

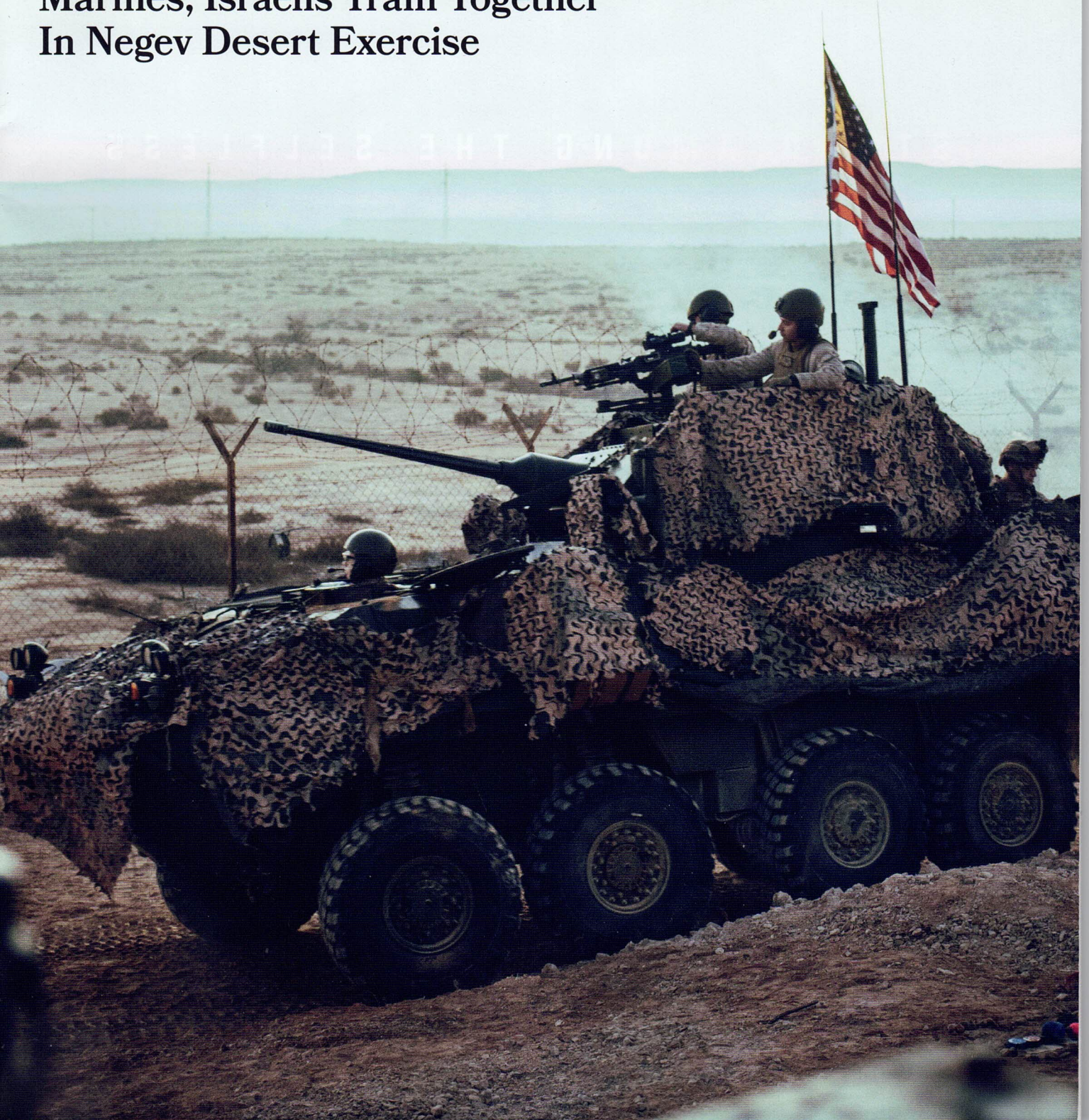
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