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Men and equipment on the black-sand beaches of Iwo Jima. USMC Photo

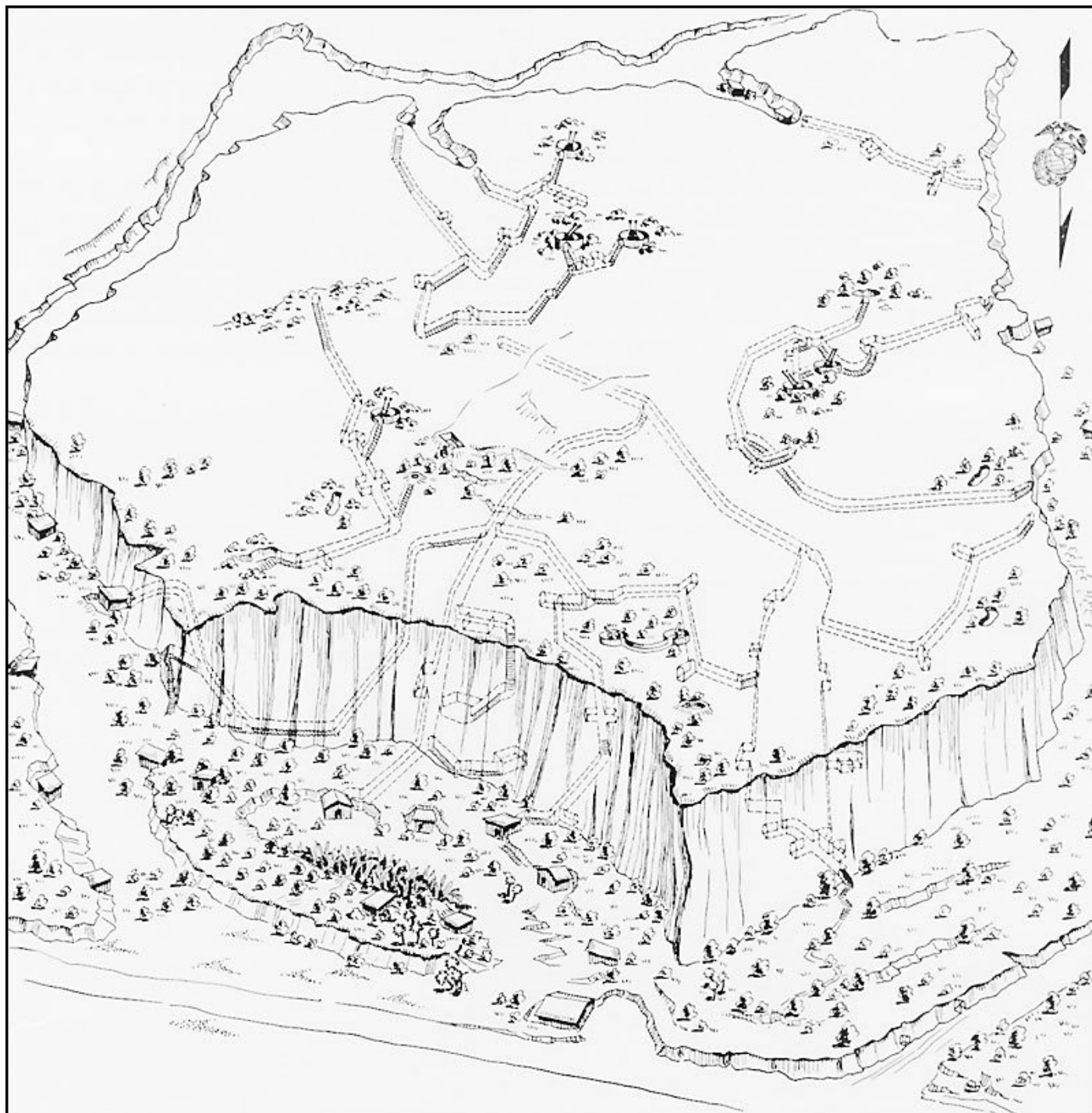
By February of 1945, Japan still controlled many Pacific islands. Those which had been lost followed a typical battle plan. As Allied troops came ashore, the defenders would shoot to kill before the enemy reached the beach. The defense of Iwo Jima, however, would be different. No one would fire a shot until the island's black sands were clogged with men and equipment.

Lt. General Tadamichi Kuribayashi commanded nearly 22,000 troops on Iwo Jima in February of 1945. Part of Japan itself, the island represented "sacred soil" to its defenders. Their job was to make the island impregnable. Their mission was to prevent Allied forces from capturing this stepping stone to Japan's home islands - or die trying.

