

IWO JIMA 1543-1945
AN ISLAND HISTORY

Spanish, British, and Russian explorers all preceded the Japanese to Iwo and its fellow members of the Volcano Islands, and all seem to have decided the same thing: not to pursue colonization efforts on the sulfur island. Not until the Japanese came in 1887 were there any colonists. Spain claimed jurisdiction over the group because of the original discovery, but this and other claims were never backed up, so by 1891 the Japanese had a firm enough grip on the Kazan Retto to incorporate it into the Owasawara (Bonin Island) Administration.

Foreigners were forbidden to land on the islands and as far as known, previous to the invasion, no non-Japanese since Kruennstern in 1805 set foot on these rocks. No foreign ship ever put in here, not even in distress, and no foreign plane ever pancaked on its runway until Marine flyers started to use the Seabee repaired southern field of Chidori on February 26, 1945, when an Air Force B-29, the Dinah-Might, landed after a bombing mission on Tokyo with engine problems.

IWO-CALIFORNIA

Iwo Jima can be compared to the climate of coastal California. The average rainfall is 60 inches a year, with most of the "liquid non-sunshine" occurring in April, May, and June. The temperature of the coldest months, January and February, compares with that of California during the same period. Temperatures range from an average of 55-70 F. in the winter months and from 87-100 F. during the summer months. Typhoons are in season from August thru September annually.

PEOPLE OF IWO

In 1943, there were approximately 1100 civilians on Iwo Jima, all of whom originally came from the Japanese mainland. Close to half of the population worked at the sulphur plant and mines while the other half operated the twelve small sugar mills scattered over the island. From February to May, when the sugar cane was ripe for harvest, men from the sulphur plant helped at the sugar mills. The island's only exports were sulphur and sugar with which they used these items in trade for other necessary items that could not be supplied by themselves or the land.

Most of the civilians lived at Motoyama, the largest village on the island and also the location of the sulphur refinery. The rest lived in the villages of Kita Buraku (North Hamlet), Minami Buraku (South Hamlet), Higasi Buraku (East Hamlet), and Nishi Buraku (West Hamlet).

The islanders lived in small, simple houses. The walls were structured of wooden frames, covered with padamus leaves. Tin or galvanized iron was used for roofing and the floors were made of wood covered with woven grass mats. The heavy rains provided a fairly adequate water supply for the colonists but some families with only one storage tank would run low during the dry spells; better equipped families then pooled their water to aid the distressed. After the military took over the island before WWII, water became a serious problem. An examination of the many soldiers revealed masses of sulphur in their intestines; drinking water from the local wells was believed to be the cause of it.

Gathered around Motoyama Mura (original village), was a post office, a police station, a Buddhist temple, the Taisho National School (elementary), and five stores which sold candies, clothing, household utensils, and unrationed food to civilians and military alike. There was no bank on the island but the post office operated a postal savings window. The civilian cemetery was located at Nishi Buraku; each military unit maintained its own individual cemetery.

Occasional festival celebrations and silent motion pictures were the only amusements of the civilians until the military arrived in strength, only then did they see "talkies", motion

pictures with sound for the first time. The garrison had motion pictures quite frequently. Japanese wrestling bouts, and "Imondan" (stage shows), a Japanese version of our USO tours, came once a year and performed for three days. The last show was in July of 1944, when they started preparing the island's defenses.

The most prevalent complaint from the point of view of illness were colds and diarrhea. Diseases on this island were typhoid, para-typhoid, and bacillary dysentery; there was no amoebic dysentery. The records showed of only a few cases of skin disease and very little influenza. The majority of the troops suffered from malnutrition as nearly all transports were sunk before reaching the island. There was little variety of diet. To supplement their rice and canned goods, soldiers grew vegetables, fished, and gathered bananas.

Iwo was under the jurisdiction of Toyko and a village headman was sent here from the mainland. Under him leaders of the North, South, East, and West sections collected taxes that were numerous and heavy.

All civilians were evacuated in the summer of 1944. Work was discontinued at the sulphur plant on July 12, 1944, and at the sugar mills at about the same time. After that Iwo was strictly a military base with a Japanese Army-Navy Garrison totalling 25,000 at the time of our invasion. Most of the buildings on the island were torn down by the military after the civilians left; the rest were destroyed by American air raids. Prior to the invasion, gasoline was so scarce that alcohol was used as a fuel for the motorized vehicles.

