

Iwo Jima Survivors Still Vividly Picture Hell of 40 Years Ago

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Time takes its toll, even on hardy Marines, but survivors of the battle of Iwo Jima vividly recall what it meant to be 16, 17 and 18 years old and facing hell for the first time.

Forty years ago last week, 23,200 Marines fought with Japan over, as one Marine described it, “a little spot no bigger than a hat”—Iwo Jima.

On Saturday 46 survivors of Company E, 28th Marine Regiment, gathered in San Diego to swap memories of the Pacific blood bath that changed history.

What’s left of Company E—mostly graying, balding, potbellied veterans—came to the Holiday Inn at the Embarcadero, many of them accompanied by silver-haired wives armed with Instamatics.

Killing Japanese “didn’t bother me,” former platoon leader John Keith Wells, now a Texas oilman, acknowledged. “What’s terrible is that it wouldn’t bother me now. That worries me every once in a while. Once you’ve killed, you’re a potential killer for the rest of your life. You can bury it and bury it and bury it, but once in a while somebody crosses you and . . .” A vexed look swept over his face. “And you’re still a potential killer.”

The reunion was promoted by David Severance of La Jolla, a retired Marine who commanded E Company on Iwo Jima. Attendees were to have a dinner and dance Saturday evening, with entertainment provided by a band from Oceanside made up of retired Marines.

"It's my third (E Company) reunion, and I haven't missed one once," stated the jolly, nattily dressed Charles Lindberg, 64, who is an electrician in Richfield, Minn.

Lindberg, who was armed with a flame thrower during the assault, is the sole survivor of the Marines' first flag-raising on Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945.

There were two flag-raising, the second of which was made famous when Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal snapped a picture of the Marines struggling to raise the flag.

Almost 6,000 Marines died on the Pacific isle less than nine square miles in size. The invasion was ordered so the island could be used as an air base for U.S. bombers.

For Doris Frates' husband, Anthony, memories of Iwo Jima were "a tremendous emotional thing. It took him years to get over it . . . seeing so many of his friends killed," she said. The Westminister, Calif., residents have 12 children, including a son in the Marines and a daughter who hopes to join the Navy.

Only 26 of the 310 Marines from Company E are known to have died since the battle, said veteran Phil Ward, a 58-year-old retiree from Crawfordsville, Ind. He's trying to locate an additional 100 survivors whose whereabouts are unknown.

Of the survivors, some took years to overcome their traumatic memories.

A few never could. Some of the Marines tell of one of their comrades who seemed to succumb to the glory he won at Iwo Jima helping to raise the second flag.

"Ira Hayes and I stayed in a foxhole there," Ward recalled. "After the war, he was such a celebrity that everywhere he went, people said, 'Have a drink, have a drink.' " Hayes became an alcoholic. "Once I wrote him a letter and he wrote back and said Dean Martin's wife had

offered him a job as a chauffeur and gardener. But then he went back off the wagon again." Hayes died in 1955.

Some of the veterans of Iwo Jima went on to serve in Korea and even in Vietnam. America's defeat in Vietnam stunned some of the Iwo Jima survivors who remembered having trounced Japan.

"I have never liked Truman because I thought he and his people started the 'no-win' war," Wells said. "It not only destroys people's will to fight but also destroys morale back home. In Vietnam, the 'mistake' was that we didn't win it."

Even so, the veterans agreed that war is hell.

"You don't ever get over it," said Wells, who served as a platoon leader on Iwo Jima. "When you go to a war movie, you see dozens of these people get killed and then (the survivors) get married and live happily ever after. In real life it doesn't happen that way; you *don't* get over it."

On Iwo Jima "my mind was as clear as a crystal ball," Wells said in his gentle Texas drawl. "I didn't eat or drink for three days. We could actually smell them at night and, that way, know exactly where they were."

"The (record) book says I killed three. Still, I know I knocked down eight or 10 with a machine gun," Wells said. Warfare is "hard, intensive; the noise is absolutely deafening. One of my men almost cried because he got his heel blown off; I told him to shut up."

In civilian life, Wells found that the best way to handle bad memories of war is to remain creative and active. For example, he runs his own oil company, flies a six-seat private plane and takes Boy Scouts on camping trips to the Yukon and Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

But most of the fighting men of the Company E have settled into quiet lives of domesticity.

When they sat down for a group photo, one veteran crossed his legs and his wife snapped, "Put your foot down!" Then she looked at a visitor and laughed: "Who do you think is the Marine in *this* family?"