## Flag is raised at WWII soldier's gravesite

Pvt. James Wilkins of Humboldt was killed on Iwo Jima Mar. 29, 2014



Deceased WWII Veteran receives flag pole dedication in Humboldt: Pvt. James Wilkins Flag Pole Dedication Service was held at Rose Hill Cemetery, Saturday. March 29, 2014. NICHOLE MANNA and KENNETH CUMMINGS/The Jackson Sun



William Hess used to dress up in his uncle's Marine uniform when he was a child.

"I was going to go save my uncle," he said.

His uncle, Pvt. James Wilkins, was a soldier in World War II and was killed on Iwo Jima.

Even though Hess was born four years after Wilkins' death, he said he felt like he grew up knowing his uncle. Having Wilkins as an uncle was one of the reasons why Hess, who is a retired captain from the U.S. Army, decided to go down the path of military service.

Wilkins was killed on Iwo Jima on Feb. 25, 1945.

The story of the day of his death was told by one of his commanding officers, Jim Rundles: "Black Marines (the Eighth Ammunition Company) were among the first to go ashore. I led

my company, the 34th Marines, ashore and we, too, had the gruesome task of stepping over piles of dead Marines for nearly 50 yards, through that knee-deep, black volcanic ash. And when we were off the beach, the (Japanese) turned loose a barrage of mortar fire on us that killed two of my men, and wounded five others. I look down at James Wilkins, a 17-year-old lad from Memphis, who wore a tiny American flag in his pocket. He loved his country! Ten feet away was the body of 18-year old Corporal Hubert Duverny, from Jersey City. He had counted on me to get through that shifting black sand to a place of relative safety. Only thing on Iwo, there was no such place!"

Wilkins' body was brought back to America and he was laid to rest in Rose Hill Cemetery in Humboldt.

His grave went unnoticed until a couple years ago when Humboldt Mayor Marvin Sikes and his brother came across it. It was then that Sikes and the Humboldt Historical Society began digging into Wilkins' background, uncovering more information about his time in the war and finding Hess and other of Wilkins' distant relatives.

On Saturday at 1:30 p.m., Sikes, Wilkins' family, the Humboldt Historical Society and members of the Marine Corps League gathered at Rose Hill Cemetery for a flag-raising ceremony in Wilkins' honor.

The flag of the United States of America vas raised in honor of Pvt. James Wilkins luring a flagpole dedication service saturday at Rose Hill Cemetery. Wilkins vas killed on Iwo Jima in World War II. /



"I'm real proud of it," Hess said about the ceremony. "I appreciate the city doing this."

Now, Wilkins' plot is next to a large pole topped with an American flag with the Marine Corps flag underneath.

The first American flag, which was raised by members of the Marine Corps League, was brought back down, folded and given to Hess. The group then raised the second American flag and then the Marine flag.

Charles Allison, with the Humboldt Historical Society, said holding the flag dedication was important to honor Wilkins and to let his legacy live on.

"Very few people knew about him," Allison said.

Mayor Sikes agreed.

"We can't forget this today," Sikes said. "We're going to make sure he's honored every day."

Before Wilkins' service in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Stigall High School in Humboldt and also served as the assistant Sunday school superintendent at Morning Star Baptist Church.

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# WORLD WAR II

# ...and the later years

### from the column

#### UP AND DOWN FARISH STREET

#### By Jim Rundles Jackson Advocate Feature Historian

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EDITORS NOTES: HAPPY NEW YEAR! HAPPY NEW CENTURY! HAPPY NEW MILLENIUM! We wish you all of this for you and those you love. In bending to logic, we can only accurately reflect on the conduct of those people in the century just ended.

First... What was the single most outstanding event that happened during the past century? The answer: World War II. Over the past year, we have been reminded in books, songs, movies, newspapers, and magazines that the men and women who survived both the Great Depression and World War II were members of "The Greatest Generation." That indeed is the title of the best-selling book by network news commentator Tom Brokaw, and it is the theme of Steven Spielberg's great movie, "Saving Private Ryan".

Much closer to home here in Jackson was the recent writings of Clarion Ledger columnist Orley Hood, who paid singular tribute to those men who waded and crawled onto the black sand of Iwo Jima under blistering fire. In the December 31, 1999 writings, Hood, in a remarkably candid tribute to those heroes of Iwo Jima, notes that... "They were boys then, kids fresh from farms and high school football teams. Mostly teenagers, terrified and exhilarated; scared half to death. Mississippi mother's sons asked to dig out the enemy on a narrow piece of rock in the middle of the world's biggest ocean.

"Cecil Matheny, 19, got off the landing craft and onto the beach, and the first thing he saw were dead marines piled up like firewood."

Orley Hood continued... "The fight for Iwo Jima was, for its size, the bloodiest battle of World War II. Eighty marines won congressional medals of honor in the war. Twenty two of them were earned in Iwo." We need to point out to Orley that in all there were 27 medals of honor given to men of the Iwo Jima battle; five were given to Navy corpsmen.

