

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima

BILL D. ROSS

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Iowa-born Bill D. Ross (1921–1994) was a journalist who became a US Marine Corps combat correspondent in World War II, later writing two books on campaigns for islands in the Pacific. This selection is taken from “The Men of Suribachi and Two Flags,” a chapter in his 1985 book, Iwo Jima: Legacy of Valor. Ross went ashore with the Marines at Iwo Jima with a rifle and a typewriter.

At 9:00 am on February 19, 1944, the first of eventually 30,000 Marines landed on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima, beginning what would become one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. By the end of the 35-day engagement, over 26,000 Americans had been killed or wounded, while the Japanese dead numbered 22,000. Four days after the initial invasion, on February 23, Marines climbed to the top of Mount Suribachi on the southern tip of the island, from which the rest of the island could be seen. Here they raised an American flag, and, during the second flag-raising, Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal captured the moment in his iconic photograph, which was later transformed into a sculpture for the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Virginia.¹

What did the planting of the flag mean to the Marines at Iwo Jima? Why would they have run the risk of replacing the smaller flag with the larger? What was the meaning of the picture of the planting of the flag for those back home? What does it mean for us today? Why is this image so moving?

D-plus three was George Washington’s Birthday, a national holiday back home, but on Iwo few men remembered or cared. Overnight, the weather had turned miserable. A torrential cold rain soaked men to the skin, and jelled with the coarse volcanic ash to clog and jam weapons.

Meteorologists at Makalapa had warned about the weather at Iwo this time of the year. Their studies found that major storms often buffeted the island, that the skies were

¹ To view Rosenthal’s picture, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WW2_Iwo_Jima_flag_raising.jpg; for a video of the historic flag-raising, captured by Marine Corps photographer Bill Genaust, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Raising_the_Flag_on_Iwo_Jima_\(color\).ogg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Raising_the_Flag_on_Iwo_Jima_(color).ogg).

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clear only twenty percent of the time, that forty-five percent of the days were cloudy, twenty-seven percent partly cloudy, and nine percent rainy. Now the heavy rain was driven by a twenty-knot gale that whipped up a pounding nine-foot surf. At 10:20 a.m., the beaches were closed again; it was useless to try to land reinforcements and supplies. Angry clouds hung below five hundred feet and hid Suribachi's crest.

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But a battle can't wait for weather. At eight o'clock, despite the wind and the rain, the attack against Suribachi started again.

Tanks couldn't move in the hub-deep slush; artillery didn't fire because targets couldn't be spotted; there was no air support or naval shelling. So it was another dirty job for the infantry. They shivered under the driving rain and moved out against the dreadful terrain and the desperate, determined foe estimated by "Harry the Horse" Liversedge's intelligence officers to number six hundred still alive.²

Drenched Marines assaulted foxhole after foxhole, pillbox after pillbox, bunker after bunker with rifle fire, grenades, flamethrowers, and demolitions. It was slow and dangerous work, but they made steady progress. An eleven-man patrol worked partway up the steep, rocky slopes searching for a route to the summit; naval gunfire and air strikes had wiped out existing trails.

While [Colonel Chandler] Johnson's men cleared out opposition around the eastern side of the volcano and battled up the slippery sides, [Lieutenant Colonel Charles E.] Shepard's battalion bolstered the line in the center. [Lieutenant Colonel Jackson] Butterfield's outfit still slugged around the western side, bent on final encirclement of the fortress.

At 6:30 p.m., the push was halted for the day. Opposition had been heavy, but it had come in wild flurries, not in the sustained fighting that had marked previous days. In some ways the weather helped the Marines, exhausted from three days of bloody battle. With the near-zero visibility and curtains of rain, Japanese artillery and mortar fire were sharply reduced, not only around Suribachi, but across the entire island.

And it was now becoming apparent that the assault had taken its toll on the defenders and cut deeply into their ability to hold the mountain much longer.

² Brigadier General Harry Bluett Liversedge (1894–1951), a US Marine who commanded the 28th Marine Regiment during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

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Night was relatively quiet on the lines. No infiltrators. No savage firefights. The weather improved, and once again the beachhead was operational. Men, equipment, and supplies came ashore. Casualties were evacuated.

Offshore, aboard the *Auburn*, where General [Holland] Smith now had his headquarters, losses were tallied. They were far worse than he expected, and, like President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, he shuddered. In three days they amounted to 4,574 men killed and wounded. In the push to take the airstrip, and in the fighting for the high ground around the quarry, the Fourth Division had lost 2,517 on the beaches. The Fifth Division, on Green Beach and in the push to conquer Suribachi, had lost 2,057.

