August 26, 1994

Dear Shirley Ann

I have returned from my annual Iwo Jima Reunion and was asked for a copy of my biography of the War Years. As I was making copies, I remembered that you had asked for one.

I met a number of men who served with me and in comparing stories, I find that what I have written is quite factual. I certainly tried to record things as they happened without any garnishes. It was bad enough as it was.

Those I served with certainly were heroes in my mind. They did things for one another which made them buddies for life. I saw this in evidence at the reunion. Being an officer, I never really had this rapport with anyone because the Corps required officers to be separated from enlisted personel -- thus, we never became an intimate part of the group. I did meet those who served in my platoon and they all treated me with respect as if I were an integral part of their memories. This was heartening to me to be included that much.

I hope you enjoy reading the account. I wrote it about twenty years after the fact so many incidences are still hazy. I recorded them as honestly and as vividly as I could.

Sincerely

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ALMA B. SONNE: Biography of the World War II Years, 1942-46

A hand gently tapped me on the shoulder and I heard a voice say, "Lieutenant, it's 3:30."

I was awake now and remembered that this was the fateful day when I was going to die. All the training problems we had gone through the past three months had confirmed this. Every time we would simulate a military landing on the island, as yet unnamed, I would be declared a casualty. The fun and games were now over. This, today, was the real thing and I felt that my days were numbered.

After a hearty breakfast of steak and eggs, I visited my platoon area where all the men were watching the ceaseless bombing of the island of IWO JIMA, and with the dawn just approaching, the island took on a sinister look of a vicious monster raising his ugly head out of the black water. One of the men commented that he doubted anybody could survive the intense bombing over such a small area. This had been going on for ten days. With the daily bombings from the B29's, it looked as if the landing would be fairly easy. But, Colonel JACKSON B. BUTTERFIELD, our battalion commander, had said differently. He indicated that before this operation was over, half of us would be dead. He had also made the comment that 2nd Lieutenants were expendable. This, then, was my fateful day. One of the men

began singing to the popular tune of "Argentina":

I'll bet a bucket of _____
That you'll never 'forgit'
Iwo Jima.

Back in March of 1942, three months after the bombing of PEARL HARBOR, we had a visitor to our fraternity house dressed in a beautiful blue US Marine officer's uniform. He was a SIGMA CHI and also a recruiting officer. He took a bunch of us out on the town for a night of heavy drinking and during the frivolities towards the end of the evening, when we were feeling no pain, talked us all into enlisting in the UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS RESERVE. Living 700 miles from the nearest ocean, I hardly knew what a Marine was, but in those days I was game for anything and the prospect of being a Marine Officer intrigued me. Our enlistment in the reserve was contingent on our graduation from college.

Well, I did graduate but far short of any honors. By this time my deafness had become noticeable to me but not enough for me to be too concerned with it. When I look back at my last year at school, I never cease to wonder how I was able to graduate. My physical exam for the Corps didn't include a hearing test.

I left for PARRIS ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA for boot camp JULY 10, 1942. The training was very difficult but I didn't seem to mind the rigors of the work. I suppose because I was expecting much worse. After eight weeks we transferred to QUANTICO, VIRGINIA for OFFICERS CANDIDATES SCHOOL for ten weeks. Then after receiving my commission as second lieutenant, I had another ten weeks of training in RESERVER OFFICERS CLASS.

I then transferred to CAMP LEJEUNE, NORTH CAROLINA for fourteen weeks of PLATOON LEADERS CLASS and then was assigned to the FIRST BATTALION, 28TH MARINE REGIMENT, FIFTH MARINE DIVISION AT CAMP PENDLETON, CALIFORNIA.

We spent about three months before going to HAWAII and then another three or four months before debarking for the battle operation of IWO JIMA. I had the 2ND PLATOON OF "A" COMPANY. CAPTAIN AARON WILKINS was our company commander. He, along with many others in our company was killed.

The day of the landing on IWO JIMA was clear and warm. Leaving the LST and going off the ramp into the water in our amphibious personnel tank was a long drawn out process. First, we had to rendezvous and go around in a circle until all the beach was well over a thousand yards and these tanks didn't move like speedboats. But we really weren't in any hurry to get there, at least I wasn't.

As the tank climbed up the beach, I could see the deep sand all around us, and thought, "This is really going to be hard running in", which turned out to be the case. Trying to run in sand up to your ankles after being on board ship for five weeks was some feat to accomplish. But the threat of being shot if we stopped was enough to spur us forward.

As we debarked from the tank, I noticed little puffs of sand jumping up all around us and it took a few seconds to realize that these were enemy bullets trying to find their mark -- namely me.

I happened to be with Sergeant ENOCH SCHULTZ, a professional Marine from the Everglades in Florida, who could neither read nor write. He was a tall, good looking man and I'm sure very popular with the women. I found out through the grapevine that just before

we left San Diego, he had gone over the hill to marry a girl that was carrying his baby. He was uneducated, but certainly not in knowing about honesty and integrity. I got to know him quite well, but he was not one to carry on a conversation so many of the things I would have liked to know were left unsaid. I suppose I developed more respect for him than any one else on the operation.

