

Remembering Iwo Jima

Jackson Countian Among Invading Force

By Jim Murray
Journal-Herald

As dawn broke on the small volcanic island of Iwo Jima in the Pacific, 50 years ago this morning, an invasion force of 71,245 men waited aboard 800 ships of the U.S. naval fleet. One of those men was Ralph Brohard, a native of Jackson County from Ray.

Iwo Jima, located 700 miles south of Tokyo, was considered an important gateway to the Japanese homeland. Emperor Hirohito knew this and intervened in the war planning by sending one of his favorite generals, Tadamichi Kuribayashi, to hold it at all costs.

American war strategists also knew the importance of Iwo Jima. Located halfway between Guam and Tokyo, this tiny island, only one-and-a-half miles wide and five miles long, was ideal as a base for operations aimed at Japan as well as a location for fighter support to America's premier air war machines, the B29s. Since September 1944, plans had been underway to take the tiny island. The Japanese D-Day, Operation Detachment, was on line. D-Day H-Hour was set at 9 a.m. Feb. 19, 1945.

A member of the legendary Seabees, Brohard, who had been called up for active duty Dec. 5, 1942, after enlisting two months

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earlier, would be part of the historic invasion of the first Japanese territory to be taken by the Allies during World War II. Brohard clearly remembers those historic events of 50 years ago, which have since been symbolized by one of this nation's most cherished war memorials in Washington, D.C.

"I think it's important that people today know what happened 50 years ago in the Pacific," Brohard said in a recent interview with *The Journal-Herald*. "I think it's important that they know why we still have our freedoms here today."

Fifty years ago this morning, at 6:40 a.m., the 800-ship U.S. fleet sitting off Iwo Jima, began an 85-minute long bombardment of the island, held by Kuribayashi and 21,000 men.

At 8:05 U.S. fighter planes began shelling the island and strafing the flanks of the chosen landing beach, a 3,500-yard long strip of beach on the island's east coast near the only major piece of terrain on the island, the 554-foot high dormant volcano,

Mount Suribachi.

The chosen landing beach was the only invadeable piece of real estate on the island. It had a gradual incline up to the plateau of the island. Other beach front was edged with steep cliffs.

The island was a defender's dream, an invader's nightmare. The Japanese held the high ground while the advancing Americans would be in the sights of the Japanese rifles looking down on them.

At 8:45, two of the three divisions of Marines began the invasion. The 4th and 5th Divisions were the first to land. Brohard's 62nd Navy Construction Battalion, was attached to the 5th Division. Not a part of the initial wave of the amphibious invasion, they waited off shore.

According to historic accounts of the invasion, at exactly 9 a.m. (H-Hour), the first Americans set foot on the beaches of Iwo Jima.

Backed up by a resuming of heavy gunfire from the fleet, the landing met what initially appeared to be weak resistance from the Japanese, but soon the

resistance intensified and the beach was strewn with hundreds of fallen Marines.

Once off the beach and on the plateau of the island, the Marines were able to move rapidly over the strange black volcanic soil of Iwo Jima. The 4th Division was ordered to swing northward, while the 5th advanced westward, cutting the island in two. The 28th Marines of the 5th Division were then ordered to capture Mount Suribachi.

Brohard said he landed sometime around midnight. "We were to dig into foxholes, three men to a foxhole," Brohard said. "That lava ash was really strange. The island was shaking so much from all the activity, it made the sand in the foxholes act like coffee grounds sifting away under our feet. One minute you'd be in the foxhole then all at once you were back up on top of the ground after the sand sifted." Brohard remained in the foxholes for 41 days straight.

Air reconnaissance was not accurate in picking up all the pill boxes and gun placements Kuribayashi's men had built and kept well-camouflaged, but perhaps the heaviest enemy gunfire came from the slopes and the summit of Suribachi.

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Ralph Brohard of Ray is proud of the role he played 50 years ago today during the amphibious landing on the Japanese territorial island of Iwo Jima. Following a recent interview with *The Journal-Herald*, Brohard posed with his two favorite souvenirs from the now-famous Pacific island: a Samurai sword (one of only four or five found on the island) and a Japanese bayonet rifle.



Before shipping off from Pearl Harbor for such places as Midway Island, the Marshall Islands and Iwo Jima, four Jackson County boys, all Navy Seabees, posed for a photo. They are (from left) Lowell Leach of Limerick, assigned to the 62nd NCB of the Marines 5th Division with Brohard; Dee Damron, also of Limerick, who shipped out to Midway Island; Ralph Brohard; and Melvin Brohard, Ralph's brother, who left Hawaii for the Marshall Islands.



From Ralph Brohard's photo album is this picture showing the black sand terrain of the small island of Iwo Jima and the dormant volcano of Mount Suribachi where the heroic flag-raising took place. This Sunday marks the 50th anniversary of the famed World War II invasion of the Pacific island of Iwo Jima. Brohard, a Jackson County resident, was among the Americans in the invading force.

Ray Man A Hero At Iwo Jima

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Mount Suribachi was the key to the success of the invasion. Planting the American flag atop the extinct volcano was the symbolism needed to keep the American fight going and later, to keep the patriotic fires kindled at home.

