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A wave of 4thMarDiv Marines hit the beach on D-day at Iwo Jima as another boatload of battle-tested veterans is disgorged on the beach by an invasion craft.

From the *Leatherneck Archives*: May 1945

D-Day on Iwo Jima

By SP3 Bryce Walton, USCG

It was another D-day; another H-hour. For many of the 23rd Regiment of 4th Marine Division—veterans of Saipan and Tinian—it seemed the same old story. To many of them, it was the first one.

The 23rd was to hit Yellow Beaches 1 and 2, the central beachhead position along the 2 ½ miles of landing beach. They were to advance straight up the slope to seize the first airstrip, advance on to cut the island in two, and circle to the right into the northern bulge, the main defensive part of the island.

It was all figured out—on paper.

To Lieutenant Paul F. Cook, commander of Company A, 133 Seabees attached to the 23rd Regiment, the shore looked okay.

It didn't look bad as their LCVT dipped in on a rough sea toward the blackish colored line. It was H-hour plus 30 minutes. It didn't seem logical that the beach would be tough. It had been strafed, rocketed, bombed from the air, and shelled from battlewagons and cruisers taking more bombardment with more explosives for its area than any other island to date.

The Japanese didn't believe in logic.

Just in front of the high square prow of the LCVT and to either side high fountains of water sprayed upward. The boat's coxswain, Seaman First Class Caisey Kidd from Wheelwright, Ky., smiled reassuringly. "It's all right," he yelled. "It's our own shells moving in ahead of us to

keep the Japanese dazed and glassy-eyed."

Caisey Kidd was wrong.

They realized suddenly that the outlines along the beach were wrecked Navy and Coast Guard landing craft. One Seabee said he saw a bunch of the advance assault waves of the 23rd up the slope running like hell.

Two beach parties, each of 45 men and one officer, one under Lieutenant Commander Loomis and the other under LCDR Baldwin, had tried to move in early to set up their regular beach party direction system for landing men and supplies. The wrecked boats were evidence of their disaster. Both beach parties were put out of action with heavy casualties. The ad-

Much of the mechanized equipment, which was absolutely essential to a successful drive into Iwo, was put out of action the first day. For a while it seemed impossible to get needed supplies on the beach. (USCG photo)

vance wave of Seabees under LT Cook had to operate completely on its own without direction. The men would have to set up their own combined shore and beach party.

They would have to use their own judgment as to how to land and where on the treacherous beach through the unpredictable gyrations of a freak surf.

The shore party headquarters personnel of Company A with LT Cook consisted of Carpenter's Mate Third Class M.C. Gille, from Detroit, Mich.; Carpenter's Mate H.H. Olson, from Los Angeles, Calif.; Electrician's Mate First Class H.T. Ashworth, from Westport, Conn.; and EM1 A.E. Powell, Portland, Ore. Of this staff, only LT Cook was still on the job at the end of D-day plus one. All the others were evacuated casualties. The Japanese had made a direct mortar hit on their dugout.

The fire on the beach was murderous. It came from both flanks—from the heights of Mount Suribachi on the left, a lone high volcanic crater on the extreme left tip of the island being assaulted by the 5th Division and from the high area forming the bulk of the island to the right—a deadly territory of pillboxes, gun emplacements, machine guns, mortars, mines, snipers, all manned by Imperial Japanese troops with orders to fight to the last man.

From both these areas, from right and left, the invasion beachhead was one maelstrom of explosion which even the astute 24 hours a day duty of the air liaison section could not control this early in the



operation. Japanese emplacements were reported to the section commander who sent word to Heckler and Black Cat observation planes flying constantly over the island to spot these places and report them to naval guns or attack themselves. But this early in the operation only a small percentage of the positions had been spotted and not many of them knocked out.

From all sections of Iwo, the beachhead was under fire. Snipers hid in wrecked landing craft and picked off men, particularly one sniper who played hell from a demolished Japanese lugger on the right flank of Yellow Beach 1. Finally, on D+1, some Marines went in and got him. Machine-gun emplacements above the beach on the terraces and in sandstone pillboxes at the base of the airfield kept a chattering death raining down on the area.

The Pioneers, Seabees and Marines of the 23rd were trying to get stuff ashore. Tanks were groping to find a road inland but in the shifting sand, there weren't any roads.

