

# Two Flags Over Iwo Jima

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

**I**wo Jima's unique historical distinction and legend derive not only from the battle's strategic importance in the Pacific War, characterized by the heroism and the tenacity of the Marine Corps, but also from a single spectacular moment of combat photography. *Two Flags Over Iwo Jima: Solving the Mystery of the U.S. Marine Corps' Proudest Moment*, written by military historian Eric Hammel, posits that "Joe Rosenthal's 'Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima' is, the best-known image of American war history." Hammel delivers a compelling narrative to understand the circumstances behind the two flag-raising on 23 February 1945 and determine the significance of the iconic photograph.

The centerpiece of Hammel's flag-raising "mystery" is not new. In fact, doubts regarding the identities of certain personnel depicted in the iconic photograph arose as early as 1945 and persisted for years. However, in the 1950s the doubts seemed resolved and the names of six flag raisers were, literally, engraved in bronze.

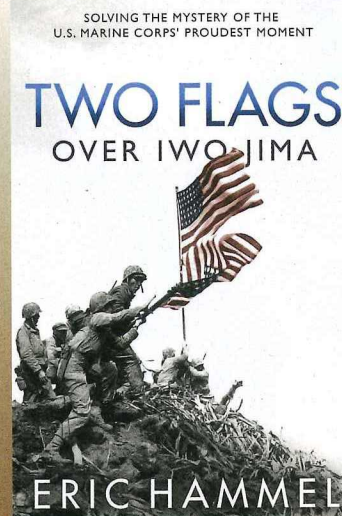
In 2014, two "history buffs" claimed that Pharmacist Mate Second Class John H. Bradley is not in the Rosenthal picture, contradicting what "had been believed for almost 70 years." Their analysis seemed persuasive; consequently, in 2016 Marine Commandant, Gen Robert B. Neller, appointed a panel headed by retired Marine LtGen Jan Huly (Huly Board) "to 'accurately identify and appropriately credit' the flag raisers seen in the Rosenthal photo."

**>Col Chase served as an infantry platoon commander in Vietnam, and retired from the Marine Corps Reserve in 1998 after more than 30 years of active and Reserve service. As a Marine lieutenant, his father, the late MGen Harold W. Chase, was wounded twice on Iwo Jima. The Gazette's annual Chase Essay Writing Contest, which invites "bold and daring" ideas that challenge conventional wisdom, is named in honor of his father.**

(Mary Reinwald, "Examining the Evidence: USMC Reviews Iwo Jima Flag-Raising Photo," *Leatherneck Magazine*, [Quantico, VA: July16]).

Iwo Jima's enduring place in World War II history is grounded firmly in the Rosenthal Pulitzer winning photograph as is the battle itself, which raged for over five more weeks after the two Mount Suribachi flag raisings on D+4. Thus, historians rarely fail to provide expansive coverage of the colors hoisted atop Suribachi, along with the combat story thereafter of a grueling, yard-by-yard conquest. The battle and flag stories were inseparable.

Iwo Jima was the penultimate Pacific island battle. Many campaigns preceded it, but only one came after—Okinawa. Starting with Guadalcanal, 7 August 1942 to 9 February 1943, and ending with Okinawa, 1 April to 22 June 1945, American forces seized and maintained the offensive in the Pacific to secure victories in a myriad of island battles, each conquest moving the



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Allies a step closer to mainland Japan. All commenced with amphibious assaults launched from ships offshore against tenacious Japanese defenders who had prepared their positions from weeks to months. After the dramatic sinking of four Japanese battleships and the downing of 250 Imperial naval aircraft at Midway, 4 to 7 June 1942, America's island march in the Pacific reversed the Japanese successes of late 1941 and early 1942. The island strategy was successful and each battle ended in an American victory. Less than two months after the final island campaign on Okinawa, the Japanese surrendered after atomic bombs leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Pacific Theatre consisted of a relentless island hopping campaign across a vast ocean; however, no single battle has earned more lasting historical recognition and respect than Iwo Jima. Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz immortalized this battle in a single sentence: "Among the Americans serving on Iwo island, uncommon



valor was a common virtue.” This battle was the first time where the Japanese soldiers fought on their own soil and embraced the “bushido” credo which encouraged soldiers to fight to the death rather than surrender dishonorably. However, the Japanese had generally discarded the “banzai” tactics of charging against enemy positions having been slaughtered *en masse* in previous battles. LtGen Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the Japanese commander of Iwo Jima “assigned directly by the Prime Minister, General Hideki Tojo,” strategized instead to impose deadly cost on the invaders with prepared positions, patience, stealth, and targeted ferocity. His forces waited as initial Marine assault waves landed virtually uncontested on the beach.

