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Iwo Jima: Legacy of Valor

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WWI proved useless, or in error. This challenge of sorting out the relevant from the passé, the still viable from the OBE, is facilitated by a firm grasp of what the specific item's history is. Mr. Potter's *Bull Halsey* provides such history, and a classic sea yarn to boot!

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Ross, Bill D. *Iwo Jima: Legacy of Valor*.
New York: Vanguard Press, 1985.
359pp. \$22.50

In this extraordinary history of the battle that was to become a Marine Corps legend, B.D. Ross tells the story of Iwo Jima in a manner that is both gripping and exhausting. The reader lives each danger-filled moment on that island where "uncommon valor was a common virtue," with almost disbelief at the intrepidity and endurance, both mental and physical, graphically described by a man who, as a Marine sergeant combat correspondent, was there.

This is not a book for the timid. Few of us, even those in the ships close aboard Iwo (or other island invasions), had any idea how savage an amphibious assault could be. After reading Ross' account, a former Marine colleague of mine who went ashore at Iwo on D-day, commented that he had of course known it was rough but until he read this account he didn't fully appreciate just how bad it had been for many units. In reading the day-by-day, almost hour-

by-hour account, some may temporarily be depressed by the tragic, ever-building "body count"—to use a term popularized in a different war. The cumulative effect of all these stories, that too often end sickeningly in death and a posthumous Medal of Honor, is to reraise the question that demands attention after each military engagement—could the same ends have been accomplished with less loss of life; was there an easier way? No definitive answer is provided, though we understand the urgency of taking Iwo to protect the B-20 routes to Tokyo and as a staging base for the final push to the Japanese mainland.

Ross also highlighted the controversy that raged before, during and after the battle on the adequacy of naval ship bombardment and carrier airstrike support. This question does not have an easy answer either. In an amphibious assault the need for ship and airborne firepower is indisputable, but how much is needed and at what point is it time to stop waiting for more are open arguments. At Iwo there were bitter recriminations between Marine generals and the Navy high command over the decision to go in with a minimum of preinvasion softening up.

Others still wonder how much good more would have done. I was a gunnery officer in a battleship at Tarawa and remember how surprised we were later that our pre-H-hour D-day bombardment had accomplished so little. Obviously more was needed and more was applied at subsequent beachheads. But at Iwo

the enemy was dug in as he never had been before in networks of tunnels. He was almost completely inaccessible to ship and air bombardment. About the only way to get at the enemy was to seal the entrances to his caves. Marine losses, and the strength of Japanese resistance were both a surprise to the commanders at Iwo and were a matter of great concern back in the States.

An interesting element of the battle Ross brings out is the priority that was assigned to press coverage. At Iwo there were five specially designated landing craft with the word "Press" painted on their sides. Fortunately, there were no TV cameras and there was a clear-cut ideological enemy. At Iwo, as elsewhere in WWII, the media reps had virtually unrestricted freedom to accompany the troops. This point has been brought up recently in connection with restrictions placed on the media at Grenada. An admiral, commenting on this, was quoted, saying: "Yes, but in WWII the press was on our side." Action in Iwo was reported daily by the press corps and on radio. Scores of journalists, writers and photographers moved about the battlefield with the troops, some coming to the same tragic end as so many of the men whose heroics they were reporting.

In evaluating the performance of the Marines on Iwo Jima, it is necessary to keep in mind the concentration of terror under which the operation was conducted. Over 25 thousand Americans became casualties (6,221 of them killed) on an

island, only 3 by 5 miles in area. The exposure to devastating fire and harassment was unrelenting for 36 straight days before the island was secured. Some 27 Medals of Honor (13 posthumously) were won in this bloody battle against 22,000 superbly dug-in and fortified Japanese, only 1,000 of whom survived.

Ross cites *The New York Times* reporter, Drew Middleton, who, in a 1983 interview with Marine Corps Commandant General Paul X. Kelley, summed up his observation, saying: "The Corps is at once a home and a profession. It is set apart from the other fighting services, removed from the people it serves by an almost mystic belief on the part of the Marines that the Corps is unique, that it can do anything."

The only serious criticism this book merits is over the paucity of maps with which to follow the action. I had read quite a way in confusion before locating two crude charts sandwiched into a section of photos between pages 176 and 177. No question, among military and naval historians, this is a common fault. But it should in no way deter one from reading this masterly piece of eyewitness reporting fleshed out and carefully detailed after 40 years of verification and contemplation.

Ross' writing is professional, readable and fast-paced, though there are a few times the reader is not sure he can make it up another hill or ridge with those incredibly courageous and persistent Marine foot soldiers.

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