Mr. Hood concludes that... "Like many of you, as the 1900s disappear into the mists of time, the temptation to look back has been impossible to ignore.

It is a well deserved tribute and I agree with all that he so eloquently wrote about the men of Iwo Jima. I know his writings are accurate. I was there when it happened! However, I feel called upon to press another point, and I do so with apologies to Orley Hood, because there was no reason for him to segregate his opinions on that bloody battle by reminding his readers that Black marines were on Iwo Jima in abundance! That many of them died and are buried in the Fifth Marine Division cemetery. That the dramatic flag-raising on Mount Suribachi on D-Day Plus 4, often called "The Photo of the Century", is just as you saw it in the move "Sands of Iwo Jima" starring John Wayne. Only difference, where I'm concerned, is John Wayne played the role of a marine sergeant on Iwo Jima. Hell, I was a marine sergeant on Iwo Jima. I watched Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal scramble atop a pile of rocks to take that picture.

Black marines (the Eighth Ammunition Company) were among the first to go ashore. I led my company, the 34th Marines, ashore and we too had the gruesome task of stepping over piles of dead marines for nearly 50 yards, through that knee deep, black volcanic ash. And when we were off the beach, the Japs turned loose a barrage of mortar fire on us that killed two of my men, and wounded five others.

I look down at James Wilkins, a 17-year old lad from Memphis, who wore a tiny American flag in his pocket. He loved his country! Ten feet away was the body of 18-year old Corporal Hubert Duverny, from Jersey City. He had counted on me to get through that shifting black sand to a place of relative safety. Only thing on Iwo, there was no such place!

There were three companies of Black marines on Iwo Jima. I mentioned my company (34th Marines) and the 8th Ammunition Company. The 36th Marine company was headed up by a good friend of mine, Gunnery Sgt Kermit White of New Orleans. I am told that White died last year in New Orleans.

On March 15, 1945, we were told the island was secured, and fighting was over. "The last pocket of resistance (Kitano Point) on the southern tip of Iwo Jima has been mopped up." There was just one problem...the Japanese were not through fighting! At 4 a.m. on the morning of March 16th, 500 screaming Japanese suicide (Banzai) soldiers charged out of an underground cave, and started killing American army pilots who had just landed (at an airstrip on the "safe" end of the island) and were sleeping in pup tents. One Jap would slit the tent with his sword and the others tossed a hand grenade in. They were systematically slaughtering the pilots.

Black Marines rallied to their aid. After four hours of fighting, the battle was over. Four hundred and seven Japanese were killed, 66 wounded, and 22 captured. On our side, we lost six and 11 wounded, among the Black marines. The airmen suffered 44 pilots and 88 wounded. My point is that Black marines, like Black soldiers, sailors and airmen, were fighting for their country with every ounce of their being. They were fighting for home and families, and the American way of life. But more than anything else, we were fighting with the hope that we would return to a grateful America, an America that was ready to open its arms and its heart and say, "Welcome home you men and women of color, good job. You're no longer second class citizens. You have proved your loyalty and devotion to this nation with uncommon valor. Even with your lives."

But Orley, that wasn't what happened. When Black marines finally left the island on April 12th, we boarded a segregated ship, landed in Hilo, Hawaii, and were immediately transported to a segregated makeshift campsite north of the city near a tiny town called Olaa. When the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war, I was separated from my men, because I had enough points to return to the States and be honorably discharged. I returned to a segregated Marine Corps facility at Montford Point, NC, via a segregated bus. Two days later I boarded a segregated train in Greensboro, arriving 14 hours later in Meridian, then rode the back of the bus to my hometown of Jackson, Miss.

I left the segregated depot at the corner of Capitol and Mill streets, and tried to get a cup of coffee at a café. They tried to send me to the kitchen. I told the man to go to hell, caught a cab, and went home; at least there I was welcomed with unsegregated love from my mother, who incidently, had sent four sons to war. One of my brothers, Paul, was fighting on Okinawa (with the marines) when I left two Jima. We all made it home safely.

That first night home I lay half asleep in bed thinking about my men who were heading for Japan with the occupation forces. I prayed for them and I prayed for this nation, and for guidance in my efforts to stimulate wholesome change. That was a Friday night, one week before Christmas, I believe. After the holidays, I found my way down to the offices of the JACKSON ADVOCATE.

Jackson Advocate editor Percy Greene was a veteran of World War I. He was a fighter for equal rights, equal, justice and opportunities for all Americans, especially black veterans. Percy Greene was a fighter for equal rights for Negroes when it was dangerous. It was a life-threatening career. I was no stranger to danger, so after being hired, I plunged right in. First, Mr. Greene attacked the Mississippi poll tax issue, and intimidation at the polls. He spoke all over the state, and across the nation. In time, he was hailed as "one of the nation's outstanding black leaders." The prestigious Pittsburgh Courier, the nation's black newspaper at the time, placed him on their "Top Ten Honor Roll" two years straight. Percy Greene also wrote his "radical thoughts" in his newspaper. Harry Truman, himself a veteran of World War I, had become President when Franklin Roosevelt died, April 12, 1945.

