



SGT REECE LODDER, USMC

Barbara Kenney displays a photo of her late father, 1stLt George Greeley Wells, at her home in Bellevue, Wash., Oct. 25, 2014. Wells provided Marines with the first flag that was raised on Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Remembering Greeley

The Marine Who Carried the First Iwo Jima Flag

By Sgt Reece Lodder, USMC

Few events in Marine Corps history are as storied as the iconic flag raising on Mount Suribachi during World War II's Battle of Iwo Jima. The quiet event, starkly contrasting the bloody battle that claimed the lives of a third of the war's fallen Marines, later marked a deafening Allied victory and powerfully symbolized the resolve of a nation at war.

History will forever honor famed Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal for capturing the celebrated photo of the flag raising. But without the attention to detail of a young Marine lieutenant, this powerful image of American patriotism would likely not exist.

The Adjutant

Before a 96-inch-by-56-inch version of Old Glory whipped in the wind atop the volcanic mountain in the famous photo, a

54-inch-by-28-inch flag flew there. The smaller flag was drawn from the map case of 25-year-old First Lieutenant George Greeley Wells, the Lake Forest, Ill.-born adjutant of 2d Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment, Fifth Marine Division.

The sharp, amiable officer, known by his family and friends as "Greeley," joined 2d Bn, 28th Marines shortly before the battalion began training for the Pacific campaign. After receiving orders and driving cross-country with his wife and child to California, Greeley checked in with his new unit a day late. Noting the young officer's tardiness, Greeley's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chandler W. Johnson, named him the battalion adjutant, remarking, "You will be my adjutant, and you will rue the day. Report on time tomorrow."

Unaware of an adjutant's responsibilities, Greeley scoured the Marine Corps manual on his new job. Near its end, the document noted an adjutant was to carry a flag.

Retired Colonel Dave E. Severance, who as a captain served alongside Greeley on Iwo Jima as 2/28's "Easy" Company commander, recalled receiving the first briefing on the operation and being "amazed that we'd been given the mission of climbing the volcano."

Now 95 and settled in La Jolla, Calif., Severance still clearly recalls the "young, very enthusiastic lieutenant's" portion of the briefing.

"When Greeley said his piece, he mentioned the Marine Corps staff manual directed an adjutant to maintain a flag for every operation, so he took a flag from the USS *Missoula* and carried it in his map case," Severance said.

A senior officer inquired why Greeley kept a flag close, and he replied, "I don't know, but I'll have it if you need it." While not apparent at the time, his steadfastness helped set into action a hallmark of American history.

Below left: Marines show *Leatherneck* photographer SSgt Louis R. Lowery the flag they are carrying up the slope of Mount Suribachi. Lowery accompanied the 40-man patrol and photographed the first flag raising.

Below right: Marines tie the first American flag to a Japanese water pipe before raising it atop Mount Suribachi.



SSGT LOUIS R. LOWERY, USMC



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Landing on Iwo Jima

On the morning of Feb. 19, 1945, following a steak and egg breakfast—their last such meal for 35 days, as Greeley recalled in his memoir—Greeley and fellow 2/28 Marines splashed ashore in landing crafts on Iwo Jima's beaches. Unable to move any closer since “the beach was covered with too many Marines,” the men waded past their fallen brothers while braving intense mortar, sniper and machine-gun fire.

Eventually arriving at the command post, Greeley spent his first night on the island in a foxhole next to Private First Class Rene A. Gagnon, who later participated in the second flag raising. Waking up to find Gagnon on his knees praying, Greeley remarked, “I thought you weren’t very religious.” Gagnon, the lone child of French-Canadian immigrants, replied, “If you look next to you, there’s a big hunk of shrapnel. I didn’t bother to wake you, but it was a tough night.”

Although encamped only 400 yards from Mount Suribachi’s base, Marines slogged through three days of intense fighting to gain control of the territory. While chatting with troop replacements on the second day, Greeley was shot through the arm. The bullet didn’t hit any bone, so he was patched up and resumed his duties, resolute to support the men fighting for their lives.

