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John A. Scocos Column: 70th Anniversary of Iwo Jima

Seventy years ago, the month-long battle of Iwo Jima took place, pitting the United States against the Empire of Japan in yet another fierce island battle as the Americans worked their way closer to Japan.

Beginning on February 19, 1945, the bloody battle for an eight-square-mile volcanic island involved 80,000 Americans and cost the lives of 6,821 Marines. More than 20,000 others were wounded. Nearly the entire Japanese garrison of 22,000 died. Of the thousands of Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima at the beginning of the battle, only 216 were taken prisoner, some of whom were captured because they had been knocked unconscious or otherwise disabled. Marine veterans received slightly more than one-third of the total Medals of Honor awarded to the entire Marine Corps in the entire Second World War during the thirty-six day Iwo Jima campaign. More medals for heroism in combat were awarded at Iwo Jima than at any other battle in U. S. history. Two out of every three Americans who fought on Iwo Jima were killed or wounded.

The epic fight for Iwo Jima was immortalized in America with photographer Joe Rosenthal's famous photo of five Marines and one Navy corpsman raising the U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi while the battle still raged. Three of the Marines were killed shortly thereafter. The unforgettable image remains an icon forever associated with American valor and it became the basis for the Marine Corps Memorial in Washington DC.

John Bradley, a Navy hospital corpsman, from Antigo, helped raise the flag on Iwo Jima and lived to see the end of the war. Despite being something of a celebrity after the Battle of Iwo Jima, Bradley never spoke to his family of the photograph or the Navy Cross he had been awarded during the war. An unassuming, hard-working, small town Wisconsinite, Bradley lived a simple life – he married his third grade sweetheart; opened a funeral home; helped raise eight children; joined the PTA, the Lions, and the Elks. But Bradley's quiet ways, like those of so many of his comrades in the Greatest Generation, masked the reserves of strength and resolve that America's enemies never counted on.

Bradley was hardly the only notable Wisconsinite to serve in the famous battle. Others include Admiral Marc Mitscher, born in Hillsboro, who toward the end of the war commanded a carrier task force, which led aerial assaults on not only Iwo Jima, but on Okinawa, and the Japanese home islands as well.

Many Wisconsinites served in this battle and came home and shared their stories. One of these men, Clayton Chipman of West Allis shared his story of Iwo Jima in an oral history with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in 2003. In his detailed account of the fighting on the island, he talks about landing on the beach and fighting inland, being wounded, and how much of a morale boost the flag-raising on Mt. Suribachi provided the young troops in the fight. He described the fighting as horrendous and said he "was told that out of that 240 men there were, only three that landed D-Day... walked off the island."

These stories are the stories of many of his generation – battle-hardened warriors who lived through some of the darkest days our nation has ever seen, but yet came home and continued to contribute in many amazing ways; amazing enough to earn the title of the "Greatest Generation."

From the vantage point of 70 years, we can take pride in the accomplishments of the Greatest Generation's veterans. They showed us the way. It is up to our generation to live up to the example of service and sacrifice they set. We owe the veterans of that time a debt of gratitude.