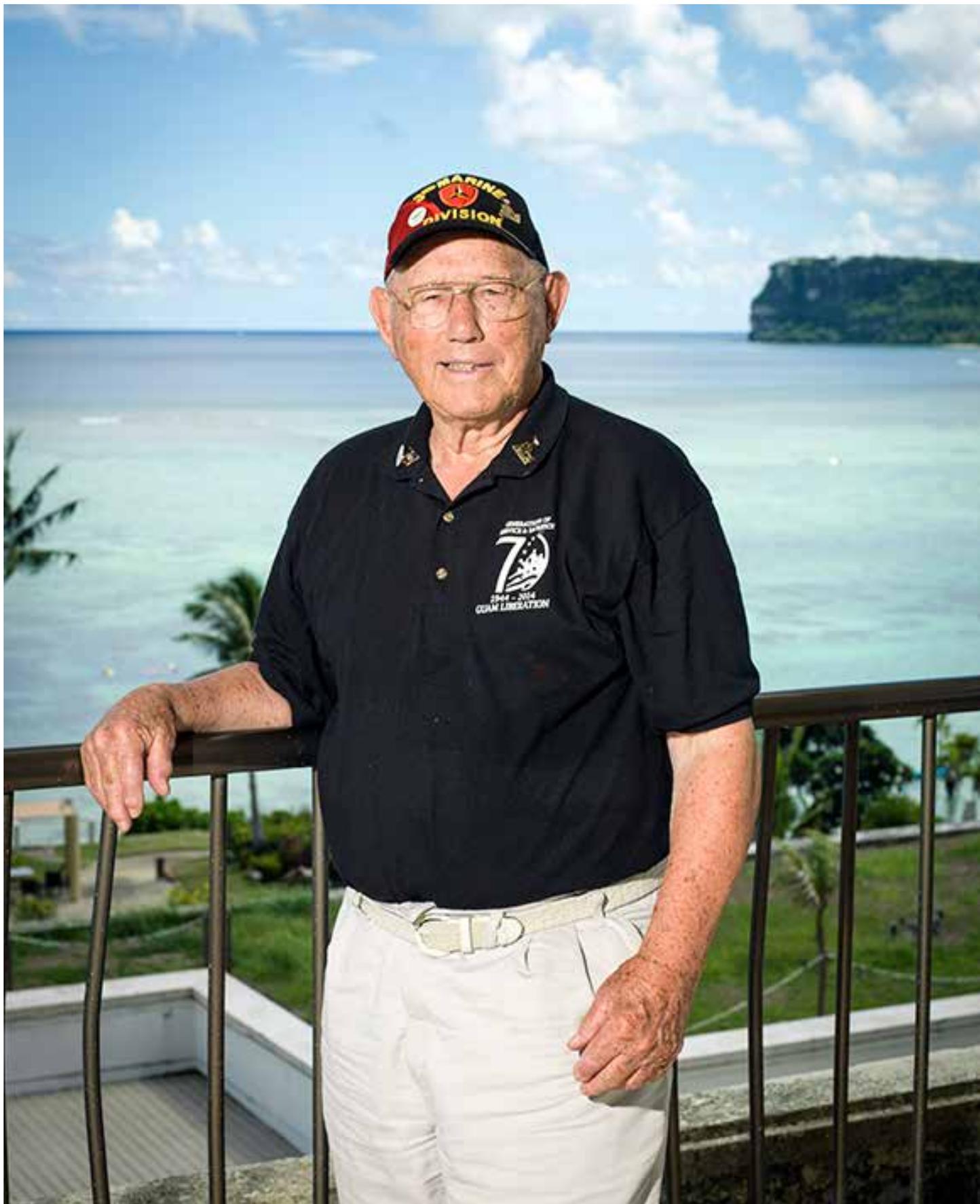


Profile
GENE BELL



PROFILE OF THE MONTH

The Liberation of Guam

A Marine still remembers.

WORDS BY NESTOR LICANTO PHOTO BY STEVE HARDY

GENE BELL was the only representative of the World War II Marine invasion troops at the 2016 Guam Liberation Day festivities. Three years ago there were seven of them. But for the last two years it has only been him.

Bell is 90 years old now, but looks and moves around like someone much younger. It has been 72 years since his first visit to Guam. He was part of the replacement force that stormed the beaches following the first wave of Marines. "I turned 18 just before we went ashore, and it sure made a man out of me quick," Bell recalled.

He had enlisted in the Marine Corps at the age of 17, and after boot camp was shipped directly to Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Islands. Guam was the next leg for U.S. forces as they went from island to island on their way to a showdown in Japan. Bell's first sight of Guam was in July 1944. The island had been mercilessly bombarded by American warplanes to "soften" it for the Marine land invasion. "It was complete devastation, unbelievable," he said.

Bell and his unit were spared from the initial carnage, and afterward their job was to sweep the jungles and round up or kill any remaining enemy forces. They believed there were perhaps 3,000 to 4,000 Japanese troops left. "The jungle was the hardest part. Trying to find the enemy was very difficult," Bell remembered.

Three months after the invasion, in October of 1944, they were ordered to make a final push and were split up into 8-man patrols to methodically sweep the entire island. "One day we would encounter the enemy, and then there would be two or three days when we wouldn't encounter anybody. When we encountered the enemy it was either we eliminate them, or they would've eliminated us. Fortunately, my platoon didn't lose a lot of men, but we did lose some."

"I turned 18 just before we went ashore, and it sure made a man out of me quick."

After the push they trained at a camp in Talofofo to get ready for the next assignment in Iwo Jima, the site of a battle made famous by the iconic photo of marines raising an American flag. Bell said there was a boy and girl about 12 and 13 years old who came by the camp each day to pick up the laundry. "I always wondered what happened to them. I'd sure like to know who they were. All I know is their names were Pedro and Maria, they were brother and sister."

The war ended about a year later, and while it may have changed him from boy to man, Bell said he didn't really think a whole lot about how else it may have impacted him. "It's kind of funny because most of us (WWII veterans) don't talk about it. But in the last few years I've begun talking at schools and civic organizations, and telling them what it was like during the war and my experiences in Guam and Iwo Jima. They mostly want to know why I joined the Marine Corps, and why Guam and Iwo Jima were taken."

When he eventually came home, Bell exchanged his Marine uniform for a police uniform. He went on to serve 30 years in the Inglewood, California police department. After turning in his badge, he donned yet another uniform, and served a decade as a National Park Service Ranger at Montana's Glacier National Park.

The nonagenarian is long retired. He has four sons, four grandchildren, and three great grandkids, but lost his wife more than three years ago. He smiled though when he told the story about how he met a "younger" woman



Gene Bell was an 18-year old newly-enlisted U.S. Marine when he first set foot on Guam in July 1944 as part of the World War Two Guam Liberation force. (Photo courtesy of Gene Bell)

in Guam during the Liberation celebration two years ago. "She asked me to join her for lunch." She also invited him to come back the following month for her 78th birthday party. He surprised her and did. Isabel Siguenza was about eight years old during the Liberation of Guam, and Bell said she just wanted to thank him for helping to free her from Japanese occupation.

There is something about the island that keeps bringing Bell back. He has been to Guam 18 times in the last 72 years. "I love the Guamanian people. Every time I come back I get the same wonderful greeting."

See you same time next year, Marine. 🇬🇺