

**P**aul E. Ison still looks at his photo in disbelief, shaking his head. To make the dash across "Death Valley" once, without being wounded or killed, was quite an accomplishment.

To make that suicidal sprint three times was practically a miracle. And to be able to prove it, photographically...well, that was just *too* much.

If, as some say, "a picture is worth a thousand words," then the photo of Marine Pfc Paul E. Ison dashing across "Death Valley" must be worth a book of words. The photo has been seen by millions, although Ison himself is not often identified as the "dashee." Even *he* wasn't sure until many years later.

Hard to believe that it was 40 years ago....

April 1st, 1945. It was April Fool's Day and Easter Sunday. It was also

D-Day at Okinawa. (See "Okinawa: The Final Battle of WW II," on page 20.)

Life hasn't been easy for Paul E. Ison, but it has been good. He's worked hard for what he has, and is just starting to enjoy the results of his labor. His home, in Ft. Myers, Fla., is comfortable, roomy and spotless. He and his wife, Serita, enjoy their heated indoor swimming pool and the view from the patio looks out on the Intercoastal Waterway only 50 yards away.

Paul's den is a miniature Marine Corps Museum, with plaques, photos and books.

Even the front of the house on Prather Drive tells a bit about the man. Centered in the lawn (an expanse of thick green that some golf courses would envy) is a towering flag pole from which the Stars and Stripes wave 24-hours a day. Paul

has installed spotlights, so the flag is illuminated at night. And, should the electricity fail, he has an automatic back-up system which will light Old Glory.

"This is a very pro-American neighborhood. Neighbors walk their pets, passing the house. Many stop and salute the flag. Others toot their horns as they drive by, in salute. Very patriotic area...many retirees and former servicemen," Paul explained.

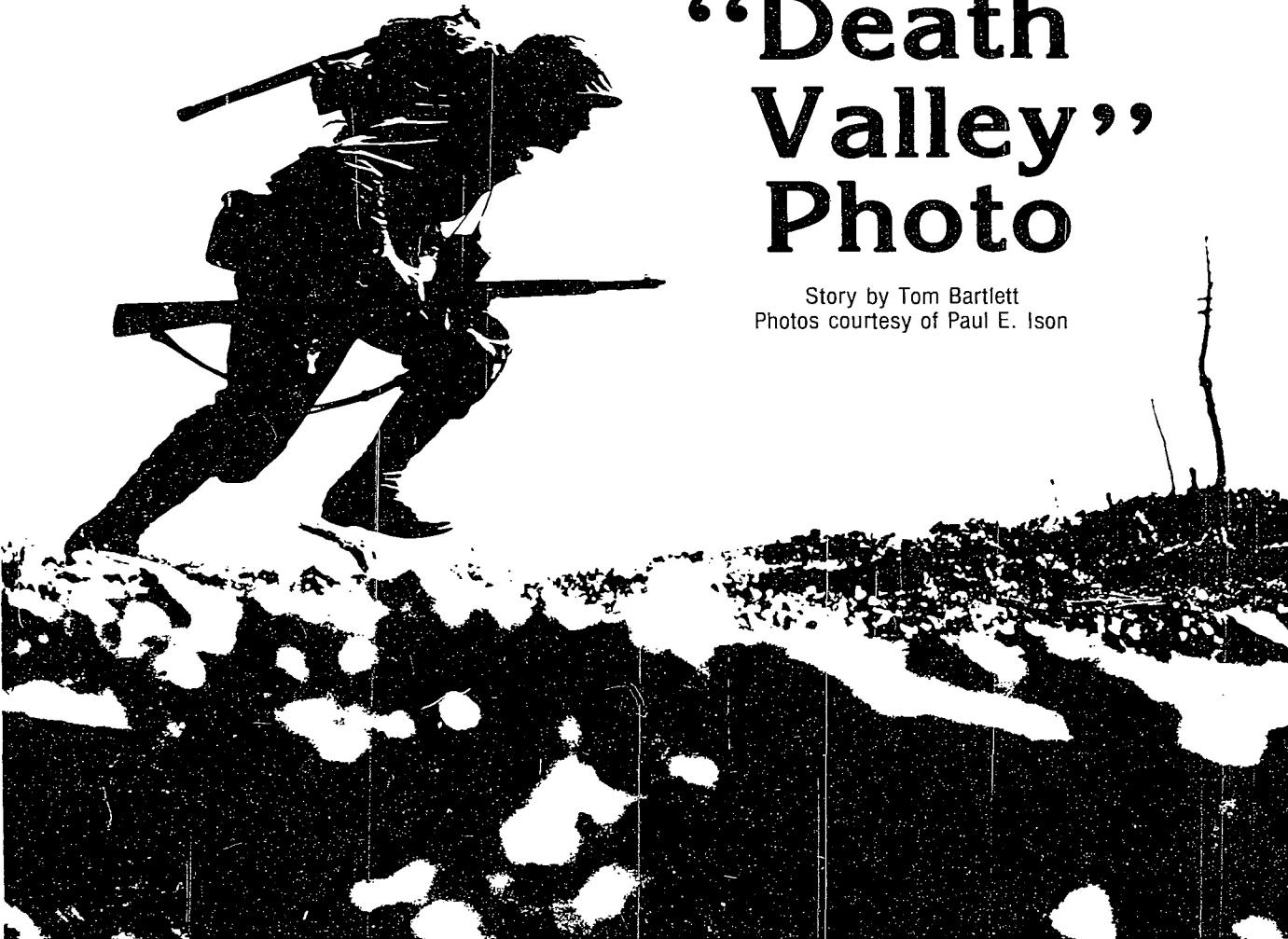
The years have been good to Paul. His hair has turned pure white, and the Florida sun has bronzed him. He exercises, and maintains an athletic appearance in spite of his years, although he admits that Serita is an excellent cook, and he must firmly refuse seconds on deserts.

