
Reports From Iwo Jima:

724th Military Police Battalion, Company C, March–April 1945

By Mr. Andy Watson

Recently, much attention has focused on the Battle of Iwo Jima. Movies, magazine articles, and books have featured the battle and its many aspects. More than sixty years later, we are still fascinated by Iwo Jima. The event was a massive battle with horrific casualties, the results of which produced iconic images of American heroism and the capture of important airfields from which to strike Japan. The tenacity of the Japanese defenders and the persistence of the American troops engaged in capturing the island is almost beyond comprehension.

In a shift of focus, from a very large picture to a more specific study, let's examine the role of the military police at Iwo Jima. Although the Battle of Iwo Jima was overwhelmingly fought and won by the Marines, other branches of service played a part in operations. Fortunately, we have a record of one such Army unit—the 724th Military Police Battalion—and its service during the Battle of Iwo Jima. Although not part of the initial assault force, the unit's contribution to victory should not be overlooked.

The 724th was activated on 25 January 1942 at Camp Blanding, Florida. In the succeeding months, the unit grew in size and moved, first, to Camp Stoneman, California, and later to Hawaii.¹ Company B participated in the Philippine Campaign and made an assault landing in Okinawa. Company D took part in operations on Anguar Island in September 1944. In January 1945, at a staging area on Oahu, Hawaii, Company C was relieved of service with the 724th and attached to Army Garrison Force APO 86.^{2,3}

Now part of a much larger force, Company C was divided into two echelons and readied to move out. The first echelon consisted of 4 officers and 107 enlisted Soldiers under the command of Captain Ernest M. Johnston. The second echelon consisted of 1 officer and 37 enlisted Soldiers under the command of First Lieutenant Ronald W. Harvey. In addition to the echelon division, three military police were detailed to Headquarters, Army Garrison Force to guard Americans of Japanese ancestry accompanying the unit as interpreters.

On 4 February 1945, an advance party from the first echelon boarded the *SS Sea Sturgeon*, a civil registry troopship, to establish guard operations.

Captain Johnston served as the ship provost marshal while Military Police Soldiers maintained order during the transport of Army Garrison Force personnel. The rest of the company boarded the ship on 5 February, the same day the ship departed Hawaii. The following statements are excerpts from ship reports. The statements are brief and exclude the mention of overcrowded conditions or other incidents.

6 February to 13 February 1945: We sailed on the *SS Sea Sturgeon* and arrived at Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Island Group. . . . Regular guard duty was performed aboard ship.

13 February to 20 February 1945: Anchored off Eniwetok Atoll for 7 days. No shore leave granted.

25 February 1945: The ship dropped anchor off of Saipan Island for 8 days. Officers were allowed a short leave ashore.

On 7 March 1945, the unit reported changes as it arrived at Iwo Jima. The Marines had already captured Mount Suribachi (on 23 February 1945), and many considered the battle for the island to be almost over. Unfortunately the battle raged on.

. . . arrived off Iwo Jima in the Volcano Islands on 7 March 1945 at approximately 1000. At 1600, debarked from the *SS Sea Sturgeon* and boarded an [landing ship, tank] LST boat to be taken ashore. Landed on Blue Beach on the eastern shore of Iwo Jima at 1800. We set up a bivouac area for the night on the beach, a few hundred yards from our landing place. Heavy fighting still going on the north end of the island.

8 March 1945: We left the beach bright and early this morning and hiked to our temporary bivouac



The SS Sea Sturgeon transported Company C, 724th Military Police Battalion. Although built in 1944, steady use took a toll on the ship's appearance.

Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Naval Historical Center

area at the foot of Mount Suribachi. The area was littered with duds and live ammunition. After removing the duds, foxholes were dug for the nights [sic] sleep.

9 March 1945: Spent the day improving our area and strengthening area defenses. Fighting is still raging on the north end of the island.

10 March 1945: Our organizational equipment started coming in today. Two trucks with a detail assigned for each were assigned the duty of getting our equipment and hauling it to the company area from the beach. We were assigned our first official duties today. Our mission was to guard pilferable supplies on the beach and to control traffic. We were also charged with the security of the [quartermaster] QM ration dump.

The reports go on to mention routine traffic and guard operations, minor noncombat wounds and, later, enemy presence and the importance of vigilance.

19 March 1945: Some enemy infiltration in our bivouac area. One Jap [sic] was killed by our security guards on Post Number 3.

More routine information followed as the company's bivouac area changed to White Beach.

The report on 26 March 1945 documents one of the enemy's last attacks and an added military police task—to guard prisoners of war.

26 March 1945: Had a Jap [sic] "banzai" attack, beginning at approximately 0500 and ending at 0800. Surrounding organizations suffered some casualties. No casualties were in our company. Approximately 195 Japs [sic] were killed in the vicinity. [The] company took over [prisoner of war] PsW compound from the 5th [Marine] Amphibious Corps. [sic] 11 PsW were turned over to us by the Marines.

30 March 1945: PsW stockade was moved from 3d Marine Division area to our new area today. PsW are being brought in increasing numbers each day.

During this time, a jeep patrol of the island was established and combined with the duties of traffic control, installation and beach guard operations, and prisoner of war management. On 13 April 1945, Company C set up operation of the garrison stockade for U.S. military prisoners. For the members of Company C, final contact with the Japanese before the enemy became prisoners of war took place on 23 April 1945.



Three Japanese soldiers, persuaded by a compatriot and American bullets, emerge from their hiding place to surrender.⁴

Photograph courtesy of the Army Signal Corps Collection in the U.S. National Archives

23 April 1945: Enemy activity near the company area this evening. No enemy reported killed.

The activity described was probably Japanese defenders searching for food or medical supplies. The siege, attack, and encouragement of suicide had eliminated vast numbers of Japanese forces. Those who chose to surrender or were captured were often in poor physical condition. On numerous occasions, military police from Company C were evacuated to medical facilities in Guam.

The company continued managing traffic and performing confinement and law enforcement operations until August 1945. In recognition for its service at Iwo Jima, Company C was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation. As a testament to its importance in amphibious operations, future battle plans (such

as the invasion of Okinawa) included large numbers of military police units.

Endnotes:

¹The 724th moved to Hawaii on 23 July 1942. The headquarters detachment of the 724th remained on the island until the unit's inactivation on 20 April 1946.

²Although "APO" is the acronym for Army Post Office, in this case it refers to a mobile garrison force. This APO address also serves as a separate designation.

³Army Garrison Force APO 86 was based at Fort Kamehameha, Oahu, but officially changed its APO location to Iwo Jima on 14 March 1945.

⁴This photograph was taken by U.S. Army Forces on Iwo Jima, 5 April 1945.

Reference:

"Unit History," 724th Military Police Battalion, Company C, January–June 1945.