MEN & GUNS AT IWO JIMA

by Walter Davenport

How many men make a hero? Collier's correspondent flies over the Pacific island battle scene and, to get the answer, takes you behind the scenes to see part of the almost incredible task achieved by those who make it possible for Americans to fight on Japan's doorstep

MEN with guns will beat the Jap army—men fighting on the ground. But on the second day of our attack on Iwo Jima, no Jap blazing away at the American Marines from his cave in the side of Suribachi. the dead volcano that is the head of the island, could raise his eyes and see the American Navy and hundreds of supply craft, huge and tiny, and still be the Jap he was before we attacked the place.

Those ships and aircraft and guns and bulldozers, and the heroes who handled them (as we saw them from a plane flying low over the tortured island) were part of the American answer to Japan. They were a climax. But to see the entire picture, we must begin back on Guam; we must begin with a young man standing in the sun.

Where he stands was but recently a jungle, heavy with the sick, sweet reek of rotting tropics and death. Now it's a broad, bald plateau, flattened by tractors and bulldozers and massive crushers, paved with concrete plazas and grand boulevards, absurdly called runways and air strips. Behind him are the huge-mawed shops, the hospitals into which wounded warplanes are wheeled to be operated on and returned to life by such specialists as Master Sergeant Peter Munch, who, stripped to the waist, himself, looks like an untamed jungle. And farther behind, beyond the wild fall-away of cliff, spreads the treacherous Pacific, alluring, beguiling and poisonous with deceit.

He is quite young; thirty. The sun, a suggestion of cynicism and a weariness that is deeper than muscle and bone narrows his eyes, tightens his jaw, slants his mouth. He is a welterweight, blond, dapper in spite of his open collar, his unpressed pants, his blunt, battered, punishing combat boots. You'd guess he was a salesman of some sort back in civil life and be very pleased to find that you were right. Advertising.

He doesn't seem to see the general, the admiral, the colonels and commanders who in a moment are to listen solemnly while his valor is extolled in stilted, frozen military phrases, and to pin upon him the Distinguished Flying Cross. Instead, he seems to be peering at the humid sky, at the infested hill chain yonder where Japs who fled the Yankee assault live like wilderness creatures and who occasionally emerge to steal a few cases of Yankee rations, to kill and be killed.

He is a hero and what we shall say hereafter reflects in no adverse degree upon his right to the title. He flew through a rage of flak and machine-gun hail across a Jap atoll, smashed Jap planes on the ground, blew Jap planes out of his path, was stitched in both legs by Jap bullets. and he brought back to his Marianas base a plane that was all but riddled junk. He fetched it back all in one piece or, at least, all the piece the Jap fire had left him. So he is a hero, and hundreds of men here watching, who have never flown a furlong, will be glad to have a hand in slaughtering anyone who denies it.

They can kid him. They can sit around drinking their beer, talking with mock solemnity about guys who ran into

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"The Jap is fighting for his life but our life is pouring into his island in endless streams" from a five-mile ring of battlewagons and supply ships. Many small craft were hit, but most made the shore first and the river of supplies flowed on unchecked

fame by getting off their course. They can tell one another what a difficult thing it is for a hero to stay a hero, and about the ghastly fate of heroes who go back to the States for parade luncheons, cocktails, shows, night clubs, speeches and worse—women. They can read imaginary newspaper and magazine eulogies of this trim young hero and the ever-enlarging recountings of his derring-do.

They can do all this—all of them from the most obscure Pfc. or Navy yeoman third class who filled out the simplest supply requisition for the plane Munch piloted, to the maintenance crew chief, Sergeant Reuben "Red" Thompson of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Officially, by virtue of what the commanding officer has proclaimed, and by the evidence of the medal on his chest, Munch is a hero. But in spite of that, he's just their guy, as his plane is their plane, as what he did was their doing as well as his. A good guy with guts. But hero? Hell, heroes are civilian chow!

