

## The Two Flags of Iwo Jima

### Marine Corps Museum marks anniversary of battle

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The National Museum of the Marine Corps has placed two famous American flags on display in its World War II exhibition to commemorate the 77th anniversary of the assault on Iwo Jima, which saw some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific campaign.

Frank Pote, a docent at the Triangle museum, was showing visitors last week the small, crisp flag that was flown atop Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi, which rises more than 500 feet above the otherwise flat terrain of the small volcanic island, 750 miles south of mainland Japan.

"This [smaller] flag is historically significant because it was the first American flag to ever fly on Japanese soil," Pote said. He noted that the iconic photograph by the Associated Press' Joe Rosenthal was taken a few hours later, when Marines took the small flag down to hoist the much larger flag in its place, which flew for six weeks.

The two airfields on the island were seen as crucial assets for a possible invasion of the main Japanese islands, Pote explained. More than 2,000 Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, however, had plenty of time to prepare for a possible attack, so the island was heavily fortified with bunkers, hidden artillery and an 11-mile network of tunnels.

The amphibious assault began Feb. 19, 1945, and the outcome was never in doubt, as American fighter planes dominated the skies, and the Japanese soldiers had nowhere to retreat. More than 450 American ships were offshore, preparing to land 60,000 Marines and thousands of Navy Seabees.

#### MOONSCAPE OF AN ISLAND

Woody Williams, the last surviving Iwo Jima Medal of Honor winner, said in an interview for the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project that he had fought to capture Guam in the summer of 1944 before shipping out to Iwo Jima in early 1945. He contrasted the jungles of Guam with the moonscape of Iwo Jima, which had been subjected to continuous shelling from battleships and destroyers.

"Everything had been wiped off that island," Williams said. "About the only protection you could find would be a shell crater or try to dig your own hole."

American tanks tried to open a lane for infantry but encountered a network of reinforced concrete Japanese pillboxes. "The only way to actually eliminate the enemy inside those pillboxes was by flamethrower," Williams said.

Williams received a Medal of Honor for going forward alone to reduce the machine-gun fire from the Japanese. The Army Center of Military History reported that the 22 Medals of Honor – 12 posthumously – awarded to Marines at Iwo Jima represents nearly 30% of Medals of Honor awarded to Marines in all of World War II.

Ivan Hammond, who lives near Houston, was just a teenager then. He is an Iwo Jima Marine who attended the commemoration at the museum last week. Now in his 90s, he was assigned to a Joint Assault Signal Company.

"I called in the air strikes for the P-51 Mustangs," a long-range fighter-bomber deployed by the Army Air Forces, Hammond said. "You had to guide them in, and



Visitors can view both flags raised after the battle of Iwo Jima at the National Museum of the Marine Corps through the end of March. PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA

#### WANT TO GO?

Both flags flown at Iwo Jima will remain on display through the end of March.

- » **Where:** National Museum of the Marine Corps, 18900 Jefferson Davis Hwy, Triangle.
- » **Hours:** Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day except Christmas. Admission is free.

so I did that for six weeks."

Owen Conner, a museum curator, noted that the battle for Iwo Jima was a turning point in the Pacific and one of the worst battles for the Marine Corps, with 6,800 dead and more than 26,000 casualties.

"You had to take on the Japanese and you had to get their islands. It's one of those things where all of them were learning lessons at that point," Conner said. "We certainly learned how tenacious the Japanese are going to be defending their islands. This fierce defense plays into the later history of Okinawa and eventually dropping the atom bombs."

#### EPIC PHOTO ALMOST WASN'T

Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal was heading up Mount Suribachi, and stopped to talk to Marine combat cameraman Lou Lowry, who was on the way down the mountain to replace his broken camera. Lowry teased Rosenthal that the flag had already been raised, referring to the smaller flag, and Rosenthal had missed the moment on the summit.

Once at the summit, as Rosenthal was preparing his camera, someone yelled, "Joe, you're going to miss it, turn around." Six Marines had taken down the small flag and were raising the flagpole with a larger Stars and Stripes flapping in the wind.

Pote said Rosenthal turned around and reflexively snapped a picture, unaware of what he had captured. He took several other photos, including a posed shot of the Marines after they secured the flagpole. The film went back to the United States and was cleared by censors.

After it graced the front pages of many U.S. newspapers, Pote said, that moment captured by Rosenthal



Ivan Hammond, who now lives in Texas, autographs an Iwo Jima book at the National Museum of the Marine Corps on Feb. 17. Hammond, who directed bombing strikes on the island, attended the 77th anniversary reunion at the museum. PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA



The iconic image of the six Marines raising the American flag on Iwo Jima is autographed by photographer Joe Rosenthal. JOE ROSENTHAL | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

came to symbolize the courage and sacrifice of all those who fought for the United States, and it holds a special place in the heart of every Marine.

Those entering the museum see that moment reflected in the architecture of the building, with the tilt of the flagpole mirrored above the entrance.

Gwenn Adams, the museum's public affairs chief, said reunions for Marines and their families elevate the museum to a place of community.

"All the artifacts in the world are great, but to have these Iwo Jima veterans here, and hear their stories and see the connection that they have with young Marines, and to see them sharing their experiences and sharing their ethos of being a Marine means so much," Adams said. "Because it doesn't matter if they served in World War II or if they're serving now, being a Marine is still the same."