



**Left: From the left, historian Andy Giles; WW II Foundation CEO MajGen Andrew B. Davis, USMC (Ret); Marine veteran and Chicago restaurateur Dick Portillo; and WW II Foundation founder, president and filmmaker Tim Gray, visit Japan in February 2019 during the making of “The Portillo Expedition: Mystery on Bougainville Island.”**

# “Lessons of World War II Were a Blueprint”

## Documentary Filmmaker Strives to Educate and Inspire Future Generations

By Sara W. Bock

**T**im Gray never served in the military, but he’s walked the beaches of Normandy, passed through the foreboding gates of Auschwitz and trekked through lush vegetation on the remote Pacific islands of Peleliu and Guadalcanal. His mission? To use the visual medium of film to bring younger generations of Americans with him as he explores personal stories of those who

served and whose lives were imperiled during World War II on these and other now hallowed grounds.

For Gray, an award-winning, prolific documentary filmmaker and founder of the Rhode Island-based World War II Foundation, his lifelong fascination with WW II history led to the production of a 2006 film chronicling the return of five D-Day veterans to Normandy, France, where they retraced their steps of June 6, 1944. Fourteen years and 27 films later—

all of which have aired on hundreds of PBS affiliates nationwide—Gray plans to wrap up production on “Return to Iwo Jima,” featuring one of the Marine Corps’ most iconic battles and narrated by actor Gary Sinise, early next year.

It’s Gray’s guiding belief that “the lessons of WW II were a blueprint” for future generations to emulate, he says, adding that these lessons are best displayed in the individual accounts of those whose sense of duty and selfless service helped prevent America and its allies from being overtaken by fascist regimes. Rather than employing the sweeping, exhaustive approach to the history and military strategy of the war made popular by Ken Burns and other documentarians who occupy the same genre, Gray and his team center each film on firsthand interviews with a small number of veterans to tell one specific story.

Each of these stories are what retired Marine Corps Major General Andrew B. Davis, who joined the WW II Foundation in 2017 as Chief Executive Officer, refers to as “mosaic chips” of the war.

“When you put all those mosaic chips together, you get a sense of the big picture,” said MajGen Davis, who retired in 2008 and previously served as the director of



A cameraman collects footage on the island of Peleliu in September 2019 for the WW II Foundation film “1st to Fight: Pacific War Marines,” the first of the organization’s documentaries to focus exclusively on Marines in the Pacific theater during WWII.

**While the WW II Foundation’s extensive cache of films appeals to audiences of all ages and backgrounds, Gray attempts to cater specifically to today’s students, now largely made up of members of “Gen Z.”**

cache of films appeals to audiences of all ages and backgrounds, Gray attempts to cater specifically to today’s students, now largely made up of members of “Gen Z” who are digital natives and have grown up in a world inundated by social media, reality television and a vast array of attention-grabbing content at their fingertips.

Gray’s approach to getting the younger generation interested in WW II history is simple yet effective. By leveraging the broad appeal of actors like Sinise; Jon Seda, who portrayed Marine Gunnery Sergeant and Medal of Honor recipient John Basilone on HBO’s “The Pacific”; Dan Aykroyd; Matthew Broderick, and Liev Schreiber to narrate the films, Gray lends himself instant credibility. But what’s most striking about each film is not the celebrity voiceover; rather, it’s the interviews with veterans, historians and other key players, and the juxtaposition of black-and-white archival film alongside vivid, colorful present-day footage of the same locations.

In recent years, Gray’s team, which always films on location, has utilized high-resolution drone imagery that gives their audience a bird’s-eye view of places that most have only ever read about in a history book and brings the stories to life in a way that archival black and white footage cannot. But spectacular cinematography aside, the stories themselves take center stage.

“The films are really ‘micro views’ of World War II. It’s the stories, it’s the

Marine Corps Public Affairs. He now lends his experience both as a Marine and in the nonprofit sector to help further the foundation’s mission of educating and inspiring future generations through the stories of WW II.

The “blueprints” found within these individual stories, said Gray, provide a model that Americans desperately need to follow today.

“You don’t get things accomplished when you’re divided. You get them accomplished when you’re part of a team, and we’ve lost that in this country. That doesn’t exist anymore,” said Gray. “It’s how we responded as a nation that is the biggest lesson that I feel that time period and that generation has left for us—and also to be humble. [...] They came through the Great Depression, and then they fought a world war where 70 million people died, and they came home and they rebuilt America. And they did it without boasting, and they did it without the fanfare that people generally want to seek today.”

