiers and sailors are gathering in flocks all over this island.

Ah! In comparison of this island with the operation theaters of the Chinese continent, the continent was just like an oasis in a desert, and the battle in the continent was like a maneuver. There are many officers and men who have been in China and they say unanimously that China was very good.

All officers and men are determined that they must have same fate as that of the members on Attu and Saipan. Therefore, their faces look sad and we cannot see their smiling. It is same with me. All the time except my sleeping



Kuribayashi's Iwo Jima

time, I am thinking of my last moment. Even in my sleeping time I dream about it many times. The other night, I dreamed that I went back home, you and Takako (second daughter) were very glad to see me, but as I told you that I just came back home for telling my will to you and had to go back to Iwo Jima, Takako looked very sad. One more dream was this: When I went to a village shrine of my native country for worship, already you and Takako were waiting there and I was surprised.

Well, open my military trunk which was taken back to you by LtCol Nishi and check the containing stuffs. Particularly, sterilize all stuff in order not to allow the worms to propagate themselves at my house. Take out some sweetened bean-jellies from the trunk as soon as possible.

I believe that nothing of my properties will be sent back home in the case of my death. So I want to send back most of my properties, leaving here only daily necessities.

I am thinking how to deal with the dispersion of my house. In my opinion, Tokyo will be bombed by the enemy one month after the fall of my Iwo Jima. Therefore, I think the best way for you is to move to Nagano Prefecture. Chibacity and Inage city, both 15 miles south of Tokyo, will be the landing place of the enemy for their capture of Tokyo. The war situation has come to the critical time that we have to think of the enemy's invasion against the mainland of Japan. I suggest that you go ahead to move to Hiaku, Nagano Prefecture. It is important to make difference between the daily necessities and luxuries, when you adjust the household properties. Of course it might be a good idea to send all properties with one chartered train. You can sell whiskeys and cigarettes, but if Taro can not quit smoking it is all right to keep cigarettes for him.

Let me close for this time. Take it

easy, please. Oh! I will send some money, my salary for June and July to you. The paymaster told me that my salary would be paid to you after September 1944.

I don't write to my children, today.
Very truly yours,
Tadamichi

Letter to wife dated 9 September 1944

I want to write mainly about the enemy's air raid today. It might serve as a reference for you if Tokyo was raided.

Firstly, the enemy aircraft in various formations composed of 50 or 80 which took off from their aircraft carriers cruising near Iwo Jima come to bomb this island, firing their machine guns against any targets. As soon as one formation finishes the bombing and firing for about 30 minutes or one hour, another formation comes. Our antiaircraft guns and machine guns shoot these aircraft, but it is very difficult to shoot down them because their speed is very fast. All our members except the antiaircraft troops get into the air raid shelters during their bombardment. The air raid shelter is very nice and there is few of straight shot. Following their air raids, they send warships and fire their naval guns. The naval gun fire gives us more casualties than air raid. By these air raid and naval gun fire, any and all of the Japanese visible houses have been completely destroyed. The housing areas called "Village" were burnt to the ground.

Secondly, big bombers come from Saipan. The air raids from the aircraft carriers used to start in the early morning and quit a little time before nightfall. But the big bombers come to attack us at any time. Recently one or two aircraft come just before dawn or just after dusk. The air raid from the aircraft carriers are very violent but it does not last so long time, however, the

bombings by the big bombers are very nervous.

I guess that their bombing against Tokyo will be started by the big bombers and then the air raids by the aircraft carriers will come.

Even at night we can never take off our uniform and we have to be ready to get into air raid shelters at any time when we hear the air alarm. Therefore, we are living in small temporary cottages or tents built close to our shelters. We take our evening meal before dusk. If they start their bombing against Tokyo, you have to be ready to get up at any time from your bed and you had better carry your money-bag, some food and water into your shelter. Children might think much of their books, but tell them that some food and tea are more important than the books.

I have many things to write, but our aircraft for Tokyo will leave here very soon, so I have to close for this time.

Very truly yours,
Tadamichi

Letter to Taro (Son) dated 10 October 1944

Very glad to receive your letter. It will be true that Japan must have help of students for the supply service of the Army and Navy. However, the study at school is more important for your future. You have to make every effort to train your body and foster your scholarship. Japan has come to the turning point



overseas and no more housemaid also your mother is not so healthy, you have to work hard, helping your mother. That is your responsibility as a man.