Schultz and I were running along the sand when we saw again the familiar little puffs of sand all around us. We saw a shell crater and both dove in the crater headfirst. I sat up and noticed blood all over my face. I thought I had been shot, but further examination indicated that I had just cut my lip on my rifle.

The beaches of IWO were terraced and when we got on the third terrace, I tried to reorganize my platoon but we were pinned down by a machine gun to our front. We couldn't find a way to get close enough to close it with hand grenades or our napalm flame thrower. So we waited until we could get some reinforcements on our flanks.

I finally got a report about our company's casualties. They were enormous. Lieutenants BRUGGEMAN, PRIOR, and TOWER were among those killed. I knew these men intimately and had known and worked with them for almost a year. My platoon suffered about two or three killed, and about 6 wounded. Our battalion was scheduled to cross the island and then form an offensive line facing the volcano and to move towards it, but we were so badly shot up that we couldn't move.

I had a good vantage point of the entire beach and could see much of the activity. We were pinned down on the third terrace, but those below seem to have much more mobility. I watched two or three LCVP's blown out of the water, many killed and injured. It really was like being in hell.

I could see TONY STEIN, one of my machine gun corporals, on the beach with his "stinger" machine gun firing towards the volcano. I saw his assistant shot and Tony carrying him back out of gunfire range, then picking up a box of ammunition, he went back to his gun position. He was wearing a baseball cap because someone had stolen his helmet. I talked to him about it earlier and he remarked that the baseball cap would distinguish him from everyone else.

The "STINGER MACHINE GUN" I mentioned came to us by luck. One day, while we were still at the Hawaiian base. Stein approached my and said he had a friend who could get us three of these machine guns from an F4U fighter plane that had crashed on the airfield, for the sum of two fifths of whiskey. He explained that he could put bi-pods and stocks on two of the guns and keep the third for spare parts. We could then arm our platoon and carry them the same as the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). This would increase our fire power greatly. The guns would fire over twelve hundred rounds per minute where our conventional machine gun fired about four hundred fifty.

Well, I got the booze and asked for and received two weeks special duty for Stein to fix the guns. I think he enjoyed his time very well and when I noticed him walking down the company street, he seemed to stagger more than usual. I determined that the booze had been meant for him, but it turned out to be a good investment nevertheless.

I believe that Tony's actions on the beach that day saved my life and the lives of many of my men. It was later determined that he had killed over two hundred and fifty Japs, which was enough to cripple the counter attack we were expecting from the volcano. For this action, he was awarded the CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously.

Tony was a happy go lucky fellow and in my private talks with him, he had told me that problems he had at home didn't offer any incentive for him to return and that he didn't expect to live through the operation.

He was brave as well as foolhardy. Later on, that first day, he asked me if he could be detached from the platoon and help some of the adjacent units. I told him to go ahead. Stories of his heroic deeds spread all over the island. I found out later that he had been wounded and had been sent back to the battalion aid station.

When we landed on the island, I could look out over the terrain and see literally thousands of Japanese flags lying neatly on the ground, as if some ceremony had just taken place. I though that I would get one later on for a souvenir. The next day you couldn't buy a flag for love nor money. They were all gone.

I didn't realize how disorganized combat could get. I now understand the meaning of what my drill instructor at Parris Island said, "We will now play organized grab-ass!". That evening Marines were milling all around without any leadership because nobody knew what to do. I had my platoon intact and had moved across the island, but hadn't received any orders, so we decided to dig in where we were.

The next day we were in the assault line. We began our attack towards the volcano and encountered fire coming from a row of caves in a small ravine. We began firing on the enemy and they took cover in the caves. We used flame throwers on them and closed a few of the caves but the larger ones required more detonation than we could carry. I left SAM HANKS to guard the caves so that the Japs couldn't attack us from behind. The next thing I heard that he had been shot and died instantly.

It was either the next evening or the next, I don't remember, that we again moved towards the volcano and camped right at its base. We were guarding a small corridor, at the mouth of which we later found out was a huge tunnel leading into the volcano. Iwo Jima was honeycombed with tunnels that went from one end of the island to the other.

As we took turns on watch, we could hear a lot of commotion from the front. Singing and yelling of the enemy lasted for what seemed hours, then, everything was deathly quiet. The Japs were usually liquored up for their fanatic bonzai attacks.

All at once we heard bloodcurdling screams from the front and then a burst of machine gun fire from all directions that sounded like every gun on the island was firing. Bursts of artillery and mortar shells blanketed the whole front. Yelling and screaming lasted well into the night, then outside of sporadic firing, all was quiet. Our survey the next morning listed many of our own dead as well as stacks of the enemy dead heaped in the piles where the machine guns had cut them down. This was the night Sergent SANTELLO was killed by a hand grenade.

