Chapter 28

Iwo Jima

My name is Marvin Hart. I have black hair and green eyes. I was 23 in 1945.

The wind was blowing just right into my face as my landing craft got closer and closer to the shores of the island. The boys were right, the island smelled like the gates of Hell were opening onto this earth. Back in my home of Boston, Massachusetts, the worst smell I had to deal with was that of rotten fish instead of this horrible sulfur smell. I’m glad my family did not have to smell or even face what I know I’m about to. My father is gone, but my mother still has my two younger sisters to take care of. I’ve been in this war since I was old enough to join the army and this has leaded me to being a sergeant. Unfortunately, I rarely get much leave time so I’m stuck over here instead of being with my family. One day I hope, I’ll make it back when these threats have been completely eliminated.

As the island drew nearer, I prepared for the fighting to begin. On February 19, my troop and other invaded Iwo Jima. The island was only 4.5 miles long and 2.5 miles wide, but it was covered in mountains and Japanese underground installations. Our objective beside to capture the island was that we wanted to gain extra airfields for bombing raids against Japan. This was going to be tough, though, because intelligence reported 750 major defense installations, 13,000 yards of tunnels in the mountains, and 21,000 men defending the island.

To soften all these defenses, the aircraft started bombing raids on the island starting on December 8. So it was a total of 70 days of bombing and 5,800 tons of explosives made it onto the island. Just before the invasion, the navy launched a three day bombardment, but this proved to be ineffective because the Japanese were hiding inside the island.

At 0902 or 9:02 am, we landed more than 30,000 marines onto the shores of the island. Right away, nothing happened and the defenders seemed to not even be present on the island. However, I could see right away why the island received the name that it bears. In Japanese, Iwo means sulfur, and there was sulfuric mist rising all around the island, casting it in a ghostly image. For one hour, nothing happened to us. After that, all Hell broke loose. The machines firing came out of nowhere, pinning many strugglers to loosely built foxholes and gun emplacements. The fighting was horrible and bloody as we fired back, trying to gain ground and stop the Japanese assault. By the end of the first day, we had a total of 2,420 casualties. I heard one soldier remark that it was, “A nightmare in Hell...”

The next day on the 20th, the tanks finally arrived onto the shores to assist our advance up the island. The smart ones hid behind their heavy armor and shooting all stragglers that were not hit initially by the tank’s fire. During that day, we made sufficient progress and dug in for the night.

On the 21st, the Navy ordered carrier-based pilots to begin air attacks on the island. Their goal was to strike the Japanese positions in front of us and not to hit us. Several times, there were a few close calls to be felt comfortably and one of the officers sent word to stop all attacks. Because he was not a very high ranking one, the brass ignored them until a colonel ordered all attacks to cease. Even with these almost unfortunate events, we manage to gain much more ground.

A few days later on the 23rd, probably the most influential event happened to us that I will never forget: the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. It started with a 41-man patrol climbing to the top of the tallest mountain on the island. Several of them came together and hoisted the flag for all of the soldiers to see down below. Cheering went up all over the island and on the ships that could see. We all knew we had much more to accomplish until the island was secured, but in that moment, we felt as if we had already won and were ready to celebrate. I heard rumors that one of the admirals was going to take this flag instead of the marines that fought for it to have it. A top officer decided to take the original flag down and raise an even bigger one in its place. In fact, the flag was one that was aboard one of the ships that sunk at Pearl Harbor. The raising of this flag has come to be the most famous picture to have been taken during the war.

Finally, after more than a month of fighting, Iwo Jima was declared conquered on March 26. Of the original 21,000 Japanese defenders, only about 1,000 of them were taken prisoner and the others had died. The American troops suffered 25,000 casualties but only 7,000 dead. I was 23 years old. I thought this fighting was bad, but I guess I’m lucky I wasn’t at Okinawa.