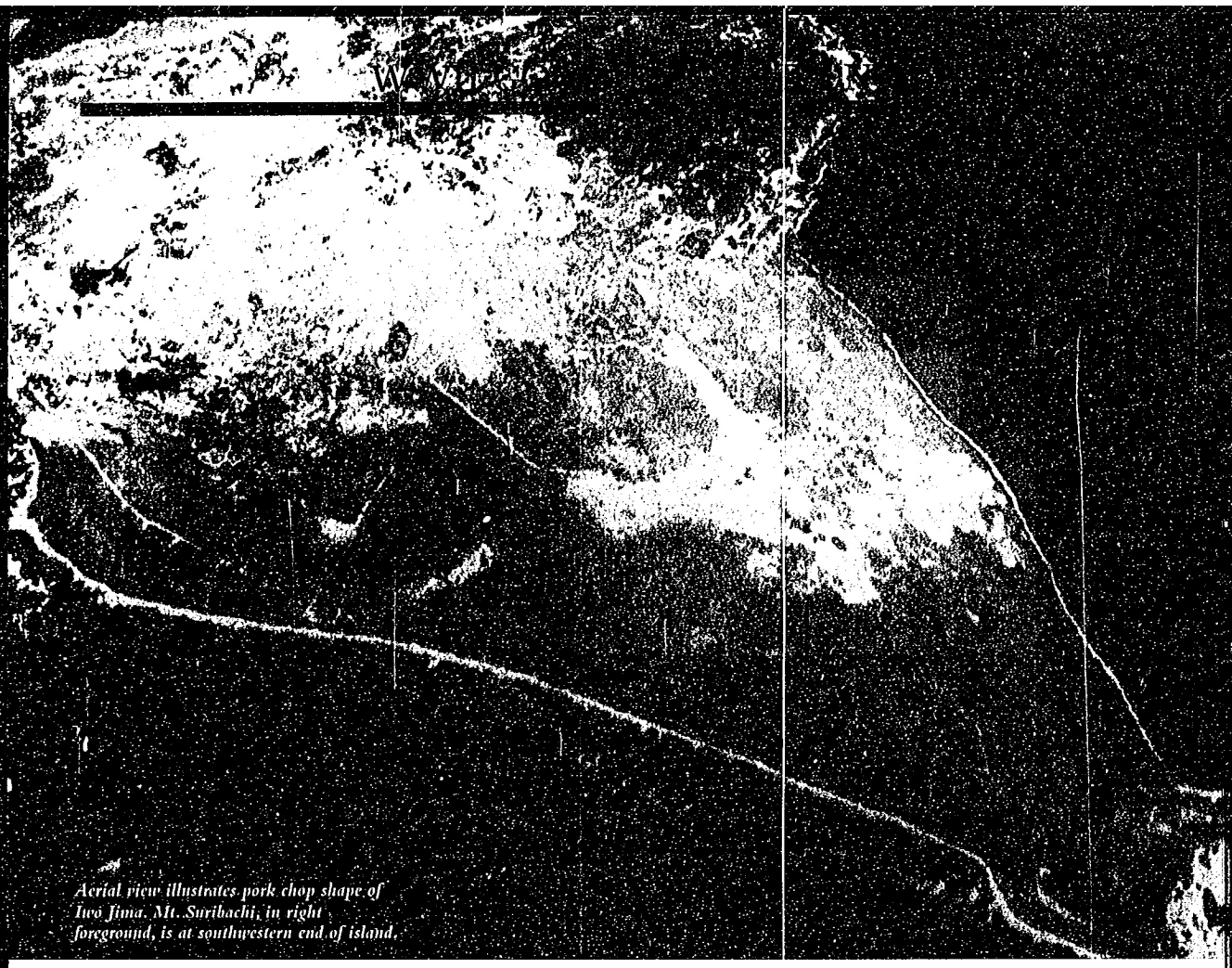

Aerial view illustrates pork chop shape of Iwo Jima. Mt. Suribachi, in right foreground, is at southwestern end of island.

Operation DETACHMENT: The Corps' Supreme Test at Iwo Jima

by Maj Michael C. Howard, USMCR

'Above all else we shall dedicate ourselves and our entire strength to the defense of this island. We shall destroy the enemy and his tanks. With every salvo we will, without fail, kill the enemy. Each man will make it his duty to kill 10 of the enemy before dying.'
—LtGen Tadamichi Kuribayashi, IJA

Victory was never in doubt. Its cost was. What was in doubt, in all our minds, was whether there would be any of us left to dedicate our cemetery at the end, or whether the last Marine would die knocking out the last Japanese gun and gunner. . . . Such were the comments of MajGen Graves B. Erskine, at the dedication of the Iwo Jima 3d Marine Division Cemetery, 14 March 1945.

The United States Marine Corps has always taken pride in its motto "Semper Fidelis" . . . Always Faithful. To both country and fellow Marine, this faithfulness, devotion to duty, and strong sense of brotherhood have been exemplified in the Corps' history of accomplishing a given mission. At Iwo Jima, more so than at any time in its history before or since, the doctrine, techniques, equipment, weapons, and men of the Corps received the ultimate challenge. This was unquestionably the costliest battle in Marine Corps history.