Kuribayashi brilliantly conserved his units’ battlefield strength. They defended from interlocking caves and reinforced underground sanctuaries, where they weathered days of American prep fires from sea and air, and where they had stockpiled supplies of crew-served weapons, artillery, ammunition, and sustenance. The plan was to emerge opportunistically to inflict as much damage as possible before retreating into the covered refuges. The Japanese on Iwo Jima were tough, resilient, disciplined, well-led combatants.

However, Marines in the Pacific had mastered their amphibious specialty after a series of hard-fought amphibious landings against a determined and entrenched enemy. Amongst the most brutal example of amphibious assaults in the Pacific War was the Battle of Tarawa. In a period of three days starting on 20 November 1943, over four thousand Marines and Sailors became casualties. Among the Japanese, only 17 surrendered and almost 4,700 died. American politicians, military leaders, and the public were astounded by the high casualties and clamored for a more effective way to assault the defended islands in the Pacific.

Amphibious operations project power from the sea, but they inherently begin with all the disadvantages of

attacking forces, storming ashore against prepared defenses. In the Pacific Theater pre-assault prep fires from naval gunnery and saturation bombing proved to be minimally effective against hidden and covered defenders; such was the case on Iwo Jima. The landing craft of the era, including Higgins boats and amphibious tractors, were defenseless and vulnerable as combat troops and their gear rode the waves to beaches. Frequently, the confusion of battle caused landings to occur far from designated zones. The Marines believed that when they waded ashore on Iwo Jima, they would endure an eruption of deadly firepower as they had at Tarawa. However, the enemy’s resistance began only after an uncontested initial landing; with the Marines crowded on the shore the Japanese dealt their resistance with a vengeance.

A barren volcanic island of just eight square miles, Iwo Jima was the only major amphibious assault where the Japanese inflicted a higher number of American casualties (26,000 dead and wounded) than they suffered, although Japanese killed in action (18,000 to 19,000) numbered about three times those of the U.S. (about 6,000). American planners viewed the island as a critical strategic site for warplane launches with fighter escorts against mainland Japan and as a mid-ocean oasis for friendly aircraft returning from Japan. The decision to assault, rather than by-pass, Iwo Jima nevertheless became controversial after the unexpectedly heavy casualty toll.

With the passage of more than 70 years since 1945, one might ask why a distinguished military historian might venture into yet another history of the Battle of Iwo Jima, especially one focused on the flags raised atop Mount Suribachi. As an author of over 50 books on war, including two volumes of “Pictorial Records” of Iwo Jima, Hammel provides a convincing answer in *Two Flags*. Hammel explains why a seemingly simple identification of combatants from a specific time and place turned into a tortuous enigma. Uncovering the truth behind the flag

raisings was a noble and honest, yet elusive, historical aspiration.

Hammel provides insight on the confusion that began on 23 February 1945:

The second flag-raising was so devoid of importance at the time that no one—ever—has been able to place an accurate time on it. Some figured it might have happened between 1400 and 1430; others thought it took place at 1230. But these were guesses made long after detailed memory faded, because the event of the second flag-raising fell beneath notice in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion’s February 23 after-action report entry.

We, who have witnessed this 70-plus-year effort to collect the *correct* names of merely six flag-raisers, all assumed a lot over the ups and downs of those decades. No one took notes; they just fell in as ordered to perform a routine task requiring grunt labor.... It wasn’t until after The Photo gained notoriety and presidential notice graced it that anyone in authority attempted to systematically piece it altogether, and that took place because of newsmen who were looking to promote human-interest stories for their readers. It was only then—weeks after the fact—that *that* job, the *flag* job, was pretty much a long-shot memory exercise from odds and sods who were there *and still alive*—for nearly half of all the men who raised both flags, real or otherwise, were in their graves by the time orders came from on high to identify and locate the second-flag-raisers, then get them safely home to the United States to take part in the latest war-bond drive.

