



The Long Blue Line: 75 years ago —the Coast Guard lands on bloody Iwo

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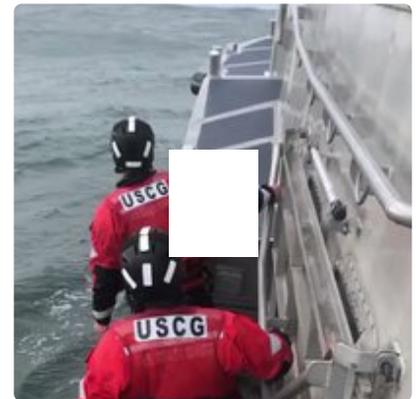


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Here's a look at how we help people out of the water during heavy weather. 🌊

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From the crest of Mount Suribachi, the Stars and Stripes wave in triumph over Iwo Jima after U.S. Marines had fought their way inch by inch up its steep lava-encrusted slopes. Ca. February 1945. PhoM3c. John Papsun.

(Coast Guard)

Dr. Robert M. Browning, Historian, U.S. Coast Guard retired

The American flag was raised on top of Mt. Suribachi. Many a life was lost trying to get to the top of that mountain.

-Diary of Carpenters Mate 3rd class Leno DiRosario, LST-795, February 23, 1945

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In the quote above, CM3 Leno DiRosario recounted in the pages of his diary the famous flag raising on Iwo Jima's Mt. Suribachi. At 10:00 a.m. on Friday, February 22, 1945, DiRosario's Landing ship tank-795 beached on the Japanese-held island. It was D-Day plus four of the invasion, but it was the first day of the first invasion for the new Coast Guard-manned LST.

The Allies had set Tuesday, February 19th, as D-Day for the invasion of Iwo Jima. The assault forces arrived off the southeast side of the island to land men on seven beaches stretching only 3,500 yards. Included in this armada were the Coast Guard-manned transports Bayfield and Callaway, 14 LSTs and Patrol Craft-469.



Profile photograph of LST-795 in April 1945 at Okinawa. The 795 was one of 14 Coast Guard-manned LSTs that landed troops and equipment at Iwo Jima. (Navsource.org)

By early 1945, with most of the Philippines secured, the Allies began looking to the final assault on the Japanese islands. Along the route lay Iwo Jima, a volcanic island over four miles long and two miles wide. Allied planners believed the capture of Iwo Jima would ease later air operations because it could serve as a landing area for crippled bombers

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returning from missions over Japan. Furthermore, U.S. fighters could fly from Iwo Jima providing cover for the bombers' roundtrip to the targets and back.

Nine hundred vessels sailed in task groups of the Navy's Fifth Fleet supporting the invasion. These ships carried expeditionary forces of more than 70,000 Marines, nearly 4,000 men in the naval landing force, and more than 36,000 garrison troops. This force of over 110,000 men was set to attack the island's Japanese garrison of 21,000 defenders. Unlike many of the Pacific atolls already captured by the Allies, Iwo Jima had no surrounding reefs, so planners believed the landings would be easy.



