

Flags of Our Fathers: commemorating Iwo Jima

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By David McNeill

Hollywood superstar Clint Eastwood wants to tell both sides of one of the Second World War's most infamous battles. Is he walking into a minefield?

Early in 2005, as Japan was gearing up for a summer of painful World War II anniversaries, Shindo Yoshitaka received an unusual phone call. Hollywood superstar Clint Eastwood was planning to visit Tokyo in April and would very much like to meet the Japanese Diet member to discuss a project he was working on. Was he available?

"Of course I said yes," Councilor Shindo recalled.

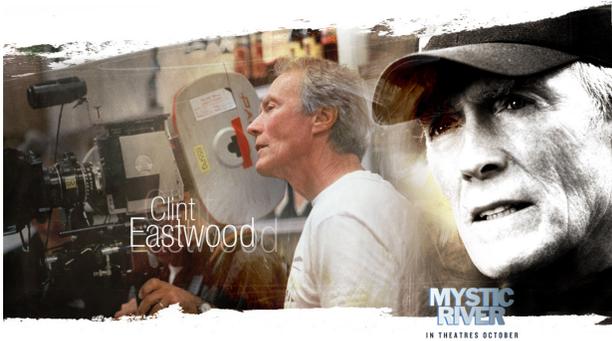
The project was a movie about Iwo Jima, a speck of volcanic rock in the Pacific Ocean about 700 miles south of Tokyo that was the site of one of warfare's most brutal battles. Shaped like a teardrop, the 8-square-mile island - a third the size of Manhattan -- was blasted almost flat, becoming what one veteran called a "sulphurous, crater-filled hellhole" in six weeks of intense fighting in February and March 1945.



Iwo Jima

When the fighting stopped, 7,000 mostly US soldiers were dead and just 200 of the 21,800 Japanese troops defending the island had been taken alive. The black sands of Iwo Jima passed into military legend, immortalized in a famous photograph by Joe Rosenthal showing a group of battered, exhausted Marines raising the Stars and Stripes on Mount Suribachi on Feb. 23, 1945. The battle remains, even after 60 years of blood-soaked history in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, the US Marines' deadliest: nearly one third of all Marines killed in World War 2 died on the island.

Like many Japanese, Shindo wondered what the two-time Oscar-winning director would make of this story. The gung-ho star of prime slabs of Americana such as Heartbreak Ridge and Dirty Harry, Eastwood is famously right-wing; a longstanding Republican who supported presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Wouldn't Eastwood's effort - tentatively titled *Lamps Before the Wind* - be a replay of the infamous Sands of Iwo Jima, starring another Hollywood tough guy, John Wayne?



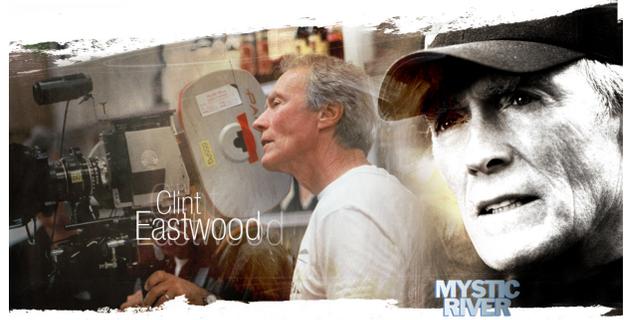
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Eastwood

Sands, made just four years after the soldiers returned home, was as shrill and jingoistic as a piece of Stalinist propaganda and became a recruiting poster for a generation of Marines. It inspired, among others, Ron Kovic, the paraplegic Vietnam veteran whose story was dramatized in *Born on the Fourth of July*. With its big-hearted US grunts pitted against fanatical, banzai-screaming ‘Nips’ and ‘Japs,’ the movie has few fans in Japan, where many old soldiers know that John Wayne never served a day in the armed forces.

When he met Eastwood, however, Shindo was pleasantly surprised. “He told me he didn’t want to make a movie simply about war, but about families and the human heart,” says the lawmaker, who believes Western movies about wartime Japan focus too much on what the Japanese call *gyokusai*, literally meaning to ‘pulverize the jewel’ but referring to the Japanese military tradition of dying an honorable death, often in suicidal mass charges. “He wants to tell the story from both sides.”

