

# Virginians at War

## WWII: Battle of Iwo Jima

### Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

#### **WORLD WAR II 1939-1945**

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific Theater. Following the sneak-attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese swept across the South Pacific, bringing their domination to within 200 miles of Australia. During the next 4 years, the United States and her allies battled north toward Japan. One of these battles was for the tiny island of Iwo Jima.

#### **IWO JIMA**

BILLINGSLEY: Iwo Jima was extremely important, because they had two air fields on Iwo with a third one under construction. Those planes on Iwo, they would go up and harass the B-29's on their way to Japan, and then they were waiting for them on their way back. Of course, they jumped on the cripples and everything and a lot of those guys, they couldn't make it back and they had to land in the sea. But with Iwo, they had a place to land.

#### **GATHERING FORCES**

NEWMAN: It was probably January, we headed out for Iwo, but of course we didn't know we were going to Iwo until we were almost there. It took us about three weeks to zig-zag across the ocean, and then they broke out this pork chop-shaped

island, you know? [They] said that's where we're going, it's gonna be a cake walk. How wrong they were...

COOPER: Iwo, the island, was a volcanic island. It went deep, and these big battle wagons could almost come up the shore because of the depth of the water there. They'd come up and they'd, point blank with those 16-inchers, BAM... into the side of Suribachi, and they were dropping napalm and strafing, and boy, we all said, well, there won't be anything there when we get there, you know?

HENLEY: So they had bombed that thing for I don't know how many days, bombed it and used ships and shot at it and what have you, and they hadn't made a dent in it, really.

COOPER: They had tunneled Iwo from one end to the other, they had escape routes, they had hospitals underground. There wasn't a building on the island, and there's 20-some thousand Japanese, they live underground.

BILLINGSLEY: They had a lot of artillery on there, a lot of mortars, and that was Japan's home country. I mean, the mayor of Tokyo is also the mayor of Iwo Jima, that's all considered Japanese and had been Japanese for hundreds of years. They had been fortifying it for years and years, and they told us when they were laying out the battle plan, five days and it would be over, but it just didn't turn out. They didn't know that they had all those caves where they had fortified, and we didn't get the preliminary bombardment from the Navy that we were supposed to have gotten, and we didn't get the Air Corps bombers as much of it as the Commander Generals were asking for. And I know they wanted nine days of preliminary, they only got three. And then on the day of the invasion, if the target was obscured you didn't drop anything. I never understood that; the island was so small, if you dropped it, it was gonna hit something that they had. I know once we got there, when they started shooting at us, everything they fired would hit something, there were so many of us packed together on that little island.

## **THE LANDING**

WIESSLER: I'll never forget, it was a beautiful day in February '45. As far as the eye could see to the horizon, nothing but U.S. Navy ships and boats coming in, literally thousands of small boats and ships descending on this small island.

REEKES: The landing itself was scheduled for nine o'clock, so naturally that morning we were up to have breakfast and get our gear ready and everything.

COOPER: One of the traditions of the Marine Corps, the day before the invasion they'd give you steak and eggs for breakfast at three in the morning. When you're so scared, it didn't amount to a whole lot. We hit the beach and immediately started unloading supplies, and it was relatively quiet.

NEWMAN: We landed right in about the middle between Suribachi and the stone quarry which is the high ground on the right. While we were landing, there was hardly any incoming **roll**, them suckers waited until everybody was on the beach, all crowded on the beach. Not a very big island, and [we] had two divisions – 5<sup>th</sup> Division up towards Suribachi and we were going up toward the other end of the island. And then they got us.

*The island of Iwo Jima was just 5 miles by 2 ½ miles*

COOPER: That night, all Hell broke loose. They started throwing mortars and strafing the beach.

REEKES: And on the flying bridge about 100 yards off Red Beach, with 12-power binoculars, you could pick out everything that was happening on the beach, which was a horrendous day because they just wiped out the first wave of Marines going in. And I was up there, and could pick out hand-to-hand fighting and the tanks and the flamethrowers... everything was happening in the beach area, so that was an unbelievable experience.

THOMAS: The Japs were, they were great at camouflage. You would see the gun fire – that would be the first time you would see it. And then, if you looked real quickly, you could see them hauling the gun back. We found out later that the things were mounted on railroad tracks, some of them.

COOPER: And they were excellent mortar people, they had a little mortar called a "knee mortar." Our mortars had plates, and had sights and all these things. They put a little base in the ground, put it between their legs and put a hand grenade in it and – whoomp – whatever, these mortars, and they played havoc on us. We had no cover.