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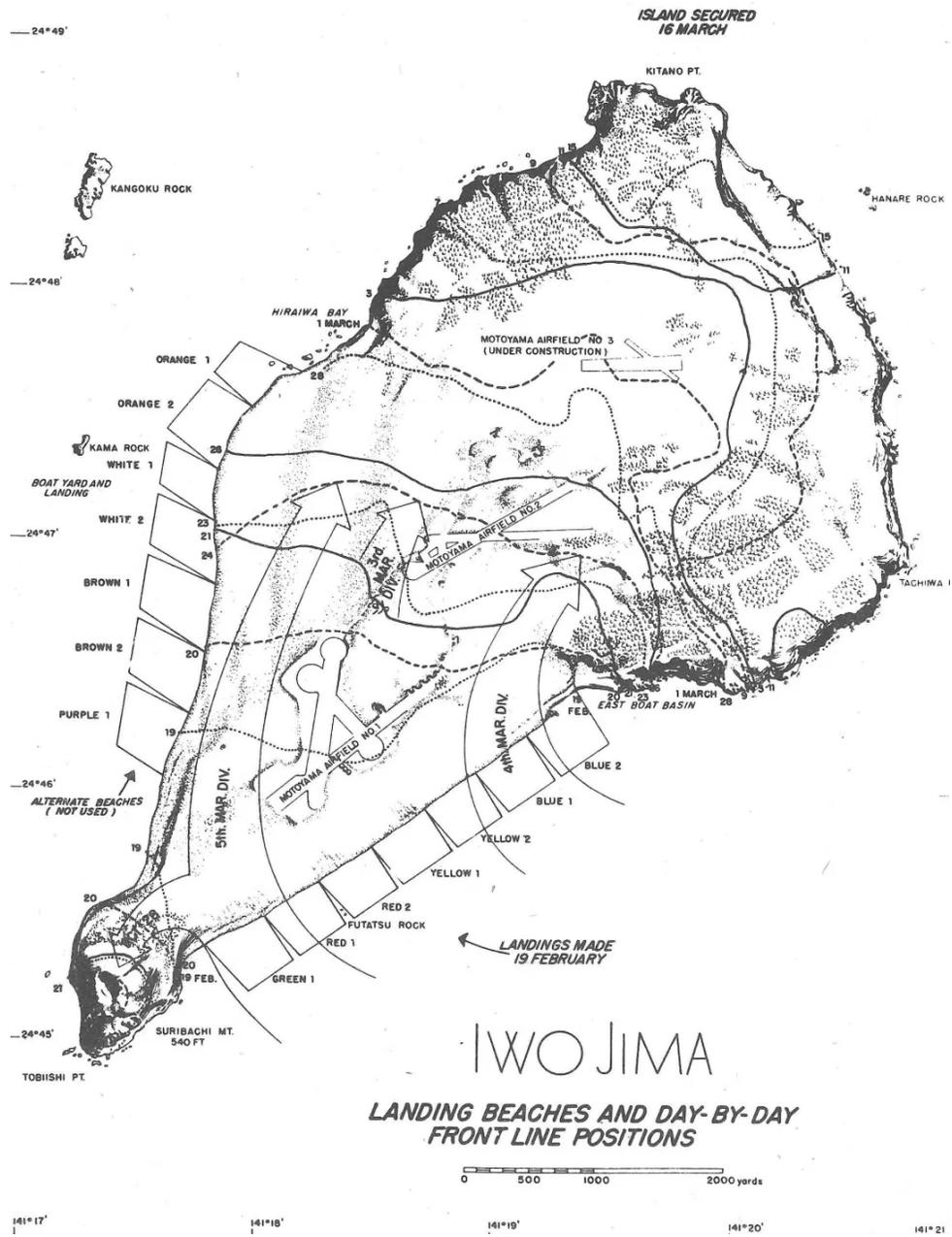
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Photo taken by CM3 DiRosario showing LSTs unloading cargo and famed Mt. Suribachi rising from the fog of war in the background. (courtesy Jack DiRosario)

On February 19th, Allied amphibious forces arrived off Iwo Jima before daylight and began debarking troops into various forms of landing craft for the assault. The first five assault waves landed at 9:00 a.m. The anticipated good beach conditions never materialized. With no reef to protect the surf zone, heavy ocean seas broke directly on shore, broaching landing craft and carrying them sideways onto the beaches. In no time, the landing zone became littered with watercraft.

During the first days of the landings, the beaches became a choke point for troops and equipment. Successive waves of landing craft had difficulty getting to the beach and likewise became damaged and beached. Coast Guard coxswains found it necessary to back their craft into the wind and current to keep from grounding hard onto the beach. As the wreckage piled up, the landing beaches had to be closed to smaller landing craft until tugs and other craft could pull them off.