The base of Mount Suribachi was secured on the fourth day, Greeley recalled. Shortly thereafter, Severance was ordered to select a 40-man platoon from Easy Co to patrol to the peak. Before the patrol,

led by 1stLt Harold G. “George” Schrier, stepped off, LtCol Johnson turned to Greeley and asked for the flag. Producing it from his map case, Greeley handed the flag to Schrier and observed as Schrier led his men to the peak. Not a shot was fired on their ascent.

As *Leatherneck* magazine photographer Staff Sergeant Lou Lowery captured photos, they fastened the flag to a heavy pipe, secured it between the rocks and struggled to raise it up. This marked the first American flag raised on captured Japanese soil. It was Feb. 23, 1945.

“We suddenly heard shouts and horns blowing from the 350 ships surrounding the island!” Greeley wrote in his memoir. “It was like the Fourth of July!”

Making History

Landing on the beach below, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal saw the flag and is said to have remarked, “The flag raising on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years.” Forrestal requested the flag as a souvenir, but when the request reached Johnson—described by Greeley as a “feisty individual”—it stopped there. “This is our flag and we have fought and died for it!” Greeley recalled Johnson saying.

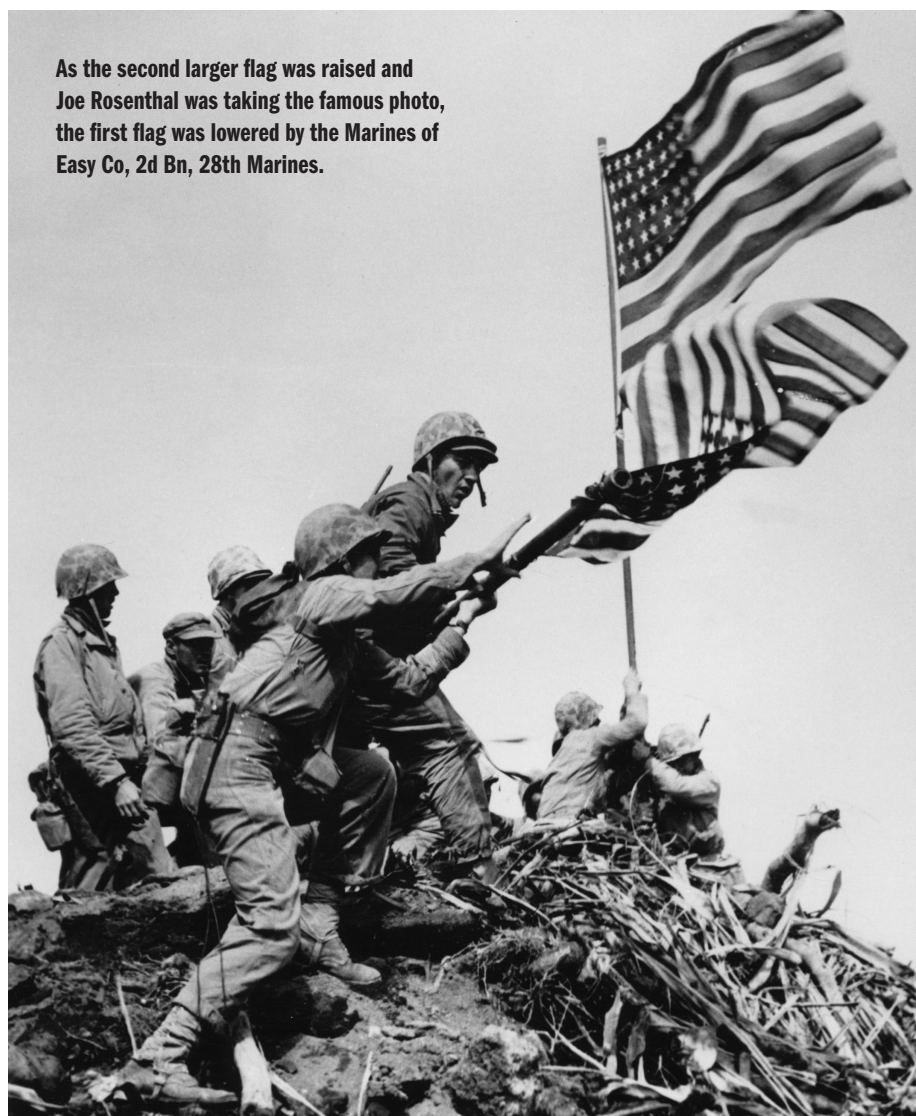
Instead, Johnson sent his assistant operations officer, Second Lieutenant Albert T. “Ted” Tuttle, to the beach to retrieve a larger replacement for the initial flag from a nearby ship, USS *LST-779*. As the Japanese attack resumed, PFC Gagnon carried



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A suit jacket adorned with military awards earned by 1stLt Greeley Wells is displayed in the home of his daughter, Barbara Kenney, in Bellevue, Wash., Oct. 25, 2014.