One of our officers by the name of "SALT" SANDBERG was quite a man with the women, and was quite proud of his encounters with the opposite sex. He would tell of his exploits with them and I believe, would garnish them a little to make them more interesting. He had always mentioned that the only place he didn't want to be shot was in his reproductive parts. He had made us swear that if that happened, we were to put a bullet in him.

Well, it did just so happen that "Salt" was wounded by a Jap hand grenade. He was bleeding profusely and the first thing he said was to ask me to take his pants off to see if he was all

there. Fortunately he was and happily he was sent back to the battalion aid station.

That afternoon we made our approach to the volcano from the southwest side. We had tank support and one particular tank was in our area. It was moving its turret up and down, signaling for someone to pick up the phone, which was located in a box at its rear, and no one was in sight to receive an order to do it. It was a lousy job, but it had to be done before the enemy targeted in on a stationary tank, so I decided to do it. I don't really recall why I didn't take the platoon with me. It's possible they were out on a work detail or some sort.

From the telephone, I was directed to guide the tank to the front and point out any pockets of enemy resistance that I could see. We moved out in front of the lines. I would point out any place where I though the enemy would be and they would fire tracer bullets until they were on target, then would fire their large gun. I couldn't tell how many of the enemy were hit, maybe none, but that didn't lessen the anxiety I felt being out in front of the lines with no cover other than the tank. It was a very lonely feeling. I try to remember why my platoon wasn't with me. Apparently I had moved out of the platoon area when I encountered the tank.

We could see the enemy action to our left flank but the tank commander didn't want to be involved with them without more support, so he directed me to take him back behind the lines which I very happily did.

One of my most harrowing experiences occurred the next day. We were ordered to follow the beach around to the far side of the volcano. In order to do this, we had to go through a mine field. I was assigned to lead the company. The beach was covered with large boulders and every step we took we felt certain that was the rock with a mine under it, and would be our last.

As we made our advance I noticed two marines looking at us from about a hundred yards away. I thought they were standing in fox holes. They looked alive and I called out to them to see what unit they were from. When I got closer I could see that they were both dead and had stepped on land mines, which had blown the lower part of their bodies away and the Japs had apparently propped them up in an upright position with them still clutching their rifles. We learned later that they were part of a reconnaissance platoon that had landed three or four days before D Day.

We reached our objective and were ordered to search all of the caves above us. There wasn't much of a beach but the rocks gave us the cover we needed. The next three days were good. No one fired at us and we were able to rest and relax. We found plenty of food that had washed to the shore from sunken supply ships. For a time things were very rosy. We thought our fighting days were over. The truth of the matter is that they were only beginning.

After the volcano was secured we moved back to the other side of the volcano for a short bivouac. Each evening we received heavy artillery fire from the north end of the island and one night a shell landed and exploded about three feet from my fox hole and completely buried me. The next morning I surveyed the damage and found out that the shell had also struck an oil drum which was not more than a food from my foxhole. The ground all around was soaked with oil. Fortunately, the oil had not ignited. I really had a charmed life. (When I got home, my father said that he had prayed for my safe return as many as a dozen times a day. I think this had something to do with my return.)

We were ordered to move to the front towards the north end of the island. The fighting was

very intense and there had been many casualties. Our regiment had been trying to clear out a strong pocket or resistance in our front sector. We had received an order to move out early in the afternoon. In trying to gain some kind of fire superiority, I had watched other commanders place machine gunners in position to fire to the front and all were killed before firing more than a few shots.

About 10 minutes before moving out, TONY STEIN came moseying up the road, approached me and said he was reporting in from the aid station where he had been treated for wounds. He asked me what his orders were and Sergeant SCHULTZ interrupted and said, "Come with me, Tony, and I will fill you in as we go."

Many were the times when we would be given an order to move out only to find out that by the time we got back to our platoon area, "H" hour had passed. Such was the case in this episode.

When our "H" hour came, I hadn't had time to organize my platoon and make a plan of attack, and everyone was yelling to "move out", and so we made our attack under these conditions. Of course, all confusion, broke loose at the outset. The fire was so intense that some of the men came back, and I found myself in a large shell crater with about six of my men, and two hundred yards ahead of the front lines. Corporal Ben Green was one of them. He had assessed the casualties and had seen TONY STEIN and ENOCH SCHULTZ shot down with machine gun fire and both were dead before they could be taken back to the battalion aid station.

We were completely pinned down and couldn't go forward nor backward. It was growing dark and I had to make some kind of decision before nightfall. It would be suicide to stay there all night. We were in the middle of the enemy and had no contact with our unit. Ben Green volunteered to go back for reinforcements.

Now, Ben Green was a seasoned fighter. He had fought with the Marine Raiders and was on Guadalcanal and had been wounded once. That wound was the result of a bullet going into his leg and out his rectum. He never wore his purple heart because he was too embarrassed to tell the girls where he had been shot.

