



THE UNCOMMON VALOR OF MICHAEL STRANK

Immortality was the furthest thing from Sgt. Michael Strank's mind on February 23, 1945. That's when the Western Pennsylvania native led a four-man patrol from Company E's Second Platoon to the 550-foot summit of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima and raised an American battle flag. Strank, who was on his second tour of duty with the Marines and who, at the age of 24, was the oldest of the group, was just doing his job.

Earlier in the day, another Marine patrol had planted a smaller flag on the inert volcano, but Lt. Col. Charles Johnson of the 28th Marines didn't think it was large enough. The Americans had been battling Japanese po-

sitions on the "flea speck" Pacific island for five days. Casualties were high. The men were in desperate need of a boost. When Strank's patrol got to the hilltop with the full-size battle flag, he told his four fellow Marines and one Navy corpsman to raise it high "so that every son of a bitch on this cruddy island can see it."

The event should have drifted off into historical oblivion. It was only marginally newsworthy; the Battle of Iwo Jima would not be won for another month or so. But an AP photographer, Joe Rosenthal, was standing nearby and at the precise moment that the iron flag pole reached its now famous 45-degree angle, Rosenthal pointed his

camera and clicked away. Later that day, he hustled the film off the island to Guam, where it was developed and sent over the Associated Press wire.

When it ran in American newspapers a few days later, the photograph showing Strank and his comrades struggling to raise Old Glory breathed new life into a war-weary home front. Within days, politicians took to the floor of the Senate to request that a memorial be built based on the image. President Roosevelt personally selected the photograph as the theme of the Seventh (and subsequently most successful) War Bond drive. Rosenthal won the Pulitzer Prize.

Today, it is purportedly the most reproduced image in the history of photography.

It's easy to see why. Frank Capra couldn't have scripted a more dramatic scene or have cast more archetypical characters. The cluster of bodies included a daredevil Texan, a humble kid from a Kentucky tobacco farm, a wholesome midwesterner from Wisconsin, a dashing French Canadian from New Hampshire and a laconic American Indian fresh off an Arizona reservation. When the AP re-ran the photo later that spring, the headline read: "Six Men Who Raised the Flag in Iwo Symbolize Melting Pot That Has Made America Strong."

Among the flag-raisers, according to the AP, was the "son of a Czech immigrant coal miner": Johnstown's Michael Strank.

The AP got it mostly right. Strank was actually Slovak. His father, Vasil, arrived in Johnstown in 1920 from Jarabina, a small village in Slovakia. With the help of an uncle, Vasil got a job in one of Bethlehem Steel's bituminous coal mines and settled in Franklin Borough, an industrial neighborhood contiguous to Johnstown, and home of Bethlehem's steelmaking operations. Two years later, the elder Strank sent for his wife and young son Michael, who was just 3 years old when the family was reunited in the New World.

Michael Strank's childhood and adolescence fit a familiar pattern: the family lived in a small home built by the company (Bethlehem) in a densely settled working-

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class neighborhood on a hillside street (Pine) perched above the mill. Mike's kid sister Mary, who wasn't born until her big brother was almost 14, remembers her street as being populated by "Polish and Slavish people." The family attended Holy Trinity Greek Catholic Church.

According to military records, Strank went to Franklin High School and graduated in 1937. With the Depression still on and the employment outlook bleak, he turned to the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program that offered un-

derprivileged kids manual labor in the nation's forests and three square meals a day. When he left the program 18 months later, there still weren't many jobs, so Strank joined the Marines. He enlisted in October 1939, 26 months before Pearl Harbor propelled the country into the war. Strank was looking for work, not for glory. "He might have made it a career," his sister thought.

Strank was shipped off to the Pacific, where, according to his sister, he found himself thrust into the front lines in the brutal Pacific theater. "There were times when we had no idea where he was and we had to contact the Red Cross to get letters to him." Although war weary—"he wasn't feeling good," according to Mary—Mike re-enlisted for a second tour and by this time had been promoted to sergeant. Mary finally got to know her older brother during a month-long leave in 1944. Friends tried to get Mike out for a drink, but he preferred to stay home with his 10-year-old sister. "We played a lot of cards and checkers," she said about her brother who had to go back to war.