Shindo has a personal stake in the project: his grandfather General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, was handpicked by Emperor Hirohito to lead the defense of Iwo Jima.



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General Kuribayashi Tadamichi

Eastwood’s Tokyo trip, during which he flew to Iwo Jima and met survivors and politicians including Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro, confirms reports that the ageing, increasingly introspective star had something of an epiphany while working on a long-cherished project to turn the bestselling book *Flags of Our Fathers*, by James Bradley and Ron Powers, into a movie.

The film - Eastwood’s 26th as director -- finishes shooting this month. It tells the story of the young Marines in the iconic Rosenthal photo. Three never got off the island alive, while the rest became reluctant heroes, ferried from city to city to whip up morale and flog war bonds before disappearing into postwar obscurity.

Eastwood may hope that the tragic tale of the rise and fall of ordinary American heroes used then discarded by forces beyond their control, will resonate with contemporary US audiences increasingly weary of the war in Iraq. Or perhaps the Hollywood icon who supported the brutal US 1983 invasion of tiny island Grenada believes he can rally the troops with the retelling of classic American derring-do. Either way, somewhere during filming he realized he was only telling half the story and decided, remarkably, to make a second film. “Sometimes

you have a premonition...and just have to trust your gut," he told Time magazine.

Participants in the project say he developed an 'almost obsessive' interest in the battle, and particularly in General Kuribayashi, a disciplined and loyal Imperial warrior who was told to defend the island at all costs to give the mainland time to prepare for the expected US invasion. Like the defense of Okinawa, also designed to slow rather than halt the American advance, it was a mission all knew was doomed, and soon after Iwo Jima fell the US began carpet bombing Japanese cities.

"We brought supplies to the island before the fighting began and we gave the soldiers left behind all we had, including personal possessions," says Kitahara Koji, who was a 23-year-old Japanese Navy recruit at the time. "We knew they weren't coming back."

Kuribayashi drove his men relentlessly, digging more than 11 miles of tunnels in scorching heat and orchestrating a murderous defensive campaign before apparently committing ritual suicide. His body has never been found. Hundreds of press-ganged Iwo natives and thousands of Korean laborers were among the dead.

The self-willed Japanese general, imbued with the spirit of the quasi-religious Bushido cult, is a standard trope of countless Japanese war movies, as much a cliché as the bug-eyed scarf-wearing Arabs that populate US movies about the Middle East, but Shindo says he hopes the movie will show another, less well-known side to his grandfather.

"I'd like people to see that he was full of love for his family and children. Japanese soldiers like him were not fighting just to die honorably. The reason they fought to the last man was to delay the air raids on their families and the Japanese people. It doesn't matter if the soldiers were from America or Japan; they fought to protect their families."

Eastwood is clearly aiming for authenticity. He has hired Japanese-American writer Iris Yamashita to write the script and reportedly intends to hire some of the cream of Japanese acting. Like all American filmmakers today, he has a financial interest in getting Japan right: the country is the world's second-biggest market for Hollywood movies, one reason why the barbaric, buck-toothed stereotype of yore has disappeared from movies like Pearl Harbour, which showed clean-cut Japanese pilots warning American children to flee the bombing. And was a box office hit in Japan.

But the star got a taste of potential problems with the project when he met Governor Ishihara, under whose jurisdiction the island falls. In between jokes about the perils of being mayor (Eastwood was once mayor of Carmel, California) Ishihara said that Iwo Jima is a 'sacred place' for the Japanese and pointedly said he wanted 'national sentiments to be respected.' Ishihara's famously anti-American politics were formed during the war when he remembers being strafed 'for fun' by US planes "with pictures of naked women and Mickey Mouse painted on the fuselage."

"I couldn't believe my eyes! I was scared to death, and angry but I was also thinking what a place America must be, what a culture, and how different from Japan. Then I heard other planes but no machine guns this time; they were Zeros in pursuit, and their insignia was the Japanese flag. I felt like reaching up to embrace that rising sun."

