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trip.” On Feb. 19, 1945, Pfc. Nielson landed on Iwo Jima aboard one of many Higgins boats, each carrying more than 30 Marines, all with the common goal of establishing a beachhead as soon as possible. “Before we hit the beach we were still joking,” said Nielson in his 1945 newspaper interview. “But the Japs took all the humor out of us. It was really rough, and I don’t mind telling you I was scared as hell.”

As the Marines worked their way ashore, chaos rained down in the form of Japanese artillery and mortar fire. The thick, ashy black sand of the volcanic island made running difficult, and there weren’t many places to secure cover.

As Nielson put it, they would trudge a little way up the beach, dig a shallow hole to duck in and return fire, then move a little further up the beach and repeat.

Occasionally, Nielson said he’d come upon a fellow Marine defending a spot, and the two would huddle up and shoot from the same position.

During once such instance of shared cover, Nielson glanced over at the guy firing next to him before turning back to

face the enemy. They were two young men, scared, but fighting bravely side-by-side in a foreign land of brutal violence.

When Nielson looked back at his fellow Marine mere seconds later, something was wrong – his neighbor’s head was gone, his body slumped over.

In shock, Nielson bent to search the ground for the missing head, thinking that if he could just find it and put it back on, the Marine would be okay.

The hellish fighting continued. Thousands of Marines were killed on the island, and even more wounded, including Nielson.

Six days into the Battle of Iwo Jima, on Feb. 24, 1945, Nielson turned 19 years old. He was shot in the shoulder that day.

The birthday gunshot didn’t keep him down for long, however, and after getting patched up, he went back out to do more fighting.

At one point, he found himself engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a Japanese soldier, who carved up one of Nielson’s forearms with a bayonet before another Marine shot and killed the soldier as the two fought.

It was on March 6, 1945, that Nielson received the wound that would take him away from the battlefield and affect him for the rest of his life.

He’d gone out with several other Marines that day to take on a Japanese pillbox – a heavily fortified concrete guard post – and the fighting quickly grew intense.

“When we were almost on it,” Nielson told the *Times Union* in ‘45, “one of them let go with a grenade. I tried to duck, but it exploded in midair and I took the best part of it in my right eye.”

Added Nielson: “There was no pain, but I knew I had lost my eye.”

Despite the grenade blast and loss of his eye, he never lost consciousness. He emptied all his ammunition into the pillbox, remarking later that the Japanese within “didn’t bother us anymore” after that.

Actor Tyrone Power, a pilot with the Marine Corps, was at that time flying cargo into Iwo Jima and hauling out wounded Marines.

Nielson caught a flight out with Power, who took him to a hospital in Guam. He ultimately ended up in Bethesda, Maryland, for reconstructive surgery, and was released in April of ‘45.

He was a corporal when he left the military.

Nielson was the only one of his five brothers to be wounded in the Armed Forces. After he and his twin joined in 1943, their younger brother Richard enlisted in the Marines in 1944, and two half-brothers joined the U.S. Navy later.

Postwar, Nielson worked at the Navy Depot in New York before moving down to Florida, where he started his own business called Nielson Electric.

In 1971, he brought that business to Union County, which reminded him of home in Upstate New York. Nielson helped to wire many buildings around the county throughout the years, including the Union County Primary School.

He was a master electrician for over 30 years, and also worked seasonally with the Campbell’s Pepper Plant in Blairsville until the plant closed in 1984.

Nielson married his wife, Virginia, in 1947, and together they had four children: Milton A. Nielson, Janice Pouncey, Wendy McCrary and Wayne Nielson.

He received various service medals for his actions during the Battle of Iwo Jima, including a Purple Heart with Gold Star in lieu of a second Purple Heart. To this day, he has grenade shrapnel throughout his head.

As part of the 5th



This picture shows U.S. Marines holding a position at Iwo Jima.

