

A Portrait of Service & Sacrifice

PHOTOS CAPTURE LIFE'S MOMENTS

– joyous, tragic, momentous and everything in between. Before the age and convenience of cell phones, one photo could transport viewers to a world they'd never experienced and tell a story worth more than a thousand words.

Al Leisey's life has been captured through snap shots of special family moments and personal achievements, but one photo of him, from 1944, has taken on a life of its own. A symbol of the service and sacrifice of U.S. Marines in World War II, it hangs in the National Museum of the Marine Corps. It is a permanent reminder of a time in Al's life of which he went decades without speaking.

The photo (see p. 10) features a wide-eyed young man, dirty and tired, being assisted by two fellow soldiers onto a ship. It was during the battle of Parry Island, in the Marshall Islands, and Al was hauling a 65-pound radio and his rifle up a cargo net. He made it most of the way up the net, but exhaustion caught up with him when he reached the ship's railing.

The photo first appeared in newspapers nationwide, including Al's hometown

paper in Honey Brook, Pennsylvania. His mother immediately recognized him. It was then published in Life magazine in 1944; in "Life's Picture History of World War II;" on the cover of "On Killing" by LT. Col. Dave Grossman; in a calendar called "Celebrations;" in the American Legion magazine (September 2001) article "G.I. Joe;" and on plastic carrying bags from the National WWII Museum in New Orleans.

Joining the Elite

The story behind the photo began when Al enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. He was a freshman at Penn State University in 1941, studying commerce and finance. He played on the football and baseball teams and was a member of the university's ROTC. On Dec. 7, at approximately 4 p.m., Al was in the middle of a study session when news broke of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Looking at the young men around him, he knew they'd all be called to duty soon. Al chose to enlist in the Marines because he felt it was the elite branch.

"If I ever got shot, I wanted to be around the best," he said.

Al was sent to Parris Island, South Carolina, for basic training, where he served as an escort to President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he reviewed the base. He played for the Marines' baseball team and pitched against future major leaguer Bob Feller (Al's team won). He was asked to remain at the base to play baseball but was not happy with this assignment, so he went to his colonel (who happened to be ex-heavy weight boxing champ Gene Tunney).

"I told the colonel I enlisted in the Marines to fight, not to play baseball. I finally made it to another base, but after the grueling combat training, I never complained again about baseball duty," he said.

Once assigned to a ship, he traveled to Mexico, New Zealand and Australia, although his unit never landed. Overcoming sea sickness and a variety of tropical diseases, he eventually stopped in Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and Pago Pago, Tutuila, American Samoa, where he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company of the 22nd Marine Regiment for more training. Al was a scout, first gunner and combat radioman. His job was to stay in contact with battalion headquarters, let them know his unit's position and communicate with other companies in the vicinity.

He spent some time in the hospital during this assignment when he had his wisdom teeth pulled. As he recovered, Eleanor Roosevelt sat down on his bunk one day and talked with him for about 15 minutes. Her son, Jimmy, was also in the Marine Corps.

Al saw combat at the Marshall Islands, followed by three more islands, and he suffered various injuries. While on Parry Island, a shell exploding nearby caused both his eardrums to rupture. Later, a faulty 16-inch shell from Battleship Pennsylvania blew his combat boots off his feet, leaving him with a concussion and killing dozens of others.

On the Engebi Island in the Eniwetok Atoll, on the morning of Feb. 20, 1944, Al was setting up his radio gear with friend Ty Laiho when he spotted a Japanese sniper atop a coconut tree.

As Al lined up his shot, the sniper fired first, hitting Al in the back of his right hand. To avoid his next shot, Al did a back flip. Fortunately, as Al had hoped when he joined the Marines,



Ty was among the best. Ty shot the enemy soldier and grabbed his rifle, which he held onto and gave to Al several years later. Al was taken to the medical station and placed on a stretcher, not yet out of harm's way.

"As I lay there on a stretcher on the beach, a mortar shell came into the area and exploded and threw my body in to the air – they say 15 feet," Al said.

Al was put in a stretcher basket and lifted 60 feet onto a landing craft for transport to the Hospital Ship Relief. The doctor on duty told him he might lose his hand, and for a young man whose biggest passion in life was sports, this was tragic news. He was placed on a tanker headed to Pearl Harbor Naval Hospital, where he had surgery on his hand and shrapnel removed from his backside. The surgeon discovered the earlier concussion from the mortar shell had caused painful swelling at the base of his spine. On May 10, 1944 – one year to the day since he was sent overseas – he was transported to the Naval Hospital in Oakland, California.

