

Robert Johnston

# Memories of Robert Johnston

*The following article comes from interviews with residents at the Concord Deaconess and is included in the book "Memories of World War II."*  
DC

I joined the Marine Corps and was sent to Paris Island for boot camp. Then I went on to Camp LeJeune for training on the firing range. Formed the Fourth Division at Camp Pendleton. Nine months later, we experienced our first battle.

I was shipped over to Kwajalan Island where they were trying to displace the Japanese. It was not a big island. We lost our top ranked Colonel and had several other casualties. Afterwards we were sent to Maui in Hawaii for rest and then on to Saipan in 1944. Again we were fighting to push the Japanese out.

On the first night, I lost my best friend. It was a bad night. We were at a sugar refinery and had dug foxholes. But there were rats in the foxholes. My friend got out and sat above ground 10 feet away. A shell hit and there was not much left but his dog tags. I never told his family what really happened.

We stayed two weeks on ship and took another island, Tinian's — losing lots of men. After going back to Pearl Harbor, where I saw my friend's brother — we were shipped on to Iwo Jima. We lost lots of people — I was a corporal but got a field commission to 2nd lieutenant — officers were being killed too.

Iwo Jima was a tough battle. There were no buildings — it was all underground. The Japanese could see us but we could not see them. We had a platoon of 45 and then 20 replacements. Out of 65 men, only 18 survived.

To stay alive, we finally resorted to flame throwers. We would blow flames into one end of a tunnel, and the enemy would run out of the other side of the tunnel. Then the fighting would happen with our soldiers stationed at the other end.

Once in a tunnel, I stepped over 18 Japanese soldiers we thought were dead. One rose up with a saber to kill me and a friend shot him. So many close calls.

Sometimes we could not get the Japanese out of the tunnels and just had to close up the caves with putty explosives. It was so hard.

I was lucky. I was wounded, lost teeth when shrapnel hit me in the mouth. I was going with Claire (who became my wife). She was a dental hygienist and picked up that I was talking funny on the phone. Was awarded the Bronze Star medal and Purple Heart for injuries on Iwo Jima. Also a Presidential citation for battles there. It certainly matured us in a hurry.

Then I was sent to Quantico for officers training and the war ended while I was there. All my decorations came on Iwo Jima.

I was really edgy when I first came back. At Quantico, they put me in an ROTC type training program and I was the only vet in a group of college kids. It was really hard to focus, to study. They helped me. I couldn't sit through two movies, but it passed.

Faith really helped me get through. People ask "Why did Joe X get killed and not Y" and I don't have an answer. But God answered the prayers of my Mom and all four brothers came home.

War is no good. My sister asked me to go and on Veteran's Day I spoke at the middle school to the eighth grade. I told them — It is no good! There have to be other ways to settle things, not through war. You have to find another way.

But all of us (four brothers) were proud to fight for our country — we weren't drafted, we all joined up.

The Fourth Division was the most beat up of the Marine Corps. You'd get back aboard ship and wonder how you made it. I lost 40 pounds.

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