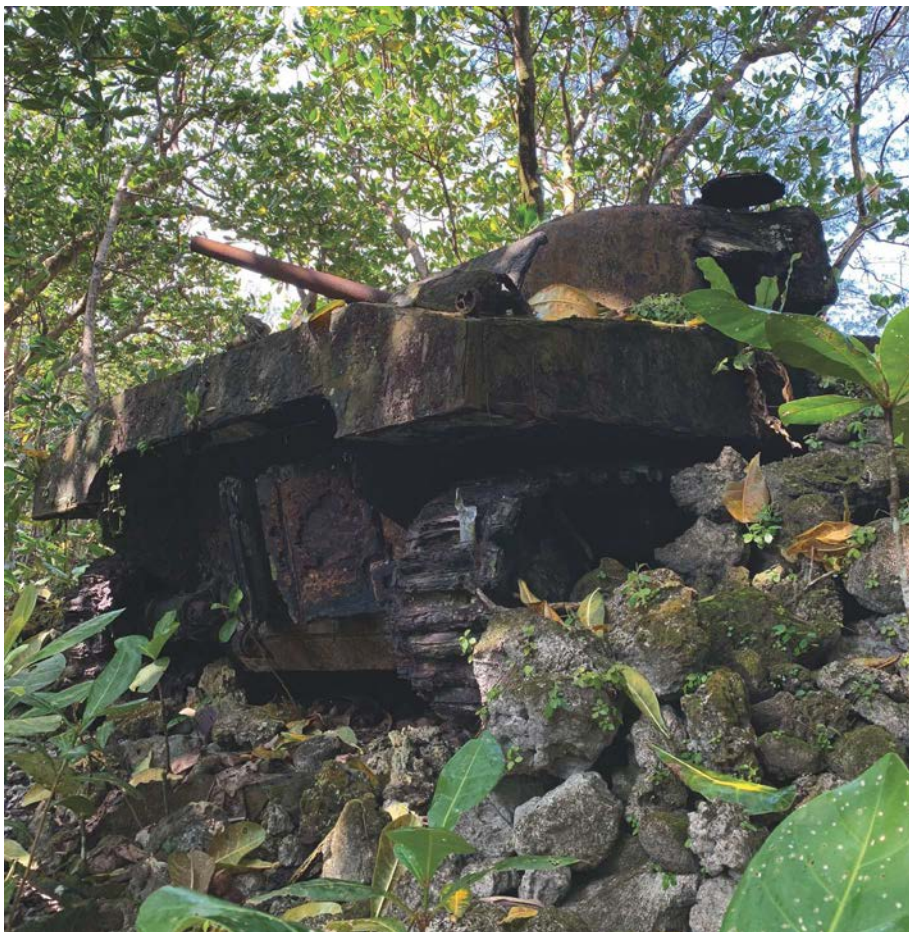
While the WW II Foundation’s extensive



**Young students show off their copies of WW II Foundation documentary films given to them during a field trip to the foundation’s Global Education Center in Kingstown, R.I., in June 2019. For founder and filmmaker Tim Gray, passing the stories of WW II to younger generations is what drives him to produce numerous films each year.**



**Above: Marine veteran Oliver Marcelli, who served with Headquarters Co, 1st Bn, 1st Marines, 1stMarDiv, shares his story of landing at Guadalcanal on Nov. 25, 1942, with a WW II Foundation film crew during the filming of “1st to Fight: Pacific War Marines,” which first aired in May.**



**This image of the wreckage of an M4 Sherman tank from the Battle of Peleliu was captured by the WW II Foundation crew while making the film “1st to Fight: Pacific War Marines.” When the crew visited the island, they found that many relics from the war remain untouched 75 years after the Marines engaged in fierce fighting there.**

personal stories of the individuals rather than the ‘macro view’ of the strategy of the war,” said Gray. “We find that for the younger generation, it resonates with them because they love stories and they can relate a lot of these stories to things that happen in their own daily lives.”

Gray’s hope is that his films will pique the interest of young students, who will then utilize the technology available to them to learn more.

“We want them to go to Google and search ‘Pearl Harbor’ or ‘Auschwitz’ or ‘1st Marine Division,’ ” said Gray. “We look at ourselves as a conduit, kind of the opening of the door for this younger generation, and so that’s why we make everything available for free.”

From the first film to the most recent—“Grandpa’s War Story Goes #Viral”—which first aired in November of this year, the WW II Foundation has donated its productions to American public television, and the films regularly rank among the top five most requested programs nationally by PBS affiliates. Gray and his team are so dedicated to eliminating any roadblocks to accessing the films that they’ve also made them all available for free on the foundation’s website with the hope that students and educators can utilize them in the classroom.

As a nonprofit, the foundation relies on the support of a long list of corporate donors to fund its films and other educational initiatives, as well as a number of individual donors and grants. And while Gray’s organization is best known for his films, it also operates the WW II Foundation Global Education Center in South Kingstown, R.I., where school groups can learn about the history of the war through a hands-on experience. The foundation also offers a number of free online educational resources like quizzes and essay questions, and produces a weekly podcast featuring actors and authors, “From the Front to the Films,” which also is available on its website.

