

A Stamp for Gunny Minila John Basilone USMC

The *GySgt John Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment* was first presented on ***Basilone Day*** 19 February 2004, at the Freedom Museum in Manassas, Virginia to Sergeant Major C.A. “Mack” McKinney [USMC ret]. Brooks Corely, at the time National Executive Director for the Marine Corps League was asked to choose to whom the award would be presented. The award was presented by the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Sergeant Major Estrada.

As a tribute to Sergeant Major Estrada it was decided that hence forth the awardees would always be chosen by the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps.

The Basilone Award is only given to Non Commissioned Officers [NCOs]. The list of recipients is requested by the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps from his Senior NCOs. The Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps then picks a recipient from the list of nominees. The Sergeant Major’s office then notifies the Basilone Award Committee and the award is designed and arrangements are made to send the award to the Marine recipient.

The purpose of the GySgt John Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment is to honor the memory of GySgt John Basilone as well as to recognize the actions of today’s Marines who uphold the ultimate attributes of what it means to be a United States Marine.

When the *GySgt John Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment* is given it is done so in the honor of all those Marines who did not get to come home.

What you are about to read is an American story. It is the story of how one person and the honor and courage they exhibit can unite many and make a difference. This story is about the courage and commitment of two Marine heroes whose actions during World War II, years later spurred a ragtag group of people [a core of about ten to fifteen] to

come together in an unorganized but egalitarian fashion in order to honor these Marines and the men they led.

It is an American story because ultimately the underdog prevailed. The majority of these people who fought to keep the memory of valiant Marines alive were retired; some were ill or had family members that were very ill and some survived at or just above the poverty level. Quite often they were told they would never accomplish their goal, but they refused to give up. When some of their group got tired and took a break, the others hung on. They thought that honoring American Icons would be a no-brainer. But they came to find out they were going to have to fight “city hall,” and fight they did just like their heroes.

On 10 November 2005, on the two hundred thirtieth birthday of the United States Marine Corps, the *Four Distinguished Marine Stamps* were unveiled at Marine Corps Bases on both the East and West Coast and made available for sale at post offices across the United States.

The unveiling of these stamps was the culmination of a two thirteen and ten year grass roots stamp campaigns that had spread from coast to coast and involved both the Chesty Puller and the John Basilone Stamp Campaign. This is the story how these movements began and how the *Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment* grew out of the Basilone Stamp Campaign.

In December of 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Imperial Japanese Navy, Americas did not learn of this disaster by turning on the television or surfing the Internet. News in the 1940s was distributed by telegraph, the radio, news reels at the beginning of movies in theaters and the newspapers. Similarly when John Basilone was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Guadalcanal 24-25 October 1942, newspapers and radios were how Americans learnt of this brave Marine hero. However, one little boy, Peter Ippolito learned about John Basilone standing outside of Saint

Roccas Church on Bergen Street in Newark, New Jersey listening to the GIs talk. The year was 1943 and Peter was twelve years old.

Peter had heard that members of the “Basilone Club” [located across the street from Saint Roccas]-an organization that returning GI’s had started- would be handing out shirts with Basilone’s name and the phrase that General MacArthur coined regarding Basilone “A one man army.” Like many boys all over the United States in 1943, John Basilone was Peter’s idol and Peter wanted a shirt.

The members of the Basilone Club gave Peter and the neighborhood boys their shirts. Basilone continued to be Peter’s hero and from Peter’s perspective the Gunny’s heroism grew in stature when Basilone was killed on Iwo Jima, February 1945. Peter Ippolito grew up never forgetting Basilone. Like John Basilone Peter became an amateur boxer.

Peter also had another hero, Rocky Marciano-a world heavy weight boxer who won forty-nine consecutive fights from 1947-1955. In 1993, Peter started gathering signatures from those in favor of a United States Postage Stamp honoring Rocky Marciano. This drive for a Rocky Marciano postage stamp took three years. Having completed this one ambition, Peter thought there would be no impediment to securing a postage stamp honoring Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone. After all Peter reasoned, GySgt Basilone was the only enlisted Marine to receive both the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross-who in their right mind would think that a stamp honoring Basilone was anything but a good idea.

