

Onto the Black Shores of Hell

The Battle for Iwo Jima

by Peter Doornekamp

Onto the Black Shores of Hell: The Battle for Iwo Jima

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Second Edition

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ISBN: 978-9-402-13696-8

To contact the writer, please send an email to:

patdoornekamp@gmail.com

Cover picture:

<http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/photos/images/ww2-156.jpg>

National Archives and Records Administration (80-G-413988)

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National Archives and Records Administration (127-N-110249)

To all World War II servicemen and -women: thank you for your service! I hope this book does you justice.

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Background	4
Map (Iwo Jima)	8
Map (Landing plan)	9
Map (Zones of Action)	10
Map (Progress D-day through D+5)	11
Part I	12
Prelude	13
Growing up	16
Boot camp	19
Continued training	23
Map (Progress of the 5th Marine Division)	29
D-Day	30
D+1	37
D+2	41
D+3	45
D+4	49
D+5 through D+9	54
D+10 through D+12	59
D+13 through D+19	70
D+20 through D+25	86
D+26 through D+34	93

D+35	99
Part II	101
Map (Progress of the 4th Marine Division)	
104	
D-day	105
Onto the high ground	113
Rock-bottom	119
Into reserve	123
Into the Meat Grinder	130
Reorganizing	138
The final days	145
Farewell, Iwo	160
Part III	162
Operation Detachment	165
Map (Progress of the 3rd Marine Division)	171
Landing on Iwo	172
The flag raising	179
The attack on Motoyama Airfield No.2	182
Hills Peter and Oboe	194
Motoyama village	196
Hill 362C	200
Cushman's Pocket	208

My final week	212
References	219
Bibliography	243

Preface

When we were young, my parents and grandparents often took us to war museums. My grandfather, who fought with the Dutch Resistance in Rotterdam, found it important that we knew about the events that took place in the 1940s. Of course, I grasped little of the economic and social aspects of the war. However, the stories of the fighting men spoke to my imagination, and I often reenacted them with toy soldiers or, armed with a branch for a rifle, against imaginary villains in the woods of our holiday home. It wasn't until much later that I started to understand more of the impact the war had had on millions of peoples' lives. As a result of my interest in it, I wrote several projects about the war in secondary school. When I started to play the guitar, my interest and focus shifted and I forgot about the war.

That changed when my grandfather passed away and I realized that with him, a piece of history had gone. It was during the same period of time that I met Roy, who knew a lot about the war (the Western Front in particular) and sparked my interest in the war again. In the following years, I watched more and more documentaries and read even more books on the subject. In 2012 I had to write a graduation thesis, yet I had no clue what subject to choose. At some point, I realized that I knew little about the Pacific War, other than the name Pearl Harbor. In the Netherlands, most people only learn about the war with Germany in some detail, and little to no attention is given

to the Pacific War. I read war diary after war diary, watched documentary after documentary, and spent hours absorbing information on the war in the Pacific Theater of Operations. It was during this quest for information that I came across the name of a tiny island I had never heard of before. It was accompanied by a little picture, showing six United States Marines raising a flag.

Something about this picture and the ferocity of this particular battle gripped me and I knew I wanted to know more about it. Over the next two years, I spent hundreds of hours on the subject. I realized that most of the books I had read so far were either about the battle in general, a number of specific aspects of the battle, or veterans' war diaries. I felt I could contribute to this list by writing another book: one that combined personal experiences with the overall (mostly day-by-day) events that took place during Operation Detachment, as seen through the eyes of members of all three Divisions who fought the battle. The battle for Iwo Jima.

I would like to dedicate this book to my grandfather, Bram de Haan, and everyone who fought in the Second World War. I thank you for your service, dedication, and sacrifice. I hope my writing does justice to your stories. I also hope this book may contribute to broadening the reader's awareness of the war, and any war in general.

Please note that any characters mentioned in this book are completely fictional (apart from Robert Cushman, as an important area on the battlefield was named after him, and Japanese commanders Tadamichi Kuribayashi, Senda, Ikeda, and Takeichi Nishi). Any resemblance to real people, either living or dead, is purely coincidental. Almost all the protagonists' experiences in this novel are based on stories I learned through reading veterans' war diaries or other books, and are not my own. I was only able to piece together the day-by-day events through a number of websites, books, and official documents, which are mentioned in the sources.