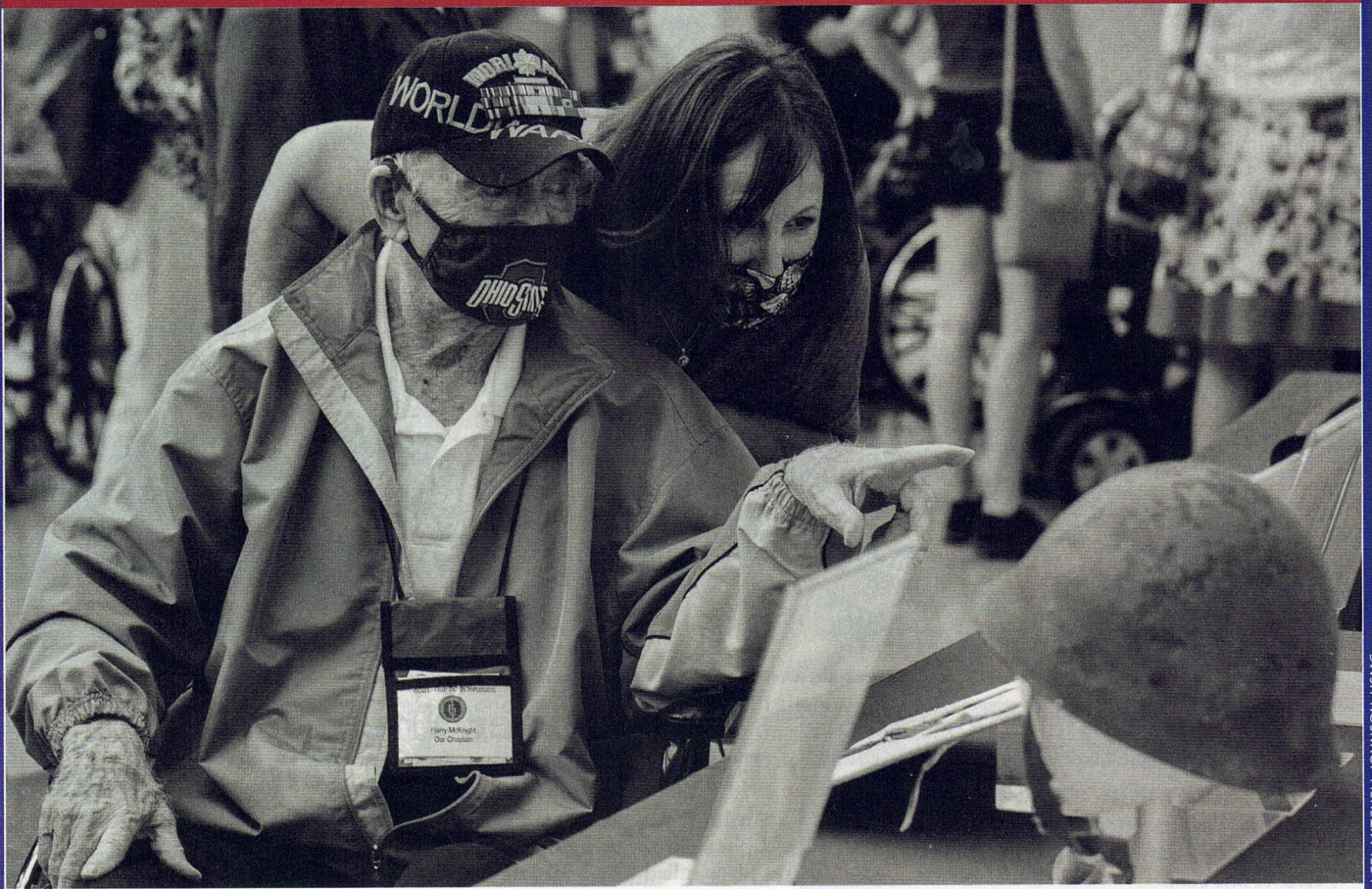
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LEATHERNECK