Anyway, there is our hero. He is a composite. He's a combination of several halo receivers we've beheld in identical circumstances. All of their triumphs were of similar weave—a fabric of quiet courage, careful training, swift decision, the fatalism that comes to men accustomed to combat, and an abiding faith in those he left behind him on the runways. For the purposes of this piece we shall deal with that last component: the unquestioned confidence of the man at the controls and his crew in the men who sent them forth upon their mission.

That cross was pinned on only one sweat-stained shirt. Actually it is the property of nearly five thousand men, and the lad who now wears it would be the first to admit that fact. Statisticians would smother us with figures. Researchers, their imaginations ignited, have tried to drag us beyond this horizon to

include the most remote sharer in our hero's honors—a girl who threaded a fuse and a man who crated and shipped his plane, men and women to be found somewhere east of San Francisco, 5,500 miles from this steaming island of Guam. But we shook them off wearily.

We shall not, therefore, go beyond the shores of these coral and limestone geological burps, the Marianas Islands, that poke their dripping pates above the surface of the far Pacific. It's a story of supply and maintenance, of plane and salvage, not of parched fact and arid figures. It's an analysis only to this extent: How many unsung men does it take to make a hero?

Ask the question yonder on the airdromes from which the bombers soar—the Superfortresses, the Liberators and the rest of them—or in the clubs and hangars of the fighter pilots, and they'll tell you the answer is too

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easy. They'll tell you from three to twelve men on the ground can keep a plane in the air, depending on the size of the ship. They'll dismiss the whole story just like that, bid you sit down and reduce your fever with a bottle of beer and listen to the latest and ruggedest verses of the No. 1 song hit in the Marianas, Three Cheers for the Jones Junior High.

So we drink our beer and listen to the latest social activities of the best Junior High in Toledo, which sound very enjoyable indeed. But being a prosaic sort of guy, we keep thinking what a shame it is that they have given no credit at all to a wispish young Pfc. at an uninspiring pine table far down the requisition line in the Air Force depot where nearly nine hundred men who have never fired a shot at a Jap and who probably never will struggle daily with forms and rubber stamps and pens and computing machines to send a hero, potential or actual, into the air and on to Tokyo. The kid is called "Sharpie." It wasn't so long ago that he was in some city junior high, and we'll identify him no closer because he's only one of thousands of such.

Of course, Sharpie is pretty far outside the aura of our hero, but it is the objective of those who run the Army Air Forces to keep as many planes in the air as possible at all times. They will tell you that a plane—say a B-29—should do ten missions a month, one every three days. Let Sharpie and his buddies at their poor pine tables make a requisitional error, and some plane may not make its ten sorties or even five. Maybe none.

Okay, we'll have another beer. But how about those two thousand seagoing Joes—soldiers, not sailors—who man Colonel Matthew Thompson's Air Force maintenance

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unit with their 500-ton FSs (freight smalls), which plod from island to island—Guam, Saipan and Tinian? With their FSs and their 1,200-ton barges, their LCMs and their LCVPs, they fetch air supplies to the repair and maintenance base from Liberty ships and other freighters just arrived in Saipan's harbor or anchored outside the Guam reef. They are the lads who, when our hero's shattered plane just managed to make the airfield on Tinian—just that and no more ---picked it up, lashed the wounded thing to the deck of a barge and brought it down to the repair base, where in five days it was back in our hero's hands as good as ever.

A Mighty Supply Line

After you've pursued this particular aspect of the apparently limitless story of supply in the Pacific, you inevitably come to a few conclusions, some of which are reasonably accurate and worth talking about. For example, it becomes more than a theory that if Guam in 1941 had been the massive military base it is now, there would have been no Pearl Harbor attack.

At this moment the supply and maintenance depots on this geographical accident can do about everything about a warplane but manufacture one; and it may not be long before they can do that. Assembly is simple here. Here, too, are men who can dismantle, repair and rebuild anything from a Norden bomb sight to a telephone. Here are warehouses containing more than 200,000 separate and distinct items to refit a plane.