As the second larger flag was raised and Joe Rosenthal was taking the famous photo, the first flag was lowered by the Marines of Easy Co, 2d Bn, 28th Marines.



PFC ROBERT R. CAMPBELL, USMC

the replacement flag up the mountain along with fresh radio batteries. Simultaneously, Rosenthal and two Marines, photographer PFC Robert R. “Bob” Campbell, who had a still camera, and cameraman Sergeant William H. “Bill” Genaust, who carried a movie camera, worked their way to the peak. Arriving as Greeley’s flag was replaced by the larger one, the three journalists quickly captured imagery of the change, in both still photos and on film. “For posterity,” Greeley wrote in his memoir, Rosenthal asked the Marines to line up by the flag for a “gung-ho” photo.

Returning to the front lines to continue photographing the battle, Rosenthal sent his film off to Guam to be developed. There, his original, unstaged photo of the second flag raising caught the eye of a photo editor, who sent it to Washington, D.C. The image quickly became the most famous photograph of WW II.

A friend of Rosenthal’s later asked him if the photo was posed. Still unaware of the photo’s fame and thinking his friend was referring to the gung-ho image he’d staged, Rosenthal replied with yes.

While many called into question the authenticity of the flag-raising accounts, Greeley wrote, Genaust’s film captured the replacement in its entirety. The smaller flag Greeley carried was brought back to the command post, where he witnessed it being returned to LtCol Johnson and stored in the battalion’s safe.

Upon their safe return to Hawaii, the 2/28 Marines turned over both flags to Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. Today, they are displayed at the National Museum of the Marine Corps near Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

Not Over Yet

The battle raged on after the flag raisings. Around day six, Greeley received a “wonderful surprise.” His cousin Preston Wells, a Marine officer supporting a Navy construction battalion that was rebuilding Iwo Jima’s landing strips, walked into the command post after a long search, remarking to Greeley that “finding you was the most dangerous part of my stay on Iwo Jima.”

Later that day, 2/28 received word that

their commander, Johnson, was killed by artillery fire. Greeley remembered that the news delivered a crippling blow to the unit’s morale and propelled him and others into positions of greater responsibility. Greeley took charge of the unit’s command post. He oversaw a busy medical staff, kept account of the dead, wounded and fighting Marines and facilitated logistics to obtain food and equipment for their men.

“We continued the battle down the east shore to the very end, and it was very intense fighting all the way,” Greeley wrote. “The memories of the daily battles run one day into the next.”

The fighting stopped on day 35. Greeley and his fellow Marines were ordered to return to the beach where they dropped their weapons and ammunition. Boarding landing crafts, the embattled Marines returned to their ships.

“That first night I realized why they had us remove our weapons,” Greeley recalled. “The men were jumping up all night fighting the battle again.”

Greeley’s sage leadership and sacrifice didn’t go unnoticed. He was awarded the Bronze Star with combat “V” and the Purple Heart.

After the War

Greeley completed his Marine Corps service as a captain in November 1957. After a brief stint in the Chicago area, he moved his family to the quaint community of Harding Township, N.J. There, he became a partner in GW Bromley & Co., mapping out cityscapes for local governments. Greeley later sold the successful business to Sanborn Map Co. and became its president.

Years removed from his time as a Marine, he never lost his will to serve. Over his years in Harding Township, he sat on its city council, planning commission and eventually served as the mayor and police commissioner.

“After serving on Iwo Jima, Greeley wanted to continue to give back to the community,” said his daughter Barbara Kenney, a native of Bellevue, Wash. “He was very firmly conservative and wanted to display these values as an elected official.”

Despite challenges at home with his wife and son having polio, Greeley is remembered by his children as a caring father who always devoted quality time to them and his wife of 68 years, Bobsy. Others close to Greeley remember him for his “love of people,” optimism and problem-solving skills.