Realizing that he is nearing 70, and knowing what he has accomplished, an

# "Death Valley" Photo

Story by Tom Bartlett

Photos courtesy of Paul E. Ison



introduction to Paul E. Ison is an experience. He appears much younger than his years. His hand is firm, and his smile is warm. He could have stepped off the set of a Van Heusen shirt television commercial.

"I became a Marine late in life, but it wasn't because I was afraid or was hiding," Ison explained. "I tried to enlist, but they just wouldn't take me."

Born in 1916, he traces his family back to his great, great-grandfather who received a land grant from none other than General George Washington. "We were of Scotch-Irish ancestry," he smiles, "and the land deeded to my family is known as 'Isonville,' which is in Kentucky. My grandfather had a huge plantation there. In fact, I'm an honorary Kentucky Colonel," he continued.

"World War II began. I tried to enlist,

but I was married and I had four children. My father died when I was nine. I quit school in the eighth grade and went to work. As the years passed, I married and got a job making airplane engines for B-17's and B-29's, but I didn't feel that I was doing enough. I'd walk down the street, and people would look at me, and I could almost read their minds: 'There's a big, strapping young man. Why isn't he in uniform?'"

His eyes turned a deeper blue as he continued. "Our youngest son, Paul Thomas Ison was born on November 10, 1941. November 10...you know that's the Marine Corps' birthday. (Paul Thomas later served as a Marine; released from active service as a lance corporal after serving with the motor transport unit at Twenty-nine Palms, Calif.)

"I remember one time, hitchhiking from our home in Ashland, Ky., to Cincinnati, trying to enlist in the service," the senior Ison said. "The recruiter was sympathetic, but said he didn't have any choice but to deny me because I had a wife and four children. Finally, I talked it over with my wife. She knew how I felt. I had to serve. I was *gung ho* and I love my country."

