

TO THE SHORES OF IWO JIMA



Teacher's Guide

by

Paul Stumph

INTRODUCTION

The battle for control of Iwo Jima was waged between forces of the United States and the Japanese Empire. It took place in the Pacific-Asiatic Theatre of Operations during World War II. The U.S. victory was a significant step toward a final victory over the Japanese Empire.

Through viewing this videotape and supplementing it with additional research, the viewer will gain a more complete understanding of the importance of controlling this island fortress situated on the doorstep of the Japanese mainland.

PRE-VIEWING

Have students view the program with the following purposes in mind (stop tape at appropriate points for discussion):

To understand the location of Iwo Jima in relation to the Japanese mainland.

To gain an understanding of the rationale behind the decision by the Pacific-Asiatic High Command to assault this tiny, heavily fortified island.

To understand the severe difficulties that the military would face in capturing this Japanese held island.

To understand the general size and geographic make-up of Iwo Jima.

To understand the military strength for successfully completing this operation.

To understand the make-up of the military forces that would vie for control of Iwo Jima.

To understand the final outcome of this battle and its significance in attaining the overall objectives of the Pa-

cific-Asiatic High Command.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Iwo Jima is the largest of the Volcano Island chain in the northwest Pacific, east of Taiwan. It is a 2 1/2 mile wide, 5 mile long island off the Japanese mainland. There were two airfields on this island from which the Japanese planes were raiding American bases in the Marianas and intercepting American bombers headed for Japan. To control these two airfields the United States must capture Iwo Jima. Gaining control of the Iwo airfields would eliminate Japanese raiding capabilities, provide emergency landing facilities for crippled American bombers, and provide bases for American fighter planes to escort the bombers on their raids.

With these thoughts in mind, the High Command set February 19, 1945, as D-Day.

THE MILITARY STRATEGY

Because Iwo Jima was located close to the Japanese mainland, it was necessary to formulate a combined Army, Navy and Marine Corps effort. The island had no sheltered water; therefore, it had no harbors that could serve as a base for any fleet activity. The invasion would require an amphibious landing. The prime objective of this entire operation was to gain control of the airfields on Iwo Jima.

The Japanese had held this island for over fifty years. Knowing that these islands might someday be the last defense for the Japanese mainland, fortifications had been built that caused Iwo to be described as the most heavily fortified island in the world. Every inch of the landing beaches was covered by Japanese gun emplacements.

From August 9, 1944, to February 19, 1945, and for 72 consecutive days prior to D-Day, Iwo was bombed and

strafed by American Army, Navy and Marine planes. In January 1945, naval forces combined with these air strikes for an incessant pounding of the island. Following this devastating air/sea blasting, the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine divisions were assigned to take the island from the heavily entrenched Imperial Japanese forces.

THE BATTLE FOR IWO JIMA

In the clear dawn of February 19, 1945, an armada of over 800 naval vessels would support and supply the three Marine divisions that made the amphibious assault.

It was hard to imagine that anything or anyone could withstand this preliminary pounding. The Marines landed with full knowledge of what might lay in store for them and in short order they encountered murderous enemy fire. As in previous Marine assaults, it became quite evident that these defenders would have to be rooted out of their numerous caves (often connected by an intricate tunnel system). The hillsides were honeycombed with pillboxes and heavily entrenched gun positions. Added to these defenses, the Marines had to land on beaches of volcanic ash. Their maneuverability was greatly hampered and mechanized equipment found the conditions on the beaches almost impossible.

After fighting their way off of the beaches and suffering staggering losses in men and equipment, the Marines faced vicious crossfire from elevated Japanese gun emplacements. Advances were measured in feet in this wild, rock-ridge infested terrain. The Marines that fought their way westward encountered the defenses established on Mount Suribachi. These intricate fortifications looked down upon any invader who approached. The summit of the mount was the site for the famous flag raising that took place during the battle for control of Suribachi.

It took 60,000 Marines twenty-six days of the most ferocious fighting of World War II to defeat the 23,000 Japanese defenders. (The statistics on the videotape underestimated the final figures.) The Marines suffered over 20,000 casualties; 5,500 of them were killed in action. The Japanese were sworn

to defend the island until their death. Therefore, very few prisoners were taken. Control of the sea made it possible to protect and supply the Marine amphibious forces. Complete control of the air protected the Marines and the naval armada from Japanese support from their own air or naval forces. Although air and sea domination were vital keys to the successful operation, the men of the 5th Amphibious Corps paid a ghastly price for control of this volcanic island fortress.

The operation to take Iwo Jima was considered a strategic success. Its completion was an important phase of the overall Pacific-Asiatic High Command offensive plan that led to the final U.S. victory over Japan. But it was more than that. It was a saga of American heroism destined to endure as an inspiration to Americans for generations to come.

“Among the Americans who served on Iwo, uncommon valor was a common virtue.”

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz
Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet

POST-VIEWING

1. What was the military importance of Iwo Jima? What prompted the decision to capture Iwo? What would be gained by controlling this Japanese held island? When did this battle take place?
2. Exactly where is Iwo Jima located? Why was the location critical to the decision to assault the island? What specific military problems were created because of the geographic location of Iwo?
3. What opposing forces were involved in the Iwo Jima operation? What type of U.S. military forces would be required for this assault? What specific task would each of these forces be required to accomplish for the operation to be successful? What advantages or disadvantages

would the opposing forces face in the battle?

4. Describe, in general, the actual battle for control of Iwo Jima. What type of terrain was involved? Approximately how many American and Japanese troops were involved? Did the battle follow U.S. command expectations? What topographical feature on Iwo was the site of the famous flag raising by victorious Marines? Where is the memorial depicting this event located? What were the resulting casualties suffered by the opposing forces? What factors led to the ultimate U.S. victory?

5. What were the immediate, as well as the long-range results of the U.S. victory over the Japanese on Iwo Jima?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Make map assignments to familiarize students with this geographical area.

2. Discuss the developments which led to this costly conflict.

3. Discuss the question: Was it a wise decision to order the invasion of Iwo Jima?

4. Discuss the question: Would this type of military operation be prudent (or necessary) today?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Paul Stumph served on Iwo Jima in the 25th Regiment of the Fourth Division of the U.S. Marine Corps. After the war he earned a B.S. degree from Indiana Central University in 1949 and an M.S. degree from Indiana University in 1951. He has devoted his career to education both as an instructor and an administrator.

