

## THE MEN OF IWO

## Saying goodbye to Iwo Jima

By Steve Thompson  
Guest writer

**A**s our plane circled the island of Iwo Jima in preparation for landing, only an occasional whisper broke the silence among the passengers. Many huddled around windows to glimpse at what lay below.

While others stared straight ahead or simply closed their eyes... perhaps trying to recollect their thoughts and visions from 55 years earlier. Playing quietly in the background, compliments of Continental Micronesia Airlines, was the music of Glenn Miller bringing back memories from the WWII year of 1945... "almost" the end of the war.

However, for many of

these old warriors on the plane, the war had just begun for them on February 19 of '45. Most were just 18 to 20 years of age on that day when they crashed through the waves and surf of Green, Red, Yellow and Blue Beach and fought through the heavy black volcanic sand of "Iwo," and through a barrage of artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire. They were part of 70,000 Marines of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine divisions who spearheaded this invasion along with Army, Navy, and Army Air Corps personnel who fought beside them or provided support, and now they were coming back for a reunion... for the last time, and to "say good-bye to Iwo Jima."

I had been lucky able to join this group through my contacts as a war historian — my

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It may not be of World War II vintage, but this helmet atop an M16 rifle was erected during ceremonies to honor those who died in the 1945 battle for Iwo Jima.

**Editor's note:** Military historian Steve Thompson of St. Charles recently visited the island of Iwo Jima with several Marines who fought there. He submitted the story of a look back at one of World War II's bloodiest struggles as a contribution to the Chronicle's Veteran's Day coverage.



Steve Thompson of St. Charles sits on monument built at the exact site where the famous flag-raising photograph was taken on two Iwo Jima.

Iwo Jima was just another one of those names — previously unknown islands and atolls — where American teenagers became men, or where they became souls in heaven much too early in life. A fellowship of courage, both in life and in death.



War historian Steve Thompson stands atop Mt. Suribachi on two Iwo Jima during his trip to the island with surviving veterans. They attended a ceremony for those who lost their lives in the Pacific conflict.

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avocation and hobby. I was just 5 years old in 1945, and thus did not pretend for a moment that I would be accepted into this unique fraternity of combat veterans. I could only be an observer on this trip, but that was an honor and a privilege in itself.

The Iwo of today is not a lot different from what it was in 1945. It was given back to the Japanese after the war and they now consider it to be a national shrine. No one is allowed to travel to the island without the permission of the Japanese government. Our group of veterans received this approval, but for just one day. Only a small defense force which maintains one airstrip inhabits the island. I do not believe anyone lives there on a permanent basis and I cannot imagine that anyone would want to.

As you explore this barren and windswept island of death, and the caves and tunnels, there is an eerie and ominous feeling of despair and loneliness. A total of 100,000 men savagely fought over this 8 square miles of volcanic rock for 36 days. In the end, 27,000 of them died.

You cannot take a step without knowing that someone fell either dead, wounded or laid in fear on that spot. Also, beneath the feet of the Marines were 16 miles of tunnels and 1,600 caverns, which to this day still entomb thousands of the fanatical Japanese defenders.

Many of those who did not die in combat committed suicide. The Marines who laid in their fox holes on Mt. Suribachi at night could hear the sickening sound of exploding grenades beneath them as the Japanese blew themselves up.

One of the best friends I made on the trip was 73-year-old Bill Rhoads Island. He had joined the Marines at 17, and had already fought the battles of Saipan and Tinian when he hit the beach at Iwo with the 4th Marine Division.

Just three days into the battle one of the grotesque ironies of war tore his body apart. Bill's attacker was accidentally strangled by one of our own Marine Corsair Fighters and 21 of his buddies around him were killed. Bill caught four 50-caliber slugs in his back. He remembers little about it, but related that it took eight hours to get him off Iwo, with at least one Navy corpsman being killed by sniper fire as he tried to move Bill to safety.

He told me that he was 5-10 when he joined the Marines, but just 5-5 when he left after all the surgery and reconstruction. He paid a severe price, but at least lived to retrace his fateful steps 55 years later.

An emotional ceremony was held on the invasion beach while we were at Iwo. Japanese defenders who had survived the battle and many family members of those who died, sat side by side with the American veterans from our trip. Military and civilian dignitaries from both sides spoke. The

tears shed on the beach this day were not those of the pain and suffering of 55 years ago, but rather of the sadness of loss and aching that has lingered in the hearts of all to this day.

A dramatic moment occurred when a Marine Corps vet presented the Japanese representative with a small religious statue that had removed from the clenched fist of a dead Japanese. He said he had kept it in his dresser drawer for all of these 55 years and related that every morning he has awakened with a knot in his stomach thinking about that statue after the memories it brought back. As he handed it over he said, "Maybe now I can finally get a good night's rest."

I had noticed a U.S. Navy ship moving back and forth across the invasion beach area during the ceremony. We learned that night that a burial at sea had been conducted from that ship. The ashes of a retired Marine colonel had been spread, apparently his last request had been to rejoice in death with the many Marines who had died before him on Iwo Jima. So, while the old veterans of our trip were preparing to leave after saying good-bye to Iwo Jima and their fallen comrades for the last time... the deceased colonel was returning to his chosen last retreat, his final home... the sands of Iwo Jima.

As our plane lifted off for our return to Guam, we circled one last time over Iwo. As I looked down on that blackened island as it disappeared into the night, and once so stained with the blood of brave men, I wondered why it all had to happen. Perhaps that volcano known as Mt. Suribachi had never exploded from the bottom of the sea thousands of years ago and spewed its molten rock over eight centuries, but none of this would have occurred. Sadly, that is not true.

It started with Pearl Harbor and spread to forbidding sounding places like Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Peleliu, Bougainville, Kwajalein, Roi-namur, Okinawa... and the list goes on. Thus, Iwo Jima was just another one of those names — previously unknown islands and atolls — where American teenagers became men, or where they became souls in heaven much too early in life. A fellowship of courage, both in life and in death.

Each island battle was fought in almost exactly the same way, as best described by Lt. General Holland Smith, USMC, when he said in regard to Saipan... "A campaign in which men crawled, clutched, shot, burned and lay on their backs, other to death." There are no pretty words to describe war.

As we celebrate Veteran's Day on Nov. 11, remember the patriotism, heroism, and sacrifice of those Americans who fought on Iwo Jima. They symbolize the bravery of all the men and women who have fought in all the battles in all the wars that have given us the freedom we enjoy today.