As the war waged on, restrictions were eased, and so it was that 28-year-old Paul E. Ison became a Marine private. He was called "Pappy," but that didn't bother him. Recruit training at San Diego was rough, but he has always been determined to finish whatever he starts.

"And when I graduated 'boot camp,' I shipped out of San Diego, sailed for the Russell Islands. Because of my age, I thought they would give me a nice safe job. Guess again!" And his tanned face breaks into a huge grin.

"I thought I'd get a desk job on New Guinea, or some safe place, but instead, I was made a flame thrower and demolitions man, assigned to an assault platoon. But I was patriotic, and I was proud of being a Marine. Kids today would probably call me a sucker or something, but that's the way I am. I love the Corps and my country..."

While American families dined on traditional Easter ham, Ison and others of the First Marine Division ate the traditional "amphibious assault" breakfast of steak and eggs. Later, standing on the



Married and the father of four children, Paul Ison was rejected in his first attempt to enlist. As the war progressed, restrictions were eased. He became a 28-year-old Marine private.

deck of the USS *McCracken*, he watched as the island of Okinawa grew from a "bulge" to a landmass of pine trees, tree-covered ridges and tile-roofed villages.

"We were to assist the U.S. 10th Army in gaining control of the island," Ison explained. "The Japanese had four airfields on the island, and it was our job to put them out of order. We would then have a bomber base only 350 miles from the mainland of Japan.

"We could see a seawall, and behind that wall was a flat, slowly rising, open plain. We would have to scale the wall. Scaling ladders were on hand. Even an untrained eye such as mine could see that the Japanese could pour a heavy fire on us after we had scaled the wall and attempted to advance across that open plain."

The First Marine Division was assigned the center of the beach. It would be flanked by the Sixth Marine Division (on the left), and the XXIV Army Corps (right flank).

"Our division was to cut the island in half," he continued. "The Sixth Marine Division would go north, and the Army would go south. At 8 a.m., it was our turn to go over the side and to do our part in the battle for Okinawa.

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**Pfc Paul E. Ison dashed across Death Valley three times during the battle for Okinawa. Even he couldn't believe he made it—but a Marine Corps photographer provided proof!**

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## DEATH VALLEY (cont.)

"I thought of my wife and the children; James Edward was six; Marilyn, five; Paul Thomas was three; and the baby, David Anthony, was two. But as my turn came to go over the side, I forced myself to put thoughts of the family aside. I was carrying 100 pounds of equipment and had to climb down the nets into the waiting Higgins boat."

The small boats ran in circles, then turned toward Okinawa. "About 1,000 yards out, we pulled up to an amphibian tractor and transferred into it," he recalled, eyes narrowing in recollection. "We were ordered to 'lock and load' and to keep our heads down. Cpl Glen Hill peered over the side to see if there was any mortar fire coming from the beach."

As it turned out, the Marines landed "standing up," meaning there was no enemy fire at all. In fact, as Ison's amtrac roared onto the beach, he recalled seeing a Marine sitting atop a parked amtrac, sunning himself while reading a comic book.

"It was not until later that we learned that the Japanese General (Ushijima) had commanded his 32nd Japanese Army to permit us to land. He was hoping to chew us up later on.

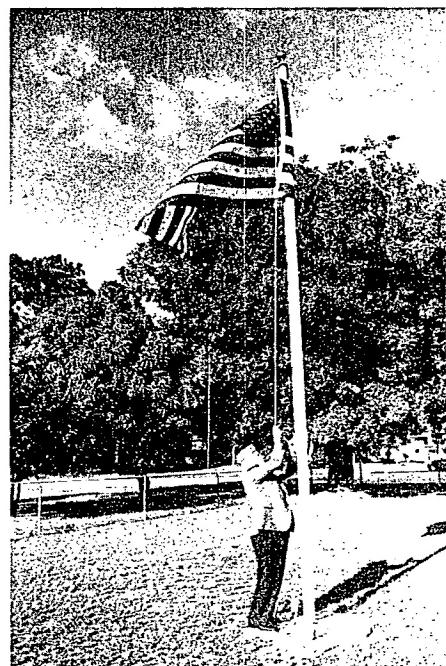
"The First Marine Division, initially, was 'lucky.' The Army was stopped. The Sixth Marine Division was meeting stubborn resistance. We were patrolling a lot, but contact was, for the most part, minimal. But then, on May 1st, members of my assault platoon boarded trucks. We were told that the honeymoon was over. More ammunition was passed out. Weapons were checked and double checked, and demolition teams were issued full units of TNT satchel charges.

