

Iwo Jima and the Struggle for Historical Truth

Breanne Robertson

As educators, we often look for ways to make events in the past both exciting and relevant to our students. One approach is to foreground personal stories. Whether biographies, reenactments, or oral history interviews, individual perspectives help infuse emotion and immediacy in our treatment of an historical moment. These are important pedagogical tools for bringing the human experience into sharper relief, but what of the main historical narrative? Perhaps the most impactful lesson we can teach our students is that the past is not set in stone. Our understanding of the past evolves alongside the questions we ask and the sources we consult. And, like scientists performing experimental lab work, we can and do change history when new evidence emerges. By inviting students to question the past, to think and behave like professional historians, teachers and museum educators can reveal historical interpretation to be a dynamic field open to revision and debate. This requires an approach that goes beyond strict content learning toward the modeling of disciplinary problem solving.¹ What might this look like in a classroom setting? The recent correction to the roster of Iwo Jima flag raisers offers a compelling example of history-as-practice and provides an opportunity for students to engage with diverse types of archival evidence, develop analytical skills, and consider the meaning of historical truth.



Photo by Joseph Rosenthal, Associated Press.

The iconic photograph of Iwo Jima flag raisers is familiar to most Americans. On the morning of February 23, 1945, six Marines gathered around a length of broken pipe on the summit of Mount Suribachi, an extinct volcano on the southern tip of Iwo Jima. The U.S. invasion and ensuing World War II battle on the island was the latest steppingstone in an American island-hopping campaign against Imperial Japan.² Just five days into the fierce and costly fight, Marines of Company E, 2nd Battalion, scaled the steep, rocky terrain and planted the American flag. Their effort lasted no more than a few seconds; yet in that time Joe Rosenthal, an Associated Press photographer, captured

Old Glory Goes Up on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, Feb. 23, 1945.

one of the most famous images of the war.

Instilling hope and patriotism in a war-weary nation, the flag raising provided the theme for the U.S. government's Seventh War Loan drive; garnered Rosenthal a Pulitzer Prize; and later inspired a spirited reenactment in the Hollywood movie, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). In 1954, sculptor Felix de Weldon immortalized the flag raising scene with his monumental rendering for the Marine Corps War Memorial; while more recently, military recruiters, cartoonists, civil rights activists, and athletic brands have absorbed and reinvented the emblem for

diverse persuasive ends. Still today, the flag raising remains transfixed in our cultural memory about the Greatest Generation and World War II.

In 2013 Stephen Foley, a military enthusiast in Ireland, phoned the Marine Corps History Division in Quantico, Virginia, to share some surprising observations about Rosenthal's picture. The famous image—believed to depict five Marines and one Navy corpsman—did not portray anyone carrying the distinctive olive drab canvas bags that medical personnel used to hold their instruments and supplies. Was it possible that Pharmacist's Mate Second Class (PhM2c)

John Bradley, the Navy corpsman whose wartime experiences inspired the bestselling book *Flags of Our Fathers*, was not in the photograph?³ This was not the first time the public had contacted the Marine Corps History Division claiming to know or even to be a previously unacknowledged flag raiser. In fact, federal historians routinely received letters, calls, and emails from individuals asserting special knowledge about that event. For many years, the division answered public inquiries with the official identifications as determined in 1947. That is to say, as far as the Marine Corps was concerned, it had *already* investigated the Iwo Jima flag raising and corrected the roster.

During World War II, the flag raisers commenced a nationwide tour in support of the Seventh War Loan drive. PhM2c John Bradley and Privates First Class Rene Gagnon and Ira Hayes became household names, as did their fallen comrades Sergeant Michael Strank, Sergeant Hank Hanson, and Private First Class Franklin Sousley. But by the summer of 1946, it became clear an error had been made. Belle Block, the mother of deceased Marine Corporal Harlon Block, claimed that her son was pictured in the iconic scene at the base of the flagpole. Surviving flag raiser Ira Hayes agreed and penned a letter of support to Mrs. Block. When his letter leaked to the press, an impartial Marine Corps board investigated and confirmed Block's participation. The board's correction rested on interviews and documents

Detail of photo by Private Robert Campbell, National Archives⁴

Pharmacist's Mate 2nd Class
John H. Bradley, at left.



collected immediately after the war. Decades later, in 2013, there was little reason to think another investigation would yield better results.