On this 8-square-mile island (4 3/4 miles long by 2 1/2 miles wide), 6,821 Marines were killed and

19,217 were wounded. At the rate of 852 killed and 2,402 wounded per square mile, next to Tarawa this was undoubtedly the single most expensive piece of land that the United States has ever had to purchase. The 75,000 Marines who landed at Iwo Jima would exact a heavy toll on the defenders. Of the approximately 22,000 Japanese, 21,000 were killed (many of the surviving Japanese were simply too weak or shell shocked to kill themselves). Nowhere in the Pacific war would Japanese troops be better deployed and led in conducting a textbook heavily fortified defense. Over the 36-day period lasting from 19 February to 25 March 1945, 22 of the 80 Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to Marines in World War II were earned (11 posthumously). In the annals of warfare, few battles rival Iwo Jima in concentrated intensity and human cost. True to their motto, the Marines, despite the desperate fighting, never wavered in their resolve to secure Iwo Jima as an American objective. In this, it has become as meaningful to our Nation's heritage as Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and Belleau Wood.

When considering such staggering losses in American lives for such a small, barren, and obscure piece of terrain, that unavoidably reflexive and simplistic question arises: Why? The answer at the time was strategic, tactical, and psychological. Strategic, in that Iwo Jima lay almost directly halfway between new U.S. B–29 airbases in the Marianas (Saipan, Tinian, and Guam) and mainland Japan. It thus was a significant step in the Central Pacific island-hopping scheme of moving the focus of the war ever closer to Japan. Tactical, in that Iwo Jima was the midpoint (625 miles from Saipan and 660 miles from Tokyo)—an ideal haven for crippled bombers. (The first B–29 emergency landing occurred during the height of the battle on 4 March 1945, when the "Dinah Might" stopped briefly on Airfield #1 to correct hydraulic and fuel line problems before proceeding back to Guam.) Utilized as a stop-off for return flights, B–29s could carry less fuel and more bombs, refueling on their return leg at Iwo Jima. Taking the island also denied the Japanese their early warning capability for U.S. raids on their mainland, while also eliminating the fighter and antiaircraft threat to U.S. bombers. And finally, psychological, in that Iwo Jima's fall marked not just the loss of an integral Japanese possession, but for the very first time, an actual portion of the Tokyo prefecture—Iwo was considered Japanese soil by the people of Japan.

The clearest justification and vindication for the taking of Iwo Jima is simply that by the end of World War II, well over 2,500 B–29s, carrying approximately 25,000 airmen, had made emergency landings there. At the height of the Pacific air offensive against Japan (the summer of 1945), an average of 20 American bombers per day put down on Iwo Jima. This island, which had represented hell on earth to Marines, was an obvious godsend to these flyers.

LtGen Kuribayashi commanded Japanese forces on Iwo Jima.

The man who proved to be the Marine Corps' most formidable enemy in its history was LtGen Tadamichi Kuribayashi. An extremely intelligent, talented individual who studied military history and wrote poetry, he had served in both the United States and Canada as a military attaché from 1928 to 1933. He had traveled extensively in North America and was impressed with the U.S. industrial capacity. A former cavalryman who had also served as commander of the Emperor's Imperial Guards, he represented the very best in wisdom and innovation that Japan possessed. Following the fall of Saipan in June 1944, Kuribayashi, upon receiving command of the garrison at Iwo Jima, had a private audience with Emperor Hirohito. Not only did he realize the importance and seriousness of this assignment (he would leave his Samurai sword at home with his family), but he also reached the conclusion that Japanese island defensive tactics were flawed. Desperate banzai charges launched in an attempt to hurl Marines back into the sea were counterproductive in the face of overwhelming U.S. firepower. The most effective tactic, Kuribayashi concluded (and this was later affirmed by a German staff study for the Japanese), would be one of disciplined defense aimed at pure attrition warfare. His goal was to establish a complex series of mutually supporting, heavily fortified positions in which interior lines of tunnels were used to shift Japanese defenders wherever needed. Traditional offensive tactics would be prohibited so as to preserve manpower and "bleed the enemy white." In this Kuribayashi succeeded. He and his entire command were waiting underground in over 16 miles of interconnecting tunnels and firing positions when the Marines landed. With Iwo Jima fortified to near perfection into five major defensive sectors, U.S. tactics were forced (with airpower, naval gunfire, and artillery support minimized) to rely ultimately on close-in fighting by exposed infantry, combat engineers, and armor. The Marine response became known as "corkscrew tactics" in which assault elements advanced under a hail of covering fires, with the sequence: "blind" (using smoke), "burn" (employing flamethrowers), and "blast" (using explosive satchel chargers) employed to destroy and seal up the Japanese positions. As Kuribayashi correctly surmised, this was winning the hard way. Iwo Jima took well over twice as much time as U.S. forces had planned, and the Japanese ratio of troops lost to enemy casualties was the most favorable in the Pacific War.

