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IWO JIMA

Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero

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I had a feeling when I left here . . . that I shouldn’t have left. I was leaving people behind. I should have stayed in their place.

Dewey Norman, an American veteran of the battle, back on Iwo Jima,
February 19, 1985

D+Forty Years:
A Gathering of Heroes

The Japanese looked toward the sea, as they had done forty years before. A few war widows, a handful of old men from the garrison, children and grandchildren of those killed on the island, three Buddhist priests bearing trumpet shells, said to be effective in calling forth the souls of fallen warriors: 132 Japanese sat on the black sands, beneath a cloudless sky, facing the Pacific—and the Americans. It was almost noon on February 19, 1985.1

The Americans looked inland, toward Mount Suribachi and the steep terraces of sand, smoothed and lowered by the years. Two hundred seventy-seven strong, they shifted their weight on rickety folding chairs under the midday sun: wives and children of veterans, at least one teen-aged grandson, but mainly men who called themselves “survivors,” Marines and Navy corpsmen who had lived through a battle that claimed the lives of 6,621 Americans and wounded 19,217 others. There were crutches, braces, limps, and terrible scars among the old men who sat in the sun, between the water and the field of battle. The youngest had just turned fifty-five. The oldest were in their eighties. Most suspected that this would be their last trip to the Pacific, the last time anyone would observe the anniversary of the battle on the island where it had been fought. Today marked the fortieth anniversary of the invasion. Victor and vanquished had come back to Iwo Jima to remember what had happened.

A patch commemorates an event conceived during the annual Iwo Jima banquet at Camp Pendleton in 1983.

there, to honor their dead, to figure out what it all meant, to pray that such a thing would never happen again.

Of the two groups, the Japanese seemed more at ease with the place and the memories it summoned up. Takeo Abe, a former gunnery captain who had lived through twenty-seven wounds and six months in the fetid caves beneath the surface, had spent much of the past seventeen years picking his way through ravines and shellholes in search of the bones of his men. The delegation from the Association of Iwo Jima, to which most of the Japanese pilgrims belonged, was led by Tsuneo Wachi, architect of the island's defenses. After the war, Wachi had turned to religion and devoted his life to performing funerary rites for the estimated 22,000 Japanese dead, many of whom had been buried alive in their underground fortifications. Between 1952, when he first returned to Iwo Jima as a Buddhist priest, and a 1984 expedition on which he found the mummified corpses of fifty-three lost comrades, Wachi had built seventy-two small monuments on the island and recovered countless remains. Embarrassed by a pious zeal that refused to forget World War II, the Japanese government tried to outlaw private bone-hunting in the 1950s, sending out official burial parties instead. Although most of the searchers were militant pacifists, Japanese youth deplored their interest in the war dead. It was a lingering remnant of Shintoism, they said, a defacement of those who had given up their lives for the Emperor. Ironically, others shunned the few Japanese to surrender and live: by surviving, they said, the Japanese veterans of Iwo Jima had failed in their duty to the homeland.

But together, the Japanese survivors and the mourners had managed to come back to Iwo Jima, time and time again, looking for whatever message the bones of the missing had to impart. The Marines took the American dead home in 1947. The Army and then the Air Force came and went. The men from the tiny Coast Guard navigation station rotated home after a year. So did the members of the Japanese Self-Defense units stationed at the airfield in the 1960s, and the construction workers building new, top-secret installations throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Only the searchers kept coming back. Only the searchers were there to see a black and blasted place turn green again, little by little. American planes seeded Iwo from the air in the first years of peace. On the defoliated Pacific islands, natives called the plant "tangan-tangan." A mimosa-like shrub, it was hardy and fast-growing, worse than crabgrass. But the emerald leaves crept over the scarred face of Iwo Jima and softened its
cruel angles. The castor bean flourished, and the grasses, a stand of palms waved above Kitano Point, and here and there were scattered the pink and purple flowers, about the size of a dime, that American correspondents had noticed in 1945 as they lay with their faces pressed in the sand and shells whizzing overhead.⁴

