"Sometime within the next few weeks, I will run in with my sketch gear on an island near Japan that will add glory and victory to our fighting marines."

These words were written in a diary on January 9, 1945, by Harry Daniels Reeks, a twenty-four-year-old Marine Corps first sergeant from New Orleans. Part of a six-man public-relations team sent to cover the invasion of Iwo Jima, Reeks was assigned to draw and paint pictures of the marines in action.

For the Japanese, Iwo Jima was a major base used to intercept U.S. bombers flying from the Marianas on raids against Japan. By capturing this tiny island located 760 miles from Tokyo, the United States would eliminate attacks on its planes, gain a landing strip for returning B-29 bombers that were damaged or low on fuel, and provide a staging point for further bombing missions over the Japanese home islands and for long-range fighters escorting bombers. Both sides recognized the importance of Iwo Jima and made concerted efforts to achieve their objectives. The Japanese consolidated their hold on this little piece of land—to more than 4.5 by 2.5 miles—with thousands of troops dug into hundreds of fortified caves, blockhouses,
“SKETCHES IN A HAIL OF BULLETS”

A Marine Corps artist, Harry Reeks, left a matchless eyewitness record of the struggle for Iwo Jima. MHQ reproduces his battlefield pictures for the first time.

by Peter Harrington
ferroconcrete pillboxes, and trenches connected by miles of underground tunnels. In February 1945 the islands came under heavy aerial bombardment, which concluded with three days of naval shelling, paving the way for a seaborne invasion by the 4th and 5th Marine divisions on February 19. One of those marines was Reeks.

Before he joined the Marine Corps in 1941, the young artist had led a bohemian existence, living in a cheap room in the old French Quarter of New Orleans and subsisting on the sales of his sketches of bistro nightlife. While he was stationed in California in 1942, someone noticed him sketching "boot" life during basic training in San Diego. This led to assignments creating instructional charts and recruiting posters. Posted to the South Pacific, he found himself sketching in Guadalcanal, the Russell Islands, New Georgia, Bougainville, Saipan, and Guam, as well as the more peaceful havens of New Zealand and Oahu. During that time he was wounded twice.

In his unpublished memoirs, Reeks wrote that he now could draw from memory whatever the marines wore and any kind of equipment, including trucks, jeeps, artillery, and boats. "I knew the various eccentricities of the men: in the way they hung their packs, the way they carried their rifles." He added, "Sketches had to be made fast on the spot, in battle, under all kinds of extreme conditions, and done well enough to be accepted for publication or Marine Corps public-relations work."

At 9:00 A.M. on January 10, 1945, with only four hours' notice, Reeks climbed aboard an LSM (landing ship medium) at Pearl Harbor. "No one knew where we were going," he later wrote. "Aboard ship were armored bulldozers. . . . This was not a good sign, because it meant that we would be one of the first to hit the beach." He spent much of his time at sea making thumbnail sketches of shipboard scenes, although the vessel rocked so much that at times he found it impossible to draw. Reeks's plan was to show the marines from the time they left home base right up to the closing hours of the impending battle.

The men were finally informed where they were going: an island called Iwo Jima. "The briefing officer said that we would almost walk onshore. There would be very little resistance, because the B-29s had bombed the island for seventy-two days, and the whole navy (a big part of it anyway) was bombarding it and had been for three days. He doubted if there would be anyone left alive. Taking it would be a cinch. Some of us had reservations about the officer's optimistic attitude."

On February 19, he made the following entry in his diary: "This morning at 0400, still dark, one standing on the bow could see great flashes of light on the distant horizon; "H" Hour was near, and this day was the long-anticipated D-Day. The navy was giving Iwo Jima broadsides. . . . Ships, ships, ships as far as one could see, in long columns stretching from one horizon to the other, threw off a spectacle of prodigious might. Craft of all categories swayed and lurched and gathered up the distance between themselves and those lightening ahead." Three hours later, "big gray battle wagons were throwing in broadside after broadside, and everything else that could shoot was milling in and around the ugly cliffs and beaches firing point-blank. . . ."

Armed with a pair of binoculars, Reeks took up position on the bow of the LSM. Japanese shore batteries, untouched by the bombardment, came alive. Higgins boats, exposed to some of the heaviest fire encountered in the Pacific war, moved in toward the beach. Geyser boats rose and fell all over the harbor. Amid the confusion and the deafening noise, the LSM kept racing about, trying to get ashore. The news coming over the radio was not good: "Marines are pinned down on the beach and fire is coming in on them from two directions. Many dead and wounded." Reeks waited anxiously. "I knew this was an opportunity of a lifetime, and, scared as I was, I knew I had to get to shore" to have any chance of producing worthwhile pictures of the landings. Going to his captain, he requested leave and took a small boat loaded with gasoline. "Only a percentage of the troops were ashore, and this fact still presented me with the opportunity to make my landing scenes. In doing this, it was not hard to realize the danger involved, because the beach was under constant mortar and shell fire."

