



A group photo of the participants who traveled to Iwo Jima to be a part of the 63rd anniversary ceremonies commemorating the battle. I'm second from the left, wearing the white hat.

A Visit To Historic Iwo Jima

By William W. Purkey

Treasures are not always in the form of gold coins, diamond rings, and "War of Northern Aggression" belt buckles. Sometimes, treasures are found in the form of a grand adventure. Mine was a visit to an eight square mile, lonely little island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Its name is Iwo Jima.

For younger readers who are unfamiliar with historic World War II Pacific battlefields, I want to give a brief history of the Iwo Jima battle. The taking of Iwo Jima in 1945 was the biggest battle in the history of the United States Marine Corps. For three weeks in early 1945, nearly 75,000 Marines were locked in a bloody struggle with 22,000 seasoned Japanese troops who were dug in to defend their fortress island to the last man. It was a colossal fight between two well-armed, battle-hardened forces.

Almost 7,000 Americans

were killed in action during the battle, with over 20,000 wounded. The Marines suffered the highest number of casualties in the Corps' history. Practically all of the Japanese defenders were killed.

The island is dominated by Mount Surabachi, a 454' dormant volcano. Mount Surabachi became engrained in world history as a result of the unforgettable photograph taken by Joe Rosenthal of the six soldiers raising the Stars & Stripes on the summit. This photograph was later modeled into a magnificent statue and etched into the minds of patriotic Americans for all time.

Recently, the heroic battle of Iwo Jima became the subject of two motion pictures filmed from the perspectives of both the Japanese defenders and the American invaders. These movies were directed by popular

Hollywood actor Clint Eastwood and were nominated for the Academy Awards.

Now to describe my visit in more detail...

As our plane made its final approach to the small landing field on Iwo Jima, I expected to feel a sense of awe in visiting this epic battlefield. I certainly did, but more importantly, I experienced a great sense of gratitude, respect, and pride in the men of all the U.S. branches of service who fought in this historic battle.

I was indeed fortunate to take this journey to Iwo Jima. Other than the gallant men who fought in the battle, very few people have been allowed to visit the island. After World War II, Japan was given total sovereignty over Iwo Jima. Until a decade ago, the Japanese did not allow anyone to visit the island except for active-duty military personnel. Then a little-known provision in the Japanese/American Treaty was discovered that permitted veterans of the battle to go back to Iwo Jima.

The combat veterans of the Iwo Jima battle who accompanied me on the trip made it possible for me to be part of the 63rd anniversary ceremonies commemorating the battle. These Iwo Jima veterans select those who are allowed to accompany them to visit the island. Although I am not a veteran of the Iwo Jima battle, I am U.S. Air Force explosive ordnance disposal specialist who served in the Korean War. There happened to be a last-minute cancellation of one of the 22 veterans, and I was selected to take his place. Now for a brief



This photo was taken from the window of the small aircraft approaching a rainy Iwo Jima.

overview of why Iwo Jima was so important to both the Japanese and Americans.

The postage-stamp sized Iwo Jima was a major strategic importance to the Army Air Corps (now the United States Air Force) because it is situated halfway along the B-29 Superfortress bombing route to the Japanese mainland from the Marianas. The island had to be taken to prevent Japanese fighter planes based on Iwo Jima from attacking the American bombers, and to destroy the Japanese radar installations that gave early warning of impending air raids on Japan. Moreover, taking the island would allow it to be used as an emergency landing field for American bombers returning from raids on Japan. By the war's end, a total of 2,252 B-29 bombers had made forced landings on the island. In fact, the bomber *Dinah Might*, a crippled B-29, made an emergency landing on Iwo Jima right in the mid-

dle of the battle.

Beginning in early December 1944 and continuing over ten weeks, American B-24 Liberator heavy bombers from the 7th Air Force flew in from the Marianas almost every day to bomb the smoking island. At the same time, American P-38 fighters and other planes strafed and napalmed the island.

The result was the total disappearance of the Japanese garrison! The Japanese moved everything underground—command posts, barracks, hospitals, and massive gun emplacements. One underground installation ran seven stories deep in the soft but durable volcanic rock that made digging fairly easy. When a large Japanese underground hospital was discovered and opened in 1984, the cave contained the mummified remains of 54 Japanese servicemen and all their equipment.