Iwo Jima was too green for the Americans who came back in 1985. It was too bucolic, too pastoral, too damned peaceful, with its nine-hole golf course and the manicured lawns of the Japanese base. “It looks very tame now,” said seventy-year-old Earl Tharaison, as he edged down the tail ramp of the C-130 transport that morning. Tharaison had come to Iwo Jima “to try to get rid of some of these memories,” but with the dense vegetation and the postwar military construction, spots that loomed large in memory would prove hard to locate in reality. Charles Early, fifty-eight, a Florida tax lawyer whose limp testified to his first encounter with Iwo Jima, found himself disoriented by the greenery, too. “I didn’t think anything would ever grow again,” he told a reporter. In memory, the sun never shone there, no birds ever twittered, no trees ever swayed in a gentle breeze. In memory, it was always 1945, and Iwo Jima remained a place of fear and horror and death. Seeing it forty years later, so still and sweet and green, Claude Duvall, a retired state senator from Louisiana, wondered what 1945 had been all about. “I look around today,” he said, “and I wonder what was the point of it. There doesn’t seem to be any point.”⁵

The ceremony on the landing beach aimed to make some sense of their own history for the Americans and the Japanese who faced each other across a stretch of sand and time and culture. Both sides prayed for guidance, but the American preachers also confessed their puzzlement at the strength of the urge to come back. What was the meaning of this odd homecoming, Chaplain John Pasanen asked the Almighty?

We have returned to this place, O God, though we vowed never to set foot here again. We have returned to this place... to relive a past that has long pervaded our dreams and haunted our sleeplessness... We come back, O Lord, of compulsion, drawn by memories and loyalties, deep and firm... to make fast the bonds that tie us to our dead... for consummation, our one last deed to do.⁶

But what was that final obligation? Was it remembrance—or forgiveness, peace, and a new beginning? Younger men presumed to answer the question for the old veterans: Speaking on behalf of his government, Vice
Admiral Kenichiro Koga pointed to the amity between American and Japanese personnel currently stationed on Iwo Jima, where men from both nations bowed politely after the weekly softball game and socialized at the sandstone cliff that bore the likeness of the flag-raising upon its face. Japan and the United States were now allies in the cause of world peace, the admiral concluded, and “those who are the happiest to know this fact are, I believe, the souls of the dead officers and men of Iwo Jima.” Both sides had fought with “uncommon valor,” Lt. Gen. Charles Cooper added on behalf of the Marines in the Pacific. Time had all but erased the differences of forty years ago: “Seated here together are men who, on this same soil on an earlier day, were the most mortal of enemies. . . . If peace and friendship is possible between these men, then peace and friendship is possible among all men, everywhere . . .”

The admiral and the general had plausible answers. Arnold Shapiro—he was only four years old when the Marines stormed ashore on Iwo Jima—also thought he knew why the old men had come back. A Hollywood producer with a longtime interest in the battle and in Rosenthal’s photo, Shapiro wrangled an invitation in 1983 to the annual anniversary banquet held at Camp Pendleton by the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Marine Divisions in commemoration of their landing. The banquet intrigued him almost as much as the battle. While most reunions, he wrote, “are about events best forgotten, this one was about life and death, horror and heroism, duty and bravery.” The men who gathered to remember Iwo Jima seemed larger than life, touched with a special greatness.

Shapiro asked if the group had plans to fly to the Pacific for the upcoming milestone year: other units, after all, had made trips to Raban, Tulagi, and Guadalcanal into regular excursions, and small bands of American veterans had, with some difficulty, arranged transportation to Iwo Jima on the tenth, the fifteenth, the twentieth, and the twenty-fifth anniversaries of the battle. Why not on the fortieth? Shapiro volunteered to write the first letter to the prime minister of Japan, proposing a “Reunion of Honor” for February 1985. At the same time, the producer laid plans to film the pilgrimage for television. The drama would come from a real-life situation, the story of “what happens when the former enemies of World War II meet again on the sands of Iwo Jima.”

It was clear from the beginning that Japan was reluctant to sanction a reinvasion of Iwo Jima under any circumstances. A reunion there, if permission could be obtained, would have to include Japanese veterans. And, as officials warned Shapiro and Bob Hoskins, the Fourth Division veteran who went with him to the Pacific in the autumn of 1984 to strike a deal and scout locations for the filming, there would be “no victor-vanquished attitudes, no American flamboyance,” none of the tear-eyed Rosenthal-style flag raisings that had become a perennial feature of such reunions back home. The keynote of an acceptable ceremony was struck by the old Buddhist, Reverend Wachi, as he sat with Hoskins and Shapiro.
atop Mount Suribachi, with his back to the monument on which that familiar symbol of American victory was emblazoned: “So many brave American Marines. So many brave Japanese soldiers. War is such a pity.”