"We met another convoy coming from the front. Our trucks were full of eager, smiling youngsters who had no idea of what they were to face. We also had some old-timers who knew the score, and sat rigid, lost in their own thoughts. And in the backs of the trucks coming from the front were casualties.

"After traveling for a while, the trucks stopped near Uchitomari. We got out and a roll call was held. We would go the rest of the way on foot. We could hear the firing of the guns. We began taking incoming enemy artillery fire."

As Ison dove for what little cover was available, he saw his first Japanese soldier. "He was dead. Killed himself by holding a grenade against his stomach. The stench was dreadful," he recalled.

"New men always ask silly questions, I guess, and I was no different. I remember



Paul Ison adjusted his flag.

turning to a soldier of the 27th Division and asking, 'How many Japanese are out there?' And he replied, 'Enough to keep you Marines busy for a while.'

Ison's unit reached its assigned positions and began digging in for the night. He was with "Lima" Company, 3rd Battalion. "I'll never forget that night. The word came down that a night patrol would be going out, and a demolition team would remain on standby. Cpl Ralph Boschke told me to stand by with a unit of fire, which was a satchel charge of 24 pounds of dynamite.

"Just as it got dark, the four of us started moving toward the front. The lieutenant told us to blacken our faces and to make sure that none of our gear rattled. Our mission was to blow an enemy cave.

"We snaked across the open area and found the cave. We set the charge and blew the enemy emplacement. Our charge blew the cave opening shut, but it also started a fire which exposed us to the enemy. The enemy then began lobbing in flares which made us stand out even more. It was like broad daylight. We froze in our tracks, standing still as statues. It seemed like a hundred years before the last flare finally burned out.

"We started crawling once again, and the Japanese sent up another flare. That's when I realized that we were crawling amongst a group of dead enemy soldiers. The enemy fired off a few mor-

tar shells, and then it turned deathly quiet and pitch black. We welcomed the return of night!"

Ison was a demolitions man. Teams consisted of four men. Flame throwers and rocket launchers were attached to the unit.

"We were a 13-man squad," he continued. "The company was moving out when it came to heavy resistance and our squad was ordered up. The company was receiving heavy fire...machine guns, mortars and small arms. Our casualties were mounting.

"The enemy was close. We saw them in a nearby cave. Cpl Ralph Boschke and I crawled forward, trying to place a satchel charge on top of the enemy cave, hoping to drop the roof on the Japanese. It didn't work. We were spotted and an enemy machine gun opened up. Boschke took a burst across his chest, killing him immediately, and then someone yelled, 'Look out!'

"I saw a Japanese knee mortar shell coming right at me. Like someone throwing a ball. I slammed into the deck, and the shell hit a small tree right behind me. It exploded and blew the tree into toothpicks. I crawled back to my foxhole and fell in, exhausted.

"After dark, Sgt Simmons, Cpl Hill, Pvts Hays and Keaton and myself crawled up to the top of the hill to retrieve Cpl Boschke. Marines pride themselves on taking their dead and wounded with them. I even found Boschke's Thompson (submachine gun).

"Later, on the night of May 3rd, the



Matt Uzzell (left) presented a carved figure depicting Ison's dash across Death Valley during the battle of Okinawa.

