

# Parade Marshal, WWII vet, a quiet hero

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SUDBURY - When Patrick Finelli closes his eyes he can still see the beaches of Peleliu in perfect detail, mentally exploring the currents and the reefs where enemy booby traps might hide.

What's difficult for Finelli, now 83, is to describe the emotions of the 19-year-old Marine sergeant who swam those waters for hours on reconnaissance missions in September 1944, often under heavy fire, looking for obstacles that would prevent landing craft from reaching the Japanese-held island. As a member of Underwater Demolition Team 6, Finelli was highly trained in the use of explosives, a strong swimmer and mentally focused on survival, not only his own, but on doing his job expertly so that others would live to fight.

Today Finelli has a an impressive collection of medals including a Purple Heart, an extensive library of World War II history books, and a deep love of country and the U.S. Marine Corps, but it's the men whose stories are not told in those books, and whose heroism was not rewarded with a medal, that he remembers.

"I saw too many people die real heroes and nothing was done for them," said Finelli. "My reward comes from being alive today."

As Parade Marshal of the Sudbury Memorial Day Parade on May 26, Finelli will be honored for his heroism in World War II, but as he marches he will remember all of his comrades.

"Pat Finelli is one of those quiet giants who walk among us, and he seeks no recognition. This is a guy who was awarded a Purple Heart, who was wounded in close-quarter combat, stabbed by bayonet," said Peter Harvell Sudbury Veterans Agent. "These are the kind of guys who did these quietly heroic things, and no one knows about it. Most people don't realize, that when they are standing in line behind these men at Sudbury Farms, that they did extraordinary things under extraordinary circumstances."

Finelli was 18 years old, a Newton resident, when he enlisted in the Marine Corps in Feb. 1943. His two brothers also served in the war.

He loved boot camp at Parris Island, S.C., and graduated with a Private First Class stripe. Showing good mechanical aptitude Finelli was sent to aviation ordnance school where he graduated near the top of his class and was promoted to corporal.

"You go where they send you and do what they ask you do, and absolutely try to do your best," said Finelli who was sent to California bases where he trained fighter and torpedo squadrons, and later attended bomb disposal and munitions school.

He was taught all about Japanese mines, booby traps and munitions. He learned about rocketry and trained in the Mojave Desert in knocking out pillboxes and other obstacles.

Transferred to Marine Air Group 45 which was just forming for overseas service, Finelli was always busy, but it seemed the "more we were ready to go, the less we went."

Then a query came from out of the blue. The OSS (Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to the CIA) was looking for demolition men, good swimmers who could be trained for underwater demolition work. Finelli's captain volunteered him for the job.

"Pat was in an elite unit of guys, one of the original frogmen that later became the Navy SEALs. You had to get a rare breed of guy, a great athlete, someone who could do ordnance disposal and who was willing to swim into enemy territory," said Harvell. "Entire invasion decisions were based on the intelligence provided by one guy like Pat Finelli, and without that information it could easily go very badly, very quickly."

Finelli arrived on Eniwetok for training in July, 1944.

The scent of death from decomposing bodies piled in trenches was everywhere. It was a stark reminder that others had made the ultimate sacrifice.

Finelli was part of a mixed group of Army, Navy and Marines who were trained by the OSS. The first hurdle was a swim test where the men were dropped offshore in full uniform with helmet, rifle and 80 rounds of ammunition and told to swim a mile.

"The test was not to see if you could swim it, but to see how you would react to the panic when you realized you couldn't swim it without deliberately disposing of your equipment," said Finelli. "It was done more to test your response to stress than your ability to swim the distance with all that weight."

Finelli trained extensively and on Sept. 12, 1944 he has his first look at the forbidding profile of Peleliu Island. It was his team's job to do reconnaissance and to clear mines and man-made obstacles as well as coral that would prevent a good landing on the island.

The men were in the water for hours at a time wearing just swim trunks, sneakers and leather gloves.

"We must have set well over a thousand charges," said Finelli of one mission. "We were close to shore, being shot at, in shallow water for four hours."

It was hot, thirsty, itchy, and terrifying work. The Japanese had their own swimmers hiding explosives in the coral reefs.

"We made a night swim at 11 o'clock, that's about the most frightening thing I've ever done," said Finelli. "Your every movement creates phosphorescence and every time you rub up against something you think it may be a big fish that wants to eat you or a Jap swimmer who wants to kill you."

The D-day landing on Sept. 15 was brutal with massive casualties, but UDT Team 6 helped to clear the beach so the U.S. tanks could take the island airfield.

Later, as Finelli was setting up some charges, lowering them by ropes into caves on the island, he heard someone yell, "Here they come!"

"It was too close to shoot. There was hand to hand combat," said Finelli who has difficulty talking about the fight. "It's visceral, all thought is on survival, your adrenaline is on high. You ask yourself, 'What have I done? Why am I here?' Any way I can, I have to survive. I still have the KA-BAR that saved my life. I treasure that knife."

Bleeding from stab wounds Finelli was evacuated to a naval hospital in Guam and then to Hawaii, but was eager to get back to the Marines he loved. In Jan. 1945 he hitchhiked his way across the Pacific where by chance, getting out of a mail plane to stretch his legs on Fallop Island, he saw equipment marked with insignia of his MAG 45 outfit.

Finelli was "sanitizing" the island of Yap in Sept. 1945, removing mines and booby traps when an explosion sent him flying.

"The doctor said, 'That's it, you're all done,'" said Finelli who suffered a concussion and was sent back to the hospital in Guam.

Finelli was honorably discharged in March 1946.

Finelli married the former Kay DiPalma in 1948, and is the father of four children, Patrick, Jim, Christina and Susan, and grandfather of three. A Sudbury resident for more than 50 years he retired as a senior manager in research and development from Polaroid in 1993. He still swims regularly.