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Chandler Johnson was busy long before dawn of D-plus four, briefing his company commanders on the day's plan of action. He was determined that Marines would be atop the volcano by sundown, and was trying to figure out the best way to get there. Shortly after daybreak he ordered out the first patrols. At eight o'clock, he sent a runner for First Lieutenant Harold Schrier, who had taken command of Wells's platoon during the night.

He pointed out to Schrier a possible route up the slopes. His orders were simple: "Take the platoon up the hill, and put this on top."

Johnson handed him a small flag—it measured fifty-four by twenty-eight inches—that First Lieutenant George G. Wells, the battalion adjutant, had brought ashore in a map case from the transport *Missoula*. Wells knew it would be wanted when the summit was taken.

Scouts from D and F Companies already were on the steep sides looking for a path to the crest and feeling out resistance. Sergeant Sherman B. Watson and three privates were surprised at how easy the ascent was going—once out of the sliding rocks near the base the footing was good. George Mercer, who came from a small Iowa town, was amazed at the quiet. Louis Charlo, an Indian from Montana's sheep country, glanced over his shoulder at the spectacular view. Theodore White, a Kansas wheat farmer, expected that "all hell would break loose at any minute." So far they had met no resistance, and within forty minutes they were on the crest, peering into the cone. Still no Japanese, but they spotted several machine guns with neat stacks of ammunition nearby. It was 9:40 a.m. They scampered and slid down the slope to make their report.

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Lieutenant Schrier, a lanky twenty-four-year-old veteran of a disbanded Marine Raider Battalion, was ready to move out with his men. They had stocked up with ammunition, replenished supplies of hand grenades and demolition charges, and flamethrowers were full of fuel. A radioman and two stretcher teams joined the forty-man patrol. So did Louis R. Lowery, a twenty-five-year-old staff sergeant photographer for *Leatherneck*, the official Marines Corps magazine.

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They left in single file, moving at a fast clip until the climbing became steeper. They passed a Marine howitzer with two men sprawled across the weapon—it had taken a direct hit from artillery—as well as several dead Japanese, one of whom wore bright orange sneakers. As the slope steepened, the men stopped every few minutes for breath. Flankers went out to guard the column. At times when climbing became difficult, the ascent was on hands and knees. Several threatening cave entrances were passed, but there was no fire; nor were any live Japanese seen.

Marines below watched in astonishment. Offshore, men tracked the snake-like column through binoculars. One sailor on a transport said: “Those guys should be getting flight pay.”

Schrier crested the summit first and called a halt. In thirty minutes the patrol had climbed half-a-thousand feet up what had been a death-dealing mountain for four days. Not a shot had been fired, not a man hurt. He peered into the crater, saw the unmanned machine guns, several destroyed rocket launchers, a number of mortar pits, and five artillery pieces. “Where the hell are the Nips?” he muttered aloud, and signaled the rest of the men to follow.

Harold Snyder, the sergeant who was “looking forward to this fight,” was next over the lip. Harold Keller, the careful corporal from Brooklyn, Iowa, followed. Right behind was “Chick” Robeson, the platoon’s teen-age “baby”; then came the scholar corporal, Robert Leader. They felt they were in the eye of a hurricane: it was all too quiet—an eerie, frightening, almost deathly stillness. One man urinated into the cone. “This is what I think of you sonsabitches,” he said.

Sergeant [Ernest] Thomas and about half the patrol, weapons primed for firing, stood silhouetted on the skyline atop the rim. Others probed down the crater’s sides looking for Japanese. Several men scouted for something on which to raise the flag.

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Keller saw the first enemy. “The Nip started to climb out of a deep hole with his back to me,” he said in telling of the action. “I fired three times from the hip and he dropped out of sight.” The rifle fire triggered an immediate torrent of grenades from several camouflaged cave mouths, and the Marines answered with bullets and grenades of their own in a short-lived scrimmage that ended as quickly as it had begun.

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While the melee was at its height, two men—Leader and Private First Class Leo J. Rozek—had found a seven-foot length of iron pipe from a rainwater cistern, and they attached the flag to it. No one in the patrol bothered to check the time, but thousands of men below, and aboard the ships of the offshore armada, knew to the minute when it happened.