Kita to Minami

Iwo is the largest of the islands that make up the Kazan Retto. The island has a total area of 4,850 acres with a maximum elevation of 340 feet to 387 feet on the northern end of the island and 568 feet on the southern end atop Mount Suribachi, an extinct volcano. The coasts of the north are steep and rocky. Beaches are located in the southern part of the islands, east and west sides, and are composed of black, coarse, volcanic sand. From the beaches there are sloping terraces extending inland to the central backbone of the island. Vegetation was sparse throughout the island until 1947 when the U.S. Air Force reseeded the island. Prior to 1947, vegetation consisted of low grasses, small scrub growth, and a few trees but now the jungle has taken over in many areas. The surf is turbulent when the wind is in excess of 10 m.p.h. The cone-shaped rocks, that appear on clear days, off the northern and southern tips of the island are Kita Iwo Jima, (North Sulphur Island), and Minami Iwo Jima, (South Sulphur Island). They are each approximately 40 miles off the coast and are both active volcanos. Kita was used as an observation post by the Japanese naval units. It is said that cotton and sugar cane grow on the island. Nothing much is known about Minami Iwo Jima although it was believed to be another observation post by the Japanese.

The Japanese unloaded most of their ships on West Beach, due to the fact that the greater depth provided a more suitable anchorage than is possible on East Beach. Only when the wind caused unfavorable surf on the western side of the island was the East Beach used.

The south portion of Motoyama Airfield number one (Chidori Field) was built by civilian contractors in 1933, and the first plane landed in that year. It was enlarged in 1938 to the size found upon invasion. Motoyama Airfield number two was built in March 1944 and was in use by about May of that year. This field was built by "Gunzoku" (laborers) and soldiers. Motoyama Airfield number three was under construction during the invasion.

The last time Mount Suribachi erupted was in 1727 and it was completely silent the 50 odd years of occupation. Seismographs have had a workout from slight earthquakes on Iwo. A subterranean explosion occurred in the vicinity of Chidori Airfield in 1933 and left a large hole. The following day, after the steam had settled down, the men were able to enter the cave for quite a distance. In 1938 when the ground was being prepared for Chidori Airfield an earthquake caused the airfield to be broken in several places. In 1945 the sulphur pit along the west shore was used as a refuse dump and erupted frequently, emitting great lava boulders.

As far as can be determined, none of the caves or labyrinthine tunnels on the island were built until after the first American air raid, June 15, 1944.

OTHER LIFE ON IWO

Before the invasion there were lots of mosquitos on the island during the rainy season and flies were much more numerous than at present. The island also had its share of fleas, but thanks to the Air Force and the insecticide DDT, all the itching today is caused by the vegetation and the heat. Iwo has no poisonous snakes, spiders, or tarantulas although there are an abundance of non-poisonous insects. The only known poisonous creatures that are located on Iwo are centipedes, which are usually from 2-4 inches long, and scorpions.

Although the conditions were not optimum, the Japanese grew tomatoes, turnips, carrots, burdocks, white cabbages, pumpkins, squash, and string-beans. Other items coaxed out the black, volcanic ash were coca, from which cocaine was derived for medical purposes, "derisu", a plant from which the extract is used to exterminate insects on plants and animals, "beehiba", a plant from which perfume is extracted from the roots, and lemon grass, from which perfume is also extracted. There are also the small but spicy "Iwo Jima hot peppers". Fruits grown were bananas, mangoes, "anana" (sweetsop), coconuts, papaya, lemons, tangerines, peaches, watermelons, muskmelons, "buntan" (Chinese oranges), and "ichimurasaki", a fruit green on the outside and purple on the inside. No grains were raised on the island, but were all imported from the mainland in trade for fish and vegetables that were harvested by the villagers.

Trees that grew on the island were "tamana", which makes good lumber but takes years to grow, "gajimaru", which grows fast and gives good shade, "mom tamana", which bear fruit-like peaches but is now extinct on Iwo Jima, and a tall tree called dragons tongue ("nuclear asparagus" for the Americans stationed here).

