

BEYOND HEROISM: HOSPITAL CORPSMEN AND THE BATTLE FOR IWO JIMA

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Arthur C. Clayton administers a blood plasma injection to a wounded Leatherneck, Feb 1945.

At 0900 on February 19th, 1945, the first assault waves from the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions hit the beaches of Iwo Jima.[i] Embedded within these units were corpsmen like Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Stanley Dabrowski, of New Britain, Conn., who remembered, the tremendous noise, concussion of small arms fire, explosions of artillery and sounds of shells. "As we were coming into the beach we were under a rolling barrage of 16-inch guns of the battleships. You could just feel those shells going over your head."

The beach was unlike anything U.S. forces encountered in previous campaigns. What was called "sand" was volcanic ash that one corpsman later compared to walking in a "bin of buckwheat." Directly behind the beach the wind and waves shaped this soft terrain into a 15-foot terrace that slowed the progress of vehicles and men into the fight. It was not long before the beaches were clogged with the invading force.

Although the initial landings did not face heavy counterattack, once the beaches were full of men, vehicles and equipment the island's defenders unleashed the full fury of artillery, mortar and rockets. In this chaos, casualties mounted quickly and calls for "Corpsman!" were ever-present.

Hospital Apprentice First Class James Ferkin Twedt was among the first to arrive on Iwo. A veteran of the Navy for just over a year, the 19-year old Iowa native was assigned to the 26th Marines. As Twedt followed the calls for medical assistance an exploding shell amputated his foot and badly mangled the other.

Incredibly, despite these grievous wounds and loss of blood he dragged himself to two wounded Marines and was somehow able to administer first aid and stabilize them before relieved by another corpsman.[ii]



Amidst Iwo Jima's black sand and the wreckage of war, doctors and corpsmen struggle to save wounded marines shortly after the initial landings. Lifesaving plasma flows into two patients while a deceased comrade lies alongside, February 1945.

Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Herman S. Trevor of Hollywood, Calif., arrived on Iwo Jima as a veteran of the bloody Saipan and Tinian campaigns. When his mortar platoon came under heavy fire, Trevor left his sheltered position to attend to four seriously wounded Marines. He was applying a tourniquet to a Marine who had lost his leg when his position came under targeted attack. Trevor remained with the casualties treating hemorrhage and shock before dashing 75 yards under fire to locate a litter team. It was later reported that time and time again Trevor "treated casualties with a cool expertness that inspired all who observed him."

Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Byron A. Dary of Allen's Grove, Wisc., had the unique distinction of being a Silver Star recipient from the Normandy invasion of June 1944. He landed on Iwo Jima as part of USS *Sanborn's* "beach party" assigned to control the movement of personnel and equipment and help oversee the evacuation of casualties. Again and again, Dary left his covered position to salvage medical supplies and equipment scattered across the invasion beaches. When calls for corpsmen rang out, Dary supported the FMF corpsmen in providing emergency medical aid to the wounded before being killed in this mission of mercy.



Evacuation of wounded Marine on the beachhead, February 1945.

Iwo Jima (which translates to “Sulphur Island”) is a pork chop-shaped volcanic island located 750 miles south of Tokyo. On its southern end is Mount Suribachi a dormant volcano rising 550 feet southwest of the beaches where the landings of February 19th, 1945, took place. The northern end of the island is a rocky plateau where the Japanese operated two active airfields and where a third was under construction. Iwo Jima was truly an island fortress heavily fortified by some 23,000 troops equipped with a formidable array of artillery, mortars, rockets, tanks, an extensive system of underground tunnels and an irrepressible need to defend this strategic island at all costs.

The battle for Iwo may have been a suicide mission for the defenders of the island; it certainly was for U.S. forces that arrived in February 1945. There was no strategic advantage for the Marines and no surprise attack. Casualties were immense, and outside of Marine litter bearers, corpsmen suffered the heaviest rate of casualties. As in previous battles, corpsmen of Iwo were targets of snipers, but were also killed and injured while going into harm’s way to treat casualties.