Unfortunately, as Peter was to find out there were some who opposed a John Basilone Postage Stamp-namely the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee. Who and what appears on a postage stamp is determined by the “Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee.” CSAC is a fifteen member panel appointed by the Post Master General. CSAC meets four times a year to discuss pending postage stamps.

In 1996, Peter began collecting signatures for a GySgt. Basilone Stamp. Peter, his wife Florence, their children and all their friends in and around Union, New Jersey went to VFW halls, American Legions, and businesses to gather signatures and support. In fact, Peter became a regular outside the Vauxhall Post Office with his pen, signature papers and Basilone pins that Peter would handout after he had gained a signature.

After three years had passed and there was little or no response from the United States Post Office, Peter and Florence Ippolito formed the *Concerned Citizens Group* to discover and ultimately fight the obstacles against a Basilone Stamp. Though not always working in tandem but always toward the same end the *Concerned Citizens Group* was joined by many Italian American Organizations and various detachments of the Marine Corps League as well as individuals.

What Peter was unaware of was that in 1993, Major Jacques Loraine, [USMC ret.] had begun a campaign for a stamp honoring Marine legend, General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller. Major Loraine collected over one hundred fifty thousand signatures from as far away as Australia. In 1997, Major Loraine’s unrelenting drive was responsible for “HJ472” a resolution that every member of the Virginia House and Senate Legislature signed as co-patrons in support of a Chesty Puller postage stamp.

Therefore, there were two different stamp campaigns for two different Marines going on simultaneously. Apparently, this was cause for consternation for members of CSAC. * However, what no one from either the Basilone or Puller stamp drives could understand was that General George S. Patton and General Joseph “Black Jack” Pershing had been accorded the honor of their likeness on separate United States Postage Stamps. Thus, why couldn’t the same honor be bestowed on Marines Puller and Basilone? This unanswered question continued for years as both the Ippolito camp and Major Loraine continue to collect signatures, write letters and do whatever they could to achieve their objective. But CSAC continued to ignore the overwhelming public support for both stamps.

In 2000, New Jersey Senator Leonard T. Connors- at the behest of the *Concerned Citizens Group* as well as other New Jersey citizens -sponsored legislation in the New Jersey State Legislature asking the Postal Service to issue a stamp honoring GySgt. John Basilone. Once again the Post Office was silent.

As noted, different groups and individuals within New Jersey worked on achieving the Basilone Stamp. One in particular was Art Karin, a member of the Basilone Detachment of the Marine Corps League. In order to reach more people and thereby gather more support Art used the Internet, putting up an on-line petition. The petition ultimately collected over nine thousand signatures.

In the fall of 2000, Art published a letter in Sgt. Grit's weekly e-mail newsletter asking readers to sign the petition. Jordan Jaffe, a college student whose life had been touched by an old Marine saw the letter. After doing some research on Basilone Jordan contacted Art and offered to do all that she could. It was then that the *Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone Stamp Campaign* was officially formed. Art became chair and Jordan the project coordinator. What they both did know was that the thick of the battle against those who opposed both stamps was yet to come

Like Peter Ippolito years before Jordan thought that procuring a stamp honoring a hero should be easy. Bugs Bunny had a stamp why not Basilone? This reasoning was given particular impetus by fact that in January of 2001, William Pascrell a U S Congressman from New Jersey, sponsored "H.Con. Res. 4" a concurrent joint resolution declaring both the House and the United States Senate's approval for a US Postage Stamp honoring John Basilone. Congressman Pascrell's Resolution was followed in the Senate by Senator Jon Corzine's Resolution "S.Con Res 154" for the same. Despite having bipartisan support from Senatorial luminaries such as Senator John Warner and Senator Hillary Clinton both Resolutions remained forever stuck in committee until the Congressional year ended.

As the *Concerned Citizens Group* continued to work on New Jersey's politicians, the Basilone Stamp Campaign came up with the idea of reinstating a "Basilone Day." In 2002, on 19 February "John Basilone Day" was proclaimed by New Jersey Governor, John McGreevy, Mayor Mitchell Raftellis of Quantico, Virginia, the Mayor of Brunswick, Ohio and the Virginia Arlington County Board of Supervisors. At the generous offer of then commandant Bob Smith the ceremony was held in the *Basilone Room* at American Legion, Post 139, in Arlington, Virginia. General Alfred Gray, the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps attended as did members of Rolling Thunder. Also in attendance was Colonel Paul Ortiz the official representatives from the CMC's of office The Ladies Auxiliary provide homemade refreshments. This was the first Basilone Day since it was originally held on 25 July 1962, in New Jersey.