Tragically, in one of The Good War's more sobering ironies, Strank, the soldier who orchestrated the flag-raising, never lived to see the photograph. He died a week later while trying to subdue the enemy in the northern end of the island, reportedly as he diagrammed strategies in the sand. Strank was one of three flag-raisers who never made it off the island, and was among the nearly 7,000 American servicemen who gave their lives at Iwo Jima, the bloodiest battle in Corps history. He was buried, with Catholic rites, in a Marine cemetery there. In 1949, his body was re-interred in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington.

Strank's family did not learn of his role in the flag-raising until several weeks after the photo was first published. Rosenthal never recorded the men's names. But later that spring, the AP re-transmitted the photograph, this time identifying each soldier by name and hometown. The Stranks had just returned from a memorial service for their son at Holy Trinity Church when an editor at the *Johnstown Democrat* called to tell them that Mike was among the six soldiers in the photo.

It's easy to understand why Strank almost went unnoticed. Although there were actually six soldiers struggling to raise the flag, only four could easily be distinguished. Strank was one of two soldiers supporting the flagpole and the flag-raisers on the other side. Only his arms are partially visible, entangled with those of Pvt. Frank Sousley, the second soldier from the left. It wasn't until after sculptor Felix DeWeldon completed his bronze cast memorial that Mary Strank Pero was able to see her brother in full repose behind the other four Marines. She remembers the dedication ceremony for the Arlington memorial vividly: November 10, 1954, on what would have been her brother's 35th birthday.

Western Pennsylvania sent its share of men and women into the armed forces, even producing a few war heroes (among them "Commando" Kelly); but it is perhaps most widely known as the arsenal of democracy, its civilian factories turning out everything from armor plate to bullets. Plants worked nearly full capacity, and some, like the U.S. Steel Homestead Works, expanded to meet war-time production needs. The mills, like Strank, played an essential albeit largely unseen role.

In a postmodern-weary world, where the heat of the public spotlight seems so often to melt would-be heroes, it should come as no surprise that "The Photograph" has been scrutinized from every angle. In the past 10 years, no fewer than three books have been published on the subject. Charges that the photo was posed have been disproved, but questions about the circumstances under which the flag was raised still linger. War correspondents exaggerated the amount of resistance the soldiers faced,

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and certainly the Marines milked the photograph for all it was worth. It's still probably their most effective recruiting poster.

But James Bradley, whose father was one of three soldiers to survive, doesn't believe that the unvarnished truth detracts. It may have been the second flag on Mount Suribachi, but the raising was not without risk. The larger battle flag was bound to irritate the Japanese, many of whom were hiding in caves in and around the quiet volcano. And the fact that three of the six

U.S. soldiers subsequently lost their lives shows that the battle below was very real.

Bradley investigated the lives of all six flag-raisers for a book to be published this May. Sgt. Strank, he learned, liked to play the French horn and baseball (as a young athlete, he reportedly hit one out of Point Stadium in Johnstown) and instinctively looked after those around him. When floodwaters in 1936 threatened to destroy his hometown for a second time, Mike ran down to personally inspect the flood and reassure his family. Bradley was not surprised that Rosenthal's photo captured Strank helping one of his men to lift the pole. Weeks before landing at Iwo, Strank turned down a promotion. "I trained those boys and I'm going to be with them in battle," he was quoted as saying.

His aggrieved mother, asked to speak at a New York war bond drive rally in May 1945, put it simply: "He was a good boy, a good boy."

There are, incidentally, few traces left of Strank's brief life in Cambria County. Fire destroyed his boyhood home in 1998. The Michael Strank VFW, so named by proud hometown vets after the war, still stands on Main Street in Franklin Borough but is less active now, reflecting the declining ranks of the Greatest Generation. A state historical marker about him stands quiet vigil in front of the borough building.

That's sufficient recognition of Michael's deeds, his sister believes; in fact, she figures, it might be more than he would expect. There was lots of uncommon valor on Iwo Jima in 1945. In truth, Michael Strank's selflessness was a common virtue. ❁