The Japanese defenders on Iwo Jima knew that they were on their own and undoubtedly doomed. Their navy had been shattered, their airpower crushed, their logistics cut to a trickle—the United States wielded the initiative. Converging on Iwo Jima from the Marianas was a tremendous American task force of approximately 800 ships and 220,000 men. Since 15 June 1944, when U.S. carrier planes had first struck the island, a methodical aerial assault finally culminated in a continuous 74-day period of strikes by Saipan-based bombers. The Marines requested a 10-day period of preinvasion naval bombardment, but because of the upcoming Operation ICEBERG (the 1 April 1945 invasion of Okinawa), logistics constraints were limited to 3 days. Results later showed that this was less than optimal naval gunfire preparation time.

The assault troops who first landed on Iwo Jima consisted of the 4th Marine Division (23d, 24th, and 25th infantry regiments, and the 14th artillery regiment), led by MajGen Clifton B. Cates, and the 5th Marine Division (26th, 27th, and 28th infantry regiments, and the 13th artillery regiment), led by MajGen Keller E. Rockey. Both divisions, together with their many reinforcing attachments (combat engineers, tanks, etc.), were part of the V Amphibious Corps. This unit had been under the command of MajGen Harry Schmidt since July 1944. The 3d Marine Division (3d, 9th, and 21st Marine infantry regiments, and the 12th artillery regiment), were led by MajGen Graves B. Erskine and comprised the V Corps Reserve. Assigned the billet of commanding general, Expeditionary Troops, and having overall responsibility for the conduct of the fighting ashore, was the venerable LtGen Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith.

At 0902, Monday morning, 19 February 1945, following the by now famous message first signaled at Guadalcanal to "Land the Landing Force," the first Marine wave in 68 LVT(A)s (armored amphibian tractors), or amtracs, followed by 482 personnel-carrying amtracs, hit the southeastern beach of Iwo Jima. Within 15 minutes, a heavy volume of Japanese machinegun, mortar, and artillery fire was sweeping the beach. Marines immediately began struggling to work their way inland amid the ankle-deep volcanic ash. The overall U.S. tactical plan was not complex: Seize and establish a beachhead, take Airfield #1, cut the pork chop-shaped island in half at its narrowest southern location, seize the commanding elevation of Mt. Suribachi, and then push northward with all combined forces. The operation was scheduled to take 14 days—Kuribayashi defended for 36.

Under a constant hail of machinegun and preplotted, indirect mortar and artillery fire, the Marine advance bogged down immediately. Tanks, armored bulldozers, and amtracs hit mines and were taken under direct artillery fire. Elements of the 5th Marine Division managed to drive west across the narrow neck of the island while the 4th Marine Division swerved north to the fringes of Airfield #1. Bypassed enemy strongpoints continued to put up fierce resistance. By 1800, the advance was halted for the night in the shadow of steep 550-foot Mt. Suribachi to the south, and the gradually sloping 382-foot Motoyama Plateau to the north. Marines dug in and prepared their defensive final protective fires for the expected Japanese night banzai charge. Under Kuribayashi's firm control, these were not launched. Of the 30,000 Marines landed this first day, an estimated 548 had been killed and 1,775 wounded.

The seizure of Mt. Suribachi was entrusted to the 28th Marines, commanded by Col Harry "The Horse" Liversedge, who, it was joked, was assigned Iwo Jima's most prominent terrain feature because he had failed land navigation as a new lieutenant. On the morning of 20 February, the regiment began to probe the formidable defenses near the base of the mountain. There were no weak spots, and advances over the next few days were measured in hundreds of yards per day. It was not until the night of 22 February that plans were made to advance up the mountain the following morning.

Mt. Suribachi, which was actually a dormant volcano with a deep central crater, was defended by some 2,000 Japanese under the command of Col Kanehiko Atsuchi. They were deeply dug in behind some 200 caves and 150 pillboxes. Kuribayashi originally planned to connect the Suribachi defensive sector by tunnel with the extensive tunnel system of the northern plateau. This would have made it possible to travel from one end of Iwo Jima to the other, completely underground, at an average depth of some 30 feet. Fortunately for the Marines, he had run out of time. As it was, the existing tunnel network played havoc with U.S. rear area security—Japanese were continuously "reappearing" behind the lines in areas already cleared. On one night alone, a Marine reconnaissance battalion killed over 500 Japanese infiltrators.

