

OUR DEFENDERS

On Feb. 23, 1945 six American servicemen raised an American flag on top of Mount Suribachi on the Island of Iwo Jima. Someone had a camera, and in 1/400 of a second the dreams and ideals of the American soldier were immortalized in one elegant instant of time. That picture has become the most recognized and reproduced in the history of photography.

Iwo Jima is a tiny little island in the South Pacific, only eight square miles. It was defended by 22,000 Japanese soldiers hidden in 750 pillboxes, and 1,500 men made caves that were connected by 16 miles of tunnels. Their weapons were trained on the beaches and they had practiced for months for the invasion.

This was America's most heroic battle and claimed 25,851 U.S. casualties. More medals for valor were awarded for action on Iwo Jima than in any battle in our history. The bloody struggle ground on for 36 long days. The six men who raised the flag not only immortalize the heroism of the American soldier, but form a representative picture of the United States in 1945. One was a mill worker from New England. Another was a Kentucky tobacco farmer. The third was a Pennsylvania coal miner's son. The fourth was a young man from the oil fields of Texas. The fifth was a boy from Wisconsin's dairy land. The last was an Arizona Indian. Three died and are buried on Iwo Jima. Another was so severely wounded that he had to be carried off the island. Only two walked away from the battle. They also represent the ratio of their comrades who fought there. Two out of every three were killed or wounded.

Here are the names and a brief biography of these six heroic flag raisers.

Rene Gagmon - Manchester, New Hampshire. Rene was born March 7, 1925, the only child of French Canadian mill workers. He was strikingly handsome with a lean Gallic face and

dark hair. He was raised under the coddling influence of a single mother. Manchester was on the decline in the 1930's but still home city to the largest textile-mill complex in the world. Rene worked at the mill until he received his draft notice in May of 1943.

Franklin Sousley - Hilltop, Kentucky. Franklin was born Sept. 19, 1925. His family home was a four room cabin with no electricity and no running water. His father died when he was nine and he became the “man of the family”. He graduated from High School in 1943 and went to work in the Frigidaire plant in Dayton, Ohio. He was careful to send part of his paycheck back to his mother. He received his draft notice in Jan. 1944 and then decided to enlist in the marines.

Mike Strank - Franklin Borough, Pennsylvania. Sergeant Strank was the “old man” of the group, yet died in battle before he was 25 years old. Born Nov. 10, 1919 in Jarabenia, Czechoslovakia his family came to America like so many other immigrants. They lived in a two room rental apartment inside a Slavic enclave. He could avoided the war, but enlisted Oct. 6, 1939. He was the only one of the six who enlisted before the war.

John Bradley - Appleton, Wisconsin. Born in Antigo, Wisconsin in 1923 to an Irish Catholic family. He was an altar boy at seven and later worked part time at the Appleton Funeral Home. He survived the battle of Iwo Jima and died in Jan. 1994. He was married 47 years to his childhood sweetheart and spoke of Iwo Jima only one time to her. It was on their first date.

Harlon Block - Rio Grande Valley, Texas. Harlon was born on a farm just outside of McAllen, Texas. Oil was discovered 40 miles west of McAllen and the Rado refinery offered free gasoline to anyone with a truck who would haul crude from the fields. Harlon started driving trucks at an early age. His athletic skill and strength made him the star of the high school football team.

Ira Hayes - Gila River Indian Reservation, Arizona. Ira was born Jan. 12, 1923, he was the oldest of six children. Arizona had only been a state for 11 years and Pima Indians were not recognized as citizens. His mother, a devout Presbyterian, read him the Bible as he was growing up. Every morning in school they would get a report on the war, and sing the anthems of the Army, the Marines, and the Navy. Nine months after Pearl Harbor he enlisted in the Marines. He was only 19 at the time. His community sent him off to war with a traditional Pima ceremony.

(Adapted from *Flags of our Fathers* by James Bradley)