There are enormous quantities of fish in the waters around Iwo, mostly tuna, barracuda, mackerel, wahoos, and bass. The biggest catches are between Kama and Kangoku Rocks. The best season is from May to August.

When the civilians were evacuated, they left behind 200 cows, 200 pigs, 2,000 chickens and three goats.

IMPROVEMENT OF IWO

Post war development of Iwo Jima as an advanced air base began while the assault was still on and progressed rapidly, resulting finally in three complete airfields, North, Central, and South, with an extensive housing program and numerous installations. An approximation of the cost of the development and the improvements made on Iwo Jima during the first two years after the war are as follows:

Airfields-----	\$10,000,000
Roads-----	2,000,000
Housing	
Quonset Huts-----	2,500,000
Labor-----	500,000
Lumber-----	500,000
Installations	
Tank Farm-----	5,000,000
Signal Communications-----	6,000,000
Harbor Construction-----	2,750,000
Water Development-----	200,000
TOTAL	\$29,450,000

(Approximately \$6,100 per acre of land)

POTENTIALITIES

Iwo Jima, with what was its three airfields, is located mid-way between the Marianas Islands and mainland Japan, being approximately 650 nautical miles north of Saipan and 750 miles south of Tokyo. It could potentially serve as a commercial airline stop as well as a military base. There are no natural harbors so it would be difficult to use as a naval base and the cultivation of crops would be unprofitable due to the island's limited size and natural resources.

FACTS ON THE BATTLE

Prior to the invasion, Iwo was bombed continuously for 72 days. Army B-24 Liberators dropped approximately 7,000 tons of explosives on the island. In five naval bombardments, exclusive of the final pre-invasion ship-to-shore barrage, surface forces fired another 3,100 tons of explosives into the island. In the final bombardment through the twentieth of February, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers of Admiral Raymond Ames Spruance's Fifth Fleet fired an additional 8,000 tons of explosives thus bringing a conservative total estimate thru February 20 to 20,000 tons of high explosives, about 2,500 tons per square mile.

During the battle of Iwo, Task Force 58, under Vice Admiral Marc Andrew Mitscher sailed into Japanese home waters and launched its planes against airfields around Tokyo to throw the Japanese off balance by pinning their home-based planes on the ground while other units of the Fifth Fleet pinned down forces on Chichi Jima in the Bonins, 120 miles away, where a single airfield had nuisance value. Hot on the vapor trails of the carrier planes came 200 Marianas-based B-29's with more than 1,200 tons of bombs to batter the Tokyo area and secondary targets, further isolating Japanese support from the battlefield of Iwo Jima. Over 800 ships made up the invasion armada and at H-Hour, 0900 (9:00 A.M.) on February 19, 1945, one of the bloodiest and costliest battles of the Second World War was in full effect.

General Kuribayashi knew from the beginning why the Americans had brought their mighty force to Iwo Jima and why they wanted the island. When it was conquered, if it was conquered, the ugly and barren rock would become a powerful forward base from which to mount all-out air attacks against the Japanese homeland, and a gigantic staging area for the certain-to-come invasion.

Lieut. General Holland M. (Howlin' Mad) Smith, USMC, commanded the Marine expeditionary groups with Major General Harry Schmidt, USMC, in command of the invading V Amphibious Corps. First landings were made by the Fourth Marine Division under Maj. General Clifton Cates, USMC, and Fifth Marine Division under Maj. General K.E. Rockey, USMC, with the Third Marine Division under Maj. General G.B. Erskine, USMC, in reserve.

The 133rd Naval Construction Battalion (Seabees) made up elements of the Regimental Combat Teams of the 23rd and 25th Regiments, Fourth Marine Division. Landings were made on Futatsune (East) Beach, 4,500 yards long. When elements of the Third Marine Division landed February 21st, 60,000 Marines and Seabees had been put ashore in three days.

Twenty thousand Japanese troops waited in reinforced positions so far untouched by naval bombardment or air strikes. By noon of D-Day, assault battalions reported over 25% fatalities. Frontal assault was the only way to overrun the Japanese positions.

General Kuribayashi placed Colonel Atsuchi and his troops in charge of the defense of Mount Suribachi. After three days of fierce fighting by the 28th Regiment, Old Glory was raised on mountaintop at 1035 on February 23rd.