Official illustration of Iwo Jima showing the landing beaches on the southeast side of the island. (Coast Guard at War)

Ordinarily, beachmasters, salvage parties and cargo handlers kept landing beaches clear, but enemy mortar fire focused on the shoreline kept these men from remaining there for long. Not only were Japanese guns focused on the 3,500 yards of landing beaches, the volcanic beach sand slowed foot traffic to a crawl. Troops that had landed on the beach were killed in large numbers. The official Coast Guard history characterized the scene as follows: *“To run, even to crawl, in the soft gravelly volcanic sand was like trying to move through foot-deep mud.”*

However, by nightfall on D-Day, Allied landing vessels had put ashore 30,000 troops or 10,000 more men than the number of enemy defenders.



Carpenter's Mate 3/c Leno DiRosario in his dress blue uniform. (courtesy Jack DiRosario)



Photo taken by CM3 DiRosario on February 22, 1945, showing the debarking of its cargo on the beaches of Iwo Jima. (courtesy Jack DiRosario)

For CM3 DiRosario, the experience seared images into his memory that he would never forget. Forbidden by official regulations, he used a small camera to capture dramatic black and white images of Iwo Jima.

Regarding LST-795's D-Day plus four landing, he recounted in this diary: *"At that time, we lost our First Lieutenant Graff, who was shot in the left thigh by a sniper. We retracted off the beach at two-thirty, leaving two men behind on the beach. Three men lost in our first invasion."*

Coast Guard LSTs did more than merely land men, equipment and supplies. Landing ships like LST-795 secured their bow to the beach for days at a time providing succor to troops on the front lines. *Coast Guard at War*, the official Service history of World War II, captured eyewitness accounts of Coast Guardsmen on board these large floating aid stations. One LST crew member recounted, *"The coffee-ground black dirt of Iwo island is on the decks of this LST tonight. It was tramped in by thousands of rain-drenched, unshaven, dog-tired, U.S. Marines."*

Another LST man wrote, *"The battle for Iwo is only a few hundred yards away. The ship lies in the brightness of star shells overhead. Beneath her bow, explosive flashes come from a marine artillery position. A*

short time ago a man was hit there by sniper fire. Occasionally, the rifles of sentries aboard ship crack. They are looking for Japanese swimmers.” Another recalled, *“Tired men are lying in bunks vacated by Coast Guardsmen. The wounded are here too. They lie under blankets in every available place, on mess tables, in the crew’s quarters and in the wardroom, tended by the ship’s doctor.”* Another Coast Guardsman wrote, *“Aboard, the Chief Commissary Steward said at last count he had fed ‘at least three thousand men. But they’re still coming.’ They’re still coming out the blackness and grit and the fighting.”*



Wreckage and war material abandoned
on the landing beaches of Iwo Jima.
(U.S. Coast Guard)



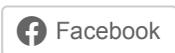
Troops, equipment and supplies landed
on the beach by Coast Guard LSTs to
support combat operations on Iwo Jima.
(U.S. Coast Guard)

On March 4th, well before the end of hostilities, the first crippled bomber made a forced landing on Iwo Jima, proving the strategic importance of the island. Not long after that, U.S. fighter aircraft took up station at the newly-occupied airbase to provide protection to the bombers flying to and from their targets in Japan. On March 16th, D-Day plus 25 and nearly a month after the initial landing, organized resistance on Iwo Jima finally ended.

The Battle of Iwo Jima was supported by thousands of Coast Guard officers and men serving in transports, on board landing craft and on the beaches. Over the course of the one-month battle, U.S. forces suffered nearly 5,000 killed and 16,000 wounded while enemy dead numbered over 21,000 or virtually the entire Japanese garrison force. In his final entry for Iwo Jima, CM3 DiRosario wrote: *“Left Iwo Jima. We were the second ship to unload and leave the beach on the 22nd. A job well done and our first.”*

Iwo Jima is yet another chapter in the 230-year long combat history of the long blue line.

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