Dabrowski recalled that corpsmen were often singled out because they looked different. “We carried [medical kits] which I didn’t like at all because they marked us as corpsmen. . .because of this, we were told to carry side-arms not as offensive weapons but for self-protection.”

Despite the fact that the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions at Iwo Jima were assigned five percent more corpsmen than was allotted by the Marine Corps Tables of Organization, corpsmen casualties took a heavy toll and it was apparent that this number was insufficient. Corpsmen casualties in six battalions exceeded 50 percent. Hospital Corps casualties among one battalion exceeded 68 percent. In the 36-day battle, 332 Hospital Corpsmen were killed in action or died of their wounds. Another 659 corpsmen were wounded and required evacuation.

Knowing this fact, it is little surprise that Iwo's corpsmen were highly decorated receiving 14 Navy Crosses, 108 Silver Stars and 287 Bronze Stars. And among the 27 Medals of Honor awarded to Iwo veterans (the most of any battle), were four hospital corpsmen—Francis Junior Pierce, George Wahlen, Jack Williams, and John Willis.



PhM1c John Harlan Willis

John Harlan Willis, was a 23-year old corpsman from Columbia, Tenn., serving with the 27th Marines. On February 28th, Willis was sent to an aid station with shrapnel wounds but, disregarding his injuries, soon left to rejoin the fight and attend a wounded Marine. While administering plasma to the Marine, the enemy lobbed eight consecutive grenades into his shell hole. Willis retrieved each and hurled them back towards the enemy before being killed by a ninth grenade. In December 1945, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal bestowed a posthumous Medal of Honor to Willis's young widow, Winifred, and his newborn son. A photograph taken of the event remains a poignant and a powerful reminder of preciousness of life and the pain of loss.



Forrestal bestowing posthumous MoH to family of John Willis, December 1945.



George Wahlen on Nimitz Day, October 1945.

Despite incurring severe wounds George Wahlen of Ogden, Utah, and Francis Junior Pierce of Earlville, Iowa, both survived the battle and were the only living Iwo Jima corpsmen to receive the Medal of Honor. After leaving the Navy in 1945, Wahlen served in the Railway Messenger Service and later the Army. Today, he is the namesake of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.



Francis Pierce getting MoH from Harry Truman on June 25, 1948.

Francis Junior Pierce joined the Grand Rapids Police Department after the war remaining in this role until retiring in the 1980s. In 2003, Hasbro released a commemorative G.I. Joe figure of Pierce. To date, Pierce is the only corpsman ever to be honored with his own action figure.



Cover of Naval Hospital Farragut's Bedside Examiner autographed by John Bradley.

Pharmacist's Mate Second Class John Bradley of Antigo, Wisc., is perhaps the best known corpsman to have served at Iwo Jima. Initially credited as one of the six Suribachi flag raisers in Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, Bradley was later sent on a war bond drive across America with Marines Ira Hayes and René Gagnon. He appeared as himself in the John Wayne film, *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and his story was the subject of the bestselling book, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000) by his son James Bradley and Ron Powers. Although in 2016, a Marine Corps investigative team ruled that Bradley was not in fact part of the second flag raising, Bradley was, however, decorated veteran and a recipient of the Navy Cross for heroism on Suribachi. Suffering significant wounds during the battle, Bradley was medical discharged from the Navy in November 1945.

Today, Rosenthal's photograph of flag raising is emblematic of the Marine Corps and represents the hard fought struggle and tenacity of service. Corpsmen share in this hard fought victory and few ratings have been more impacted by a single battle. Their valor, their dedication to duty, their performance is

undeniable. Seventy five years later Iwo should be remembered as a memorial to the fallen, to their service, but also the shear grit and resilience of those Navy corpsmen who answered the call.

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[i] [i] Medical personnel were embedded with the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Division. The 3rd Marine Division remained in reserve during the invasion. Only the 9th and 21st Marines of 3rd Marine Division landed on Iwo. Medical personnel could also be found serving with “beach parties,” offshore aboard LST(Hs), hospital ships *Solace*, *Samaritan* and *Bountiful*, aboard hospital transport *Pinkney* (APA-2) and auxiliary ship *Ozark* (LSV-2).

[ii] Twedt later died of his wounds.