By D-Day Plus 5, Airfield No.1 had been taken. Some of the heaviest and bloodiest fighting on the island fell between D-Day Plus 14 and D-Day Plus 35. Names like Turkey Knob, the Amphitheater (also called the Meat Grinder), Cushman's Pocket, Hill 382 and Hill 362A (along with Nishi Ridge) became famous during this time.

D-Day Plus 35, the final phase of the campaign would last another ten days and claim another 1,724 American casualties before the island was secured and the fighting finally was over.

General Kuribayashi, and what was left of his staff, moved through tunnels with four hundred men to a last-stand cave near Kitano Point (near what is now the U.S. Coast Guard station). The last pocket of battle was at a place called Bloody Gorge where gullies and ridges made the fighting rough for the Fifth Marines. There were many caves with Japanese snipers in most all of them. Artillery could no longer be used for fear of landing on the Marines. Tanks were unable to maneuver in the narrow ravines. So Fifth Corps engineers built four specially-designed sleds, each mounting twenty rocket-launching tubes that could deliver 640 pounds of TNT in a single salvo, but, it was tank bulldozers that carved paths for flamethrowing Sherman tanks that would finally end the battle.

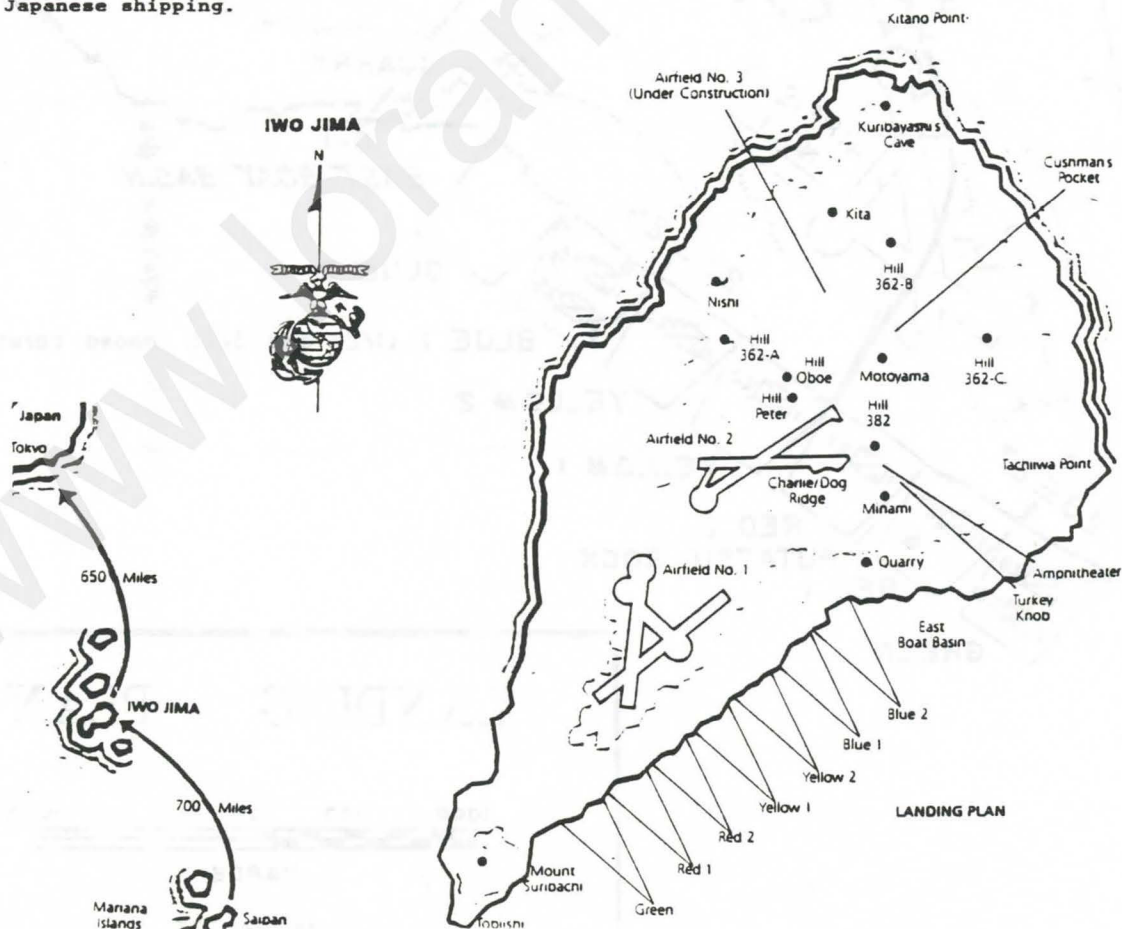
The battle was considered over at 0600, March 16th, when elements of the Third and Fifth Divisions pushed through the cave and pillbox defenses to Kitano Point. The Third and Fourth Divisions had reported resistance ended in their sectors several days before. The Third then joined the Fifth for the final push.