During his recovery, he had the chance to talk with U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

"I told him I thought he should be a Marine Corps general instead of an Army general because he kept using the Marine Corps to take all the islands in the Pacific," Al recalls. "He said to me, 'No one ever told me that before.' We, as Marines, always wondered why he never picked on the Army."

In June, Al was given leave and took a five-day trip to Honey Brook in a railway coach car. The trip caused further injury to his back, and he was admitted to the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia for more surgery. He first learned about the Masonic fraternity thanks to an admiral at the hospital, who helped him join Howell Lodge No. 405, Honey Brook, in January 1945.



Another significant event in Al's life took place in the city of brotherly love. He secretly married his high school sweetheart, Mary Helen, on Feb. 24, 1945 – a year and four days after he was shot in combat. She was in the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, and at the time, nurses in training weren't permitted to marry. They wed in the Arch Street Methodist Church, located next to the Masonic Temple. Legend has it, Al had to give the city employee issuing their marriage license \$5 to keep it a secret.

As World War II waged on, Mary Helen completed her training in Butler, Pennsylvania (later passing the state boards to become an RN). Upon Al's release from the hospital, he was assigned to officers' training and was to rejoin the 22nd Marine Regiment, 6th Marine Division, in combat. Fortunately, he was given medical leave on July 21. The war ended Aug. 15, 1945. Al was awarded a Purple Heart, among other medals, for his service.

Life After War

Al returned to Penn State, with Mary Helen, and resumed his studies. He played baseball again, but the battle injuries he sustained to his hand prevented him from having the same success as before. He graduated from college in 1948, and he and Mary Helen had six children. He worked for several companies, including the Minolta Company, U.S.A., where he became president of several of its subsidiaries.

"Going from fighting the Japanese to working with them made me understand that war is caused by political idealists who cannot peacefully negotiate and solve the problems of their time in power," Al said.

Beyond his career, he was active in his community, serving on a school board, city and town councils, a board of supervisors, six terms as president of the Lion's Club and other volunteer commitments.



Top photo: Al in 1944 while serving in the Marshall Islands. Middle photo: Al's World War II Victory and Purple Heart medals. Bottom photo: Al being honored during a visit to the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

"The thing I wanted to do most after the Marine Corps was to help people," Al said. "I felt a calling to do it. I also felt being a Mason would put me in a position to do that kind of work. I was blessed with a wife who knew what I wanted to do was important. I never heard from her, in 70 years, 'don't do that.'"

Mary Helen was busy herself volunteering with the League of Women Voters, YWCA, Girl Scouts and PTA.

"Both my parents set a really good example of how to be engaged in the community," daughter Kimberly Leisey said. "To not do it, seems abnormal."

In 2002, Al and Mary Helen moved to the Masonic Village at Elizabethtown, and Al's commitment to service continued.

"We moved here because of my Masonic affiliation," Al said. "Every place I went, Masonry was an important thing. We knew we'd be cared for here. I also knew, if I ever couldn't pay my bills, the Masons would help me."

Mary Helen, who "liked to have a good party," quickly acclimated them with friends and neighbors by hosting

weekly cocktail parties, as well as volunteering on campus. Al led a group which supported young entrepreneurs, sang in the Men's Chorus and helped launch the Grey Lions of Elizabethtown, a Penn State Alumni Interest Group.

Mary Helen died in 2014, a few months shy of their 70th wedding anniversary. Al cared for her in their cottage, with the help of Masonic Village Hospice. She cared for others her whole life, and at the end, Al wanted to care for her. He read medical books and learned everything he could to make her comfortable.

"As a Marine, you're taught never to leave a buddy behind," Al said. "Once a Marine, always a Marine."

As Al recently moved from his cottage to the Masonic Health Care Center, he has embraced receiving care as well.

"The care he receives is greatly appreciated," Kimberly said. "I live two hours away, and it's nice to know, anytime day or night, I can call or email staff and check in."

A Picture of American Grit

At age 96, Al's not done making an impact. His next goal is to be the oldest living Marine from World War II.

Seventy-five years later, the iconic photo of Al tells a story – not just Al's – of many soldiers who fought in World War II. Soldiers were tested and persevered, laying the groundwork for a generation who never hesitated to sacrifice everything for their country and family.

Al was devoted to giving his all as a soldier, a husband, a Mason, a father, an employee, a volunteer and a role model. He has set a good example for his children, 12 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

"In all my life, I've made mistakes, but I've never told a lie," he said.