



Tormented Flag Bearer

Immortalized in an iconic photograph,
Ira Hayes didn't embrace fame's salute

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

Ira Hamilton Hayes never wanted to be a hero. The quiet, self-effacing young man was loyal to his family and his fellow U.S. Marines, proud to serve his country during World War II, but was not the type of person to seek recognition.

If an Associated Press photographer named Joe Rosenthal hadn't snapped an image of 22-year-old Hayes and five other soldiers raising a U.S. flag on the island of Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945, few people outside of Hayes' family and friends would know who he was today.

But in 1/400th of a second, the time it took to capture the photograph, Hayes' life changed forever. The photo taken on top of Japan's Mount Suribachi landed on the front page of newspapers

around the world and became a national symbol of victory and hope. Hayes embarked on a 33-city war bond tour with Rene Gagnon and John Bradley, the two other men in the photo who survived the battle, and was heralded by throngs of Americans and paraded before reporters and photographers who chronicled his every move. The photo of the six men struggling against the wind to raise the flag adorned a U.S. postal stamp, was memorialized in dozens of books and movies and today stands frozen in time in bronze as the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Va.

The photo made Hayes famous. He spent the 10 years after it was taken trying to live it down.

All he did was help erect a flag on top of a hill. How could he feel like a hero when the 36-day battle resulted in more than 26,000 Allied casualties, including the deaths of 5,931 Marines, Hayes wondered?

"Most of our buddies are gone," he told *The New York Times* in August 1946, on the first anniversary of the victory over Japan. "Three of the men who raised the flag are gone. We hit the beach on Iwo with 250 men and left with 27 a month and a half later. I still think about that all the time."

A Pima Indian, Hayes was born Jan. 12, 1923, on the Gila River Indian Reservation in Sacaton, Ariz., and raised in a one-room adobe hut. Nine months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hayes left school to enlist in the Marines. He was 19.

The fighting on Iwo Jima was brutal. Two out of three Americans who fought in the battle were killed or wounded. Hayes and the other soldiers in the photo were just following orders to run a telephone line up the mountain and replace the flag another team had raised earlier in the day with a larger one. It was an easy, 40-minute climb

and there was no enemy fire.

"We were just there," John Bradley told one of his children in *Flags of Our Fathers*, by his son James Bradley (Bantam Books, 2000). "We put a pole up and someone snapped a picture."

But the photo became a national sensation. Once they were identified in the photo, Gagnon, Hayes and Bradley were dismissed from battle so they could return to the U.S. to raise money for the war. "It's funny what a picture can do," Hayes wrote home to his parents. All of a sudden, they were celebrities, lauded by the title "hero" at every turn.

Hayes, whose culture discouraged individuals from seeking recognition, was so tortured by the "hero" title that he drank to excess. In May 1945, a superior officer attending a re-enactment of the flag raising at Soldier Field in Chicago saw that Hayes was so drunk he couldn't even stand on his own. He ordered the young soldier to rejoin his unit in the Pacific.

Once the war ended, Hayes tried to put the photograph behind him. He returned home and got a job as a day laborer, only to be sought out by photograph-seeking tourists and greeted by fellow Pimas as "Iwo Jima hero!" He continued to drink heavily.

Distressed that one of the dead men in the photograph had been mis-identified, Hayes took action. Five months after he came home, he walked off the reservation and hitchhiked more than 1,300 miles in three days to Weslaco, Texas, the boyhood home of his friend Harlon Block. Belle Block had always recognized her son in the photo, but the man had been identified by the U.S. Marines as Hank Hansen. Hayes confirmed to Ed Block that it was his son Harlon in the photo. "It did not seem right for such a brave Marine as your son not to get any national recognition," Hayes wrote to Belle Block. Two years later, the Marines wrote to the Blocks, confirming the military's mistake.

However, the journey gave Hayes little peace of mind. During the next decade, his life was marked by more than 50 arrests for drunkenness, many of which made the papers. "His attitude was not bitterness, but some hurt that I couldn't sort out," Pauline Bates Brown, a caseworker for the U.S. Indian Service, told James Bradley. On Jan. 24, 1955, Hayes was found dead. He had wandered outside after an all-night card game and passed out. His death from overexposure and alcohol at the age of 32 came almost 10 years after he was photographed raising the flag on Iwo Jima.

Hayes was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Some people might have called him a hero, but he would have been unlikely to agree.

"People referred to us as heroes. We certainly weren't heroes and I speak for the rest of the guys as well," John Bradley told his son James in *Flags of Our Fathers*. "The heroes of Iwo Jima are the guys who didn't come back." ■

Announcing the **NEW 3" Series** **Bayonet Style Dry Disconnects**



Bayco brand bayonet style dry disconnect fittings are designed for use in the fuel and lube oil service industry.

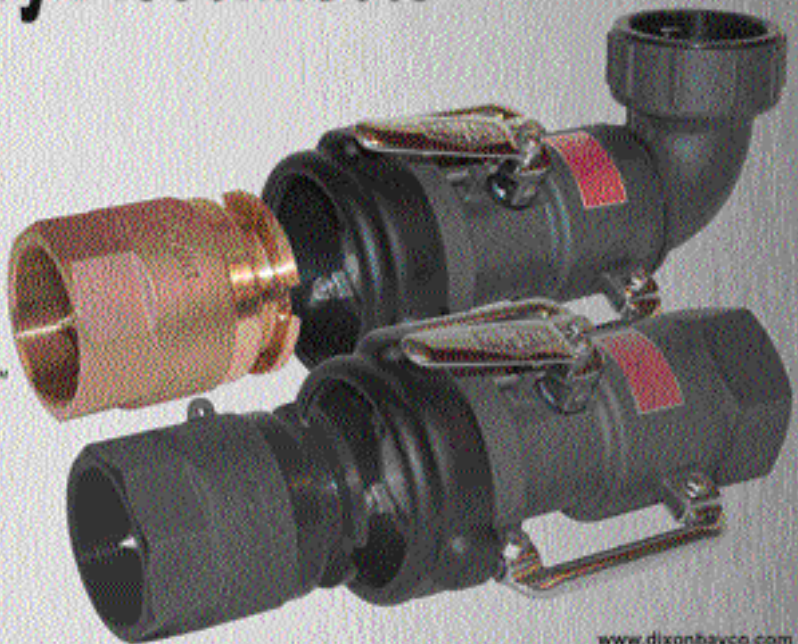
- black hard anodized coupler body
- heavy duty, easy to replace stainless steel handles
- durable square drive linkage for rugged service
- polished stainless steel hardware
- smooth coupling action and swivel rotation
- Buna or Viton® seals available
- 3" straight swivel or 3" 90° swivel available
- interchangeable with Emco Wheaton™ Dry Break™
- 3" adapters are available in brass and aluminum

Dixon Bayco

800 High Street, Chestertown, MD 21620
800-355-1991 • Fax: 410-778-4702

Dixon Group Canada Limited

2315 Bowman Street, Barrie, Ontario L9S 3V6
800-355-1991 • Fax: 705-436-6251



www.dixonbayco.com