

On the other side of the planet is an awful speck of an island called Iwo Jima, where 60 years ago thousands fought -- and thousands died -- in a five-week battle between U.S. Marines and Japanese Imperial forces.

Recently I flew to the island for a day. Also on the trip were 65 Iwo Jima veterans, old men returning to a beach where they fought for their lives. I heard their stories, shook their hands, thanked them again and again.

Although I'd never been to Iwo Jima before, it's been a central part of my life. My father, also Cliff Hadley, was a 19-year-old Marine radioman. He was wiry and strong, a tough kid from Southside Chicago, already smoking two packs of Winchesters a day by the time he completed boot camp with his 4th Division buddies at the San Diego Recruit Camp in early 1944. They trained for months more at Oahu in preparation for a landing the following February at a location they knew only as "Island X." They learned how to work as a team, with complete discipline, a dedication to mission, and a sense of deepest pride and honor.

As one Marine put it: "I wasn't afraid of dying. I was more afraid of letting down my fellow Marines."

My landing on Iwo Jima was a chance to retrace the steps of a man who did impossibly brave things long before I was born. I never learned much about his time as a young Marine when he was alive. He rarely talked about the war. That's a common trait. When I'd ask Iwo Jima veterans what they did in the battle, they'd repeat exactly what my father told me as a youngster when I'd beg him to tell me war stories: "Nothing special."

Not true, not true.

Still, these veterans remember best the fallen. The friends who didn't return

Why Iwo Jima mattered. By the end of 1944, World War II was at its endgame.

In Europe, Italy had surrendered and Germany was making its last shot to stop the Allied advance at the Battle of the Bulge. It was only a matter of time before Hitler was toast.

In the Pacific, the Marines' 3rd Division had liberated Guam, the only U.S. civilian population to be taken captive during the war. One by one, Marines took other Japanese-held islands. Tawara. Pelulu. Tinian. Saipan. It was an exhausting effort, with terrible losses, all to capture airfields so our bombers could damage the Japanese homeland.

That's where Iwo Jima comes in. Its 8 square miles of volcanic sand -- its name means Sulphur Island in Japanese -- jut midway between Guam and Tokyo. By taking Iwo's radar and two airstrips, our B-29s could get to Japan unmolested and have safe haven on the way back if they got into trouble.

The Japanese were ready for us. They'd spent a year preparing the island's defenses, positioning hundreds of artillery and machine gun nests, all hidden in miles of tunnels and caves. Their plan

was to let the Marines land, then pin them on the beach with murderous firepower from Mount Suribachi -- an active volcano on one end of the island -- and concrete pillboxes and crossing fire from high points on the rest of the island.

For the 23,000 Japanese soldiers and sailors, this was their Alamo. There would be no reinforcements. They were told by their commander to kill 10 Americans before dying themselves. And they would take no prisoners.

U.S. pilots bombed the little island for 72 days, the longest continuous bombing of the war. An 800-vessel armada arrived in mid-February 1945, then bombed Iwo another three more days. None of it mattered. The Japanese were safe underground.

So the Marines went ashore on Feb. 19, 1945. Each step was laborious. The black volcanic sand swallowed feet up to the ankle, and tanks and jeeps and other vehicles bogged down in their tracks. And the Japanese held all the high ground.

My father landed with the 3rd Battalion, 25th Regiment, on the extreme right, farthest from Mount Suribachi. They expected some of the heaviest fighting early on, and it was so. Hidden guns from rocky heights above the beach pinned down the regiment early, but eventually they advanced. The 25th Regiment's commander, Lt. Col. Justice "Jumping Joe" Chambers, was terribly wounded and would receive the Medal of Honor.

Here is all I know about what my dad did on Iwo Jima, learned mostly from what he'd told my mother and also one night on my last trip home before he died.

n As the huge door of the landing boat opened, my dad's first sight was a dead Marine, baby faced, bobbing in the surf, glasses still on. With 80 pounds of equipment strapped to his back and his M1 rifle in hand, dad jumped over the dead boy.

n A Marine who'd gotten a "Dear John" letter from his best girl lost his senses and ran straight into the line of fire.

n In his foxhole at night, as Japanese infiltrated the lines and there was constant fear of crazed banzai attacks, my father was so scared the only prayer he could remember was: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." He did wake up once with a dead Japanese soldier next to him. Whether the chap had been wounded earlier and stumbled into his foxhole, or shot as the soldier stood over him, my father never knew.

n He gathered for burial the pieces of the pal blown to bits by a mine. Asked years later how he and his buddies, wearied by battle, felt about this, he said, "Jealous."

n On the fifth day of the battle, members of Easy Company in the 28th Regiment, 2nd Battalion, 5th Division, scrambled to the top of Mount Suribachi and planted the American flag. Shortly after, a second, larger flag was raised, and the photograph of that moment would become the most reproduced image in history. My father, on the far end of the island, saw the first flag

flying, as every ship's horn blasted the accomplishment and everyone celebrated the accomplishment. Like most of the Marines in the battle, he didn't know about the second flag-raising and the famous photo until weeks later.

n Finally, while clearing out a tunnel, he took a jacket a Japanese sailor had discarded.

It was a singular battle -- no front, no rear, no flanking, no maneuvering -- just straight ahead. Imagine the horror: Day after day after sickening day, fighting a mostly unseen enemy, yet having to dodge sniper fire, grenades, mortars, and artillery from every direction. At night there was constant noise from artillery and mortars and ships' batteries, the sky lighted up by parachute flares, and, providing a weird contrast, popular tunes of the day from Glenn Miller and Frank Sinatra blared over loudspeakers.

