

Combat leadership at Iwo Jima

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Four hundred yards inland, Col John R. Lanigan, commanding officer, 25th Marines, discusses the situation with his operations officer, Maj John R. Jones, 0800 D-day, Blue Beach-2 (USMC photo).

Combat Leadership at Iwo Jima

by Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC(Ret)

"In the last and final analysis, it is the guy with the rifle and machinegun who wins and pays the penalty to preserve our liberty. . . . My hat is off to the Marines. I think my feelings about them is best expressed by MajGen Julian Smith. In a letter to his wife after Tarawa he said: 'I never again can see a United States Marine without experiencing a feeling of reverence.' "

*—James V. Forrestal
Secretary of the Navy
Aboard the USS Eldorado
off the island of Iwo Jima,
16 February 1945*

The battle of Iwo Jima occupies a meaningful niche in the heritage of our Nation and our Corps. Marines of subsequent generations, accustomed to limited wars and restrictive rules of engagement, may find it hard to imagine the battle's sheer size and fury. The raw dimensions are staggering: 3 Marine divisions assaulting a densely fortified island from the sea; 36 days of savage, point-blank fight-

ing that won a great victory but cost the V Amphibious Corps nearly 28,000 casualties (all Services, including battle fatigue), the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history.

Iwo Jima proved so costly to the Marines because the Japanese devised a disciplined defensive plan that maximized the island's formidable terrain and soft interior rock. Seizing "Sulphur Island" would demand every bit of experience gained by American

amphibious forces in the 30 months since the initial landings at Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

While the colorful LtGen Holland M. Smith is widely known for his role as the senior Marine at Iwo, the real workhorse was the commander of the V Amphibious Corps, MajGen Harry Schmidt. Schmidt had commanded that corps effectively in the seizure of Tinian the previous summer. At Iwo Jima, Schmidt would



Capt Fields, now a retired colonel, receives the Bronze Star for actions rendered at Iwo Jima from commanding officer, 26th Marines, Col Chester B. Graham.

have the honor of commanding the largest landing force of Marines ever committed to a single battle.

Schmidt was fortunate to have three veterans of the heaviest fighting of World War I commanding his divisions: MajGen Graves B. Erskine (commanding general, 3d Marine Division), Silver Star, two Purple Hearts, with the 6th Marines; MajGen Clifton B. Cates (commanding general, 4th Marine Division), Navy Cross, two Silver Stars, two Purple Hearts, with the 6th Marines; and MajGen Keller E. Rockey (commanding general, 5th Marine Division), Navy Cross with the 5th Marines. Their collective experience would prove invaluable during the prolonged battle of attrition at Iwo Jima, which often resembled the bloodbaths of the earlier war. Iwo would see the kind of fighting characterized by one Marine officer as "throwing human flesh against reinforced concrete."

To the extent humanly possible, the men in the ranks of the assault divisions had the right mix of training and élan to undertake this daunting task. The 3d and 4th Marine Divisions were recent veterans of the Marianas campaign in which they virtually annihilated the Japanese 31st Army. The newly organized 5th Marine Division

would be facing combat for the first time, but a good third of its members were veterans, including many former Raiders and ParaMarines.

Gen Schmidt's divisions emphasized small-unit action during work-up training for Iwo Jima, a good investment in view of the localized fighting to follow. Capt Fred E. Haynes, assistant operations officer of the 28th Marines, believed his regiments' preassault training paid off in spades:

First, we ran all 81 rifle squads through a live-fire assault course—twice. Then, knowing we had to cut Iwo in two on D-day on the left flank, we found volcanic terrain on Hawaii similar to Mount Suribachi and practiced moving from the beach to our assigned positions. We even marked out control lines with white tennis-court tape. Every man knew what to do.

