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Former combat correspondent looks back on WWII

by Melissa J. Brachfeld | Staff Writer

Cyril "Obie" O'Brien knows what it means to risk life and limb to get the job done right.

More than 60 years ago, O'Brien served as a United States Marine Corps combat correspondent and told the stories of the men who fought and died to defend the nation during World War II.

His stomping grounds were Guam and Iwo Jima, the tiny volcanic island in the Pacific Ocean that played host to one of the costliest battles of the war.

Still just as willing to recount the war as he was back then, the 90-year-old Leisure World resident who rose to the rank of sergeant can remember in vivid detail what it was like to stand on the shores of those tiny islands with artillery fire whistling overhead.

"The interesting thing about being a combat correspondent is you were right there with the troops," he said. "You watched what they did and you talked to them. You covered them and they were very happy to talk to you."

The story begins

O'Brien got his start in the military after recruiters from the Marine Corps visited St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, where he was majoring in English and philosophy, seeking men for officer-candidate school, which educates, trains and evaluates men and women to see if they have what it takes to become successful leaders.

He had no interest in the military, but said he knew that if he did not enroll in the school he would be drafted anyway.

"I passed the physical perfectly and they were going to take me and then they said, 'We can't take you — you're less than a half-inch too short,'" said O'Brien, who stands not quite 5 feet 6 inches tall. "Less than a half-inch too short and they rejected me. So I thought, 'This is damn nonsense' and I went down to the colonel and complained."

The officer told O'Brien that if he was "so interested" in joining the Marines he could just enlist, which is exactly what he did.

He fought in the Battle of Bougainville in the South Pacific and then went to Guadalcanal for more training. It was there that he stumbled into his career as a correspondent.

Walking around one day, O'Brien saw a tent marked "combat correspondent." He wandered in and met Bill Burnette, a military correspondent who had worked for The Sun in Baltimore. O'Brien told him he had been a reporter for The Courier-Post in Camden, N.J., during college and asked how he could write about the war.

Burnette said O'Brien was in luck because the Marines were going to invade Guam and would probably need someone to cover it.

"It was completely fortuitous, but that's how I became a combat writer," O'Brien said.

The plot thickens

He began by writing up medal citations, but was soon given bigger assignments.

"I'll never forget when I landed on Guam as a correspondent with the third assault wave and honest to God everything was happening," O'Brien said, laughing as he remembered that day in 1944. "Everything was whistling and there were noises and the clatter was something like ... it's like if five guys stood around you with jackhammers."

Armed with a pistol and a backpack that held his small typewriter and paper, O'Brien would accompany troops while they were involved in battles and on patrol.

"I never had to worry," he said. "There were professional Marines around me all the time and they knew what they were doing."

O'Brien said he wrote "hundreds and hundreds" of stories, which got picked up by new services and newspapers across the country, but the highest praise he received came from his old Marine company after he had published an article about how they had gotten "up behind the Japanese and helped to break the back of the defense of Guam on Chonito Ridge."

He said the Japanese had been holding the top of the steep hill and another group of soldiers had already tried in vain for a day and a half to take it. The troops from his company went up the side and tried three times to assault the Japanese, but were thrown back. Finally, O'Brien said, they were able to flank their enemies and take the hill.

"It was very difficult and this is where so many of them were killed," he said. "I wrote the story and it got everywhere in the states; it got a lot of play. The biggest honor I ever had was when the captain called me over ... and there while the company was assembled he had me stand in front of them and someone read the article to them."

O'Brien said he will also never forget seeing the first American flag go up on Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945.

"Even today when I see an American flag I can't help but think of Iwo Jima and the raising of the flag," he said, adding he had been on a troop ship when the photographer he was with hit him on the arm and pointed it out. "And I looked up and there on the top of Mount Suribachi, that was the name of the volcano, there was a little American flag going up."

He said everyone began to cheer and all of the ships blew their horns. A few hours later, Joe Rosenthal, an Associated Press photographer, would go on to capture the famous image of six soldiers raising the second American flag on the mountain.

A happy ending

O'Brien went on to write for several newspapers and cover politics in Washington, D.C. He eventually moved on to do media work for the Applied Physics Laboratory at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Nowadays, he writes for Leatherneck, a magazine for Marines, and is working on a book about his experiences as a combat correspondent. O'Brien also has published a 38-page volume called "Liberation: Marines in the Recapture of Guam."

Despite all he has done, O'Brien said he remains proud of his correspondence work.

"I'm very happy to think that I, as well as other correspondents, put down for history what was ordinary events

of Marines — things that would have been completely ignored — and we wrote about them and it got into history and the archives," he said. "And more importantly, it got into family histories and family bibles and great-grandchildren will later be talking about what their great-grandfather did on Iwo Jima and how there's a story about him that one of the reporters wrote at the time."

Bridget Turow, O'Brien's daughter, said her father has accomplished a great deal in nearly a century, including writing the wording on the World War II memorial plaque on Guam. She is proud of the work he did as a combat correspondent and has accompanied him to Guam and Marine reunions.

"What he did, I think, was very good for the troops," the Silver Spring resident said. "He would write about the troops and send those stories back to the local newspapers. I think he made a lot of people happy that way, like their husbands, sons and brothers were not quite so far away."