Uncommon Valor Revisited: Iwo Jima & the Stamp

by Ted Bahry, Major USMC Ret.

[Editor’s note: This is an updated and expanded version of an article that appeared in the February 1995 issue of The American Philatelist.]

This month marks the seventieth anniversary of the most famous combat photograph of all time: the Marines raising Old Glory atop Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. That photograph, taken by Associated Press civilian combat photojournalist Joe Rosenthal, electrified the country and resulted in the issuance of a postage stamp (Scott 929) just five months later.

Rosenthal’s photograph also inspired philatelic cachet makers to produce many patriotic and first day of issue covers, some of which are shown on these pages. It is important for readers to understand that it was and is common practice to put cachets on covers after they are postmarked.

No event in Marine Corps history has led to so many myths, rumors, and unsubstantiated “stories” as that now famous second flag-raising on Mount Suribachi on February 23, 1945. The facts about the Suribachi flag raisings were first documented by eye witness reports from survivors, coupled with combat movie film and photographs taken at the time. The essential facts have been the same for seventy years, despite many stories to the contrary.

To understand the events leading to the issuance of the postage stamp, it is first necessary to summarize the war in the Pacific and the assault on Iwo Jima.

War in the Pacific

America was shocked by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. After fighting on the defensive at such places as Wake Island (December 8–23, 1941) and Midway (June 4–7, 1942) the U.S. Marines went on the offensive. In an island-hopping campaign across the central Pacific toward Japan, the Marines conducted bloody but successful amphibious assaults against many enemy-held islands including Guadalcanal (August 7, 1942–February 9, 1943), Tarawa (November 20–23, 1943), and Peleliu (September–November 1944). By the beginning of 1945, the campaign focused on Iwo Jima, a well-fortified, eight-square-mile volcanic island some 700 miles south of Tokyo. Iwo Jima would provide a base for U.S. fighter planes escorting B-29 bombers on raids to Japan while serving as a sanctuary for many crippled bombers returning from those long flights.

The 4th and 5th Marine Divisions began the amphibious assault on Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945. The 3rd Marine Division, in reserve, soon was committed due to the tremendous losses the assault forces took attempting to dislodge 20,000 well-dug-in Japanese troops. Fighting was vicious, with some Marine units suffering ninety percent casualties. Overlooking the entire bat-
tle from the southern end of the island was 550-foot-high Mount Suribachi — a giant, inactive volcano honeycombed with enemy positions. On February 23, the order went out to the Marines: take Suribachi!

First Flag-Raising

After receiving surprising reports that there was no apparent enemy activity atop Suribachi, a forty-man patrol from the 2nd Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment headed up. Most of those Marines, exhausted by four days and nights of hard combat, didn’t think they’d survive to make it back down the mountain. One of the men in the patrol carried a small American flag tucked in his jacket. He was told to raise it if they made it to the top. Accompanying the patrol was Staff Sergeant Louis Lowery, a USMC com-
bat photographer and correspondent for Leatherneck magazine. He took many pictures while the patrol headed up, nakedly exposed to all who could see the bare mountainside.

Surprised to find no initial enemy resistance at the volcano’s crest, the Marines lashed the flag to a long pipe they found in the debris and raised the flag at about 10:15 a.m. Lowery took a photograph of the event, along with many other photographs of the pa-
trol’s actions. Because it was taken for a monthly magazine, his photograph of that first flag raising was not publicized until after the now more famous Rosenthal image appeared.1

“There goes the flag,” said men fighting for their lives on the rugged plains of Iwo Jima. Ship whistles went off and morale momentarily soared. But there still was a lot of horrible fighting and dying to come.

Second Flag-Raising

A short while later, Lt. Col. Chandler Johnson, the battalion commander of the Marines who had raised that first flag decided to replace it with another one. Why? The Secretary of Navy was coming ashore and the word went out that he wanted that flag. Lt. Col. Johnson (later killed in action on Iwo) had other ideas. He sent a runner down to the beach to get another flag so his unit could keep the first one they had raised. As an afterthought, as the runner was leaving for the beach, the battalion commander yelled out to him to try to get a bigger flag. Later a second larger flag, obtained from the ship LST 799, was sent along with another patrol heading up Suribachi.

Covering his sixth combat landing, the Associated Press’s Joseph John Rosenthal went up the mountain shortly afterward, accompanied by a couple of armed combat photographers. Rosenthal was 33 years old, thin, 5’5” tall, near-sighted, and unarmed. He had no idea the second flag had gone ahead of him.