Capt Thomas M. Fields, commanding Company D, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines (Company D/2/26), formed and equipped a 15-man assault squad of 3 teams. "The basic assault team had flamethrowers, bazookas, and satchel charges," said Fields. "Each man was a rifleman with advanced specialty training. Most other Marines in the company knew the basics of these weapons." This practice was widespread and represented a signifi-

cant change from the Tarawa assault where a handful of combat engineers had to provide all the flamethrower and demo support, and the infantry had no rocket launchers available.

Capt David E. Severance, commanding Company E/2/28, took pains to provide tank-infantry orientation for his men. He commented:

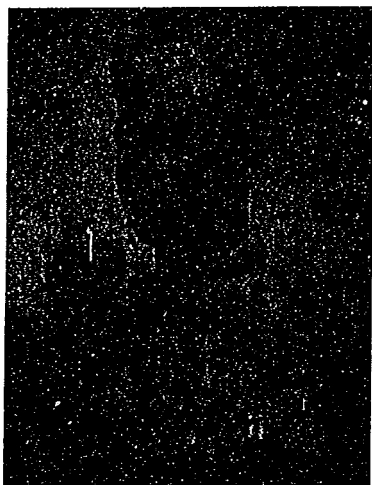
They not only learned how to talk over the 'bustle phone' on the rear of the tank, they also took turns riding in the bow machinegunner's seat, using that weapon to mark targets for the main gun.

Severance had his men dig foxholes, then tested their nerve and validated their digging skills by driving tanks over the occupied holes. The Marines also learned how to retrieve casualties in a hot zone by straddling a wounded man with a Sherman tank, pulling him into the tank through the bottom escape hatch. LtCol Robert E. Cushman, Jr., commanding 2/9 (and future Commandant), also practiced this technique, then used it successfully on Iwo Jima to rescue one of his wounded company commanders.

Many of the company commanders in the 5th Marine Division were former Raiders or ParaMarines with combat experience in the Solomons and Bougainville. Fields and Severance were in this category. So was Capt Frank C. Caldwell, commanding Company F/2/26. All three



Capt Ketcham, now retired as chief counsel for IBM International, receives the Silver Star for actions on Iwo Jima.



Lt Keleher, USN, now a retired physician, receives the Silver Star for his actions at Iwo.

applied their former ParaMarine experiences to small-unit training. "Our goal was for each Marine to be familiar with every weapon the company would use in combat," said Caldwell. Added Severance, "We wanted every man to be ready to assume a higher level of responsibility: our PFCs were taught how to act as squad leaders." The veterans also taught basic battlefield survival skills to the newcomers. Years later, some of Capt Fields' surviving noncommissioned officers (NCOs) paid him a tribute, saying "you taught us everything we needed to know about hunting and killing Japanese."

Other commanders were new to war. Capt William T. Ketcham, Jr., took command of Company I/3/24 in late 1944 after serving as an instructor at the Reserve Officers Course in Quantico. The 4th Marine Division by that time had commenced amphibious training in the waters off Maui. Ketcham was impressed that the Expeditionary Troops commander, the legendary "Howlin' Mad" Smith, spent so much time observing these procedures at the lowest levels. "He would come upon you and yell if you screwed up or didn't know what you were doing."

Iwo Jima would also be LtCol Donn J. Robertson's first fight. He had spent much of the war serving with a defense battalion in Samoa; 2 weeks before embarking for Iwo he took command of 3/27. Robertson imme-

diately scheduled a 4-day field firing exercise. His men executed their landing plan, crossing an imaginary line of departure in assigned boat teams while artillery fired overhead and close support aircraft made nearby strafing runs. Robertson came away impressed with his unit's combat readiness.

Most commanders believed they were ready for Iwo Jima. "We were a well-trained, well-equipped, motivated outfit," said Capt Caldwell of his Company F. Said Col Robert E. Hogaboom, chief of staff of the 3d Marine Division, "We were in good shape, well trained, and thoroughly supported." "Our training was very realistic," said Col Robert H. Williams, executive officer of the 28th Marines, "and I think the entire 5th Marine Division was as ready as any division could possibly be." Maj Frederick J. Karch, operations officer of the 14th Marines, believed that "The 4th Marine Division ... had a continuity of veterans that was just unbeatable."