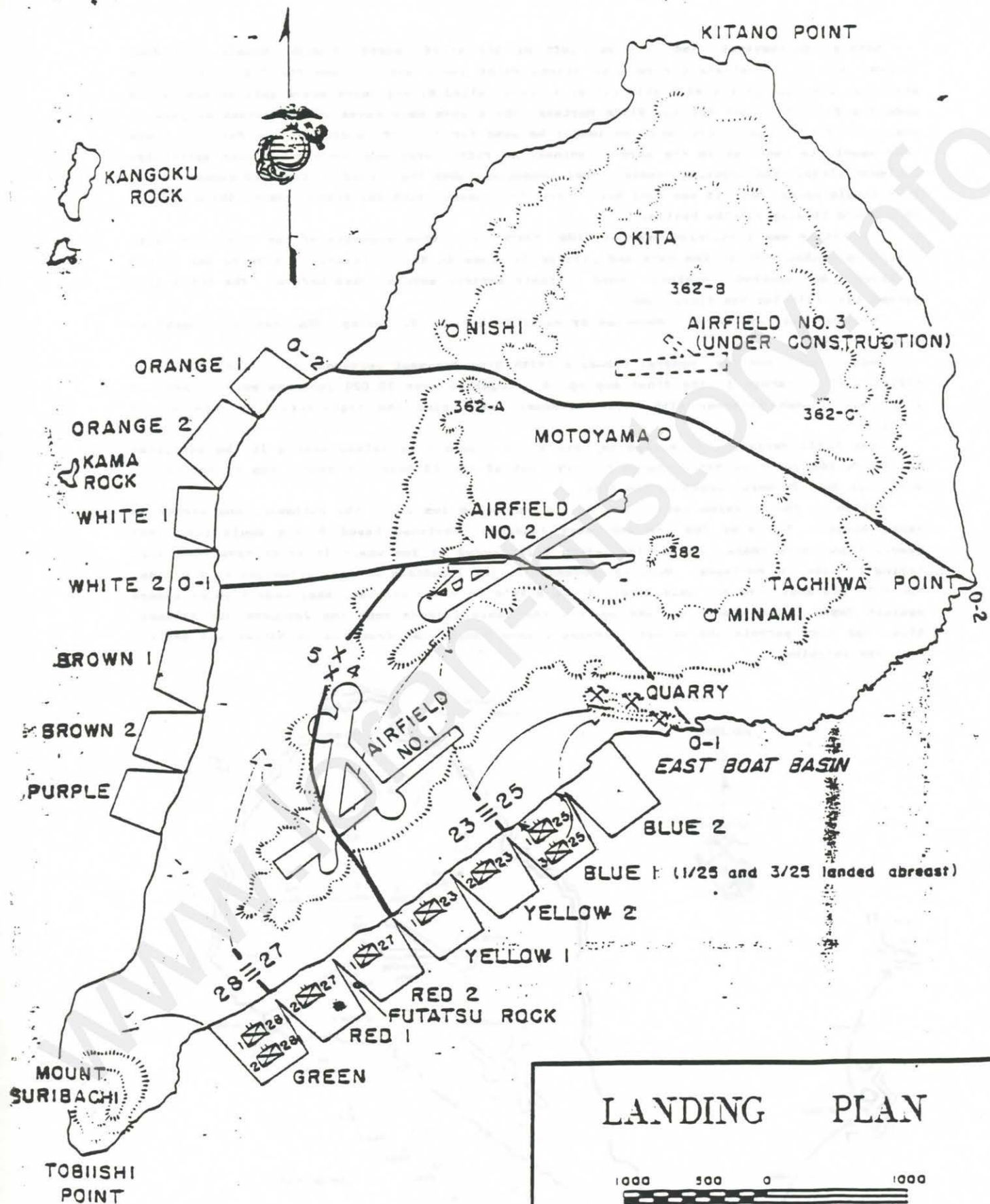
The Army Garrison Force, commanded by Major General J. E. Chaney, USA, assumed command on March 26, 1945.

