

Veteran Clif Cormier

From Iceland to Iwo and a Nixon Encounter,
Marine Trudged Through World War II

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

Gathered around the island of Iwo Jima are many American ships, the total climbing to almost 500, and aboard one, a transport ship named Mormac Port, warrant officer Clif Cormier heads topside to watch his fellow Marines charge onto the volcanic-ash hellscape.

The Mormac is closer than most of the other ships — so close that, through his artillery binoculars, Cormier can see individual U.S. troops scurrying about the beach after they land.

Surprisingly, the Japanese aren't making too much of an attempt to repel, firing only a few artillery rounds and some small arms.

"We figured, 'Hey, great. We killed all the bastards'" with the pre-landing naval shelling and aerial bombings, Cormier said. "They're not even shooting back."

But soon, within two hours after the first landings and with the beach now full of Marines, the Japanese unleash their machine guns and artillery, creating devastation with no escape.

The lead battalions of Marines trying to cross the island just beyond the beach prompted the attack from the Japanese, who had been, up to then, mostly hiding underground. It's also popularly said that the Japanese commander, Gen. Kuribayashi, wanted the U.S. troops packed onto beach before firing so the clustered numbers would be easy targets.

Watching the chaos from the deck of the Mormac, Cormier remembered saying, "Poor bastards."

"The Japanese threw everything they had. There were just shell bursts all over the place. In a couple of cases, I could actually see bodies being flung around like a rag doll. I'll tell you,

it was pretty awful."

By the night of Feb. 19, 1945, more than 550 Marines were dead — about 8 percent of the 6,800 who would lose their lives in the five-week battle — and 1,800 wounded.

"In the context of what actually happened, it wasn't all that many (losses)," Cormier, 96, said from his well-kept southwest Gainesville home, maybe a dozen military medals hanging in a frame across the room. "It could have been a lot worse. That's what everybody thought when the first day ended."

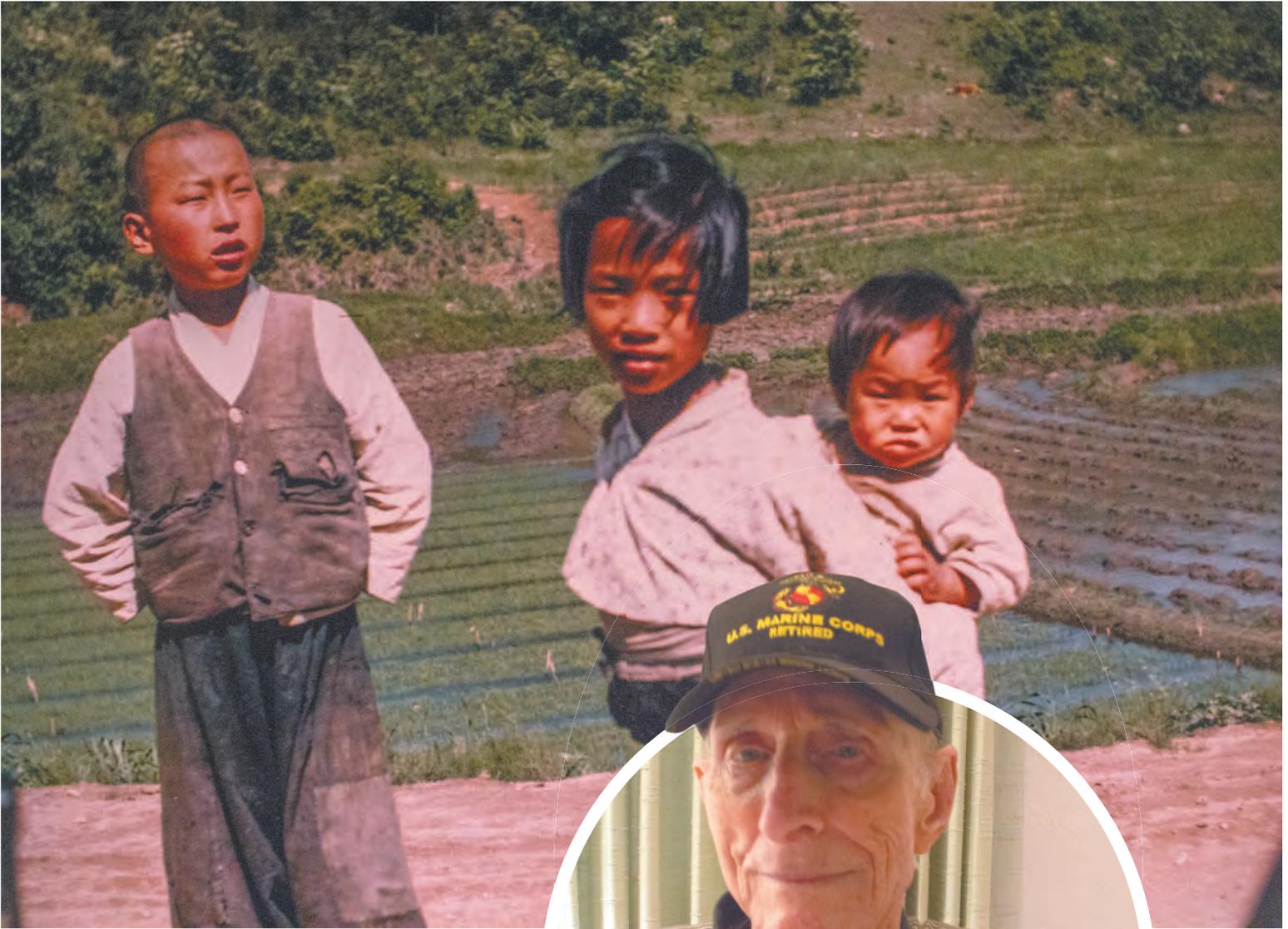
Cormier, then an artillery officer in the 3rd Marine Division, is one of the 70,000 men, the most ever gathered for a Marine operation, who saw action in the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II.