The troops would find their hard training quickly validated at Iwo Jima. Three things happened on D-day to knock assault plans awry. First, the beach proved treacherous. The combination of high surf, steep slope, and poor trafficability in the volcanic sand created a bottleneck of stalled vehicles and smashed boats along the high-water mark. Second, and despite these conditions, Gen Schmidt continued to land his re-



LtCol Galer, now a retired brigadier general, pictured here in 1946.

serves and artillery units, seeking to build full combat power ashore before the anticipated night counterattack. This created incredible congestion along the beaches and lower terraces. Third, Japanese gunners opened a devastating fire throughout the crowded lowlands, enjoying open targets and fire superiority that they would never again experience in the battle. So confused were conditions by late afternoon on D-day that 1/28 reported 600 missing in action (MIAs) (nearly all would resurface in the next 24 hours). Here the small-unit training paid valuable dividends. When Company B/1/28 lost five of its officers, the staff NCOs and NCOs stepped up and kept the company moving. The 28th Marines cut the island in two in 90 minutes with such initiative. On the right flank, 3/25 lost 22 officers and 500 men the first day; junior officers and NCOs maintained the frontal assault against the face of the Rock Quarry and prevailed.

Among the ranks of the landing force on D-day were two Medal of Honor Marines from Guadalcanal who had voluntarily returned to combat. One died on the beachhead: the legendary GySgt "Manila John" Basilone. The other survived: LtCol Robert E. Galer, one of the first Marine fighter aces in the war. As hectic as that first night ashore on Iwo was for Galer, he could readily see the progress since the Guadalcanal years. "Then it was 'can we hold?' Now it's 'how long before we're done here?'"

As the battle swung north into the teeth of the Japanese defenses, the Marines on the ground were accompanied by an unprecedented wealth of fire support: corps artillery (two battalions of 155mm howitzers), a fledgling fire support coordination center, division artillery, 4.5-inch rocket trucks, close air support (including a few napalm bombs), and some of the best post-landing naval gunfire support of the war. But the Japanese garrison somehow endured, hunkered down in well-prepared bunkers and tunnels, waiting for the guns to lift and the attack to begin. Then it would be the turn of the Japanese gunners to take their toll. Said LtCol William W.



Capt Caldwell, now a retired colonel, pictured here in 1944.

Buchanan, assistant operations officer of the 4th Division:

We still didn't have an effective way of either destroying or neutralizing the defenders in a very restrictive area so it fell to the thin green line to get in there and dig them out in hand-to-hand combat. There must be a better way.

Gen Holland Smith, in his "Task Force 56 Action Report," best summarized the fighting on Iwo:

There was little possibility for tactical initiative. . . . It was an operation of one phase and one tactic. From the time the engagement was joined until the mission was completed it was a matter of frontal assault maintained with relentless pressure.

Capt Bill Ketcham found that "all the 'School Solutions' from Quantico's rolling hills were inappropriate. Here it was more important to tie in the flanks, hug your supporting fires, and keep grinding ahead." As LtCol Cushman recalled the fighting:

It was discouraging; after every one of our terrific artillery barrages you'd hear the damned enemy open up their machineguns. It was just painful slugging with tanks with high explosives and flame, and then the infantry with their flamethrowers and grenades and pole charges digging them out. Casualties were terrific.

Cushman also characterized the conflict as "a battalion commander's

battle." The fighting indeed took its toll at that echelon and below. Twelve infantry battalion commanders were wounded, five were killed, and three relieved. One of the few to emerge unscathed was LtCol Donn Robertson of 3/27. All three of his company commanders died in action, two killed by the same shell. Cushman's 2/9 paid a stiff price:

By the time Iwo Jima was over, I had gone through two complete sets of platoon commanders, lieutenants. . . . we had such things as an artillery forward observer commanding a company and sergeants commanding the platoons, down to half strength or less.

Col Hogaboom released his staff secretary to take over a leaderless rifle company.