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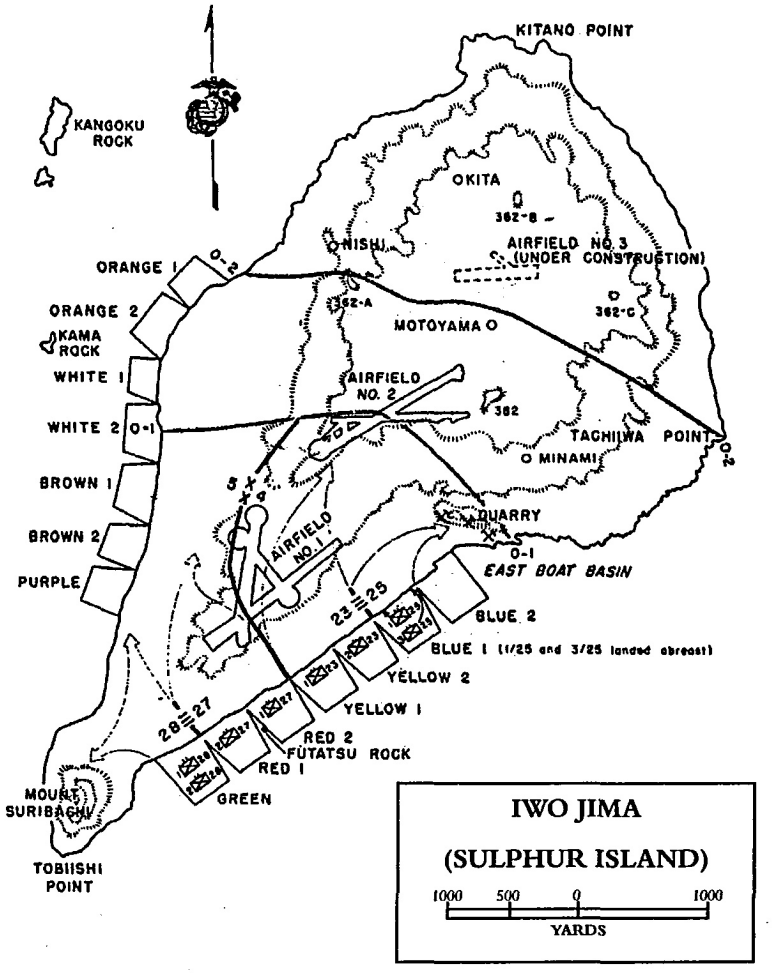
It took 4 days of intense fighting for the 28th Marines to clear and reach the base of Mt. Suribachi. The battleships USS *Arkansas* and USS *Tennessee*, together with other naval, air, and ground support, fired directly into the fortified slopes. Early on the morning of 23 February, 1stLt Harold G. Schrier was ordered to take a 40-man patrol (from Company E of the 2d Battalion) up Mt. Suribachi to seize and occupy the crest. The battalion commander gave him a 4 1/2-by 2 1/3-foot flag to be raised if the unit gained its objective. Despite occasional sniping and the mined path, the combat patrol reached the crest at 1020, where even as a brief

skirmish was in progress, the flag was raised. This first flag raising was recorded by Sgt Louis R. Lowery, for *Leatherneck* magazine.

An unidentified Marine obtained a larger set of colors (8 by 4 1/2 feet) from LST 779, which was beached at the base of Mt. Suribachi. Joe Rosenthal, a photographer for the *Associated Press*, noticed this and followed a detail of four Marines up the mountain. Lt Schrier decided that the new flag should be raised as the original was lowered. As Sgt Michael Strank (Conemaugh, PA), Cpl Harlon Block (Yorktown, TX), PFC Franklin Sousley (Flemingsburg, KY), and PFC Ira Hayes (a Pima Indian from Sacaton, AZ) appeared to be having difficulty getting the large flag firmly planted, Pharmacists Mate 2d Class John Bradley (Antigo, WI) and PFC Rene Gagnon (Manchester, NH) came to their aid. The five Marines and one navy corpsman were struggling to raise the length of Japanese pipe with the large flag when Rosenthal snapped "the" picture. This unposed photograph of the second Iwo Jima flag raising soon became perhaps the most famous single photograph ever taken. The raising itself had an immediate impact, for this larger flag could be clearly seen from all around. Dozens of ships sounded their horns and sirens while Marines below took heart in the fact that Mt. Suribachi was now friendly real estate.

Observing the first flag raising from ashore, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal was landing down below wearing unmarked khakis and a steel helmet. Turning to Gen Smith as he gazed upon the flag, he stated: "Holland, this means a Marine Corps for 500 years." Howlin' Mad simply nodded with tears in his eyes. Of the six individuals who participated in the flag raising, three were subsequently killed on Iwo Jima, and another wounded.