The USS Spearfish (SS 190), a Navy submarine, had paid a surreptitious visit to the island in the late fall of 1944. Through the sub's periscope, ship's personnel observed a great deal of Japanese activity on Iwo. Their photographs, including this panoramic view of Suribachi's base, helped invaders plan their mission.

To defend Japanese soil, Kuribayashi ordered his men to construct miles of underground tunnels and to build concealed pillboxes and bunkers. Defenders were thus completely hidden from view.

We get a sense of this hidden-from-view approach, at Iwo Jima, from this sketch prepared by the 31st U.S. Naval Construction Battalion. Included in *Iwo Jima: Amphibious Epic* (a USMC Historical Monograph by Lt. Col. Whitman S. Bartley, USMC), at [page 130](#), the drawing depicts Hill 362A. The "dotted lines indicate underground construction."



Robert E. Allen, in his book *The First Battalion of the 28th Marines on Iwo Jima: A Day-by-Day History*, tells us about these specific defenses (and how they impacted advancing Marines):

The reverse slopes of 362A boasted many strongly fortified positions. These were designed to entrap advancing marines in the open area between 362A and Nishi Ridge [which was located about 200 yards north of 362A]. Crossfire between the reverse slope of 362A and Nishi Ridge devastated Fifth Division troops on March 2 and March 3. (Allen, at [page 279](#).)

To protect their airfields, the Japanese installed 127mm dual-mount anti-aircraft guns. One such gun, covering the island's eastern beaches, was knocked out by U.S. forces before the invasion.

The defenders also made ready with 320mm (spigot) mortars. (For a description of them, scroll down 60% on [this link](#).)

Japanese-planted mine fields would cause great difficulties for the invaders, disabling tanks and killing men. Marines would have to clear the area before any support vehicles could move forward. White tape would have to designate lanes of safe travel.



Suribachi flamethrowers. USMC Photo 110599

From their positions atop Suribachi, the Japanese had a clear view of the landing beaches and the southern section of Iwo Jima. Their wooden rocket launchers would come in handy to ward off an attack.

Iwo's defenders were protecting sacred soil. They held the honor of Japan in their hands. Every man picked for the job was prepared to fight to the death. They may have believed, as von Urach did, that:

One can only understand the enormous power that the emperor cult gives the Japanese people once one has seen it in action in Japanese life. The materialistic peoples of America and England cannot understand this form of state religion. They do not comprehend it. They cannot understand the enormous strength the emperor cult gives the Japanese people. This strength is spiritual, and can outweigh superior fleets of battleships and armaments budgets.

Or ... maybe not.

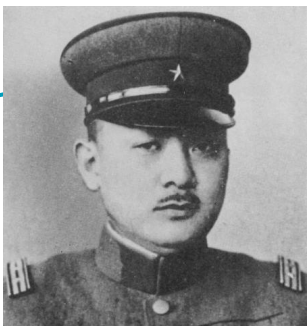
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Media Stream

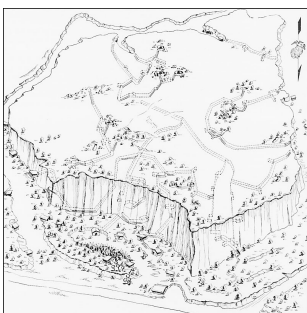


Lt. General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, Commander of Troops in Iwo

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Iwo Jima Tunnel Defenses

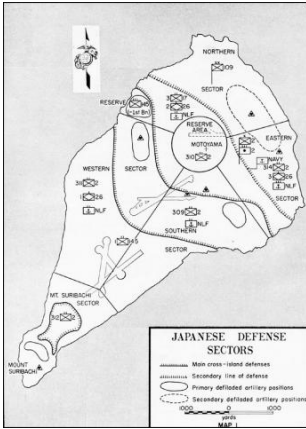
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Navy Submarine

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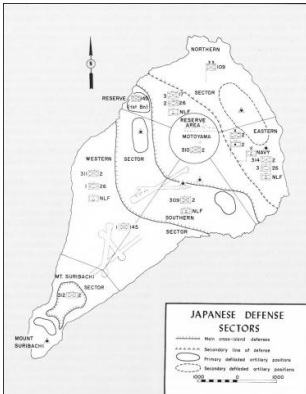
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Japanese Defense Sectors Map

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Map of Japanese Defense Sectors in Iwo Jima

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127mm Dual-Mount Anti-Aircraft Gun - Japanese Defense

Photo, U.S. National Archives.

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127mm Anti-Aircraft Gun Knocked Out by US Forces

Photo, U.S. National Archives.

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320mm Spigot Mortars

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Tanks in Iwo Jima were Disabled by Japanese-planted Mine Fields

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Marines Clearing the Area and Checking for Mine Fields

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On Top of Mount Suribachi where Japanese Viewed Coast

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Wooden Rocket Launchers used by Japanese to Ward Off Attacks

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