The air was filled with shrapnel from exploding mortar and artillery shells and land mines. Many dying and wounded men were lying on the smoking sand.

Through this hell the Pioneers, Seabees and Marines of the 23rd were trying to get stuff ashore. Tanks were groping to find a road inland but in the shifting sand, there



Under fire from Japanese machine guns and mortars, Marines of the first waves dig in on Iwo's volcanic ash beach. Equipment was shelled and put out of commission almost as fast as it was landed.



On D+1 at 9 a.m., Feb. 20, 1945 Marines push forward battling both the Japanese and the terrain.

weren't any roads. Other tanks struggled over terraces one and two, and even up to three, only to be blasted by mortars. A few did set up and over the crumbling sand hills. Ensign R.H. Ross of Hartford, Conn., saw one tank blown up 50 yards away as he was struggling with a 37 mm, trying to drag it through the sand.

"It was trying to edge over the first terrace toward the airstrip," he said that night. "It was hit by a mortar that blew off its right tread. Marines began trying to get out of the turret. Another mortar lit right in the turret. The tank spread apart a little. All the Marines were killed."

It seemed impossible to get all the supplies and equipment ashore that was necessary to keep the advancing assault troops going. The Seabees hugged the sand. Many of them hadn't been able to get more than 10 yards inland. Men were falling with a certain horrible steadiness. Mortar craters appeared everywhere, all the time.

It was proving the worst beachhead operation in the long chain of such amphibious campaigns stretching across the Pacific. The Seabees, primarily a construction battalion to reinforce behind assault waves of the 23rd and get roads up from the beach over which to run in supplies and ammo, found themselves dug in behind rifles and 37 mms. They suffered casualties and deaths equal to

any front-line outfit to come under the devastating fire.

The staff beach parties had been evacuated because of their high casualties and all direction for landing seemed lost. The advancing front line troops were moving forward slowly and were almost to the airstrip.

Much of this mechanized equipment, absolutely necessary to a successful drive into Iwo, was put out of action the first day.

But everything seemed against getting in the supplies to keep them going. There was the volcanic sand—ash like quicksand that resisted any attempt to build roads or land vehicles; the unique variation of high and low tides, and a terrific undertow that breached landing craft, turning them sideways to the beach and pounding them to kindling.

The heavier landing craft, LSMs and LCIs and even Coast Guard-manned LSTs, were edging in to get more tanks and equipment ashore. But as soon as cranes, bulldozers, trucks and cats staggered off into the thick sand, mortars tore

into them and shrapnel cut into delicate motorized parts. Much of this mechanized equipment, absolutely necessary to a successful drive into Iwo, was put out of action the first day. Chief L.A. Bean of Portland, Ore., later wounded by the sniper in the Japanese lugger, received high praise from the company for his efforts in getting equipment ashore from an LSM. He tried to keep on working despite a bullet through his shoulder.

Almost all the cranes, bulldozers and trucks were back in operation the second day, due to the ingenuity of Seabee mechanics who swapped parts and sweated all night under fire.

Meanwhile, the wounded and dying were being brought down to the beach—but no further. Inability to get landing craft in made evacuation of casualties another trial. Landing craft continued to crack up on the beach.

Another story should be written about the Navy corpsmen who tried to save lives on Yellow Beaches 1 and 2. But no one ever could be graphic enough to cover what 12 corpsmen did under heartbreaking and impossible circumstances.

It wasn't long before only one medical corpsman remained on the job giving emergency treatment to the injured mounting on the beach. He was Pharmacist Mate 3 Richard Dreyfuss. Casualties had to be given more than just preliminary treatment because of the impossibility, at the moment, of evacuating them to the LST hospital ships off shore.

Dreyfuss did a job that those who saw him and those whose lives he saved can never forget. Trying to do the work of the 12 corpsmen, or possibly the work of three times as many, he crawled, dodged, and staggered up and down the beach through enemy fire from one shell hole to another, from one line of wounded to another, everywhere he thought he was needed. Without regard for his own life, Dreyfuss faced almost impossible odds. He moved inland later with his regiment.

Deserving equal credit is H.J. Kelsch of Roseland, Mass., who followed Dreyfuss, keeping him covered as best he could with a Browning Automatic Rifle.