It was 10:31 a.m., February 23, 1945. An instant in history.

“There goes the flag!” shouted the Marines at the base of Suribachi.

Those on the beaches, who were aware of what was happening and could see it, cheered the sight with their own shouts of jubilation. Ships’ radios crackled with news of the momentous event and flashed it to those in the fleet who couldn’t see it. General [Tadamichi] Kuribayashi, if he saw Marines atop the mountain, must have known the end for Suribachi’s defenders was at hand—something the Japanese on the volcano already knew.

Lou Lowery focused his Rollecord camera to capture the historic moment: the raising of the first flag on Iwo Jima. Robeson, crouching at the cameraman’s side, refused to be in the picture; he “didn’t want to be a Hollywood Marine.” As the flag blew almost horizontal to the rocky ground, four members of the platoon were photographed: Schrier, Thomas, [Corporal Charles W.] Lindberg, and Private First Class James R. Nicel, a replacement who had joined the outfit that morning.

As Lowery clicked the shutter, a Japanese leaped from a cave and opened fire on him and Robeson. He missed. Robeson didn’t; his BAR³ cut the enemy down in midstride. The body was grasped by its feet and dragged into the cave. An officer sprang from the entrance, snarling and swinging a broken sword in a giant half arc. Howard Snyder squeezed the trigger of his Colt .45. It misfired and the sergeant ducked for his life. A

³ *Browning Automatic Rifle.*

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rifle burst from Private First Class Clarence B. Garrett stopped the one-man charge. But this was just the start.

Grenades came like hailstones from several caves. Marines sprayed the mouths with rifles and grenades, then flamethrowers moved in to burn the openings, and demolition blasts closed many almost as soon as they were flamed.

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Lowery leaped to escape a grenade's explosion, and rolled and skidded fifty feet down the steepest slope. He was unhurt, and the camera, with its precious roll of film, was undamaged. His photo coverage of the campaign became an historical treasure in Marines Corps archives. After the war he stayed with *Leatherneck*, first as a six-striper sergeant and then as its civilian photographer director, until his retirement in 1982.

The frantic mini-battle was over in minutes. Within half an hour, Suribachi's commanding summit was serving the Marines as it had the Japanese—as an observation post. High-powered binoculars and electronic detection devices were in place, spotting enemy artillery whenever it fired anywhere on the island.

Lieutenant Schrier was puzzled as the platoon scouted the crater and nearby slopes for enemy positions. He wondered why the brief, sharp counterattack—the last organized resistance on Suribachi—hadn't come the instant the Marines moved over the crest. "We'd have been real dead ducks," he said. "They could've killed us all."

That afternoon, Sergeant Thomas and ten men inspected the cave from which the last attack had come. It burrowed nearly a hundred yards into the mountain; in it they found more than 150 dead Japanese. Most died by holding hand grenades to their stomachs and pulling the pins. Demolitions men blew the entrance to kill the overpowering stench and to give the enemy an unmarked mass grave.

Among the litter of documents the Marines found in the crater was one indicating that, the night before, about one hundred troops had left in the darkness in an attempt to sneak through Marine lines and join General Kuribayashi's main forces in the north. Only a handful made it, and they probably died in the fighting for the second airstrip.

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Colonel [Kanehiko] Atsuchi's⁴ body was never found, nor were those of any of the other Japanese officers who most certainly were killed on the mountain with nearly two thousand of their men.

Several men on the beaches and near Suribachi's base, and at least one man aboard the hospital ship *Samaritan*, were more interested than most in the capture of the volcano's summit.

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One was Chandler Johnson, watching from his CP [command post]. "Some sonuvabitch is going to want that flag," he told his adjutant, "but he's not going to get it. That's our flag. Better find another one and get it up there and bring ours back." A runner, a lipping corporal called "Wabbit," was sent scampering to the beach to see what he could find.

Fate had placed two others on Green Beach when the flag was raised. One was General Smith, and the other was the Secretary of the Navy.

"Holland, this means a Marine Corps for another five hundred years," [Secretary of the Navy James Vincent] Forrestal told the Old Warrior as they watched what was happening. "Howlin' Mad" nodded, his eyes filled with tears. Neither knew in advance that the final push to the summit was underway. Forrestal was on the beachhead because, over strenuous objections from Admiral [Richmond K.] Turner, he wanted to be there.