Sentiments expressed in language like that are rare in Japan, but many Japanese are ambiguous about their postwar relationship with the US, which bombed the country's cities to rubble before incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Memorials to Iwo Jima dot the country, including one on Mt. Takao in Western Tokyo officially opened by current Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro when he was health minister. Under the leadership of Koizumi and

Ishihara, Japan has grown less inhibited about celebrating its wartime past and increasingly willing to commemorate its millions of dead soldiers; both support prime ministerial visits to the war memorial Yasukuni Shrine, despite the poisonous impact these visits have had on Japan's relations with China and Korea.

After six decades of negative portrayals of the Imperial Army, right-wingers like Ishihara and Shindo want Eastwood to show that Japanese troops were no better or worse than their US counterparts. Like them, they obeyed orders and fought to the death. And amid swelling neo-nationalist sentiment in a country where the wartime generation is dying out -- leaving behind young people with little awareness of the bitter ideological struggles fought over the legitimacy of Japan's brief colonization of much of Asia -- they feel more confident about pressing their claims.

"The idea that the Japanese side was undisciplined and barbaric and the US civilized is a typical misunderstanding," says Shindo. "I'd like Mr. Eastwood to correct that misunderstanding." It is into these shifting ideological sands that Eastwood is about to step, perhaps unwarily. But even those who do accept that the Imperial Army committed brutal crimes during its conquest, colonization and battle for Asia, wonder whether the movie will show how the battle looked from the Japanese side.

"We were disciplined and the US side was careless" says Omagari Satoru, a former pilot, now 88, who was one of a handful of Japanese to escape the island alive and says the battle for Iwo Jima was very different from how it has been portrayed. He calls the battle, "the most terrifying experience of my life."

"We were said to have been the ones fighting dirty, but the Americans surrounded us and for two or three days carpeted the island with shells, and we did not retaliate. When they

landed they expected it to be easy but we hid and waited before attacking, which is so why so many of them died. It was the only place in World War II where they suffered so many casualties, and I think that is why we have earned this reputation of being so barbaric."

US veterans confirm that the Japanese surprised them. "They damned near cleaned our clock," says John Rich, one of the first Marines on the island. "They were a formidable enemy. I threw myself into a bomb crater and there were two marines there and I realized I was the only one alive. It was an incredibly bitter battle, so I'd like Eastwood to do something that would bring us together."

Some Japanese veterans also question the authenticity of the Rosenthal photo. By the time he got to Suribachi four days after D-Day, the flag had already been planted on the summit. The Marines decided to restage the event using a larger flag. Rosenthal clicked the most famous image of the war, but the kinetic spontaneity that made the shot such a potent and mythological propaganda weapon has always been suspect.



The iconic photograph

"The Marines certainly raised the flag, but I

don't think the act was as brave as has been portrayed," says Omagari. "Any army will plant their flag, and Mt. Suribachi was about the only place they could have done it."

Nevertheless, Japanese and Americans appear to have come to terms on Iwo Jima in the last decade. As Shindo observed, "Over and above what side won or lost, I think the real meaning of Iwo Jima for the US was that it showed that even the winners could suffer huge losses. You could see the result of this during the 40th anniversary of Iwo Jima, when America first suggested a joint memorial service that honored both the victims and survivors." Yet six decades later, the battle for Iwo Jima in historical memory continues.

Eastwood seems to have sensed the passions the battle for Iwo Jima arouses: in Tokyo he promised to respect Ishihara's wishes and avoid hurting Japanese feelings, saying he saw

the battle as a 'cultural, not a military conflict.' But he will also be under pressure to make a movie that makes his American audience feel proud of their past.

As he casts around for inspiration, he could do worse than read the poetry of US veteran Bill Madden, who lost friends and much of his hearing on Iwo Jima before later writing:

Jim is gone, mortar-blasted
 Iwo blasted, evil-blasted;
 Just two survive, Al and me.
 Then Al is gone.

David McNeill is a Tokyo-based journalist who teaches at Sophia University. A Japan Focus coordinator, he is a regular contributor to the London Independent and a columnist for OhMy News. This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared in The Independent on Dec. 27, 2005. Published at Japan Focus on January 9, 2006.