The theme of the reunion would be just that—the mutual tragedy of forty years past, a pledge of peace in the years to come; its centerpiece, a marble slab, planted on the invasion beach, on the border between the landing zones where the Fifth and the Fourth Divisions had waded ashore, halfway between the water and the sandy slope rising toward Mount Suribachi. And there, on February 19, 1985, sat the survivors of Iwo Jima, the Americans facing the land, the Japanese facing the sea, the slab of a stone between them. The monument was the gift of the actor John Wayne’s family and of Wachi’s Association of Iwo Jima. The words—in Japanese on the landward side, in English on the reverse—were Shapiro’s answer to the riddle of their coming back, the old Americans turned toward the high ground and the rusting guns, the old Japanese looking out at the water and a fleet that still sailed there in memory:

The first showing of Return to Iwo Jima: Joe Rosenthal with producer Arnold Shapiro.

On the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, American and Japanese veterans met again on these same sands, this time in peace and friendship. We commemorate our comrades living and dead who fought here with bravery and honor, and we pray together that our sacrifices on Iwo Jima will always be remembered and never be repeated.

The slab was uncovered. The Buddhists blew their trumpet shells. A band flown in from Okinawa played “The Marine Hymn,” slowly, mournfully, like a dirge. At first, nobody sang. Then a few scattered voices joined in. Finally, all the Americans were singing, and many were in tears. The ceremony was almost over. The only thing left on the morning’s agenda was the “Handshake of Peace,” led by the organizing committee from California. As the committee members moved across the strip of sand still separating the Americans from the Japanese, as they embraced their former adversaries, the other Americans watched and waited and wondered. Had it really come down to this? To “men in the twilight of their lives” finally “recognizing the futility of war”? To starry-eyed visions of “love and peace for all mankind”? Was war the sport of the young? Of
long ago? And were the old—the survivors—fated to become pacifists in their powerlessness, or in their wisdom? 13

Those for whom the meaning of Iwo Jima lay back there in 1945, when their friends had died at the hands of the “Japs,” stayed away from the Reunion of Honor for the most part. Men who lived in the past could not cross that last yard of beach to clasp the hand of a “Jap.” Yet even those who had already decided to forgive but not forget—to forgive one another while refusing to forget the heroism of the honored dead and the tragedy of all war—found it hard to take the first step forward, to grasp the first gnarled and wizened hand. “They were the enemy!” cried Greg Emery, a former Navy corpsman haunted by the memory of the carnage he had seen, the bodies left in pieces, the viscera strewn across the beach. Emery forced himself to shake the hands held out to him and felt better for having done so: the ritual had “expelled some of the demons,” he said. Others, who also came to Iwo Jima full of ill will toward the Japanese, felt as if a burden had suddenly been lifted from their hearts. Shuffling forward reluctantly, grudgingly, toward the tearful widows and the clutch of shy old men behind the monument, they realized that these gentle souls were not the foe. Their feelings of enmity belonged in another time, in another place, far away from this green and peaceful island. 14

And so the ceremony ended in tears and smiles. Speeches, gestures, trumpets, the slow, sad melody of “The Marine Hymn”: the lofty rhetoric of reconciliation declared the public significance of the journey back to Iwo Jima. In private, however, confusion and pain still dogged the footsteps of those who walked the shoreline, looking for the stretch of sand where they had been hit, the crater where a friend had died. “I came back to answer a lot of questions,” said Tom Abbot of Los Angeles: he had spent two years in a VA hospital reliving the terrible things he had seen on those beaches. Frank Pokrop of Milwaukee had been disturbed in his Tokyo hotel just the night before by his roommate’s bad dreams. His buddy awoke in a cold sweat, wishing he hadn’t made the trip. As for himself, Pokrop thought he “just might go off and cry.” “Jesus, there are a lot of memories,” said Joe Buck, of Cherokee, Oklahoma, as he paced the terrace. Scooping wet sand into plastic sandwich bags for a souvenir, Tibor Torok, of Grand Prairie, Texas, remembered coming ashore on the very same spot—“a place of death”—and watching the Marine next to him be cut in half by machine-gun fire, “just like you’d slice a sausage.” Why had one man lived and another died? Had the lives of those who went home justified the sacrifices of those who stayed behind, buried in the sands of Iwo Jima? 15

Trucks made a regular circuit of the battle sites. The time was short and the terrain was treacherous: hours before the unveiling, two live pineapple grenades were found not far from the rows of folding chairs. But the little trips from point to point served a therapeutic function. The reporters and the cameramen, their fellow veterans, and the young Marines and Coast Guardsmen who served as tour guides pulled men out of the world of memory, back to the present, a present in which they were obliged to make sense of the past. On the flight to Japan, one of the time-travelers admitted, “We killed a million Japs.” On Iwo Jima, one’s per...
The beginning of reconciliation: at left, Isao Ohshima, and at right, Edward J. Moraniec.