He jumped out of the fox hole and began making his way back to the company front when he was cut down by a Jap rifleman. I could see that he had been wounded and was still moving around, so a couple of men ran to his aid and carried him back to our crater.

As we were carrying him, he was swearing a blue streak. When I asked him why he was so angry, he pointed to his wound. It was in the same place as before. He still never got a chance to wear a purple heart.

We finally decided to move back closer to our company lines, although we never gained any contact until the next morning. Volunteers went out and brought back whatever wounded they had. They were marvelous and courageous acts. But these men took actions like this into their daily routine. I felt proud to have been just a small part in witnessing their devotion to each other. This camaradery (sic) is very widespread, especially among the enlisted personnel of the Marine Corps. From that day on I have always been proud to be called a Marine.

That evening six of us defended a hundred and fifty yard frontage. We were so far apart that we actually didn't have any contact with each other, but were fortunate that the enemy didn't try to infiltrate. I doubt if they knew where we were.

When we began digging in, we found the sand very warm and after we had dug out foxholes the steam from the active volcano soil heated up our foxholes so much that we spent the night pouring cool sand in to counteract the heat. By morning, we were almost on level ground.

I finally found the rest of the platoon, who thought that we had all been killed. One of them said that he couldn't understand how anyone could live through the fire that we went through. I remember the day before when we were about to move out that we were trying to put some machine gunners in place to give us fire support and five of them were killed before they could get one shot. I don't believe we ever had any machine gun fire support.

The next day we moved out only to find the enemy had moved back and we were able to walk over the same ground that had been so dangerous the day before, without being fired on.

As we approached the enemy, the fire became much more intense. We found a huge bunker as big as a house, and were trying to close it with hand grenades and flame throwers without much success.

The Japanese had a weapon they called a knee mortar. It was like a mortar weapon, but much smaller. It wasn't fired from the knee as the name would imply, but the user would place it on the ground and put a conventional hand grenade in it. If it landed on the firing pin, it would explode. If not it would be a dud. There was only about a 25 percent chance on them exploding.

As we were trying to take that bunker, I happened to look up and directly above my head I could see about 50 of these grenades in the air coming down on us. Someone yelled, "grenade!!" and we all hit the deck. That was the longest five seconds I have ever experienced. They were landing all around us and I was expecting one to hit me at anytime. Some exploded but most didn't. We had some casualties, but not as many as I thought we would have.

We were ordered to bypass the bunker and let the engineers demolish it. We encountered much opposition throughout the day. I believe it was the toughest day we had thus far had to go through.

It was about this time that Corporal BLANCHETTI was killed. He was the comic of the platoon and was always thinking of ways of getting laughs. He became a souvenir collector and when he found a dead Jap, he would search him for something to take home. He got in the habit of wearing the Japanese uniform and I had warned him a number of times of being mistaken for the enemy. He laughed and disregarded my advice. We found him dead with a number of bullet holes in him. I still don't know whether he was killed by the enemy or his own unit.

That evening, we dug in among some huge boulders and communication and visual observation were very difficult, so I placed my foxhole in the center and a few yards behind the platoon lines. Later, as things wee beginning to quiet down, I heard a lot of firing from my right flank and then a bloodcurdling scream, and then a series of explosions. Before I realized what had happened someone had jumped in my foxhole and landed right on top of me. Before I could do anything, he was out and running. One of the men recognized him to be a Jap and shot him.

The next morning, I learned that there had been a bonzai attack on our company command post by some Jap officers. A Sergeant HARRELL had been one of the casualties and the way it happened made an interesting story.

The Japs had made their attack by throwing hand grenades into the foxholes. Harrell picked one up that had landed in his foxhole and threw it. As the grenade left his hand it went off and blew his hand off. One of the Japs then took his saber and cut the Sergeant's other hand off.

Sergeant HARRELL showed tremendous courage that night and received the CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR -- the second such award in our company.

As the Japs came from the command post, they were running parallel and a few yards behind our lines, throwing grenades into the foxholes. My foxhole being behind the others was probably hard to see and it was then when one of the Japs fell in on top of me.

One of my men, Pvt CONTE, had lost a leg and had asked me to get the saber from the Jap who had been shot. A couple of us approached the Jap, whom we thought was dead by now. As we got closer to him, he raised up and threw a grenade at us. We opened fire on him and must have shot him ten times at least, and he was still lying to get another grenade out to throw. He did arm the grenade and was trying to throw it when it went off and killed him. He was typical of the courage and fanaticism that pervaded the Royal Japanese Marines. Sergeant SAVAGE was the courageous one in this encounter. I understand he received the Navy Cross for his heroism.

The last few days on the island were still rough. We had closed in on the enemy so that they were cornered in a small ravine from all sides. Each evening, they would try to infiltrate our lines. This would be going on all night, but we were prepared. Everyday we would order a supply of hand grenades so that each foxhole had about ten cases stacked up beside it. If we heard a twig snap or any kind of movement to the front, we would let off a barrage of grenades that sounded like the whole island was exploding. This went on for four or five nights. We calculated that we had thrown over 5,000 grenades during that period.

