

IWO JIMA

Twenty years ago this month the bloodiest Marine Corps operation in history was launched. Twenty-two Marines earned the Medal of Honor; twenty-three thousand Marines became casualties. What did we learn?

... THE LESSON

By Maj C. G. Dunnagan, USMC

IHIS year thousands of tourists will gaze up at the bronze faces of a massive statue in Arlington Cemetery. There, five Marines and a Navy corpsman are caught forever, leaning forward to shove an iron-pipe flagstaff into the volcanic ash of a captured mountain.

The statue had its inspiration in the flag-raising on Mt. Suribachi during the bloody battle for Iwo Jima, 20 years ago. It epitomizes the glory of the battle, just as Iwo epitomizes amphibious war in the Pacific. Yet Iwo Jima was more than a battle. Iwo was many things.

It was the projection of naval force across the broadest of the world's oceans.

It was the first US landing in the very shadow of Japan's full home-based air might.

It was the largest purely Marine landing in the Pacific. Three of the Corps' six Divisions were involved; two of them landed abreast on D-day.

It was the longest land battle Marines fought that followed a contested landing.

And it was the most glory-filled Marine operation of the war. More than 23,000 Marines became casualties at Iwo. And, during the 35 days

of the capture and occupation, twenty-two Marines and two Navy men won Medals of Honor. Iwo has taken its place beside Bladensburg, Chapultepec and Belleau Wood as an epic of valor and fighting skill.

Unfortunately, one of the most important things that Iwo was, frequently is lost in the dazzle of "firsts." Iwo was the ultimate justification of the feasibility of amphibious landings in modern warfare. Not even Normandy, on its much grander scale, fulfilled as many *test* requirements. The Normandy landing, despite the fact that it came from the sea, was essentially a large river-crossing. In terms of distances and administration and logistics, the attacker's problems were those of land warfare. Iwo, on the other hand, was 100% pure amphibious warfare.

The Battle

The battle began much like almost every other landing operation in the Pacific. In August, 1944, scheduled air strikes from the Mariannas started hitting the porkchop-shaped island. These strikes were gradually increased in frequency until, on D-minus 74, they were on a daily basis. Starting D-minus 20, Iwo was bombed 30 to 34 times daily until three days before D-day. During the three day preparation, both naval guns and air, despite some bad breaks from the weather, hammered the island.

At 0640 on D-day, pre-H-hour shore bombardment began a greatly increased tempo. Naval efforts shifted from pre-D-day point target destruction to area neutralization and beach preparation. Beginning at 0805 and continuing for 20 minutes, 120 carrier-based planes pasted landing beaches and adjacent areas. Following the air strikes, the big naval guns again picked up the bombardment. When the troops went ashore, the Navy employed a timed and observed rolling barrage to provide maximum close support. Then one of the Corps' most significant battles was joined at the water's edge in the farthest reaches of the Pacific.

The battle for Iwo Jima has been termed one of the bloodiest in Marine Corps history. It was. It has been called one of the most savagely contested landings in the Pacific. It was that, too. But those statements reflect only the circumstances of the battle; not its lasting importance.

Even Iwo's strategic value is not the true measure of the battle's importance. Of much more lasting import are the doctrines proven there; even though doctrinal proof was only a bonus at the time. Most certainly, the men who fought and died at Iwo did so for a much higher and more immediate purpose.

Yet the bonus value has outlasted the immediate import. Strategy aside, Iwo was important for the near-perfect conditions testing the amphibious

doctrines already established. Those doctrines had been learned in peacetime exercises. They had been tested variously, in the wartime landings spanning the Pacific. Here, at Iwo, the entire amphibious doctrine would be thrust into a crucible to prove the total.

A number of factors combined to make Iwo an almost perfect vindication of the Marine Corps' stubborn preoccupation with amphibious warfare in the 1920's and 1930's.

There were other landings as bloody, or bloodier, if you prorate the casualties against the battle length. Tarawa saw more than 3,300 Marines become casualties in barely more than 72 hours. That's a lot of casualties in a little time. But in the time element lies one of the distinct differences between Iwo and other purely Marine landings in the Pacific. Except for the extended ordeal of Guadalcanal, Marine operations were mostly slam-bang, over-early battles. Because of that, they attached only a fraction of the massive administrative and logistic problems that the Iwo planners faced.

And there were other major differences that made Iwo distinctive as a testing ground. Guadalcanal, the longest essentially-Marine battle, lies almost the same distance from Japan and the United States. But it is only 1,000 miles from our nearest Australian bases. Iwo, almost as far as Guadalcanal from the US lies only 750 miles from Japan. Not only were the enemy's supply lines reduced by almost five times, but the shorter distance created unique danger to the attackers.

