

Overdue Punishment

Run for your life

“Hiroshi, get over here. We haven’t gotten word from General Shibata on our orders. Take this message and go find him. He’s at Mount Suribachi last I heard.”

Just like that, I had to leave the relative safety of my bunker for the hornet’s nest. Positioned between Suribachi and Airfield #1, the mountain loomed high. This was certainly not the first island that we defended from the American invaders. However, for the first time, we were fighting on Japanese soil. Mt. Suribachi was the location of the brunt of our defenses, and the Americans clearly understood this. For days, planes and artillery smashed its surface. Constant puffs of black sand were jumping off its volcanic slopes. Every second or two the reverberations from the shells could be felt in my ears. I had grown numb to this headache. After days of shelling, the land invasion began. The Americans hit the beach two days ago, and the mountain became their immediate target. It was beyond me how I was supposed to get this message to General Shibata. The only way there was to cross hundreds of feet of ground almost completely exposed.

General Kuribayashi was in charge of all the island’s forces, and scrapped our defense network on the island soon after he arrived. We had all been digging trenches down by the beach, where their landing would take place. Kuribayashi scrapped this and told us to get to work immediately on building a vast tunnel network inside Suribachi. From its elevated position, our guns could fire upon a large portion of the island. Machine guns and artillery were given specific fields of fire. Before he arrived, we had trenches out in the open close to the beaches.

It was the crown jewel, and the brunt of our defense of the island. As long as we held Suribachi, the Americans would never be allowed control of the island. With the heaviest fighting ahead of me, I did what I knew I had to do. I ran like hell through the open ground towards the mountain. To my surprise, I covered half the distance before taking any kind of fire. There was nothing to take cover behind, save a few large rocks and the few trees that weren't blown to splinters by now. Just keep running, Hiroshi. Whatever happens, whatever you see, don't stop until you reach the tunnels. Thankfully, the fire I took wasn't substantial, save for a couple instances. Chunks of bark from a tree were raining down on my head briefly from machine gun fire. My ears picked up the thud of bullets slicing through the dirt, but I couldn't see this so it must've been behind me.

Every sound from Suribachi grew and made my head pound more and more, as I got closer. I knew I had arrived when I began to see a few lone body parts spread out in the black sand. One severed arm laid on the ground to my right. As I ran past it, I noticed that it somehow still held a grenade tightly in its grip. Suribachi now loomed ahead of me casting its enormous shadow over the tunnel entrance. One of our men was yelling at me, but the sound drowned out whatever he tried to tell me.

“Do you know . . . where the General is? I have . . . a message to . . . give him.”

“I don't know where he is.”

“I was told he's here at Suribachi. Someone must know where he is. I have to give him this message. Only him.”

My breath was finally returning to me, but I could see I was getting nowhere in finding the General. At this point, I just wanted to get inside the tunnel, but this man started firing at the enemy while blocking the entrance. I was about to yell at him to let

me pass, but then a bullet slammed into his neck. He fell backwards immediately. Leaning down to try and help him, I could hear faint gurgling sounds coming out intermittently. The whites of his eyes engulfed the rest of his face, and they never left mine. Blood from the wound was rushing out and cascading down the mountain in little rivers. Finally his eyes were at peace. Knowing I still had to find the General, I stood up and ran inside the tunnel hoping to find someone that could offer more help. The last thing I wanted to do was return to Lt. Naito without accomplishing this task.

Our soldiers all appeared to be completely brown—covered in vast amounts of dirt. It rained down constantly from the result of each loud thud from American artillery. Our machine guns were firing at the same time, creating a deafening orchestra. Spent shells from machine guns and rifles were jumping and pinging as they struck each other, forming piles that showed how long the soldiers had been in that position. There was another horrid smell mixed with the dirt, sweat, and gunpowder—piss and shit. Since the Americans started bombarding Suribachi, no one wanted to leave the tunnels and venture outside. I desperately wanted to leave this place knowing safety didn't exist outside either.

“I need to find the General! Where's General Shibata? Lt. Naito has a message that must be delivered to him!”