Several weeks later the conundrum of two stamp campaigns that had apparently beset CSAC came to a pinnacle when a retired Marine Colonel asked the following question of the Basilone Campaign Project Coordinator "what would you do if the Post Office offered to do one stamp or the other but not both?" The Project Coordinator quickly replied that as a civilian this was not her call and she would refer the Post Office to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. However, the question hung heavily in her mind and so she phoned the only person who could aptly answer the question-Major Loraine. Major Loraine's answer was simple and in true Chesty fashion. "Let them choose the Basilone Stamp-it only means that we have won a battle and will keep fighting the war." From that day forward the Basilone Stamp Campaign and the Chesty Puller Stamp Campaign were fighting for a single goal-both stamps. The Project Coordinator had an ink stamp made that read "**the Basilone Stamp Campaign supports the Chesty Puller Campaign.**" All correspondence from the Basilone Stamp Campaign was stamped with this message before they were sent out for mailing.

Support for the Basilone Stamp Campaign continued to grow in 2002. The *Concerned Citizens* in New Jersey had joined forces with the formal Basilone Stamp Campaign in Virginia. People all over the United States were signing and sending petitions. Every week *Sgt. Grit's Marine Specialty Store* in Oklahoma sent in petitions for both Puller and

Basilone Stamps. Retired Major, Barry Ferich enjoyed his retirement attending basketball games across the Western part of the United States while armed with blank Chesty and Basilone Petitions. Every two weeks Major Ferich's completed petitions were sent to the Basilone Stamp Campaign headquarters in Virginia. The Basilone Stamp Campaign was also given an extra shot in the arm with an official website as well as posters that were designed by Sergeant David J Murphy; at that time a Lance Corporal. Still there was no official word from the Post Office. The unofficial word was that they could not issue single stamps honoring individual Marines. Why? No one in the public ever knew.

In the early summer of 2002, Elizabeth "Betty" Kilbride of the *Project America Foundation* came to the rescue and sent the Basilone Project Coordinator to see Colonel Howie Snow, an aide to Jim Saxton, a US Congressman from New Jersey. Colonel Snow understood that the only way to beat CSAC at its own game was to out maneuver them. So Colonel Snow gathered a group of Marine Fellows who were working on the Hill. Their group consensus was that CSAC might be able to say no to an individual Marine Stamp but there was no way that CSAC could refuse to issue a set of stamps. Especially since the Post Office had already set a precedent for this decision when in May of 2000, they issued the *Distinguished Soldiers* set of four. Colonel Snow and his Marine Fellows went to work and by January of 2003, Senator Corzine of New Jersey had sponsored "S.Con Res 2" a resolution stating that it was the sense of the United States Senate that the US Post Office should issue commemorative postage stamps honoring Americans who distinguish themselves by their service. This was followed by "H.Con.Res.37" a House resolution that mimicked "S.Con.Res 2." And just in case the Post Office was not sure what "was meant by honoring Americans who distinguish themselves by their service," Congressman Pascrell introduced "H.Con Res 218" in June of 2003. Senator Corzine's "S.Con.Res 56" followed a week later. Both of these resolutions supported a stamp honoring John Basilone.

Earlier in 2003 on 19 February the second "John Basilone Day" was held. At the invitation generous invitation of Chuck Colgan Jr. the ceremony took place at the *Freedom Museum* in Manassas, Virginia complete with an honor guard from Quantico,

MCB. Brooks Corley at that time the National Executive Director of the Marine Corps League was the guest speaker. Again Governor McGreevy of New Jersey proclaimed “Basilone Day” and was joined by Governor Erlich of Maryland at the request of the First Mar Div Association of Maryland and Angela Calabro [formerly of NJ] Also proclaiming “Basilone Day” were the cities of Quantico VA, Manassas, VA, Anchorage, AK, San Diego, CA, Stockton, CA, Lakewood, CA, Sioux Falls, SD, Nashville, TN, Hobarth, IN, Hurley, NM, Clifton, AZ and Raritan, NJ.