General Smith was there to be close to his Marines, and to be with the Navy's top man if anything happened; he didn't want to be safely aboard ship if Forrestal was hit by enemy fire. The beach was far from quiet: twenty-three Marines had been killed within the hour a few yards from where the brass stood. With them were two admirals, two of Forrestal's aides, and several reporters.

Forrestal wore khakis and a gray sweatshirt to break the cold, blustery wind. Both had steel helmets, were unarmed, and Smith wore a zippered combat jacket over fatigues. He chomped his omnipresent unlighted cigar and was "proud as hell to be wearing my Marine dungarees."

⁴ *The Japanese commanding officer of Mount Suribachi.*

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Platoon Leader Wells was aboard the *Samaritan* and raising seven kinds of hell to get ashore despite his wounds. “By God,” he ranted, “they’re my men, I’m sure of it, and I want to be with them and dammit, I’m going to be.” An understanding doctor gave him a first-aid pack of sulfa and morphine, and the lieutenant hitched a ride on a press boat headed for shore to pick up correspondents’ news copy. He limped to the start of the path up Suribachi and found Chick Robeson and Private Robert E. Goode about to go to the top again. With arms around one another’s shoulders, the trio labored up the steep slope to join the valiant platoon.

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Colonel Johnson professed to be livid when he heard Wells was back on the mountain. He wasn’t. “I was proud as hell of that young fighter,” he told a newsman, and Wells kept his platoon to finish the mop-up of the crater.

Private Charles S. Rodgers also had more than a casual interest in the flag-raising. He was nineteen, one of Johnson’s men, and had been seriously wounded by mortars on D-Day. From his cot on the deck of the hospital ship *Solace* he could barely see the flag and wanted to lift himself for a better view. He couldn’t make it, but he tried; his eyes misted and he was proud of the lump in his throat.

Joe Rosenthal was sorry he missed being with the platoon, but that’s the way things often turn out. The thirty-three-year-old Associated Press photographer had been in the business a long time and knew, as he put it, “you win some, you lose some.”

He’d been in the Pacific for a year, and had landed with the Marines at Guam and Peleliu, where he’d made a name for himself as a man who could make good pictures under fire. Before shipping out from AP’s San Francisco bureau, he’d tried to enlist but none of the services would take him because of myopia so severe that he wore thick glasses, and had two extra sets with his photographic gear. He carried 150 pounds on a five-foot-five-inch frame and had a small mustache. Some friends said he resembled a French chef.

Rosenthal landed early D-Day afternoon on the Fourth Division’s beaches and had made dozens of pictures of the fighting since then. He returned at sunset each day to the *Eldorado* to write captions and see that his negatives were aboard the courier flying boat to Guam, and to eat and sleep.

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When he came ashore the morning of February 23, he trudged through the sand and up the terrace to Colonel Liversedge's command post. "Harry the Horse" told him Schrier's platoon already was on the summit, but Rosenthal decided to go up anyway; maybe he could get a panoramic shot of the island, or find something else worth shooting.

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Two Marine photographers had the same idea, Sergeant William Genaust and Private Robert Campbell. Genaust was a motion picture cameraman with several rolls of sixteen-millimeter color film. Campbell had a Speed Graphic for black-and-white stills. The trio was about to begin the climb when "Wabbit" returned.

He was out of breath, but he had located another flag on LST 779⁵ on the beachhead. It took several minutes to tell Ensign Alan S. Wood why he wanted it; with his excited, lispng speech he had trouble making himself understood. When Wood was able to decipher the Marine's mission, he gave him the ship's rarely used ceremonial flag. It was twice the size of the original, measuring eight feet by four feet, eight inches.

"Must be rough up there," the ensign said, as "Wabbit" nodded "yes" and took off in a dead run. He didn't want to catch hell from the colonel for being gone too long. Johnson immediately sent a man to the summit with the new flag, and he was there with several of the original flag-raisers when the trio of photographers arrived, huffing and puffing.

The new flag was immediately lashed to a longer length of pipe, and six Marines were having trouble shoving the staff into the rubble. The photographers watched for a moment and then scurried for positions to shoot the action.

Rosenthal frantically piled rocks to get better elevation to make his picture. He focused, and the Speed Graphic's shutter clicked just as the struggling Marines hoisted the new flag. He had preset the exposure at one four-hundredths of a second at between f/8 and f/11.

Genaust caught the action with his Bell & Howell Filmo, and was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the AP man, shooting the identical and unforgettable scene in color on the few feet of color movie film that remained in his camera. As the second flag was

⁵ *A tank landing ship.*

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raised, the first was simultaneously lowered. Campbell snapped his shutter at that instant, his photo showing both flags.