The few replies I got were of no help. I couldn't believe how disorganized our communication was already, not even three full days into battle. Not liking my options, I decided to return to the Lt. and face his wrath. Peeking out the tunnel entrance, I had a vantage point where a vast stretch of ocean appeared before me. Everywhere there were American ships. There must've been hundreds of them. Right then and there my mind

started to wonder at the size of this force. Maybe this had to do with Lt. Naito's note that was so important to get to the General. I tried to compose myself before my sprint back to the bunker. Grabbing my Arisaka rifle until my right hand felt as if it would give out, I ran back over the same open ground.

The fire was significantly more intense this time. You can always tell when you're being shot at when that "snap" is heard as bullets ricochet off different surfaces—dirt, rocks, or what few trees exist. Every interaction has a slightly different behavior and accompanying sound. Without question, they tried to catch me this time. The distance I needed to cover had to be at least one hundred yards, which is easier said than done when wearing a full set of gear and lacking proper food or water. Explosions were becoming frequent as they were clearly shifting some of their artillery eastward away from Suribachi. Upon reaching the bunker, Lt. Naito was waiting for me.

Escalation

"Hiroshi! Did you deliver the message? Come on, out with it. What did General Shibata say? Answer me!"

"Sir, he told me he would send a runner with a response soon. That's all he said, sir."

"Get ready, Hiroshi. We're going on the attack soon. As soon as we get some reinforcements, we'll break through their lines!"

Somewhere on my run back, the decision came that I wasn't going to tell the Lt. I failed to find Shibata and give him the message. Lt. Naito had a reputation I wasn't going to put to the test. Word was he helped convince some "cowardly" soldiers to take their own lives rather than bring further shame to Japan and the Emperor. Grenades were the

method of choice—hand each coward one and let him blow himself to bits. That certainly wasn't the only story I had heard about this man, and I even had my own experiences. A few weeks ago, we were training bayonet lunges against straw targets. Lt. Naito was instructing and showing us places where we could stab the enemy and keep them alive—suffering. With one of my first attempts, in my anxiousness, I missed the stomach and stabbed directly where the heart would be. The Lt. was furious and grabbed my rifle from my hands and used its butt against my skull. He was getting ready for a second blow when General Kuribayashi saw what was happening and put an immediate stop to it. I remember the General's words to Naito: "Don't punish the men for killing an enemy. That lunge would've killed him immediately." Today, he wasn't going to get the satisfaction of punishing me. When Naito left the bunker, I pulled out the note to examine its contents before disposing it.

General Shibata,

I have been unable to get word on reinforcements. I fear we may not be able to hold out much longer. The enemy is trying to cut off our forces between your positions in the mountain and the airfield. Tonight, we will break through their lines and link up with forces to the east. They will not surround us. We are prepared to die to the last man if necessary. We are running low on ammunition, rations, and are short on drinkable water. The foreign devils will never take us prisoner. We will continue to fight for our Emperor!

Lt. Naito

Desperation came creeping into my mind. Naito made it sound like it was a sure thing that we were getting reinforcements. Lying prick. Convinces others to kill themselves, and lies to us to keep us from knowing what's really going on here. We're completely on our own. The difference between the soldiers fighting here and in Suribachi was stark. Here, the tan-colored uniforms retained their form. The smell of our own waste was gone. There were ten of us in this bunker, with slits in the concrete to fire through while in protection. The bunker was so thick that it withstood the huge shells from enemy ships. From this position, we could look ahead to where the island slopes downward towards the landing beach. Resting the end of my Arisaka rifle on the slit, I saw a group of Americans running up the slope towards us. Taking aim, I held my breath and took a carefully aimed shot. It hit a medic in the stomach—exactly where I aimed. We had constantly been drilled to wound, not kill, the medics. Many Americans would risk their lives to save medics.

Sure enough as the medic hit the ground, four men turned to try and help him out. One of these men that turned carried a flamethrower. I worked the bolt-action, chambered another round, and took aim for his exposed tank. Exhaling and resting my rifle back on the concrete, the bullet exploded from the barrel and flew on a rope straight through the tank. The impact knocked the man down to the ground. Fuel sprayed the ground and the flamethrower carrier. In the process, he must've pressed the trigger on his gun by mistake. The result was a large ball of orange flame that immediately engulfed his entire body. I could hear his screams clearly over the sound of the artillery guns and machine gun fire—even from a distance of about sixty or seventy yards.

