

## Memories of Iwo Jima

*Survivor hit twice in one of World War II's bloodiest battles, carries shrapnel in his heart*

BY KEN YODER REED

**T**he beach was crowded," Ed Cavallini remembers. "We couldn't move up because the Marines ahead of us were pinned by mortar and artillery fire. Plus the beach on Iwo is black sand — fine, volcanic — you can't dig a regular foxhole. I ordered my men into the craters, the ones where mortars had blown out a big hole.

"Under heavy fire the second morning, I came out looking for my men. I had 45 guys in my platoon. I checked off the guys in a little spiral notebook with my mechanical pencil. Some of the guys had been wounded overnight. I was leaping between holes when the mortar exploded right overhead. I fell into a hole — it wasn't mine — with a three-millimeter fragment in my heart muscle. Lucky me — it hit my dogtags, which probably slowed it down. While I was stretched out on the beach waiting for evacuation, I got hit again with shrapnel. The knee this time. That bothered me more than the heart wound. I left Iwo before they raised the flag over Mount Suribachi."

Cavallini had survived Iwo Jima, one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. The Marines did what they came to do. In 36 days of continuous, grueling combat, they cleared the tiny island only two hours southeast of Tokyo of 20,000 entrenched Japanese soldiers under orders never to surrender, to fight to the death. Victory came at a terrible cost — 25,851 casualties in the total landing force of 70,000 Marines and the sad distinction of more than one-third of all Marine deaths in World War II. The cleared island became a key lift-off point for the invasion of the Japanese homeland.

Cavallini was back in training for that invasion four months later, running up and down the sides of Haleakala Crater in Maui with his buddies, resigned to the fact they would not survive the Japanese homeland invasion. Unexpectedly, the down-

town sirens went off. The war was over.

Cavallini came home to his war bride, Jeanne, settled down in San Jose and worked for an aerospace company while they raised their four children and then became head librarian for the new, consolidated Milpitas Community Library in 1982. During those years, he never talked about the war.

"That was the last thing any of us wanted to do. Trade war stories? Everybody had war stories. What's new?"

Time went by. On the radio one evening, the announcer introduced "an expert from the Hoover Institute." Cavallini sat stunned. That voice was familiar! Dick Burress? The lieutenant from Iwo?

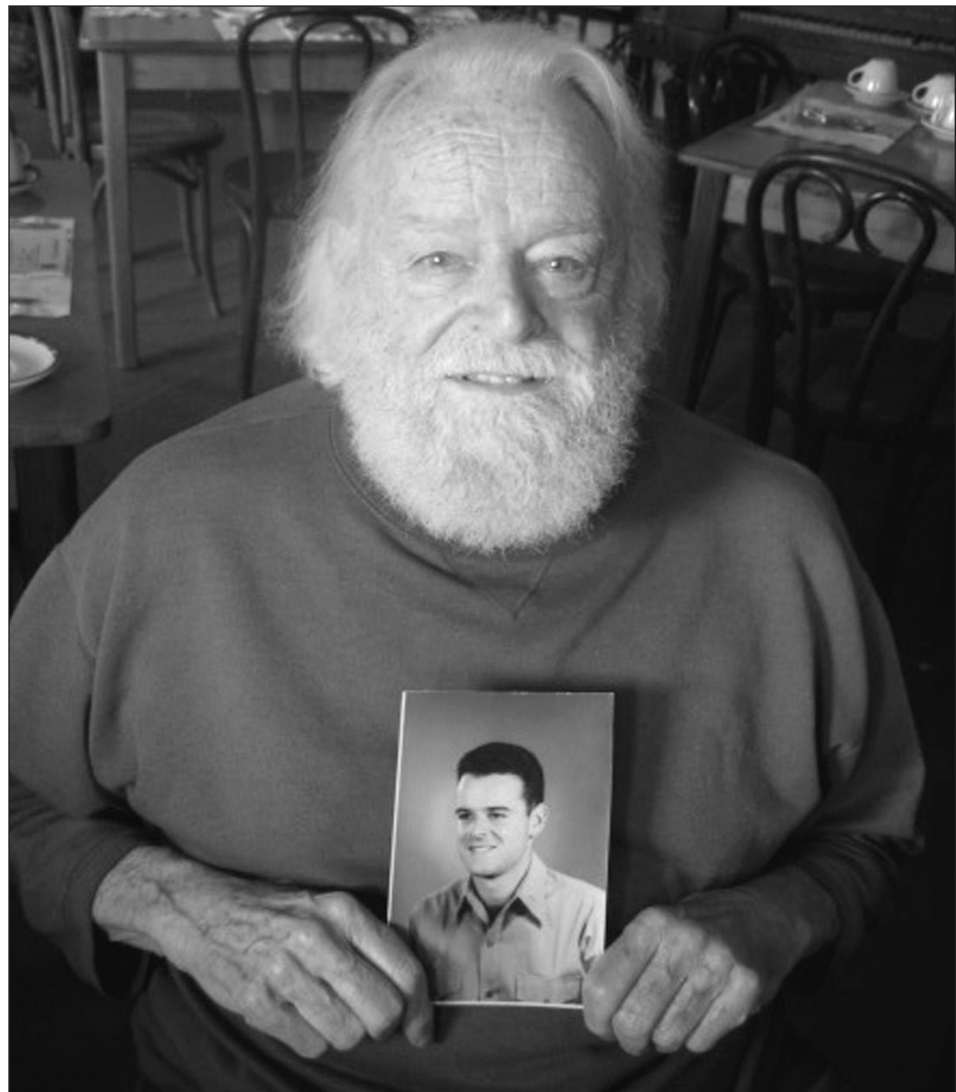
"Over the years, your voice changes less than anything else," Burress says today. "I mean, look at Ed, would you? That beard."