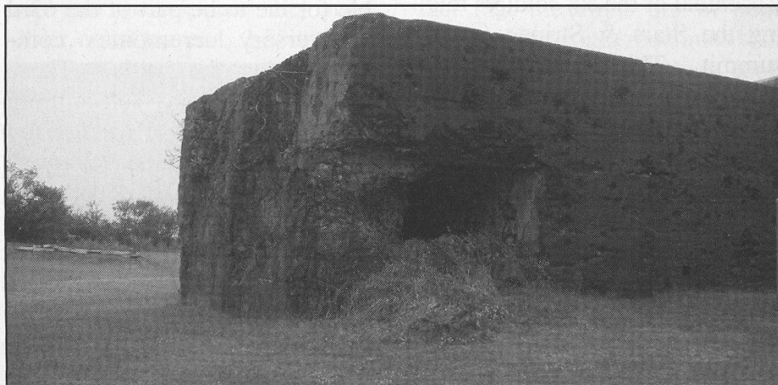
When I stepped off the plane upon arrival at Iwo Jima, my

impression was that it is an ugly, sulphur-smelling island of volcanic sand and rock. Iwo Jima is, in fact, an emerging volcano. Its steep beaches drop off sharply to meet a turbulent surf zone. The beaches are not sand at all. They consist of tiny volcanic cinders, soft and black. During the assault on the island, the softness of these cinders immobilized the wheeled vehicles and even caused some tracked vehicles to belly down. As the veterans describe the cinders, it was like “running in loose coffee grounds.” Another veteran said that trying to dig a foxhole was like trying to “dig a hole in wheat.”

When the first Marine assault wave struggled with the unforgiving beach, over 700 hidden Japanese gun emplacements awaited their arrival. Many of the placements were “hardened” casemates and artfully concealed. Most were impervious to the most intensive shell-fire from battleships standing only 2,000 yards offshore. It's been estimated that after weeks of shelling and bombing, over 75% of the fortifications remained operational.

Looking down on the landing beaches was Mount Surabachi. It was honeycombed with Japanese gun emplacements, from heavy machine guns to major artillery. The Marine veterans said that the sullen mountain seemed to take on a life of its own.

There is not room here to describe the awful carnage that occurred during the next three weeks as the battle raged. The Japanese were led by one of their most able soldiers, Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, Imperial Japanese Army. According to Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, U.S. Marine Corps, the Marines have rarely faced a tougher opponent. General



One of over 1,000 gun emplacements, large and small, on Iwo Jima.

Kuribayashi knew that trying to defend the island on the landing beaches would be impossible. Therefore, he moved his troops away from the beaches and prepared a vicious welcome for the Americans.

He supplemented all of the Japanese weapons by rigging enormous makeshift explosives, including 500 lb. unexploded bombs dropped by American bombers. They also buried torpedo heads, depth charges, and large artillery shells, each triggered by accompanying pressure mines. General Kuribayashi instructed his soldiers not to fire until the landing beaches were jammed with Americans. This way the Japanese would not give away their carefully concealed positions. When the Japanese finally opened fire, the destruction was horrific.

Readers might think that metal detectors would have been a valuable tool in locating the countless Japanese land mines and other buried explosive ordnance. Unfortunately, the cinders of Iwo Jima retained enough metallic substance to make metal detectors unreliable. Remember that this all took place in 1945, well before the development of more advanced metal detectors.

An unusual weapon employed by the Japanese was an enormous "spigot" mortar. These 320mm mortars hurled a 675 lb. shell a maximum of 1,440 yards. Unlike a conventional mortar, the shell was placed over a tube instead of being dropped down the barrel. Marines described this terrible tumbling end-over-end projectile as truly terrifying. It was like a wobbling airborne trash can. "You could see one coming," said one veteran, "but you could never know where it was going to land." Along with the spigot mortars the

Japanese timed air-bursts fired by Japanese dual-purpose antiaircraft guns.

The most memorable moments during my one-day visit came as we were exploring Japanese fortifications and looking at the entrances of burned-out Japanese bunkers, still scorched from the fury of Marine flamethrowers.

There were times when I wished I could have used my Compass metal detector, as I'm sure that there are military artifacts everywhere. But since over five tons of unexploded ordnance are discovered every year, I don't think I would have had the courage to go digging, even if it were allowed. The present Japanese security forces used their own detectors at the Iwo Jima Airport to ensure that we were not carrying any military artifacts when we departed the

island. Still, the thought of countless undiscovered caves filled with military artifacts is exciting.

Perhaps the day will come when all Americans are allowed to visit Iwo Jima. Perhaps, too, there will be a museum to honor the brave soldiers of both sides who fought and died there.

As our plane took off from the Iwo Jima runway and I looked back at forbidding Mount Surabachi, I thought once again of the heroic soldiers who fought in this epic battle, and how proud I was and am to be an American.

For details of my visit, please contact me at wwpurkey@aol.com □

Reference:

Alexander, J. JH. (2008). *Combat Veterans of Iwo Jima Reunion of Honor, 2008 Anniversary Tour: Iwo Jima: A Historical Guide*. Fairfax, Virginia.