Especially, the war situation becomes worse day after day for our country and the life of your father is just like a flickering light before the wind. Our fate will be same as that of Saipan, Guam and Tinian if the enemy assaults, and we can never expect returning alive. Please be the strong pillar of our house and live strongly overcoming any difficulties.

I think you have been bred in a hot-house and it is not good under the miserable circumstances. I wanted to give you severe Sparta-type training at home, but at that time you could not understand my real affection for you and you did not like the training. Very soon you will come to find what I am writing now. Please grow up mightily and honestly with my mind and your mother's affection and be a trustworthy man for Japanese society.

The selection of books you read is very important, and you had better quit smoking. Many soldiers who smoke cigarettes have now big trouble here due to difficulties of getting it. Lt. Fujita, 2nd Adjutant-general, who started his smoking after he became a salary-man is worrying how to get cigarette or how to quit smoking. If possible, you had better not drink wine.

At home, get along with mother and sister and sometimes joke for the comfort in their sorrow.

Very truly yours,
Father at Iwo Jima

P.S. You wrote big letters on every other line of the letter-paper. That is not good from the viewpoint of saving paper.

Letter to Taro dated 27 November 1944

According to your mother's letter you are studying and also working for the Army Supply very hard. That is very good and I am very happy.

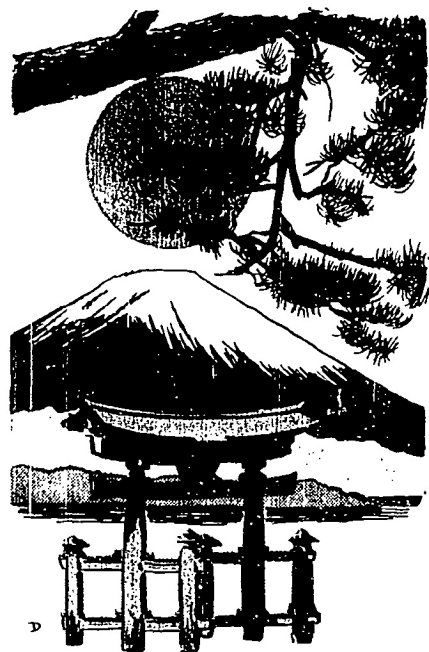
I, your father, stand on Iwo Jima the

front which the enemy will assault very soon. In other words, this island is just entrance of Japan. My heart can be such as the heart of Gen M. Kusunuki who went to the Mino River to fight Gen T. Ashikaga 650 years ago. (*Gen Kusunuki was the commanding general of the Emperor's Army and he fought against Gen Ashikaga with his smaller number of Army at the Mino River and was killed there. He is a famous general in the Japanese history.*) Just like him I can not expect returning alive, however, I am very much honored and proud of fighting to death for my mother country.

Well, today is your birthday, and it is sensible for us because you became the age of 20. Up to date we had many troubles and pleasures upon your breeding, particularly your mother's effort was very splendid, especially because I was abroad so many times, for 3 years in the United States, 3 years in Canada, 1 year in Manchuria and 2 years in China. Now you might be able to judge many problems by yourself even without the help of your parents, but it is very important to have self-examination. It is nature that it is hard for you to judge yourself. Self-examination is the first step of man's culture. Strong will is essential for a man, and a man of weak will can not do anything. There are many cases that murder or some other heavy crimes are done by the men of weak will. There is a man who makes some faults, or can not execute the thing he thinks good, or can not improve the thing he thinks bad. That comes from weakness of his will. In conclusion "Will" is boss of a man, and whether or not a man becomes a successful man is decided by the strength of his will. On the other hand, I think you have not trained your will. If your will was weak you might be unable to be "good host" of my house.

I pray God on your birthday for your success in training your will and in becoming a great trustworthy man in Japan. Particularly you have to be the

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to get ruin or prosperity now, therefore, you should do your best for your mother country also for your house. I know you did not do anything for your house before, but as now the time is very critical and particularly your father is

foundation-stone of my house after my death.

Take it easy, Taro.

Very truly yours,
Your father

Letter to wife dated 11 December 1944

I am very sorry to hear that the winter has come in Tokyo and water is cold, causing chaps on your fingers. I deeply sympathize with you. I believe you had better wipe off any moisture after you use water and rub your hand with hand. Also I am sorry to hear that you can make bath only once every 10 days in order to save fuel. I understand that the present fuel situation in Japan is very bad in comparison with that in the last winter. I realize how it is bad for your body if you don't take bath, because I am suffering from dirt too much over here now.

