



# Ison Crossing the Draw

Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of Paul E. Ison

**T**here is a picture from the battle for Okinawa. A Marine in leggings runs crouched through an open field. His hand grips tightly around the battered stock of an M1 rifle. His face shows a stubble of beard and an uncommon mixture of uncertainty and resolute purpose: to move forward to the object on which his eyes have become fixed.

There is no doubt that he expects at any moment to be shot, but is moving forward nonetheless.

In the 50 years since, the photograph taken by combat photographer Private First Class Robert Bailey has achieved fame in the Corps as a symbol of Marine infantrymen's willingness to advance under fire. The photograph also appears in museums, on plates and embossed on medallions, making it somewhat of an icon symbolic of World War II.

The Marine is Private Paul E. Ison. They called him "Pop" because he was 28 years old then, and anyone who's ever been in combat knows that to the majority of those who fight wars 28 is ancient. He was a stogie-smoking Kentuckian who worked in a Cincinnati, Ohio, factory making automobile lights to support his wife and four children.

Ison was not a big man, but he was strong, fast and loaded with homespun common sense. When the war broke out, the factory changed over to making shell casings. Ison had a changeover, too. Being the sole provider for his large family had earned him a draft deferment. However, he wanted to get involved in the war.

There was guilt, albeit needless, which ate at him constantly. His older brother, Lewis, was a veteran of World War I, and, more importantly, in his mind Pop Ison saw people staring at him and asking: "Why is a strapping young buck like you walking down the streets while my brothers and sons are in the service fighting for our country?"

"Look, I'm married and have four children to support," was the answer he gave in his mind, but the answer never seemed right, even in his imagination. Ison felt "like a slacker."

In 1944 Pop Ison told his wife that he loved his family, but he also loved his

country. He went back to his hometown of Ashland, Ky., and notified the draft board that he was enlisting in the United States Marine Corps.

Less than a year later, he landed on Okinawa, struggling under 100 pounds of equipment befitting a demolitions/flame-thrower man with Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division on April 1, 1945.

Headquarters had attached Ison and Corporal Ralph Boschke to Co L, commanded by a former Raider, Captain Bob Smith. Ison felt fortunate to be working for an experienced Marine like Smith, and, even better, he was with Boschke, with whom he'd gone to demolitions school.

The 1stMarDiv entered the line April 30 near Shuri Castle on southern Okinawa. Ison's demolitions team was issued full units of TNT satchel charges in addition to the rest of his equipment, and with the rest of the assault platoon he was pulled onto trucks headed south for the front. The ride ended in a desolate-looking area called Uchitomari where the Marines were told to march. "We passed many trees that had been knocked down by gunfire. Shell holes were everywhere, and tree trunks were filled with bullet holes. One of the old-timers said, 'Well, lads, this is it!'"

Shortly afterward, the Japanese shelled them. "Bits of earth and small

stones hit my legs, then steel fragments flew over my head like a flock of birds. We had some casualties, but being a private, I was not in a position to know who they were or how many.

"I asked a 27th Division Army man, 'How many [Japanese] are out there?' He said, 'There's more than enough for you Marines to handle.' In the hard fighting to come, I would often remember his words."

Ison, as well as the rest of the Marines with him, quickly became a seasoned veteran. Demolitions men were marked men. Fellow Marines used them more often than not because the explosives they carried were often the only effective way to destroy the enemy without incurring heavy losses to the company. On the other hand, human beings as a whole do not relish the thought of being blown up by a satchel charge or sealed alive in a cave. Consequently, the Japanese zeroed in on Marines carrying demolitions kits. This made the life of a demolitions man one perilous and frightening adventure after another.

"The enemy would see us through his field glasses and start firing. I'd usually run up and throw a grenade and follow it with a satchel charge."

On May 3 Ralph Boschke took a burst of bullets through his chest and died. Ison became an acting corporal of the demolitions team.

Four days after that, Ison found himself facing the enemy on a hill. The patrol had started with 70 Marines. The Japanese allowed the leathernecks to take the hill because they had every intention of getting it back. They "hit us with everything they had."

Ison and another Marine worked their way to the deep end of a shallow hole. Through the deafening burst of rounds the Marine yelled, "Pop, I don't like it. Let's get out of here!"

Ison nodded in agreement. "We got out, and a minute later, three other Marines jumped in that same hole just as a mortar [round] hit. I saw arms and legs flying all over the place.

"As you know, Marines never withdraw. They just move forward to a better position," Ison said, shaking his head. "Well, we were ordered to pull



**Ison loved his family, but he also loved his country. Consequently, he gave up his deferment and enlisted.**



The photo and what it represents literally and figuratively have dwarfed Ison the individual. The School of Infantry at Camp Pendleton, Calif., erected a sign in 1991 that used Ison crossing the draw as inspiration to Marine students.

back. Two other Marines and I were the last off the hill. They threw grenades.... I gave them cover with a Thompson submachine gun."

For covering that withdrawal the two Marines were awarded Silver Star medals, and Pop Ison received the Bronze Star with "V."

Ison and his demolitions team of three Marines, Wilson, Hayes and Keaton, were considered to be well-trained and deadly proficient in their work.

Consequently, Capt Smith would call for his team and then order up a mission: "Ison, in front of our line there is a small opening dug into the side of the hill which will allow the enemy to escape. I would like to have it destroyed."

"We had a weapon that the Japanese and the Germans did not have," said Ison. "Our officers would often ask us privates for our thoughts and ideas in particular combat situations."

