

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Remember Iwo Jima?

It all started when I spoke to the family and friends of the JROTC unit at Riverbank High School last Thursday for their annual inspection. It always concludes with a pass-in-review, and a guest speaker. It has been my privilege to be the speaker the past two years.

What I mean by "it all started" has to do with a portion of my talk which focused on the importance of 19 February 1945. I asked if anyone knew what this date represented. No one offered an answer. Well, all you have to do is ask any Marine and they'll tell you it was the beginning of the invasion of the four-mile-long island known as Iwo Jima. During this five-week campaign some 6,800 Marines gave their lives so that allied forces would have an airfield to use in their attack on the Japanese mainland. It was also critical for our bombers to have a place to refuel, or land if they sustained damage from enemy anti-aircraft fire.

As I concluded my remarks, I pointed to the cadets and told them, "Many of the young men who died on Iwo Jima were just your age – 17 and 18. They were willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice so that you and I could enjoy liberty and freedom."

My final remark was to point out that when you take the oath upon entering the military (or law enforcement, or political office) you "Swear to defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic." I added, "It says nothing about defending a political party or even a certain president. That is irrelevant. You are to defend the Constitution! Period! It is from that document that you are guaranteed your rights and liberties. In fact, you don't have to like the president. I began my military service under Richard Nixon and ended under George W. Bush. Did I like all the presidents I served under? No! But I love the Constitution, and was willing to defend it with my life."

So, today, after church Isaura and I picked up our friends, Elwood and Patricia Cooper, and drove to the American Legion Post 632 in Stockton. The Stockton Marine Corps Club was hosting a "Battle of Iwo Jima Remembrance" for its club members and friends. The ceremony focused on three Marines who had fought on Iwo Jima. One of our own members, Gunnery Sergeant Ted Salisbury, aged 93, brought the house down with his various stories. One story was how upon becoming a Marine he took up smoking cigars and has smoked them ever since. He says his grandkids called him "Grandpa Stinky!" Upon his return to the States due to serious wounds on Iwo Jima, he called his girlfriend, Pat. Her father answered the phone, and realizing it was Ted, said, "Stay right there! We're on our way." Pat and her whole family piled into their car. They even picked up his dad and a brother, I believe. When they arrived, Ted shook hands with all the men, and kissed all the ladies, but someone was missing. Where was Pat, the one person he wanted to see above all? It turns out she was in the car crying, so happy was she for his

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safe return. When she emerged from the car, Ted proposed to her on the spot. He further regaled us with a story about V-J Day (Victory over Japan), 2 September 1945. The word went out that the war had ended, so being stationed in San Diego at the time, he and Pat, along with thousands of others, converged on the downtown in riotous celebration. One sailor foolishly grabbed Pat and planted a celebratory kiss on her lips. Ted grabbed the ill-advised swab-jockey and decked him with one punch. "That's my wife you're kissing!" he shouted at the fallen violator. They were married 66 years!

One of the other veterans of Iwo Jima was Major Bill White. This Marine did not speak of his exploits, but the write-up in our program highlighting his years in the Marine Corps is fantastic. It would not mean much to those who are not Marines or who are unfamiliar with Marine Corps history, but Bill White has served in places that became part of Marine Corps legend and lore. He enlisted in the Marines in 1934 at age 19. After some sea duty, he was assigned to Pearl Harbor from 1936-37, and then transferred to the 4th Marine Regiment in Shanghai, China, in what would be known as the "China Marines." These Marines were the first to actually witness the might of the Japanese military when they attacked Shanghai in the 2nd Sino-Japanese War. In 1942 he was assigned to parachute school and then transferred to the 4th Parachute Battalion in Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. He was later sent to Parker Ranch in Hawaii, prepping for the invasion of Iwo Jima. He served on Iwo with the 1st Battalion, 28th Marines where he was wounded and medically returned to the United States. He retired from the Corps in 1964. He is 101 years old.

The final Marine honored today was our guest speaker, Corporal Frank Wright. Frank told of lying about his age to join the Marines in January of 1942. He was 16. Later that year, while serving on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Southern California, he volunteered to help in the formation of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, the precursor of today's Marine Recon. The commander for this fledgling Raider Battalion was Major James Roosevelt, the eldest son of then President and Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Frank participated in several invasions with the Raiders up until they were disbanded in 1944. He was then assigned to the 21st Marines. During the July 1944 battle for the re-occupation of the Island of Guam, he was bayoneted in the stomach in hand-to-hand combat. Recovering from his wound, he once again joined the 21st Marines, this time on Iwo Jima. Here he was wounded by machine gun fire. He ended his time in the Corps serving as a drill instructor and a weapons expert.

I shook hands with each of these Marines, but lingered to chat with Corporal Frank Wright. Hearing I had been a Navy chaplain he began a story about a favorite chaplain of the 21st Marines on Guam. A recently commissioned ship, the USS President Polk, sailed into the harbor. This was something of a luxury ship, replete with a piano in the dining room. The Marines decided Father Paul Redmond, a Catholic chaplain, needed a piano. They stole the piano off the ship, paying a bribe here and there, with the piano ending up in the officer's tent covered by burlap. On Sunday morning with Father Redmond leaning on the covered piano conducting a service, the MPs arrived, explaining that they had reason to believe the chaplain was leaning on a stolen piano. When the burlap was removed in a flourish, Father Redmond declared in mock horror, "Why, how did that get there?"

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It was a great day, and truly an honor to be around these three Marines who helped cement Admiral Chester Nimitz's iconic remark about the bravery of the Marines at Iwo Jima, "Uncommon valor was a common virtue!"