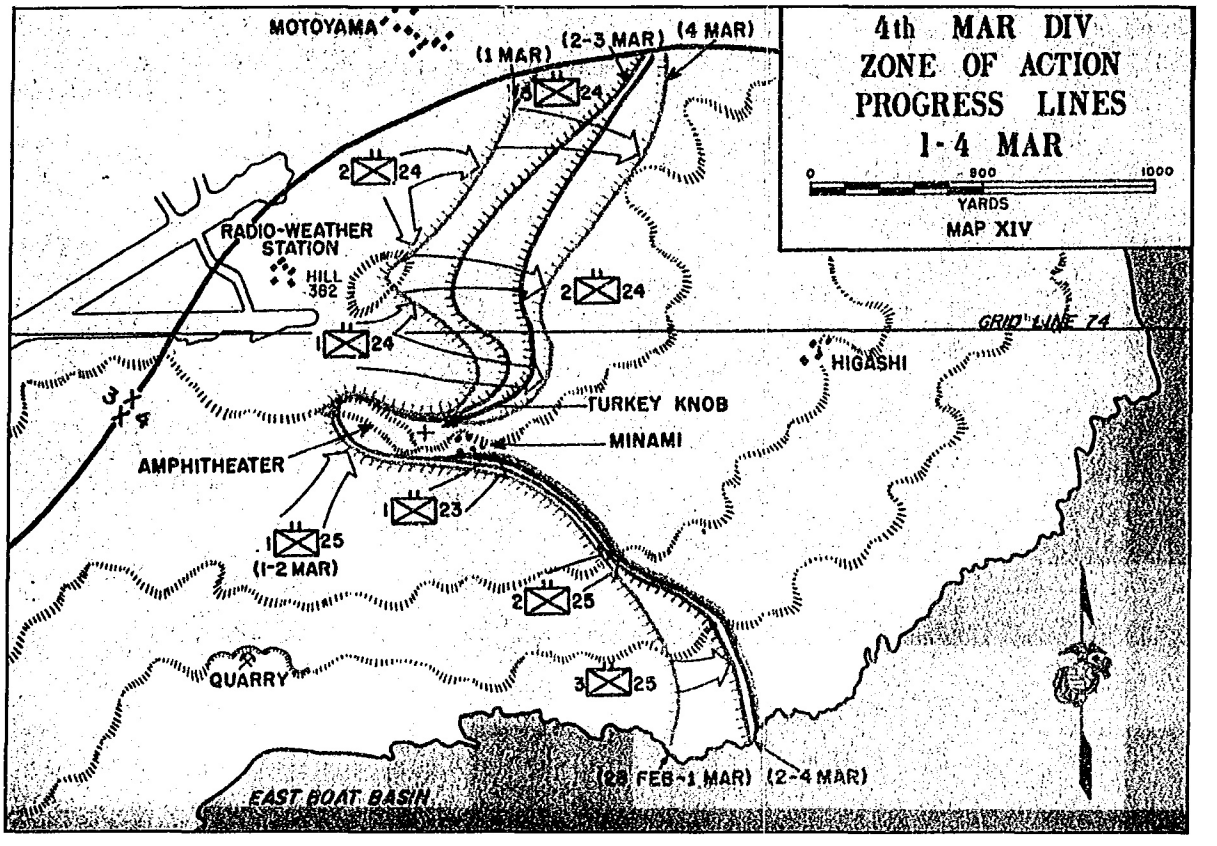
As the 28th Marines was fighting its isolated action for Mt. Suribachi, the units of 4th Marine Division's 23d, 24th, and 25th Marines, together with 5th Marine Division's 26th and 27th Marines, had taken up the struggle of securing both Airfield #1 and pressing northward into the heart



of Iwo Jima's defenses. Like Mt. Suribachi, this drive began on 20 February, and Marines found themselves constantly confronted with both direct and indirect fire weapons on the higher ground of the Motoyama Plateau. Resistance was fierce in this rough terrain, and advances were measured from 1,000 yards on the left (west) flank to a mere 200 yards on the right (east) flank for the first day. Airfield #1 was secured, and engineers rapidly began to clear and improve the runways, which were the crucial reason for taking Iwo Jima.

Marine units pushing north soon learned that Kuribayashi's arsenal had several nasty surprises in store. One was a series of huge new 320mm mortars (three times the size of the largest U.S. mortar), which fired a shell the size of a garbage can, causing a tremendous fragmentation pattern. There were also 16- and 8-inch rockets which were fired from mobile folding chutes. Though inaccurate, they contributed to 8 percent of Marines wounded who would die on Iwo Jima from their injuries compared to an overall World War II average of 3 percent.

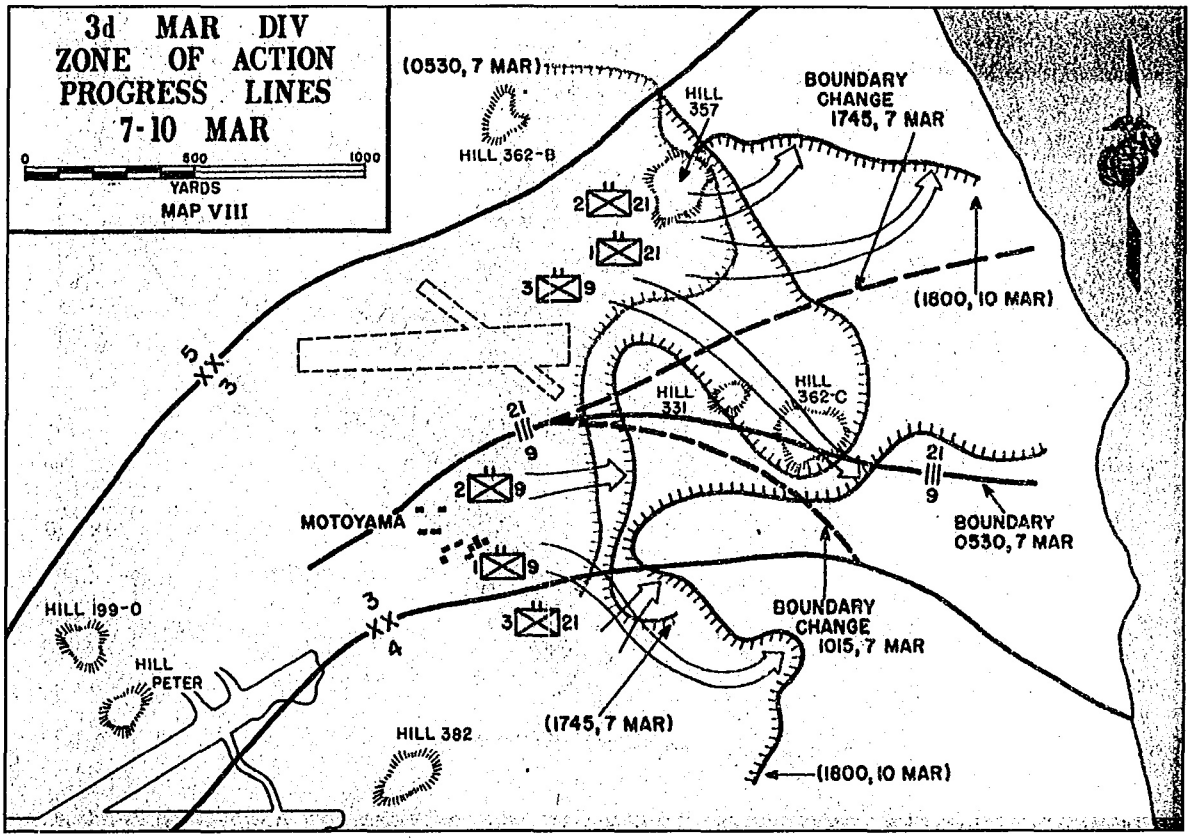
Marines had also encountered an alarming number of intact Japanese fighting positions, all giving notice to the maze upon maze of unscathed strongholds that lay ahead. It was becoming obvious that Kuribayashi had concentrated his forces in the northern and central portion of the island. This area was a mass of cliffs, crevices, gorges, ledges, and ravines. Any advance through such jagged natural obstacles also had to contend with the hundreds of excellently camouflaged