I would like to thank my family and friends, who inspired me to finish this book. In particular, I would like to thank my partner, Suzanne, for her incredible patience and commitment to both me and my writing. Special thanks to Mr. Henry Rushlow and Mr. Charles Curley, two Iwo Jima veterans who were as kind as to share their memories of the battle with me.

Background

In the early 1930s, Japan, like many other countries, was in a depression. The answer, according to the Empire, was expansion. However, Japan did not own enough natural resources to maintain itself and was heavily dependent on foreign states. The Empire wanted its own resources, and in 1931 invaded Manchuria, a Chinese province. Slowly but steadily, the Japanese expanded their empire, and by the mid-1930s the economic depression ended. The wish to expand had not, and in 1937 a full-size attack on the rest of China was launched.

Little was done about the situation as the League of Nations lacked the muscle to interfere. Japan was able to overrun the French and Dutch overseas empires in 1940, as these countries were occupied by the German invasion of Europe. In order to stop the Empire's expansion and the threat to American bases in the Philippines, the US placed an embargo on Japan and demanded its retreat from Indo-China and China. The embargo was imposed with the idea that the economic pressure would force Japan to retreat. Rather than retreating, Japan forced its expansion by starting a resource war in the region. It invaded the Marianas, the Caroline, Marshall and Gilbert Islands, Burma, Malaya, Kuril Islands, New Britain, North-West New Guinea, and Malaysia, thereby creating a defensive perimeter around Japan.

The next step for Japan was to invade the Dutch East-Indies and claim its huge oil resources. However, the communication lines between there and the Japanese homeland went through the American dominated Philippines. Japan knew it needed time to get the oil it needed for its expansion. It also knew there was only one real threat in the area: the American Navy. Japan thought that if it could cripple this force, the expansion could be completed before the Americans could recover. It was believed that by this time a negotiated peace could be obtained.

Even as negotiations between the US and Japan were still ongoing, the American Navy in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was attacked on Sunday 7 December 1941 without any formal warning. The Japanese believed that having crippled most of the American fleet in the area, America would not be able to defend their other bases in the Pacific. In order to expand the defensive perimeter around the Japanese Empire, Guam, Wake Island, and the Dutch East-Indies were invaded within the next three months.

Japan's next plan was to invade the island of Midway in order to neutralize Hawaii, from where American soldiers could be shipped to the Pacific Theater. If this plan succeeded it would mean that America would have to conduct the Pacific War from the West Coast, making it very hard to make a comeback. It was believed that if they did somehow manage to stage an attack, the Americans would

wear themselves out in costly frontal assaults against the perimeter, and in the end settle for a negotiated peace.