Ison recalled drawing up a plan to destroy an enemy machine-gun emplacement and having Capt Smith approve every detail. It worked, too. "What a thrill it was to know that our mission had been accomplished successfully. The captain said, 'Well-done.' I said,

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26 December 1991

Dear Mr. Ison,

Thanks for your kind note and photos. The final result of the Infantry School's sign was outstanding. I know that your photo will be an inspiration for all our young Marines as they are welcomed to the school. The pride, honor, and dedication to duty that your photo displays so vividly, will continue to motivate our Marines for years to come.

Again, thanks for the note and photos, and for all you do for our Nation and Corps.

Sincerely,

*C. E. Mundy, Jr.*

C. E. MUNDY, JR.  
General, U.S. Marine Corps  
Commandant of the Marine Corps

'Captain, we were just lucky.'

They were going to need that luck to continue. On the night of May 9, Ison was told to take his team up to the line the next morning. On the way, they stopped to draw satchel charges.

The sergeant at the ammunition point said: "All the explosives your team is going to need are already up there."

("There" was a place called "Death

Valley," a draw between two hills. The Japanese held one hill and had every inch of draw registered and covered.)

Ison shrugged, happy to have a break. "No sense in lugging heavy 24-pound satchel charges over open ground." Ison and his three men traveled light for a demolitions team with their weapons, ammunition, field marching packs, entrenching tools and demolition kits.

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The image of Ison crossing Death Valley has appeared on commemorative plates (above) and life-size photos (below) at the Imperial War Museum, London.



When they reached Death Valley, the rest of the platoon was already 75 yards on the other side. Somebody yelled back to them to come across one at a time. "With all the machine-gun fire and incoming mail," said Ison, "I knew he was right. They had the high ground and had us zeroed in."

Ison watched as each one of his men made that run for it. It was only 75 yards, but it seemed like the length of Okinawa.

When it became Ison's turn, he fought the natural, fear-prompted urge to run a straight line. "I got up and ran in a zigzag pattern—it's harder to hit a man who's zigging and zagging, but they sure tried. You could hear the bullets whizzing past—zzzwizzzz."

"When you're facing death like that, all kinds of things occur to you, like, 'I've got four kids back home who will never see their dad again.' But my chief thought was to get the hell across there as fast as I could. If you're going to make it, you have to run like a rabbit with hound dogs chasing it!"

He reached safety, hit the dirt and fell into a slit trench. Marines Steve Evans and Ernest Haurer laughed. "Hey, Ison, that guy took your picture when you



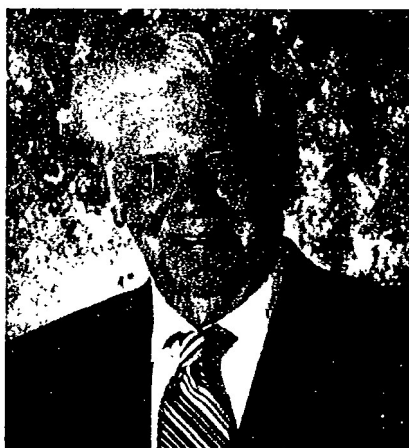
The commemorative coin minted for the 50th anniversary of the battle for Okinawa was stamped with the image of Ison crossing the draw, which has become an icon of WW II.

went past." Ison recalled seeing a photographer out of the corner of his eye, but with the memory of that run still vivid and still catching his breath, Ison said: "Well, I'll never live to see it," and longed for a stogie to draw on.

There wasn't time. The word came down: "Ison, the 'Skipper' wants you."

"Ison, I have a mission for you...." said Smith.

"Captain Smith told me what I had to do, and I said, 'OK, where are the explosives?' He looked at me surprised



Although he never thought he'd live to see the photo taken by PFC Bob Bailey, at 78 Paul Ison is still going strong and still looking for Bailey.

and said, "What explosives?"

Ison silently swore. "That sergeant had given us bum dope. We went back across Death Valley, got the satchel charges and came back across Death Valley once more to do the job." That's a total of three trips, loaded with equipment and under fire!

"Once we gathered our strength, we attacked the hill and took it, but we had 125 casualties in eight hours. That's the main reason why it was called Death Valley.

"You know," said Ison recently during a return visit to Okinawa, "it seems like only yesterday that I did that dash, and sometimes it seems like 100 years ago."

He sat comfortably in the lobby of the Rizzon-Sea Park Hotel, smoking his stogie, some 30 kilometers north of where Death Valley used to be. He is 78 now, but with a full shock of hair, albeit, completely white.

"After Okinawa I went to China for a while on occupation duty. When I got back to the States, I sold a Japanese sword that I had along with some souvenirs. With that money I got a truck and went into the hauling business.

"Eventually I was driving cross-country. I did it for 29 years. I also had 23 years of safe driving. I'm proud of that. I finally retired in 1981 and settled in Fort Myers, Florida, where I fly the American flag 24-hours-a-day.

"You know, I never expected to ever see that photo, let alone that it would become reprinted in so many places. It's appeared in a book called 'Okinawa, Touchstone To Victory' by Benis M. Frank and in 'The Old Breed: A History of the First Marine Division in World War II.'"

Ison was surprised to see the photo displayed in many of the exhibits and museums on Okinawa. There was one other surprise for Ison. A commemorative coin was minted celebrating "Fifty Years of Peace & Friendship" between Japanese and Americans on Okinawa. The reverse side of the coin says, "Battle of Okinawa Remembered," and the symbol of that is an image of Ison crossing Death Valley.

"The coin staggered my imagination," he said. "To think that I'd be the symbol of the battle of Okinawa."

Paul "Pop" Ison contemplated the blue veil of smoke from the gray ash on his cigar and said, "You know, I've never been able to locate that photographer, Bob Bailey. I'd sure like to thank him."