Japanese started a counterattack. The assault began with artillery and mortar fire. Keaton and I were in a foxhole when a white phosphorous shell hit nearby, and a tree fell across our foxhole. Some of the phosphorous fell on Keaton's jacket and began burning. I ripped his jacket off him as quickly as I could.

"The enemy came towards us, and I remember seeing two Marines throwing grenades over the hill. They must have thrown a couple of cases of grenades, and as they began returning to our lines, I covered them with Boschke's submachine gun. Enemy mortar fire was heavy. I didn't like our position.

"Ever have a feeling about something?"

"I told Keaton and Hays that I didn't like where we were and I said, 'Let's move over to the bottom of that small hill.' We all agreed and began running as fast as we could. We had no sooner jumped into a shell hole when three Marines jumped into the place we had just vacated, and a Japanese mortar shell made a direct hit on that foxhole, killing all three."

The Marines defended themselves throughout the night and into the early morning hours. Enemy fire began dying down when one of the Marines found a new M-1 rifle. Turning to Ison he yelled, "Hey, Pop. Want this?" Ison grabbed it and checked it out. He liked it, and gave Boschke's Thompson to another Marine.

Time passed, the 28-year-old private was becoming a combat-hardened veteran. The Marines moved, slowly, paying dearly for each step toward victory. Strange words became common to his vocabulary; Dakeshi Ridge...Wana Ridge...Shuri Castle.

"Captain Smith came to me and said he had spotted a small opening dug into the side of a hill. The captain thought it was an ammunition cache or something, and he wanted it destroyed. I got my satchel charge ready, crawled around through the barbed wire and wormed my way close to that small cave. I threw a hand grenade into the opening, and there was a crashing sound, and a huge plume of white smoke poured out of the opening. It looked like an Indian smoke signal or something, and, needless to say, it gave my position away to the enemy. I hurriedly lit the fuse to the satchel and ran through the smoke, placing my charge.

"The TNT went off, and it shook the side of the hill. There *must* have been explosives in that hole. I could feel the earth beneath me shaking as the charges went off. A lieutenant yelled to me that the ex-



Paul Ison stands by an Iwo Jima carving made by Matt Uzzell who sculpted the historic event.

plosion had caved in a foxhole right near me, and that a Marine was buried in there. The Japanese were firing, causing most of the Marines nearby to stay where they were.

"I squirmed over and began digging with my bare hands. The ground was soft, so I was able to get to him. In the meantime, a sniper was using me as a target. I had dug the Marine's head out, and Keaton came running up with an entrenching tool to help get the Marine. When we finally got that Marine out from what could have been his final resting place, he began looking around and yelling, 'Where's my cap?'

"I told him he was lucky to be alive and that we should get the heck out of there. He told me he thought a shell had landed on top of him. 'It was so dark,' the Marine said, 'I thought I was dead. What a wonderful thing it is to be alive!'"

For blowing up the enemy ammunition cave and rescuing the entombed Marine, Paul E. Ison received the Bronze Star Medal with combat "V".

The rain forced the Marines to bail out their foxholes periodically. "By the time we had a foxhole dug, it was already half full of water," he recalled.

Ison isn't one to trade sea stories. He'll answer questions if prodded, but he doesn't volunteer much. If you're lucky, he'll tell you about one day in his life. One which he relives in his mind, and one recalled occasionally because of a picture published in a number of books, magazines or military pamphlets.

"It was May 10, 1945. Death was all around us. We had been told the night before that we'd have a job early in the morning, so we were getting ready. We dined on cold C-rations. We got ready to

go down to the ammunition dump to get our satchel charges. Then, just as we arrived at the ammo dump, the sergeant down there told me that he'd already sent the TNT up to the front lines. We thought that was a stroke of luck. Now we wouldn't have to carry all that weight forward.

"We came to a draw between these two hills. Later on, it would be called 'Death Valley' because of all the casualties the Marines suffered there.

