Flame Throwers

You cannot understand the battle for Iwo Jima without understanding flamethrowers. This is true, because we had an enemy largely unaffected by bombs and bullets, but could be destroyed with fire hurtling through the air licking up everything in its way.

Imagine yourself as a Japanese soldier holed up in a cave and a roaring sound is thundering toward you. You have been playing sniper in your protected bunker. You have retreated to the safety of the cave. Suddenly, you feel the heat on your face, then you cannot breathe because the oxygen has been consumed by the flames, you are burning to death and then you pass out. You never saw your enemy but you were forced to understand some measure of “consuming fire.”

United States Marines on Iwo Jima, were constantly facing off with impregnable concrete bunkers full of gunners who were able to retreat to safety into the tunnel behind them. The flamethrower was the perfect weapon to neutralize their positions.

This was the 20th century equivalent of dropping boiling oil on the enemy. If you are looking for one of those “humane” weapons, this is not one of them. It was chemical warfare pure and simple, and it was the most terrorizing weapon of war.

The portable backpack flamethrower, consisted of two tanks that fed into one nozzle. In one tank, Mix 2/3 diesel fuel, 1/3 one hundred octane gasoline, and napalm jelly. Fill the other tank with compressed gas and viola… the most effective weapon on Iwo Jima. Open up the valves merging the fuel and the gas and it blasts through the nozzle licking up anything within one hundred feet.

It is hard to conceive of a more frightening weapon of war. On Iwo Jima we used the third revision of the flamethrower, the M2-2. It was heavy - 80 pounds.
The psychological effects were powerful.

Bill Henderson told me that “we could not have taken the island without the flame thrower.” My dad said that “the flamethrower saved lives because the weapon did not require soldiers to go inside the cave to get the enemy. The caves were booby trapped and promised certain death for all who entered.”

We learned that most of our bombing efforts were in vain. The Japanese were dug in deep enough underground to escape death even though they were pounded by the heaviest pre invasion softening in the history of the Pacific war. Holland Smith wanted six months of pre invasion softening, but was only given two months. It seemed to be known by many that Smith was bitter toward Admiral Chester Nimitz because he felt that the shorter the softening, the more casualties he would have.

Not only was bombing ineffective, but bullets had their limitations as well. We were not able to take the island with bullets because the enemy was hidden in caves and concealed bunkers. They would pop up and then disappear, run to another cave opening, and then pop up again in another location after moving underground to another position.

The flamethrower was a great weapon, but there was a major downside. Anyone carrying one had a short lifespan. One flamethrower unit on Iwo had a 92% casualty rate. A Marine who trained flamethrower operators on Iwo Jima told me he thought that the average lifespan of the flamethrower operator was around four minutes.

The short life expectancy was due to two facts. First, they were so effective that the Japanese feared and hated them above any other weapon. Second, they were carrying explosive fuel on their backs, making them marked men – easy to see and easy to hit and easy to blow up. Carrying a flamethrower was like putting an X on your back that said, “Hit me here.” The danger to the operator, was huge. This is why many of the flamethrower pictures from Iwo Jima also show at least one other soldier covering the
flamethrower operator. These men were strapping on a backpack of explosives and then putting themselves in front of a hail of gunfire. I think they call this courage.

Only a few flamethrower survivors ever lived to tell their stories. Imagine the difficulty of trying to get testimonies from men who actually handled flamethrowers for historical purposes. Problem: they are all dead. Well, almost all. One who survived was Corporal Hershel “Woody” Williams of Quiet Dell, W.Va. “It was like fighting ghosts,” he says. “One minute the enemy was attacking and being killed, then they would disappear, including their dead. They were going underground into 16 miles of tunnels we did not know existed.”

Williams’ heroics as a flamethrower operator in the battle would earn him the Medal of Honor, one of twenty-seven awarded to United States Marines who fought on Iwo. Today, the retired buck sergeant is one of only three living recipients from that action.²

Because flamethrowers were so dangerous to soldiers who carried them, we started mounting them on tanks, thus reducing the casualty rates that we had with the backpack flame thrower operators. The tank units used the same basic technology, except their range was longer 150 feet and flame duration was longer.