LtCol Lowell E. English commanded 2/21 until the 12th day when "a Japanese machinegunner let a blast go and I got one through the knee." His battalion suffered critical losses. "I lost every company commander . . . I think I had one executive officer left . . . it was pretty goddamned rough." Company B/1/28 went through nine company commanders in the battle. The billet of platoon commander, 2d Platoon, Company B, changed hands a dozen times.

Lt Michael F. Keleher, USNR, assistant regimental surgeon in the 25th Marines, became 3/25's surgeon when their doctor was killed on D-day. The battalion commander, LtCol Justice M. ("Jumpin' Joe") Chambers had already qualified for the Medal of Honor by D+3 for leading the survivors of 3/25 over the Rock Quarry. Then a Japanese Nambu gunner put a bullet through his chest. Keleher got to him quickly, but the wound was critical, the position terribly exposed. Somehow they snaked Chambers out of the beaten zone, down to the beach, back aboard ship, saving

his life. "I shall always wonder why I'm still alive," Keleher wrote his wife from the battlefield.

Fighting conditions on Iwo were gruesome. The Marines had never faced such a lethal combination of mines, heavy artillery, rocket guns, and enormous spigot mortars. The landscape was surreal, almost lunar. The Japanese garrison fought with uncommon discipline, for the most part eschewing their sacrificial Banzai attacks—maintaining excellent camouflage and stoic patience. Most Marines rarely saw a live Japanese. "I saw maybe 20," said Capt Caldwell, "and most of those were at the bitter end of the fighting." Exhaustion prevailed. "We learned to sleep fitfully, in short snatches," said Capt Ketcham, "but I had to constantly yell at my men to stay alert, not to make careless mistakes because of their fatigue." And with every man, fear was a constant factor.

As LtCol Cushman admitted, "I always had fear. I hated high explosives. Its effects are so terrible." Iwo veteran T. Grady Gallant later wrote of his squadmates, "They no longer expected



Capt Haynes, now a retired major general, pictured here on Iwo, 2 March 1945.

to survive. Fear was not of death, but of mutilation. And there was no end to mutilating wounds." Others simply expected the worst. "I had no illusions," recalled LtCol Chambers after reviewing the Japanese defenses along the Rock Quarry in his assigned sector, "To be honest, I liquidated myself and my outfit in advance."

Sometimes dealing with fear was a factor of one's preoccupation with responsibility. "Much of the time I was simply too busy to think about being afraid," said Capt Ketcham, "the action for us was pretty much nonstop." LtCol James P. Berkeley, executive officer of the 27th Marines, shared that view. "When you're responsible for something you don't have time to be scared," he said. Berkeley had been an observer during the Allied landings at Salerno in 1943. "I was scared to death at Salerno with those goddamned 88s going around my head, but at Iwo I was concerned with maintaining good communications."

Combat losses among the landing force grew steadily. As early as 23 February (D+4), the day of the Suribachi flag-raising, the V Amphibious Corps had already lost 6,251 men. By 3 March, the date the first crippled B-29 landed on Iwo's airstrip, the count had reached 13,665. And by 16 March, when Gen Holland Smith dedicated the cemeteries, declared the campaign a success, and departed the objective area, the casualty toll stood at 19,928. Ten more days of savage fighting in the north would further spike the count.

Each division landed with sizable replacement drafts in tow. In view of the stiff casualty losses, it is doubtful if the battle could have been won without these replacements, but no one seemed happy with the plan. Too often the replacements were fed into the frontline units as groups of individuals, rather than, say, trained squads. The new men were strangers to each other and their new outfits, disoriented, and apprehensive. Gen Erskine complained that the replacements joining his 3d Marine Division

were poorly trained; his personnel officer commented that "they get killed the day they go into battle." LtCol Cushman berated the inexperience of his replacements during the final days of the fighting, reporting that "almost all of the infantry were replacements. They lacked entirely the will to close with the enemy."