caves, blockhouses, bunkers, pillboxes, and tanks. All possible avenues of approach were bitterly contested by weapons in well-integrated and overlapping fields of fire. Aside from the very few which had taken direct hits from naval gunfire or aviation support, these had to be carefully and painstakingly taken out by hand. Dominating the northern Motoyama Plateau was Hill 382 (denoting its height in feet), and its smaller neighbor known as the Turkey Knob. The latter overlooked a broad natural amphitheater. These positions were held by desperately courageous Japanese who earned an overall nickname from Marines for the area: the Meat Grinder. In this area, nearly four Marines went down for every yard gained.

Because of these extremely heavy losses, the V Corps reserve (3d Marine Division) was committed and began landing on 21 February. It was decided to place the 3d Marine Division in between 4th and 5th Marine Divisions, so as to push through the center of the island along the higher elevations. At 0700 on 25 February, these reinforcements were in place with the "Striking Ninth" (9th) Marines moving out behind 26 Sherman tanks. Gen Erskine (a veteran of Belleau Wood in World War I) wisely planned to push laterally up through the center of the plateau and down the other side to the northern coast. This would enable his Marines to fight along, not through, most of the enemy ridges and thus provide better support to the bogged down 4th and 5th Marine Divisions on his flanks. This scheme of maneuver would also make use of interior lines and deny the enemy continued use of key artillery observation points. Every elevation assumed tremendous tactical importance on Iwo Jima and was thus bitterly contested. Many of the tanks, which often had to be preceded by trail-blazing armored bulldozers, were knocked out by direct fire weapons, mines, and Japanese demolition teams. Marine infantry were grateful for the armor's additional fire and flamethrower support, though they were careful not to get too close as tanks had a tendency to "attract" enemy fire.

In addition to the valuable armor support provided to infantrymen on Iwo Jima, precious assistance came from even closer at hand in the form of Marine combat engineers. An example of this took place on 12 March from PFC Larry Rogers of 3d Combat Engineer Battalion. After rescuing a wounded buddy while exposed to enemy machinegun fire, Rogers moved forward on his own and hurled a satchel charge with a 5-second fuse into the enemy installation. Undaunted when the Japanese promptly threw out the high explosive, he rushed back and "returned" the charge, which detonated, killing the Japanese crew and sealing the position. Soon, while again trying to evacuate a wounded fellow Marine, Rogers was again fired upon by a concealed enemy machinegun. Immediately, he assaulted the position on his own, firing into the opening and killing the enemy, while at the same time falling mortally wounded.



For this he would receive the Navy Cross, posthumously, from Secretary of the Navy Forrestal (it would be presented to his sister back home in Des Moines, IA). Throughout the battle for Iwo Jima, variations of this same story were constantly repeated: While Marine infantry would suppress by firing, blinding, and burning, "engineers up" would be the call, and the Japanese fortification would be blasted and sealed.

Another combat engineer-related incident on Iwo Jima was recalled by Gen Erskine as his 3d Marine Division pushed north. A team from 3d Combat Engineer Battalion was in support of the 21st Marines, operating a piece of heavy equipment. As Erskine tells it:

> There were no roads in this area. They were trying to make a path there for the tanks to come in, and by God this guy was shot off this thing, and he had hardly hit the ground before another one jumped on it, back and forth, absolutely oblivious to any fire. And the kid got away with it, and there were machineguns all around him.

