

# Local Vets Recall Bloody Iwo Jima

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BY DAVE HOSMER

Before Eugene Drier and Gerald Hill left Yankton in 1943 they probably hugged their Mothers. Yankton was different then. About 7,000 people lived here, but agriculture was still the largest industry. Eugene's family owned a creamery and probably knew many farmers. Gerald's Father farmed near Mission Hill. To cross the Meridian Bridge required a toll, and Gavins Point Dam did not exist. The most popular business was Gurney's Seed and Nursery. By that time, Yankton's Battery E of the 147th Field Artillery Unit had already been in the Pacific for over 24 months. Both Eugene and Gerald left by bus or train. And they held one more thing in common — they both died during the Battle of Iwo Jima, which was fought 70 years ago this month.

There are several reasons to remember Iwo Jima. First, the victory was a turning point in the War. Bombers could now fly straight to Japan. There were no pesky Japanese fighters from Iwo to bother them, until they reached Japan and often there were now American fighter escorts. And, Japan's early warning radar on Iwo was gone, which meant less timely anti-aircraft fire. The Japan bombing campaign shortened the War and, in so doing, saved the lives of many GIs. And, rather gruesomely, Iwo Jima and Okinawa established the level of defensive brutality that would face the Americans should they invade. As a result, it ushered in the Nuclear Age.

Second, the iconic symbol of six Marines raising an American flag gave a super boost to morale. The War had been slogging along for over three years with no end in sight. Iwo Jima was a prefecture of Tokyo, which meant that a American flag on Iwo was an flag flying over Tokyo. The picture emphatically speaks of teamwork and suggests the likelihood of success. The picture was the center of the 7th Bond Drive, which raised 26 billion dollars — more than any prior war bond drive.

But there is a more compelling reason for Yanktonians to recall Iwo Jima. We might be able to say that we walked in the shoes of Eugene and Gerald, only because we live in the Yankton area. But only a few Yanktonians walked in their "combat boots." We should know more about them because they and 6,819 more men served and sacrificed more than any of us. Another 19,217 were wounded. Forgetting about them is not an option. After a few interviews, I think I can paint a picture of their short military careers.

Nathan "Bob" Steinbach tells a funny story about Eugene and Gerald. Both of them, along with Bill Boyer and Clinton Baggs, were in Sioux City waiting for a train to Omaha. They purchased a "jug" and borrowed a guitar for the train trip. When they arrived in Omaha, perhaps a little tipsy, they were greeted by a short stocky Marine. He appeared to have no sense of humor. "Well, what do we have here? Any volunteers for the Marine Corp?" Boyer snorted and the Marine addressed him. "Well, there are already too many dead Marines; we're here for the Navy!" The Marine squirmed and smiled, "Don't you know that the Marines are part of the Navy?" Off they were sent to Marine training in San Diego. Bob went to Great Lakes for Navy training.

Marine basic training was at Camp Pendleton near San Diego. Basic training was "terrible" according to Donald Graves, a member of the 28th Regiment, 5th Marine and Iwo Jima veteran. This shared, rigorous training created a bond. Don said he would "have died" for his buddies. They loved their fellow Marines. Jack Thurman, a member of the 27th Regiment, 5th Marines and Iwo Jima veteran, described it as "a feeling of togetherness."

After stateside training, there was island training. Gerald, who was in the 3rd Marine Division (which had fought in Guam in July of 1944), received additional training in



PHOTO: JOE ROSENTHAL

Probably the best-known photo of war ever taken: The raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima in 1945. Joe Rosenthal's iconic photo actually shows the second flag being raised during the battle.

Guam. Eugene, who was in the 4th Marine Division (which had battled in Saipan in June of 1944), was in Saipan for his training. Dale Oare, also in Saipan with the 2nd Division, said the training consisted of mock landings. Finally, the men of the 5th Division (which was created in response to the bloody Battle of Tarawa in 1943) prepared for their first engagement at Camp Tarawa on the Big Island, Hawaii. All three of these divisions saw combat at Iwo. D-Day was set for February 19, 1945.

Prior to the amphibious landing, American airplanes and Navy bombed the hell out of Iwo. Unfortunately, it did little, other than create craters that Marines could use for cover. "Iwo Jima" translated is "sulfur island." The Island emits yellow sulfuric mist that smells like rotten eggs. It was created by the volcanic activity of the now dormant 500-foot high, vent referred to as Mount Suribachi. The Japanese took advantage of this topography by building tunnels. Hidden within the landscape were concrete bunkers and pillboxes.

Jack was in one of the first waves on Red 1 Beach on February 19, 1945; his job was to advance to the north and west of Airfield #1. On the way into the beach, he saw two amphibians blow up with dozens of men aboard. As soon as he hit the beach he saw an injured Marine so he moved to help him. "That's when I got it. ... The bullet went through my canteen and cup. It was full of water. It must have slowed it down. The bullet knocked me off my feet. I had a lot of pain, but I saw to it that I was going to get over and help that guy yelling for help." He fought onward.

Donald was in the third wave; he landed on Green Beach, the closest to Mt. Suribachi. His duty was to advance up the beach, pivot to the south and secure Mt. Suribachi. His amphib went as far as it could go in the water; it hit sand and then the coxswain

yelled, "over the side." He rolled over and went down with the flame thrower on his back. "Two guys jerked me up and drug me up to where I could walk." When he hit the beach he buried his head in the sand. He started talking to himself. "God, I don't know anything about you. I have never been to church, but if you get me off this island I will serve you the rest of my life." He fought onward.