I will write here my latest daily life:

I get up at 0530 (In my troops, some get up at 0400, 0430 or 0500, sometimes they work at night and sleep at day time), go to toilet, wash my face, swing my wooden sword for my health, take breakfast at 0630, inspect the front line from 0700 to a little time before 1100, take lunch at 1100, see the paper works of my staffs, inspect the front line or see the troops' maneuvers from 1400 to 1630, take supper at 1700, sing some songs or poems, go to bed at 1800 and start sleeping very fast because of fatigue.

Letter to wife dated 21 January 1945

I will make this letter's address "Hiaku," presuming that you already moved there. I think the first trouble you get there might be difficulty of getting food and fuels. If you moved to Nagano city or to Matsushiro city you might have not so many difficulties, because there are many relatives. But at Hiaku there is no relative, so I sympathize with you.

Did you leave Taro in Tokyo? How do you think about Takako? Even though the room you borrowed at Hiaku is small, I believe you had better take Takako in to your room. Changing of school is not good for her, but she will

be satisfied with her stay with mother and sister. If a part of the Tokyo Divisional Hqs moves to "Iwabushi," ask Col Itazu and get his help.

Well, the war will last long, and the enemy's attack will become more violent. I have an information here that B-29 which bomb Tokyo is calculated at Saipan now about 140 or 150, may increase up to 240 or 250 in coming April and 500 at the end of this year. Therefore, the bombing against the mainland of Japan will become severer and severer.

If Iwo Jima fell in the enemy's hands, hundreds of aircraft will be released for bombing Japan.

Probably the enemy will invade the shores of Kanagawa and Chiba prefectures and they will advance towards Tokyo. Listen to radio and read newspapers, and be careful in regard to the war situation, and do your best in reference to the situation.

The war in Philippines is very bad for Japan and I think the enemy would be able to come to this Iwo Jima at any time.

We officers and men of Iwo Jima have determined to do our best until the last moment and nobody has expected returning home alive. At home, never think that I would return home alive. Already I have written to you about my death over here. Therefore, don't be surprised by the news of my death.

Well, never show my letters to other members particularly to the newspapermen. Because my letters will become good materials for them.

I hope you find a small land for my grave and buy it. If you can get it in Tokyo it is good. If you can not find it in Tokyo, any place is all right. I know that my ashes will not be sent back, and my soul will stay in your body and children's bodies, but I think you want to have small grave to enshrine my soul.

Take care of your health and live as long as possible. Take care of children instead of me too.

Very truly yours,
Tadamichi

Letter to wife dated 3 February 1945

I have not received your letter for about 25 days. Anything happened? I think you might have caught cold.

How is your dispersion? Are you still staying in Tokyo? You had better believe that the enemy's bombing will become severer and severer, and it is good for you to go to some safe area. The possibility to be killed by the straight bomb might be few, but I am afraid it might happen that you would get hurt by the fire caused by fire bombs. Even over here the enemy drop the fire bombs, and they cause fire although there is no more material to be burnt. Sometimes they drop drums of gasoline, causing "Sea of Fire."

On Iwo Jima most of officers and men have suffered from disease, but I am very happy I have never suffered.

Today, Major Omoto, 1st Adjutant-general, goes to the Imperial Japanese Hqs. I am going to ask him to take this letter to you. He will go to his native town, Fukushima-city. Don't ask him anything to bring here.

Take it easy. Don't catch cold. Sometimes get masseuse's help in order to get recovery from your fatigue.

Tell Taro to have ruled life.

Now, as the mail-plane is going to leave here, I will close.

Very truly yours,
Tadamichi



On the 19th of February 1945, the American Marines landed on Iwo Jima. In those days Mrs Kuribayashi and Yoko (oldest daughter) went to one shrine close to their house in Tokyo every day to pray God for Japanese victory on Iwo Jima.

The War Department promoted LtGen Kuribayashi to General on the 21st of March as of 17 March 1945, and General of the Army Sugiyama, War Minister, went to Mrs Kuribayashi's house and handed over the writ of promotion. At Chichi Jima, I tried my best to communicate the promotion to the still surviving General by wireless on 22nd and 23rd of March, but probably in vain, because the wireless on Iwo Jima was hurrying too much to send their messages and did not try to receive our telegrams. USMC

These letters are published through the courtesy and consent of Mrs Yoshii Kuribayashi.