The other three men checking on the medic spread to avoid the fire. The medic was no longer crawling on the ground and looked to be abandoned now. My first two kills of the battle. One of the machine gunners standing next to me had been firing nonstop, and I could smell the heat pouring off the weapon. The last cartridge is ejected and he starts to frantically yell.

“I’m out of ammo! I need more ammo!”

Lt. Naito comes running back into the bunker. After reading his note, I feel even greater hatred towards this man. The man can’t be taller than 5’6”, his clean-shaven face never displayed any emotion but anger, and he was always yelling at someone. By now, the sun had almost set on the third day of combat.

“Men, prepare your weapons. We are going to attack during nightfall. You must make them pay for each step. Do not die before taking as many lives as you can. Make the Emperor proud. If any of you think about retreating and bringing shame to his name, you will answer to me.”

To me, this attack didn’t make sense. Even though ammo was becoming a problem, Lt. Naito was jumping to the most desperate answer before it was necessary. We could hold them off longer, and we didn’t have a large enough force to break through. Other faces told me no one could say anything. Naito always tried to install intimidation in his men, so his orders would never be questioned. We were going to attack and face who knows how many enemies. Walking outside, I could see there were around thirty of us. Some attack. Worried faces, heavy breathing, sweat trickling down faces and darkening uniforms, this was a tired bunch of soldiers. This kind of tired couldn’t be helped by a night of sleep. Drinking poor water that results in diarrhea and

scrounging for worms can only sustain life for so long. But I guess it was still better than surrendering to the Americans—surely they would torture or kill us outright. At least, that’s what we had been taught.

Offensive

“Tenno heika banzai!” (Long live the Emperor!)

Under the cover of darkness, our attempt to break through enemy lines to the east began. All thirty of us took off in a dead sprint for the airfield, running through exposed terrain. Our offensive had barely begun when we heard loud pops high above us. Suddenly, we could make out each other much more clearly. Flares. We were already covering exposed ground, and now we were lit up for all to see. Before we ever see the enemy, we heard their guns and saw dozens of bright muzzle flashes ahead of us. They were waiting in shallow trenches dug into the hard ground. Dirt and sand showered us as bullets impacted at an alarming rate. The man in front of me fell forward and slumped immediately after machine gun bullets traced right through his head. I still had my rifle with some ammo, but a few others didn’t even carry a weapon. Artillery fire soon joined the machine guns as a couple bodies were torn apart. One man had his body cut clean in half, as the top half was flung clear of our attack.

I witnessed two of our men try to turn and retreat. A shell landed right on top of them before they had made it ten yards. New flares gave greater light to the situation. Ahead to my right, I could clearly tell where one machine gun was positioned. It was focused off to my left. Forcing myself to stop and take a knee, I chambered a round in my rifle and took aim. He was lying on the ground right next to a large grey rock. The ground between us was completely flat and couldn’t have been more than thirty or thirty-five

yards. His prone position made it impossible to search for a large target like his chest, so I would have to go for a headshot. Slowly pressing the trigger, controlling my breath was a huge challenge after sprinting. My training betrayed me as my shot missed my mark. However, it still hit home around his right cheek. Blood sprayed from the fatal wound, and one machine gun was silenced. Out the corner of my left eye, I saw Lt. Naito hiding behind a tree. He had a grenade in his hand and was in the process of pulling the pin. Instantaneously, a handful of bullets sliced his stomach and chest as he began to turn. Scanning the muzzle flashes located another MG position. Artillery was consistently landing amongst our ranks. My head pounded and hurt from each shell's impact. The gunner was reloading and gave me a window to fire my shot. Suddenly, an explosion a few feet to my left lifted my legs off the ground. I could see fading flares for a second, and then everything went black.