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

Stability in the Region—
Marines, Israelis Train Together
In Negev Desert Exercise





LCPL MITCHELL JOHNSON, USMC

During a visit to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., Sept. 16, 2021, Harry McKnight looks at the Medal of Honor that was posthumously awarded to his best friend, Pvt Robert M. McTureous Jr., for heroism during the Battle of Okinawa in June 1945.



SARA W. BOCK

Veterans of 6thMarDiv gather around their Division flag shortly after its arrival at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Sept. 16, 2021. The flag, which had been missing for decades, was located at MCRD San Diego and transported to the museum, where it is now part of the permanent collection.

The Last Men Standing

Battle of Okinawa Veterans Gather for Final 6th Marine Division Reunion

By Sara W. Bock

At 96, Marine veteran Watson Crumbie is nothing if not tenacious. So it's unsurprising that in the years leading up to the 50th and final reunion of the 6th Marine Division Association, he managed to track down two invaluable items that had disappeared without a trace: the Division's flag, which flew on Okinawa as its Marines engaged in bitter fighting to take control of Sugar Loaf Hill during the last major battle of World War II, and a decades-old bottle of Chivas Regal Scotch whisky, housed in a wooden case and adorned with a decanter tag that reads, "The General's Bottle for the Last Man."

It was a bittersweet occasion when the association gathered one last time in Fredericksburg, Va., Sept. 14-19, 2021, and an air of finality was almost palpable. Yet for the nine surviving members of the Division in attendance—all of whom are well into their 90s—having those items present and accounted for was affirmation that the time had come to close that chapter.

Unique in that it was stood up overseas on Guadalcanal in September 1944 and stood down in Tsingtao, China, just 18 months later in April 1946, the 6th Marine Division never graced U.S. soil and was never reactivated. Its Marines—some of whom, including Crumbie, had already tasted combat in the Pacific theater as members of the 29th, 22nd or 4th Regiments—earned their place among the legends of the Corps during the Division's sole campaign before the war's end: the Battle of Okinawa. While the 6thMarDiv's operational existence was brief, its spirit endured with the establishment of the 6th Marine Division Association, which began holding annual reunions at various locations across the U.S. in 1971.

For years, veterans of the 6thMarDiv had a plan for their final reunion, and it



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Watson Crumbie

involved opening a bottle of Scotch—but not just any old bottle. According to the association's newsletter, "The Striking Sixth," the origins of its "last man's bottle" can be traced back to Nov. 10, 1989, when three of the Division's veterans visited their former commanding general, Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., who later served as the 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps.

"They brought a bottle of champagne, a German chocolate cake, and a bottle of Chivas Regal to celebrate the Marine Corps birthday," the story reads. "At the end of the evening, the general insisted the Marines take the bottle of Scotch to 'give the boys a drink' at the next reunion."

Rather than directly follow the general's orders, the Marines decided they had a better idea. One of the men, Jack Hoag, crafted a wooden box for the bottle with a plaque that read, "Property of the 6th Marine Division Association by order of Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd." Each year, beginning in 1990, the association auctioned off the bottle at its annual reunion, with the profits going to the scholarship fund at Gen Shepherd's alma mater, Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va. The winner of the bottle would have their name engraved on the side of the box and would be its "caretaker" until the following year. And when the day came, the last surviving members of the Division would open it up and take a drink.

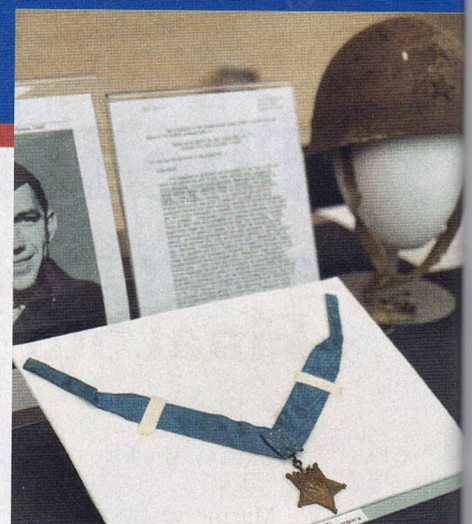
But sometime around 2006, the bottle didn't resurface, and no one seemed to recall who had "won" it or where it could be. The mystery remained unsolved until 2020 when Crumbie, in anticipation of the forthcoming final reunion, acted on a hunch and called the museum at VMI. The bottle was indeed there, having been errantly donated by its last caretaker, and would be delivered to the reunion personally by Colonel Keith Gibson, director of



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN



COURTESY OF HARRY MCKNIGHT



Harry McKnight, left, pictured in the center photo while serving with Hotel Co, 3/29, 6thMarDiv, befriended Robert McTureous after the two completed boot camp and reported to Camp Lejeune. While visiting the National Museum of the Marine Corps during the Division's final reunion in September, McKnight had the opportunity to see the Medal of Honor that was posthumously awarded to McTureous, pictured in the photo on the right.

the VMI Museum System, who would then return it to the museum to be kept in perpetuity.

