

## JOE ROSENTHAL: 1911-2006

### Photo was his fame -- his pride 'My Marines'

### The image of flag going up on Iwo Jima was extraordinary

Kevin Leary, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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Retired Chronicle photographer Joe **Rosenthal**, who won the Pulitzer Prize and international acclaim for his soul-stirring picture of the World War II flag-raising on Iwo Jima, died Sunday in Novato.

**Rosenthal**, 94, retired from The Chronicle in 1981 after a distinguished 35-year career and many professional honors, but the flag-raising picture was his masterpiece for which he will always be remembered.

The Pulitzer Committee in 1945 described the photo as "depicting one of the war's great moments," a "frozen flash of history."

**Rosenthal**, born Oct. 9, 1911, in Washington, D.C., was found dead at about 10:45 a.m. in his bed at his home in the Atria Tamalpais Creek assisted living center.

He was a 33-year-old Associated Press photographer on Feb. 23, 1945, when he captured the black-and-white image of five battle-weary Marines and a Navy corpsman struggling to raise a flag atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima.

He took the picture on the fifth day of the furious 36-day battle that left 6,621 American dead and 19,217 wounded. All but 1,083 of the 22,000 dug-in Japanese defenders were killed before the island was secured.

It was of that battle -- one of the bloodiest in Marine Corps history -- that Adm. Chester Nimitz, World War II commander of the Pacific fleet, said: "Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Wartime Navy Secretary James Forrestal said of **Rosenthal**: "He was as gallant as the men going up that hill."

The photo was an instant classic and is the best-known combat photo of World War II, and perhaps the most famous photograph ever taken.

The image is still regarded as a symbol of the fighting spirit of the Marine Corps.

Even more than half a century later, **Rosenthal's** picture retains its emotional power as a work of art as well as a patriotic icon. It has been reproduced on postage stamps, calendars, newspapers, magazines and countless posters. The picture was used as an inspirational symbol for a War Bond drive in 1945 that raised \$26.3 billion.

The flag-raising picture was the model for the gigantic bronze Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Va., which stands 110 feet tall from base to flag top and weighs more than 100 tons.

The photo was so dramatic and perfectly composed that some believed **Rosenthal** must have posed the figures.

"No," **Rosenthal** told a friend in recent years. "It was not posed. I gave no signal and didn't set it up. I just got every break a photographer could have wished for. If I set it up I probably would have ruined the shot. I was lucky."



But it was the luck of a fearless photographer who went into the thick of battle "to get where the action is, where pictures happen themselves, and all I had to do is point the camera," as he said, with typical modesty.

Unable to serve in the military because of bad eyesight that plagued him until his death, **Rosenthal** shot World War II as a combat photographer, first with the merchant marine and later as an Associated Press correspondent.

Few veterans of the war saw as much action, close-up, as **Rosenthal**. He crossed the North Atlantic in a convoy of Liberty ships that was attacked by German U-boats. He was in London during the Blitz.

He photographed Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Army fighting in the jungles of New Guinea. He cruised into battle in the South Pacific aboard a cruiser, a battleship and an aircraft carrier. He flew with Navy dive-bombers attacking enemy targets in the Japanese-occupied Philippines.

He hit the beaches with the first waves of Marines landing under fire on the islands of Guam, Peleliu, Angaur and Iwo Jima.

In *Colliers Magazine* 10 years later, **Rosenthal** wrote of going ashore on Iwo Jima with "those kids looking at me. It was grim. I stuck my index fingers up in front of my glasses and moved them like windshield wipers as if to clear the spray. The kids smiled, and then we ducked our heads and the boat beached."

When the Marines assaulted the sulfurous island on Feb. 19, 1945, **Rosenthal** was among the first ashore. "The situation was impossible," he recalled years later. "No man who survived the beach can tell you how he did it. It was like walking through rain and not getting wet."

When **Rosenthal** and a squad of Marines climbed to the top of Mount Suribachi on the fifth day of fighting, he was disappointed to find a small American flag already flying over the 546-foot volcano's summit.

He missed the picture of the first flag-raising a few hours earlier, but then he saw five Marines and a corpsman hoisting another, larger flag that could be seen all over the 7 1/2-square-mile island.

It was that flag-raising, caught at high noon in 1/400 of a second, that electrified the nation and won the Pulitzer Prize for photography in 1945.

After the war, **Rosenthal** returned to work for the Associated Press as a heroic celebrity, a role that embarrassed him. He often said that the real heroes were the young men he called "my Marines," who fought and died on Iwo Jima, and that he was just a newsman with a camera.

"I took the picture," he said. "The Marines took Iwo Jima."

In January of 1946, he joined *The Chronicle*. "My intention was to be here for a couple or several years, and then go on to some other place. I stayed for 35 years."

**Rosenthal** made little money from the Iwo Jima picture. He received a \$4,200 bonus in war bonds from the AP, a \$1,000 photography prize from a camera magazine and about \$700 for a couple of radio appearances.

Altogether, **Rosenthal** reckoned he made less than \$10,000 from the picture.

"And I was gratified to get that," he said in a 1995 interview. "Every once in a while someone teases me that I could have been rich. But I'm alive. A lot of the men who were there are not. And a lot of them were badly wounded. I was not. And so I don't have the feeling someone owes me for this."

For many years, **Rosenthal** was a familiar figure around San Francisco as a news photographer and as a popular and respected member of North Beach's close-knit community.

In his retirement, **Rosenthal** spent much of his time organizing his papers and photographs and reading the news and World War II history with a thick magnifying glass. His knowledge of the Pacific war was vast and personal.

He kept a framed certificate declaring him an honorary Marine, which he said was his proudest possession.

"He had determination, grit and good humor," said his daughter, Anne **Rosenthal**, of San Rafael. "He had more persistence than anyone I ever knew and he cared about his work. He outlived everyone in his photo, he outlived a great number of people who were on that island, and he outlived many of his friends and great photographers. That was hard on him."

**Rosenthal** was president of the San Francisco-Oakland Newspaper Guild in 1951, twice president of the San Francisco Press Club, and three times president of the Bay Area Press Photographers Association.

He is survived by his daughter, and an adopted son, Joe **Rosenthal** of Washington state, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

*Chronicle Staff Writer Tanya Schevitz contributed to this report.*