Casualties were so bad that when the figures were told to President Roosevelt, it reportedly was the first time anyone had seen him gasp at news about the war. And how bad was it? Of the 918 men who landed as part of the 25th Regiment, two-thirds were killed or wounded, most in a square mile of hilly terrain and outcroppings that Marines called The Meatgrinder. Overall, assault units of the corps sustained 24,053 casualties, including 6,140 killed, the most losses in a Marine action ever. Another 681 died in support roles and on ships, many from suicide kamikaze attacks.

For the record, around 22,000 Japanese were killed, and just over 1,000 were taken prisoner. Some Japanese held out for weeks and months, hiding in caves. The last two weren't captured until 1949. After Pearl Harbor, it was the only battle in which the U.S. suffered more casualties than the Japanese.

It's an incredible story, in which otherwise ordinary men knew they were part of something magnificent, noble, a high moment in history. A Marine correspondent at the time wrote after one day's action: "There was nothing spectacular about the day's action. But death was everywhere and heroism was commonplace."

A Reunion of Honor Since the 50th anniversary of the battle in 1995, American and Japanese veterans of the battle have gotten together for a ceremony to honor those who died on both sides.

Iwo Jima today remains a Japanese airbase. It's also hallowed ground for our one-time enemy. Forensic teams regularly search for bones. It's slow going. Some 13,000 soldiers and sailors are unaccounted for.

U.S. dead in three division cemeteries were exhumed in 1953 and shipped home. Still, 48 American dead remain on Iwo Jima, missing in action.

At the ceremony, Japanese speakers recalled the sacrifice of their soldiers and marveled that former enemies are now allies in the fight against Islamo-fascism.

Gen. Michael Hagee, the Marine Corps commandant, told the crowd of 300, "Our first duty is to always remember."

A Marine Corps band, flown in from Okinawa, played patriotic tunes. During “The Star Spangled Banner,” I could barely sing the last line. “O say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave, Over the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

It does.

The island, barren of vegetation 60 years ago, today is dressed up somewhat. It was reseeded after the battle, and I twisted an ankle trying to get to the beach through the thick brush. I scooped black sand into a plastic baggy. On top of Suribachi, I looked down into the maw of the volcano, as it vented sulphur. I tapped a 1945 penny on the spot where the flag was planted, a gift for a Marine wounded in Iraq.

Heroes were all around.

There was Medal of Honor winner Jack Lucas, who jumped on two grenades to save his sergeant’s life -- and lived to tell about it.

There were John and Clinton Butler, both former Marines, whose father, Lt. Col. John Butler, was a battalion commander in the battle. An anti-tank slug killed him in his jeep.

There was Marvin Perrett, a coxwain whose Higgins boat is immortalized at the World War II museum in New Orleans. He was the only coxwain to drive warriors to shore at both Normandy and Iwo Jima.

There was John Hartford from Kansas, a Seabee, slang for Navy construction battalion workers, who picked up shrapnel from exploded mines near the airfield and watched as a B-29 low on fuel landed at that field in the middle of the battle. Another 2,250 bombers made similar landings before war’s end, saving the lives of 24,761 flight crewmen.

There was Cy O’Brien, a war correspondent. And William “Bangs” Tosline, from Wilkes Barre, Pa., who ran telephone wire for communications. And Bob Grooney, a jeep driver for 4th Division Gen. Clifton Cates. And John Schuman, a rifleman whose 5th Division swept up the far side of the island and into what was called Bloody Gorge. And Joe Rogers, an artillery team leader who went on to become a trial lawyer in San Francisco. And radioman Les Carlyle, who didn’t know my dad but almost certainly talked with him to relay orders each day of the battle. There was a Navajo codetalker -- sadly, I didn’t get his name -- whose language was unknown to the Japanese and so his messages couldn’t be translated. And Glen Kanig, a sergeant, was featured in a famous photo showing him at the entrance to the 5th Division cemetery as he mourned his friends.

There were also just-minted Marines, most just out of high school, who saluted us as we arrived on the island and drove us around in Humvees.

And finally, I met Rosa Ogawa. Her father, Capt. Taunezo Wachi of the Imperial Japanese Navy,

had been garrison commander on Iwo until shortly before the invasion, when he was reassigned to Japan to train suicide submarine crews. After the war, he became a Buddhist minister and founded the Iwo Jima Association, which aims to return war trophies taken by American forces to the families of Japanese soldiers and sailors killed in the battle.

I gave the sailor's jacket to Mrs. Ogawa, and pointed out the Japanese writing on the collar. She wrote a long letter to me the other day. The jacket, she writes, belonged to Sannosuke Akitaya, who lived in Aomori in the far north of Japan's main island. He was born in 1911 and died in the battle. He had a family, but Mrs. Ogawa couldn't provide more details yet.

"I'll get in touch with you as for the further outcome of the jacket that made a return trip to the homeland with your kind thoughtfulness," she writes. "Please remember me warmly to your mother who had kept the jacket in good shape all these years."

Yes, Mrs. Ogawa, I'll remember you warmly.

And I'll tell her more about my father, too. How he returned to Oahu to train for a final invasion of Japan itself when atomic bombs ended the war in September 1945. That he went on to become an ordained Lutheran minister. And he then was a physician for three decades. And how he agreed to have our family open our home to a Japanese exchange student. And that, before he was my father, that man volunteered to run up a beach on an awful island in the Pacific and fight for his life.

And yours and mine.