Locating the Division colors and arranging their transport was a far lengthier process, but by all accounts, it was more than worth the effort.

"It's pretty special," Crumbie said of the flag, which arrived at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, just outside the gate of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., a week prior to the reunion, and was prominently displayed in its expansive Leatherneck Gallery

when the veterans were welcomed to the museum on Sept. 16.

Crumbie, who fought on Saipan and Okinawa during WW II, and later at the legendary Chosin Reservoir in Korea, recalled that no one knew what happened to the flag after the 6thMarDiv was disbanded in China in 1946. They assumed, he said, that Gen Shepherd had taken it home.

Nearly 10 years ago, Crumbie, who lives in Houston, Texas, began looking for the flag and eventually located it in a back hallway of the Command

Museum at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, Calif. It remains a mystery how it ended up there and where it had been previously, but all parties involved agreed that the flag should be transferred from San Diego to the National Museum of the Marine Corps. Due to bureaucratic red tape, the complicated process of moving it was stalled until 2020 when 6thMarDiv Association historian Laura Lacey, determined to get the flag to Virginia in time for the final reunion, managed to successfully facilitate its relocation.



CARROLL MCGOWAN

Veterans of 6thMarDiv Neal McCallum, Ken Wells, Leonard Turner, Harry McKnight, D.C. Rigby, Ross Laporte and Watson Crumbie proudly wave American flags while standing alongside local officials during a visit to the Stafford War Memorial in Stafford, Va., Sept. 16, 2021.

Lacey's connection to the Division is unique, and her role in its association highlights a natural progression in which members of younger generations have taken an increasingly large role in sustaining the Division's annual reunions as the decades have passed. Once attended by hundreds of Marines who fought on Okinawa, the number of 6thMarDiv survivors decreased significantly in recent years, and the gatherings were bolstered by lineal descendants, extended family members and those, like Lacey, who aren't related by blood, but have taken a special interest in the Battle of Okinawa and the men who fought there. In the 1990s, when her husband, a Marine C-130 pilot, was stationed on Okinawa, Lacey was involved with the Battle of Okinawa Historical Display Museum on Camp Kinser, gave battlefield tours and was a "tunnel rat" who explored the caves that served as bunkers during the battle. A career educator who now works for Marine Corps Training & Education Command, Lacey authored the 2005 book "Stay Off the Skyline: The Sixth Marine Division on Okinawa," based on her oral history interviews with dozens of veterans of the Division.

For those members of the 6thMarDiv in attendance, as well as those who have a special connection to it, the opportunity to see the Division featured prominently in the National Museum of the Marine Corps meant a great deal. Curators pulled a number of significant items from the museum's collection and displayed them alongside the Division flag. These included the Navy Cross awarded to Private First Class James J. Chaisson for heroism on Okinawa in May 1945 and the Medal of Honor awarded posthumously to Private Robert M. McTureous Jr., assigned to the Division's "Hotel" Company, 3rd Battalion, 29th Marine Regiment, for charging enemy-occupied caves with grenades to divert heavy fire from stretcher-bearers to himself, ultimately sacrificing his own life to save his brothers-in-arms.

For 6thMarDiv veteran and association chaplain Harry McKnight, who also served with Hotel Co, 3/29, the opportunity to see that Medal of Honor was particularly impactful because its recipient was his best friend. McTureous and McKnight met just after graduating from boot camp at Marine Corps Re-



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

From the left, 6thMarDiv veterans Ken Wells, Leonard Turner and Ross Laporte visit in the hospitality room at Holiday Inn in Fredericksburg, Va., Sept. 17, 2021.

cruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., when they reported to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., for advanced training and were ordered to line up in alphabetical order.

"Our platoon started out with four Mahoneys, and everyone else was Mc-something," McKnight recalls with a laugh. They began as friends by proximity, but a few of them quickly became an inseparable trio: McKnight, McTureous and Don Mahoney.

"We'd go to chow together, we'd go every place, we'd make our plans for after the war," McKnight said.

After McTureous' body was returned stateside in early 1949, the family asked McKnight to travel from his home in Ohio to Florida to speak at the funeral.

