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Celebration of Freedom

# STORIES OF HONOR

Stories of risk, sacrifice, duty and honor.

Prairie du Sac resident Eldor Fruehling doesn't bear visible scars from his time serving in the military. But the 94-year-old former U.S. Marine still mentally carries the burden of his time spent serving in World War II.

It was October, 1943. Like thousands of other young men, the then 18-year-old Fruehling joined the military feeling a sense of duty while the U.S. was nearing its second year in the war.

"I felt serving our country was a privilege," Fruehling said. "I joined the Marines because it sounded exciting to an 18-year-old."

Fruehling, born and raised in Nebraska, did his basic training at Camp Pendleton in California. He was given a 10-day leave, most of which was spent traveling via train to Omaha, Neb. When he got back to Camp Pendleton, Fruehling was assigned to an artillery unit and was sent to Hawaii for training. "We were training to be sent to Iwo Jima, which is a volcanic island similar to Hawaii," Fruehling said. "Of course, we didn't know that then."

By January, 1943, Fruehling and his unit were aboard a Landing Ship Tank, specially designed with a flat bottom to land on a beach. These vessels were crucial to the allies of World War II. The LST Fruehling and his crew were on was approximately 290 feet and could carry up to 20 Sherman tanks, 39 light Stuart tanks, or 22 amphibious transport vehicles known as DUKWs. "I was sick most of the time I was on it," Fruehling said. "It absorbed every wave."

The unit landed on the beaches of Iwo Jima, starting its trek on a two-and-a-half ton DUKW loaded to the hilt with ammunition. The amphibious truck was used to ferry ammunition, supplies and equipment from supply ships in transport areas. Fruehling and his fellow soldiers were essentially sitting on 5,000 pounds of ammunition. "With the things happening on the island — shells were dropping all around us from enemy planes coming from Mt. Suribachi on the other side of the island," Fruehling said. "I was scared. But I was fortunate I went through the entire

operation not being a casualty."

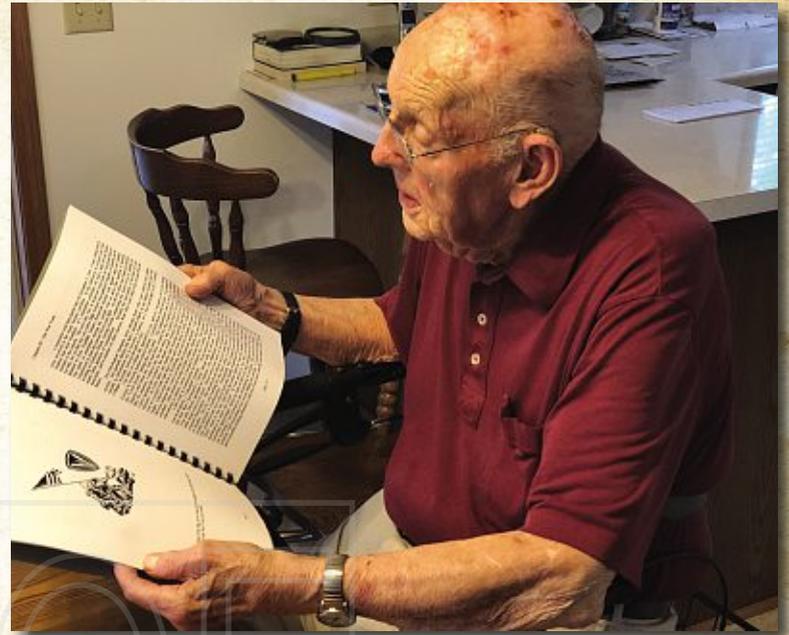
The purpose of the U.S. taking the island was to provide a safe landing area for the B-29s raiding Tokyo, because they were taking fire and wouldn't be able to get all the way back, Fruehling said. "It was the same type of plane former President George (H.W.) Bush had to abandon coming back."

Fruehling said their mission was to move inland and spearhead Okinawa. However, instead of taking three-to-five days, it became 26. One in three soldiers was a casualty; either killed, wounded or missing in action.

The trouble was Naval intelligence didn't have that information, and the U.S. Military didn't know how many of the opposition remained. "The Japanese dug into these caves," Fruehling said. "They were bombed for 53 days and shelled over about a month. But really, they ended up with few casualties because they were deep into these caves. (The U.S. Military) erred in their estimation of how long it would take for us to secure Iwo Jima."

Most of the Japanese casualties were the result of flame throwers, on the occasion a U.S. soldier could make his way into one of the caves.

During that time Fruehling spent much of his time in a foxhole, not knowing if



Prairie du Sac resident Eldor Fruehling looks through the account of his experience in World War II in a self-penned book he wrote about his childhood experiences for his family.

he would make it home alive. "We were dug in; we could see Mt. Suribachi in the distance," Fruehling said. "Then we finally saw the flag. It was the first visible message we had that progress was being made."

Fruehling said when his unit saw the flag, they cheered. "It was one of the most inspiring sights, seeing that flag," he said. He and his unit were loading their ship in Hawaii when the first Atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city Hiroshima. That was August 6, 1945. Three days later, a second Atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. When Fruehling's unit reached Iwo Jima a month later, Fruehling said they could see evidence of those Japanese caves dug in around the bay they were sailing into. By his account, Fruehling and his unit would have been "sitting ducks" if not for the Atomic bomb.

"Because of the Atomic bomb, more lives were saved than lost," Fruehling said. "Not everyone will agree with that statement. But I am pretty certain my unit wouldn't have survived."

The day Fruehling and his unit saw the flag on Mt. Suribachi, it was five days after the attacks, or "D plus five".

Fruehling and his unit remained on the island for five months during the U.S. occupation of Japan.

In his years following the war, Fruehling became a pastor. He served more than two decades as a member of the Prairie du Sac village board. Long since retired, he even penned a book for his children and grandchildren about his childhood experiences. In it is his account of landing on the beach at Iwo Jima. He is been a member of the Lachmund-Cramer VFW Post 7694 in Prairie du Sac and speaks to school children and others about his experiences.

"People have a natural curiosity," Fruehling said. "It's a historical event — if I can contribute I will."

Fruehling and his wife, who has since passed away, were present at the 45th anniversary event of the Iwo Jima invasion in Washington, D.C. where he had a reunion with members of his old unit. They visited the Iwo Jima memorial together.

"I want people to know about the sacrifices made by persons who served in the armed forces throughout history," Fruehling said. "Freedom is something many people take for granted. But that's because they weren't there. They didn't have to fight for it."

When asked whether or not his time in the military has shaped the way he feels during certain days like Memorial Day or Veteran's Day, Fruehling gets quiet. "Now as I reflect back on it, every day," He said. "I am fortunate, so fortunate. I am thankful for every day I have had since then."



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