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Iwo Jima
By Jonas Hogg

It is a moment snatched from time – a pencil sketch of a sea freckled with boats, planes wheeling over a smoldering island and the smudgy flash of naval cannons. Too small for the scrap of paper, and too far away for the artists to see, U.S. Marines are taking the island one gallon of blood, one limb and one Japanese at a time. At the bottom right is the date of the drawing and the location, “Feb. 20, 1945 – Iwo Jima.”

The artist, Charles Clements, describes the drawing as “rough.” It was done from his spot in the radio shack of Navy assault transport 208, the USS Talladega during the second day of the legendary assault. Then the flimsy paper, already yielding to time and insects, was dropped into a scrapbook and forgotten. It wasn’t until recently that his son rediscovered the drawing.

“I think that the crudeness of it makes it powerful. I think it was just an impressionistic view of what I saw in about five minutes,” the elder Clements said.

Born in Salisbury, N.C., Clements showed an aptitude toward art from an early age. But a lack of money kept him from attending art school. Then, World War II came along, and in 1942 he enlisted in the Navy at age 20.

He joined the Talladega and the 5th Marine Corps division in Hawaii, where he immediately was impressed with the quality and the training of the fighting men.

“They were just the finest, well-trained men ... and you could see in their faces that they knew what their mission was, and they were so focused,” he said. “We, as sailors, had no idea, because we went about our duties. But they looked like they had been oriented so well, they were just sharp as tacks.”

Their mission was to be a tiny island, with an airfield, in the Pacific Ocean. The Japanese, knowing the attack was coming, spent months creating an interlocking series of underground tunnels and artillery pits and machine gun bunkers. The volcanic surface of the island meant the Marines would have practically no cover or concealment.

But as Clements transitioned in his story from the Marines at Hawaii to the approaching battle, a sadness broke in to his story.

“The Talladega approached the island at about 4 in the morning,” he began, but broke off. After a few minutes, he was able to continue.

“I realized when I saw all of that lightning coming up from over the sky when we were approaching it. That’s when I realized what we were going into. During that dark time and I saw all that sky lighting and I said, ‘God, what the hell are we getting into – what are all of us getting into?’

“And then when we got there, to see the intensity of everything. The noise, noise, the noise of bombs falling from those planes and that carrier off of there with those big ol’ guns that they were hitting Mount Suribachi with and you see the explosions on the island.

“They started going ashore and there was that all-day battle going on – just the bombardment, bombardment, bombardment and dive planes diving down, diving down.”

It was during that first morning that Clements strayed from his ship’s cover long

enough, about five minutes, to make his drawing.

The Talladega stayed at the assault for roughly five days, and as the hospital ships far offshore filled to capacity and then overflowed, Clements said his ship became a secondary hospital and the honor guard for the fallen.

"So each day during however long we were there, we would have go out to sea about 5 miles, and we always on ship dressed in dungarees, sloppy, any way we wanted to go about our job.

"But when they had the burial ceremony for these fine young men, we had to dress in our dress whites and go on deck and the chaplain would be there, and they would have the body on the slab. And he'd be wrapped on white canvas with a weight on the bottom of the feet, and the chaplain would do a service, and then they would tilt the plank and drop them into the ocean.

"And I can remember always thinking," said Clements, his voice fracturing under 63-year-old memories, "every time they did that, that somewhere, back in the United States is some mother – this is her son; some wife – this is her husband, and they don't know about it. But we did so many of those ... we did so many of those."

Eventually, the Talladega was withdrawn to carry wounded for treatment. Clements smuggled his unauthorized drawing in his duffel bag. But shortly after leaving Iwo Jima, Clements and the Talladega were sent to the battle of Okinawa.

"I don't have many memories of Okinawa. We went there the same way and the same situation, but it wasn't as vivid or anything as Iwo Jima."

"(After) Iwo Jima, I think I sort of blocked it out of my mind what it was going to be and I could deal with it, and I just don't have any memories of Okinawa or what happened there. ... I just remember that it was a battle."

He said he remembers hearing about the bombing of Hiroshima, "Of course we had no idea what an A-bomb was – A, B, C, D, E – what's an A-bomb?"

He also was present in Tokyo Bay during the official Japanese surrender.

"At the moment they signed it, you never seen such a site again ... here came planes, American planes, horizon to horizon. Every kind of plane you could think of came over, flew over Tokyo. Big, huge bombers, little bi-planes, little small planes. Flew over Tokyo for a show of strength that we meant what we were going to do ... just plane after plane after plane."

Clements was married while in the service, left the military in 1946 and attended art school. He has worked as an artist at the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and he took his last job at Coastal System Center, now Naval Support Activity-Panama City, before retiring.

Clements, now a resident of Clifford Chester Sims Veterans State Nursing Home, said he has a hard time remembering new things, but his memory of that time and that battle is "sharp as a tack." Several of his paintings hang in the veterans home, including a portrait of President Dwight Eisenhower.

"There's a brotherhood aboard ships," he said. "You form friends, but even with friends, you don't always let them see you completely, you hold back a little bit ... you hold back that side. But aboard ship, you just know the gutsy person that's in the next bunk."

He said even though those who remember the historic battles of World War II are

dwindling rapidly, he is not afraid that the legacy will be forgotten. In fact, he said sees more people paying attention to history,

As for his drawing, Clements said as a document of a history-changing event, he would like to see it preserved.

"It's so rough, but I didn't have time to sit up there and loll back and do a nice picture, you know. Because there were also Japanese planes around, too. There weren't just our planes."

