

Contributed by Jay de Wolf

Western Pacific
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Dear Mom:

This will be very short so that I can enclose a copy of a descriptive story I wrote of Iwo Jima. In the eyes of Censorship it comes under the heading of personal experiences and will give you a brief insight into what went on at Iwo Jima. All information is accurate except for one little word in the last paragraph. The description has been toned down somewhat from an earlier draft and so no mention is made of the odors which accompany such a situation, mainly because I don't know how to describe a disagreeable odor and I'm so used to them that its unimpressive.

TONIGHT AT IWO JIMA

I am standing on the vast tank deck of a huge landing ship which has been converted into a front line hospital ship. We are close to the shore of bloody Iwo Jima and the vast hold of this ship that once contained amphibious tanks and strong healthy marines, is now a scene of mutilated men, navy corpsmen doctors and a polyglot array of medical paraphernalia. The scene before me has never been witnessed in any other war, and never before in this war. The long rows of canvas cots hold the still breathing bodies of men who were snatched from a narrow beach of black volcanic ash and rushed to the comparative safety of this ship which is but a few hundred yards from the vortex of death. The vortex where their buddies are digging in under a constant barrage of rockets and mortar shells, mortar shells the size of ash cans. The fire is so intense that it is impossible to set up any sort of medical aid station, and the casualties are dragged from the beach over the ramp of an assault boat which clings to the steep beach alongside the many which have broken to pieces in the heavy surf. From the beach, the assault boat has but a few hundred yards to travel before the willing arms of the navy reach down to pull out what is left of its human cargo.

The doctor bends over to look at the medical tag of a marine who lies in a sea of blood on a green canvas stretcher. His face is pasty white between the patches of blood, and the entire back of his skull has been blown away by the force of a mortar shell. He's alive and he will live for hours, yet the greatest brain surgeon cannot save him. Life has not passed from his body but he is dead. Thank God there are only a few like him. The Medical Officer drops the card and walks on.

Everywhere corpsmen and sailors are bending over the blood soaked forms. Few have escaped without tremendous loss of blood and the pathetically white faces attest to their almost lifeless bodies. In the passageway, that leads to the operating room and the 'worst' cases have been laid as they came from the beach, still in their jungle cloth uniforms, their faces packed with particles of the black sand. There isn't much order, corpsmen making avoiding steps to get over the stretchers. Space is at a premium aboard ship even under normal conditions, but now every deck is covered with the gleaming white navy blankets that drape the shivering forms beneath.

In the operating room, confusion and disorder is non-existent. Skilled surgeons work in the stale serious atmosphere. Every movement is an attempt to save a man's life. A casualty lies stripped and scrubbed on the slender steel table, he has been there for five hours while surgeons mend the small perforations in his intestines caused by shell fragments which ripped into his abdomen. He has only a fair chance of surviving, but now his right arm must be amputated just below the shoulder. His arm is dismembered and tossed into a large G.I. can which is now filled to the brim with human limbs and bits of flesh.

To these men the price of war is not measured by the cost of a ship, a tank, or a flame thrower, but by the loss of life and the irreparable damage to these muscular specimens. The surgeons are working against time. The only chance of saving these men is now, and not four or five hours from now. The job looks impossible, but there is nothing to do but go ahead and save what is left.