The author credits the detailed forensic findings of the Huly Board in 2016. The panel published two detailed reports on the two flag-raisings which are included verbatim as appendices to *Two Flags*.

The first raising of a small American flag on Mount Suribachi inspired cheers and celebration from Marines below who prematurely thought that conquering the 500-foot summit signaled an easy victory. My father, then-Lieutenant Harold “Hal” Chase, witnessed that early event from the beach and recalled it to me as a seemingly “miraculous” moment. The



Marines' optimism on the fourth day ashore was soon dashed by the daily killing fields as they inched to the north in vicious, close combat.

Within hours of the first raising, the second "flag was considered to be a morale booster," as MGen George A. Roll, CG 5th MarDiv, "request[ed] that a larger flag be flown that could easily be seen by all combat troops." Thus, as the small flag was lowered, six men struggled to plant the larger replacement on a different pole "pulled out of the rubble of a radar station near the volcano's summit."

Rosenthal, an Associated Press photographer, climbed his way to the marginally secure Suribachi summit, on the morning of 23 February, where he snapped a series of pictures. Rosenthal, who "was not especially impressed with what he believed were the mediocre results of his day's exertions," sent his undeveloped film to a ship where it was dispatched via "seaplane to Guam." Once the film was developed, an editor on Guam saw the iconic photo and proclaimed, "Here's one for all times." He cropped the picture to focus "on a solid artistic pyramid of Marines beneath the rising national colors." It ended its journey to New York by radiofax and was available to world press a mere seventeen hours after Rosenthal snapped it.

Hammel poignantly summarizes the moment:

What in the photographer's own mind felt like an ordinary, rather pedestrian shot of little value had turned into *The Photo*, an unsurpassed and unsurpassable masterpiece—immortal, emotional, fervent. The ultimate expression of American patriotism.

By 25 February, the Money Shot appeared on front pages of newspapers throughout the U.S. and around the world. The public sensation was immediate. During a time of national war weariness—three months before Germany's surrender, before Okinawa, and before the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the photograph heartened both the American public and millions more worldwide. To civilians and military

alike, the image projected much more than the denouement of seizing key terrain in yet another island battle. Rather, the artistically and esthetically "perfect," inspirational image exemplified Marines' warfighting prowess, cohesion, courage, and honor.

The Rosenthal photo is alive today in innumerable pictorial reproductions and depicted in a magnificent, multi-story sculpture that comprises most of the Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington Ridge Park.

The colossal bronze monument was dedicated on November 10, 1954, the 179<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States Marine Corps. The human figures are 32 feet tall—four stories.

The monument was endorsed by the Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Louis Denfeld, and CMC, Gen Alexander Archer Vandegrift, authorized by a joint resolution of Congress, but funded privately. Each year, millions of visitors see the Iwo Jima Memorial.

Hammel adopts the findings of the 2016 Huly Board, laying to rest perhaps the last of the flag-raising controversies. The Huly Board concluded that Corpsman John Bradley was *not* one of the flag raisers atop Mount Suribachi depicted in the Rosenthal photograph. Bradley did participate in the earlier Suribachi flag raising the same day, but he was not in Rosenthal's Money Shot. Instead, the Board found that PFC Harold H. Schultz, never previously listed as a flag raiser, was in the position where PFC Franklin Sousley had been misidentified. It was actually Sousley in the position where Bradley was mistakenly identified for 70 years. The memorial statue in Arlington reflects these corrections.