When the Marines carrying the second flag reached Suribachi’s summit, the officer there said the first flag was not coming down until the second one was up. So several Marines then started to prepare to raise the second flag, looking around in the debris for another pole.

Soon after, Rosenthal arrived. He gathered up some rocks and debris to stand on to get an advantageous po-
sition to try to get a photograph of the second flag going up. Sensing some movement, “There it goes,” he said to those around him, while quickly snapping a shot of that second flag raising. It all happened so fast that he had no idea how the black-and-white photograph had come out. Later that day his film, along with that of the other combat correspondents, was sent for processing to Guam.

After being developed and released to the stateside press, Rosenthal’s photo of the unposed and unrehearsed raising of the second flag quickly became a sensation. But Rosenthal, still on Iwo Jima, hadn’t even seen a print yet!

On Iwo Jima, vicious fighting continued.

A rare die proof of Scott 929 in purple, the usual color for a 3-cent, first-class stamp.

The island was not declared officially secure until March 25. It was taken at the cost of some 25,000 U.S. dead and wounded, mostly Marines. In that context and at that time, for all concerned, the Suribachi flag raisings were not very important. That would change later.

The Stamp

A series of U.S. postage stamps to commemorate the Armed Services had been under consideration for some time, but it was the publication of Rosenthal’s sensational photograph that brought things to a head. Congressmen and others put pressure on the postmaster general to turn the photograph into a stamp commemorating the U.S. Marines. On March 31 it was announced that President Roosevelt endorsed the idea. A Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) model of the stamp was approved on June 4.

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to be issued in purple with the first day of issue to be July 11, 1945 — the anniversary day of the U.S. Marines being authorized in 1798. Those announcements sparked complaints against depicting the Marines and the flag in purple, the usual color for a 3-cent (first class) stamp. The postmaster general and the BEP quickly relented. An announcement on July 4 said that the stamp would be issued in "Marine" green (a multicolor stamp was not practical in July 1945).³

There also was some controversy about showing living people on the postage stamp. Three of the six flag raisers — Pfc. Franklin R. Sousley, Sgt. Michael Strank, and Cpl. Harlan H. Block — were killed
Joe Rosenthal and Ted Bahry, about twenty-five years ago.

The 7th War Loan poster, “NOW ALL - TOGETHER,” printed from the painting “U.S. Marines at Iwo Jima” by C.C. Beal, using the Associated Press photo. The poster received a first day cancel and Joe Rosenthal’s autograph.
in action on Iwo Jima. The other three — Pfc. Ira Hayes, Navy Pharmacist’s Mate 2nd Class John H. Bradley, and Pfc. Rene A Gagnon — survived and later were sent stateside to participate in the 7th War Bond Drive.

**Aftermath**

The 7th War Bond Drive featuring the famous Iwo Jima flag-raising had a goal of $14 billion and actually collected more than $26 billion. (A 7th War Loan poster with a block of four Iwo Jima stamps and first day cancel was pictured on the cover of the July 1992 issue of *The American Philatelist.*) On July 11, 1945, sales of Iwo Jima stamp first day cancels topped the 400,000 mark. One hundred fifty million stamps eventually were printed using six plate numbers.

The Marines went on to fight and die for their country in many faraway places. As for the unpretentious yet famous photographer Joe Rosenthal, he had the last words about the second Iwo Jima flag-raising: “I took the picture, but the Marines took Iwo Jima.”

The other Armed Services eventually had stamp issues. Although the Iwo Jima stamp had no service listed, the whole world knew that the U.S. Marines took Iwo Jima, and that those other services — fondly known as “support troops” by the Marines — helped along the way.

This story is dedicated to those U.S. Marines who did not live to see a postage stamp issued in their honor.

**Endnotes**


Watch a video of Marines landing on Iwo Jima and raising the flag [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ZEl05G2S8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ZEl05G2S8)

**The Author**

Maj. Ted Bahry, USMC (Ret.), APS and APRL life member, has been an active contributor to the hobby for some forty years. Major Ted avidly collects covers relating to Iwo Jima, as well as many other things. He also still hikes, lifts weights, and does push-ups!

Left: A souvenir card of the first flag raising on Iwo Jima signed by photographer Louis Lowery and survivor Charles W. Lindberg.

Below: The cover of the February 1951 *Stamps Comics.*