Few other field commanders shared Cushman's harsh assessment. Most found no lack of fighting spirit among the replacements; the troop leaders were much more concerned that the combination of inexperience and disorientation made the replacements such initial liabilities. The 5th Marine Division reported a casualty rate of 55 percent of its replacements. Capt Caldwell ordered each member of Company F, veteran or replacement, to fasten black tape around the base of their helmet. "That way they at least knew who the hell was in

"In 3/25, Capt James G. Headley, the senior company commander and a veteran of three previous assault landings, took over the battalion when LtCol Chambers went down and retained command for the remaining 3 weeks of combat . . ."

their own company." Within the 4th Marine Division, Capt Ketcham tried to orient and integrate Company I's newcomers, "but often we didn't have time—sometimes we could barely write down their names before the fight was on."

Most commanders who survived the battle condemn Holland Smith for stubbornly refusing Harry Schmidt's repeated requests to release the 3d Marines from Expeditionary Troops reserve. All three of the divisions would have welcomed reinforcement by one of the full-strength battalions of this veteran regimental combat team. Smith refused, possibly from the perspective of his other hat, commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, knowing how critically he would need at least one experienced, intact regiment upon which to rebuild his shattered forces for the forthcoming invasion of Kyushu.

Lacking this perspective, the troop

commanders on Iwo could only curse Smith when the ships bearing the 3d Marines departed for Guam on 5 March. By that time, each commander had to deal with filling leadership billets with his few surviving veterans. In most cases, combat savvy took precedence over normal rank or lineal list standings. In the 25th Marines, SSgt Alfred I. Thomas took command of the half-track platoon when his lieutenant fell wounded on D-day and stayed in command throughout the campaign, earning the Silver Star and a battlefield commission in the process. In 3/25, Capt James G. Headley, the senior company commander and a veteran of three previous assault landings, took over the battalion when LtCol Chambers went down and retained command for the remaining 3 weeks of combat, the only captain to command an infantry battalion in the battle. Headley

earned the Navy Cross and a battlefield promotion to major (which unfortunately did not stick; already half-deaf before Iwo Jima, Headley lost almost all of his hearing in combat).

Fatigue and illness took their tolls among higher echelon commanders. Within the 3d Marine Division, Gen Erskine developed pneumonia but refused to be evacuated. His chief of staff, the competent Col Hogaboom, quietly ran the show for several days until Erskine could recover his strength. Similarly, Col Williams unobtrusively called the shots for the 28th Marines during the period when Col Harry "the Horse" Liversedge became too sick to function.

The temporary illnesses of Erskine and Liversedge were far different than the totally debilitating effects of combat fatigue which caused the evacuation of 2,648 Marines during the battle. This was still a relatively new phenomenon for the Marine Corps, which categorized these cases as "sick" and therefore did not list them among battle casualties. Yet they were very much casualties of the protracted fighting; few, if any, ever recovered

in rear area field hospitals in sufficient condition to return to the frontlines.

Doctor Keleher, 3/25's surgeon during the initial phase of the fighting, recalled that battle fatigue occurred in two different categories. The first was more akin to "shell shock." Noting that the landing force sustained 99 cases of battle fatigue on D-day alone, Keleher said, "This was attributable to the shelling we took on the beaches—the noise, shock, blast, and sense of helplessness." The second form occurred as the battle progressed and seemed more a function of sleep deprivation and bone-weariness. Keleher continued:

We all had battle fatigue to a degree; we were numb, fatalistic, exhausted, but some men simply crossed the line, could no longer function in a combat zone. Some would even hallucinate at night, open fire on imaginary enemy troops, exposing our lines and endangering our own men. We had to get them out of there.

Capt Fred Haynes recalled examples of both kinds of battle fatigue:

One staff officer became so terrorized by that Japanese artillery barrage along the beach on D-day that he would not leave the shelter of the first shell crater he found—even hours after the barrage stopped. We had to evacuate him.