Marines Division, Nielson received a Presidential Unit Citation from then-Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan, on behalf of the President of the United States, which reads as follows:

“For extraordinary heroism in action during the seizure of enemy Japanese-held Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, February 19 to 28, 1945.

“Landing against resistance which rapidly increased in fury as the Japanese pounded the beaches with artillery, rocket and mortar fire, the Assault Troops of the 5th Amphibious Corps inched ahead through shifting black volcanic sands, over heavily mined terrain, toward a garrison of jagged cliffs barricaded by an interlocking system of caves, pillboxes and blockhouses commanding all approaches.

“Often driven back with terrific losses in fierce hand-to-hand combat, the Assault Troops repeatedly hurled back the enemy’s counterattacks to regain and hold lost positions, and continued the unrelenting drive to high ground and Motoyama Airfield No. 1, captured by the end of the second day.

“By their individual acts of heroism and their unflinching teamwork, these gallant officers and men fought against their own battle fatigue and shock to advance in the face of the enemy’s fanatical resistance.

“They charged each strongpoint, one by one, blasting

out the hidden Japanese troops or sealing them in.

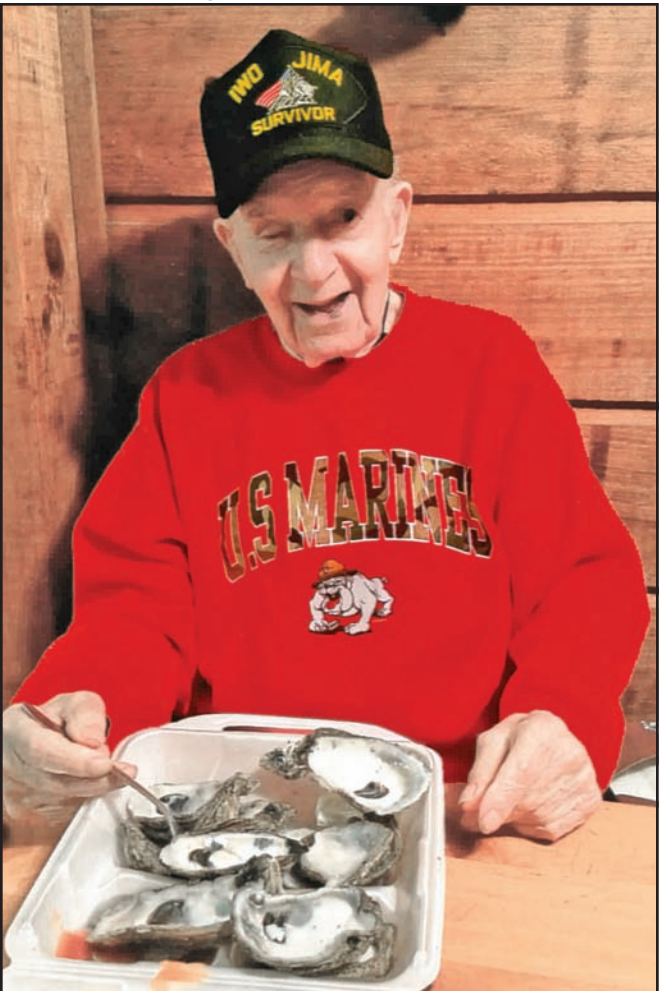
“Within four days they had occupied the southern part of Motoyama Airfield No. 2.

“Simultaneously, they stormed the steep slopes of Mount Suribachi to raise the United States Flag.

“And they seized the strongly defended hills to silence guns commanding the beaches and insure the conquest of Iwo

Jima, a vital inner defense of the Japanese Empire.”

Nielson saved two of his fellow Marines’ lives by applying pressure to and packing bleeding wounds during combat, and all these years later, he still remembers the serial number of the rifle he used on Iwo Jima, an island that will always be with him.



For Milton Nielson’s 91st birthday on Feb. 24, Mike’s Seafood made a special delivery of two dozen raw oysters to his home



Here’s Nielson with his twin brother, Niel. The two signed up to be Marines together on Flag Day, 1943.