

Battle of Iwo Jima

U.S. Marines raising the American flag over Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, in February 1945. **Battle of Iwo Jima**, (February 19–March 16, 1945), World War II conflict between the United States and the Empire of Japan. The United States mounted an amphibious invasion of the island of Iwo Jima as part of its Pacific campaign against Japan. A costly victory for the United States, the battle was one of the bloodiest in the history of the U.S. Marine Corps and was cited as proof of the Japanese military's willingness to fight to the last man.

Context



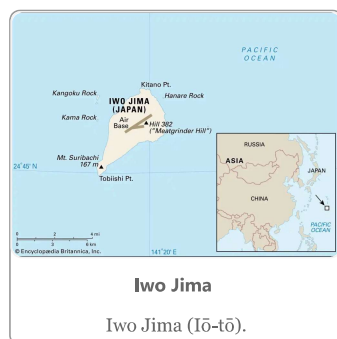
Shortly after its attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japan gained control over much of Southeast Asia and the central Pacific. The Japanese sphere of control extended west to Burma (Myanmar), south to the Dutch East Indies (now Malaysia) and New Guinea, and east to Wake Island. However, the United States assumed command of Allied forces in the Pacific theatre and mounted a counteroffensive that incorporated a strategic combination of land, air, and naval assaults.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCOS)—Adm. Ernest King, Adm. William Leahy, Gen. George Marshall, and Gen. Henry (“Hap”) Arnold—was created in 1942 to provide a body of high command to direct U.S. operations during the war. Each member was a four-star officer from the U.S. Army, Navy, and Army Air Forces (AAF). The Marine Corps was not represented in this body during World War II. Convention dictated that a single officer should command all armed forces in the Pacific, but the JCOS could not agree on any one person to do so. At King’s urging, the body chose to bifurcate the theatre and gave Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Adm. Chester Nimitz command over one half each. Even then, however, there was contention over how to make progress toward the Japanese homeland. MacArthur wanted to retake the Philippines en route to Tokyo, while Nimitz wanted an “island-hopping” approach that focused on small

strategic gains throughout the Central Pacific. In 1944 the JCOS agreed on a two-pronged plan that combined both strategies. By October of that year, MacArthur had landed on Filipino soil, and Nimitz had seized the Mariana Islands, severely crippling Japanese naval and air power along the way.

Arnold was of the opinion that the Bonin Islands could be useful for conducting B-29 Superfortress air raids on Tokyo. He was convinced that Iwo Jima (now Iō-tō) in particular, being halfway between the Mariana Islands and the Japanese capital, would place his fighters in range of the city so that they could support bombing operations in the region. Arnold had to rely on the Navy to take these islands for him, however. At the JCOS’s direction, Nimitz initially intended to take Formosa (Taiwan) rather than Iwo Jima, but recommendations from his subordinate admirals prompted him to propose that he seize Iwo Jima and Okinawa instead. The JCOS approved the plan, and in October 1944 Nimitz began preparations for an Iwo Jima invasion, later known as Operation Detachment.

Battle



Iwo Jima is located about 760 miles (1,220 km) from Tokyo. It is a small island covering an area of about 8 square miles (20 square km) and spanning about 5 miles (8 km) in length. A volcanic island, Iwo Jima is dotted with hundreds of caves and is covered with volcanic sand and ash. At the southwest tip of the island is Mount Suribachi, a largely dormant volcano that provides a sweeping view of most of the island. Two beaches flank the northwest and southeast parts of the western sector. At the time of the U.S. invasion, there were two airfields in the middle of the island, Motoyama 1 and 2. A third airfield to the north was unfinished.

In May 1944 Japanese Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki had sent seasoned Lieut. Gen. Kuribayashi Tadamichi to organize the defense of Iwo Jima. Despite the apparent futility of resistance, Kuribayashi resolved to make the United States bleed for its victory. He began by ordering the construction of a tunnel network beneath the island to provide both protection and a means to circumvent enemy lines. He then had his troops erect hundreds of

pillboxes, blockhouses, and gun sites for aboveground coverage, many of which were so well constructed that only a direct hit from a battleship could cause serious damage. However, rather than heavily defending the coastline, he planned to keep his soldiers in caves and tunnels until the Americans advanced far enough inland to be decimated by coordinated infantry and artillery fire. Finally, in a break from traditional Japanese defensive strategy, Kuribayashi gave his men strict orders to abandon the often-suicidal banzai charges and instead kill 10 Americans each from their hideouts. By the time U.S. forces initiated their assault, Kuribayashi's Iwo Jima garrison had grown to an estimated 21,000 soldiers.