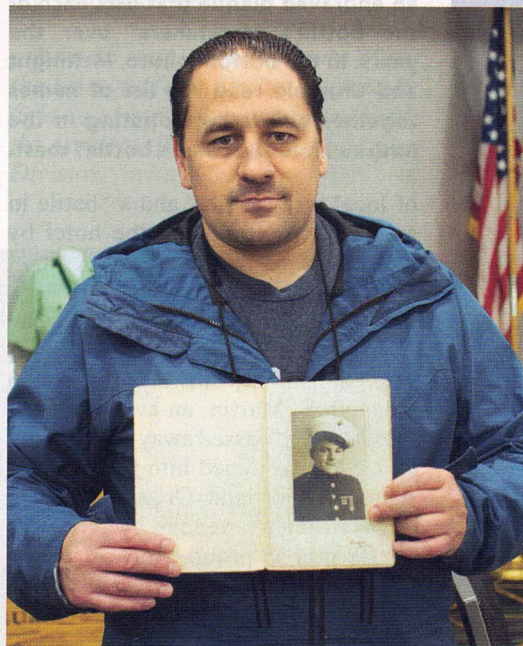
"I went down and did what I thought was my moral duty, which was to represent Bob," said McKnight.

His friend's death forced him to face the realities of war. Once, during a firefight, McKnight recalls thinking to himself, "If I get out of this alive, what am I going to do with my life?"

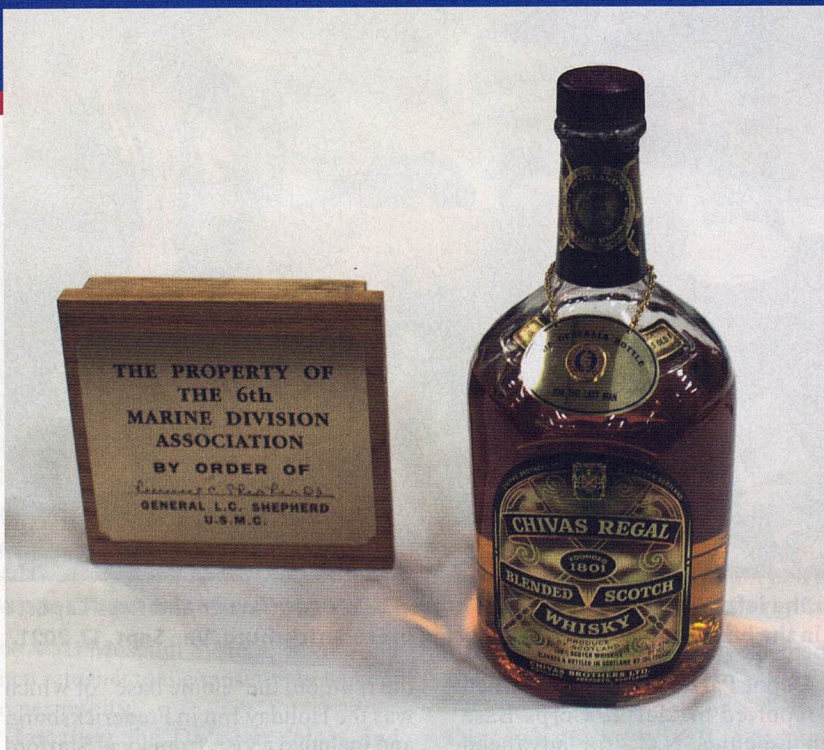
"And I thought, 'Who had the best influence on me when I was growing up?' It was my teachers and coaches," he said. He considers himself lucky to have made it home without a scratch. He attended Ohio State University, later becoming a teacher and coach while also serving in the Air National Guard. In impressive shape at 95, McKnight still drops to the ground and does a push-up for every point Ohio State's football team scores.

The visit to the museum was just one of many activities on the itinerary during

the reunion, the "home base" of which was the Holiday Inn in Fredericksburg, and included a visit from local Stafford County, Va., representatives, who issued a proclamation honoring the 6thMarDiv Association; a recognition event at the Stafford War Memorial for the Division's veterans; music by the jazz band from MCB Quantico; tours



Marine veteran Joshua Hendricks displays a photo of his grandfather, Harold Youngren, who fought in the Battle of Okinawa with 6thMarDiv. Hendricks joined the Marine Corps because of his grandfather's influence and attended the reunion in hopes of learning more about his service during WW II. (Photo by Nancy S. Lichtman)