Incidentally, when I said "we threw them" that wasn't quite right. My injury to my shoulder from a skiing accident before I got into the service prevented me from throwing, so my runner, Pfc RUPPERT, had to throw enough for both of us.

RUPPERT was a good runner and stuck with me through the whole operation. He demonstrated courage many times. I don't know of one incident where he didn't do his duty without question, and being a runner required him to move out and carry messages whenever needed.

One of the men in my platoon was Private LOUIS HEMME. I had to censor all the platoon mail leaving for the States, and read each of his daily letters to his wife and two children. I doubt that a more conscientious and devoted man ever lived. He was very quiet, but he did everything he was asked to do. He always ended his letters with "may the good Lord bless you.." and then he would tell them how much he loved them.

He was in his foxhole one afternoon, after an especially difficult day. There were large boulders everywhere and it was difficult keeping contact with each other. I had ordered the men to be especially alert because we were receiving an unusual amount of fire from the front. I just happened to be watching Hemme when he got a bullet through the head and he was dead even before he hit the ground. His death had a more traumatic effect on me than

any of the others. I have oft-times thought of the great sorrow felt by his family.

Our platoon did take one of the 47 prisoners. We had been trying to close our last cave, when all at once we saw a white flag waving from the cave's entrance and out walked a Jap. By this time, the men had become so bloodthirsty that they didn't want to take any Jap alive, and I had to do some tall screaming to keep them from killing him. We had been taught some phrases in Japanese and this was the time I had to remember one to tell him to take off his clothes so that he wouldn't be concealing any weapons. As it was, he was shot in the hip before I could stop the firing. He turned out to be a very valuable prisoner. I think he was assigned to his division intelligence unit.

After thirty six days on IWO, what was left of us embarked on a reconverted luxery liner names the "ZIELAND", which took us back to HAWAII, the same camp where we were before. I went back to the same tent area I lived in before and found that of the 27 officers in our regiment, LT CHARLES WEAVER and I were the only two on the original rifle platoon leaders left. Captain RUSSELL PARSONS, our new company commander was shot in the legs and I understand he had one leg amputated. All the others had either been killed or wounded. For some strange reason, I wasn't even wounded, not because I wasn't shot at because I was. It seemed that I developed an instinct as to when the enemy would fire and I would know when to run and dodge their fire. I sincerely believe this developed into a skill.

When we hit the beach, I had 45 men plus a machine gun section assigned to my platoon. We received a number of replacements and I boarded ship with 8 men, all that was left of the 60 who started with me.

The adjustment I went through was extremely difficult. The realization that you lived through something like that is almost impossible to comprehend. We all had our problems and I know of at least two Marines who committed suicide within two weeks after our return to our original base at Hawaii. A number of Marines went out of their minds and had to be hospitalized.

One such incident occurred one day when I was officer of the day over our regimental guard. I received a call that a Marine had five or six men lined up in a tent and was threatening to kill them. I took a couple of the guards to the tent and went in. The marine with the weapon kept his rifle aimed at us and was crying and screaming that he was going to kill us all. I could think of nothing more to say than to command him to put down his weapon and that no one would get hurt. At this, he seemed to collapse and one of the men grabbed his weapon. I never heard what eventually happened to him. Incidentally, the weapon he used was loaded.

War is a terrible thing, but if it was a matter of preserving the freedom of this great country of ours, I would gladly serve again. This certainly is a far cry from the feeling we get from our young people today, and the "no win" situations in which our government gets involved.

Upon our return to Hawaii, I decided to see if I could get my shoulder repaired some way so that I could throw hand grenades during our next combat operation. Each time I tried, my shoulder would slip out of its socket and tear the tissue around it and then would get extremely sore.

I checked in to the aid station for a series of x-rays. When the doctor saw them he immediately detached me from duty and sent me to the hospital at Pearl Harbor. When I arrived and checked in, the doctors re-examined me and determined (after 5 weeks) that my shoulder injury was too old for a successful operation and since I had survived one

combat operation, I should be "fit for the same."

I was given a psychiatric exam and was asked the question, "Would you go back in combat again?" My answer was that if I could get out of it honorably, I wouldn't, but that I would if ordered to do so.

While I was in Pearl Harbor, I really had good duty. I had accumulated past pay and was told that I only had to check in to the hospital every 72 hours and other than that, my time was my own. So I went to Honolulu and got a room at the Moana Hotel on Waikiki, and stayed there as much as I could. When I reported back to camp, I would sublease the room to some Marine who was on leave. It was a very nice arrangement.

When I reported back to the 5th Division, I found that I had been replaced. Before leaving I had been changed from a rifle platoon leader to a machine gun platoon leader. Now they were going to assign me to the battalion intelligence section.