The further you dig into the subject, the more you begin to realize that the old formula that it takes nine men in the rear to maintain one combat soldier or Marine on the line is doomed to the camphor chest along with a lot more of the ideas with which we started this war. As our supply lines lengthen from 5,000 to 7,000 to 10,000 miles,

so do our transport and maintenance problems become more complicated, calling for innovations, conversions, new mechanized contrivances.

Thus (and this is quite unofficial) for every one man assigned to kill Japs. on the ground, on the sea, in the air, there will soon be fifteen men armed with pens, hammers, typewriters, rivet punches, slide rules and mulligan pots to see that he has at least his chance to become a hero. There's only one other of the several conclusions we have reached that we will annoy you with here. It is that we'd like to know just what the scattered Jap soldiers hiding out in the hilltops yonder think when they see these hills of supplies and this expanding industrial establishment. Not that we didn't try to find out.

Down from the hills one day came a Jap who must have a yearning similar to ours: to know what we Yanks were thinking about. Nobody had to ask him any question; he just started talking. Up there, he said, the chief topic was American might, American wealth, American mechanical power. He is a graduate of Columbia University and speaks English so well that it was hard to believe he'd learned it in New York.

We asked him who, in view of all repeated praise of American might, wealth and power, was going to win the war.

He smiled gently and said, "Very few of my countrymen have had the advantage that I have enjoyed of having lived in New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh."

We repeated our simple question, thinking, of course, that he hadn't understood. He repeated his answer. And that was that.

We tried also to get a bit of information from a refugee Jap civilian, using the tongue and ears of a Nisei, a young American soldier from Oakland, California, whose parents are Japanese. But this time we got nowhere at all until we told Abe (the Nisei) to ask the fellow what he thought of democracy as a form of government.

Abe and the civilian spent the next five minutes screaming at each other, and presently Abe said, "He says it won't work, and that anybody, even the crazy Americans, would be fools to try it."

This is not getting so far off the track as you'd think. It still would be nice to know what the abandoned Japs down yonder and what the doomed Japs in the marked islands to the north are thinking of as they behold the distance between our hero's winged guns and Hirohito's palace diminish day by day.

While we're watching our hero listening to the citation, surrounded by his flying crew, his ground crew, the maintenance crews and the men from the supply base, that distance has suddenly been shortened by 750 miles, to the island of Iwo, which in turn is only 750 miles from Tokyo. While they're pinning on the cross, let's fly to Iwo Jima.

A Ring Around an Island

The battle wagons are hulking off the is-

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land when we arrive, so close that their huge guns are scarcely elevated—a mile or two away, perhaps. Within the ring they've drawn around the island, which looks like an enormous otter headed southward, the cruisers and the destroyers, their guns braying baritone, blast the middle and north of the island into clouds of flying rubble and steel, until the bombers above and the diving torpedo planes beg them profanely to ease up for a moment and give them a chance.

Inside this double ring of warships are the troopships, the supply ships—huge carriers with ten thousand tons aboard, smaller and smaller craft bearing a great array of alphabetical designations taking men and things off the big boys and scooting for the shore in crazy courses. They wriggle in like the heads of serpents. They do it in ever-widening circles. They do it at wild angles, all but crashing into one another. From the air it looks like Sunday traffic of the old prewar days when everybody had a tankful.

Beyond the beaches, men are fighting one another with gun and fire. On the beaches in ever-lengthening rows, food and ammunition are being piled up. Already a platoon of hungry bulldozers are chewing great hunks out of the wilderness, places for more and more supplies. The Japs are much too busy holding back the armed Yanks to give these supplies, these emergency dumps, the attention they merit. The Jap is fighting for his life, but our life is pouring onto his island in endless streams, and the Jap can do nothing about it. It doesn't matter what the Jap's philosophy is, or what his religion may exact of him, he can't look down from Suribachi, he can't look up from that limestone and coral quarry to the north and see this torrent of men and material land, and still be the same Jap.