In the words of Captain Frank C. Caldwell, a company commander in the 26th Marines: “In my view it was the flame tank more than any other supporting arm that won this battle.” Tactical demands for the flame tanks never diminished. Late in the battle, as the 5th Marine Division cornered the last Japanese defenders in “The Gorge,” the 5th Tank Battalion expended napalm-thickened fuel at the rate of 10,000 gallons per day. The division’s final action report stated that the flame tank was “the one weapon that caused the Japs to leave their caves and rock crevices and run.”³

The job was no picnic. Here are a few reasons it was a difficult weapon to use:
It’s bulky heavy package (80lb) made it hard to run on rough terrain.

If the wind changed and blew the flames back on you – you were toast.

It was slow and hard getting up from lying on the ground.

But, what bombs and guns could not do, the trusty flame throwers (and grenades) could. It was the most effective way to clear a cave or a concrete bunker.

The caves and tunnels offered one of the major challenges of fighting on Iwo Jima: you never saw the enemy because they were underground and moved freely in subterranean tunnels – sixteen miles of them. Japanese defenders were constantly appearing in hundreds of cave openings that led to the tunnels. Many of these openings were well fortified fortresses of three feet of concrete all around. Keeping clear battle lines was a real challenge on Iwo because you never knew where the enemy would pop up. “Some caves housed entire field hospitals complete with surgical instruments and operating tables. Live steam, electricity and running water were piped in. Minimum specifications for the caves called for 35 feet of overhead cover, more than enough to resist any shell or bomb. The caves were at least fifteen feet wide, 33 feet long and five feet high. Some were build on three levels and all had multiple entrances.” The Marines on Iwo Jima, The Battery Press, Nashville, Tenn 1987, P10

This is why the Japanese commander, General Kuribiyashi was called,

“Lord of the underworld”

He directed the battle from his bunker seventy feet below the surface where he eventually committed “hari kari.”
His days were numbered. One by one, we closed up his portholes to the surface. Our mode of operation was to clear the tunnels with the flame throwers and then cover them up with bulldozers. When most people think of war they do not think of bulldozers, but this was one of the truly effective tools on Iwo Jima.

With flamethrowers clearing the way forward, and bulldozers right behind, the enemy was entombed in their own underworlds. Iwo Jima is one of the battlefields that remains one of the truly large graveyards in the world. Except on Iwo Jima, most of the Japanese dead are buried in the place where they breathed their last. (Check this Out for accuracy – what did the Japanese do with the bodies in the caves?)

The flamethrower calls up dreaded images of the terrors of burning flesh and the unthinkable horrors of burning to death in a fiery furnace of thousands of degrees of life consuming heat.

These images remind us of the way fire is used in the Bible to explain the nature of the judgment of God against sin. They help us to see how irrational it is reject of God in the face of the unavoidable consequences. God is a consuming fire who judges sinners with righteous judgment and punishes them with fire.

Needs a solution – the mercy of God toward sinners

His Word is like a fire; His judgment is with fire; He is consuming fire.

Because there is no place to hide, the wise would run to Him for mercy.

*The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice...*
* A fire goes before Him, And burns up His enemies round about*

*Psalms 97:1*
Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads,” says the Lord God.

Exekiel 22:31

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Matthew 13:49-50

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

For our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28-29

Questions for discussion and reflection:

Why was the flamethrower so effective?

What was the life span of a flamethrower operator on Iwo Jima?

Use two words to describe the qualities you need to operate a flamethrower?

What was one of Kuribiyashi’s nicknames?

Why did the Marines shift from using hand carried flamethrowers to tank mounted?

What important tool was often used alongside the flamethrower?

What does God’s use of fire tell us about the nature of sin?

Why does God call Himself a consuming fire?