We were on our last operation, preparing to hit the beaches of Japan, when the war ended. (The atomic bomb, according to President Truman, had saved the lives of three million American soldiers.) This changed the structure of the Division from a combat to an occupational unit. I was reassigned as commander of our regimental rear echelon, with 250 men to assist in inventorying fifty thousand seabags.

We moved our unit to Hilo, Hawaii and began counting seabags. This duty lasted for about three months, and finally we were shipped stateside and landed at San Diego in Jan, 1946, and then to Camp Pendleton.

While at Hilo we had another hair raising experience that I would like to forget. I was officer of the day over our division rear echelon, and received a call from the division commander. He was complaining about a drunken party going on next to his quarters and he couldn't sleep. I was ordered to stop it.

I took two enlisted men with me and went to stop the disturbance. We went inside of the quarters and found ourselves in the middle of a bunch of drunken black men. I told them that they were disturbing the Colonel's sleep and I had been ordered to quiet things down. They laughed at me and continued their frivolities.

We went back to our quarters and I ordered each of them to load their weapons. I loaded my carbine and we went back.

This time I walked in first with my weapon at my side pointed toward the floor. I ordered them again to stop the noise and one of the bigger men edged toward the light switch, I believe, to turn off the lights. I brought my weapon in front of me, still pointing it to the floor, and told him if I pointed it at him I would fire to kill. This stopped him. We left and heard no more disturbance that night.

The thing that scares me is the fact that I would have had used my weapon if I had to. I'm just thankful that things didn't go any farther than they did.

I was at Camp Pendleton for only two days when I received orders to take a detachment of 200 men, by train, to the Naval Base, Great Lakes, Illinois. Upon arrival, I found that I lacked a few points of being eligible for release, so I was given a 30 day leave.

I returned from leave and was released from the service and put on reserve status May,

1946.

I have lived with this story for 40 years and some of the incidents are still very vivid in my mind. Names of my men, other than the ones I have mentioned, are very hazy, and I don't have any record of them.

I have related these stories as truthfully as I could. I don't believe I did anything heroic, and the trauma of trying to do your work and at the same time keeping alive presented some very difficult decisions. I pray that mine were all correct, but I'm sure that some weren't.

There were many times when I would have to give orders to my men that placed them in very hazardous positions, and some of them died. This is the memory that has stayed with me all these years. Did I do the right thing by them? Was I in any way responsible for their deaths? Well, when I get on the other side, I will find out.

One thing about being a platoon leader. He has to move around more in the line of fire. There were a number of incidents when I would be called back to the company or battalion command posts to receive my orders for the day, then, make my way back to my platoon area. Many orders for the day, then, make my way back to my platoon area. Many times I would be fired on. I believe that I was able to develop a skill in dodging bullets and knowing when the enemy would fire. I remember that I would count the number of times the sniper would fire and knew that his rifle carried only five rounds, and after the fifth round I would take off until I figured he had time to reload.

I remember one particular evening, after a devastating withdrawal, the men were completely disorganized and there didn't seem to be anyone in the company who was ordering the men to organize their lines. I was late in returning to the company area and might have been the only officer left. It was getting close to dark when I began placing each squad in a defensive front. I didn't get finished until way after dark. A number of times I came close to getting killed by my own men, since they could only hear and not see me. So I did have plenty of exposure to enemy fire.

The memory of war is not pleasant. I am writing this for my posterity so that they will know about me and the experiences I had to go through. I believe my story is unusual because of my combat experiences.

The following is from my journal when I attended the Iwo Jima Reunion at Washington DC:
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MARCH 11, 1990

On February 22 (Wednesday) we departed for Washington DC for the forty fifth Iwo Jima Reunion. We drove to Los Angeles the first day and stayed near the airport. There we stored the auto and the next morning took our flight on American Airlines for Washington.

We arrived at 4:30 at Dulles Airport and took a taxi into town which is about 28 miles. The taxi fare was about $40. We registered at the Mayflower Hotel, where I used to stay on weekends when in the service.

I had received a letter from Mary Nell Hanks who was inquiring about her brother David (we knew him as Sam). He was killed on Iwo and happened to be in my platoon. In fact, I remember the circumstance under which he died. It was about the third day of battle and we had crossed the island and was headed towards the volcano when we encountered opposition from a number of caves to our front. After we had cleaned out the caves as much

as we could, I left David to guard the openings to lessen any attack from the rear. It's difficult seeing into a cave and much easier looking out from the inside of a cave which is the disadvantage David had. Apparently he didn't see the enemy and they killed him, from what I gathered was a shot in the head. I was told he died instantly, but Mary Nell's story was that he died of several wounds in the stomach.

The evening we got there, I was standing in the registration line and met a girl by the name of Peggy Caldwell. There were 950 people there and it was quite a coincidence that Peggy was the first I introduced myself to, and to find out that she knew Mary Nell. This led to an appointment with Mary Nell the following night.