"Some of the men in our assault platoon were on the other side and one of them yelled over to us, 'Send one man at a time across the draw.'

"We could hear the enemy machine guns firing on the other side. I got ready to go first, leading the way. As I began making that run, I noticed a combat photographer (Pvt Bob Bailey) aiming a camera at me. I didn't slow down to wave or smile, believe me!

"I threw myself belly down on the ground and flopped into a foxhole. Steve Evans and Ernest Hawer, two good buddies of mine, told me that the photographer got a picture of me as I dashed past. 'Yeah, well that's just great, but I'll probably never live to see it,' I said.

"We reached the front and I found Captain Smith who told me what we had to do. I asked where the TNT had been stored. The captain looked at me, obviously surprised and told me that as far as he knew, none had been sent up. I didn't bother telling him what the ammo sergeant had told me. The captain was busy enough.

"I ran back to my platoon and shared with them the news that we were going to have to cross Death Valley once again to get the charges. We arrived at the ammo dump and got our 96 pounds of dynamite.

[continued on page 61]



Retired General Lewis W. Walt chatted with Paul Ison during the 1977 Marine Corps League birthday ball held in Cincinnati, Ohio.

## DEATH VALLEY

[continued from page 29]

mite. We had to cross Death Valley once again to get our satchels back up to where they were needed. So, that made three trips in all. How we ever made it, I'll never know, because from what I've read, Marines suffered 125 casualties just in that one area in an eight-hour period."

Ison would again cross Death Valley, but by then, the area was secured and free of Japanese troops. The years would pass, and he would nearly forget about his being photographed as he crossed that open strip of land known as Death Valley.

The Marine Corps refers to it as combat picture #120562. It was published in the book "WWII Small Arms" (page 131); it was the cover of Benis Frank's book, "Okinawa"; and it was published on page 390 of the book, "The Old Breed."

Seldom is Paul E. Ison identified as the Marine making the dash, and chances are, even if he is identified, his name is misspelled.

"I don't care," he smiles, and with a wave of his hand he says, "I know who the Marine is, and I am very proud to be a part of Marine Corps history. Ironically, even the Navy and Air Force have used the picture in some training manuals.

"And when my son was stationed at Twentynine Palms, he noticed that a silhouette of me was used as part of the

Combat Center's logo. That made me very happy... to think that an act which transpired 40 years ago still benefits the Marine Corps in some way."

Paul E. Ison, the man, also continues serving the Marine Corps in his own way. He is a life member of the Marine Corps League, the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, the Marine Corps Association and the First Marine Division Association. He is also an active member of the Seabee Vets of America, ("Island X8"), and he's active with the Marine Corps Reserves' "Toys for Tots" campaign. He writes historical features for his Marine Corps League newsletter, and also serves as the Judge Advocate for the Lee County Detachment.

"I have a lot of spare time on my hands," Ison admitted.

"After Okinawa, I went to China for a while on occupation duty, and when I came back to the United States, I sold the Japanese sword that I had and some other souvenirs, and with what money I had, I bought a pickup truck. I started in the hauling business.

"It was hard work, but in the long run, it paid off. In time, I bought a trailer truck and was doing cross-country hauls. I did that for 29 years. I had 23 years of safe driving. I'm proud of that. I finally retired there in Cincinnati in January 1981.

"In August 1982, I married Serita. That was one of the smartest things I ever

## MAIL CALL

[continued from page 17]

N.Y. 11963, to hear from members of Recruit Platoon 154, MCRD, Parris Island, S.C. (November 1941). PltSgt Calwell and Pvt Hansen were DIs.

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T.W. "Ted" Blackburn, 450 S. Columbus St., Xenia, Ohio 45385, to hear from Sgt John C. GILL (Dallas, Texas) and MSgt John E. HUFF, 1st MT Bn., Korea (1951-52), or anyone knowing their whereabouts.

