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## **Capture Living History - Pappy Wagner kept the lights on Iwo Jima**

By Carl Kelly

**Harold Wagner is called Pappy today, but in 1944 he was a farm boy from southern Ohio. Drafted in March, he spent the next 11 weeks in Marine Corps basic training on Parris Island.**

"We had a lot of sand fleas in Parris Island. That was fun," he said with a sly smile, "standing at attention for an hour with sand fleas crawling in your nose, your eyebrows, your ears. But we all lived through that."

From there he was sent to Camp Lejeune, N.C. to the first telephone school to become a wireman. Then, Wagner was assigned to the USMC 3rd Division Joint Assault Signal Company (JASCO) and sent to the Pacific.

"There were 80 of us sent over together on a ship, a converted carrier," he explained. "We slept underneath the hangar deck going to Pearl Harbor just before Christmas of 1944."

They were kept at Pearl Harbor for less than a month and Pappy has only one vivid memory. "I remember the beer stand was out on the sand. We were only allowed two cans of beer at a time, so we got in line and stayed in line. All Saturday afternoon we never got out of line. We just went around and around and around with one beer in each hand. By the time you got back around you were ready for two more. That was the big entertainment for Saturday."

From there they were sent to Guam and then to Iwo Jima. "We set sail on a transport carrier, but we didn't know where we were going," he commented. "The seas were so dadgum rough that everybody was sick."

They arrived at Iwo Jima during an assault. "They were bombing it, strafing it. There were ships out there everywhere," he recalled. "We sat out there two days and watched that happen. Did exercises and played poker." Wagner asserted they were not anxious about going into battle. They were all seasick and just wanted to get off the ship.

They went ashore in 30 to 40 foot seas. "We climbed over the side into a Higgins Boat, small boat, drop down front, held about 20 or 30 people." He paused, then added, "A lot of guys got their legs crushed," because of the heavy seas.

"The first day we stayed on the beach. We were tied down by some sniper. My buddy Elmer and I dove into a hole, and he grabbed me and said, 'Look. They're raising the flag on Mount Suribachi.'

"The next day they had cleared it out and we moved in to take the airstrip. Then we started to heading north and got all the way to the north end of the island. About 10 days later my buddy took a direct mortar hit. Then, the Lieutenant got hit, and another boy from Minnesota."

JASCO's job was to call in the naval gun support over Iwo Jima. Wagner described the nights. "We lit up the sky all night with naval gunfire. We put them guns on target and all night long, the star shells, as quick as one would get down to about 20 feet off the ground another one would go up. It's an amazing thing to me: 40-foot seas and those guys could put that thing right in front of us all night long. So, we kept the lights on all night long.

"I dove into one of the shell craters one day," Wagner remembered. "There were two or three marines laying on the bottom dead. Sitting on the side were two other marines with their Bibles praying."

Wagner said they didn't question how or why or the wisdom of what they were doing. "We didn't really think about it much. It was what we had to do. So, we just went ahead. We're here to take this island, no matter what. That's it."

At the end of the battle, "We buried all our dead there by the airfield. They were in a half circle, the 3rd, the 4th, and the 5th Divisions," he said. "We went down and checked out our dead, like Elmer. We made a little plaque for him out of rock. We put it on his grave."

Wagner's unit spent 36 days on Iwo Jima before being evacuated. They had no facilities for cleaning up, and had only K rations for food. "We did get C rations at the last," he noted. "It was like getting ice cream."

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