Pounding at the back of my head woke me after some time. It was still the dead of night, and I could hear the faint shelling and fighting at Suribachi. There was a faint metallic smell mixed with the smell of . . . Did I piss my pants? How long have I been lying here? Glancing down at my pants, the darkened spot around the crotch confirmed the humiliating end to my glorious offensive for our Emperor. As I sat up, the pounding only increased as I felt for the source of the pain. My left hand returned from the back of my head to reveal that I was bleeding, or had been bleeding. Flares were still being fired and exploding in the sky constantly, but there were no shots being fired. My body was intact somehow, while others around me weren't so lucky. Bodies were riddled with holes and bloodstains, or missing limbs. One man's entrails were leading away from his body; another had a huge hole in the middle of the face, making identification impossible.

While crouched down examining his body, a groan close by stopped me dead in my tracks.

Toughest fight

For whatever reason, I expected to find one of our men wounded. However, an American medic was the source of the noise. It was a faint noise, one that signified he was hurt. There was no way to know how hurt he was, so I slowly crept forward with my rifle up and ready to quickly aim at a target. The wounded man was covered up by a dead rifleman, and I slowly used my rifle to move the corpse. My focus was shattered like the flares bursting above. In that instant where the dead body flopped over, the first thing I saw was a silver pistol aimed right at my chest. My first instinct was to drop to my left and hit the dirt without trying to beat him to the punch. The long barrel of my rifle nudged his pistol enough to move it off the mark of a fatal wound. A loud bang rang out in the meantime and I felt a sudden, excruciating pain in my right leg. I sat up and used my rifle to swing at his pistol and was successful in knocking it away before a second shot could find its home. It happened at the same instant, and the second bullet zoomed past my right ear.

Pounding sensations in my head were overtaken by buzzing and ringing from this near miss. This man's lips were saying something now, while his hands were straining to reach his displaced pistol. Not wanting him to even the odds, my foot kicked at it and achieved the desired result. The pistol landed on a rock and made a heavy clanging noise. He screamed and grit his teeth, kicking my right leg just below the knee. This brought me down to a knee as I discovered there was still plenty of fight left in him.

Despite the blood-soaked stomach of this man, he was sitting up and grabbed my rifle before I could line up any kind of shot. Every bit of my weight was brought into trying to shove my rifle into his chest and knock him on his back. His right hand dropped quickly and struck me in the face hard enough to lose my grip on my rifle. Suddenly, my mouth was wet and filled with a bitter taste. This punch staggered me and as I was forced to take a step backwards, the medic lunged forward and took a wild swing with his right arm. However, it was sluggish and gave me just enough time to duck, load up, and strike with my right fist. I aimed for the bulls eye located on his stomach and connected hard. A large scream of pain came out of his mouth and he dropped immediately. An opening presented itself and instead of landing another blow, I searched frantically for my Arisaka.

It was lying in the dirt a few feet behind my position. Reaching down to pick it up, its barrel was submerged in bloody dirt. Another airburst of flares showed me the surroundings and I noticed how many dead were around us. The blackened corpse of the flamethrower soldier still gave the smell of fuel that bristled the hairs in my nose. I turned as fast as I could to line up a quick shot with my rifle. The medic was struggling to his feet, holding his left hand on his stomach. My sights were locked onto his chest, with small enough distance where I couldn't miss. Pressure clicking the trigger gave way to disappointment as no round followed. No bullet was chambered. The window was closing along with the distance between us. I worked the bolt-action to load another bullet and fire without taking the time to bring the iron sights back to my eye and the butt to my shoulder. His shoulder charged and struck my stomach, but this time I wasn't going to drop my weapon. One of my fingernails became mangled because my grip was

as strong as could be. We tumbled violently to the ground rolling around a couple times. I ended up on top and delivered a hard blow with my rifle butt to his stomach wound.

Chance encounter

Instinct told me that I already needed to be looking down my sights and fire before his adrenaline kicked in and he could recover once again. The medic had no shot of retrieving his pistol, and put his hands up slightly as if giving in. Everything told me that there was no room for hesitation, or compassion, and that he would kill me without a second thought. The pounding in my head had gotten worse with the shot to my jaw, and I was really feeling the gunshot wound in my right leg. At least the ringing in my ears had subsided. I can't say why but I didn't want to shoot him. The bullshit offensive had taken my lust for killing, or something along those lines. I just stared at this man for a few seconds when I saw a bronze Olympic medal sitting next to his body. It was partially covered in blackish dirt, but I could make out the date—1936.