Cavallini admits he doesn't look like his Marine self. "People say I look like Alan Ginsburg. Or Karl Marx."

Fast forward 20 years, to March 2009. Cavallini and Burress are having their bimonthly coffee at La Casa Rosa in San Juan Bautista with their old Marine buddy, Walt Conley.

"Everything the Marine Corps does is alphabetical," Burress says, explaining how they became buddies. "Bu, Ca, Co ... you see the pattern in our names? We bunked next to each other. Ate next to each other. Our whole class at Officer Candidate School was sent to Iwo together. We were 19 years old."

"What did we talk about when we got back together?" Cavallini remembers that first reunion in the '80s. "Not much at all. Except the wonder of it. That we had come through that war and here we were, getting back together after 45 years." Iwo survivors started getting together all across the country in the 1990s. Initially there were 250 members of that special Officer Candidate School who came to the reunions. By 2004, it was down to 48 and 20-some in 2006. But still, they only sought out each other. Their stories were not for the public. Or even their families.



*Ed Cavallini, 85, shows a photo of himself as a 19-year-old Marine prior to his battles in Iwo Jima in 1945. Cavallini admits he doesn't look like his old Marine self.*

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

"Tom Brokaw's book, 'The Greatest Generation,' that really made me think," Burress says. "For the first time, I talked about the war with my family. And then Clint Eastwood showed up at our Iwo reunion five years ago and spent the whole day getting background for his new movie."

Eastwood's two movies on Iwo Jima brought the brutal battle alive for the American public.

"I decided to take my family to see 'Flags of Our Fathers,'" Cavallini says. "The re-enactment was good. When we got home, we talked for three hours. It was the first time we'd ever talked about the war. Jeanne got up during the discussion and came back with a whole scrapbook of newspaper headlines and photos. Photos of Iwo Jima. All these years she'd been dragging them around and I didn't know it. During the war, she didn't know where I was. In my letters, I couldn't tell. But she guessed. And when the battle for the island

started, she clipped out all the headlines."

The old heroes talk on in the café about their memories. The reunions are getting smaller and smaller. There were only four guys in 2008. They talk about their mementos of the battle.

Burress has been back to Iwo. "Heavily overgrown," he says. "It's difficult to imagine how it looked back then." Cavallini lost his lucky dogtags a couple years ago. But he still has the Scripto mechanical pencil he was using to take notes the day he was hit. It still works.

He's in no danger of losing his most important memento. The three-millimeter mortar fragment is still embedded in his heart muscle.

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