Rosenthal made two more pictures; one showing three Marines grasping the pipe after the large flag was raised; the other a group shot of the jubilant platoon with the Stars and Stripes snapping in the wind. He went down off the volcano and continued working until late afternoon, when he hitched a ride to the *Eldorado* for his nightly chores.

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In his captions covering the day's shooting, the one for the flag-raising said: "Atop 550-foot Suribachi Yama, the volcano at the southwest tip of Iwo Jima, Marines of the Second Battalion, 28th Regiment, Fifth Marine Division, hoist the Stars and Stripes, signaling the capture of this key position."

When the press pouch arrived at Guam, and Rosenthal's negatives were processed, darkroom technicians knew immediately that the Suribachi photo was something very special. It didn't fit the pattern of a conventional news picture; the face of only one man was clearly visible, the rest were either hidden by hands and arms raising the flag, or their heads were turned.

But it was a masterpiece of instantaneous composition and lighting that captured the mood of the unfolding drama on Iwo Jima. Its stage-like setting and the powerful position of the men gave it the graven look of a posed statue; so much so, in fact, that cynics and critics of the Marine Corps later suggested the photo was staged.

Anyone on the island, friend or foe, could plainly see the second flag. It touched off new waves of cheers on the beaches, where unshaven and weary shore parties thumped one another on the back and shouted. Those on the front, their ranks already decimated by the hundreds, felt the battle was at last making some headway.

Whistles, horns, and bells rang out aboard the ships surrounding the island. The next day, when the photo appeared on front pages of virtually every newspaper in the States, it became an instant symbol for millions on the homefront—an indelible portrait of patriotism and determination.

It took days to track down the names of Rosenthal's flag-raisers, a frantic quest touched off by a clamor at home to identify the men. They were, from left to right, Private First Class Ira H. Hayes, a Pima Indian from Arizona; Private First Class Franklin

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R. Sousley, a Kentucky mountaineer; Sergeant Michael Strank, from central Pennsylvania's coal country; Pharmacist's Mate Second Class John Bradley, from the farmlands of Wisconsin; Private First Class Rene A. Gagnon, of French-Canadian descent, from New Hampshire's Green Mountains; and Corporal Harlon Block, from the southernmost tip of Texas.

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Sousley, Strank, and Block were killed before ever learning of their fame. Bradley was wounded and evacuated; only Hayes and Gagnon left the island physically unhurt, but both would die as alcoholics—a situation, friends said, brought on by their inability to cope with fame the two felt was undeserved.

Rosenthal became an overnight celebrity of sorts, albeit a confused one. When the Associated Press headquarters radioed congratulations on “the war's most memorable photo,” he didn't know which one they were talking about; he'd made dozens of shots since D-Day. The picture won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize and was the official symbol of the Seventh War Bond Drive, when \$220,000,000 in bonds were sold. It was later reproduced on a postage stamp and re-created in minute detail in the world's largest bronze statue, at the foot of Arlington National Cemetery, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

Bill Genaust never saw what he shot; he was killed a few days later making more footage of Marines in battle. But millions saw his film within days in movie theaters across the nation. Decades later it was being viewed by other millions almost daily in television documentaries. That Genaust was never given credit for the footage, and that he died still filming the action at Iwo, were sore spots with those who knew him. Lowery's and Campbell's pictures received scant attention, but they and Rosenthal remained friends.

And what of the forty men of the Third Platoon who first scaled Suribachi's summit? Four made it to the end of the battle; the others were killed or wounded before the island was conquered.

Suribachi's conquest cost the 28th Regiment 510 men in four days of fighting. Since D-Day, its total casualties—including those killed or wounded on the beaches before the assault on the volcano began—were 895, nearly thirty percent—and the battle for the island had just begun. The regiment stayed on and around Suribachi for another week,

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cleaning out die-hard Japanese, reorganizing and taking on new men, and refitting before swinging north.

Years later an official Marines Corps monograph summed up the capture of the fortress. “The Japanese had conducted an effective defense,” it said. “Making maximum use of their artillery, mortars, and automatic weapons, they did not waste themselves in costly all-out counterattacks. Forcing the Marines to come to them, the enemy inflicted heavy casualties before being blasted or burned out of their fortifications.”

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Men who had been on the mountain thought the forty-seven words weren’t enough to tell the story.