My gun started to come down a bit as the faint trace of a smile came to my lips. By this time, his face scrunched into a frown. No doubt he was trying to figure out what the hell I was doing, and his face showed nothing but dirt mixed with blood. The blood did not belong to him and must've come from the body that was piled on top of him a couple minutes earlier. In this moment following our struggle, it seemed as though we were the only living men on the whole island. The audio told a much different story. I could not see any of my own soldiers, except remnants of Lt. Naito's "heroic breakthrough," and could see no American soldiers anywhere. Off to my right was Suribachi, and even though it was a good distance from us, there was still a lot of heavy

fighting there. The occasional pops of artillery shells landing on the mountainside were mixed with steady machine gun fire.

My rifle's connection with his stomach wound opened it back up as blood seeped through the formerly white bandage and ran down the legs of his pants. With my right hand, I pointed to his pack that had fallen to the ground in the midst of our brief struggle. The medic's head turned sharply and he noticed that my aim set on the red cross of his green medic bag. He just looked at me for a couple seconds with scrunched eyebrows. Eventually, his hard face softened a bit and he gave me a curt nod. Knowing that this uneasy truce could give way at a moment's notice, my hands slowly grabbed the bag and I took a look at the contents. All I could find was a small shiny pair of scissors and a few threads where bandage dressings used to reside. Clearly, this medic had tended to many men, as his supplies were very low. Something was needed to wrap the stomach and stunt the bleeding. I searched my pouches and came up empty, save for my few rounds of ammunition. Somewhere along the way, I had sustained a rip in the front of my uniform. Three strong tugs and it was free, and clean enough to fasten around this man.

“Why didn't you just kill me? The fuck are you doing this for?”

I had no idea what he was saying, and even if I spoke his language, his speech was somewhat labored. As soon as it was applied and wrapped tightly, the tan of my uniform quickly began to soak up his blood like a sponge. This seemed like as good a time as any to try and talk to him.

“Watashi Hiroshi (I am Hiroshi).”

“My name's James. Thanks for tryin to fix me up. I don't understand why you did it though.”

Reaching into my pocket, I found what I hoped would still be there—a picture that would help explain my actions. I handed him the picture and closely watched his face as he took his time looking it over. This time, James was the one to smile. He began to talk as he held up his medal proudly for me to see.

“No shit? You were at the ‘36 Games? Know what I got this for? Small-Bore rifle shooting. Just missed out on Silver. I know what you’re thinkin. This guy can shoot a rifle and medal at the fuckin Olympics. Now here he is as a goddamn medic. I don’t blame you if you don’t understand it. To tell the truth, killing a man is something that I can’t bring myself to do. You’re the first I ever shot at.”

The picture I showed James was of my father and I at the ‘36 Olympics. My father had his arm around my shoulder as we stood in front of a wooden signpost with *Berlin* written on it. Among the events we watched was the rifle shooting. I hadn’t recognized him during our fight, but it was coming back to me nine years later.

I pointed away from James with my rifle and mimicked the posture of an Olympic shooter. His grin widened as he understood what I was trying to say and show him, that we watched him win his bronze medal.

“Ha. No shit. Yeah, I had hoped to compete in ‘40 again. But I got a shoulder injury that kept me out of qualification rounds. The goddamn war kept the games from happening anyway. Who woulda thought, here on this little shitty island, I’d run into someone that watched me shoot. Too bad I couldn’t compete in ‘40. Maybe we woulda seen each other again. How you like that. Come on, Hiroshi. Better let me take a look at that leg.”

As we talked to each other, I wished we could actually understand what the other was saying. I wished I could tell him about the influence watching those Olympic shooters had on my future. My father was so intrigued and impressed by the sport that he began to train me to shoot. He never told me how or where he learned, but taught me of the importance that it very well might have in my future. In 1940, when Japan signed the tripartite pact with Italy and Germany, my father got the sense of foreboding that I would probably end up in the army sooner or later as world tensions grew. I remember our training sessions out in the country, and his words of encouragement to me.

“Anata wa itsuka kore o hitsuyō to shimasu. Tsuneni anata no kokyū o oboete iru, namerakade antei shita. Anata ga shotto o toru toki ni hakidasu.” (You will need this someday. Always remember your breathing, smooth and steady. Exhale when you take a shot).