While Iwo is the most well-known operation he was involved in, Cormier also took part in Bougainville, Guam

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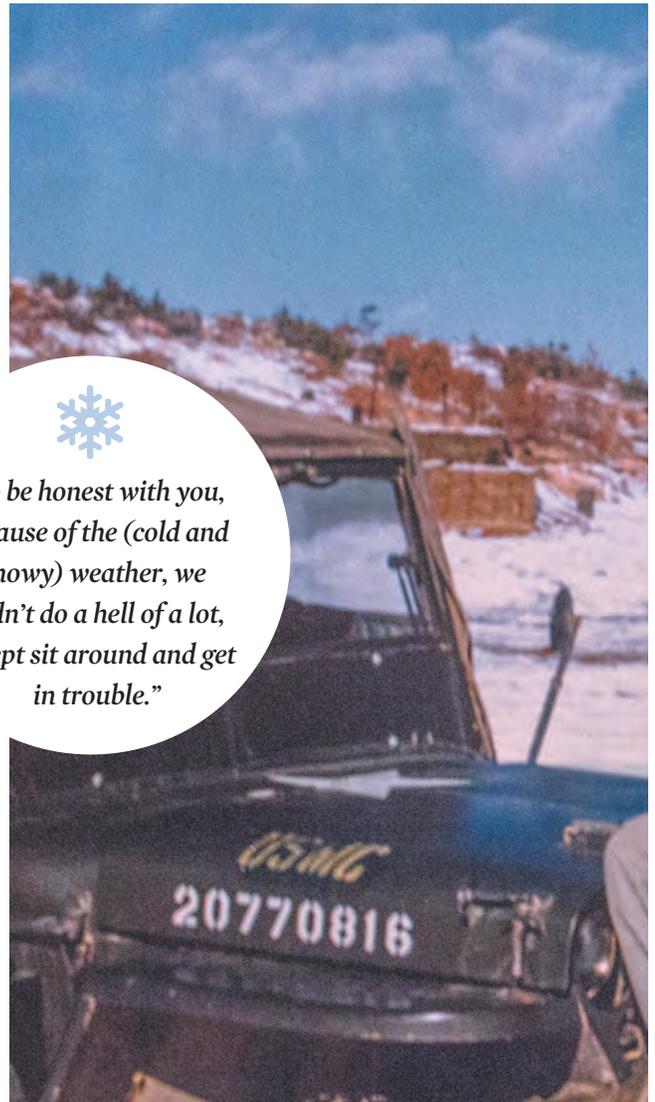
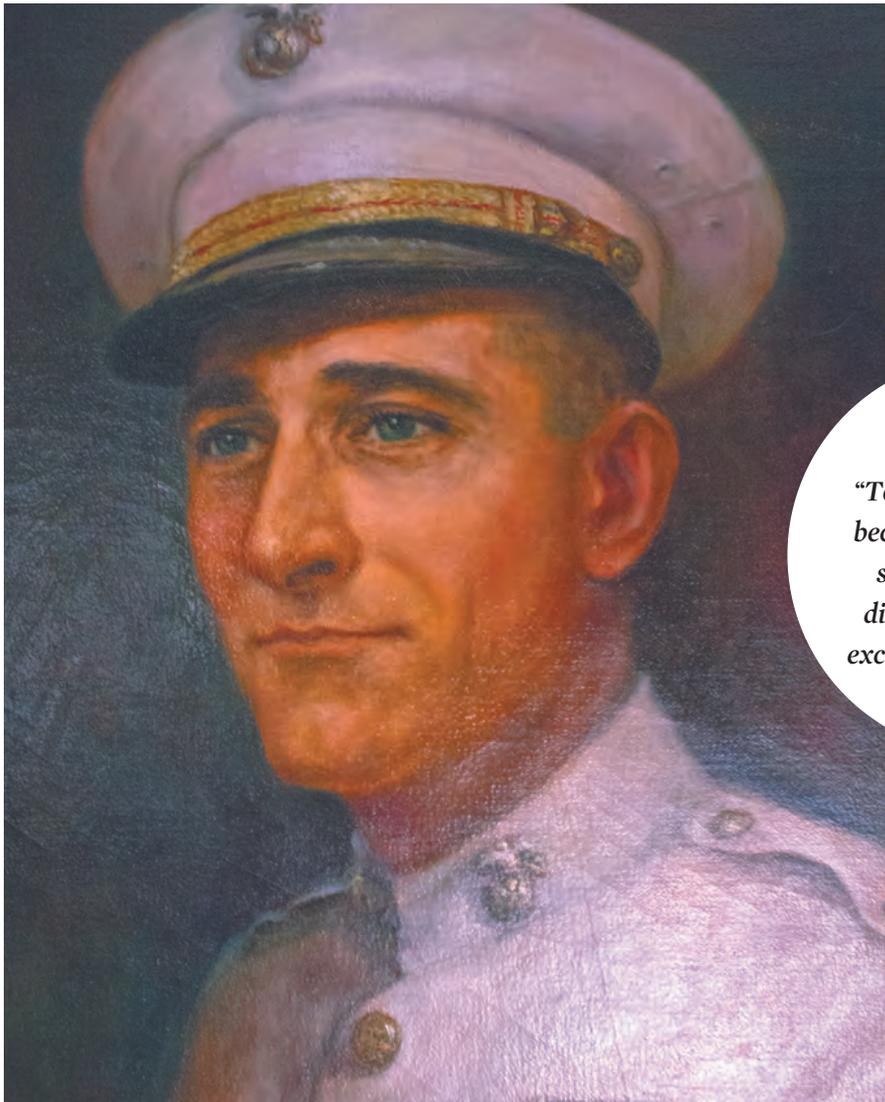
and the pre-war guarding of England's facilities in Iceland — events that, while widely participated in at the time, are becoming increasingly rare to hear about firsthand as the original WWII veteran total of 16 million has dropped into the hundreds of thousands.

In 1938, to get out of rural Louisiana and captivated by recruitment posters, Cormier enlisted in the Marines. Eventu-



World War II and Korean War veteran Clif Cormier (right) took the photos of children and an artillery post during his time in Korea.





