

Remembering Iwo Jima

As 70th anniversary of iconic Pacific battle arrives, four local veterans recall their experiences

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Marines and sailors celebrate after the raising of the U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi on Feb. 23, 1945, early in the Battle of Iwo Jima.
IWO JIMA.COM PHOTO



Lt. Col. Bob Beckham
COURTESY PHOTO

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Seventy years after United States armed forces secured a victory at the battle of Iwo Jima during World War II, four men who fought there are set to be honored for their service.

The Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation, in collaboration with the Channel City Club, is planning to hold a luncheon and symposium titled "70 Years On: The Sands of Iwo Jima" on Feb. 26 at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd.

Cpl. Benedict E. Bellefeuille, Cpl. Joseph Hale and Lt. Col. Bob Beckham, all Marines, and

Pharmacist's Mate Kenneth E. Morehouse of the Navy will be present as foundation board members share the veterans' stories with presentations, film clips and music.

Cpl. Hale, 89, explained why he has chosen to share the story of his WWII experience.

"My original intent was to kind of show that (war) is not the glamorous way they portray it in the movies," he said. "It was such a waste. One of the things that I think about ... is all those friends of mine that were 18, 19 years old that were killed."



Cpl. Joseph Hale in 1945
ADAM LEWIS PHOTO

While Lt. Col. Beckham, 95, said his memory of the event is still "very strong," he finds it hard to talk about the experience.

"I've had a lot going on in 70 years, of course, but I can still visualize the ship that I was on and I can still visualize the sand that I walked over and all that kind of stuff," he said. "That always stays with me, but I don't relive every minute of it and I've tried to forget a lot of things that happened to me."

The battle for Iwo Jima, a Japanese island, lasted from Feb. 19 to March 26, 1945. About 6,800 Marines were killed in combat and 20,000 were wounded, while most of the Japanese soldiers defending the island, about 19,000, were killed.

The battle is known for the famed photograph of six American servicemen raising the U.S. flag atop Mount Suribachi.

Although he said talking about the war "stirs up memories," Cpl. Hale said he hopes people can better understand the casualties of war after hearing the veterans' stories.

"It ruins so many lives," he said. "It never occurred to me that anyone would care. Memories are short."

Cpl. Hale's memory of the battle, and seeing so many of his comrades die, endures to this day.

"It makes an impression when you hear that sound that a bullet makes when it hits the body," he said. "It just stays with you."

Regarding the upcoming accolades, Lt. Col. Beckham, who held the rank of sergeant major during the battle, said he finds it somewhat "embarrassing" to be honored.

"When I talk about it, it's almost like I'm bragging that I was important to be there and I don't like to think of myself as a bragger," he said. "It's not a big deal for me ... (but) I'm certainly proud to be a Marine."

The three board members speaking at the luncheon, who are veterans of the Vietnam War, will discuss the history of the Battle of Iwo Jima and present each of the honored veterans with a plaque. After the speeches, audience members will have the opportunity to meet and speak with the World War II

veterans.

In allowing people to recognize and celebrate the veterans, event coordinators are carrying out the original mission of the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation.

The foundation was started by John W. Blankenship in 2003 with a \$1 million gift from Pierre Claeysens, a Santa Barbara philanthropist who became committed to honoring members of the U.S. military.

Maureen McFadden, president of McFadden and McFadden Public Relations, said the event will offer a "very valuable" experience to attendees who want to meet the veterans.

"It's really history," she said. "For an opportunity to go up and shake their hands after the luncheon is over, a lot of people find that a very rich experience."

Registration for the event, which will run from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., will begin at 11 a.m. Anyone interested in attending must RSVP by email to info@channelcityclub.org or by phone at 564-6223 no later than Feb. 23. Tickets cost \$40.

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