However, Stephen Foley persisted. He and another researcher, Eric Krelle, took their findings to the *Omaha World-Herald*, which in turn caught the attention of Matt Morgan, a former Marine public affairs officer. Morgan began filming a documentary for the Smithsonian Channel and, as part of that project, hired two analysts to evaluate Foley and Krelle's observations using digitally enhanced photographs. He shared these reports with the U.S. Marine Corps in 2015; and the following spring, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Robert Neller, ordered an official review.

In 2015, I was a relatively new hire in the federal workforce. Although I did not know it at the time, my education and experience as an art historian meant that I would soon take part in the historical reevaluation of one of the most meaningful emblems of the Corps.

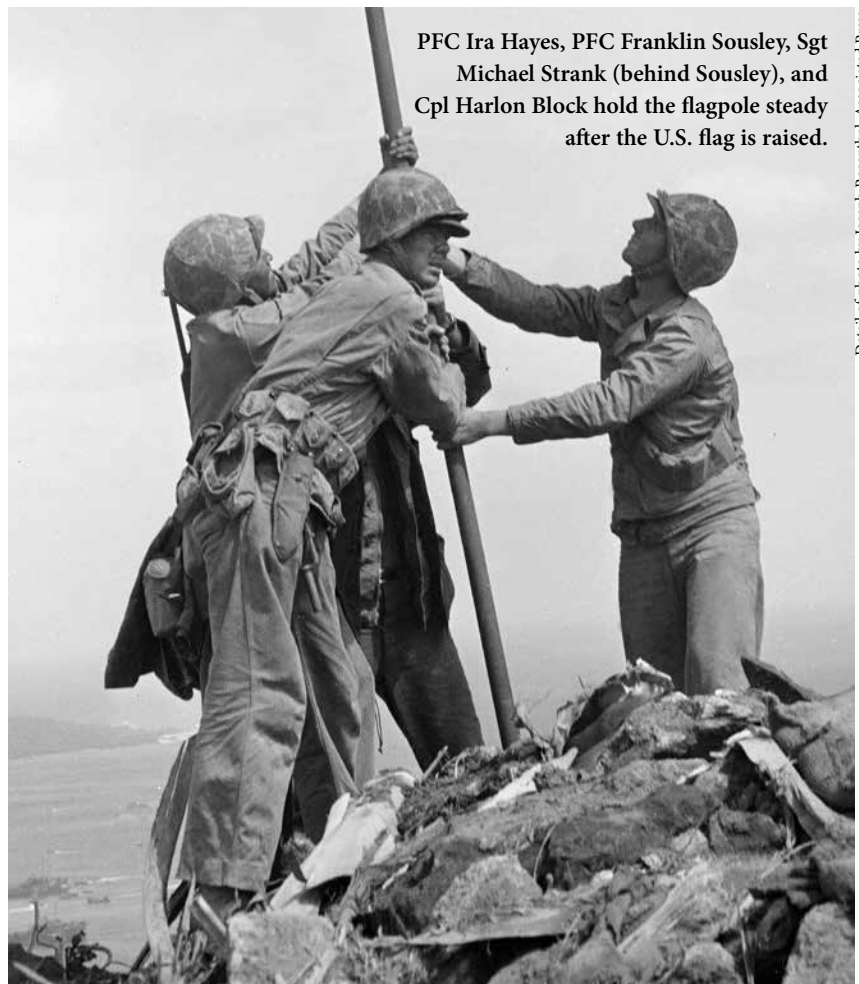
Generally speaking, the Marine Corps board gave greater weight to photographic evidence than just about every other piece of evidence, including eyewitness accounts. Many police officers can attest to how notoriously unreliable eyewitnesses are, and the panelists saw examples of this in several instances.⁴ The testimonies were especially unreliable when accounts were given years or decades after the battle. We quickly learned to ask about the context of these accounts,

especially the dates of their recording. Time and again, the board determined that the witnesses who had become "experts" on the flag raising years after the fact, and whose testimony had been used to support the original identifications, had not in fact been present on Mount Suribachi during the flag raising. Instead, their descriptions had been based on secondhand accounts, assumptions, and hearsay. This was significant because much of their testimony directly conflicted with other evidence.

