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Iwo: Bloody Inches



Official Coast Guard Photo

Wounded Marine: One of thousands cut down in the fight for Iwo Jima

To the weary Marines closing in on the northern tip of Iwo Jima this week, victory seemed almost within sight. After grinding out painfully slow gains day after day, the Third Marine Division drove a wedge into the Jap lines only 300 yards from the island's northeastern shore. On their right and left, the Fourth and Fifth Marines struggled through close-knit fortifications to broaden the wedge. At their backs, Marine observation planes took off from the southernmost airfield, while Seabees continued to fill in bomb craters and clear off jagged shell fragments.

On both the east and the west beaches, food, gasoline, and ammunition began to pile up in the supply dumps. But to the troops in the foxholes, the surest sign that things were going well was the arrival of mail from home, dropped by parachute from low-flying planes.

Gothic Line Junior: Yet the enemy garrison was determined to make the American victory costly. The Japanese took full advantage of the bristling defenses across the northern quarter of the island. John Lardner, NEWSWEEK war correspondent on Iwo Jima, radioed this description: "The Japs copied a few tricks from the Germans in Italy when they built this arid little base. Their pillbox and blockhouse defenses (some are sunk two stories into the ground) are organized into lanes of interlocking fire. Their exploitation of terrain and high ground is more expert than ever before, and they have made intelligent use of the island's tiny dimensions. They use German tricks of registering their rear artillery upon their own pillboxes to smash our mopping-up parties—the pillboxes, being too thick and too deep to suffer any damage, merely serve as detonators and bouncing boards for shrapnel. These tactics, like those still used by the Nazis in Italy, are designed for defense and are useless for attack."

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Bloody Inches

Thus the Japs continued to play a delaying game. Their trapped garrison, practically cut off from supplies, showed signs of acute suffering from a shortage of water. Small raiding parties took desperate risks to steal American water barrels.

In a futile effort to conceal their high casualty rate, the Japs had been cremating their dead. In one underground cavern, advancing Marines discovered 200 bodies that had been saturated with gasoline and burned. (So far, 12,864 enemy dead have been counted; only 36 Japs have surrendered.) Some Jap officers, unable to face the prospect of defeat, dressed in their best uniforms, laid their samurai swords by their sides, and then shot themselves in the head. Tokyo broadcast a plaintive admission from the Jap commander on Iwo Jima, Gen. Tadamichi Kuribayashi: "This island is the front line that defends our mainland, and I am going to die here." He was right on both counts.

