

# The Seabees On Iwo Jima

By Victor Maggi



*"... The Navy will remember  
this war by its Seabees."*

*Vice Admiral W. L. Calhoun, USN*



Above: "Seabee encampment on Iwo Jima"

One day while looking through a shoebox full of my dad's old military photographs, I came across a curious metal object laid in behind the negative envelopes. There sat a piece of cast aluminum, about 6" long and molded in the shape of a pork chop, with a bump at one end and a flat part at the other. The flat part had an embossed helmeted infantryman. I realized the same image was on Dad's cast aluminum belt buckle that he'd worn forever. I asked him about some of the photos and about that curious "pork chop" thing. He explained to me that it represented a far-off Pacific island called Iwo Jima, and that bump was a place called Mount Suribachi. As he tapped his belt buckle, he explained to me that he was there during the war when he'd served as a Seabee.

Iwo Jima? Mount Suribachi? Where was that? What was a Seabee? For the first time, Dad actually explained to me what he did during "the War". The aluminum used to cast both the island model and his belt buckle came from an actual Japanese Zero propeller that had crashed on that island!! I held that piece of aluminum in my hand for a long, long time. I wanted to know more about my Dad's experiences in WWII.

My dad and all four of his brothers fought in WWII, but Dad served in a new organization—the Seabees. The Seabees were established on 28



*“... the only trouble with your Seabees is that you don't have enough of them!”*

*General Douglas MacArthur to Vice Admiral Ben Moreell, Feb. 1944.*

December 1941, and instantly became the “old men” of WWII. While the average Marine rifleman was around 19 years old, the average age for a Seabee was 34 years. Many a combat Marine was heard to comment, “don’t curse a Seabee, he might be your dad!” Usually married and with families to support, the men who became Seabees left well-paying, draft-deferred civilian jobs to accept military life at service wages. They readily adopted their civilian expertise to military needs and were sought after for their construction skills and experience. Over 60 skilled trades were represented in the Seabees. The Seabees derived their name from the initials of their official title of Construction Battalions or “CBs”. Their symbol became a bee carrying not only tools, but a “Tommy gun,” signifying that the Seabees provided for their own defense, hence the label — “Fighting Seabees.”

In the Pacific theater of war, there was a particularly desperate need for ship-borne supply handling, war materiel delivery and the construction of useable landing areas and new infrastructure. Raw jungle and undeveloped islands were the norm. The Seabees, some 325,000 strong worldwide, actively fulfilled this need. It was the Seabees who converted raw jungle into highly efficient military facilities. My dad served with the 90th Naval Construction Battalion, or NCB, as a pipe fitter in the Pacific Theater, an occupation tested at the fuel farms on Iwo Jima.



Left: “Five Brothers in Arms”: The five Maggi boys in the service (~1943): (left to right): Raymond (Coast Guard, S. Pacific); Vernon (U.S. Army, S. Pacific); Frank (U.S. Navy, Pacific Coast); Anthony A. Maggi (U.S. Navy Seabees); Theodore (kneeling, Merchant Marine, later U.S. Army).

Below: A picture of men and their souvineers, including a Japanese battle flag and an Arisaka rifle with bayonet.



*Worry is interest paid in advance for a debt you may never owe.*



Top: 90th NCB Building Emblem. Above: "An early Seabee camp on the black beach sands of Iwo Jima" entire Quonset hut on Iwo Jima".

Above: Seabee laundry on the beach at Iwo.

### The Seabees on Iwo Jima

Iwo Jima is a small island in the Bonin Island chain, located in the southwest Pacific between Japan and the Marianas Islands, which include Tinian, Guam and Saipan. These islands were among most strategic military areas of the Pacific during WWII, especially after Guam was regained by the Allies. Although Iwo Jima was only 8½ square miles in size, the Japanese Imperial military located there kept two functional airfields operational with a third in development. Japanese bombers with fighter support became a constant menace to American bases in the Marianas.

Alternately, U.S. military planners also recognized the strategic value of this small island. If American and allied forces could gain the airfields of Iwo Jima, they would eliminate the menace to the Marianas Islands, and gain strategic airfields within striking distance of Japan's main islands. Plans were put in place to invade Iwo Jima and capture its airfields.