There is no Jap navy here to stop us; no Jap air force, either. We're looking down on what is known as D-plus-one—one day after the attack was launched. Art Primm, the radio news broadcaster, is with us, and we scream at him that it all looks so easy there on the beaches, this supply thing, that it looks like New York Bay. We're only 900 feet above the island, 400 feet above the

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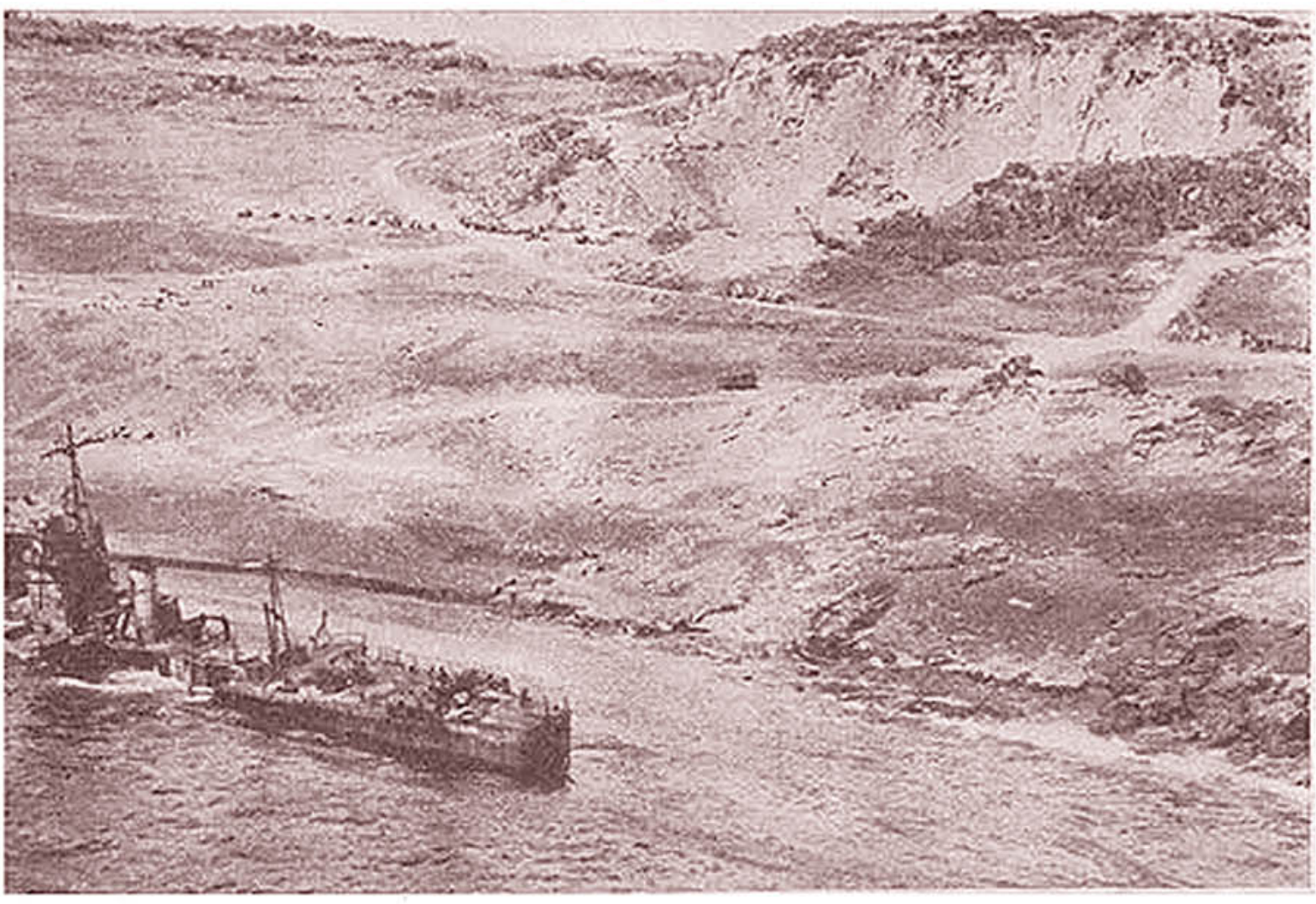

This pre-invasion photograph, showing a dead Jap destroyer escort lying offshore, gives an idea of terrain U.S. Marines had to fight up and over. Cliffs, in background, were honeycombed with deep caves which were not smashed by the bombardment

hollow crest of Suribachi. We don't hear what Primm replies, because the Japs yonder have decided that we've been there long enough, and they open up with their ack-ack.