Though but a small glimpse of the heroics demonstrated by individual Marines in the desperate struggle for Iwo Jima, they, together with the countless other stories of this epic fight, serve to better illustrate what Adm Chester Nimitz would later say: "Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Throughout this part of the battle in particular, gains were slight while losses were heavy due to all three Marine divisions having come up against Kuribayashi's main defense line. The major push, to be accompanied by at least 50 percent of U.S. on-island artillery assets, would be in the center with the 3d Marine Division led by the 9th Marine Regiment. With the additional support of most of the flamethrowing Sherman tanks on Iwo Jima, this Japanese line was finally cracked after 3 days of continuous pressure. By the evening of 27 February, the Striking Ninth found itself in control of the twin hills north of Airfield #2. The following afternoon, her sister regiment, the 21st Marines, had overrun the remains of Motoyama village and taken the high ground that overlooked Airfield #3. Behind both regiments lay hundreds of shattered, burned out, and sealed up enemy fortifications. On the 3d Marine Division's left flank, the 5th Marine Division was being held up by the Japanese defenders of Hill 362A, which comprised the strongest series of defenses and critical terrain features in this western sector of Kuribayashi's main defensive line. These strong defenses continued to run to the northwest, an area known as Nishi Ridge, which was also held by crack elements of Kuribayashi's 145th Infantry Regiment. At this same time, the last day of February, the 4th Marine Division was struggling desperately to the southeast, on the right flank, to take Hill 382. This was the opposite end of Kuribayashi's main defensive line across the island and was reinforced by an equally

Marines gather around the first B-29 to land on Iwo Jima.

reputable regiment of Japanese naval guard forces. Because of this stiff resistance on both flanks, on 1 March all U.S. artillery fires were redistributed equally so as to hopefully speed the American advance. By the following day, despite heavy mortar and artillery fire, advances were made on the left flank when Gen Rockey's 5th Marine Division finally took the heavily fortified positions of Hill 362A and Nishi Ridge. By 3 March, they had also taken Hill 362B. On the right flank, Gen Cates' 4th Marine Division had relentlessly hurled themselves into the Meat Grinder, directing their main effort against Hill 382. This effort, despite additional naval gunfire and airstrikes, was extremely difficult, and progress was blunted repeatedly by the bewildering maze of interlocking Japanese positions. On 2 March, Hill 382 finally fell to the determined 24th Marines, but both Turkey Knob and the Amphitheater would hold out fanatically until 10 March. For both 4th and 5th Marine Divisions advancing on opposite flanks across the "washboard" terrain of Iwo Jima's defenses in depth, daily progress was all too often measured in yards and lives. Both units were exhausted physically and rapidly approaching 50-percent combat effectiveness. Total Marine losses up to this point now stood at 2,777 killed in action while another 8,051 had been wounded. Another 1,102 were out of the struggle due to combat fatigue and "shell shock" for a total of 11,930 casualties. When considering these high figures, it is understandable why U.S. newspapers were already comparing what was taking place on Iwo Jima to the historical yardsticks of Antietam, Shiloh, and Gettysburg.

By 7 March, Gen Erskine's 3d Marine Division was poised to hurl itself forward in another major thrust, this one focused on Hill 362C. A request to bring the division's 3d Marines (this regiment had been held back as Expeditionary Troop Reserve) was denied by both Adm Kelley Turner and Gen Howlin' Mad Smith with the response: "You got enough Marines on this island now, there are too damn many here." Erskine's attack would differ from established Marine tactics in the Pacific campaign, for it was launched under cover of darkness. Up to this point, U.S. forces would normally "dig in" and switch over to the defense at night, reassuming the offense at dawn. Confident that the Japanese had been lulled accordingly into a false sense of night security, and remembering how effective this same tactic had been against the Germans in World War I, Erskine stated his case and received approval for his predawn assault. The unit that would spearhead this attack was the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines (3/9), which began moving into the front lines at 0320 in the morning. Their objective was Hill 362C (about 250 yards to the southeast), the last major Japanese strongpoint between the 3d Marine Division and Iwo Jima's northern coastal shore. The "Big E," as Erskine's Marines fondly referred to him, had been right. The Japanese were caught by surprise, and 3/9 managed to cross unopposed over the heavily fortified area. Though daylight found the assault companies spread out after seizing the wrong hill (terrain features on their maps no longer matched the battered terrain actually there), the objective had been secured and enemy resistance was eliminated by midafternoon.

Though the Japanese continued to resist stubbornly, their efforts were no longer as closely coordinated. Kuribayashi's carefully integrated defensive system had finally broken down under the relentless Marine attack. On 9 March, units of the 3d Marine Division reached the seacoast. There was still one major pocket of resistance within the division's zone of action and many isolated Japanese troops who had to be eliminated one by one. Within the 4th Marine Division sector to the south, enemy resistance had grown desperate. A condition of panic grew among the predominantly Japanese army forces—their communications cut off, they abandoned their carefully prepared defenses to launch a counterattack. A combination of infiltration and banzai attacks, preceded by an increased intensity in mortar and artillery fire, was mounted by the Japanese throughout the evening of 8 March. Its results, in accordance with Kuribayashi's original appraisals, were disastrous: Over 800 enemy troops were cut down by Marine defensive fires. Japanese resistance greatly crumbled in this sector following the attack, and by 10 March the 4th Marine Division had cleared the Turkey Knob-Amphitheater portion of the Meat Grinder and had also pushed to the coast.

