

Senior Times

Remembering Bob Gasche

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WWII Vet who survived Iwo Jima and made military, educational, and religious contributions to Alachua County Passed Away in July at 94

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STONE

In 2016, Bob Gasche joked about besting fellow World War II veteran and former President George H.W. Bush. They had both went skydiving in old age, “but he was on his 90th birthday,” Gasche told me in an interview that summer shortly after his jump. “I jumped at 91. I got one up on him.”

Taking place at the annual Patriot Festival in Virginia Beach, it was quite an experience for a nonagenarian: jumping tandem out of a plane, freefalling, floating down via parachute, and being treated as a celebrity by event-goers, selfies and all.

Gasche called the jump “one of the biggest thrills of my life.”

A Marine in the war, Gasche landed on Iwo Jima during the battle’s first day and fought there for 12 days until being injured by a mortar blast. He went on to serve in the Korean War, work for many years at P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville, start a landscaping business, serve in an abundance of local and military organizations, and become one of the most prominent veterans in the area.

Gasche died at age 94 on July 30 — 10 days after dozens of friends and family members lined the halls of North Florida Regional Medical Center for a “send-off” as he was transferred into hospice care. They held American flags and recited the Pledge of Allegiance and the Marines’ Hymn.

“Every now and then, I watch it again” on video, his daughter Tracy McCoy said of the send-off. “And it brings tears to

my eyes ‘cause he deserves every second of love that he got, and I’m so grateful.”

A great many returned to support Gasche and his family at the funeral service at Trinity United Methodist Church on Aug. 10 — at the service itself but also by lining the road, American flags again in hand, for the procession.

“I just remember riding and thinking that this was not a private ceremony whatsoever,” McCoy said. “This was a very public appreciation of life, and people came out of the woodwork. It was crazy how much love they showed my dad.

“And he’s just my dad, you know? My dad would say, ‘I’m just a yard boy. What’s all this about?’”

At the funeral, fellow Marine Dennis Wait delivered a eulogy. Wait met Gasche through the local military community in 2010 while working for the University of Florida’s Navy ROTC program. Despite the age difference of about 50 years, they became good friends.

“The World War II veterans, they’re not called the Greatest Generation for nothing,” said Wait, who’s now with Gainesville High School’s Navy JROTC program, which Gasche would visit to talk with the cadets.

“I’m a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, and those men that landed on the beaches of Iwo and Tarawa and Okinawa and some of those places ... they were a different breed.”

But Gasche didn’t portray himself as an extraordinary some-





From his porch in 2016, Gasche holds a photo of Marines on Iwo Jima during the 1944 battle against the Japanese entrenched on the island. Gasche fought there for almost two weeks before being injured by a mortar blast. Some of the fragments remained in him, and complications from them are what eventually took his life in July.

one, just that “old yard boy” with a landscaping business — even, his daughter said, when asked to speak at the Pentagon.

“I am so blessed,” Gasche said in our 2016 interview, “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.’”

Robert Gasche was born in 1924 in Buffalo, New York. When he was still a kid, the family of four moved to Florida so his father, in poor health, could receive treatment.

At the outset of World War II, Gasche was too young to join the military, so he contributed by going to work at a Savannah, Georgia, shipyard as an arc welder. Then in March 1943, a few months after his 18th birthday, he went to Savannah’s Marine recruitment office to join.

“They said, ‘Raise your hand. Say I do,’” Gasche recalled. “I said, ‘I do.’ ‘Welcome to the Marine Corps.’”

The first lean toward combat for Gasche, a rifleman, came while his 5th Marine Division was in the floating reserves at 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.’”

Months later, the division was again deployed for combat, toward what was called “Island X” — later known to them, and everyone, as Iwo Jima. Gasche landed in the afternoon of the battle’s first day, Feb. 19, 1945.

He and the rest of the 110,000 Marines eventually engaged and faced constant danger, fighting and dying for seemingly every foot. Opposing them were an estimated 25,000 Japanese defenders, deeply entrenched in earthworks and tunnels.

Once, a shell landed right next to Gasche’s foxhole near the island’s Mount Suribachi but was absorbed into the ground enough to end up only dirtying his head.

He didn’t watch the Feb. 23 flag-raising atop Suribachi — the most iconic moment of the battle and perhaps the whole war for the U.S. — but did turn to look right after because of all the cheering.

“We were almost in a killing [field]. We were having terrible casualties,” he said in 2016. “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.”

Gasche also remembered being at the very front of the line to help advance it, dodging machine-gun fire, chucking gre-

Gasche holds two photos from the Battle of Iwo Jima: Marines with Doberman pinschers, and the iconic flag-raising atop Mount Suribachi. Dogs assisted U.S. forces in the Pacific by detecting hidden enemies, mines, and booby traps; being on alert for enemy movement at night; and carrying supplies, messages, and ammo. The flag-raising, which came on the fifth day of fighting on the island, was a much-needed sight for the battle-worn U.S. troops, who cheered from below and blew ship horns out at sea.

nades, and popping into cave entrances to check for hidden enemies. He didn't find any that way but did come upon six bottles of sake and, separately, a box of crayons. (Civilians had been on the island but were evacuated prior to the battle.)

Among his other contributions was taking out an enemy officer. "He acted like he was out on a beach or something sunning himself," Gasche recalled. "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."

Gasche made it to March 3, almost two weeks, before being critically injured by the mortar blast. Shrapnel and pieces of his own belt buckle went into his abdomen, and some of it remained there, triggering the occasional airport metal detector.