The National Archives holds the only motion picture of the flag raising. Shot by Sergeant

William Genaust, the footage is both informative and exasperating. While it offers glimpses of individuals not available in still photographs, the film has degraded over time, rendering key frames blurry. Moreover, the flag-raising sequence contains several breaks. Could Marines have swapped positions or changed their clothing? The board reviewed the motion picture numerous times, giving each frame scrutiny, but the film breaks created uncertainty.

After much deliberation, the members of the Huly Board, named for the leadership of Lieutenant General Jan Huly, USMC (Ret), concluded



PFC Ira Hayes, PFC Franklin Sousley, Sgt Michael Strank (behind Sousley), and Cpl Harlon Block hold the flagpole steady after the U.S. flag is raised.

Detail of photo by Joseph Rosenthal, Associated Press.

that PhM2c Bradley was not pictured in Rosenthal's photo and that a previously unidentified Marine, Private First Class Harold Schultz, had in fact helped raise the flag. This was not a simple one-to-one exchange, however. As Foley had observed, there were discrepancies in uniform and equipment. Whereas Bradley can be seen wearing medical unit 3s, a helmet without a soft cap, and cuffed trousers, Sousley, originally identified as the Marine in Position 5 (numbered in the photograph on page 195 from right to left), is seen wearing an empty canteen cover, a cartridge belt without

suspenders, wire cutters, and a soft cover under his helmet—an exact match to the individual in Position 3.

Who, then, is in Position 5? The equipment, or lack thereof, indicated that it couldn't be Bradley. Upon reviewing film and still photographs from that day, two key pieces of evidence revealed the identity of the Marine in question—a broken helmet liner strap and a distinctive rifle. As it happens, only one Marine atop Mount Suribachi had a broken helmet liner strap hanging from the left side of his helmet—PFC Harold Schultz. Equally important, the individual in Position 5 attached

his rifle sling to the stacking swivel and not to the upper handguard sling swivel, as was appropriate. Again, photographs and motion picture footage showed that the only Marine with his sling attached in that manner was Schultz.

Remarkably, the 2016 identification of Schultz would not be the last time the Marine Corps corrected the historical record. Foley and two new collaborators—Dustin Spence and Brent Westemeyer—soon furnished evidence supporting another revision. While prior investigations focused on the Marines nearest to the photographer, this one considered those

Film by SgT William Genaust, National Archives

View of Private First Class Harold Schultz taken from motion picture.



pictured on the far side of the flagpole.