Meanwhile, the first day of the amphibious assault on Iwo passed. Captain Jack Palmer, shore party commander of the Pioneers, was wounded and replaced by LT Jack Carver. They dug in for the night. Late that night a mortar fell into the dug-out of LT Cook and Co A headquarters staff. All were shell-shocked or wounded.

Companies B and C of the Seabees had moved in during this time. That helped some when orders came that ammunition had to be got up to the front lines. There still were no trucks ashore, or if there



Smashed by Japanese mortar and shellfire and trapped by Iwo's treacherous black ash sands, amtracs and other vehicles of war lay knocked out on the volcanic fortress. (Photo by PhoM3c Robert M. Warren, USN)

were a few vehicles working, there were no roads. The ammo would have to be carried by hand.

The sky was lighted by starshells. There still was no let-up in the murderous Japanese shelling of the beachheads. Casualties continued to mount steadily.

LT Cook was disabled temporarily, nerves shattered from the dugout disaster. "I don't know what the riflemen up at the front, or any of us, would have done without Chief Douglas Davis," LT Cook kept repeating the next day. The lieutenant's command was assumed by Davis, and it was his untiring efforts that got the ammo up through the network of enemy fire to the front lines.

"Front lines," mused Chief Davis. "There weren't any damn front lines. This whole island is a front line. You get it anywhere."

They got enough ammo up there to tide them over until the next day, struggling through the bottomless mush of sand with the backbreaking shells. They stumbled

over 500-pound aerial bombs buried by the Japanese in the sand as mines.

One man staggered beneath a load, his neck wrapped in a big swath of blood-stained bandage. He had been working all day under constant fire unloading an LSM. The Japanese sniper hidden in the lugger had got him across the neck. Despite his wound he carried on all night. The man was Seaman Richard D. Fries, from Sioux City, Iowa.

And so it went; D-day, D+1, D+2, D+3, D+4, D+5. The firing never stopped. Those who didn't get it directly by a shell got their nerves pounded steadily. Shock casualties were high. On D+1 the situation was relieved somewhat and a semblance of working order was set up and supplies began arriving in greater quantity. A naval and Coast Guard beach party command under supervision of beach masters and the regular shore party command under Marine guidance began operating. Although this was done on all the beachheads along the entire length of

the area, this account is limited to Yellow Beaches 1 and 2 where the 4th Division's 23rd regiment landed. These beaches bore the brunt of supply problems coming in to the central beachhead.

Lieutenant Commander G.A. Hebert from Culver City, Calif., a veteran of the First World War, came in as beach master on the left flank of Yellow 1 to work with Lt Carl C. Gabel who served as commander of the Marine shore party for the 23rd, although Lt Gabel's regular job was regimental quartermaster.

As far as enemy fire and odds were concerned, D+1 was worse than D-day. There seemed to be more intense mortar fire, and there was much more mechanized equipment and personnel to hit. But worst of all was the weather. The day was stormy and the surf ran high. The beaches proved a trap for the smaller landing craft. Wrecked Higgins boats, LCVPs and other landing craft littered the beach.

Herbert and Gabel worked together under these colossal odds and the most

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important unit in amphibious operations—the beach master, beach party—team was thrown into action. They worked together five days and nights with little or no sleep.

On the right flank of Yellow Beach 1 LT Crosby of the Coast Guard-manned assault transport, Bayfield, set up a beach party command, only to suffer casualties and be broken up.

Hebert and Gabel were the vortex of the ship-to-shore-to-interior setup on the beach. Everything that should have been done the first day had to be done now, and fast.

Hebert, as beach master, had the responsibility of bringing in boats to the beach, handling them on the beach, keeping it clear of wrecked craft, and maintaining salvage parties. He was also responsible for evacuation of all wounded from the beach seaward, building traffic roads along the beach, and rebuilding the shoreline when it became disfigured by the surf.

It was Hebert's opinion that the beachheads at Iwo Jima were the toughest any beach or shore party he ever headed had to tackle. Bulldozer watches were established to keep roads open, but it was just a case of pushing a track through the bottomless mush of bogging sand over and over again.