The 28th Marines of the 5th Division were first given the order to take Suribachi on Feb. 19. At 9 a.m. on Feb. 23, the 2nd Battalion was ordered to the top of Suribachi. Forty men of Company E, led by Lt. Harold Schrier reached the top and

reached to the top of Suribachi. Forty men of Company E, led by Lt. Harold Schrier reached the top and planted a small flag.

Word reached the fleet of the flag raising, but the flag was too small to be seen easily. A second flag raising was ordered, this time using a larger flag taken from one of the Navy ships off shore. Under the same intensity of enemy fire as the first, the second flag raising succeeded at 10:35 in the morning, this time, caught in the lens of Associated Press war photographer Joe Rosenthal.

Six men raised the flag. Of those six only three survived the battle on Iwo Jima. But those six men are memorialized for generations to come in the familiar statue of the U.S. Marine Memorial, better known as the Iwo Jima Statue, at Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

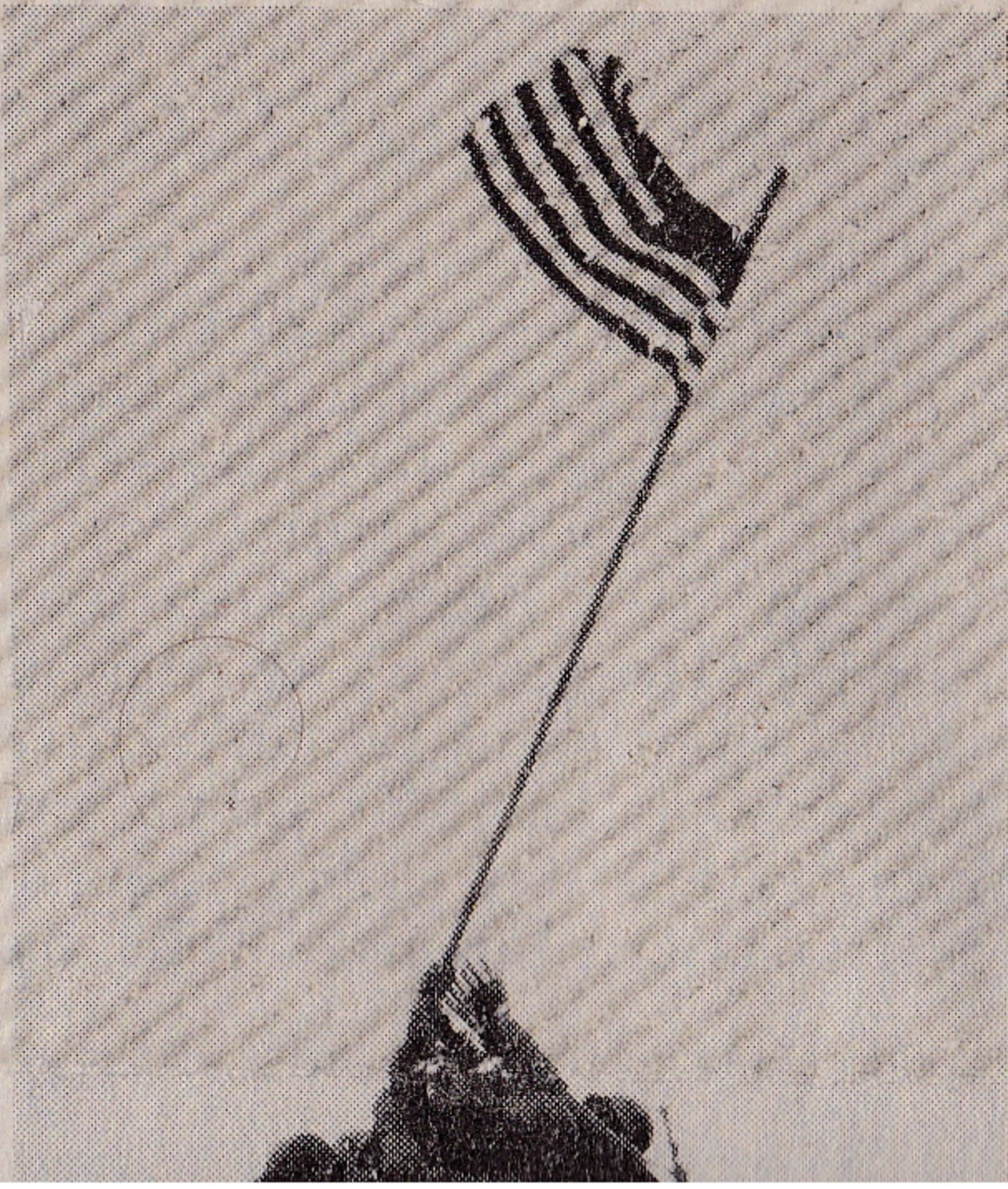
With the enemy routed from the heights of Mount Suribachi, the remaining enemy defense was a well-constructed and well-hidden network of caves and tunnels supporting an underground fortress. It took Kuribayashi's men eight months of hard work to build this underground garrison the Americans now faced on Iwo Jima.