“To be honest with you, because of the (cold and snowy) weather, we didn’t do a hell of a lot, except sit around and get in trouble.”

ally, as the war heated up in Europe, the U.S., while claiming neutrality, helped England in several ways, including contributing 4,100 Marines to protect Iceland.

Iceland had in effect been neutral, but because of its proximity to Atlantic shipping lanes from North America to England, the English military seized control of the island to prevent the Germans from doing so. But the constant threat from Germany meant the troops were needed back home, so the British called on the U.S. to aid by protecting Iceland.

In July 1941, months before Pearl Harbor, the Marines arrived on the north Atlantic island.

The Germans never attacked Iceland, and Cormier remembered his time in Reykjavik, the capital, as largely uneventful, concerned with roll calls, inspections, keeping up the U.S. encampment and other odds and ends.

“To be honest with you, because of the (cold and snowy) weather, we didn’t do a hell of a lot, except sit around and get in trouble,” he said, noting one specific instance of a pugnacious fellow Marine having a few drinks and finding a reason to start a fight that got Cormier and some others confined to quarters.

One freezing-cold day in December, while helping unload supplies from port for the Army troops who would soon replace the Marines, Cormier went aboard ship for a hot cup of coffee. There, over a radio bulletin, he heard about Pearl Harbor.

Nevertheless, he and the other 50 or so unloaders went on with their work, and as they wrapped up that evening, a howling storm moved in, preventing them from heading back to base.

“My views of the Army changed (that night) ‘cause they issued us sleeping bags, they fed us a hot meal, we got in a warm Quonset hut, and we had it pretty damn nice,” Cormier said. “And I’m trying to sleep, and all we’re thinking about is, ‘We’re in war! War has started. We’re stuck here in Iceland. We don’t like it, but there’s nothing we can do about it.’”

By March 1942, all the Marines on Iceland had made it back to the U.S., but it wouldn’t be until March 1943 that Cormier would head to the Pacific. His first stop: New Zealand, where all the men were gone.

“There were no male troops. They were all fighting with the British up the Mediterranean area. ... So you can imagine a bunch of hardy Marines and all these women. I was pretty true



(Left) A painting of Cormier in full military dress hangs in the living room of his southwest Gainesville home. (Right) Cormier poses beside a Jeep in a photo from his time in the Korean War.

to my fiancé, I'll have to say," Cormier said of Dorothy, a school teacher whom he met in California before shipping out and was married to for 68 years before she passed away in 2013.

It was then onto the Marine-occupied island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomons, where the Japanese would still carry out occasional bombings. But the real bombing scares would come when, in November 1943, Cormier made it to his first battle, Bougainville.

Working in artillery, Cormier was away from the front lines. But with the artillery being in a more fixed position than infantry, and the Japanese bombers knew where to drop.

"I was shot at by rifles, machine guns, mortars, artillery — but there's nothing more terrifying than to hear a 500-pound bomb whistling through the air. *Whew-whew-whew-whew-whew-whew!*" Cormier said, noting they landed sometimes mere yards away from his foxhole.

"And the louder the whistle, the closer it is to you."

Eventually, a broken arm in a driving accident would take him out of action. While he was waiting on a stretcher to be flown off Bougainville to recover, next to other soldiers much worse off than him, a Navy lieutenant commander charged with plane loading named Richard M. Nixon checked Cormier off the manifest.

"How do I know it was Nixon?" Cormier asked. "I had a vague recollection of

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what the guy looked like, and years later, I read that Richard Nixon's job had been a loading officer on the airfield at Bougainville. So I put two and two together, and I know it was him."

After recovering in the New Caledonia archipelago, he'd return to combat by mid-1944, participating in the Battle of Guam and, in February and March 1945, Iwo Jima.

Though he watched the horror of the Iwo's first days from afar, he was sent in on the fifth day, just in time to witness the famous flag raising on Mount Suribachi. Within the first hour after landing, he was rushed into battle to participate in taking the second of the three airfields on the island.