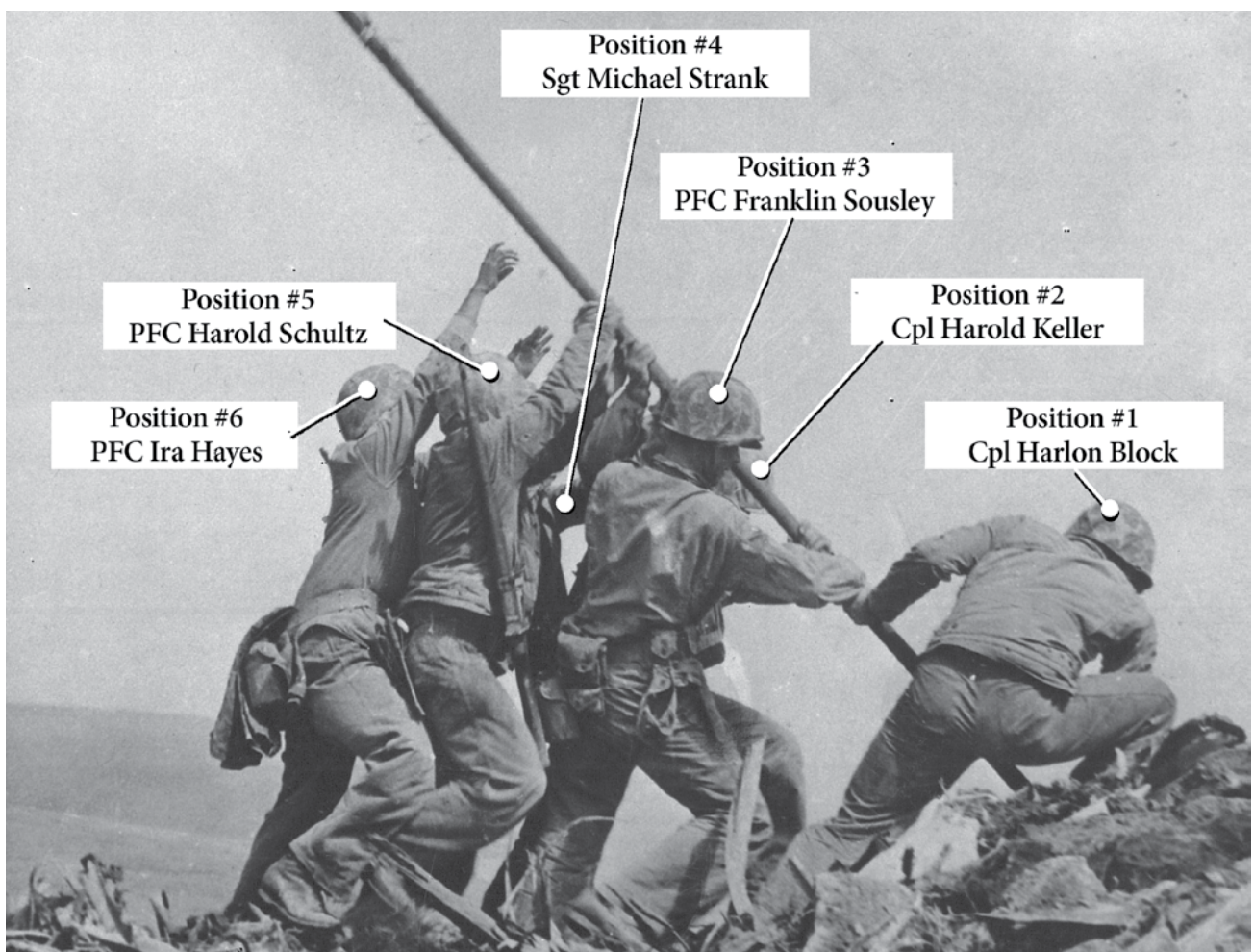
In my role as a federal historian, I worked alongside retired Marine Colonel Keil Gentry and Master Sergeant Stacy Patzman to conduct an exhaustive review of primary and secondary source materials related to the Iwo Jima flag raising. High-resolution scans taken directly from the film negatives at the National Archives revealed that the facial features, uniform, and equipment for Position 2—originally attributed to PFC Rene Gagnon—bore a notable resemblance to Corporal Harold Keller. Next we requested assistance from the

Federal Bureau of Investigation, which performed forensic photographic analyses. By comparing fluctuating elements, such as the American flag flapping in the breeze, the FBI was able to establish the precise timing of the still photographs in relation to the motion picture footage. Federal scientists also processed the images to improve the visibility of facial features, as well as details of clothing, footwear, gear, and weapons.⁵

Numerous photographers were present on the summit during the flag raising, but only Marine Private Robert Campbell captured a distinct, if miniscule, glimpse of the Marine in

Position 2. Although the man's face is cast in shadow, the camouflage pattern of his M1 helmet cover in combination with the creases formed by the double bandoleers over his field jacket permitted a positive identification. In June 2019, the Bowers Board, chaired by Brigadier General William Bowers, concluded that the official list of flag raisers—already twice corrected—overlooked the participation of Cpl Harold Keller.

There are six men pictured in Rosenthal's photo; three were initially identified as someone else, and a fourth switched positions. For me,





Side-by-Side comparison of Campbell's photo (NARA) and Burns's photo showing Corporal Harold Keller (U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center).