The initial American assault on Iwo Jima began on 19 February 1945 with the 5th Amphibious Corps taking the point. Seabees from the 31st, 62nd, and 133rd NCBs landed with three divisions of Marines in the

first wave. During this assault, Seabees of the 133rd NCB experienced the greatest number of casualties suffered by any Seabee unit during WWII. The larger contingent of six Seabee battalions, including the 90th NCB, landed in the second wave.

The battle was horrific for both sides. Enough of the Japanese defensive weapons survived the initial "softening" bombardments to wreak havoc on advancing Marines, Army and Seabee units coming ashore. In spite of huge casualties taken, the invading forces established a solid foothold on the beaches. The hope of pushing the Americans "back into the sea" was not to be realized by Iwo's Japanese defenders. Through some of the toughest fighting witnessed in the Pacific theater, the Americans made slow but steady advances inland.

The 31st, 62nd, and 133rd NCBs acted first as shore parties on the beach and later initiated the repair work needed on the captured airstrips—making them useable as soon as possible. The six Seabee battalions included in the second wave, helped to secure a beachhead and then the ubiquitous Seabee bulldozers clanked into action. Seabees cleared and filled the runways around the clock, at Motoyama #1. They did so as enemy artillery, mortar, and sniper fire continued. Due to these efforts, Marine artillery spotter planes were able to use the airfield just one week after the initial landing. Navy casualty evacuation flights began; close-in fighter support from P-51s became available; soon followed by

crippled B-29 landings. The Seabees continued their maintenance work—repairing crater damage to the airstrips as fast as Japanese artillery could strike it.

On February 23, American forces captured Mt. Suribachi and the famous flag raisings occurred. Back home, daily newspaper headlines and radio broadcasts made the battle for Iwo Jima one of the most widely followed of the war. Once Joe Rosenthal's famous photograph circulated in newspapers world-wide, Iwo Jima became a household word. Not long after taking Mt. Suribachi, Seabee bulldozers, graders and trucks went to work building a road to its top, which the Japanese never attempted. Despite the presence of landmines, booby traps and enemy snipers still hidden inside the mountain's labyrinth of tunnels and caves, the Seabees completed a two-lane road winding a mile to the top of the mountain. Radar equipment was then installed and immediately put to good use tracking Japanese movements.

By March 3, all three airfields on Iwo were captured. By March 16, the island was fully secured and crippled Super Fortresses, returning from bombing runs over Japan landed regularly on the Seabee-repaired runways. By April 7th, the first land-based fighter escorts gathered on Iwo Jima. After first improving the landing strips, the Seabees then set about improving or constructing just about everything needed by the military on the island.

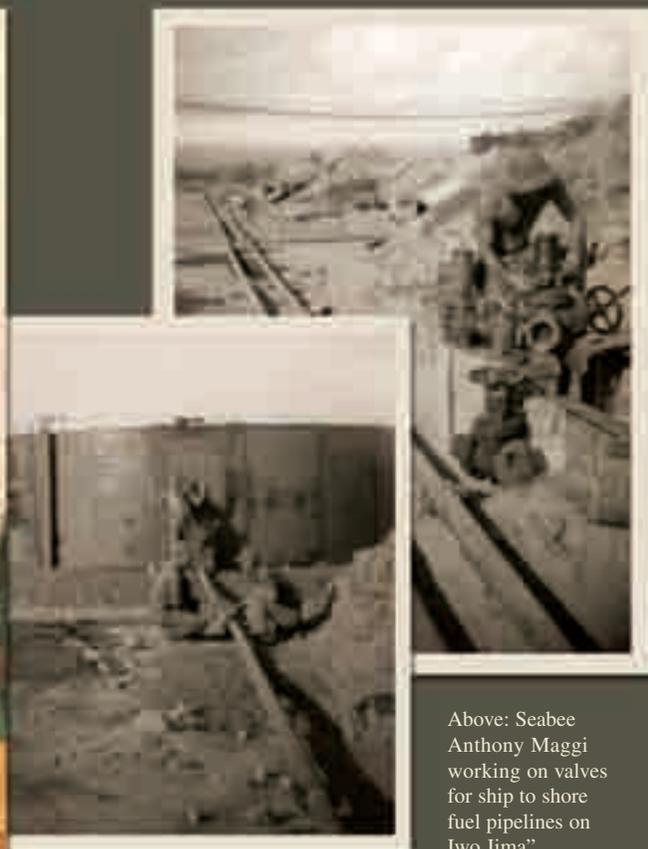
As the war moved ever closer to the Japanese home islands, Okinawa in particular, most of the American military moved off



Top: "A Seabee finishing a cement floor for a Quonset hut on Iwo"

Above left: "Seabee-built cement plant in action on Iwo Jima"

Above: "90th Naval Construction Battalion or Seabees moving an entire Quonset hut on Iwo Jima".



