

'Our guys never knew what hit them'

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Iwo Jima survivor shares heroics by black Marine units on final day of battle

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — In the pre-dawn stillness of the Iwo Jima airfield on March 26, 1945, Branford's Vinnie Thomas couldn't sleep. As he watched Marines light flares for planes to land, he heard, at a distance, a commotion. It was coming from a complex of tents.

Later that morning he would learn about the actions of Marines from the 8th Ammunition Company and the 36th Depot Company, both black Marine units, who, until that day, had been segregated and relegated to non-combat duty.

On the occasion of Black History Month, the 92-year-old, who's previously been averse to sharing his seven weeks on the 8-square-mile sulfur-reeking island, wants their show of extraordinary valor to be remembered and honored.

"I didn't think anything of what I heard," Thomas recalled. After 36 consecutive days of what would constitute among the ferocious fighting of World War II, resulting in more than 26,000 American casualties, including 6,821 dead, "the fighting was over."

More than a month before, on Feb. 23, Marines had fought their way to the

top of Mount Suribachi, the most prominent landmark of the island, and hoisted the American flag. As much as the moment, captured in an iconic photograph, buoyed the spirit of the war-weary American people, the battle would continue for several more weeks.

On March 16, the island was declared secure. Organized resistance, it seemed, had ceased.

Ten days later, nearly 200 men lay peacefully asleep in a group of tents, "a mixed bag," Thomas said, "of Marine shore parties and supply troops, Air Corps crewmen, Army anti-aircraft men and Seabees."

"They had bedded down believing they weren't in any danger," he added.

At around 5:15 a.m., 300 Japanese forces emerged from the vast network of underground tunnels. Within seconds, they were everywhere, slashing tent walls, knifing sleeping men, throwing hand grenades and ceremonial swords and firing automatic weapons.

"Our guys never knew what hit them," Thomas said. "The enemy commander, Kuribayashi, did it as a silent attack. That was different from the loud banzai charges of previous battles. And he picked the

spot where he could inflict maximum destruction before they went down.

"They knew they were going to die, and they were going to die slaughtering Americans."

In all, they killed 42 pilots in their sleep with swords and bayonets, and wounded 88.

By a stroke of fortune, the Japanese penetrated the Marine lines in the area where First Lt. Harry Martin's platoon was encamped. The swashbuckling Martin, who would be awarded the Medal of Honor and the Purple Heart for his bravery that morning, immediately organized a firing line. Among those who helped him systematically beat back wave after wave of Japanese attacks were two African-American units.

They were known as the Montford Point Marines of the 8th Ammunition Company and the 36th Depot Company. Following a 1941 executive order by President Franklin D. Roosevelt compelling armed forces to accept blacks into the service, they were the first black Americans to serve in the Marine Corps.

According to Thomas, most of the roughly 700 black soldiers were assigned to segregated battal-

ions and units on Iwo Jima and restricted from front-line combat duty to ammunition and supply roles.

That didn't stop them from playing integral non-combat roles.

They braved Japanese fire, as military historian Bernard C. Nalty writes, "as they struggled in the volcanic sand to unload and shuttle ammunition and other supplies to the front lines." Under enemy fire, they also, Time Magazine reported, "piloted amphibious truck units during perilous shore landings, helped bury the dead, and weathered Japanese onslaughts on their positions."

At no time, it seems, were they more essential than when they helped repulse the surprise enemy attack on March 26, 1945. Thomas learned later that they were the first on the scene. After 90 minutes of furious fighting, Iwo Jima's last battle was over.

"I saw the aftermath," Thomas said. "It was horrible, bloody, blood-spattered tents, bodies strewn all around, but it could have been a lot worse."

Two members of that 36th Depot Company — Privates James M. Whitlock and James Davis — earned the Bronze Star for "heroic



Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

Vinnie Thomas, of Branford, shared the heroic actions of black Marine units in the Battle of Iwo Jima.

achievement." One Marine from the depot company and another from the ammunition company were fatally wounded, but four others, two from each unit, survived their wounds.

"If the black Marines hadn't come to the rescue, it would have been a hell of a

massacre," Thomas said.

In the end, "it didn't matter what they were assigned to do. When the test came, they were Marines. A Marine is a Marine."

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