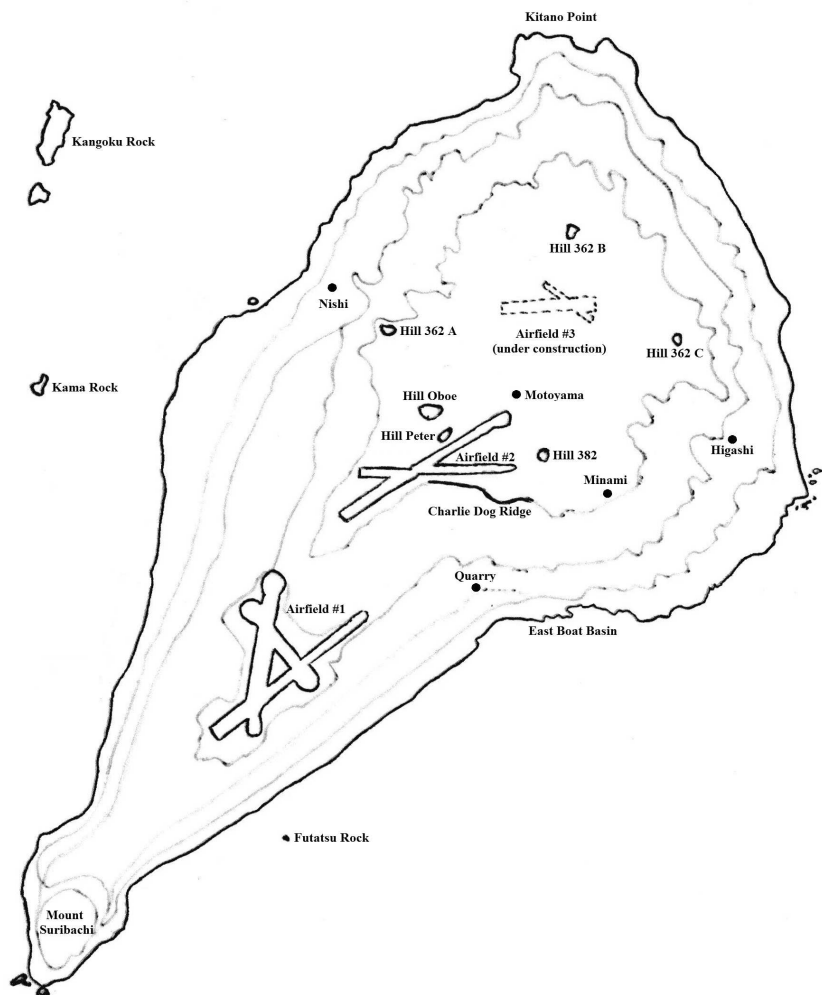
The attack on Midway was planned on 4 June, at the break of dawn. However, American code breakers were able to tell where and when the attack would take place, and what the composition of the Japanese attack force would be. As a result of this knowledge and careful preparation, four Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk, and most of the Japanese's elite fighter pilots were shot down. The Japanese Navy never fully recovered from this blow, for it did not have enough manpower. The US, however, had plenty replacements and after the Battle of Midway, the initiative shifted to the US.

The common belief in those days was that no effective offensive was possible beyond land-based air attacks. For that reason, it cannot be underestimated how important it was for both sides to control islands capable of providing suitable places to build airstrips. Shortly after the Battle of Midway, American Intelligence found out the Japanese were constructing an airstrip in the Salomon Islands. When constructed, this airstrip would threaten communication with Australia and it was imperative that the US Marine Corps would capture the location. Both the potential threat of this airstrip and the victory at Midway lead to the first American offensive of the Pacific War: the Battle of Guadalcanal.^{1,2}

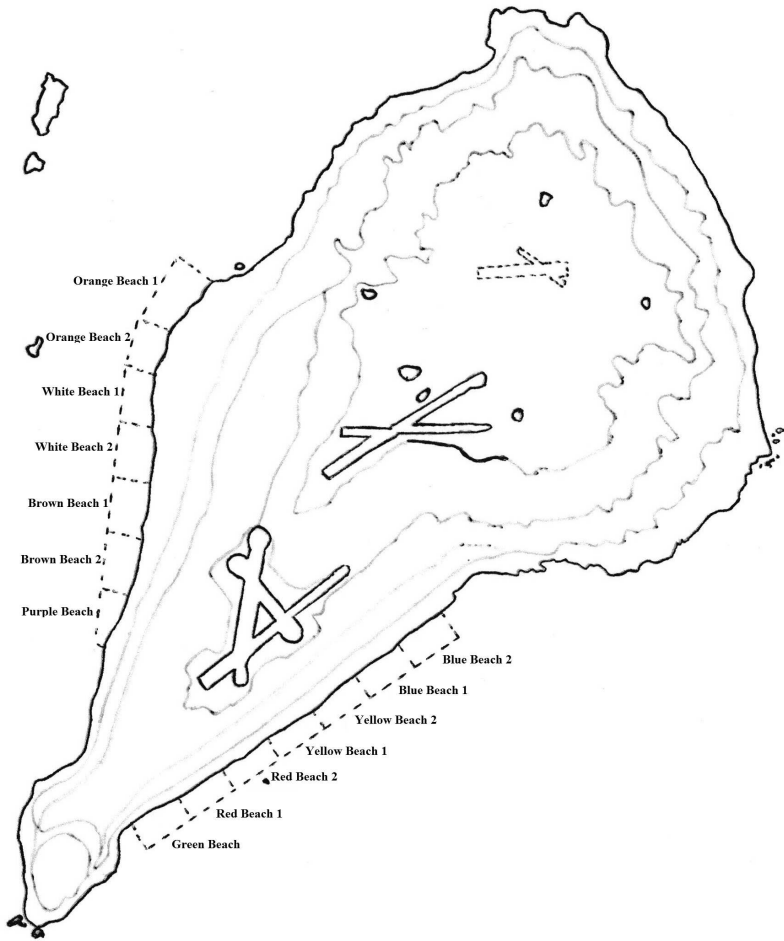
In the following years, a so-called “island hopping” pushed the Japanese back towards Japan proper. All the while, both American and Japanese forces adjusted their tactics. The most strategic difference occurred in 1944 when the Japanese forces gave up on the Banzai charges in which they ran towards American forces and directly into their line of fire en masse. Instead, the Japanese turned to fighting from caves and underground and concealed positions, and by 1945 the tactic had been perfected. In February, American forces reached a tiny island called Iwo Jima. In the penultimate battle to take place before the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese fought from well-camouflaged positions within the island.²