Nimitz created a U.S. Joint Expeditionary Force of Navy and Marines to carry out Operation Detachment. At its disposal was an armada of 11

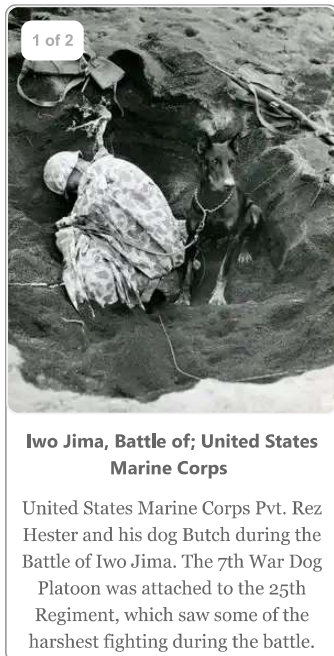
warships that were intended to soften up Japanese defenses with sustained bombardment. Maj. Gen. Harry Schmidt took charge of Marine operations. He fielded the largely veteran 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine divisions, totaling some 70,000 troops. U.S. intelligence had reported only 13,000 Japanese defenders and excellent beach terrain for landing, so planners chose to have the Marines land on the southeastern beach in seven sections (listed southwest to northeast): Green, Red 1, Red 2, Yellow 1, Yellow 2, Blue 1, and Blue 2. The 28th Regiment at Green would plow across the 0.5-mile (0.8-km) stretch to the other side of the island to cut off and eventually take Mount Suribachi. The 27th Regiment at Red 1 and 2 would head northward past Motoyama 1, which would be taken by the 23rd Regiment at Yellow 1 and 2. The 25th Regiment at Blue 1 and 2 would head east to secure the right flank. Schmidt was prepared for Japanese banzai attacks and expected the swarm of bodies to expedite the invasion process, anticipating total control of the island in no more than four days.



Before landing his Marines on the beaches, Schmidt had requested that the Navy bombard the island for 10 consecutive days. His request was denied, however, and he was granted a mere three days on account of Nimitz's tight schedule ahead of the Okinawa invasion. The brief period of shelling was blighted by poor weather, and, when compounded with the island's well-protected defenses, the bombardment did little to soften up the Japanese. About 9:00 AM on February 19, 1945, Marines began to land on the beach in intervals. They were

surprised to encounter embankments of volcanic ash towering some 15 feet (4.6 meters) high. What was supposed to be an easy and methodical landing process quickly became congested, and Kuribayashi maximized the confusion by directing his troops and artillery to fire on the U.S. soldiers.

Schmidt sent in U.S. Naval Construction Battalion units (Seabees) with bulldozers to clear some of the ash, and by the end of that day the 28th Regiment had successfully isolated Suribachi from the rest of the island. On February 21 Kuribayashi executed a kamikaze attack on U.S. Navy vessels, badly damaging several ships. U.S. Marines continued to press forward on land, though, and on February 23 they secured Suribachi. Marines twice raised the American flag on Suribachi's summit. The second flag raising was photographed by Pulitzer Prize-winner Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press, and his photograph became one of the most famous combat images of World War II.



The 23rd, 25th, and 27th regiments began to measure their advances in yards. The 23rd Regiment managed to take Motoyama 1 by February 24 and Motoyama 2 by February 27, but progressing past that point proved exceedingly difficult. The first main Japanese line of defense lay beyond a sulfur field filled with man-made and natural defenses. Japanese soldiers battered the Marines with artillery by day, and at night they would slip behind the U.S. rear and plant mines along roads to disrupt enemy movements. On February 27 the central regiments, reinforced by the 21st Regiment from the 3rd Marine Division, mounted a massive coordinated assault that broke through the centre of the Japanese line and overran the heights adjacent to the unfinished Motoyama 3 airfield the following day. However, intense fighting continued on the right flank at the Amphitheater, Turkey Knob, and Hill 382, a rise that would be dubbed "the Meat Grinder." From their defensive positions, the Japanese fired on the Marines relentlessly, and U.S. soldiers resorted to using flamethrowers to snuff out every possible defender, but the area remained at a stalemate even after Marines took the Meat Grinder on March 2.

On the northern end of the island, the 28th Regiment fought alongside troops from the 5th Division for control of Hills 362A and 362B, seizing them both with considerable difficulty by March 3. Similarly, the 21st Regiment managed to take Hill 362C near the island's northeast shore, leaving only a small but resilient group of Japanese soldiers in that sector holding out at a site known as Cushman's Pocket. On March 8 Japanese Navy Capt. Samaji Inouye led a nighttime banzai attack against Kuribayashi's orders in hopes of driving the Americans off of their hill. His attack proved futile, however, and the casualties inflicted provided an opening for the Marines. By March 10 U.S. troops had finally cleared the Amphitheater and Turkey Knob of its defenders.

Despite areas of intense resistance at Cushman's Pocket, the northwest coast, and a small area on the east coast, the U.S. declared Iwo Jima secure on March 16. In actuality the island would not be secure until March 26, when a few hundred Japanese troops moved behind enemy lines toward Motoyama 1 and killed about 100 Americans in their sleep before being gunned down themselves. With the other pockets of defenders killed or captured, that night attack marked the last major engagement at Iwo Jima.

Japanese strongpoint during the
Battle of Iwo Jima.

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