Always on the lookout to gain more support and spotlight the Basilone Stamp Campaign the Chair, Art Karin and the Project Coordinator decided to walk the 2003 Marine Corps Marathon while carrying the full size 2003 John Basilone Day Poster. Official research has not been done but most likely Art is the only blind, diabetic former Marine over the age of fifty-five who has completed the Marine Corps Marathon. Oddly enough the newspapers never carried the story.

As 2004 rolled around the status quo on the Post Office’s decision on the Basilone and Puller stamps seemed to be the same. However, behind the scenes the walls of the citadel were beginning to crumble. Major Ferich had arranged for the Project Coordinator to give a speech at the forty-third reunion of the Basic School Class 4-60. This speech elicited interest from former Marine Officers who were now high powered lawyers and leaders of industry. They had direct contact with those within the highest level of the Post Office. It was becoming clear to those who thought otherwise that the Basilone Stamp Campaign was not going to go away.

On 19 February 2004, the third Basilone Day was again celebrated at the Freedom Museum in Manassas, Virginia. This time the governors of New Jersey, Virginia, South Dakota, West Virginia, Rhode Island, Colorado, Iowa, Oregon, South Carolina and Pennsylvania all declared Basilone Day in their respective states. In addition, San Juaquin County in California proclaimed Basilone Day and the governors of Michigan, Arizona and Texas sent greetings. Every declaration represented the hard work by a citizen or

citizens of their respective state in contacting their governor. Medal of Honor recipient Woody Williams was responsible for West Virginia's proclamation.

However, what made 2004, an extremely special Basilone Day was that Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Sergeant Major Estrada was the guest speaker and presented the first annual *Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment* to Sergeant Major C.A. "Mack" McKinney [USMC ret]. Also speaking was author, race driver and Iwo Jima Survivor, Chuck Tatum. It was Tatum's 30 Caliber Machine Gun that Basilone had used to take out a Japanese pill box on 19 February 1945 an hour before his demise. Continental Airlines flew Chuck and his editor Frank Taylor as their guest all the way from California just to attend the occasion. In addition, local Boy Scout and Marine Corps Dependent Son, Zachary V. Jongema gave an outstanding rendition of the Marine's Hymn and National Anthem on his bugle. Also attending were many members of the Basilone Parade Committee who drove down from Raritan, New Jersey just for the ceremony. Earlier in the day at the request of Chuck Tatum the United States Marine Corps had arranged a wreath laying ceremony at Arlington Cemetery at the grave of GySgt. John Basilone.

John Basilone did not like fanfare, he was not impressed with the fact that he had received the Medal of Honor. Basilone felt that he was simply doing his job and that the Marines who had died during the forty-eight hour horrific fight on Guadalcanal were far more deserving of recognition. However, by recognizing Basilone for his actions above and beyond the call of duty it has led past and this present generation to strive to answer the call above and beyond what is expected. Thus, it was hoped that by creating the *John Basilone Award for Courage and Commitment* others would be inspired to go forward with the same courage and conviction. It was also a way for civilians to say "thank you."

The calls for the Chesty Puller and John Basilone Stamps were never about just honoring Chesty and Basilone; although that is what many thought. Chesty Puller and John Basilone loved their Marine Corps, they loved their Marines and they loved their country. John Basilone's first concern was always for the Marines he led and any Marine day or night could stop by Chesty Puller's house near Saluda Virginia-the door was

always open to Marines. The Chesty Puller and John Basilone Stamps may recognize two individual Marines but they represent all Marines, especially the ones who never came home.

The United States Post Office did not agree to the Marine Stamps willingly. The Post Office acquiesced because of people like Colonel Howie Snow and the Senators and Congressman whose constituents would not let them give up. The thirty-seven cent *Distinguished Marine Stamps* that were released on 10 November 2005, were supposed to be on sale for a year, but in January of 2006, the cost of a first-class postage stamp went to thirty-nine cents thereby making them obsolete. However, from the stand point of all those who fought so hard and so long for both stamps it just made them all the more special and in the end two more Marines, General John A Lejeune and Sergeant Major Dan Daly were also honored.