In the 2000 bestseller, *Flags of Our Fathers*, Corpsman Bradley's son, James Bradley, was mistaken in the book's premise that his father was in the Rosenthal photo, an error common in all histories of Iwo Jima prior to the Huly Board. Clint Eastwood's movie of the same name portrayed Bradley in a similar manner. Bradley participated in the war bond drive in

the spring of 1945 and went on to live a long life after Iwo Jima as a supposed flag raiser. He never corrected the error during his long life span of many post-war years, including participation in the 1954 dedication of the statue. Hammel devotes a short section of his book to speculate about Bradley's reticence and silence. He did not talk to anyone, not even with his son James who learned details about his father's war record after Bradley died. It was then that Bradley's son learned about Iwo Jima, the flag, and his Navy Cross for extraordinary courage in rescuing a Marine caught in a "merciless crossfire." Hammel suspects that Bradley's many heroic actions as a battlefield corpsman and the carnage he witnessed caused undiagnosed "war neurosis," now commonly described as post-traumatic stress disorder, which likely silenced and troubled him for almost a half century. Hammel goes even further in his speculation:

It is entirely possible that the order this brave and earnest man received from the lieutenant colonel who interviewed him in Washington in April 1945—keep quiet about the official list of second flag-raisers—was taken too much to heart and never rejected by a mind that never grew healthier. He had been threateningly ordered to do nothing to fix history, and that he did: nothing. Only death lifted the burden of balancing between the truth and the profound anxiety of never-ending duty.

The verdict is clear now; the six servicemen who raised that flag were all Marines. In my *Marine Corps Gazette* article in November 1997, "Iwo's Legacy," I identified "five Marines and a Navy hospital corpsman" as those who had "replaced the small flag with a larger one." It was not so.

*Two Flags* is far more profound than a belated investigatory correction of historical error. Hammel focuses on the courageous actions of the Marines and Navy corpsmen who served on Iwo Jima. The author also incorporates the unusual literary choice throughout his narrative to publish numerous medal citations of his book's actors, including Bradley's Navy Cross. This technique serves as a jarring



reminder of ADM Nimitz' tribute to "uncommon valor." An incredible 27 Medals of Honor were awarded to servicemen for their courage at Iwo Jima: 22 Marines, 5 Navy personnel, 14 awarded posthumously. The flag seemed incidental to the men at the time. Without the photo, the two 23 February flag events may have remained unknown to history.

serious historian has learned the hard way: there is no such thing as settled history, there is still information out there that will confound the orthodoxies of the keepers of history, and almost without a doubt it will be discovered and promulgated by amateur historians who refuse to be bound by such orthodoxies. Inevitably, I wonder where and when the next changes in the Iwo Jima flags story will emerge.

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Three of the six Marines depicted in the Rosenthal picture died on the island. Hammel gives full context to how and why people mis-remembered or chose to mask the details of combat actions and the events that accompany them. Using the Huly Board's analysis, Hammel's painstaking forensic summary compels his observation that conventional history can frequently get "facts" wrong. In her 2016 *Leatherneck* article, Col Reinwald implies that the story may produce yet another chapter, "[w]hile the Huly panel's results may be correct, further forensic analysis is needed."

*Two Flags* is cogent reading on every level. Hammel is a master craftsman who weaves the flag-and-monument narratives into both the battle and the long saga to ascertain the identity of those in the iconic photo. This book offers clarity to understand the significance of this battle and the importance of the iconic image it produced. Furthermore, it addresses the greater historical issue of how the struggle to find precise historical truth can be so elusive.

In the Afterward to *Two Flags*, Hammel ponders the fragility of recorded history and issues this caution to historians and others who rely too readily, and with subjective certainty, on apparent truths:

All of what has transpired with respect to the Iwo Jima flag-raisers over more than seven decades proves what every

Nevertheless, none of the *post hoc* investigation of the Iwo Jima flag-raisings and the battle alters this indelible history lesson: Iwo Jima's Marines, Navy corpsmen, and Sailors should always be revered for what they accomplished so valiantly. The Rosenthal picture and the Arlington Memorial stand as lasting and worthy tributes to them and all American warfighters. Hammel concludes his narrative with the quotation of Col Reinwald's apt final paragraph of her *Leatherneck* article:

Ironically, the significance of Rosenthal's photo and the Marine Corps War Memorial that it inspired is not who raised the flag, but rather who and what they represented. While the desire to correct the historical record is both understandable and necessary, that moment on top of Mount Suribachi more than 70 years ago will still hold a special place in the hearts of Marines and in the history of the Corps regardless of who raised the flag.

USMC



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**DOLLARS**  
WAS LEFT UNUSED  
ON GIFT CARDS

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GIFT CARDS STACK UP!  
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