Revelation

“Hiroshi, I’ll tell you why I’m a medic. My father was a sharpshooter during the First World War. He told me horror stories about his experiences, about looking through his scope and seeing the faces of the men that he killed. He told me he was responsible for killing more than twenty men during the war. He had trouble sleeping, occasional nightmares. When I told him I planned on joining the Marines, he hated the idea. I told him I felt like I had to do it. Eventually, I assured him that I would become a medic. So I compromised and ended up in the Navy. Save men instead of killing them.”

James found a bandage in a pouch that I hadn’t looked in. It felt odd to me that he didn’t point this out when it came time to bandage his wound, but used it for my leg. James kept talking to me, but his tone dropped and seemed to become more somber now.

“I don’t know where my brother is. He was carrying a flamethrower, so he should be easy to spot. I saw him down by the beach yesterday. Can’t leave here without knowing. It’s been such a fuckin mess, dead bodies, wounded, all over the place. I gotta find him.”

With a wince of pain, he reached into another pouch and produced a picture of his own and handed it to me. It was a picture of him in his medic uniform he was currently wearing. Alongside was another man, a little taller and more muscular. This other man held a flamethrower in his hands. Turning over the photo, I saw the words: *James and Ralph Harrison*. While I had friends here on Iwo Jima, it made me relieved that I didn’t have a brother to worry about—always wondering if he was still okay. James’s health was getting worse as we talked and he was taking longer breaths, each a bit tougher and more drawn out. Bandaging the wound was not enough. He needed to get to a doctor, or at the very least, another medic. It didn’t help matters that if James gave me instructions on what to do, I couldn’t understand what he was saying anyway.

There was also the horrible realization that came from seeing his brother Ralph, standing there with his flamethrower. My mind returned to the scene when that flamethrower soldier came running towards my bunker. I shot and punctured his fuel tank, deliberately, in the chance that it could hurt others in proximity. The pouring fuel ignited and he burned alive. Not a quick death. I knew what I was doing when I took that shot, and I made a man suffer tremendously through my decision. Now it hit me like a punch to the gut that this man was Ralph. He never got that close to my position, but I had a clear enough look at his face to recognize it in the photo. Even if James and I could

effectively communicate, I don't know how I would explain myself to him. My actions were the results of my training, but somehow, that didn't bring me any comfort.

“Kimi, ryouji ga iru. Eiseihei made tsurete iku.” (You need treatment. I'm gonna get you to a medic).

Grabbing his arm, I helped bring him to his feet. I threw his right arm over my neck and slowly walked with him down the slope towards the beach. He couldn't support his own weight, and my leg wound gave me a pretty serious limp. As soon as we started the decline, the landing crafts, armor, and massive ships came into full view. Most of all, there were thousands of Americans there. Some were frantically running back and forth, tending to the wounded. Others were still on the beach, either dead or on the verge. A couple of the soldiers spotted us and came running up to us, and specifically paid special attention to me. Two rifles were staring me right in the face, and it was probably a good thing that I couldn't understand the words. James didn't hesitate to wave them off with his left hand.

“Wait. Wait! Don't shoot! He needs someone to look at his leg. He's got a bit of a head wound too. He helped bandage me up.”

James and I were allowed to continue further down to the beach. I couldn't believe the scene that unfolded next. Numerous medics were going to work on Americans, but I also spotted three other Japanese soldiers here on the beach. It was the last thing I would've expected—American medics helping our men. If Lt. Naito, or another officer of that mindset, had seen my actions, I would've been branded a traitor and killed without question—along with these other three men. Choosing not to kill an

enemy, bandaging him, and bringing him to help, would have brought shame to our emperor and myself.

Instead, I was gingerly walking with James down to the beach, not knowing what my future had in store. In not killing James, I took the chance that maybe not everything I heard about the foreign devils was true. My brief experiences with this American medic were not what I ever would've expected. This wasn't the enemy I was supposed to see, supposed to kill. Maybe I can make it through this war after all. At the very least, I'm afraid that I will never be able to forget what I did to James's brother Ralph. No one should have to die that way.