

STING OF BATTLE

Night Patrol on Iwo Jima

by Col Dave E. Severance, USMC(Ret)

The fog of battle never seems to lift. Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 28th Marines (2/28) raised both flags on Iwo Jima. The harrowing story doesn't end there. The commanding officer and his company of Marines were still fighting the Japanese on D+31, over a month into the fight. Watch for task organization in battle as the author takes us on the night patrol at Iwo.

The 28th Marines joined the attack to the north on Iwo Jima on 1 March 1945, after the capture of Mount Suribachi. On the extreme left flank of the 5th Amphibious Corps' line across the island was "Easy" Company, 2/28. Being on the left flank did not mean that we extended to the western shoreline; there were never enough men.

On D+19 (10 March) my left platoon encountered an enemy position that could not be neutralized. The Japanese had dug tunnels behind the face of a 30-foot cliff that ran parallel to the shoreline and had cut small firing holes hardly visible to the Marines. After viewing the situation I pulled the platoon out of the position, and we bypassed it. Because of the delay, Fox Company had been deployed from the battalion reserve and replaced Easy Company on the line. Before the day was over, both of the two small platoons that comprised Easy Company had been moved up to fill in the existing gaps in the line.

On D+31 (22 March) Dog Company, 2/28 was relieved from the lines during the morning by a company from the 5th Pioneer Battalion. Later in the day the 2d Battalion commander received word that 3/27 was to launch an attack from the east end of a deep canyon known as Kitano Gorge, to push the Japanese into the sea at the western exit from the gorge. Kitano Gorge was shaped like a giant hairpin cutting across the northern tip of the island with the open end being on the northwestern tip of Iwo Jima. Marines were in position along or near the outer rim of Kitano Gorge. In the case of the 28th Marines, we were about 50 to 75 yards short of reaching the canyon rim.

The battalion commander, Maj Tom Pearce, briefed me on a plan in which I was to take a platoon consisting of 1 second lieutenant and 50 privates from the pioneer battalion. We were to intercept the left flank of the 3/27 as they came abreast of our battalion right flank. This was a plan that looked feasible on the map but, in actuality, was far from practical, whether executed in the daylight or darkness. The plan did not get a "go" until shortly after 5 p.m. at which time I moved out with my patrol in tracked landing vehicles for the trip to the frontlines. By the time we arrived there it was dark. I left the end of my sound-power telephone wire with the right flank pioneer troops who had relieved Dog Com-

pany and asked them to connect it to the battalion circuit. We moved out in single file. It should be mentioned that the men in this platoon I had inherited had no combat experience. They had spent their time on Iwo handling cargo on the beach. With me was my runner, Frank Crowe, always known as "Music" as he was our company bugler. Music considered himself to be my "bodyguard" and was with me almost everywhere I went. This was to be a night maneuver, contrary to all 5th Amphibious Corps instructions that decreed that all personnel moving after dark were to be considered as enemy. American troops were to hunker down in their foxholes at night and shoot anything moving!



Iwo Jima's harsh terrain, March 1945.

Official Marine Corps photo.



Official Marine Corps photo.

Flamethrower at work on Iwo, March 1945.

The area in front of the 2d Battalion was very rough terrain. Off slightly to our right, in front of the 1/28 was a fairly clean sloping sector leading up to the rim of the gorge, a distance of roughly 60 yards. Since I had advised our battalion staff that I would be going out in front of the 1st Battalion sector, I assumed that all of the 1st Battalion units would be alerted. It soon became obvious this notification had not been accomplished when we had moved out some 20 yards in front of a 1st Battalion machinegun position. I could hear the machinegunners talking to one another.

"Did you see something out there? Wait a minute, what was that?"

My patrol had been instructed to "freeze" every time a star shell burst. In fact, this was about the only briefing I had time to conduct. We were fortunate that the machinegunners did not fire some "just in case" rounds.

The night was pitch black, and the lieutenant instructed his men to remain in single file and to maintain contact with the men in front of them. In retrospect, this would have been a difficult mission to perform with an experienced infantry platoon. As we reached the rim of the gorge there was a 20-foot deep ravine on our left leading into the gorge. This would have to be my means of gaining entry to the gorge. I was waiting for the noise of 3/27 attacking down the gorge, but another sound reached our ears. Down in the ravine were a number of Japanese smoking cigarettes and talking. From the number of glowing cigarettes I estimated there were 20 to 30 of them. This presented a problem I had not anticipated. It would have been difficult enough just making our way into the ravine and down to the gorge as the attacking battalion passed. How many in the attacking unit were expecting a Marine patrol to contact their left flank unit? Would they wait for a "password" or just keep on shooting? All of this was academic when I reminded myself that I could not jump down into the ravine in a night attack on the Japanese in the ravine with my 50 inexperienced troops. I was not aware of how many of my troops had grenades, nor was their lieutenant. Somehow the attacking battalion would have to be warned of the presence of this group of Japanese. I tried to reach my battalion with my sound-power phone, but no answer. I would later determine that the pioneer platoon responsi-

ble for attaching my phone wire to the battalion wire terminal on their frontlines did not know how to make that connection. I had no success reaching the battalion with my walkie-talkie radio. While analyzing my situation, part of the solution was provided by action that flared up just forward of our 2d Battalion frontlines. About 20 yards in front of the lines was a burned out tank. Someone must have detected motion near the tank and threw an illuminating grenade near it. The group of Japanese I was observing scattered, some running directly toward our position. I reached for the two grenades I was carrying in my jacket pocket, only to discover my cartridge belt had slipped down and sealed off the pocket. After some jockeying around I managed to remove the grenades. By that time it was obvious the Japanese had disappeared into caves underneath us. This made my mission even more difficult. The only way into the gorge was down the bank of the ravine, and to do this, we would have to pass in front of the Japanese occupied caves.

At just that moment a body appeared out of the black night coming from the direction of our lines. It was a runner who had come to tell me to secure the mission; the 27th Marines unit was not going to attack down the gorge.

I told the pioneer lieutenant and Music to remain where they were for 5 minutes while I tried to move silently down the slope and contact the 1st Battalion machinegunners to warn them not to fire on the patrol as it withdrew to our lines. I reached the machinegunners' position without being fired on by calling out the password for the day, and then waited there for my 50-man patrol to pass. Shortly, three men—the lieutenant, Music, and the sound-power wire carrier—came past us. After returning to our lines I learned that word had been passed to secure the mission and return to our lines just as the last of my patrol was leaving our lines. It was obvious that the word was passed all the way up the single file of the patrol, but didn't get to the man carrying the sound-power wire, nor to the lieutenant in front of him. I was in position on the rim of the gorge with 3 men . . . not 53!

We returned to the battalion command post and were instructed to wait. There was a possibility the 3/27 might still commence their attack. Music was all set to return to our position overlooking the gorge. He had a pearl handled .45 caliber pistol that had been given to him by one of the men being evacuated earlier in the battle. Somewhere on the slope or at our farthest position he had lost his pistol. I strongly recommended to him that he not go out to find it! About an hour later the mission was cancelled for the night, and so far as I know the mission to contact the flank of the attacking battalion was never attempted again—at least not at night.

I know of no other night patrol conducted by any unit during my 36 days on Iwo. There was one report of a battalion having launched an attack in the early morning darkness to occupy a hill, only to find when daylight came that they had captured the wrong hill.

US  MC

>Col Severance was a captain commanding Co E, 2/28 during the epic battle for Iwo Jima.