Cormier's job was forward communications for the artillery, so he would advance just behind the line and unspool a wire as he went to signal back to the command post.

When he arrived at the airfield, many other Marines were already assembled at the edge, ready to attack; when the order came, they charged forward. Cormier remembered dodging endless shrapnel from the U.S. bombings and jumping over a Marine armed with a flamethrower whose body was severely burned by his tank being hit and exploding.

"Somehow, we had made it across the airfield, and the Japs were in a trench on the other side," Cormier said. "Our guys went in after them with machine guns, Browning automatic

rifles, and, I mean, there was one hell of a fight."

In the clash, a young Marine — uninjured but with half his helmet shot off — approached the company commander and started senselessly babbling, his rifle still smoking.

"The company commander had seen a lot of this before," Cormier said. "He wasn't terribly impressed, but he looked at him and he just nodded his head, as if to say, 'Good job, boy. Get back.'"

Hundreds of Japanese were killed in the airfield battle; none got away or surrendered.

Cormier was on Iwo for the remainder of the battle, his last before being sent stateside. For the war's final months, he worked in Williamsburg, Virginia, in a prison camp that held some Germans and "bag eggs" from the Navy: "We made Marines out of them."

He'd go on to serve 26 years in the Marines, fighting also in Korea and retiring as a captain, before, in his early 40s, moving to Gainesville to further his passion for writing by getting a journalism degree from the University of Florida. (Because of his age and his nice suit from Hong Kong, he was often mistaken for a professor.)

Cormier reported and edited for the Gainesville Sun for 22 years, covering many of the big stories of the '60s and '70s, including desegregation. When Gainesville High School absorbed the students from the all-black Lincoln High, fights

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Cormier's medals from his 26 years in the Marines hang in his Gainesville home. Among them are a World War II Victory Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal and the Korean Service Medal.

constantly broke out among the students.

"That's where the fireworks were, (and) there were plenty of them," he said.

Once, while reporting at GHS, Cormier walked out to find teenage black Americans surrounding his Ford Mustang.

"I said, 'Excuse me, I've got to go, and I need my car, if you don't mind,'" he recalled. "They looked at me kind of hard, and finally, they started unfurling themselves from the car. I was able to get out and drive away."

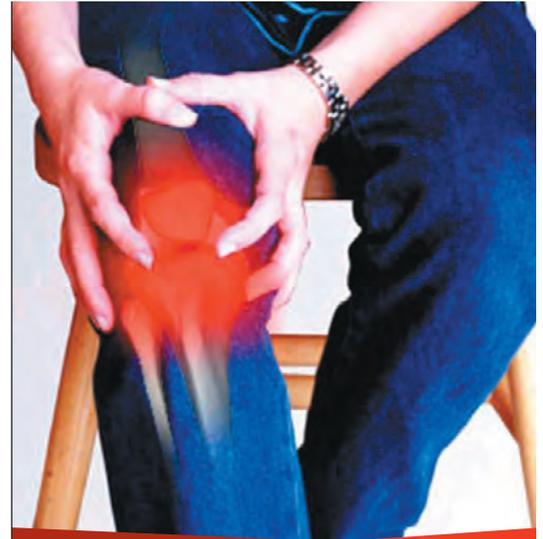
The Sun assumed a pro-desegregation stance and was met with much criticism from "typical Southern anti-black" people, once even having the building's wires chopped with an axe, Cormier said.

In retirement, he wrote the book "A Postcard from Joseph" and has been active in veteran activities, including forming the organization Iwo Trio with Alachua County Iwo vets Bob Gasche and Clair Chaffin, who passed away in 2009 at age 83.

"We have a camaraderie, if you will, because of what we went through — one of the toughest battles in the Marine Corps," Gasche said. "Certainly there's a bonding when we meet, and we can just feel the bond that prevails on the part of the veterans who have been through such intense enemy fire."

With all he encountered, Cormier said he doesn't know how to explain emerging from the war with just the broken arm.

"I was right up there where people were getting killed," he said. "I can't describe the feeling of not having been hit considering what I went through." ■



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