Our Flag's Unfurled

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"I can best sum up what I feel after 10 years by saying that of all the elements that went into the making of this picture, the part I played was the least important. To get that flag up there, America's fighting men had to die on that island and on other islands and off the shores and in the air. What difference does it make who took the picture? I took it, but the Marines took Iwo Jima."

–Joseph Rosenthal, interview by Collier's, *1955*

Friday, 23 February, marked the day on which the Marines climbed to the top of the craggy 550-foot rim of Mount Suribachi. The steep slopes of the mountain fortress all but precluded a converging ascent from various directions. When it was discovered that the only practical route to the crater lay up the north face of the mountain, in the zone of 2d Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson became directly involved in planning the climb. The battalion commander's decision was to send several small reconnaissance patrols to the top before ordering a platoon-size combat patrol to make the ascent.

At 0800, Sergeant Sherman B. Watson of Company F led a four-man patrol up the mountain. On top of Suribachi this patrol encountered a battery of heavy machineguns with ammunition stacked alongside around the rim of the crater. There was no sign of the enemy. The bald, gray rock was now surrounded by silence; the caves and underground chambers seemed devoid of life. Uprooted blockhouses and pillboxes offered mute testimony to the destructive power of the heavy naval guns; most of the tunnels on the slopes were closed and smoking. Unaccustomed to the silence, the men wondered why they drew no fire. They slid and scrambled down Suribachi to report to the battalion commander.

Even before the first reconnaissance patrol returned from its climb, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson dispatched two three-man patrols from Companies D and F at 0900 to reconnoiter other suitable routes up the mountain and probe for enemy resistance. None drew any fire.

The first flag raising atop Mount Suribachi, 23 February 1945. Hank Hansen (without helmet), Boots Thomas (seated), Harold Schrier (behind Thomas), Louis Charlo (hand visible grasping pole), Jim Michaels (with carbine), and Chuck Lindberg (behind Michaels).

While the small reconnaissance patrols were still executing their mission, Colonel Johnson assembled the combat patrol that was slated to seize Mount Suribachi in force and hoist the American colors over the mountain. The 3d Platoon, Company E, was selected for this mission. The company executive officer, 1st Lieutenant Harold G. Schrier, led the patrol. A member of the patrol was to recall later:

> The 25 men of the 3d Platoon were by this time very dirty and very tired. They no longer looked nor felt like crack combat troops. Although they had just had a relatively free day, their rest had been marred by the chilling rain. They hardly yearned for the distinction of being the first Marines to tackle the volcano. But the colonel didn't bother to ask them how they felt about it.

Lieutenant Schrier assembled the platoon at 0800 and bolstered its thin ranks with other men of Company E until it totaled 40 men. Before starting the ascent, he led the men back around the base of Suribachi to battalion headquarters just northeast of the base. Johnson's final orders were simple and to the point: the patrol was to climb to the summit, secure the crater, and raise the flag. As the patrol prepared to move out, the battalion commander handed Schrier a folded American flag that had been brought ashore by the battalion adjutant, 1st Lieutenant George G. Wells. The flag, measuring 54 by 28 inches, had been obtained from the Missoula, the transport that had carried 2/28 from its staging area to Iwo Jima.

Forming an irregular column, the patrol headed straight for the base of Suribachi. They moved at a brisk pace at first. When the route turned steep and the going became more difficult, the patrol leader dispatched flankers to guard the vulnerable column against surprise attack. The men, heavily burdened with weapons and ammunition climbed slowly, stopping occasionally

to catch their breath. At times, the route became so steep that they moved upward on their hands and knees. Along the way, they passed close to several cave entrances, but the caves appeared deserted and no resistance developed. The only Japanese encountered were the dead. Friendly eyes were observing the patrol's laborious ascent: Marines near the northeast base of Suribachi and men of the fleet, who, cognizant of the drama unfolding before them, were watching through binoculars.

Higher and higher the patrol picked its way, avoiding heavily mined trails and keeping men out on the flanks to thwart any enemy ambush. Within half an hour after leaving battalion headquarters, the patrol arrived at the rim of the crater. There, Schrier called a halt while he sized up the situation. He spotted two or three battered gun emplacements and several cave entrances, but no sign of the enemy. He signaled the men to start filing over the rim. As the patrol entered the crater, the men fanned out and took up positions just inside the rim. They were tensed for action, but the caves along the rim and the yawning floor below remained silent.

The original Rosenthal photo. Front row: (Left to right) Ira Hayes, Franklin Sousley, John Bradley, Harlon Block. Back row: Mike Strank (behind Sousley) and Rene Gagnon (behind Bradley).

While half the patrol deployed around the rim, the remainder pressed into the crater to probe for resistance. Part of their mission had been executed. It now remained for them to locate something to serve as a flagpole. Scouting along the rim of the crater, a couple of men located a 20-foot section of pipe. Lashing the flag to one end, they thrust the other into soft ground near the north rim. At 1020, the Stars and Stripes rose over the highest point of the island, where it fluttered in a brisk wind. Small though it was, the flag was clearly visible from land and sea, proof that Suribachi had fallen.

Far below, on the sandy terraces and in foxholes, still exposed to deadly fire from enemy artillery and mortars in the north of Iwo Jima, exhausted and unshaven men openly wept, while others slapped each other on the back and shouted. Out at sea, ships' whistles, horns, and bells rang out in jubilation. On the deck of the hospital ship *Solace,* badly wounded Marines raised themselves on their elbows to look up at the tiny speck on the summit.

Not far from the CP [command post] of the 28th Marines, a group of men stood on the beach near the surf. They had just stepped ashore from a Higgins boat to become fascinated spectators of the most dramatic moment of the Iwo operation. Deeply moved by the sight was Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, accompanied by General Holland Smith and an assortment of Navy and Army personnel, including two admirals. Turning towards General Smith, Forrestal said gravely: "Holland, the raising of that flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years."

Atop the mountain, the men of Lieutenant Schrier's patrol had little time for rejoicing. The sight of the American flag waving over Suribachi was too much for the remnants of Colonel Atsuchi's garrison to take lying down. Sergeant Louis R. Lowery, a Marine photographer, had just clicked the shutter of his camera, taking pictures of the flag raising on the rim of the crater, when two Japanese charged out from a cave near the summit. One of the Japanese, running towards the flag and waving his sword was promptly shot down. The other heaved a hand grenade at the Marine photographer who escaped injury or death by vaulting over the rim and sliding about 50 feet down the mountain before his fall was broken. His camera was smashed, but the negatives inside remained safe. The second Japanese was also killed. Other Japanese, frenzied by the sight of the American flag, started to emerge from caves near the crater and met the same fate.

The first flag is lowered as the second is raised.

Three hours later, a larger flag, almost twice the size of the first one, was raised over Mount Suribachi. It was the raising of this second flag, obtained from LST 779, that resulted in photographer Joe Rosenthal's picture of the flag raising that became perhaps the most famous photograph of World War II and that has since served as an inspiration to countless Americans.

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