NEWMAN: I can remember getting up and starting out and bingo, my whole leg was sorta missing, it was sorta hanging there, you know? And I said to myself, here I am, it's my second Purple Heart, I'm getting off this place, and I ain't gonna make it.

SMITH: I was on an LST so they just dropped the front and we drove off, and of course water came up in the truck – I was the truck driver, and water came up in the floor of the truck about a foot. And we just barely got ashore, and they says, "Dig in here." And I was an old farm boy, I thought I knew how to use a shovel, but I could move more sand there with a spoon than most people could with a shovel.

COOPER: The island was a volcanic island, and had volcanic cinder – it wasn't sand. And you'd try to dig a hole, a fox hole, it was like digging a hole in a wheat bin. You know, it caved in on you, you couldn't get any depth. There was no cover, and they just threw mortars in and of course, on Suribachi they were looking right down at us.

REEKES: I was scheduled to go ashore on the third day. And so, I was kinda taking it easy, watching it from the ship. There came a guy running down the landing deck of the LST hollering, "Reekes, get your gear! You're going ashore!" And that was like, something, afternoon on the first day. Fighting was so severe at that time, they called for everything else that they could get ashore at that moment.

SMITH: They couldn't get ashore. Every time they'd start going ashore they'd just mow them down. And you can't believe how many dead Marines were on the sand and floating in the water.

REEKES: It was like another world. And when you hit the beach, you became a part of that world. Like I say, it might be a blessing that you don't remember everything.

## **KAMIKAZES**

HEFFNER: We were under almost constant Japanese air attack, and this is where the Kamikaze first became a known factor as far as we were concerned. And they would normally come in in the latter part of an afternoon, as dusk was approaching. There was no defense, really. Once these things, from a distance, aimed at your ship with a wide open throttle, with the Japanese pilot absolutely looking forward to committing suicide and would simultaneously destroy the enemy, it was tough.

TYSON: We also shot the twin engine bomber that crossed our bow trying to hit the Enterprise aircraft carrier, and that was his mistake going across the bow, because four five inch guns can bear on you right away. Two twin and two quad 40 mm. We hit him, and there was not a solid piece coming down. It was all floating.

## TAKING THE ISLAND

COOPER: Of course, the only thing that made it possible for us to take Iwo successfully was the flame-throwing tanks. The way we worked on that, the flame-throwing, when we finally put them in, they lay down napalm right in front of us, and we'd move right up 15 or 20 yards and dig in. Then he'd do another one. So that napalm made it possible for us to take that island.

WEISSLER: So the famous icon of raising the flag at Iwo Jima happened right there at Suribachi...

THOMAS: We did salvage, or try to make salvage ships out of pulling stuff off the beach. The whole beach was littered with wreckage of small LCVP, jeeps, tanks, you name it.

REEKES: The beach, the whole area, was covered with body parts. One of the most vivid things that I remember of the last days on the island, we came across an area that looked like it had been raked clean, but there was one hand reaching up out of the sand like it was grasping for life.

HEFFNER: As history shows, the Japanese just fought viciously as well as vigorously so that our ultimate taking over Iwo lasted weeks longer than had been anticipated. And of course there were far, far more losses, both within the ship range as well as, by all means, the personnel and Marines that were dead. It was terrible.

*Out of 21,000 Japanese soldiers, 216 surrendered.*

*The battle lasted 25 days. 6,821 Americans were killed and over 20,000 were wounded.*

COOPER: So if you ever meet a Second Lieutenant who was on Iwo, you can just say he's a lucky son-of-a-gun. That's about the size of it, because not many of them got off there.

BILLINGSLEY: About 6,000 Marines were killed, about 18,000 wounded so they had a pretty good toll. From then on, once we took Iwo, those P-51's could escort the B-29's to Japan and back out again. I think it was roughly like 10 guys on a B-29, and I think about 2,500 of them made emergency landings at Iwo Jima, so they credit it down with saving about 25,000 lives of Air Corps pilots, I mean crew, that would otherwise have landed in the Pacific ocean.

*More than one fourth of all Medals of Honor awarded in World War II were awarded on Iwo Jima.*

COOPER: You know, say you see these movies of John Wayne, *Sands of Iwo Jima* and all that gung-ho, that's a lot of **malarkey**. To me the definition of courage is when you're scared to death and yet you continue to do what you're supposed to do. I mean that's courage.

*"Among the Americans serving on Iwo Jima Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."*

*-Admiral Chester A. Nimitz*

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