The battle that ensued was estimated to be over within a week. Ultimately, it lasted for 36 days. It was the only battle in the Pacific in which American forces suffered more casualties than the Japanese.

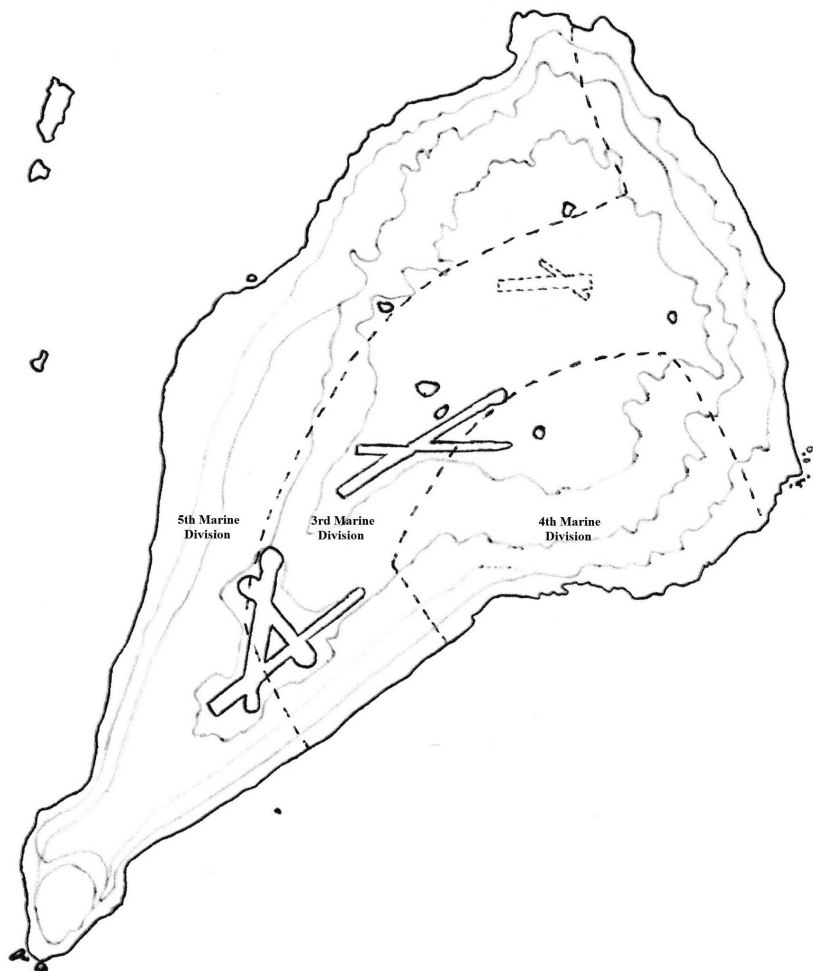
Iwo Jima



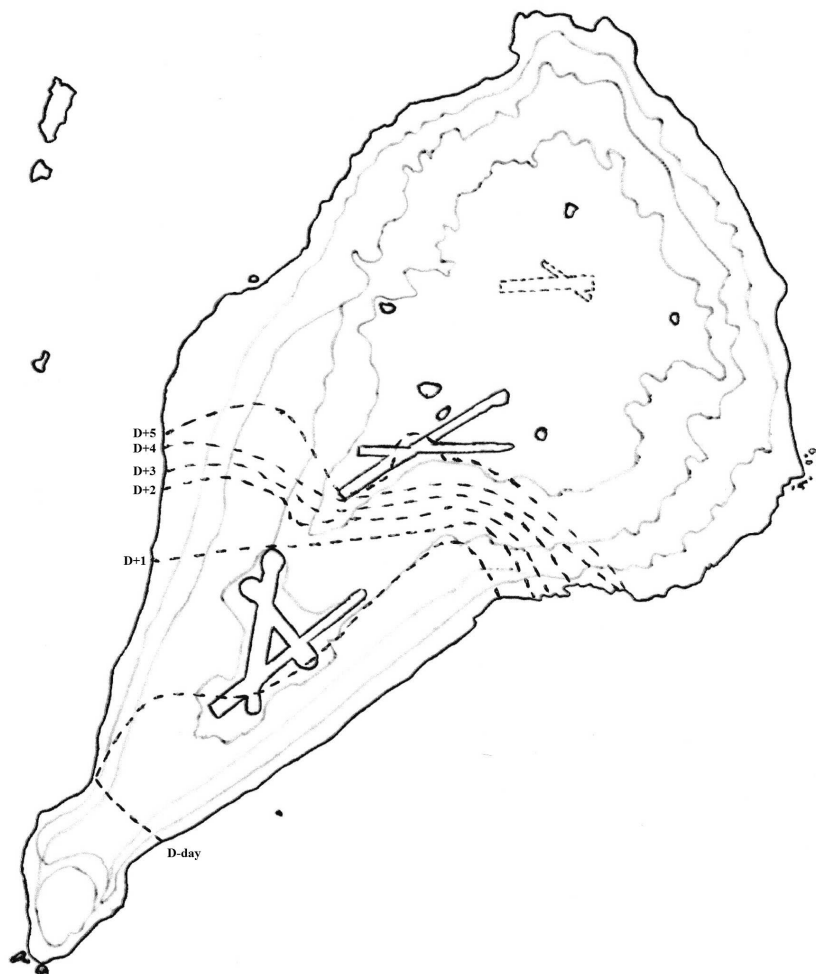
Landing plan



Zones of Action



Progress D-day through D+5



Part I

Prelude

February 19, 1945

I shifted my gaze from my buddies and peered over the edge of the Higgins boat. The ocean around me was filled with vessels of all shapes and sizes, and it looked as if one could easily step from one onto the other without getting his feet wet. If the naval bombardment of the past few days had not discouraged the Japs, the sight of this vast armada surely would. I wondered what it would be like, seeing wave after wave of armed steel coming right at your position.

My daydream ended abruptly when a mortar hit the water to our right, and a wave of water gushed over the side, merging with the puddles of vomit floating around my feet. We were bouncing around like corks, and the sight and sound of my buddies being sick didn't make me feel any better.

Behind us, a battleship fired its 16-inch cannon, and I could see the projectile fly through the air. It flew overhead and sounded like a freight train passing by. It landed somewhere on the island to our front, although I couldn't quite see where exactly. The whole island was shrouded in black smoke, and I was certain nothing in that place could survive. It was the sorriest place I'd ever seen, and I wondered why anyone would want to fight for it.

The island ahead was Iwo Jima, located some 600 miles from the Japanese mainland. Capturing the island would not only provide the United States with an emergency landing strip for crippled B-29s returning from bombing runs over Tokyo, it would also provide a base for fighter escorts, and half the flying distance for future bombing raids. In addition, possession of the island meant that the Japanese Navy would lose a haven in the area and could no longer use the air base to intercept American planes and stage air attacks.

This, however, was not on my mind as I approached the landing beach. Instead, I wondered whether I would remember what I was taught in training, and how I would respond in the heat of battle.