For the first time, US amphibious forces were landed within reach of the full force of Japan's air power. Admittedly, Japanese air was lessened in quality at this stage of the war. However, it must be noted that their air had not yet suffered the near-complete destruction it was to undergo at Okinawa.

However, the most important test-condition difference between the two longest purely Marine operations is not in distances. It lies in the fact that Guadalcanal was an uncontested landing. Iwo, on the other hand, was well-fortified and hotly contested from the waterline to the last tunnel. Anticipation, and actual knowledge, of the Japanese defense required provisions for a maximum of replacements, materiel and equipment, as well as men.

Another facet of Iwo's near-ideal test conditions is that, for the first time, landing craft of the correct type and in sufficient numbers were available. That the V Amphibious Corps was able to get ashore in the face of the enemy's determined opposition of the landing proved the value of having the right craft in the right quantity.

The enemy's determined defense also laid the requirement for sustained ground combat of the most vicious kind. Sustained ground combat, in turn, laid a requirement for the utmost in all

types of support. The circle of demand continued into the numbers of ships that were required to remain in the objective area for purely administrative purposes. That these ships needed protection demanded that a larger-than-normal number of fighting ships also remain. All of these increased administrative demands proved that planners can predict, with some considerable accuracy, the requirements for a future operation.

Iwo proved again, and the proof is there in the history of the battle, the necessity for naval gunfire in shore bombardment. Air had hammered the island daily for more than two months. Yet the high-level bombing did little more than hamper the Japanese daily routine.

It was the carrier-based planes and naval guns, working painstakingly against point targets, that did most to destroy Japanese weapons and emplacements. And it was naval gunfire that destroyed almost all blockhouses and pillboxes in the area of the east coast landing beaches.

The gunfire ships destroyed all high-velocity weapons capable of delivering direct fire on the landing craft. Still there was not enough. The lesson brought home was that the efficacy of the big naval gun depends on sustained bombardment as well as inherent accuracy.

A final unique facet of the Iwo operation is that Marines were seizing an advanced—not naval, but—air base! Before Iwo, most Marines usually thought of their mission in terms of advance naval bases. Yet neither the Marines nor the Navy made any use of Iwo. It did become a life-saver for more than 2,250 Superfort crews who diverted to Iwo instead of ditching at sea.

The battle for Iwo Jima proved, that with proper planning, equipment, and support, the Navy-Marine team can project an awesome force ashore at a geography of their choosing. That force can stay!

The Lesson

In the Iwo Jima battle, as in all history, the value is not in the pleasure of the reading nor in the glory of the events. The true value is in the lesson it holds. The lesson of Iwo Jima is not one of details, nor tactics, nor techniques. Rather it is the fact that in the almost laboratory-perfect testing conditions of the battle, the Marine Corps' amphibious doctrines proved abundantly valid and completely workable.

Nor was the lesson lost on those who were closest to the operation from its inception to its completion. Riding to the beach with LtGen Holland M. Smith, the then Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal looked up at the flag going up on Mt. Suribachi. He turned to the Marine Commander of Expeditionary Troops.

"Holland," he said, "the raising of that flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years."



The glory won by Marines on Iwo Jima was considerable; but it was not glory that prompted the Secretary's remark. It was the crystal clarity with which the landing had proved the amphibious warfare doctrine.

But the battle for Iwo Jima was 20 years ago, and nothing remains constant. What about the present? Are amphibious operations as valid in the modern context of military strategy? Fortunately, there have been no Iwo Jimas to capture in recent years. There hasn't been a current "live fire" test to doctrines.

Instead, there are the continuing landing exercises, which indicate that the ever-improving amphibious doctrines are as valid today as when Iwo proved them. The most recent, and the largest of the peacetime exercises, was last fall on the coast of Spain. Named STEEL PIKE I, it involved the landing of the II Marine Expeditionary Force (Second Marine Division Reinforced and the Second Marine Aircraft Wing) with full supplies, equipment and support.

At this writing the evaluation of STEEL PIKE is not complete, but early reports term it "highly successful." It provided the test of all latest doctrines and tactics, including SATS airfield operations and helicopter landings. And it proved, as Iwo did, the ability to launch and land a large amphibious force across the full width of an ocean. It also showed a need for naval guns.

Maybe, in this changing world, there will never be another amphibious landing under fire. If there is, all will owe an immense debt to the men who fought at Iwo. Their battle gave a proven base on which to build a modern amphibious doctrine, and their proof remained constant during the "no more landings" era of the late '40's.

When Korea put the lie to the "no more landings" theory, the Iwo-proven doctrines were there to use and to build on. They were in the near-perfect Inchon landing, and built upon through the '50's. We're still building on them. And, we're still finding that the basics proved at Iwo are as solid as the Iwo-inspired statue in Arlington.

USMC