

No single chapter, no single book could describe that battle. To tell the story of Iwo Jima, I would have to tell the individual story of every man in the assault force.

HOLLAND M. SMITH, *Coral and Brass, 1948*

CHAPTER 1

Omission

On the morning of 19 February 1945, James Vedder, combat surgeon for 27th Regiment, 5th Marine Division, waited for his landing craft to touch the volcanic sands of Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima would serve as the doctor's first test in combat. Undoubtedly anxious, he could at least console himself with the thought that planners expected a two-day offensive, with a third day dedicated to mopping up enemy resistance.¹ U.S. commanders predicted that the assault force of 80,000 combat-hardened Marines could rapidly traverse an island neutralized from bombardment, either destroying the Japanese in their defensive positions or mowing them down in waves of desperate *banzai* attacks. That the Navy had originally scheduled these same three divisions for use in the Okinawa invasion just

thirty days later demonstrated that it did not, at least initially, consider the operation very difficult.² At 0830, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers leveled their massive guns on the beachhead of Iwo Jima and blasted the landscape with the largest preparatory bombardment to date. The violent explosions ashore quickly shrouded the visible topography of the island in smoke and debris. Little did Vedder know that U.S. commanders had severely underestimated the defenses on Iwo Jima, incorrectly assumed Japanese defensive strategy, and overrated the effects of technological and numeric superiority. The men of the 109th Japanese Infantry Division, in their meticulously designed fortifications, were poised to skillfully defend Sulfur Island (the literal translation of the Japanese name “Iwo Jima”) from the 3d, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions, resulting in the most appalling contest of the Pacific War. With a bare twenty months of military experience, Dr. Vedder was about to face thirty-three days of the most horrific carnage imaginable as American boys and amphibious veterans fed the “meat-grinder” on Iwo Jima.³ Vedder hit the beach just minutes behind the first waves of troops, attempting to exercise compassion in hell.

Peacetime forgets that wartime accounts of misery, destruction, and death can be amazingly direct, detailed, and diverse. On the lunar landscape of Iwo Jima, Vedder treated wounds that mangled faces, shattered jaws, and split skulls wide open. He frequently attempted to care for American boys with missing limbs, wounds so devastating that no healing was possible. He witnessed Marines and sailors die most violently from massive artillery and mortar rounds, as well as from unexpected and precise Japanese marksmanship. He looked after sanitation aspects of hundreds of decomposing corpses. The same insects that infested the dead infiltrated the eyes, ears, and nostrils of the living; or worse, they contaminated food designated for human consumption. In all this horror, his job became almost routine, allowing for times of humor and even small moments of happiness. However, in a 220-page narrative dedicated to the battle, combat surgeon James Vedder made no mention whatsoever of an American flag raised on top of Mount Suribachi. Perhaps that “omission” constitutes the most important evidence of all . . .

Nearly everyone has heard of Iwo Jima and recognizes the monumental icon of six U.S. servicemen raising the American flag on top of Mount Suribachi in 1945. The public generally understands that this image symbolizes patriotism and valor, even though the picturesque scene greatly distorts the miserable experiences of the combatants. Operation Detachment (the code name for the U.S. war plan to invade Iwo Jima) was the largest U.S. Marine

Corps operation ever conducted and cost the lives of over 25,000 Americans and Japanese. However, the public has failed to realize that, tragically, the decision of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to seize Iwo Jima cost thousands of American lives for an objective that never fulfilled the intended purposes—a truth that has been unaddressed by historians for over sixty years. The valuable lessons of Iwo Jima lie covered and dormant, buried under myth and legend.

A more detailed look into the planning for Iwo Jima demonstrates that the service rivalry resulting from the dual advance of the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army in the Pacific heavily influenced the decision to initiate Operation Detachment. Rather than waiting for the Army to complete its seizure of the Philippines in 1944 and release the ground forces needed to invade Formosa, the Navy made a hasty change in plans to seize Okinawa instead and thereby continue its northward advance. Although Okinawa satisfied the Navy's purposes, the objective of seizing Iwo Jima actually derived from Army Air Forces strategy. The intent was to improve poor performance of the B-29 Superfortress by providing fighter support from Iwo Jima. These combined objectives of Okinawa and Iwo Jima ensured approval by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This alliance between the Navy, which was seeking to outflank the Army, and the Army Air Forces, which wanted to prove the case for strategic bombing in order to create an independent postwar service, satisfied their respective interests. However, the Marine Corps, which predominantly paid the heavy price for carrying out Operation Detachment, remained excluded from the decision-making process. When fighter operations from Iwo Jima failed, the military sought additional reasons to justify the costly battle, and historians have unfortunately perpetuated these illusions.

Far from glorious, combat on Iwo Jima was perhaps the most brutal, tragic, and deadly in American history. Scholars have never yet sufficiently addressed the strategic decisions and ensuing justifications for Iwo Jima. The major weakness in the conduct of the Pacific War resided in the inability of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to unify the efforts of the Army and Navy. Consequently, the Army, Navy, and Army Air Forces conducted separate and competing campaigns against Japan. Operation Detachment derived from Army Air Forces strategy, brought about by the need to improve disappointing B-29 operations, in an atmosphere of fierce competition, and with the fear of losing autonomy. At the cost of thousands of lives, Operation Detachment resulted in an airbase of questionable value, with a price that neither the public, nor the military, could swallow.

Nearly every book, journal article, encyclopedia entry, and Web site

that addresses the battle justifies the nearly 7,000 American dead with the “emergency landing theory.” Essentially, the theory argues that 2,251 B-29 Superfortresses landed on Iwo Jima; each Superfort carried eleven crewmen; accordingly, Operation Detachment saved the lives of 24,761 Americans. But the emergency landing theory does not stand up to scrutiny. The absurdity of the claim demonstrates the extent to which the battle has been misunderstood. Rather than saving the lives of U.S. airmen, Operation Detachment may have actually detracted from U.S. war efforts to defeat Japan. If we view the Pacific war through the lens of Iwo Jima, its most important lessons may emerge.