

From the Pacific Theater to Branford

WWII vets meet by 'shear' luck at local babershop

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BRANFORD » Each of the two veterans enlisted in the Marine Corps in the wake of the Dec. 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Each served as a radio field operator in the South Pacific. Each fought in pivotal military campaigns that would decide America's fate in World War II.

In May 2016, Malcolm Schwab and Anthony Pagnataro happened to make appointments at the same time on the same day at the Branford institution that is Top Notch Haircutters.

"So many of us didn't make it," Pagnataro, 90, said when the two recently got together to swap more stories at his Branford home. "For the two of us to meet so many years later, that's pretty special."

And a few weeks before Memorial Day, no less.

While five years separate Pagnataro and Schwab, 95—Tony Pegs, as he's known around town, affectionately referred to Schwab as an "old salt"—the two are alike in insisting there was never any doubt what they had to do when their country's existence was in mortal danger.

"This was all-out war. No one was running off to Canada. No one was trying to avoid it," said Pagnataro who, following his 37 months overseas, studied political science at UConn and then became executive vice president of his father's pioneering supermarket chain for 25 years.

Schwab, a West Haven native who retired in 1982 as a general engineering manager at SNET, agreed. "I tried to enlist in the Air Force when I was 17 and then in the Navy when I was 18 and my father refused to sign the papers both times," Schwab said. "I didn't need permission at 21."

Pagnataro, who wasn't quite 18 when he signed up, faced similar resistance from his parents. Then there was another hurdle: his poor eyesight. "I'm standing in line for my eye chart at the Springfield Armory," said the New Haven native, "and I let about 200 guys go ahead of me, and in the meantime I'm memorizing that eye chart," he recalled.

He passed the eye test, of course, and went on to rise to the rank of corporal, hauling a 38-pound radio backpack with two heavy 9-pound batteries clipped to his cartridge belt, surviving the gruesome battle on Sugar Loaf Hill as a member of the Sixth Marine Division Strike Force on the island of Okinawa.

But ask Pagnataro about being struck on his right leg by shrapnel during that battle and he'll



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World War II United States Marine Corps veterans Malcolm Schwab, 95, top, and Tony Pagnataro, 90, both of Branford, served as combat field radio operators in the South Pacific. They met for the first time by chance at a barbershop in Branford earlier this month. Pagnataro was a corporal and served in the 1st Marine Brigade and the 6th Marine Division, 29th Regiment. Schwab, a Lieutenant, served in the 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Regiment. Among other wartime engagements, Pagnataro was in the Battle of Okinawa and Schwab in the Solomon Islands.



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World War II United States Marine Corps veteran Tony Pgnataro, 90, in a photo taken after the Battle of Okinawa while on leave on Guam. Pgnataro, a corporal, served as a combat field radio operator in the South Pacific. He was in the 1st Marine Brigade and the 6th Marine Division, 29th Regiment. Among other wartime engagements, Pgnataro was in the Battle of Okinawa.



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World War II United States Marine Corps veterans Malcolm Schwab, 95, left, and Tony Pgnataro, 90, both of Branford, chat together in Pgnataro's home recently. Both men served as combat field radio operators in the South Pacific. They met for the first time by chance at a barbershop in Branford earlier this month. Pgnataro was a corporal and was in the 1st Marine Brigade and the 6th Marine Division, 29th Regiment. Schwab, a Lieutenant, was in the 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Regiment. Among other wartime engagements, Pgnataro was in the Battle of Okinawa and Schwab fought in the Solomon Islands.

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call it his "happy wound" because it only required 13 stitches and, in his opinion, didn't merit a Purple Heart which he rejected. "So many had it so much worse, arms, legs blown off," he said.

Ask Schwab about his part in building defenses on American Samoa as a member of the Third Marine Division, Third Regiment, so the Japanese couldn't cut off American supply lines; about his 16 months in the V-12 college training program at Oberlin College; and his four months going through the Officers Candidate School before graduating as a second lieutenant.

He'll shrug and maintain it was "uneventful." Or, like Pgnataro, pay tribute to the Navajo Code

Talkers working alongside him for thwarting the Japanese efforts to decode their messages.

In the end, it seems, it's so simple that it need not be expressed. Schwab and Pgnataro did it for love of country. And with a pride in being Marines that endures to this day.

If anything, the two men seem awestruck at the overwhelming recognition from the rest of us. Like the time a few months ago when Schwab and his brother-in-law were sitting in a booth at Turk's Seafood in West Haven talking about their experience in the service.

"We must have been pretty loud, because the waitress came over and said 'there's no check, fellas,'" he recalled. A couple in the back had enjoyed their conversation so much they paid for their

meal.

And two years ago, when Pgnataro was in a private room at Donahue's in Madison with fellow veterans to celebrate the Marine Corps birthday two years ago, and "this elderly, about my age, woman," as he wryly put it, asked what was going on. "Next thing you know, there was a bottle of wine on every table," he said. "And we never learned who she was."

There was also the quilt presented to Schwab at another Marine Corps birthday celebration by a group of women in the Connecticut chapter of Quilts of Valor, a national network of volunteers whose mission it is to make one for every service member and veteran.

"A beautiful gesture," Pgnataro commented.

No doubt Top Notch

Haircutter's John Barbaro put it best.

"They're our heroes," he said, "even if they don't think they are."

The Branford Memorial Day Parade will begin on the town Green at 10 a.m. on Monday, May 30.

World War II United States Marine Corps veteran Malcolm Schwab, now 95, of Branford, as a newly commissioned Lieutenant. Schwab served as a combat field radio operator in the South Pacific. Schwab served in the 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Regiment. Among other wartime engagements, Schwab fought in the Solomon Islands.

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