Just before the banquet, we gathered in the mezzanine with my old company commander, Russell Parson, who had been wounded in action after taking over command when Capt. Aaron Wilkins was killed. Parsons lasted only a day or two when he was shot in the leg and had to have it amputated. We talked to Mary Nell and I related the story of David's death which seemed to put her mind to rest. She seemed very appreciative that I would take the time to spend with her and reciprocated with an invitation to tour the State Dept, where she served in the diplomatic service.

We took the tour a few days later (Monday) and were surprised to find that on the top floor were rooms especially decorated with many valuable artifacts of American antiquity and very exquisitely decorated. These rooms were used for visits from foreign diplomats who required the red carpet treatment.

We bid Mary Nell goodbye and promised to write. I plan to send her my biography and any other items in which she might be interested.
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Preface (by Al Sonne):

I try to keep letters from those with whom I served on Iwo Jima. The following is from Cpl John McWilliams, who was a group leader, and eventually a squad leader in my platoon, and handled one of the stinger machine guns which was converted by Tony Stein. Phrases in parentheses are my comments.

June 9, 1992

Hello Al,

It has taken a while to answer your letter as I was writing a long letter to Russ Echenberg who is writing a book about Tony Stein. He asked in the Leatherneck that anyone who knew Tony to write him. He grew up with Tony in Ohio. Also a John D Grossi of Tampa Fla. is writing about WW II Marines who were awarded the Medal of Honor. So I wrote one long letter for both of them to share. Russ sent me a packet of things that he knew about Tony. Copies of News articles about Tony in his Dayton Ohio paper; a copy of the letter to his mother from Colonel Butterfield and a copy of the commisioning of the DE Stien in 1970. Also (he sent) some of his book, "Remembering Tony Stein". He knew Tony from the 8th grade in school until he enlisted in the Corps. I'll send your name and address to both of them.

I can't place Hanks. Do you still have the picture of "A" Co taken at the tent camp at Pendleton? If so tell me what row and from left to right what number is him. I am number 4 in the 1st row, Stanley Koich is number 1 in the second row.

Tony and I built 2 stingers at Camp Tawawa and hit the beach with them at Iwo. Joe Conte was my assistant and carried extra ammo in a bar belt. I don't remember who was Tony's assistant.

If you remember, tractor F-1 couldn't climb the first bank so we unloaded and went up that black ash with great difficulty. My fire team was to be the first to peel off to protect the left flank. Joe Conte and I were in one hole and Stan Koich was Al Martino in the next. We were taking a lot of fire from a bunker at the base of Suribachi. Tony and I got quite a few of them as they came out. Then Tony moved up the line and we lost contact with each other. We saw Tony when he was picking up the wounded out in front, then he moved out. We couldn't move as our orders were to hold our flank position until relieved. We stayed put the first night. The 2nd day before noon, Koich got hit in the left shoulder. I got him bandaged and helped him back to the beach and into a small boat.

We kept working on the pill box that had hit Koich, then a LCI came up close and layed down a blanket of rockets right on that position. Then some F4Us came in and dropped napalm on them.

That quieted everything down and we drew no more dire from that area. So in the afternoon I sent Bruggerman (the name is wrong. Lt. Bruegerman was leader of the 1st platoon) to find you and see if we were to hold there or report to you. I brought most of the 2nd squad and found you at the edge of the beach and we spent the 2nd night watching down on the beach for anyone trying to go north from Suribachi (This I don't remember).

We went around the mountain at the base and ended up almost where we had come ashore. (This I remember, but I had spent the first two nights on the other (west) side of the island. There seems to be a lot of confusion as to our location the first two nights. Its possible that we were all separated).

We went around the mountain at the base and ended up almost where we had come ashore. "A" Co was given the job of clearing the area of stragglers and sealing up all the caves and such at the base of the volcano.

We were there 2 or 3 days. One night a Jap dug out from under Conte and my foxhole. Hunt could see him working but we couldn't. When he finally got out, Hunt shot him. Then we had to blow his hole shut and that ruined our foxhole. The next night was when the Jap guns to the north hit the ammo dump of the long toms just to our north and we spent all night sweating out the shells coming in, and the ammo dump burning and exploding. Wasn't this the night that you and Ruppert almost got buried alive? (yes, it was).

Then we moved north. I think this was the trip that Tony got killed and Ben L Greene got hit, but it was too hot to get him out. Right? (Yes, the Indian's last name was Pete). Then, so that California Indian boy stayed with him all night. I think he got a Silver Star for watching over Ben L.

We went to the rear for a couple of days and got some replacements, then back north again. (This part I don't remember. I know I didn't go back and was on the front line every day since leaving the volcano).

The was when the Third Division was driving up the middle and we got squeezed together so much that I had three men to a hole. That night a Jap bastard came up from behind, walked through the mortar section, came up to the front line, cracked two grenades and dumped them in the hole next to mine. Garich and Martino got out with minor wounds but Conte had most of his leg blown away. He died aboard the hospital ship. (I relate this experience where I was able to get a Jap sword from the Jap who threw the grenade).

