

Veteran Bob Gasche

Hurt in Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945, Marine hops out of plane in support of injured soldiers

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

A veteran of the Pacific named George H.W. Bush jumped out of an airplane on June 12, 2014, for his 90th birthday — just like he had for his 85th, his 80th, and five other times, including when the Japanese shot down his Avenger torpedo bomber during World War II.

Almost exactly two years after Bush's last jump, on June 4, 2016, Gainesville got its own Pacific vet jumper when Marine Bob Gasche, perhaps the city's most well-known soldier, leaped out at 13,000 feet over Virginia Beach in tandem with a Navy SEAL.

Bush "jumped, but he was on his 90th birthday. ... I jumped at 91. I got one up on him," Gasche joked from the living room of his Gainesville home about a week after the jump, his first-ever.

"I hadn't anticipated the force of the wind that hits you when you jump. It did," described Gasche, who landed on Iwo Jima on Feb. 19, 1945, the first day of the invasion, and took shrapnel to the gut about two weeks later. "A younger person can go with it, so to speak. I'm not that flexible anymore — ya know, I'm 91 — and my body has a rigidity to it."

Waiting below amid the clear afternoon was the crowd that had gathered for his jump and the overall event: the annual Patriot Festival, a weekend-long series of concerts and general celebration of the military in Virginia Beach.

Gasche was one of 19 wounded veterans who jumped as part of the festival's seventh annual Jumping for a Purpose, which does provide the experience for the veterans but also serves as a fundraiser for the Combat Wounded Coalition's Wounded Wear program. Wounded Wear donates clothing, including with spe-

cial alterations if needed, to combat-wounded veterans.

Another of the 19 was Gasche's friend Steve Dodd, a 66-year-old Interlachen resident who received two Purple Hearts and three Bronze Stars for actions in Vietnam. Both active in area veterans affairs, Gasche and Dodd became friends in helping form Gainesville's chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart in 2013, and Dodd's veteran connections got the two involved with the jump.

"He's trying to get up from the beach to this ramp [on stage], but it's like trying to get Mick Jagger off the stage at a concert and through the crowd," Dodd said of Gasche landing and then being introduced to the festival-goers.

"Everybody wanted to stop, congratulate him, shake his hand, get their picture taken with him, do selfies, all this kind of stuff. ... Bob was quite the hero and quite the rock star."

"All of a sudden, my body was hit, if you will, like a baseball bat — just Wham!" 

Jumping, freefalling for less than a minute and floating down via parachute for maybe five more surrounded by a beautiful panorama was "one of the biggest thrills of my life," Gasche said, but "fear was not a factor."

"If you've been through a battle like Iwo Jima and saw the deaths and all that, things like [jumping out of a plane] are very significant in terms of it being different and unique and



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Combat Wounded Veteran



(Left) World War II Marine veteran Bob Gasche, who took part in the first day of the Iwo Jima invasion, poses in his wartime uniform. (Right) Gasche floats toward Virginia Beach on June 4 as part of the Patriot Festival's Jumping for a Purpose event. (Right photo courtesy of Steve Dodd).

a lot of fun and excitement and wonderment," he said, "but as far as fear, I did not have it, no. It wasn't there."

The story of Gasche participating in perhaps the third most iconic U.S. battle of the Second World War (after maybe D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge) starts in 1924 in Buffalo, New York, his birth year and place.

But Gasche's family of four soon transplanted to Bradenton, Florida, for treatment of his father's failing health. He died when Gasche was only 12, and the family proceeded to Fort Myers then Miami.

Too young to enlist when war broke out, Gasche decided on building ships as an arc welder in Savannah, Georgia, as a way to do his part.

Then, in March 1943, three months after his 18th birthday, he went to the Marine recruitment office in Savannah to join.

"They said, 'Raise your hand. Say I do,'" Gasche recalled. "I said, 'I do.' 'Welcome to the Marine Corps.'"

Marines near the East Coast took their basic training at Par-

ris Island, South Carolina, but upon arrival, Gasche received a surprise: A disease outbreak had shuttered the iconic base, meaning the newcomers would train in San Diego and become West Coast Marines.

"We went down there, and they said, 'You can't come in.' 'Yeah? Here's our orders. We're going to boot camp.' 'No, you're not. You're going catch a train in Atlanta, Georgia, and you're headed for San Diego, California,'" Gasche remembered.

After stateside training and finally setting out for the front, Pfc. rifleman Gasche's first chance at action came while in floating reserves in the Battle of Guam in the summer of 1944. But "the campaign went so well, they said, 'Naw, we don't need you. We're sending you back to Hawaii.'"

Gasche didn't like it. He wanted to fight. "I really was pining, if you will, for action. I was a young teenager. I wanted to get in."

Hawaii brought months of more training, including rehearsed amphibious landings on Maui, as well as liberty at Pearl Harbor, during which soldiers got tattoos of their girl-

friends' names and the Marine emblem.

Then it was back out to the Pacific, a voyage toward "Island X," complete with examinations of displays and maps in preparation. "It was all Island X. We had no idea other than you're going to Island X."

When the Marines finally arrived at this Island X (Iwo Jima, of course), Gasche didn't take part in the first waves of Feb. 19 but did land amid the volcanic ash and mayhem by the afternoon.

Instantly, a big problem emerged for Gasche's 5th Marine Division and the rest of the Marines' eventual force of 110,000. Though maybe 25,000 Japanese were packed into Iwo, they rarely became visible thanks to the earthworks and tunnels throughout the island.

"We had excellent weapons: M1 Garand 30-caliber rifles ... we had Browning automatic rifles, we had Browning light machine guns," Gasche said, but no targets.

