

Reflections on Learning IV: The Fight to Live—Leonard Nederveld

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The year was 1943, and the United States buzzed with talk about the war. A strong sense of patriotism and loyalty to defend our country filled conversations, movies, and the minds of the American citizens. Leonard Nederveld was like so many boys at this time—young and eager to protect our nation, which recently had been maliciously attacked. However, when he tried to enlist, Leonard was denied because he was seventeen and lacked his father’s signature for approval. But, Leonard would not be set back by these minor hindrances. Therefore, as soon as he turned eighteen and reached the age of majority, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. Although Leonard did not enjoy the fighting aspect of war, he knew Hitler needed to be stopped in order to save the country. “It was time to go,” Leonard stated decidedly, still supporting his decision almost 65 years later.

Like many other men in the military, Leonard was sent to training camp at Camp Pendleton in California. It was there that Leonard was taught how to stay in rank and in platoon, and he was then acquainted with his fellow men. Before they could get too comfortable, however, they were shipped to Hawaii where they received more training. Hawaii offered a more realistic training experience, including lessons on how to get in and out of the landing boats. Because Leonard and the men in his division never knew where they were going, they just focused on following orders.

One day, an order came unexpectedly, and Leonard and the rest of the troops were suddenly shipped out. Not knowing their final destination, they traveled for days and ended up in Guam. Soon after, they were shipped from Guam to the beaches of Iwo Jima. From a distance,

Iwo Jima appeared to be a calm, tiny island. Leonard recalls not being scared, just nervous and ready to go. As they drew closer, the sound of gunfire from the battleships echoed in their heads, and the anticipation grew as the beaches came into sight.

On February 14, 1945, Leonard and the rest of the troops hit the beaches. Although they brought ladders to climb up the beaches, they found them to be lower than expected, due to a recent typhoon. As war typically demands, changes were made, and the ladders were pushed aside. The sand on the beaches of Iwo Jima was loose and hard to grip. Leonard remembers carrying a BAR, 50 magazines of ammunition, and a pack. As he carried the 100 pounds of supplies, he worked hard to get off of the beaches.

The mission for Leonard and his Fifth Division of the 27th Marines was to cross the island of Iwo Jima. Because they were told to “move as fast as possible across the island,” they ran through fields of cane and corn, dodging bullets until they reached the other side. Their mission then was to dig foxholes and help the demolition team destroy pillboxes, which were used as shelters by the Japanese.

The fighting raged on for a couple of days, with bullets flying by and explosions never far off in the distance. On the third day, there was a glimpse of hope for the American troops. Leonard watched with countless others as a few men raised the American flag on top of Mount Suribachi. It was a sight to behold and caused a surge of morale to rush through the troops. The Americans began cheering and hollering because though they had almost won the battle. The distressing reality was the battle had only begun.

Leonard remembered the moment clearly, stating, “The flag raising must have riled up the Japanese because they really started opening up fire after that.” Two days later, Leonard’s company was ordered to take a section of the island. It was then that Leonard’s life would

change forever. Leonard's sergeant wanted a hand grenade put into a pillbox to destroy it, and Leonard found himself to be the only one with a grenade left. After a bit of debate, Leonard finally threw the grenade into the pillbox. To his surprise and horror, the pillbox turned out to be an ammunition box. It blew the roof off of the box, and the men watched it set off the next ammunition box. Thrown into the air from the explosion and knocked unconscious, Leonard does not remember anything until he woke up the next day.

Leonard then opened his eyes and looked around. He was alone. His company had left him for dead. His left shoulder and legs were badly damaged. He cut the ties off his pack and sprinkled sulfur all over his wounds. Feeling hungry and thirsty, he found a chocolate bar and tried to take a bite. It was then he discovered his jaw was broken. Nevertheless, he tried to eat what he could of the chocolate bar, and the food started to make him feel a little better. Knowing he was in enemy territory, he thought, "I can't stay here, the Japanese might get me." As dusk approached, Leonard began to crawl as well as he could. He knew that his platoon was one way and the Japanese were in the other direction. Remembering an old Boy Scout trick, he put his ear to the ground and heard digging. He began crawling toward the sound. Repeatedly, he crawled and then raised his hand in the air. His friend thought he was a Japanese soldier and was going to shoot him, but a fellow Marine told him to wait until he got closer to see who it was. As Leonard neared, they recognized that he was a Marine and pulled him in. They could not even see his name tag from all of the blood and mud.

Leonard's company planned to take him to the temporary hospital at the beach, but mortars started clamoring. As Leonard hung on for his life, they threw him into the shell hole and jumped in to wait it out. After the shock, they put him on a stretcher and carried him nearly

500 yards to the beach. The doctor took one look at Leonard, said he could not help him, and put him on the hospital ship.

From there, Leonard began his road to recovery. He was sent to the Guam Army hospital where they operated on his eye. He was then flown to the Navy hospital in Hawaii, where he remained for three months and underwent numerous treatments. He then received a troop transport to California, where he stayed at the Navy hospital for three and a half months until he was discharged. Leonard was in the hospital when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and the war ended. Years later, on June 1, 2007, Leonard received the Purple Heart medal for being wounded in the war. To him, this was an immense honor.

Looking back at his life experiences, Leonard stated, "I have no regrets." It is powerful to look at someone who has been through more than any human should ever endure and still hear him claim that it was worth the price. Leonard exhibited a life of bravery, honor, and loyalty to his country and its people. When he should have given up, he did not. Today, I stand in awe of this brave man who risked his life for my freedom, and, to him, I give my gratitude and respect.