Greene spoke in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and finally in Washington D.C. President Truman heard about Green's speech in Washington, and he liked what he heard. Almost a year later. Percy Greene and I were sitting, talking in the Jackson Advocate office on Farish Street when the telephone rang. He grabbed the phone, smiled as he said, "Yessir, Mr. President, I'm doing just fine." As he spoke, he cupped the mouthpiece and whispered to me, "get on the other line, I want you to hear this." I picked up just in time to hear President Truman ask, "What is it you need down there in Mississippi Percy? How can I help you!"

Percy Greene answered stoutly, "We need the vote Mr. President. We need the vote...without intimidation, or poll tax. . we need the right to vote and the protection of the federal government. "One year later, LIFE magazine and a score of other magazines and newspapers covered Percy Greene as he voted in a house that had been previously lived in by arch racist and Mississippi senator Theodore G. Bilbo. LIFE feature the occurrence in an unprecedented three-page spread. That was 1948. Percy Greene had secured the vote for blacks almost single-handedly.

Next he went after Bilbo. As you would imagine, Percy Greene had become the target of the Ku Klux Klan, the Citizens Council, the Aryan Nations, and other groups screaming for racial purity. On at least three occasions, we were fired on while driving from a speech, or a lecture Greene had given in Mississippi. Once, while returning from a small Baptist church in a city named Hope in southern Mississippi, to say that I was used to be shot at would be to lie, even on Iwo Jima I never got used to being shot at and it happened often.

Here are several paragraphs I wrote in this column about those 1948 hearings, in June 1992, at the request of some Alcorn State University students.

"It was a windy day in Jackson, Miss., and the flag atop the State Capitol Building rippled impatiently as the flapping of the stripes could be heard by passersby on President Street, across from the First Baptist Church. Closer to town, the streets were quiet. Few people walked Capitol Street, but there was a small crowd of some 50 Negroes standing outside the post office building that housed the Federal Courtroom, two stories up. They were praying, and hoping, but never dreaming that history was being made in the crowed courtroom, just above their heads.

After all, this was the deep south and Negroes had seldom seen a white man brought to justice in a southern court. This was the 1940's. Percy Greene, editor of the locally published Jackson Advocate, had, with the help of some black leaders he recruited from across the state, brought suit to have arch-racist, Senator Theodore G. Bilbo brought to trial, with intent to remove him from office, and from the Democratic party.

"Greene sat comfortably on the stand, after being sworn in. The defense council immediately set out to discredit Greene by having him prove that Bilbo was a threat to the wellbeing of any Negro, or group of Negroes in the state. Greene, a man who had studied law, and was denied receiving his degree because of "alleged" racism, was equal to the challenge. While flexing the "spats" atop his gleaming black shoes. Greene told the court that 'Senator Bilbo, with his inflammatory speeches against Negroes across the state, has created a climate of fear in which no Negro is safe.'

"Greene argued that, 'The very words he uses in his speeches in this state, leads others to violence against Negroes. Thus he is a threat to our God-fearing citizens, black and white, and his words and actions are a threat to human dignity and justice in this state and nation.' The judge and court agreed with Greene, and Bilbo was kicked out of office!"

Now Orley, you'll notice that these things I've mentioned took place from 1947 to 1949, well before other leaders like Martin Luther King came on the scene. I must admit there has been steady progress since those days. The change was extremely gradual and brought about by blacks and whites who knew that diversity was the very bedrock of democracy.

In a special issue of the magazine U. S. News and World Report published May 14, 1979, the prestigious publication headed its unprecedented 12-page article. "Progress and Poverty in Two American Cities," and the two cities it chose to spotlight were Jackson, Miss, and New York's Harlem. It touched on interviews with prominent citizens in both areas. In Jackson, commenting on the forward strides by this city, was among others, Clairie Collins Harvey and Herman Hines, then president of Deposit Guaranty Bank. Hines stated, "This town has learned that if you keep a man in a ditch, you have to stay down there with him. Now we've gotten out of the ditch and we plan to stay out."

The article also spotlighted John Peoples (a former marine) who was Jackson State University president during trying times in the early 1970's. U. S. News noted, too, a surprising trend where northern and eastern-based African Americans were moving to Jackson.

All in all, brother Hood, things are looking good. You state that "these heroes (Iwo Jima marines) won the last century, now it's our turn." I'll continue this conversation, to a degree next week, but I think we're going to be just fine!

WEEKLY QUOTATION: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth, a peace that was meant to be. With God as our Father, brothers all are we, so let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony. Let there be peace on earth, let this be the moment now! With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow. To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me!"

From the song, "Let There Be Peace On Earth."