"Everything was underground," Brohard said. "In the foxholes, you could put your head to the ground and hear the Japs running all around underneath us. Nothing much at all was on top of the ground."

Brohard, whose main duty in the Seabees was operating equipment said, "We'd backfill them (the openings to the underground garrison) with a dozer, but they'd just dig out again at night and go on Banzai raids."

Brohard said the underground Japanese were finally extricated by burning them out.

"The Japanese were very much against surrender," Brohard said. "We sent an interpreter in to try



One of America's favorite war memorials is the U.S. Marine Memorial in Arlington, Va. Located opposite Washington, D.C. at Arlington National Cemetery, the memorial is commonly called the Iwo Jima Statue. The statue is an exact reproduction of a photo by AP war photographer Joe Rosenthal.

to convince them to surrender, but that failed.

"Then we dropped 55-gallon drums of fuel into their caves, lit them with flame throwers. That ate up all the oxygen in the caves," Brohard said.

When the island was finally well secured and in American hands at 6 p.m. on March 16, 26 days and nine hours after the first Marines landed, it had become the costliest piece of real estate the U.S. Marines ever paid for with their lives. Total Marine casualties stood at 25,851 with 6,821 killed.

Brohard and the Seabees dug in on Iwo Jima for the duration of the war. Housed at Camp Bola (named for the first U.S. casualty of the battle) at the base of Suribachi, Brohard described life there as anything but ideal.

"The rains were terrible, like monsoons," Brohard said. He spoke of the volcanic ash under foot that was hot and seemed to get hotter. He remembered the smell of the sulfur water steam that poured out of the ground of Iwo Jima.

The Seabees Brohard was a part of built three runways for B29s to stop off and refuel on

their raids between Japan and Saipan or Guam.

Brohard operated dozers and pulled scrappers during the construction of the airfields on Iwo. He said "We kept track of Jap burials by putting notches in the dash." He said it was during the construction he came across his most prized souvenirs of the war in the Pacific: a Japanese Samurai sword and a Japanese bayonet rifle. Other souvenirs popular with the Seabees were the rising sun flags of Japan, bicycles and ammo.

Six days after the Battle of Iwo Jima ended, D-Day in Okinawa took place, the last amphibious operation of the war. Shortly thereafter, President Harry S. Truman ordered atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was not long after the devastation of the A-bombs before the Japanese government signed terms of peace on board the U.S.S. Missouri in Yokohama Harbor.

Before Iwo Jima Landing Brohard started his war career at Camp Endicott, R.I. and then Port Hueneme, near Oxnard, Calif. His battalion shipped out to Pearl Harbor from San Francisco. Arriving in Hawaii on March 29, 1943, Brohard spent several months working to rebuild Pearl Harbor in the aftermath of the devastation of the Dec. 7, 1941, early-morning air raid by the Japanese.

On Hawaii, Brohard and the Seabees built roads, an extension to an air base on Maui, built a dike from material dredged from the harbor, a machine shop, a submarine dry dock facility, cleared jungles and moved a tank farm from Pearl Harbor to Pearl City.

From Camp Red Hill on the Hawaiian island of Maui, the Seabees trained for jungle warfare, although Iwo Jima was hardly jungle terrain.

After the Battle Immediately after Rosenthal's photo of the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi hit the front pages back home, the three surviving flag raisers were whisked back stateside by order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. They began a war bond tour of the country. One was recalled to active duty while two remained on the war bond drive. All three are buried today in Arlington National Cemetery, close to the statue commemorating their heroic deeds. Their three fallen comrades are buried in the 5th

Division Marine Cemetery at the base of Mount Suribachi.

Rosenthal's photo was printed and reprinted to be used in many ways to promote the war effort and patriotism in general. Today it is perhaps as familiar to most Americans as the paintings *Spirit of 1776* and *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

The original flag raised over Mount Suribachi is on permanent display at the U.S. Marine Museum at Quantico, Va.

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The Japanese suffered dearly at Iwo Jima. Gen. Kuribayashi's body was never found. Nor were the bodies of his highest-ranking officers.

The Seabee from Ray continued his career as an earth mover after the war ended and the Seabees then only formed ranks for reunions.

His work has taken him to many locations in the U.S. and elsewhere. One project he speaks of often is a project 125 miles deep inside the jungles of the South American nation of Suriname. There he managed a project that entailed moving 20 million yards of earth and rock and placing one million cubic yards of concrete.

Retired with his wife in Ray, he spends three days a week working as a superintendent at a state highway roadside rest. He has a son living in Newark and a daughter in Orlando, Fla.

Today, when asked about his career, Brohard will smile and say "it has taken me from Iwo Jima to Suriname."

Fifty Years Later Rest assured this morning, Ralph Brohard is thinking back 50 years and the role he played on a small volcanic island in the Pacific; a role history sees as vital to the victory for the forces of democracy during World War II; a role one Jackson County veteran Seabee is proud to have played in helping secure the freedoms we Americans enjoy today.