Photographs

1. Flag Raising on Iwo Jima; 2/23/1945; Iwo Jima - [Divider #] 319 - [Code #] 38 - Flag Raising; Photographs of World War II and Post World War II Marine Corps Activities, ca. 1939–ca. 1958; Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, Record Group 127; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/flagraising-iwo-jima>]
2. Group by Flag, Iwo Jima; 2/23/1945; Iwo Jima - [Divider #] 319 - [Code #] 38 - Flag Raising; Photographs of World War II and Post World War II Marine Corps Activities, ca. 1939–ca. 1958; Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, Record Group 127; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/group-by-flag-iwo-jima>]
3. WWII Iwo Jima U.S. Flag Raising, detail of photo taken by Joseph Rosenthal; AP4502230123; Associated Press, New York.

[NB - I'm following NARA citation format with information from this AP webpage: <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/search?query=4502230123&mediaType=photo&st=keyword>]
4. Flag Raising on Iwo Jima; 2/1945; Moving Images Relating to Military Activities, ca. 1947–1980; General Records of the Department of the Navy, Record Group 428; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/flag-raising-iwo-jima-film>]
5. Left: Salute the Flag, Iwo Jima; 2/23/1945; General Photograph File of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1927–1981; Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, Record Group 127; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/salute-the-flag-iwo-jima>]. Right: First two men to reach the peak of Suribachi, Sgt Howard Snyder of Huntington Park, California, and Cpl Harold Keller of Brooklyn, Iowa. George Burns Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

this inspires questions about historical methodology and the degree to which we can ever really recover the past. Written records, photographs, motion pictures, and oral history interviews are all fragments. It is the task of the historian to assemble the pieces, to stitch them together to form a bigger picture. Allowing students to see the messiness and uncertainty of this process may well be the best lesson we can impart. By bringing the Iwo Jima flag raising into the classroom and guiding students through a historical practicum of visual analysis, source comparison, and hypothesis building, teachers have an opportunity to reveal a fundamental truth: the past is only as knowable as the sources historians use to build it.

Teaching Activities

Slow Looking

Slow looking is the act of learning through observations. Have the class look at Rosenthal's famous photograph. Go around the room and have students each say one thing they notice about the image. They may not repeat, but they can add on to what a classmate has said. Students also may choose to draw what they see, as this encourages them to study the image closely and be attentive to details. What did they notice the first time? What did they notice as they kept studying the image?

Evaluating Historical Documents

Ask students to compare and contrast the information they can glean from different primary

source documents. What can they learn from a photograph that they cannot learn from a written document? What questions are left unanswered? List the strengths and limitations for each source and discuss as a class how they might best be used in historical research.

Question the Textbook

Students often accept the authority of their assigned textbook because it was selected by their teacher. Explain that there is a limited page count, and the authors must prioritize some topics over others.

You can also remind them that textbooks are routinely updated to improve accuracy and completeness. After this introductory discussion, present the students with excerpts from three different textbooks. These might be textbooks from different publishers or editions of the same textbook published decades apart, but the excerpt should present an historical episode with which the students are familiar (e.g., Civil Rights Movement). Invite students to make observations about how the event is presented. Has the narrative changed over time? What details are missing? Does the textbook include maps, photographs, or quotes? What additional information or sources would you want to highlight, and how would you go about finding these materials? ■

Notes

1. Christine Baron, "Structuring Historic Site-Based History Laboratories for Teacher Education," *Journal of Museum Education* 39,

no. 1 (March 2014): 10–19.

2. The importance of the island to American strategy rested with its aerial assault plans against Japan. Iwo Jima posed a tactical threat as a potential launch site to target U.S. pilots on long-range bombing missions to the imperial capital, Tokyo.
3. Stephen Foley, email correspondence with author, March 11, 2018.
4. National Research Council, *Identifying the Culprit: Assessing Eyewitness Identification* (Washington, DC: National Academies, 2014).
5. Brian K. Brooks, "Iwo Jima Flag Raising Analyses" (unpublished report, Digital Evidence Laboratory, FBI, February 1, 2019), 7.

Additional Sources

Breanne Robertson, *Investigating Iwo: The Flag Raisings in Myth, Memory, and Esprit de Corps* (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D214-PURL-gpo128467/pdf/GOVPUB-D214-PURL-gpo128467.pdf>) (Marine Corps History Division Quantico, Virginia 2019).



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