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Memorial Day, 2001: Marine from Franklin Borough never knew impact of Iwo Jima photo

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By Milan Simonich, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

FRANKLIN BOROUGH, Pa. -- Not much is left of this town of 442 people except the legend of Mike Strank.

His image roars back to life each Memorial Day, attracting notice from politicians and passers-by. All the attention would mortify Strank if he were around to see it.



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He was one of the six U.S. servicemen who raised the American flag on Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945. The picture of those five Marines and one Navy man became one of the most famous photographs ever, immortalizing everyone in it.

Strank never knew of the photo's impact, for his life ended just six days after the flag-raising. He was killed by friendly fire on March 1, 1945, at age 25.

"If Mike would have lived and come home, he would never have gone for all the celebrating," said his brother, John Strank of Toledo, Ohio. "He would have said, 'I was just there and I happened to be in the picture. So what?'"

Mike Strank's sister-in-law, Ann Strank of Forest Hills, takes the same position.

"Mike, he would have been embarrassed by all of it. He was not the type to think you were a hero because you raised a flag. He saw too much war to think that was anything special."

Yet that flag-raising 56 years ago on an island hell on earth still



In Joe Rosenthal's photograph from atop Mt. Suribachi, Mike Strank of Cambria County's Franklin Borough, is mostly obscured behind the second serviceman from the left. (Joe Rosenthal, AP photo)

resonates with the public.

Part of the reason was the publication last year of "Flags of Our Fathers," a book about the six servicemen that has revived America's interest in their story.

"Flags of Our Fathers" was written by James Bradley. His father, John Bradley, was the Navy pharmacist mate who helped the five Marines raise the flag on Mount Suribachi.

Because of the book, so much attention has been focused on Mike Strank that even his original hometown -- Jarabenia, Czechoslovakia -- will put up a memorial to him in November.

**MEMORIAL DAY,
2001**

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Mike Strank immigrated to Franklin Borough as a 3-year-old. His father, Vasil, had landed a job as a Pennsylvania coal miner a couple of years earlier. When he saved enough money, he sent for his wife, Marta, and his baby boy.

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Franklin Borough, just outside Johnstown in Cambria County, was a fiery industrial town in those days. It sat in the shadow of a hulking Bethlehem Steel plant that once employed 18,000 people.

Franklin Borough had no churches, but it offered workers their choice of 14 beer gardens. At its peak, it counted a population of almost 2,300.

Mike Strank might have been the smartest kid in town. He entered first grade speaking only Slovak, but he mastered English with an ease that startled his teachers. After just one year of school, they promoted him to the third grade.

The Strank family grew in Franklin Borough. Mike soon had three American-born siblings, brothers John and Pete, and a sister, Mary. Even as little children, they were aware of Mike's intellect.

"He would read the newspaper at night, and the next morning he could recite the articles back to you word for word," John Strank said. "We knew he had a photographic memory before we knew what that was."

Mike Strank also was a terrific baseball player who worked easily with teammates. They liked him and listened to him -- an early indication of his leadership skills.

By the time Mike graduated from high school in 1937, jobs in the mills and mines had become scarce. Even for such a bright kid, college was an impossible dream.

So Mike took a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a government program that put young men to work on tree planting and other environmental projects. Mike stuck with it until October 1939, when he joined the Marines.

America was still at peace when he enlisted. He thought the military might give him a future.

World War II changed that. But by all accounts, Strank blossomed into a wondrous staff sergeant. He knew and remembered everything about all his men and each situation they faced.

More than 21,000 Japanese and 6,821 Americans died during the fighting on Iwo Jima. Strank became one of the three most famous casualties.

Of the six servicemen in the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken by Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press, Strank and two fellow Marines never made it home.

Also killed in battle soon after the photo were Harlon Block of Rio Grande Valley, Texas, and Franklin Sousley of Hilltop, Ky.

The other three servicemen -- John Bradley of Antigo, Wis., Ira Hayes of Sacaton, Ariz., and Rene Gagnon of Manchester, N.H. -- came back to a heroes' welcome.

Each felt uncomfortable about the fuss made over him, and about the Iwo Jima memorial -- modeled after Rosenthal's photo -- that was built near Arlington, Va., in 1954.

Hayes, a Pima Indian, could not adjust to civilian life. Haunted by the war, he drank heavily and accumulated an arrest record. He died in 1955, when he was just 32 years old.

Gagnon died in 1979 and Bradley in 1994.

None of them liked to talk about Iwo Jima or the photo. But it seemed that just about everybody else did.

"Any Marine who would come to town would pay my parents a visit," John Strank said.


Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Hubert Humphrey did the same when they campaigned in Pennsylvania for the presidency.

Mike Strank himself had spoken as a boy of wanting to be president. He listed that as his ambition in his high school annual.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Franklin Borough is named after

Strank, but his boyhood home on Pine Street is gone, destroyed by a fire. Bethlehem Steel's furnaces have turned icy, and the beer gardens have mostly dried up.

"It's almost a ghost town now," John Strank said. "But because of that photo and Mike, people still remember Franklin Borough."

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