Our landing craft hit the beach, and its ramp dropped on the wet, black sand. I ran to the nearest terrace and jumped into a crater. I looked around, and beside the men from my squad, I recognized no one. I realized we were on the wrong landing beach! A mortar exploded to my left, and I heard someone shout: "Corpsman!". I needed protection! Frantically, I unfolded my shovel and tried to dig deeper into the volcanic sand, but to no avail. As soon as I scooped out one shovelful, twice the amount slid back into the hole. I was knee deep in Iwo's notorious black sand, and moving was nearly impossible.

Sergeant Donahue jumped next to me, hit my helmet and shouted: "Move, move, move!". I scrambled from my cover and ran for the nearest hole while bullets hit the sand around my feet. I jumped

headfirst into the hole and felt the sergeant land on top of me. I turned around and looked right into his dead eyes. I had turned twenty that very morning.

Growing up

I was born to Jack and Marissa Sallenger, in the early hours of a typically rainy day on 19 February 1925. My parents lived in Hoquiam, Washington, close to Aberdeen. My father was a lumberjack for the Schafer Bros. Logging Company, and my mother was a housewife and a wonderful cook; I owe my sweet tooth to her.

My dad, who had fought in the Great War, knew the price of freedom well. He often worked extra hours in order to provide his family with an extra bit of “the good life”, and encouraged me to make a few bucks myself.

One day, I was bringing my father a basket of freshly baked cookies. Sam Reno, one of my father’s colleagues, who apparently had the same taste for sweets as I did, asked me what I was carrying, and I told him I was bringing my father cookies. “Well”, Sam said, “I bet your dad doesn’t know how many he is gonna get. Let me have one, I’ll give you a nickel.” Talking about good deals! I gave Sam a cookie, put his five cents in my pocket, and delivered the rest of the basket to my dad. When I told my father what had happened, he winked at me, and said: “Bet you can pull that one off again”. And sure enough, the next week, Sam Reno was just as interested in fresh cookies. So were other colleagues, and before long I used their money to buy sweets at the local candy store, and sell them to my father’s colleagues at a slightly higher price.

At the age of sixteen, I used this money, along with other savings, to buy a secondhand Ford Model T. It didn't run very well, but at least I had a car! I drove that car a lot, especially since I was charging my friends for gas. The only one who did not have to pay was my best friend, Jay Montes. Jay and I had been friends since our birth and spent most of our free time together. We went fishing and swimming a lot, but if the weather did not allow it we traded baseball cards and played indoors. Jay had a paper round on Saturday, and I often helped him so that we had the afternoon to ourselves.

When the war in Europe started, Jay and I decided we would join the Army as soon as we were old enough. The problem was that we were only fifteen, and we were afraid the war would be over before we had a chance to get to Europe.

One Sunday, I returned home after a nice drive. I didn't have a care in the world, but when I saw my mother's face, my mood quickly changed. "What's wrong, mother?", I asked her. My dad replied: "It's the Japanese, son. They attacked Pearl Harbor this morning." I had never heard of the place and informed where it was. My dad replied: "It's in Hawaii." I suddenly realized what this meant: war! I made my plan there and then: I would join the Marines. I suffered from the same patriotic fever that engulfed the entire country, and I was determined that this iniquitous attack had to be retaliated. I had seen a film about the Marines, and I was determined that if I was going to fight, I would fight with the best. Besides, both my father

and my grandfather had fought in the previous war, and from a young age, I had looked envious at their pictures that stood in our living room. I was convinced I would look just as dashing in a uniform. Jay agreed with me that joining the Marine would even be better than joining the Army.

For the next couple of months, we begged our parents to have us enlisted. Needless to say, our parents were not looking forward to sending their offspring to war. They knew that we would be drafted in due time, anyway, and they finally agreed to us joining the Marines, albeit reluctantly. Some months later, we turned seventeen, and being old enough to enlist, we walked into a Marine recruitment office with our parents' signatures.

A couple of weeks later, my parents came to wave us goodbye at the train station. A rope divided the platform into two halves: one for us, and one for our family and friends. I remember a Petty Officer shouting: "You Navy people have five minutes to say goodbye. Do not cross the rope!" Gee, I wasn't in training yet and people were already shouting at me! I hugged my parents and told them I would be fine. My mother had tears in her eyes. She asked: "Why can't you wait just a little longer?" As the train rolled out of the station, my father was still comforting her.