NANCY S. LICHTMAN



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“The General’s Bottle for the Last Man,” which was passed to the highest bidder at the 6thMarDiv Association reunion each year until it disappeared in 2006, is kept in a wooden case with an engraved plaque that lists each of the bottle’s “caretakers” over the years. In the bottom photo, McKnight and Crumbie read the list of names together before participating in the long awaited “last man’s bottle” toast.

of local historic sites and a “battle in a box” presentation at the hotel by docents from the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

The final reunion drew Gillian Martin from Seattle, Wash., just a few months after her father, 6thMarDiv veteran Kenneth E. Martin, an avid reader of *Leatherneck*, passed away at the age of 100. She had joined him for the 2012 reunion in Portland, Ore., and felt that it was fitting to attend in his memory.

“He was so proud. He was just so proud of being a Marine and serving his country, and I was so proud of him,” Martin reflected as she perused the WW II gallery at the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

For Joshua Hendricks, who also traveled from Washington state, the final 6thMarDiv reunion was his first. He wanted to learn more about his grandfather, Harold Youngren, who served in the Division and whose influence and example led him to follow



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in his footsteps and enlist in the Marine Corps in 1997.

“He never wanted to talk about his service,” said Hendricks. “He actually wrote me a letter in 8th grade when I did a report on the Marine Corps, and I still have it,” he added, pulling it out of a folder and reading aloud excerpts from its pages in which his grandfather described his arrival at boot camp during the war years.

It was a meaningful experience for Hendricks to meet Marines who served alongside his grandfather, and he lamented that there wouldn’t be

any more reunions in the future. His sentiments speak volumes about the bond shared by those who are connected to the Division, which from the outside looking in, is more reminiscent of a family than a group of individuals.

On Saturday, Sept. 18, the 6thMarDiv veterans and association members held a memorial service as a tribute to those members of the division who are no longer living, which also was a stark reminder of how rapidly members of the “greatest generation” are being lost. According to Lacey, 15 veterans were expected to attend the 2020 reunion—



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From the left, Harry McKnight, Watson Crumbie and Ken Wells partake in the final toast, Sept. 18, 2021, during which seven surviving members of the 6thMarDiv drank from the bottle that originated with Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, the Division's commanding general who later served as the 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps.

which was intended to be the Division's final gathering—before it was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Just one year later, only nine were left on the guest list.

Seven of those nine attended the final banquet on Saturday evening, as some were unable to stay for the entirety of the reunion. D.C. Rigby, Leonard Turner, Lester Penny, Harry McKnight, Watson Crumbie, Ken Wells and Neal McCallum gathered around the head table at the front of the room. It was an emotional moment, with hardly a dry eye in the room, as the veterans and attendees stood and belted out all three verses of "The Marines' Hymn."

As they prepared to open the long-lost bottle of Scotch for the "last man's bottle" toast, each of the 6thMarDiv veterans had an opportunity to speak to the crowd.

"When I reached my 90s, I thought, 'Why is the Lord keeping me going?' And it must have been for this moment right now," said Leonard Turner, who served with the Division's 4th Marine Regiment.

With that, seven shot glasses were filled, and the last men of the 6th Marine Division took a ceremonial swig.

Active-duty Marine Major Robert Murray, an infantry officer currently serving as the commanding officer of Marine Corps Recruiting Station Twin Cities, Minn., and the guest speaker at the banquet, spoke directly to the

veterans as he shared some heartfelt words.

"I am struck with similarities in our Marine culture despite the passage of time. Today's Marine Corps is the best America has to offer—we are still the youngest service, the fittest service, and the proudest service. This is a testament to your legacy. Our pride stems from your service and sacrifice," Murray said. "I assure you that we will do our best to uphold the legacy and culture you fought to give us. The Marines of

today will uphold honor, courage and commitment; our mission is to ensure our service does justice to the legacy of all veterans of the Second World War, and most especially, the legacy of the 6th Marine Division."

Editor's note: To learn more about the history of the 6thMarDiv and its fight to secure Okinawa, see "From the Archives: History of the 6th Marine Division" in the September 2021 issue of Leatherneck. 🇺🇸



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN

D.C. Rigby and Leonard Turner sit at the head table during the final banquet of the 6thMarDiv Association reunion, Sept. 18, 2021. Before the "last man's bottle" toast, each veteran had the opportunity to share a few words with the attendees.