Footsteps in the sand, photographed by a veteran who came ashore at this very spot.

Trying to find familiar places.

Mount Suribachi looming over a field of flowers.
spective was different, the battle a part of a whole, ongoing lifetime, winding now toward an inevitable end. "I'm 64 years old," said a Fresno banker, "and this [is] my last chance to relive the greatest experience of my life." Wounded on Iwo, a former track star from La Mesa, California, had seen the course of his life altered in a moment. His conclusion: "That living peacefully with our fellow men" is always better than making war. For Connecticut's Ed Moraniec, disfigured by shrapnel, Iwo "was the end of my life." Yet in retrospect the war had taught him a lesson, too. "Back home we thought only of glory. Up here," he mused as the truck labored toward the top of Suribachi, "there's no glory—only death, in its worst form."16

The legend of Mount Suribachi was the common thread that knit all the other war stories together. Some men had landed under heavy fire; some had come in standing up, in an eerie silence. Some were maimed and scarred; a lucky few had escaped unharmed. But everybody remembered the flag and the picture. And everybody climbed the mountain that sunny afternoon, swapping recollections of where they'd been and what they'd thought when the Stars and Stripes rippled in the wind. To one, it was "like a touchdown in a football game. It was a small flag, but everybody could see it." "When it went up," said another, "there was a great big cheer, right down on the beach." "It signified victory," added a third.

Atop the mountain, where the flag once flew.

A Japanese veteran (left) and a U.S. Marine look out from the top of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima.

27 February 1945
OLD STORY WAS RAISED ON THIS SITE BY MEMBER
OF THE 2nd Bn, 26th Regt, 5th Marine Division
ATop the mountain, where the flag once flew.

"It was a moment of ecstasy." Because the symbol provided a link between the home front and the battlefront, between those who had been there and generations unborn in 1945, the flag-raising was also the focus of questions directed at Marines who had not made the trip back to Iwo Jima. Like their comrades in the Pacific, for instance, Atlanta veterans quoted in special anniversary press coverage remembered "a spindly little thing sticking up [that] showed . . . at least somebody had taken something they were supposed to."17

As the delegation on Iwo Jima labored up the mountain where it all began, stateside ceremonies took the cue from the long ago flag-raising. It was recreated by young Marines in a national cemetery outside San Francisco, with Joe Rosenthal, the guest of honor, admonishing a sparse crowd of veterans and their families "to remember the incredible bravery of those men who gave all they had to give to live up to their sense of duty." Whenever he looked at his picture, the seventy-three-year-old photographer said, "I can still see the smoke and smell the blood and guts." The Marine Corps had their monument in Washington scrubbed and polished for the occasion, and observances there opened with a White House reception for 350 survivors. Many had never attended a reunion before. "I've stayed away from this kind of thing for years because you don't want to remember the bad stuff," said Larry Ryan, who came all the way from Greenfield, Wisconsin, to honor the friends he lost on Iwo Jima. When he was younger, Ryan continued, "the flag raising was no big deal" in comparison to all the deaths, but nowadays it had become an obsession. He had nightmares about it, "flashbacks" triggered by the sight of the statue on the nightly TV sign-off, a growing conviction that he had been one of the flag-raisers, misidentified by the Marines for forty years.18

Even on Mount Suribachi, in the presence of a monument bearing the Rosenthal picture, skeptics assailed the photo's authenticity. Wallace Morger, of Fort Benton, Montana, remembered Lou Lowery's picture, taken "under fire" and, despite the counterarguments of the Marine officer detailed to handle historical questions, insisted that Rosenthal's was second-best, a staged product. For the Japanese veterans, such quibbles were academic. The flag meant defeat, impending doom. According to Takeo Abe, "The raising of the flag symbolized that the time had come for Japan." There was no joy in recalling it, or in dividing a complex world into winners and losers. "It's not important who won or lost," said Katsumo Morimoto, former army surgeon, "but that both sides remember
the place where our friends ... died.” The deaths were important—and so were other photographs of deep human significance, photographs that Japanese soldiers shared with their American counterparts. Looking back down the corridor of time, an American saw himself as a young Marine, kneeling over the body of “a dead Jap” and finding photos in his wallet—a mother and father, a wife and a baby: “I knew that I was carrying the same pictures in my wallet. It made me very sad and I put everything back. I thought, ‘It could have been me,’ and ‘What for?’ I wasn’t mad at this soldier. He didn’t even know me.” A Japanese veteran wiped his glasses, peered mournfully into the camera’s lens, and told an identical story.19