The battle for Iwo Jima now entered the final stage in which the

fighting centered upon Japanese pockets of resistance. For the 3d Marine Division, this was the grim task of eliminating a heavily fortified area near Hill 362C known as "Cushman's Pocket" (named after 2/9's battalion commander, also a future Marine Commandant). For the 4th Marine Division, resistance centered in an area between the old East Boat Basin (where the Japanese formerly would land their supplies) and Tachiiwa Point. And for 5th Marine Division, extremely stubborn enemy resistance would be compressed in the north to an area known as "Bloody Gorge," just west of Kitano Point. Whereas the 3d and 4th Marine Divisions would finish off these pockets by 16 March (the former would also swing north upon reaching the coast and secure Kitano Point by this same date), it would take the 5th Marine Division until 24 March to capture Bloody Gorge.

In these final engagements, there were few Marines left who had actually landed on D-day, and the replacements, though new to battle and working alongside strangers, were more than willing to fight. In all of these cases, air, artillery, and naval gunfire support were useless due to the close proximity of the positions. Marines had to kill each Japanese defender in his fortified position using the proven corkscrew tactic combination of tank, rifleman, and combat engineer: suppressing while blinding, burning, and blasting. The tools of the trade were tank, bazooka, and rifle rounds, flamethrower fuel, fragmentation and smoke grenades, and satchel charges of high explosive. It was a brutal, painfully slow, and manpower-expensive process with no other option.

Kuribayashi's operational security was successful in that only one small tactical map was found, and the senior prisoner of war (POW), a wounded major, was only familiar with his specific sector of defense. The actual fate of Kuribayashi is unknown, although some junior enlisted POWs from his headquarters stated that he committed hara-kiri with one of his senior commanders. On 24 March, the Japanese communications station on Chichi Jima (just north of Iwo Jima), received its last message from Iwo Jima, stating simply: "All officers and men of Chici Jima, goodbye."

The United States declared an end to organized enemy resistance on 25 March, but early the very next morning, a final Japanese surprise counterattack was launched against U.S. aviation units on Airfield #2. When the final Japanese attackers were cut down, over 223 bodies were found with at least 60 being officers with swords. American losses here were 53 killed in action and 119 wounded, with the last Iwo Jima Medal of Honor going to a Marine combat engineer: 1stLt Harry Martin, who had rallied his men against the Japanese charge and killed four of the enemy with his pistol until he himself was mortally wounded. In the months ahead, an additional 1,600 Japanese troops would be tracked down and killed on the island by the Army's 147th Infantry Regiment. The last two enemy troops alive dug themselves out and surrendered in 1948.

Even before the battle had ended, Iwo Jima had swiftly begun serving the purpose for which so many Marines had died. The face of the island was changed by Navy Seabees who consolidated, enlarged, and improved the airfields even as they were in use. By the end of the war, not only had over 2,500 B–29 Superfortresses made emergency landings there, but 3,081 bomber strikes and 1,191 fighter escort sorties had been made against mainland Japan from Iwo Jima. Perhaps no other reference better describes just how much this sacrifice meant to U.S. airmen than this quote from *Impact*, a wartime publication:

> . . . Located about midway between Guam and Japan, Iwo broke the long, dangerous stretch, both coming and going. If you had engine trouble, you held out for Iwo. If you were shot up over Japan and had wounded aboard, you held out for Iwo. If the weather was too rough, you held out for Iwo. Formations assembled over Iwo and gassed up at Iwo for extra-long missions. If you needed fighter escort, it usually came from Iwo. If you had to ditch or bail out, you knew that air-sea rescue units were sent from Iwo. Even if you never used Iwo as an emergency base, it was a psychological benefit. Iwo was always there to fall back on.

In purely military terms, the savage struggle for Iwo Jima proved that the United States Marine Corps, given the support of the Navy in controlling the surrounding seas and skies, could seize any objective regardless of how powerful its guns and fortifications or how numerous, determined, professional, and skillful its defenders. Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, in referring to the countless acts of bravery that reflected the high level of individual and collective heroism on Iwo Jima stated:

> I have tremendous admiration and reverence for the guy who walks up beaches and takes enemy positions with a rifle and grenades or his bare hands.

Cpl Eugene Jones, a Marine flamethrower operator during the campaign, likened the ultimate meaning of Iwo Jima to what the survivors of the Union and Confederate Armies must have felt at the end of the Civil War:

> At dusk on the day that long, tragic war ended, the regiments of the Blue and Gray came together to share food and talk of tomorrow. In the glow of thousands of campfires spreading across blood-soaked terrain, they must have seen everywhere the faces of old comrades; weary but resolute, the living and the killed. These men had fought for what they believed in, and for each other. Even though they had been caused to leave their dead thickly on terrible battlefields, there was probably in them on that night a conviction that somehow it had all been worth it. Many of them, even then, had a perception of what they had done and why, and in this they found meaning to their ordeal and merit in their sacrifice. I think that of Iwo Jima.

USMC

>Maj Howard is currently serving as XO, 6th Engineer Support Battalion in Portland, OR, and is comanager of Howard Properties. When assigned to Okinawa during 1987–1990, Maj Howard visited Iwo Jima on a battlefield study.