In the WW II Foundation, Gray created a niche where his passions for filmmaking, history and education intersect. And the rate at which he produces content—on average, three films each year—while acting as the sole writer, producer and director is both remarkable and reflective of his sense of purpose. He laughs as he talks about the 50 or more names that generally flash across the screen during the end credits of a documentary on The History Channel. Gray’s team generally consists of himself, a videographer, and a few sound technicians.

“We travel light, and we work lean and mean,” said Gray. “My joy is to be able

to tell these stories, my job is to be able to write these stories, so that's where I find the most satisfaction, in sharing an incredible story from the Pacific or Europe or the Holocaust. That's where my love of that time period and that generation is on its greatest display."

Gray believes that people have an innate desire to hear stories of others overcoming adversity because everyone faces some form of adversity in their own lives. When he speaks with students, particularly those who are high school age, he talks about what their age group would have been doing during the war. "You have to relate everything back to them and then they become interested," he emphasized. "I say, 'Look at that generation. How did they face adversity?'"

"There's a phrase I like to use [...] 'get off the beach,' " said Gray of his talks with students. "When you land on the beach, and people are shooting at you, there's only one way to go and that's forward. If you want to live, you have to keep moving forward, no matter what's going on in your life."

Considering the fact that more than 16 million Americans served during the Second World War, there are myriad stories to tell. So much so, it wasn't until May 2020 that the foundation released

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its first film based on stories of Marines in the Pacific theater. Narrated by "The Pacific" star Jon Seda, who serves as the foundation's global spokesperson, "1st to Fight: Marines in the Pacific" follows the journey of four young Marines with the 1st Marine Division: Bill Finnegan, Lou Imfeld, Frank Pomroy and Oliver Marcelli, from Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester to Peleliu.

In spite of the decades that have passed since they participated in the first U.S. ground offensive of WW II at Guadalcanal in 1942, the firsthand accounts of the four Marines are marked by the exceptional

clarity with which they remember feeling left to fend for themselves on the mountainous, jungle-covered island. Drone footage captures the rich green vegetation of Guadalcanal and the vivid turquoise waters that surround it: today, it's still and quiet, a stark contrast from the chaos that once engulfed it.

One of the most captivating portions of the film covers the four Marines' accounts of the bitter fighting against the Japanese on the small coral island of Peleliu in 1944, where they faced a lack of fresh water, temperatures nearing 115 degrees and heavy casualties among their ranks. Gray and a crew, which included Pacific War historian Andy Giles, explored the island while making the film, walking among M4 Sherman tanks and other war relics that haven't been moved or touched since 1944 by order of the island nation of Palau. High-resolution video of the caves and pillboxes where the Japanese hid from sight give viewers a clear understanding of what the Marines of the 1stMarDiv were up against.

From his Marine perspective, WW II Foundation CEO MajGen Davis views "1st to Fight" as an example of the contemporary lessons of history and points out that today's active-duty Marines can learn from watching the film.

**Using high-resolution cameras and drones, Gray and his small team have captured vivid and colorful imagery of places like Peleliu, pictured here, which helps bring the stories and black and white photographs of WW II to life.**





**Marine veteran Dick Portillo is filmed on location in Japan in February 2019, during the making of “The Portillo Expedition: Mystery on Bougainville Island,” which chronicles his travels to Bougainville to locate the crash site of Japanese Admiral Yamamoto’s bomber and the discovery of a gold tooth that may have belonged to the admiral.**

“If you look at ‘1st to Fight’ and listen to the four Marines that were interviewed, and their experiences—particularly on Peleliu—their TTPs [tactics, techniques and procedures] for clearing a Japanese bunker [...] is not too different from a fire team going into a house in Marjah or Fallujah,” said MajGen Davis, who added that while each individual’s view of a situation is different, “their personal stories of courage and endurance and interdependence—dependence on the Marine or soldier to their left or right—are constant.”

For actor Jon Seda, narrating the film was an honor. His interest in the personal stories of WW II began when he portrayed John Basilone on “The Pacific” and had the opportunity to speak with and listen to many Marine veterans as he prepared to get in character, hoping to do Basilone’s story justice. While working with the foundation on “1st to Fight,” his interest and appreciation for members of the “greatest generation” grew.

“I’m really thankful for people like Tim Gray who continue to keep their stories alive, keep their legacy alive,” said Seda. “It’s really important to have that—that we stay connected to the men and women

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of the military who wholeheartedly give of themselves so that we can enjoy the freedoms we have today.”

