

Marines at iwo jima essay sample



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Iwo Jima is a small island on the Pacific Ocean, around 1200 kilometers south of Tokyo. It is around 4.5 kilometers long and is 2.5 kilometers at its widest - a small island as islands go. Yet this small island has been home to one of the worst fighting ever in human history. Thousands of Japanese and American lives were lost in Iwo Jima and up to this day, nearly 10,000 Japanese souls are still lying unfound in Iwo Jima's black volcanic soil.

By 1944, all indications told the Japanese that the American forces would try to invade the mainland. The capture of Iwo Jima would be beneficial to the American forces in two ways. First, Iwo Jima has an airfield. Fighter planes could be deployed from Iwo Jima that could directly attack bomber planes on the way to the Japanese mainland. Even if the planes from Iwo Jima didn't directly threaten the bombers, Iwo Jima contained an Early Warning System that gave the mainland a two-hour advanced notice of impending aerial attack. Capturing Iwo Jima for the Americans would make the island useful as an airbase that would provide escort for the bombing campaign over the Japanese mainland.

In May 1944, the Prime Minister gave the order to General Tadamichi Kuribayashi to defend Iwo Jima at all cost. Upon his arrival in the island, the US navy bombarded the island destroying all above-ground structures. Realizing the danger of building structures above ground especially when he didn't have air superiority, the General then went on to dig a large complex of mazes, tunnels and caves all over the island and Mount Suribachi, the lone mountain on Iwo Jima. The General didn't plan on attacking the Americans face to face; he planned to take them from under their feet. When the battle

started, the Japanese had already dug 18 kilometers worth of extended tunnels and underground reparations.

The use of tunneling by the Japanese protected them from the firepower of the Americans. They were effectively invincible from the air and from the Navy, making the Americans' superiority in these areas irrelevant. The Japanese soldiers had already dug in to their trenches and were well armed and waiting for the American invaders. Iwo Jima would have to be won on foot.

The invasion of Iwo Jima formally started before dawn on February 19, 1945 as the Navy opened fire on the island. By nine AM that morning, the first of an estimated 30,000 marines landed on Iwo Jima. They landed to a quiet beach, with no Japanese at sight. At first, they thought that all the optimistic predictions had come through; the Japanese were weak, on the run and were to give up Iwo Jima without a fight.

What they didn't know was that this was all part of General Kuribayashi's plan. General Kuribayashi never intended on defending the beaches - his men were already entrenched deep into the earth. He never returned fire on the Navy ships so that the Americans would never know the location of his artillery. He never fired on the Americans as they landed to lure them deeper into the island - that is when the Japanese would start their defense of Iwo Jima.

One hour after the first marines landed, the beaches were now filled with more men and incoming supplies. That was when the first typhoon of Japanese machine guns hit the troops. The Japanese were under orders to

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attack one hour after the Americans landed – this way each bullet would inflict greater damage. The marines were surprised and had nowhere to go but forward. Retreating to the beach meant being crushed by the incoming tanks. They tried digging foxholes but the loose volcanic ash proved unfit for such a structure. By the time the sun had set there were already 2,420 American casualties.

Pinned down by a storm of gunfire and exploding mortar shells, two marines displayed exceptional bravery and gallantry on Iwo Jima D-Day, both earning the Congressional Medal of Honor. These two men are Sgt. Darrell S. Cole and Cpl. Tony Stein. Cpl. Stein stood up while his position was being showered by gunfire to draw fire away from his unit, all the while taking the chance to observe the location of the enemy. Determined to neutralize the Japanese pillboxes, he forayed alone into the enemy several times killing 20 Japanese troops and escorting a wounded man back to the lines in each of his eight trips. Sgt. Cole's bravery is no less, armed with only his pistol and grenades; he personally attacked three pillboxes that were holding the progress of his unit.

For the next 36 days, the marines fought a battle that was described by historians as “throwing human flesh against reinforced concrete”. From their caves in Mount Suribachi, all the marines were within range of Japanese machine guns, mortars, rockets and anti-tank weapons. There were no lines to defend, no trenches to be dug. The Americans fought above ground and the Japanese were fighting them off from below.

The advance up Mount Suribachi was one of the worst fighting of the entire war. The advance of the marines was slow and meticulous. The Americans, thinking that a pillbox or bunker had already been cleared will push through only to be attacked from behind by those same bunkers after fresh men had manned the bunkers through the complex underground maze of tunnels. Gunfire was proving ineffective to the well dug Japanese. Rarely did the Americans see a live Japanese soldier.

By the fourth day of the battle, around 30,000 marines have surrounded Mt. Suribachi rendering it cut-off. Still, the tunnel network of the Japanese meant that taking the mountain would be a long arduous task. On February 21, PFC Donald Jack Ruhl was standing on top of an enemy bunker while bringing fire to the enemy. A grenade landed between him and his companion. PFC Ruhl quickly jumped over the grenade, making his body absorb the impact of the explosion and shrapnel and protecting his companion and his unit. For his actions, PFC Ruhl was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

By the fourth day of fighting, the Americans were finally able to take Mt. Suribachi. A platoon of 41 marines was sent up to the summit carrying an American flag with them. As they climbed the mountain, these marines believed every step to be their last. Upon reaching the summit, they were unaware that 30,000 men on the island and in different ships were watching them and as they hoisted the American flag, the entire island broke into applause. Old Glory was now flying atop Japanese territory.

With the mountain taken, the Americans now focused on taking the rest of the island and the airfield. It took another three weeks to do so as Japanese forces kept ambushing Americans through the vast network of tunnels. However the end was getting near for the Japanese. The Marines, learning that gunfire was useless to the Japanese bunker network started using flamethrowers and grenades to flush out the enemy.

The brave Japanese soldiers fighting to the end, they would rather commit suicide than surrender or be taken prisoner. By March 21, Gen. Kuribayashi reported that the men have not eaten in five days but “our fighting spirit remains high”. A day later, the general sent out his last transmission, saying that “The strength under my command is now about four hundred. Tanks are attacking us. The enemy suggested we surrender through a loudspeaker, but our officers and men just laughed and paid no attention”. Kuribayashi was most likely killed on that day. His body was never found.

At the end of the fighting, around 20,000 Japanese were dead, only a little over 200 were taken prisoner. The Americans suffered nearly 28,000 casualties, 6,825 killed in action, 1,401 dying of wounds and more than 19,000 wounded. All of these for a strip of land no more than ten square miles in area.

That was the story of Iwo Jima, a story remembered not for its strategic importance but rather because of the huge amount of dedicated brave young men from both sides who fought and died for their country. Today the American and Japanese flags fly over Mt. Suribachi. Katsuyoshi Morimoto, a survivor of Iwo Jima has said that “It’s not important who won or lost, but

that both sides remember the place where our friends and relatives died”.

On the 40th anniversary of Iwo Jima, a group of veterans from both sides of the conflict came back to the top of Mount Suribachi, and attended a monument unveiling ceremony. After the ceremony and the offering of flowers, the former enemies approached the monument, shook hands then afterwards embraced and wept openly in the arms of their enemies. They remember Iwo Jima the way it ought to be remembered, we should do it too. If not for the veterans, if not for the bodies of Japanese and American soldiers still unfound in the shores of Iwo Jima, but rather so that our sons and daughters may never have to experience another Iwo Jima ever again.

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