Above: Seabee Anthony Maggi working on valves for ship to shore fuel pipelines on Iwo Jima”

Above: The Seabees connecting a fuel storage tank to offshore transfer facilities.

Iwo Jima. The Seabees left behind to maintain the runways and infrastructure joined the remaining Marines on their patrols to deal with the enemy stragglers and snipers hidden in tunnels and caves about the island. Dad was particularly proud of being assigned patrol duty, and carrying his Browning automatic rifle. He carried his camera along as well. Dad photographed the capture of Japanese stragglers still hidden in the many caves. More often, he talked about those Japanese who chose not to surrender. They instead embraced death with a personal concussion grenade, and Dad had photos to prove it.

At the operation’s high point, some 7,000 Seabees worked on Iwo Jima. Working 10 hour shifts, seven days a week, the Seabees transformed the island into an American stronghold. Seabee construction and maintenance efforts continued for several more months. By V-J day, Seabees completed 20 miles of primary roads – paved with crushed rock and asphalt – and over 40 miles of secondary roads. Seabees moved an estimated three million cubic yards of earth on that island.

In all, the battle for Iwo Jima involved over 75,000 Marines pitted against a garrison of 22,000 Japanese

defenders. The Japanese garrison suffered great disadvantages due to an effective U.S. Navy blockade against ship or submarine re-supply and Iwo Jima’s shortage of fresh water. Continuing an effective defense became futile as the Japanese planners re-directed their dwindling resources to the defense of Okinawa and the home islands. In a sense, the Japanese defenders of Iwo Jima sacrificed themselves, and only expected to slow down an inevitable American advance toward Japan. After 36 days of combat that included futile banzai charges and suicide attacks, the Japanese garrison was nearly eliminated. Only 1,083 of the original 22,000 man Japanese force remained alive to surrender.

Some 6,821 U.S. Marines were dead or missing. Marines, Soldiers, Sailors and Seabees all suffered unthinkable casualties and losses in order to gain Iwo. One U.S. Navy Civil Engineer Corp officer, a captain attached to a Seabee unit, commented that Iwo Jima was “the most expensive piece of real estate the United States has ever purchased.” In this regard, he was referring, not to the “dollar and cents” cost, but the lives lost in order to acquire it. Estimates claim that 550 lives and 2,500 wounded were “exchanged” for each square mile of that island! On the other hand,

experts estimated that for every life lost in taking the island, three American lives were saved. By war's end, the airfields on Iwo Jima received some 2,300 emergency landings, involving 24,751 Army Air Corpsmen. At one point, up to 20 such landings were recorded along with 25 casualty-evacuation flights per day.

During the more peaceful moments on Iwo Jima, Dad's pipe fitting skills and those of the 90th NCB were put to use building and plumbing fuel tanks around the island. He and his fellow Seabees helped connect the offshore pipelines running to and from the tank farms to distribution points offshore. The island became a fuel storage and transfer depot for land vehicles, aircraft, ships, and even submarines.

Aside from designing, building, and maintaining facilities on Iwo Jima, the Seabees, craftsmen that they were, seemed to keep their hands busy making, collecting, and trading souvenirs. They were notorious for providing such artifacts. Marines, soldiers and other sailors readily purchased such souvenirs from Seabee craftsmen. Even my dad brought his belt buckle home, keeping it safe until his children could appreciate it.

These days, I regret not asking my dad more questions about his wartime experiences. However, when I hold that metal "island" in my hands I remember that day Dad let me see into his wartime life. I "feel" the history in that metal; I remember my father, the Seabees, and a faraway, mystical island called Iwo Jima.

*"It's been said that when a soldier or sailor reach the gates of Heaven, they'll find U.S. Marines standing sentry, and when they finally get inside, they'll all find that the Seabees have not only built the gates, but graded and paved the road beyond it."*



Above: Hospital built on Iwo Jima by the Seabees.

Right: Island model of Iwo Jima crafted from Japanese aircraft aluminum by skilled Seabee craftsmen.

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