As we moved north, the 3rd Div reached the sea so we had to make a left flank, move to face Kitano Point. You told me where you wanted me to place the 2nd squad. If you remember, Lewis broke his arm getting out of the tractor and I was the 2nd Squad Leader from then on.

Anyhow, as I was putting the squad where you wanted them, I took a rifle ball through my helmet. It took three shots to hit me. The first two were close but he (the Jap) hit me with the third.

I came back to your hole and you and Rupert bandaged my head and I made my way to Co Hdqtrs (with) a ten (tin?) can of meat and beans, then to the Battalion Aid Station where they sewed me up and sent me down to the beach.

The next day I got on a C47 (transport) and was flown to Guam. After a few days, heading back to Pearl Harbor, then to Camp Tawawa. I was back in the same tent with a seabag full of beer when the trucks rolled in and "A" Co. got back. I got hit March 10th, 1945, so I lasted 20 days on Iwo.

I hope this helps refresh your memory.

I am a member of the Flint Detachment Marine Corps League and at last year's Dept. Convention, we had a speaker who was the man who dug into those caves you told about. He showed slides of the caves and the bodies and weapons. He gave me a bottle of black ash from the beach. It still stinks the same.

Semper Fi

John

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March 6, 1995

Dear Richard and family,
We just returned from Washington DC where we attended the 50th Reunion of the Battle of Iwo Jima. We felt very comfortable there -- didn't fear we would get mugged or anything even though there were a few strange people around -- but then there are a few strange people around here any day of the week. We stayed at the Marriot Hotel which is just two blocks from the White House. The Hotel was lovely and the food fantastic and we met several friends we knew from other reunions -- those specifically who knew Al in the Marine Corps fifty years ago. A big shopping mall was attached to the hotel so I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I don't shop much anymore, but it is always fun to look at other stores besides K-Mart, Wal-Mart and Cornet. We had a religious ceremony at the Washington National Cathedral -- it's designed as a copy of Notre Dame and it is beautifully

architectured (sic) and the stain glass windows are magnificent but it is the pits because one cannot see anything or hear anything.

On Sunday they had a memorial service at the Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima monument which is in the Arlington Cemetery. We were about ten rows back so we could see everything well. President Clinton gave a short address -- Hillary was there on the front row. The Commandant of the Marines gave a talk and then a chaplain gave a prayer which was very touching. As he said "Amen" there was a "flyover" of two bombers and six fighters. I'm sure that even God was impressed. The Marine Drum and Bugle Corps and the Marine Band both performed and they were fantastic.

We walked over to the Ford Theatre from the hotel, and to the old Post Office which is filled with shops and food vendors. We took a trolley tour and it stopped across the street from the White House because the motor was smoking. They had us all get out of that trolley and onto another one. Just as we pulled out around the corner, the first trolley exploded and burned to a crisp. That was on all the newscasts because you can imagine how many cameras were at the ready in front of the White House and security first thought it might be terrorists because of the prime location -- but it was just me and Al and a few other tourists. The next day we took a cab up to the Capitol and secured passes to sit in the galleries of the Senate and the House. We saw Senators Hatch, Moynahan, and Bird among others and didn't know many faces in the House but half of the speakers were women -- which did my heart good. That was quite a thrill and it has made C-SPAN more interesting for us.

We did take the White House tour again. The blue room had just been refurbished by Hillary and was to be shown for the first time on TV that same night. It was beautiful but a little overdone for my taste.

I had a hard time packing for this trip. I knew it would be cold so I took my leather jacket and my boots but forgot to take a light jacket -- and we were in the hotel most of the time for visits and meals and shopping. Also, I was so uncomfortable with my bra. Every time I would move, my bra would slip up around my neck and I would have to reach up under my sweater and pull it down into place. That was quite a feat while listening to President Clinton's speech at the Memorial Service and knowing cameras were all over the place. I was exceeding (sic) uncomfortable during the whole reunion. Luckily, there was a Victoria's Secret store in the Mall. I kept thinking that I had better go in there and maybe somebody could help me with my problem. I should mention that most of the taxi drivers and the clerks in DC now are Ethiopians. The people from Bangledesh have move onto better things -- the welfare roles -- and left the jobs to these people. They are a beautiful people -- they have smooth clear skin, well-modulated voices and delightful accents. So on to Victoria's Secret. Mary from Ethiopia waited on me and she was beautiful. I told her my problem and she wanted to know what size I was wearing. I told her that was Patricia's Secret. Anyway, she came in the dressing room with me and looked over my torso in depth and told me I was wearing the wrong size of bra -- so I went immediately from a 36-C to a 38-D (without the aid of silicone) and I feel like a new woman. I find it quite ironic that I had to attend a Marine Reunion to become so firm, so fully packed in order to live a happy and well-rounded life.

Love,

Pat Sonne