

World War II at 80 – February 1945

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima

By Ronald P. May
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The second half of February began with U.S. Marines landing on the island of Iwo Jima on Feb. 19.

The volcanic island, 750 miles south of Tokyo, Japan, was a strategic location because of the airfields that could be used for U.S. fighter planes to escort B-29s flying from the island of Tinian to bomb Japan.

The island, roughly shaped from one angle like a dog’s head with a long snout, was 5 miles long and from 800 yards to 2.5 miles wide, covering 11 square miles.

At the southwestern most tip of the island was Mount Suribachi, a dormant volcano, rising 550 feet high.

It became the scene for the most famous photograph of World War II.

Iwo Jima was heavily fortified by 21,000 Japanese forces, which were well concealed in an extensive system of bunkers with hidden artillery.

The Japanese anticipated the Allied landing and fought ferociously to defend the island.

The battle for Iwo Jima, fought by the U.S. V Amphibious Corps, the Fifth Fleet, and the Seventh Air Force, lasted for five weeks, ending on March 26.

While the American forces — the majority made up of Marines from the 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions — secured a victory, it came at the highest cost.

Close to 7,000 Americans lost their lives, and over 19,000 were wounded, compared to 18,000-plus Japanese killed and only 1,083 taken prisoner.

The remainder of Japanese forces, some 3,000, held out in caves on the island until after the battle when they were eventually killed or died of injury or starvation.

This was the only Pacific battle of World War II that resulted in a higher ratio of American to Japanese casualties.

There were almost three American casualties to every two Japanese casualties.

Preparations for the landing of the Marines took place months earlier with aerial bombing, weeks earlier with Naval ship bombardment, and days earlier with underwater operations.

Locals at Iwo Jima

Martinsville native, William D. Bennett, was in the water near the shore of Iwo Jima two days before the amphibious invasion.

Bennett was a Machinist Mate 3rd class, serving with the Navy’s Underwater Demolition Team — the precursor to today’s Navy SEALs.

On Feb. 15, two days before the Marines landed, he and the other members of his UDT spent 48 hours setting up explosives and searchlights at the approach near Mt. Suribachi.

The lights proved helpful as navigation aids when the Marines stormed the beach, and the explosives protected the forces from a possible water-flanking maneuver by the enemy.

Edgar Hovious of Martinsville helped protect landing forces on Feb. 19 on board a Coast Guard-manned LST (Landing Ship Tank).

His ship was one of the first of the amphibious craft to come ashore on Iwo Jima and made repeated runs to the shoreline with men and equipment.

The 3rd class Gunners Mate was responsible for operating the anti-aircraft guns on the ship.

“The Jap planes were all over the place,” he said in an article from The Daily Reporter printed on March 9, 1945.

“Their mortar fire, as usual, was one of their most potent weapons. An LST can throw up plenty of flak and we did, continuously. It seemed as though a plane could not possibly get



The most famous photograph from World War II was taken on Feb. 23, 1945, when five Marines and one Navy corpsman climbed up Mt. Suribachi and planted a second U.S. flag on the peak. (Public Domain photo)



Marines with the LVT(A)-5 make their advance on the island of Iwo Jima in 1945. (Public Domain photo)



Bill Bennett



Edgar Hovious



Wayne Saucerman



Henry E. "Hank" Potter



Bill Hastings



Harlan E. "Bud" Grow



Joe Stockton

through it. Yet, they did.”

Over 60,000 U.S. forces reached the island.

Landing on the ashen beach of Iwo Jima on Feb. 19 was Sullivan County native, Wayne Saucerman.

Saucerman, who later moved to Monrovia, was a BAR machine gunner with a scout and sniper platoon, assigned to the 4th Marine Division.

Saucerman shared of his landing experience, “Water splashed up as (enemy) mortars were landing on either side of our LCP (Landing Craft Personnel).”

When his group made landfall, they ascended three terraces under a barrage of small-arms fire.

They did the best they could to set up a defensive perimeter as the Japanese kept firing at them.

The soft sand proved a menace as the Marines tried to dig foxholes with their helmets, only to have most of the sand cave into the hole they had just dug.

“The first night was tough and go,” Saucerman recalled.

A few days after landing, Saucerman’s platoon of 30 was called up to the front line.

“Only 10 of us made it back (to the perimeter) after that operation,” said Saucerman.

And soon, the 10 were reduced to five.

On one occasion, Saucerman found a Japanese soldier inside a hole.

Thinking the man was dead, he sought cover in the same hole.

The enemy soldier was, however, still alive.

The Japanese soldier tried to detonate a grenade to kill them both, but Saucerman was able to dispose of him.

Photos that included Saucerman later appeared in a March 1945 issue of Life magazine.

On Feb. 23, five Marines and one Navy corpsman, climbed up Mt. Suribachi and planted a second U.S. flag on the peak. (The first flag had been taken down.)

Capturing the moment on film was AP photographer Joe Rosenthal.

It became the most iconic image of World War II.

The photo was later used to build the massive Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Va.

Of the six men who raised the flag, three were later killed in action.

Wayne Saucerman recalled seeing the planted American flag, flapping on Suribachi from afar.

So did Martinsville native William K. (Bill) Hastings.

Hastings was a Marine PFC radio mechanic with

an amphibious tank battalion on Iwo Jima.

Although the flag planting was inspiring to all, there was still plenty of combat ahead.

Just three days after the historic flag raising, on Feb. 26, Harlan E. “Bud” Grow of Martinsville, a Marine in the 4th Division, was caught in a melee of enemy fire.

While his squad retreated to a better position, Grow noticed some wounded Marines in the distance.

Realizing that the men would either die from their wounds or be killed, Cpl. Grow braved the enemy fire to save one wounded man.

Fully aware of his own peril, he crawled over a hundred yards to the wounded Marine and brought him back to the safety of American lines.

For his courageous act, he was awarded the Bronze Star.

A few weeks later, on March 15, Saucerman was hit by three bullets while scouting for the enemy on a ridge.

His war was over, but he survived.

He carried one lodged bullet in his leg for the rest of his life.

Giving medical attention to wounded Marines like Saucerman was Henry E.

“Hank” Potter.

The Paragon graduate was a 1st Class Navy Corpsman serving on board the USS Yorktown Aircraft Carrier in action around Iwo Jima.

Potter and others tended to the wounded Marines and saved many of them from death.

On March 21, five days before the end of battle on Iwo Jima, Morgantown High School graduate, Joe Stockton, wrote a reflective letter to his fiancée, Mary.

He was sitting on a hill overlooking the beach with 100 ships on the water.

A portion of his letter was reprinted in the Feb. 23, 2002, issue of The Daily Reporter.

“... When you think what this island cost in human lives and material, this is an ugly place; but erase this from your mind and it is beautiful here.”

Stockton had the right perspective.

Victory was both beautiful and costly on Iwo Jima.

The planted American flag testified to the U.S. advance toward Japan that was now only 750 miles away.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Morgan County native James O. Tutterow, arrived in France for duty with the 9th Army.

He wrote a letter to his wife at the end of February.

That Grow, drafted in April 1944, was a 35-year-old with a wife and six children at home indicated how far the age for the draft had extended for needed men to fill the ranks as soldiers.

There was plenty of serving and plenty of dying that would take place in the bloody final months of the war.

Next time: *Bridges Across the Rhine and Advance in Germany (March 1945)*

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