We streak for the open sea, which means plenty of streaking. For five miles, there is no open sea, just American warships, supply ships, ring after ring of them. A hundred thousand tons of rations, shoes, medicines, blood plasma, pants, rations, rations, rations; a hundred thousand tons of shells, cartridges, dynamite—and weapons to throw them from—all being ferried inshore by small craft that look like waterbugs from the Liberator we're in, and more are arriving.

All the Jap has to do is to look at the beach and see (as we see) that scarcely any Yankee supply carriers have failed to make the shore. Two big cargo bruisers, both hit by the Jap artillery from the volcano, are lying wearily on their sides, a sharp list, nothing more. But their bows are deep in the sand. Their decks are empty save for a few crushed crates. The trucks have cleaned them out. Let them lie. If what's happened in the Marianas happens in however small a way on Iwo, there'll be ships on that beach in a few weeks—ships and piers and hundreds of men to man them. Those two clumsy luggers will be back at sea again before May.

We swooped low over the island. The Japs are being blasted by the torpedo bombers. One of the bombs hits the line of foxholes they occupy over on the west shore, and instantly those foxholes become a long, straggling, loosely earthed grave. A couple of hundred feet inside the east shore of Iwo lie the wrecks of half a dozen Alligators—our amphibians. But what the hell! They've delivered their cargoes. That's all we care about: Get it ashore! Get it ashore! Get it to those guys on the line!

It's hard to believe what you see. It must be harder for the Jap. But there's one crazy bulldozer chewing out the beginning of a road. Habit, probably. Every time one of those bulldozers hits the ground, it begins to rip a road through the nearest available jungle. Orders? The hell with orders! Let's

make a road! Up here over Iwo, we can't find out what this bulldozer is gouging out a road for. But the forward gunner, the guy at the machine guns in the nose turret, a guy named Gibbons, from Chicago, bawls out that it's for the ambulances, the Medical Corps. Maybe.

Anyway, the hospital ship is lying out there surrounded by destroyers, and the only craft carrying anything away from the shore are streaking for the hospital ship. We peer through our field glasses and—sure, that's it. They're carrying wounded men out through a trail right next to where this kid in the bulldozer is hacking out a roadway.

We're Moving in on You, Jap!

So you see, Jap? On our way up here to Iwo we flew over more supply ships, more cargo carriers. They're bringing food and clothing and medical things, too. But their decks are crazy with machinery—more bulldozers, trucks, traveling cranes, machine ships on wheels, a whole industrial town moving in on poisonous little Iwo. Those decks carry concrete mixers, Diesel-powered road crushers and rollers. There aren't many cliffs on Iwo to hide out in, Jap! You can't live for weeks in the crevices and the tunnels and caves of Suribachi. You can't grow gardens on that rock. So while you can still see, look down at what we're seeing: An American city, a harsh, womanless city is moving in on you.

Back on Guam, this ceremony of making a hero is over and forgotten. He asks the chief of his own ground crew how long it will be before his ship will be ready for another mission. His ground-crew boss, a guy named McCrorey, of Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, asks Master Sergeant Pete Munch, the man mountain, how long his ship will be in the shops.

"*My* ship!" roars Munch. "Maybe five days. Maybe eight. She's all shot to hell. *Your* ship!"

A hundred men—all very young—yonder in the supply warehouses are requisitioning a hundred items which will go to heal the wounds of *their* ship. The same gallant bomber with a hundred and fifty guys each calling her his ship. The hero? Oh, that's all over. There'll be a dozen more heroes standing on the concrete in the next few days, all looking gaspingly tired, slightly cynical, somewhat bored.

But nobody talks about them. Nobody here says, "My hero." They leave that for you people at home. Let's have a beer.

Collier's
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