The 25th Regiment of the 4th Marines landed on Blue Beach, the farthest to the north, which was overshadowed by the "Rock Quarry." General Cates stated, "If I knew the name of the man on the extreme right of the right-hand squad I'd recommend him for a medal before we go in." Eugene's duty was to advance over the beach and pivot to the north to overtake the heavily defended Quarry. If he advanced to the beachhead the first day he would have seen the hell that Donald and Jack saw. But he fought onward.

The 21st Regiment, 3rd Marine Division was in reserve. Due to the first day's heavy casualties, it was ordered into service. However, rough seas stopped their beach assault. Finally, on D+2 Gerald Hill hit the beach, which was still very hot. He would have seen the beach riddled with destroyed equipment and badly injured Marines lined up on the beach. Shells continued to hit the beach landing on those men. They relieved the 23rd Regiment, which had been tasked with taking the east side of Airfield #1. He fought onward.

That same day, Donald recalls seeing kamikazes strike and sink the aircraft carrier USS Bismarck Sea. One plane crashed through the hangar deck and struck the ship's magazines. The second plane hit the saltwater distribution system, which prevented them from fighting any fires. Three-hundred 18 men died. Don had a tear in his eye.

The flag raising was on D+4. Donald was

midway up Suribachi when the first American flag was raised at about 10:15 a.m. "We were crawling up, mopping up and ducking, and throwing grenades. ... Then we saw the first flag go up. Oh, man. Everyone said, 'Old Glory is waving up there! Look!'" Everyone started firing weapons. The horns of the ships sounded for several minutes. "You'd have thought it was New York Harbor on the Fourth of July!" He had a tear in his eye.

The flag raisers were members of the 28th Regiment. A few Marines in the 27th Regiment, including Jack, were asked to assist in the "mop up" on the north side of Mt. Suribachi. He was standing fairly close to the flag raisers as the second flag was raised at about 3:15 p.m. He was invited to join them in a group photo, but he was hesitant. They cajoled him into joining them because he was a Marine after all! Search the Internet for "Gung Ho Iwo Jima." He is the farthest left standing up with his helmet in the air.

Jack was inspired by the flag. "I looked up there at nighttime. Lying on the ground taking cover behind lava rock, I looked up there and saw an American flag every time an artillery shell or flare would go off. I thought of Bunker Hill. 'O say, can you see the flag ...?' It just moved us to see that flag waving in the breeze. It stayed up there the whole time." A tear was in his eye.

One misnomer is that the battle was complete when the flag was raised. Over a month of gruesome fighting remained. Jack advanced northward. Between airfields #1 and #2 was a minefield. His lieutenant stepped on a mine. "I went backwards 10 feet and then took off to the right. As I ran I said, 'If I'm gonna step on it, so be it.' ... I got to him and knelt down to hold his right arm. I told him, 'Help is coming. Hang in there.' His whole bottom part was ripped apart and

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## Memories Of A Soldier-Uncle

BY ALYSSA SOBOTKA

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Don Johnson is surprised he still remembers so clearly a day in 1945.

At the age of only 3 years old, he recalls being surrounded by relatives in a farmhouse kitchen in rural Wakonda. One by one, the family took their turn speaking into the telephone, hearing the news firsthand: their loved one, Jim Collins, who had been fighting as a soldier in World War II was set to return home.

"I remember to this day when the telephone call came in," Johnson said. "Everybody got to talk, including me at 3 years old."

Johnson, who lives at Lewis and Clark Lake, sat down with the *Press & Dakotan* to share his uncle's war history. Johnson's uncle passed away in 1976 at the Veterans Hospital in Sioux Falls.

The accounts of his war history were discovered by Johnson in a scrapbook of authentic photos, newspaper clippings and army papers.

In 1942, Staff Sgt. Jim Collins began his army career as the head person in charge of a

shooting range in Hawaii.

But his time heading the shooting range was short lived, as he was needed elsewhere.

"Iwo Jima is the worst place you could have been at that time," Johnson said. "And that's where my uncle ended up."

During his duty as a tail gunner in Iwo Jima, he and other service men on board the Widow Maker aircraft were forced to disembark after the plane was experiencing engine malfunctions, leaving them one option — jump.

Frightened and nervous, Collins landed on shore still clenching his parachute's rip cord, according to Johnson.

"All (men), besides my uncle, landed in good areas and were picked up right away," he said. "Unfortunately, for my uncle, he landed in Japanese territory ... and (he) had to be aware and avoid them."

And it was not long before the threat of being discovered by a Japanese patrol became a reality for Collins.

"(Collins) took off into the jungle and (noticed) the Japanese patrol," Johnson said. "There was a tree that was down and he crawled under it and the patrol walked right over him."

Having avoided the enemy, Collins set out

to return to American lines, but not without hesitation. Having a short, small stature worried Collins; he feared that, when he returned to the American lines, they might mistake him for a Japanese soldier, Johnson said.

"He's afraid that when he reaches his men, they'll think he's Japanese and will shoot at him," he said. "But, he made it to American lines and that didn't happen, so he was able to get back in."

After the war, Collins returned back to his farm in Wakonda, where Johnson spent many years by his uncle's side.

"I would go with (my uncle) wherever he went," Johnson said. "He called me his hired hand."

Although Collins never spoke of his time serving, Johnson took note of his uncle's skill, undeniably that of a veteran in charge of a shooting range and a tail gunner.

"He was a dead-eye shot, it was unbelievable," Johnson said. "I was with him when we were driving in the pickup and there was a jackrabbit right out in the middle of the field. He had a .22 and took his aim — it was a long distance, but he shot that rabbit dead."

Proud of his uncle, Johnson followed in his footsteps, enlisting in the Army and serving during the time of the Vietnam War.



Jim Collins

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