As his boat moved in, he could see a tangle of wreckage. "Boats were piled on top of boats, tanks, tractors, things of every description. There was not a single hole in the rubble for us to land in. I was in a daze. . . . The gate dropped and I was out on the run. I knew I should help those fellows unload the gasoline, but, I'm sorry, I needed the time to recover my courage." An explosion forced him down onto the black volcanic ash, and he managed to crawl into a hole occupied by three dead marines. "Sketching was the farthest thing from my mind." After an hour or two, he composed himself and crawled out of the hole.

It was sometime later when he made his first drawing on Iwo Jima. A Japanese soldier had cut the end out of an oil drum, faced the drain hole toward the beach, and stuck a rifle through it; Reeks found his body behind it. "It made a good sketch, and I began to feel satisfaction in the thought that I had once again gotten control of myself."

Within a short space of time he had completed several more drawings, including "one of the most gruesome scenes I ever set my eyes on"; nearby was a large pit, and draped around the inner rim near the top was a jumble of dismembered parts of bodies, with more at the bottom—the remains of fellow marines caught in the explosion of a mortar shell. He turned in these first drawings to the public-relations tent set up as a makeshift newsroom for the reporters and photographers who had come ashore.

Moving to the foot of Mount Suribachi, which dominates the island at its southern end, Reeks found many enemy soldiers burned to death by flamethrowers. Four days later he sketched a small American flag being planted on the summit. But he had already left when, soon after, the marines raised a much larger flag. The only person to capture this second flag raising
with a still camera was Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press, and his photograph won the Pulitzer Prize. Reeks later regretted missing the famous flag-raising scene. After the war, however, he was commissioned to paint the event for the family of a San Francisco soldier who had died in the battle.

Reeks’s memoirs describe the sights and sounds he experienced during almost thirty days on Iwo Jima. Although he was armed, he had little time to participate in actual combat. “It’s fun to shoot, but being busy with the pen and ink all the time, I never get a chance to join in the shooting,” he noted. On one occasion, Colonel Leland S. Swindler asked Major General Earl C. Long where the artist was. Long replied, “I saw Reeks on the front making sketches in a hail of bullets.”

He would spend two or three days at a time up at the front, armed with his rifle and a small sketchbook. On one occasion he received a slight wound, his third during the Pacific war, in his hand—happily, not the one he sketched with. He carried orders from the commanding general allowing him to attach himself to any unit.

I sometimes found it difficult to keep up with the activity of any one particular outfit because I moved around constantly, day by day, from one side of the island to the other. One day I was with a marine outfit pushing up the east side and saw a big Jap naval gun that had been knocked out earlier by fire from our ship. There was nothing special about the gun itself, but the Jap’s body that was draped over the breech did add the touch that made it interesting for a drawing. However, the shooting was so heavy that day that I made a mental note of the place, with the thought of returning.

Leaving this scene, he went on to find other suitable subjects to draw.

I paused here and there to make sketches of various things: A Jap tank, gutted by fire. A Sherman tank with three holes right through its thick turret and one through the cannon barrel. A Jap bunker, which looked like an ant mound. Some dead. (There is something about the dead, as I mentioned before; I’m always sketching the dead.) A clean spot showing a dismembered foot and leg with the shoe still on; the split-toe shoe of the Jap. A tiny cubbyhole where a small Jap had his nest. He must have left in a hurry, because his shoes were still there, set neatly together as you would set them by your bed. That’s all I need to practice my art: an excuse. I’ll sketch anything if I can get an idea on it. Whooops—he just missed me! Some sniper has spotted the artist.

This was not the first time Reeks had been fired at while sketching, and he often wondered what the Japanese thought when they saw him. “Do I appear to be an important kill? Perhaps an American expert of some kind making notes on this or that war equipment? A mapmaker? An officer summing up the results of his battle? Or an artist, so spare him, as they did this morning.” On other occasions, it was he who had the enemy in his sights. “On Iwo, I looked at a Jap for a period of ten minutes. He was not ten feet away. It’s true I could have killed him, but I did not have the guts. Remember? I’m the artist. If I had killed him, I probably would have gotten myself killed while I lingered over his body telling him I didn’t mean to do it! Oh no, I’m not chickenhearted. I sketch ‘em—you kill ‘em.”