And while “1st to Fight” was the first WW II Foundation film featuring Marines in the Pacific theater, another featuring a Marine veteran, “The Portillo Expedition: Mystery on Bougainville Island,” was released in November 2019. The film follows well-known Chicago restaurateur Dick Portillo, who served in the Marine Corps from 1958 to 1961, during his search on the Papua New Guinea island

of Bougainville for the crash site of Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto’s bomber after a U.S. Army Air Corps P-38 Lightning shot him down and killed him. Yamamoto was the architect of the attacks at Pearl Harbor and Midway, and at the time of his death in April 1943 was considered the United States’ most wanted individual in the Pacific theater.

Portillo, a self-proclaimed history buff, had befriended a WW II Marine veteran, Bill Faulkner, who saw action at Iwo Jima and Bougainville, and the two made several journeys to the Solomon Islands together. They were planning a trip to Bougainville to track down the Yamamoto wreckage, but Faulkner died before they were able to get there. In 2015, Portillo, along with historian and tour guide Andy Giles, two former Navy SEALs and Faulkner’s son and his family, landed on the island and hiked to the crash site, filming their adventure with the hope of making their own documentary.

What Portillo and his group couldn’t have predicted was that Giles would discover a gold tooth near the crash site, which experts believe may have belonged to Yamamoto. After Portillo returned to Chicago and the story of the discovery began making local headlines, he was contacted by Gray and MajGen Davis, who expressed their interest in being involved in the development of the documentary. Portillo agreed to let the WW II Foundation lead the way, and their quest for answers about the tooth took them to Japan and back, all of which is chronicled in the film.

Portillo, who credits his success in the restaurant business to the lessons he learned in the Corps, believes wholeheartedly in the mission of the WW II Foundation and in the benefits of military service for young people.

“They taught me the value of organization, they taught me the value of teamwork and the value of training,” said Portillo of the Marine Corps. While he didn’t become a career Marine, he carried those lessons with him in his own career and has remained a lifelong student of Marine Corps history.

The next WW II Foundation film featuring Marines in the Pacific, “Return to Iwo Jima” was initially slated for release in November of 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the 75th anniversary commemoration on Iwo Jima, originally scheduled for March of this year.

“The film is about the return of two sons of Marine veterans of Iwo Jima to the battlefields where their fathers may have actually fought and walked,” said

**Ready to Watch?** Check your local PBS listings, or visit <https://wwiifoundation.org> and click “Podcasts and Stories” to view “1st to Fight: Pacific War” and “The Portillo Expedition: Mystery on Bougainville Island,” as well as other films like “A Promise to My Father,” the story of Holocaust survivor Israel Arbeiter; “Journey Home to the USS *Arizona*”; and “D-Day at Pointe-du Hoc.”



**Andy Giles and Dick Portillo are interviewed by members of the Japanese media at the Yamamoto Museum in Nagaoka, Japan, in February 2019. The two were part of the WW II Foundation team that traveled there in hopes of positively identifying the gold tooth they uncovered on Bougainville as belonging to Yamamoto.**

MajGen Davis, who worked extensively with the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo to get Japanese approval that would allow them to take their film crew and the sons of Marines to areas of the island typically off limits to visitors, where their fathers may have been.

According to Gray, the archival footage and interviews for “Return to Iwo Jima” are complete, and he’s hopeful that the commemoration, which has been rescheduled for March 2021, will go on as planned and that they’ll be able to complete production of the film.

Another film in the works will detail the Japanese surrender aboard USS *Missouri* (BB-63) that brought the war in the Pacific to an end. Gray and his team—including Seda—were scheduled to visit Pearl Harbor for the 75th anniversary of V-J Day in August to film, but that trip was postponed due to pandemic-related restrictions.

Even before “stay at home” became a mantra of 2020, the foundation was thinking of ways to utilize cutting-edge technology to broaden its reach beyond documentary films and is in the process of developing an exciting new, first-of-its-kind project: virtual reality tours of the major battlefields of WW II from the



**Filmmaker Tim Gray answers questions about the WW II Foundation film “The Portillo Expedition: Mystery on Bougainville Island,” while visiting the Yamamoto Museum in Nagaoka, Japan, in February 2019.**

comfort of one’s own living room.

“In addition to documentary filming, we’re going to do 360-degree virtual reality filming,” said MajGen Davis. “And then we’ll edit this into an experience where the viewer puts on a headset and can go on a tour by looking and moving around and toggling—see the contemporary battlefield and then toggle a switch, it’ll cut to archival footage of what that looked like, for example, in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, or on June 6 in Normandy.”

But for now, gathering interviews and making films based on firsthand accounts remains the foundation’s top priority. As the number of living veterans of WW II becomes smaller by the day, it is with an even greater sense of urgency that Gray and the foundation collects and preserves the stories of the greatest generation.

“We want to get their stories out there while people still have the opportunity to go speak with them, and that won’t be the case much longer,” said Gray. “It’s important that these stories are preserved and that they’re told in the right way that engages a younger audience.”

*Editor’s note: All photos Courtesy of WW II Foundation.*