

IWO JIMA



By Gen C. B. Cates (Ret.)

THE day was Sunday—18 February 1945. The coming collapse of Germany was headline news. British troops had cut the highway between Goch and Calcar, driving a wedge between two German armies. The Russians had crossed the Queis and threatened Dresden. On his return trip from Yalta, President Roosevelt had been snubbed by the then Gen de Gaulle. In San Francisco, plans were being made for the April meeting of the United Nations. News from the Pacific was good. Manila was ours once again and paratroops had landed on Corregidor. The end of the three-year war was in sight. Carrier aircraft had just brought the war to Japanese home islands. This was ample proof that our fleet roamed the Western Pacific with impunity. On this day, most of the fleet lay off the Bonin Islands, 650 miles southeast of Tokyo.

For three days they had been blasting the island of Iwo Jima.

Iwo was an unknown name in American history. It had been absorbed by the Japanese in 1891. The first inhabitants had come from Japan in 1897. It was a desolate piece of land. *The Japanese Pilot* described it as "... a barren table land through which in many places sulphur gas or black smoke is emitted." It also said that Mt. Suribachi, the dominant terrain feature, was an active volcano; *National Geographic* disputed this.

On Monday, the world was to know about Iwo. On that day, Marines of the Fifth Amphibious Corps, Reinforced, were to assault the island. For the next month, the raging battle would make Iwo Jima a household word. When it was over, about 20,000 Japanese would be dead. Marine casualties would number 22,000 killed or wounded from among the three divisions engaged.

I commanded one of these divisions—the 4th Marine Division. We were to land on the right flank of the assault beaches, drive inland and then wheel right for the final push to the north. Of the three airfields on the island, the southernmost was our initial objective. MajGen Rocky's 5th Marine Division was on our left. To him fell the task of isolating and then capturing Mt. Suribachi.

The first LVT(A)s touched down at 0902. Three minutes later, a second wave with the assaulting infantry was on Iwo. As the Marines debarked from the LVTs they encountered a volcanic ash that provided slow footing for a rapid advance. Behind the beach lay a fifteen-foot terrace, making uphill going tough. Fortunately, initial resistance was sporadic. The dug-in enemy was still recovering from the effects of the naval bombardment. Our units reorganized on the beach and began the push across the island.

When night fell, I had all infantry battalions ashore and committed to the fight. As D-Day closed, we were short of the planned phase line but held the edge of the airfield. Our right flank rested on the high ground to the north. Some artillery was ashore and the remainder was prepared to land the next day. Casualties had been severe. It was most prevalent among the unit leaders. Several companies had been decimated of officers and NCOs. But we were ashore, we were dug in to hold and the outcome of the next few weeks was no longer in doubt.

Iwo had shown how far we had come in the amphibious art. It illustrated that a well organized and determined band of professionals can effect a lodgment anywhere. But in retrospect, it showed more. The reason for taking Iwo was to provide a haven for B-29s returning from the Tokyo raids; to eliminate the Japanese fighter defense based on Iwo; and to provide a base for our own fighter planes to escort the bombers over Japan. Thus, Iwo illustrates the ultimate in balance of forces in pursuit of wartime objectives. It is an application of the proper tool to complement other functional elements in the fulfillment of their mission. The loss of Iwo did not force Japan to surrender. The large Japanese casualties there did not weaken the Japanese will to resist. But the projection of our power to the homeland of Japan did. It could not have been done without Iwo.

After Tarawa, a gentleman wrote: "I can never again see a United States Marine without experiencing a feeling of reverence." After Iwo, this feeling was shared by the entire nation. USMC