To escape the carnage at the front, he would retreat to the beach to watch marine replacements landing, sometimes under fire. There Reeks dug a foxhole, covered it with some roofing material, and set up a studio, using watercolors as well as pen and ink to capture what he had seen, then delivering the art to the public-relations tent. After a day’s work, he would sleep in the hole with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other, in case of any unexpected visitors. The drawings and watercolors were taken by PT boat to Guam and then flown to Washington. But a number of his drawings were held by marine censors and never made public. To judge from the captions of some of these pictures, as recorded in Reeks’s diary, it is hardly surprising that many were suppressed:

Bleeding profusely but wounded slightly—this man hoofs it back to the forward first-aid station to receive further care. . . . A young marine, dead and still, lies where he was hit in an attempt to blast Japs from a cave. His youthful body is broken and twisted in death. . . . Mutilated bodies everywhere lie in grotesque pose. Bodies were cooked and roasted until they look like charred.
wood. Troops have to fight and sleep beside these horrors... Fourth Division boys drag their tired bodies down to the beach—on the way home, called "rear base." ... Digging in. A body lies covered with a poncho beside three marines concerned only with their "protection" in the hole they're digging. The sand in the background is just settling back to the earth after being blasted up by mortar fire.

After the war, many of these drawings were returned to the artist through the kindness of General Long.

In April 1945, Collier's magazine published some of his pictures to illustrate an article on Iwo Jima, and according to Reeks it was the "journalistic scoop of the year." Indeed it was, for he was the only combat artist to cover the invasion from beginning to end.

Shortly after the end of the war, Reeks paid a visit to Walter Heil, director of the De Young Museum in San Francisco, who was so impressed with the artist's war scenes that he made a large gallery available for a one-man show. This marked the beginning for Reeks of a long and distinguished career as an artist and sculptor on the Gulf Coast; he died in 1982. His experiences in the Pacific war left a lasting impression on his work. In an interview he gave to a Marine Corps combat correspondent a few months after Iwo Jima, Reeks summed up his feelings about his role as a combat artist:

In battle there's no worry about pleasing a patron in order to eat regularly, pay the rent, and buy supplies. No I can honestly paint what I see, feel, and sense. And what I see is the emotional upheaval each man undergoes as he constantly faces death; the utter exhaustion of the body after a few harrowing days in the forward lines; the agonizing torture in the haggard faces of the wounded. It doesn't make a pretty picture. But it is a true one, and truth is what I want to depict.

ROUGH LANDING

The initial U.S. Marine assault on Iwo Jima was hampered by rough seas, which were particularly difficult for the various small craft that carried marines from their ships to the landing beaches. Opposite, amphibious tractors pass one of the great doors of an LST and (above) head for the beach. While the tractors proved seaworthy, amphibious trucks designed for river-crossing operations were not up to the task of carrying much of the American artillery. One artillery battalion lost eight of its twelve howitzers when water flowed over the gunwales, drowned the engines, and ultimately caused them to sink. The perils of the sea, however, were mild compared to those that greeted the marines ashore. At left is a watercolor of dead Japanese, titled Flamethrower's Prey.
DEATH’S MEN

Harry Reeks’s pictures captured the essence of the fighting on Iwo Jima—the unrelieved presence of death, the endless fatigue, and the small scale at which combat took place. The thousands of shells fired on both sides strained the nerves of the living and subjected the bodies of the dead to the further indignity of mutilation. Beyond a corpse-littered foreground (left), marines advance. The sketches on this page show (clockwise from right) a noncommissioned officer shouting, “Get down!”; a rifleman advancing cautiously through rubble; and a marine in a rare moment of relaxation.
THE HUMAN COST

Many of Harry Reeks's depictions of the price paid by participants in the battle for Iwo Jima were too graphic to be published during World War II. Pictures of shell-torn American bodies, like those at lower left, were, needless to say, taboo. The dispensers of official news deemed the faces of those with shell-torn nerves too upsetting for the folks back home. The "thousand-yard stares" that emerged from the unshaven countenances of fighting marines bore testimony to unspeakable exhaustion and experiences too horrible to share.
CLEANING OUT THE CAVES

The defenders led an existence more solitary, more lacking in the necessities of life, more brutish, and certainly far shorter than that of the attackers. Superior American firepower drove the Japanese into caves, depriving them not only of light and air but also of the ability to cooperate with each other. In most cases, this meant that the marines had time to prepare each attack. Tanks could be brought up, like those preparing the way in front of Mt. Suribachi (top right), and telephone wire could be laid (right) to help bring artillery and mortar fire to bear on the caves and to isolate them. The process of reducing a defended cave usually ended when it was converted into a sealed tomb by a satchel charge or bulldozer. Every once in a while, however, the marines were treated to a rare sight: a Japanese soldier with his hands raised in surrender (above).