“Greeley learned a lot from his service, and one of his goals was to make a positive impact on people and help them see what they could achieve,” said his son-in-law,

Jim Kenney. “Regardless of who he dealt with, whether a cook or a waitress, he was very polite and always had time for each person.”

In these interactions, Greeley never shied away from his identity as a Marine. Along with retired Major General Fred Haynes, with whom he served on Iwo Jima, Greeley co-chaired a reunion for the battle’s survivors every five years, arranging White House visits with the president and dinners with the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

“When I went to Iwo Jima reunions with my father, there was a feeling that I’d never experienced before ... of all of these men from all walks of life sitting down and having intimate, open discussions about not only their experiences together but their lives,” Barbara Kenney said. “The motto ‘Semper Fidelis’ is certainly a true statement of the lives of Marines. I don’t think there is any organization in our society that has the same esprit de corps.”

Greeley didn’t speak openly with his family about Iwo Jima until years later. In the 1990s and early 2000s, he was interviewed for James Bradley’s best-selling book “Flags of Our Fathers” and “War Stories With Oliver North,” an award-winning TV series produced by retired Marine and Fox News correspondent LtCol Oliver North.

North, a decorated Vietnam veteran and award-winning journalist, remembers Greeley as “one of the finest people I’ve ever met.”

“The classical definition of a hero is not the one who catches the touchdown in the end zone; it’s the person who puts himself at risk for the benefit of others—that was Greeley, humble and selfless,” North said. “He may not have been large in stature, but he was a giant of a man.”

Home at Last

In the early 2000s, Greeley and his wife moved to Washington, joining their daughter in the city of Bellevue. Although living in a new setting, he maintained regular contact with local Marines, both prior and active duty.

LtCol Ed Doyne, a retired Marine and Vietnam veteran, befriended Greeley through a Marine support group in Seattle. He fondly remembered him as being extremely proud of his service and “happy



A hat depicting the Iwo Jima flag raising rests on display at a memorial for 1stLt Greeley Wells in Bellevue, Wash., Oct. 25, 2014.

to see young Marines carry on our traditions.”

“Some veterans return from war damaged,” said Doyne, from Kirkland, Wash. “We all come back changed. Rather than be upset or disgusted with war and government, Greeley went the opposite way. He had fought and so many of his friends had died, and this made him more patriotic than when he started.”

Greeley passed away Sept. 22, 2014.

At an intimate gathering in Bellevue on Oct. 10, 2014, his loved ones remembered a man devoted to family, country and Corps.

“Maybe this isn’t a sad occasion; per-

haps it’s a glad moment,” his son, Greeley Wells Jr., told the crowd. “After all this man went through and lived to tell the tale, he died peacefully in his sleep at 94.”

Major Sung Kim, the commanding officer of Marine Corps Recruiting Station Seattle, attended the ceremony on behalf of General James F. Amos, 35th Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Addressing Greeley’s four children, Kim read letters penned by the Corps’ senior Marine and presented each of them with Gen Amos’ ornate challenge coin.

“Your dad was not only an outstanding Marine, he was also the one who provided the flag for the most iconic image in our Corps’ history,” Amos wrote. “He witnessed the meaning of ‘uncommon valor’ firsthand, and Marines serving around the world today are proud to carry on the legacy he helped forge. His service will forever be an integral piece of our Corps’ heritage, and we are truly grateful for everything he has done for his fellow Marines through the years.”

Greeley, a member of America’s Greatest Generation, is etched into history for his role on Iwo Jima. A thankful nation has fewer privileges as great as maintaining his legacy.

“It’s important for Americans to remember and honor Marines like Greeley because a nation without heroes doesn’t have a future,” North said. “These heroes inspire the next generation to know they can be better than they already are.”

Author’s bio: Sgt Reece Lodder is the marketing and public affairs representative at Marine Corps Recruiting Station Seattle.



Above: Greeley Wells Jr., the son of 1stLt Wells, displays a challenge coin and letter he received from Gen Amos.

Left: Maj Stephen Harding with Combat Logistics Battalion 23 presents a flag on behalf of the 35th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen James Amos, to Barbara Kenney during a memorial service for her father, 1stLt Greeley Wells.