Lt Gabel's job began where Hebert's left off. To Gabel went the job, mainly, of getting the supplies from the beach inland, getting inland casualties to the beach, directing some 2,000 Seabees and maintaining their lines of communication and supply.

From their beach party-shore party headquarters set up as one unit about 30 yards off the shoreline, these two worked together as an example of the cooperation that was necessary to take the island. Perhaps the most useful and colorful parts of this setup were the public address systems employed by each man. They could be heard a quarter of a mile away. They amplified the voices of Hebert and Gabel, which soon had become hardly more than



hoarse whispers, to voices of thunderous dimensions.

These systems blared out at anything in sight needing direction. The phone was handled by each of the party commanders from a high vantage point just off the shoreline.

The foul weather kept up on D+1. Waves ran high and disastrous on D+1 and D+2. As fast as salvage or shore parties cleared them away, other craft were wrecked in the rush to get supplies and mechanized equipment ashore.

From the line of departure a few thousand yards off shore, the various boat waves came into the beachheads with personnel and supplies. They were told where to go in toward the beach by the control boats. The control boats received combination orders from both ships at sea and the beach commander and shore party commanders.

As these countless boats came into the beach, the loudspeakers bellowed out orders. Without expert direction the thick traffic would have piled up and bottle-



A view along Yellow Beach during the initial days of the Battle of Iwo Jima.

mortar and sniper fire, and a few other un-analogous features. Amphibious tractors moved from land to beach. Huge amphibious tanks moved inland. Trucks, jeeps, and more amphibious tractors clanked down the gaping runways of Coast Guard-manned LSTs. Bulldozers pushed a wrecked landing craft to one side, then pulled a truck from a hole that had been washed out, causing the vehicle to bog down before the LST's ramp.

Amphibious tractors had colorful names such as Reef Rock Katy and Coral Gertie. A jeep jumped out and got stuck in the sand, sinking up to its engine. It was lettered Dung Ho. It also was pulled out fast by a bulldozer under the blasting of the loudspeakers.

"We need a crane," said Gabel over the speaker. A head out in the surf looked through the rain with a startled expression.

"Get one of those LSMs coming in."

"You. Wave in the LCVP."

Then, and all the time, came shivering, thumping explosions. Men were running, scattering, frantic for cover. There would be a cloud of dirt, spray and pieces of a tractor going 50 feet into the air. The whine of sniper fire rang along the beach and inland toward the airstrip. Among the Coast Guard-manned LSTs along the shore, fountains of spray would go up. Other landing craft would be hit. Mortar fire went on.


Seabees ... everyone ran for cover. It was hell to keep on working out there under fire. But it was work that had to be done. Everybody was scared. They wanted to crawl, burrow, wriggle down into the earth. It took iron will not to do that.

But the loudspeaker, inspired by either Hebert or Gable never stopped. It went right on through storm, fire and hell. They both stood out in the open talking into their phones.

"Comfortable lying out there, isn't it, boys?" said Hebert.

"Yeah," continued Gabel roughly. "They're getting that all the time up in the front lines ... About every five minutes, or maybe five every minute. They get machine-gun fire up there, too, and artillery."

Everyone soon was back on the job. So were the Japanese mortars.

It wasn't so much how this ship-to-shore, shore-to-ship system worked out under the gigantic handicaps. It was a miracle that it worked at all. But the real miracles were made by men who didn't seem to know the meaning of failure. They were made by the 23rd Regiment of the 4thMarDiv and the Navy salvage and beach parties at Iwo. 

necked or gone into the wrong beach. There was a definite beach for every boat to hit. Often it was vital that the correct beach be hit.

"LVT. LVT. Are you empty?"

A signalman waved yes.

"Stay right where you are. Stand by to evacuate casualties."

The LVT stood by. It waited for the signalman ashore, standing at the beach commander's elbow, to wave him into the beach. The LCVT got the signal and churned in to the beach. The loudspeaker

blared again, making Lt Gabel's whisper thunder.

"Report down here. Right down here to evacuate casualties."

Lt Hebert: "All right there, get on the ball. Wave the LCM off! We can't take any more small boats on this beach at this time. Is that LST unloaded yet?"

"Number 728, have you got rockets on you?"

The beach area was more crowded than 42nd Street at Broadway or Sunset and Vine in Hollywood, except for the constant

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