Much later in the campaign the 28th Marines had to relieve a highly competent battalion commander engaged in the thick of the fighting. "He had lost all capacity to lead; he was slumped over and crying," Haynes said. Liversedge quietly replaced the stricken officer with his executive officer.

The company commanders had little experience dealing with combat fatigue. There was a natural tendency at first to suspect malingering. Capt Ketcham resorted to slapping one of his officers "to break him out of his sudden stupor." It didn't work. Capt Caldwell was able to save one man at the breaking point by reassigning him "20 yards to the rear with the 60mm mortar crews—just getting him off the frontlines seemed to help, and he didn't snap." Capt Severance recalled

having two brothers in his company: "one died of wounds early on, the other lasted about 2 weeks then got the classic symptoms—the wide-eyed stare, the shakes, uncontrolled crying. He had to go." Unlike wounded-in-action cases, the company commanders rarely saw their battle fatigue cases again, rarely learned whether they ever recovered.

The impact of the Marine casualties at Iwo Jima is perhaps best measured in the ranks of the rifle com-

“Capt Severance of Company E/2/28 lost 71 killed, 167 wounded, 21 sick and evacuated. He lost all five platoon commanders; a replacement lieutenant lasted 15 minutes.”

panies. Capt Fields commanded Company D/2/26 for the first 8 days, then served as battalion executive officer. The final news from Company D broke his heart. Every officer and platoon sergeant went down; so did the first sergeant. At one point, Sgt Hubert J. Faltyn, a former Raider, commanded the company for 6 days. In the end, only 17 Marines who landed with Capt Fields on D-day remained.

Capt Severance of Company E/2/28 lost 71 killed, 167 wounded, 21 sick and evacuated. He lost all five platoon commanders; a replacement lieutenant lasted 15 minutes. "In the end I had my first sergeant and my company gunnery sergeant; my three platoons had been consolidated into two, one led by a corporal, the other by a PFC." Of the six men from Company E who raised the second flag on Suribachi on D+4, three died and one was wounded in subsequent fighting in the north.

Capt Bill Ketcham's Company I/3/24 landed on D-day with 133 Marines in its 3 rifle platoons. Only 9 of these men were still standing when the 4th Division backloaded their ships 26 days later.

Capt Frank Caldwell's Company F/2/26 lost all its platoon commanders and 221 men. Caldwell's worst day came on 3 March:

We had seized Hill 362-B and were

holding on for dear life. I lost 20 killed and 25 wounded and 2 cases of combat fatigue. I lost my platoon commander and my first sergeant, killed while standing in his foxhole taking casualty reports.

Seizing Iwo Jima enhanced the strategic bombing campaign against Japan and saved thousands of lives among the B-29 crews struggling back from their raids over Honshu. Was it worth the cost of so many Marines and corpsmen, so many proud infantry battalions?

Military historian and Marine officer Ronald H. Spector analyzed the casualties of Iwo Jima from a different perspective. "Had the

war gone as expected with an invasion of Japan necessary in early 1946," he wrote in *Eagle Against the Sun*, "the wholesale sacrifice of three well-trained and expert assault divisions simply to secure emergency landing fields might have loomed as a gross strategic error."

Yet the psychological factor of the American victory at Iwo Jima cannot be ignored. After Iwo Jima, both sides could clearly see the inevitable outcome of the final battles to come. The Americans had demonstrated a mastery of forcible assault from the sea—the concentration of overwhelming combat power, the ability to sustain offensive momentum—and the will to see it through. The years of "issue in doubt!" were gone forever.

Capt Ketcham recalled that his survivors felt heartsick at their appalling losses but upbeat about their victory. "Morale was surprisingly good. We had destroyed a very good enemy force defending a real fortress. We had the sense that nothing could stop us."

USMC

>Col Alexander has resided in Asheville, NC, since his retirement in 1988. He is the author of the forthcoming 50th anniversary commemorative pamphlet on the battle for Iwo Jima, as well as the forthcoming book, *Utmost Savagery: Tarawa 1943*, to be published by Naval Institute Press later this year.