

# ***Raising the Standard This Flag Day***

## ***Wright Museum's June Display Devoted to N.H. Native at Iwo Jima***

**Mark Foynes, Wright Museum Director**



Had it not been for a breakdown in communication, Manchester's Rene Gagnon might never have been immortalized in one of American history's most iconic images.

Private First Class Gagnon was among the six Americans who raised the Old Glory atop Mt. Suribachi in February 1945 during the prolonged Battle of Iwo Jima. But this wasn't part of the original plan.

Prior to the raising, radio contact between the base of the mountain and its summit had broken down, and Gagnon was given the task of restoring communications. What happened next was a combination of extraordinary heroism and a matter of being in the right place at the right time. The fact that photographer Joe Rosenthal was there to capture the moment on film would forever alter the course Gagnon's life.

Gagnon, along with Ira Hayes and John Bradley—the two other flag raisers who survived the costly battle—were instantly regarded as heroes by Americans on the home front. The U.S. government was quick to use their celebrity as a key part of its 7<sup>th</sup> Bond Drive, which helped sustain financial support for the war effort at a critical time when the War Department's coffers were running dangerously low.

The Wright Museum in downtown Wolfeboro is honored to observe Flag Day for the entire month of June, 2007 by displaying several items documenting one of the most important figures in New Hampshire history. The Wright Museum's *Object of the Month* June display features several treasures on permanent loan from the N.H. Marine Corps Historical Association. The centerpiece of the display is a transcript of a radio interview that Rene Gagnon recorded with KOA-AM in Denver on June 16, 1945. Below are excerpted passages from the conversation:

**Sgt. Beech (Interviewer):** Rene, I think the people might be interested to know what you were doing up on that hill. Will you tell them?

**P[rivate]f[irst]c[lass] Gagnon:** Well, on the morning of February 23<sup>rd</sup> when the Colonel ordered these four men to take up the flag, they started going up and the communications were faulty between the top and the bottom of the mountain and they ordered me to take up the radio battery. When I got up there the four-man patrol with the flag had just got up there and they were about ready to put it up and when I got up I delivered the battery and then I went over to them and I was watching them put up the flag and the very heavy Jap[anese] pipe...it weighed quite a lot...so they said lend a hand...so I just got into it. [...]

**Sgt. Beech:** And this was a pretty good-sized flag, too. 4 ½ by 9 feet. How long were you up there, Rene?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** We stayed up there twenty minutes to half an hour, after it was raised. [...]

**Sgt. Beech:** Why were there 2 flag-raising?



Rene Gagnon atop Colorado's Pike's Peak, summer 1945.

**[Pharmacist Mate Second Class John] Bradley:**

Well, in that original 42-man patrol we took along with us the smaller flag and after we got that up, it couldn't be seen down below throughout the island where the Americans were fighting and the Battalion Commander Chandler W. Johnson decided to send up this larger American flag so it could be seen throughout the island, because he wanted to let the troops down below know that the volcano was in American hands. As long as the Jap[anese] held that volcano they could spot every move the Americans made and, in other words it was a great morale factor to see the American flag flying on the highest peak of Iwo Jima. [...]

**Sgt. Beech:** [Rene, w]hat are you going to do when this bond tour is over? Or don't you want to tell them?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** I don't mind telling them over here. I'm going home and get married and start another war.

**Sgt. Beech:** Oh, I see. Well, you don't seem to be very optimistic about marriage. How old are you, anyhow?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** Twenty.

**Sgt. Beech:** Twenty. Pretty young to be getting married. Who's the gal?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** A little gal from my home town. [...]Pauline Harnoyes [sic].

**Sgt. Beech:** Oh, she's the one who came out to Chicago, isn't she?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** Chicago, Detroit and Boston.

**Sgt. Beech:** Umhmmm. We never knew just exactly when she was going to arrive but she always just seemed to be there. Why, what do you want to be, assuming that this war ever ends and you get back into civilian clothes?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** I want to get on a police force. [...] Up in Boston.

**Sgt. Beech:** In Boston. Well, Manchester, New Hampshire is your home. Why don't you go on the force there?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** Nothing ever happens around there.

**Sgt. Beech:** Well, where are you going on your honeymoon?

**Pfc. Gagnon:** I haven't planned that yet.

**Sgt. Beech:** Oh, you haven't got that far, eh? Well, what do you think of this bond tour? I mean generally – do you think it has been pretty rugged? I know I have my own personal opinion about it.

**Pfc. Gagnon:** Well the three of us would agree, I think, that it is much rougher than Iwo ever was.

**Sgt. Beech:** Well, of course, life was pretty simple on Iwo. You had to worry about only one thing and that was getting killed, and here, for example we pull out of here at three o'clock tomorrow morning. That's going to be an awfully early hour to get up. That's worse than reveille.

**Pfc. Gagnon:** I wish you would wait until I sit down to tell me that.

Museum gallery admission is \$6 for adults and \$5 for seniors, veterans, and active U.S. servicemen and women; children under 8 are admitted to the museum free of charge. The Wright Museum is located at 77 Center Street in Wolfeboro and is open through October, Monday-Saturday, 10a.m.-4p.m., and Sundays from noon to 4p.m. For more information and directions, call 603/569-1212 or visit [www.wrightmuseum.org](http://www.wrightmuseum.org).

The Wright Museum is a one-of-a-kind non-profit institution dedicated to preserving and sharing the stories of America's Greatest Generation. With its vast collection of fully-operational military vehicles and extensive exhibits relating to the American Home Front, the Wright Museum is a member-supported national treasure located right here in New Hampshire. In the words of Senator Bob Dole, "The Wright Museum tells the story of [a] great national achievement, a story that, more than ever, today's generation of Americans—and especially our young people—needs to understand and appreciate."