So in what became a battle of inches, they dug in and endured. Surviving in foxholes. Wanting to do but forced to wait.

Gasche encountered murderous situations on a daily basis, whether it be a grenade fight or being bracketed, when artillery shoots over and then under an area before filling in the between land to hit the intended target.

Luck sprouted more than once, including when a mortar shell landed just next to Gasche's foxhole near Mount Suriba-

chi but was absorbed so far into the ash that its explosion only dirtied his head.

"The volcanic ash was so soft," he said. "Otherwise, I'd have been blown to pieces. But [the sand] peppered my face. I was covered."

Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal's picture of the American flag being raised atop Mount Suribachi emerged as the most iconic moment of Iwo Jima and perhaps the war itself for the United States.

(Relatedly, the Marine Corps confirmed in late June that one of the six men identified in the photo, Navy Pharmacist's Mate 2nd Class John Bradley, is rather Marine Pfc. Harold Schultz, who died in 1995.)

Gasche didn't catch the raising of the flag, but with everyone cheering across the island, he turned around to see it right after.

"We were being fired upon from Mount Suribachi ... and we were almost in a killing [field]. We were having terrible casualties," he said. "But when we saw that flag flying up there, there was a sense of relief in that we knew that we had control of that mountain."

Among Gasche's duties as the Marines advanced northeast was popping into cave entrances to check for hidden enemies. Though he never found any, he did stumble upon six bottles of sake in one and something quite peculiar in another.



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“There was one occasion where I went in a little deeper, and I kicked something in the sand. ... And I looked down, and it was children’s crayons, a box of children’s crayons” with Japanese writing on it, he said, noting the children in the civilian population that were evacuated prior to the invasion.

Though his grenades might have caught an enemy before, Gasche finally got the chance at a for-sure kill near the end of his time on the island. Bam — headshot on an officer, well dressed with visible field glasses and a map case.

“He acted like he was out on a beach or something sunning himself,” Gasche remembered. “He was on this ridge. ... I just got my sights lined up on him and fired — as quick as I could before he might move.”

On a day soon after, maybe March 3, something terrible walloped Gasche’s body.

“All of a sudden, my body was hit, if you will, like a baseball bat — just *Wham!*” he said of a mortar round. “It hit my belt buckle, and it didn’t go in straight. It went in [at an angle]. And boom, I was down and helpless.”

If it had gone straight in, he figures, the name Bob Gasche would add to the 6,821 Americans killed in the battle.

His initial medical attention included morphine and, because he wasn’t looking good, a critical tag. He made it to an aid station and then the medical boat USS Hope offshore. Gasche’s two weeks of playing a 20-year-old soldier were over, but mementos from the battle — shrapnel and belt-buckle fragments — travel with him today everywhere he goes.

(The metal used to regularly set off security scanners at airports, “especially Atlanta,” Gasche joked.)

Sleeping one night during his recovery, a nightmare struck



Gasche holds photos from the Iwo Jima invasion. The top one, the raising of the American flag atop Mount Suribachi, emerged as perhaps the most iconic moment for the U.S. during the war.

him. All around, Japanese soldiers stabbed their bayonets into his body, but his dire screams prompted a nurse to act fast and push more morphine into his system.

This is the only PTSD-type instance Gasche can remember from the war and beyond.

“I think there’s a certain amount of stoicism in my personality, and I focused on the G.I. Bill after World War II,” he said of why reoccurring psychological trauma didn’t strike him like it does so many other veterans. “I wanted to get a college education badly, which I did.”

Indeed, after the war, he returned to the Miami area and earned a bachelor’s of business administration from the University of Miami. Meanwhile, he helped support his mother and sister first as a carpenter and then working for Southern Bell Telephone Company for 12 years.

Yet teaching surfaced as Gasche’s true calling, so he eventually returned to the university to get a master’s in education. After teaching for a short while in the area, he received an offer in 1968 from the University of Florida-affiliated P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville.

“My favorite part [of teaching] is something I’m still doing:

I love interacting with children,” he said of continuing to teach classes with Gainesville’s Milton Lewis Young Marines. “I try to give them a glimpse of the right way to live, what patriotism really is: a love of our country, and a desire to serve as a contributing citizen. I feel very strongly about that.”

Since retiring from P.K. Yonge in 1988, Gasche said he’s gotten busier than ever.

Aside from the Young Marines and the Purple Heart chapter, his involvement includes: leading the monthly meetings of the Iwo Trio veterans group, which he formed with fellow local Iwo vets Clif Cormier and Clair Chaffin; collecting used American flags from area stores, including Publix, to give to the local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter for proper disposal; helping with the installation of veterans memorials in Alachua County; assisting in Memorial Day and Veterans Day events; and going to services at Gainesville’s Faith Presbyterian Church (he’s the church’s only founder still attending).

“Bob is tireless. He’s going to work me into the ground,” his friend Dodd joked. “He’s an amazing guy. He’s in every veterans organization there is.”

On retirement, Gasche said, “I can’t do that. That ain’t me. No, I can’t. I’m going down swinging.”

And on what has kept Carol Gasche’s husband of 63 years, the father of three, grandfather of three, and great-grandfather of one going for nine decades, Gasche said he gives “God the credit.”

“I am so blessed,” he said, “that the good Lord has allowed me to serve in this capacity that I just wake up and [say], ‘Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you’ve given me.’” ■

If you know a WWII veteran in North Central Florida who would like to tell his or her story to Senior Times, please email Michael Stone at MichaelStone428@gmail.com.

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