The stories, many of them, were the same narratives of loss, of fear, of flashes of kinship with men who died on the other side, of guilt at being the one who made it through. Like the Americans, the Japanese of the Iwo Jima garrison feared that what they had done there would be forgotten. An airline clerk in Tokyo had had to be told that Iwo Jima was an island in the Pacific; a publisher’s assistant on the East Coast had thought that Suribachi was the name of a pizza parlor. An old Marine, down on his luck, had run an ad in a paper out in North Dakota, offering to sell the Purple Heart he got on Iwo Jima: those who inquired about the price had asked only how much gold was in the thing. If the world forgot Iwo Jima, what had the whole, terrible ordeal meant? What difference had it made in the course of history? And the brave young men who fell there—who would remember them after the old veterans answered the final roll call? “For this many people to die, it’s supposed to mean something,” Bill Steele insisted. “But it don’t ... What did they all die for?”

Whether the answers came or not, the questions asked out loud, the tears, the closeness rehumanized men who had coped with Iwo Jima for these forty years by a studied forgetfulness. At reunions, they mowed down “Nips” by the dozen, like John Wayne in his prime. They talked about good times and old friends. Or they didn’t talk at all. They dreamed instead and woke and trembled. Vietnam made it all right for men of valor to look back in sorrow and in anger, and to cry. Vietnam made it all right for patriots to acknowledge an appalling rate of casualties, to question the wisdom of the generals, while keeping faith with the departed. A third of all the Marines who died in World War II died on Iwo Jima. Forty years later, it was finally all right to remember the truth.20

Reunions of World War II veterans were curious affairs from the beginning, part clubbish sociability among men who had shared a common set of rules and experiences—like college grads or fraternity brothers—and part self-congratulatory myth. Walt Ridlon went to his first, small Iwo Jima reunion in 1951 in Kansas City. The turnout consisted mainly of guys who had stayed in the Corps. The civilians were still too busy with jobs and new families and buying a house. Ridlon went because he thought of his old outfit as a family: he wondered what had happened to the men he commanded, how the wounded had fared, how life was going for “his boys.” But as the years passed, the opportunities for getting together and the attendance both multiplied exponentially. Divisions and even companies held their own annual functions, usually during summer recess in the period when the average member had school-age kids.21

The reunion became a vacation, with bands that played Glenn Miller

After the war, Rosenthal and Lowery always spoke of one another with great affection; Rosenthal said he’d just been luckier on February 23, 1945.
DAWNS EARLY LIGHT ...

The return to Iwo Jima saluted: California and Hawaii Elks Clubs commissioned this floral tribute to the American veteran for the 1985 Tournament of Roses Parade.

tunes, Iwo Jima ballcaps and coffee mugs, and, almost always, a recreation of the emblematic flag-raising that stood for victory and heroism and thus validated the events that brought the vets together. Nostalgia played a role, too—a longing for the camaraderie and the vigor of youth. In the case of those who had fought on Iwo Jima, nostalgia exalted the glorious epiphany of Joe Rosenthal’s picture and suppressed the grisly reality of being there in 1945.

Public remembrances of the battle always centered on the Iwo Jima statue and the men associated with it. Between 1955 and 1975, Joe Rosenthal, General Erskine, Holland Smith, and Rene Gagnon all appeared beneath the giant effigy, affirming by their presence the values it had

Opposite: At reunions of Iwo Jima veterans, a recreated flag-raising is often the centerpiece. This version was mounted by young Marines for the annual Camp Pendleton commemoration.
tried not to remember it.” “I can see it in my mind and I can hear the sounds,” wrote another veteran, tormented by ghosts that still prowled the sands of Iwo Jima. “I can walk the island in my mind.” It was time to go back and walk the beaches. It was time to climb the mountain—one last time. It was time to forget what should have happened, what other people said, the movies, the pictures, the statues wreathed in glory. It was time to remember what had happened on Iwo Jima in 1945. Forty years later, it was time for the Reunion of Honor.²⁵

