NEWS RELEASE

Iwo Jima Marine gets escort to reunion from proud American Airlines veteran

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When the iconic Feb. 23, 1945 photograph of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima flashed across the Jumbo Tron screen, American Airlines First Officer Mitchell Bell stood tall, immediately filled with pride. A retired Lieutenant Colonel with the United States Marine Corp., Bell was at American Airlines Sky Ball XIV, the premier fundraising event for the Airpower Foundation. He noticed all the vets standing up straight during the national anthem. And then everyone stood a little bit taller seeing Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize-winning image.

"That picture captures so many emotions, and for Marines, Iwo Jima embodies all that we represent," Bell says. "Our history was perpetuated throughout all the battles in the Pacific, but the massive loss of life there on that rock showed what we could do against an entrenched and determined enemy."

When Captain Jim Palmersheim, director of Veterans Initiatives at American Airlines, phoned Bell out of the blue and asked if he would be willing to use five vacation days to escort an Iwo Jima Marine back to his 5th Marine Division reunion, it didn't take but half a second for Bell to accept the mission.

The Marine, Ralph "Pee Wee" Griffiths, was a fireball back in the day. Weighing in at 117 pounds — hence the nickname — Pee Wee spent an entire day eating bananas just to make weight before the enlistment office closed in 1942 and still looks like a man who could out walk most with a 50-pound pack on his back, according to Bell.

Pee Wee knew all the men up on that hill. They put the flag up without any fanfare or glory, took a group shot, known as the "Gung Ho" picture, and moved on with their primary job — clearing the Japanese from their caves.

It wasn't until a few days later that Headquarters Marine Corps realized how important this one photograph would be in helping the 7th war bond drive. By then, only three of the men were still alive, and they got the golden ticket

out of the war to return home to support the drive.

“All of the Greatest Generation are special to us, but it’s not often you get to spend time with a man who climbed Mount Suribachi and was one of the 50 Marines on top of the volcano providing protection for the six Marines who raised the flags that morning,” Bell says. “Sitting around these men and hearing their stories was incredible. Of course, with any group of vets, when you have more than three huddled together, the tales from yesteryear begin to flow.”

This is just one of the many opportunities Bell has had through American Airlines Veterans Initiatives. “I’m proud that my company takes the time to do these incredible ‘missions,’ as I call them, whether it’s something like escorting Pee Wee, or taking care of the children of our fallen through Snow Ball Express or moving wounded vets around the country,” he says. “It’s a life-changing experience for everyone involved.”

For more information on how American Airlines employees support our military, see our recent **press release**.