

PACIFIC 1939-1945: IWO JIMA

WHY WAS THE BATTLE FOR IWO JIMA SO IMPORTANT TO AMERICA?

Photograph of the Iwo Jima campaign 21st February 1945

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Source a



YORK 288-6 - 1030 (-10), 21 FEB. 1945 - K17-24" - ALT. 2000'
IWO JIMA - A DIVISION OF F6FS ATTACKING IN SUPPORT OF THE GROUND FORCES.

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What is this source?

This photograph comes from an official report on the fighting at Iwo Jima. It shows a division of F6Fs (fighter bombers) attacking in support of ground forces. British naval officers, acting as observers, probably took the photograph as the main forces at Iwo Jima were American.

All of these materials were top secret at the time. The main reason for this detailed investigation was probably to see what further defences the Japanese might have built on the rest of their islands.

What's the background to this source?

During the 1930s Japan emerged as a major world power. It had ambitions to build a great empire in Asia and the Pacific. To do this Japan would have to defeat the USA, and in December 1941 Japanese forces attacked and sank the US Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Japanese successes continued into 1942 until May of that year when US forces destroyed Japan's aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway. From this point the USA gradually drove Japanese forces back. By 1945 US forces reached the first of the islands that made up Japan's homelands – Iwo Jima.

The attack began on February 19th 1945. The Japanese plan was to cause as many casualties as possible to the invading Americans. The troops and their commander knew their role was to delay the Americans while their comrades prepared to defend the rest of Japan. It was effectively a suicide mission. Iwo Jima was heavily defended by over 20 000 troops with plenty of artillery and other equipment. They were dug into a system of caves and bunkers. They fought ferociously. When the battle ended on March 16th 1945 US casualties totalled almost 28 000 (with over 8000 dead). Japanese casualties were almost 21 000 dead out of a force of 22 000. Those not killed in fighting committed suicide.

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It's worth knowing that...

The political and military leaders of Japan were determined to fight to the bitter end, even though it was clear by 1945 that they had lost the war. At the time huge American bombing raids were devastating the Japanese mainland.

It may be that one of the reasons the Japanese fought so hard was to cause heavy casualties and try to get the Allies to negotiate peace rather than demand a Japanese surrender.

How will you use this source?

1. What is happening in the photograph?
2. Do you think an attack like this would have destroyed the defences shown in the other photographs in the source box?
3. Does this photograph help to explain the high casualties described in the report the Allied campaigns at Iwo Jima and Okinawa?
4. If you were a politician or a military commander in 1945, how would this photograph affect your views about how to carry on the war against Japan?
5. Is there any information from the source or notes that you could use in your presentation?