Complications from the lasting fragments are what eventually took his life, more than 74 years later. "The battle of Iwo finally got him," McCoy said.

Despite being in such a gruesome battle, which left almost 7,000 Americans dead, Gasche remembered only one PTSD-like situation: a nightmare during his recovery of enemy soldiers bayonetting him.

He went on to serve in the Korean War and achieved the rank of corporal. He attributed persevering after the conflicts to focusing on his education via the G.I. Bill.

He received a bachelor's in business administration from the University of Miami and worked as a carpenter and then for Southern Bell Telephone Company for 12 years.

To pursue his true calling — teaching — Gasche got his master's in education, moved to Gainesville in 1968, and began that year at UF-affiliated P.K. Yonge. Among his roles was working in audio-visual and being the director of learning resources. He retired in 1988.

"Bob was an important part of P.K. Yonge's history and touched the lives of many," the school's alumni Facebook page said upon his passing.

Gasche said in 2016 that, in his various roles, he tried to set an example for young people by giving 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."

And contribute he did.



Gasche's decades' worth of community and veteran involvement make up one mighty magazine paragraph: Gainesville's Milton Lewis Young Marines, which he co-founded and headed as commanding officer from 2002 to 2005; Gainesville's chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, which he co-founded; D-Day Normandy Veterans of North Central Florida; the Marine Corps League Gator Detachment; the Iwo Trio veterans group, which he founded with two other Iwo veterans: Clair Chaffin and Cliff Cormier, who passed away in 2009 and 2017, respectively; the Alachua County Historical Society, which he headed as president; the City Beautification Board, which he led as president for 19 years; Keep Alachua County Beautiful, which he co-founded and led as president for a decade; collecting used American flags to give to Gainesville's Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter for proper disposal; helping with the installation of veterans memorials in Alachua County; assisting in Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and other events; and Gainesville's Faith Presbyterian Church, which he co-founded in 1973 and was the last founding member still attending or living.

"I would define him first by saying he was a humble servant," McCoy said, noting also her dad's love of trees and efforts through the beautification boards to preserve them. "He did not seek anything for himself, ever. He was selfless.

"And he had a very strong faith in the Lord, and he, I think, exemplified a person who walked the walk and talked the talk."

Friend Jim Lynch met Gasche in the mid-'90s while he was the Alachua County veterans service officer, which helps veterans with their benefits. Gasche was asking about hearing aids because of hearing loss incurred from his military service.

Lynch noticed that, despite being injured on Iwo Jima, Gasche didn't have a Purple Heart.

"He said, 'Well I never got one because everybody ... got wounded over there in Iwo Jima, and I didn't want to make a fuss,'" Lynch remembered. "So I ended up helping him get his Purple Heart, and then from there, we just became buddies."

Gasche helped other Purple Heart recipients by pushing for the creation of parking spaces specially for them at the front of parking lots.

Separately, Lynch teamed up with Gasche to create veterans memorials around Alachua County as well as catalogue existing ones, big and small. The documented number of memorials is now above 100, said Lynch, who served as an Army photographer in Vietnam.

"No one could say no to Bob, including me," he said. "And so every time the phone rang, it was Bob, and I'm going, 'Uh oh, here we go. I got more work to do now.' But it was good work."

Lynch said he hopes Gasche's efforts, like collecting flags for proper disposal, will be carried on.

One thing he said he'll miss is ringing the red-white-and-blue bell he and his wife gifted to Gasche and that Gasche hung beside his front door. Gasche would make all veterans



Gasche was one of about 16 million Americans who served in World War II, and today, fewer than 400,000 of them are estimated to still be living, according to Department of Veterans Affairs data.

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who came to his house ring the bell, Lynch said.

"I'm already missing ringing that bell," he said.

Wait, the fellow Marine, said that as a sign of respect, Gasche would call him by his rank ("major") or "sir"; Wait would reciprocate with "corporal" or "Mr. Gasche." And they would finish their conversations with the Marine Corps' motto, Semper Fi, which is a shortened version of the Latin Semper Fidelis, or "always faithful."

Wait's family helped Gasche and his wife — whether it was mowing their lawn or filling up their generator in post-hurricane power outages — and the two talked nearly daily.

"When I say we were friends, we were friends," Wait said. "Sometimes we adopt the elderly and kind of just take care of them because they need taking care of."

"Well, Bob didn't need taking care of. There were a few times that Bob needed some assistance, but in the same token, in an instant, he would turn right back around and offer you the same assistance."

Gasche was one of about 16 million Americans who served in World War II, and today, fewer than 400,000 of them are estimated to still be living, according to Department of Veterans Affairs data.

Along with McCoy, Gasche is survived by another daughter, Laurene Converse; his wife, Carol; three granddaughters; a great-grandson; and his sister, Cora Alderman. His son, Buddy, a firefighter for the city of Gainesville, passed away in 2010.

McCoy said she is continuing her dad's work in education, now serving as an instructional designer in Memphis, Tennessee.

"Everything he taught me [about education] stayed with me, and I use it today," she said, adding that the instruction began while she was in the fourth grade. "He was just a very simple man. His life's work was serving literally everyone."

Gasche remained largely active into his 90s, happily helping so many in so many ways, including the author of this article track down other World War II veterans to interview for profiles in this magazine.

"I can't do that," he said of relaxing in retirement. "That ain't me. No, I can't. I'm going down swinging." ■