At three o’clock, the trucks crept back down the mountainside, past the landing beaches, past the site of the old Marine cemetery, toward a rise overlooking the Japanese command post on the island. After twenty-three years in American hands, the Bonins had been given back to Japan in 1968. In 1985, the notion of returning territory purchased with blood still rankled some who had fought there, although the reunion had helped to appease the most intransigent among them. In Tokyo, on the eve of departure, the American contingent had returned swords and flags taken from Japanese corpses by vengeful and thoughtless young men. Although that first meeting between the two camps was stiffly formal, the enemy, it seemed, might have a human face. On Iwo Jima, the handshake of peace and the cathartic excursion into history that followed dissolved the last vestiges of hostility in salty tears. “I didn’t really want the United States to give back the island,” said Texan Marshall Yates. “But now that they have, well, the Japanese are our best allies and if it helps to have them [here], then fine.”²⁶

The trucks circled Requiem Hill and stopped at a strange, roofless structure of polished gray granite, a kind of oriental Stonehenge built by the Tokyo police as a memorial to the war dead of both nations. Tables held a buffet—soup, sandwiches, sushi, bottles of Japanese beer. Chairs had been set up in the shade. The weary plopped themselves down gratefully, to inspect postcards and hats purchased at the Coast Guard station, to finish letters that would bear a special Iwo Jima postmark. Filled with the emotion of the day, John Pasanen wrote to his little granddaughter back in California: “I wanted to be sure to let her know when she grows up that I would do anything to prevent her sons from being subjected to what men were subjected to on this island.” Lucian Caste, an architect from Pittsburg, added notes to the journal he was keeping for his twelve-year-old grandson, James Lucian McCreight. On his way to Requiem Hill, Caste met a video crew, looking for an interview. What was it really like

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Turning the tables on history: at a reunion in Mobile, Alabama, in 1989, real Iwo vets photograph a recreation of the famous Suribachi scene.

come to represent: the armed will of the nation, the justice of its cause, the inevitability of victory. But during the Vietnam war, when one military historian prescribed books on the Iwo campaign as an antidote to America’s failure of resolve, a new breed of old-timer began to turn up at the Marine Corps Memorial, ready to talk about pain. Veterans button-holed by reporters at the twentieth anniversary rites didn’t “feel glorious” about the Iwo Jima they remembered. “I will always have those memories,” said an ex-Marine from Alexandria, Virginia. “There is nothing I can do about it because they have left deep scars. The only thing to do is just push them down as far as you can.”²⁴

By the time the Vietnam vets had built themselves a monument across the Potomac, the men of Iwo Jima were owning up to lonely years of hurt and guilt. “In the past, I had just displaced that part of my life,” admitted a man who went to his first reunion in the 1980s, looking for help. “I've
in 1945? He had always been reluctant to frame an answer, but today, Caste thought he knew. “It was the insanity of war,” he wrote in Jimmy’s book: “In the beginning it was the glory of going to war—now, it was death, horrible and meaningless death. Men torn apart by hate and false pride, brought here for man to kill his fellow man—it was like standing in the cauldron of hell, performing an act of total self-destruction, killing your brother.”27

As the plane landed on Iwo that morning, a journalist rushed up to Bill Steele, demanding a statement and a picture. “We’re gonna make heroes of you people today!” he quipped. But there were no heroes on Requiem Hill that afternoon. There were only survivors, having a beer, pointing and gesturing when language failed, making friends, swapping stories. Dewey Norman slapped his hip: that was where he had got it. It could have been my bullet, a smiling Japanese veteran indicated, thumping himself on the chest. Taro Kuribayaishi, the son of Iwo’s wartime commander, moved through the clusters of men, shaking hands, bowing. Laughter could be heard, over the tunes of the Forties, played by the Marine Band: a Japanese party, American songs.28

John Bradley, the last of the official Iwo Jima heroes, had been asked to make the trip, but had refused. Arnold Shapiro filmed him in advance for the TV special and asked Bradley the same big questions the men now amiably sharing a beer on a sunny afternoon in the Pacific had just addressed. Who were the heroes? “I just happened to be at a certain place at a certain time,” Bradley replied, much as he had for the last forty years: “Anybody on that island could have been in there and we certainly weren’t heroes and I can speak for the rest of them as well.”29 Anybody could have been there when the shutter clicked. Everybody was a hero. Americans. Japanese. Those who died. Those who lived and suffered for it and came back to find out why. Those who laughed and cried and vowed together that war must never come again. “All go in peace,” said Reverend Wachi. The band struck up “Sentimental Journey.” The trucks headed down Requiem Hill, to the airstrip. The Reunion of Honor was over.

They flew out of the warm, green softness of Iwo Jima and landed in Tokyo that night in four inches of snow. It was, said some of the weary heroes, their own “white blanket of peace.”30