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Former Marine R. Canfield, 505 Polk St., San Francisco, Calif. 94102, to hear from white-haired Marine colonel who carried a silver .45 caliber Peacemaker while serving with 3rdMarDiv in RVN (1969). Urgent!

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Jung Duk Choi, 302 Livingston St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217, to hear from Cpl Ras MUFER (Korea, 1954), or anyone knowing his whereabouts.

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Former Marines, Cpl Bernard R. and LCpl Robin Hicks Dronenburg, 7505 Fisher Dr., Falls Church, Va. 22043, to hear from LCpl George F. TRIPPLETT (1970-72) or anyone knowing his whereabouts.

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LCpl Steve K. Eilbracht, Marine Barracks, PNSY, Portsmouth, N.H. 03801, to hear from Pfc Randy E. TAYLOR, or anyone knowing his whereabouts. (Sea School, 1984).

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Charles W. Griffin, Jr., 8135 Poplar Creek Rd., Nashville, Tenn. 37221, to hear from Rex FUNKHOUSER and James P. GALLAGHER, "E"/2/7, (1950), or any other members of "Easy" Company during that period.

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GySgt R.M. "Rocky" Grimsley, Headquarters Battalion, HQMC, Henderson Hall, Arlington, Va. 22214, to hear from Marines who served with him at: MCRD, Parris Island, S.C. (1951-54); Clarksville, Tenn. (1956-58); FMFLant (1973-77); TBS (1977-82); especially members of 3rd CAG, Phu Bai (1968-69) for possible reunion.

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Pfc F.A. Lauer, HMT-301, F/L, MAG-16, MCAS, Tustin, Calif. 92710, to hear from members of Recruit Platoon 2082, MCRD, Parris Island, S.C. (1984).

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Former Marine Elwood Littoral, RR 1, Box 9B, Linton, Ind. 46149, to hear from Lt Hubert C. PIRKLE, MC, USN and Lt Harry WHITAKER, Jr., MC, USN, battalion surgeons 1/1, Koto-ri, Korea (December 1950).

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Marine Corps historical writer Ben Frank (left) presented an autographed copy of his book, "Okinawa: Touchstone to Victory," to Paul Ison, whose Death Valley dash photo is on the cover.

did; and we moved on down here to Ft. Myers. This is God's country, and I am very happy."

He flipped the pages of his collection of books. Now and then he stopped and pointed to the photograph of him crossing Death Valley. "SSAMs" (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines) used it on the cover of Volume I, Number III. Ballantine used it on its book, "Okinawa—Touchstone to Victory."

"Now I'm just an old horse that is out to pasture," he smiled. "But there was a time..."

And he has the photo to prove it.



Former Marine Dick Lyons, DeSoto Towers, No. 1107, 1523 Sixth Ave. West, Bradenton, Fla. 33505, to hear from Bertram O. SMITH, or others who served in "C" Battery, Special Weapons, 1stMarDiv (Guadalcanal 1942).

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Former Marine Donald R. Maurer, 727 Poplar St., Canal Fulton, Ohio 44614, to hear from Marines from NE Ohio (near Canal Fulton, Akron or Canton) who are currently stationed at Marine Barracks, 8th and "I" and former Marines stationed at 8th and "I" (1967-68) for possible reunion.

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Christopher Miller, 7949 Brookwood Dr., Warren, Ohio 44484, to hear from Pfc Jeffery A. KOEHLER, 1stMarDiv, or anyone knowing his whereabouts.

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Albert F. Rose, 2630 Longfellow Dr., Wilmington, Del. 19808, to hear from former Night Fighters of VMF(N)-533 (1943-45) for possible formation of a Night Fighter Assn. and plans for a reunion, especially John W. BRUNS, Ward E. CHAMBERLAIN, Noel J. HALES, Harry J. HAYNES and John W. McGARR. Also John A. SZCZEPANEK, Myron W. MESSICK, Melvin MILLS, Robert W. NANNINGA and Howard B. NEWTON.

