

SULPHUR ISLAND

D+6 IWO JIMA

By Chuck Tatum

As the night of D+6 envelopes us in complete darkness (there was no moon that night) I asked Private First Class Van Conkelberg if he remembered that wild poker game back at Camp Pendleton.

Van tells me, “Fuck you, Tatum! You don’t know shit about playing poker.”

I guessed he was still pissed about the famous “Wing Dan Do Poker Game.” At times Private First Class Van treats me like his kid brother. He is only a couple of years older than me and is given to handing me advice; all with the best of intentions, for my well-being. This morning he observed me lighting a cigarette off the one I had already been smoking. Yes, I was chain smoking. He said, “Tatum I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your chain smoking. Goddammit, you know that’s not good for your health, you are screwing up your lungs!”

I said, “Okay, Van. Do you think that being on Iwo jima is good for my health? Tell you what, when you can guarantee me I will make it off this godforsaken island alive and in one piece, I will quite smoking. Right here and now.” I told him they way things were going on this piss-poor rock, that we didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of ever getting home alive. He said he would bet me ten dollars to a dog turd that we would make it all the way home, and that I could hold the stakes in my mouth! Van would bet on anything at any time.

War is the highest staked poker game in the world. You can only hope that you draw a good hand because it’s your life that’s in the pot! Iwo Jima had been the target for the Fifth Fleet on two different occasions. The Air Force had sent wave after wave of B-24 bombers to blast holes in it’s scabby surface. As soon as the bombers dropped their bomb loads, the Japanese and the conscripted Korean workers would be out in full force to patch the holes. This was done by man power and the crudest of tools, but the airstrip would be back in service. So the next day the B-24 bombers would come back and blast the holes back in the airstrip again.

To save their aircraft the Japanese had been sent back to Japan. Iwo Jima was out of service for the Japanese Air Force. For awhile the Japanese had used Iwo as the staging ground for air attacks on the B-29 bases at Guam, Saipan and Tinian. In fact, the first loss of these million-dollar Eagles was at the hands of the Japanese Betty-class bombers. They bombed them as they sat on the runways. Iwo Jima was a thorn in the wings of the B-29 Superfortress. It had to be eliminated. This was a job for the United States Marine Corps, and this was the day we had to go to work at the rock called Iwo Jima, which is Japanese for Sulphur Island.

SULPHUR ISLAND

D+14, 5th March

5th Division Machine Gun Platoon

It was on the 5th of March D+14 that Private Lavar Jenkins from Freedom, Wyoming got killed. It happened just as we were moving out to a safer area. The day of March 5th was to be a day of rest for the Fifth Division. At least we weren't to start any new attacks. We were hardening our position to make them better defensively. It was a sniper that did in Private Jenkins.

Jenkins had joined B Company's machine gun platoon at Camp Tarawa. This was at the same time that Private Lloyd Hurd and other replacements joined the company.

Jenkins' loss had thinned out most of the original squad, of the second section of the machine gun platoon. Out of the original section we have only Corporal Tremilus, now Acting Gunney Sergeant; Private First Class Charles W. Tatum, now Acting Section Leader, 2nd Squad; Private First class Billy Joe Cauthern, now Acting Squad Leader, 1st Squad and Private First Class Jeffers, Assistant Gunner, 1st Squad. We had some replacements

but I must confess that I don't to this day remember their names. But we had used up more than a few.

Before that day in March was over we would lose Private First Class John Henderson, Corporal Angeles Tremilus and the writer, Private First Class Charles Tatum. Oh yes, the platoon still had "The Iron Okie", Sergeant Raymond Randal Windel. The Sergeant had been Acting Platoon Leader of the machine gun platoon since D-Day when we lost First Lieutenant John Dreager on the beach. This Marine Sergeant was the coolest, most collected fighting machine that ever put on the Marine green. If the Japanese had a clone of Sergeant Windle, they might have kicked us off Iwo Jima. Lucky for us God made only one of Sergeant Raymond R. Windle.

The Marine artillerymen from the 13th Marines have a full employment contract. Good thing the Marines didn't have to pay overtime or the United States treasury would be busted! They had been working around the clock. I hoped they had brought plenty of rounds for the 155 m/m pack howitzers. I don't remember seeing any 155 m/m rifles on Iwo Jima. The island was just too short in length for these long-range weapons, but a pack howitzer was just perfect for Iwo Jima. A 15 m/m pack howitzer's shorter

barrel allows it to be fired more like a mortar. It's high trajectory capability was just the thing to lob a curtain of steel over the Japanese lines, thus pinning the defenders down, or making them take cover, allowing the foot marines to advance. If we were under a mortar attack the 13th Marines 155's always came to our rescue.

Historical Note: In the later stages of the siege the ranks of the 13th Marines would be depleted to fill vacancies in the line companies. This was after all the replacement drafts from the 27th had been exhausted. All Marines are first trained to be Marines, then trained to be artillerymen as a second job, thank God for that! The 13th Marines are good at their job. I give them my personal 4.0 rating! I would pick up their brass for them if they ever asked.