Boot camp

The boot camp program was designed to teach us the fundamentals of military life. I had looked forward to joining the Marines for months, but it took only one day of boot camp for me to regret my choice. After a quick medical check which involved two painful immunization shots¹, we were sent to the administrative section where we filled out the necessary forms and received our dog tags and service number.² After that, we had the infamous haircut, which cost 25 cents and was deducted from our pay.³ Another \$6.40 per month was deducted for a (not so) optional \$10,000 life insurance.⁴ At the quartermaster's warehouse, we received our sea bags, skivvies (Marine speak for underwear), shirts and trousers, and a bucket, brush, and soap.⁵ The guy who gave us our clothes randomly threw some sets in our direction, so generally, they came in two sizes: too big and too small.⁶ Having clothes that fit took some trading among our group. Although the undergarments had been white in the old days, they were drab olive green by the time I entered boot camp. During the battle of Guadalcanal (Salomon Islands, 1942) it was learned that white underwear attracted a lot of Japanese fire.⁷

Now that we were properly dressed, it was time to meet our DI (drill instructor), Sergeant Kendall. I can't say it was nice to make his acquaintance, but he sure prepared us for battle. His favorite activity seemed to be watching us take apart and reassemble our rifles, blindfolded.⁸ Although I cursed him for it at that time, I would be

really grateful for it months later. Iwo's volcanic sand had the nasty habit of jamming our rifle, and we had to clean them often. During daytime that was one thing, but at night it could be a real hassle. Thanks to Sergeant Kendall, I was able to quickly do the task in the darkness of night, or aided only by the light of falling star shells.

The first weeks of boot camp were filled with indoctrination and basic instruction.⁹ This included things like bayonet training, trench digging training, and watching videos on venereal diseases.¹⁰ We also learned how to read maps, and spent hours wrestling, boxing, and perfecting our hand-to-hand fighting skills.¹¹ We got accustomed to the sound of (live) bullets snapping overhead while crawling under barbed wire on an obstacle course. Small signs reminded you to stay close to the deck (Marine speak for ground). I remember only one of them. It said: Here lies Joe Brown, he did not keep his head down.¹²

Sergeant Kendall was always around to remind us that we were boots, which made less than even the scum of the earth. He saw every mistake we made, even if we didn't make one. One guy gave a wrong answer and had to stand at attention for hours. All the while he was shouting: I am a shit-head!”, and wore a bucket on his head.¹³ The Sergeant was a mean SOB, but he was preparing kids to stay alive in battle, so I guess we couldn't blame him for being blunt. During the war years the number of Marines grew from 66,000 to 485,000, and its ranks were filled with people from all walks of

life.¹⁴ Entering boot camp were teenagers (the average age of the fighting men was 19) from different geographical, cultural, and educational backgrounds¹⁵, and it was the DI's task to shape them up to be Marines. Although I hated his guts, Sergeant Kendall was not even the worst drill instructor around. In post-war years I learned that a small number of boots committed suicide after prolonged DI harassment.¹⁶ I didn't know anyone who did.

A few weeks into boot camp we went to the firing ranch. After hours of snapping-in (Marine speak for learning how to handle your rifle and get into firing positions), we finally got to shoot our rifles. I repeat: rifles! Anyone foolish enough to call his weapon a gun was to walk around with his rifle in one hand, and his other hand on his groin, stating: "This is my rifle, this is my gun. This one's for shooting, this one's for fun."¹⁷ At the range, we could qualify as a marksman, sharpshooter, and expert rifleman. Targets were placed at several distances, and points were given for each area of the target (e.g.: bull's-eye, first ring, second ring). Qualification required 250 points to be a marksman, 280 points to be a sharpshooter, and 305 to be an expert.¹⁸ Missing a target (which was indicated by a red flag or disc) was called shooting "Maggie's Drawers".¹⁹ Shooting "expert" resulted in 5 Dollars extra pay²⁰, which was a lot in those days. I wasn't that fortunate; I shot "sharpshooter".