During April and May, General Chaney's 147th Army Regiment captured another 867 POW's and killed 1,602 Japanese in the final mop up. All together over 20,000 Japanese were killed and 1,083 were taken prisoner with Major Mitsuaki Hara being the highest-ranking Japanese to survive.

Over 6,821 Marines were killed on this eight square mile island making it the costliest battle in 168 years of Marine Corps history. Out of the 82 Medal of Honors won by Marines in World War Two, 26 were earned on Iwo Jima.

Following the invasion over 5,000 B-29's landed on Iwo Jima, 186 following one strike on Japan alone. By using Iwo for emergency landings, Marianas based B-29's could load less gasoline and more bombs. A battle-damaged B-29 landed at Iwo where it might have been lost trying to make the Marianas. Wounded crewmen also got immediate medical attention on Iwo Jima. The P-51 Mustangs here not only escorted the B-29's on their strikes, they made fighter sweeps against Japan. The deadly strikes against the Bonin Islands kept the Japanese off balance. Also, the Navy patrols and rocket carrying planes ranged far from Iwo to harass and destroy Japanese shipping.





THE COAST GUARD ROLE AT IWO JIMA

On the morning of 19 ~~January~~^{FEBRUARY} 1945, a combination of Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard personnel stormed one of the last remaining Japanese strongholds -- Iwo Jima.

The island of Iwo Jima, occupying approximately eight square miles, is located in the Philippine Sea, roughly 640 miles south of Tokyo. It is about an equal distance to the north of Saipan in the Marianas. The island was one of the few in the Bonin, or Volcano, group with enough flat land for the construction of airstrips; however, the island had no harbor.

U.S. fighter aircraft were unable to provide air cover between the the Marianas and the industrial heart of Japan from their bases on Saipan. For this reason Iwo Jima held particular strategic importance. Its location made the island vital in planning any assault on Japan.

Twenty Coast Guard cutters and Coast Guard-manned amphibious ships, and numerous landing craft played an important part in the hazardous attack on the heavily defended island. These Coast Guard units served in Task Force 53 (Attack Force), and Task Force 51 (Miscellaneous Task Groups of the Joint Expeditionary Force).

The Attack Force, commanded by Rear Admiral Harry W. Hill, USN, arrived off the southeastern beaches just after daybreak on ~~January~~^{FEBRUARY} 19, 1945. Simultaneously, two Transport Groups reached the southwestern beach area. During the initial assault, several landing craft were wrecked due to the unfavorable beach conditions. With breaking surf pounding the craft, some were picked up and thrown broadside on the beach, where, swamped by succeeding waves, they were buried deeply in the sand. Propellers of other landing craft were damaged by the wreckage. As a result, the beaches were soon closed to all craft smaller than LCT's. Amphibious vehicles evacuated the many casualties. The beach was eventually cleared of accumulated wreckage, some equipment was salvaged, and damaged ships were repaired.

Landing boats from the Coast Guard-manned USS BAYFIELD took terrific punishment from Japanese machine gun fire, and from mines. Concealed enemy mortar emplacements laid a steady barrage at the waters edge, where the off-loading boats presented stationary targets. Still, Coast Guard boat crewmen remained fixed on their goal, going in to the beaches through heavy shelling time and time again. Some were unable to return to their ships. Those who did soon came back with another load of troops, equipment, and supplies. Boats returning to the transports carried as many casualties as possible through the enemy's heavy fire. By the end of the first day, nearly 30,000 Marines had been landed.

The battle for possession of the island raged on for over a month, with casualties heavy on both sides. Then, on the morning of 23 February, two Marine battalions fought their way to the summit of Mount Suribachi, and there raised the flag that signalled an American victory, and created a stage for the now immortal photograph of that event, later re-created in the U.S. Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Virginia.