

[Table of Contents](#)**Flags of Our Fathers**

- [Synopsis and FAQ](#)
- [The Cast and Crew](#)
- [Photos and Images](#)
- [Trailer and Downloads](#)
- [Set Reports & Stories](#)
- [The Message Board](#)
- [The Latest News](#)
- [The Store](#)
- **[The History](#)**
- [Battle of Iwo Jima](#)
- [The Flag Raisers](#)

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Interview: James Bradley

The Journey of James Bradley and *Flags of Our Fathers*

by

John Chadwell

“IN THE SPRING OF 1998, six boys called to me from half a century ago on a distant mountain and I went there.” –“[Flags of our Fathers](#)”

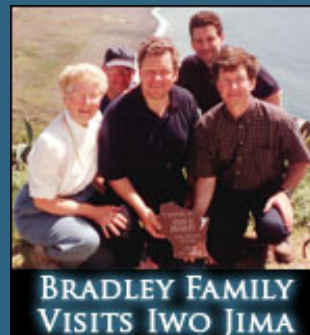


JAMES BRADLEY

So ended the journey of James Bradley to visit the mountain, Suribachi, on the island, Iwo Jima . He went there to visit the site where his father, John Henry “Doc” Bradley, a Navy corpsman, joined the ranks of heroes, along with five Marines: Mike Strank, Franklin Sousley, Ira

Hayes, Rene Gagnon, and Harlon Block. These six boys (the oldest was 24) had raised an American flag above the deadly battlefield below and were captured forever by Joe Rosenthal’s camera and the black and white image became the most reproduced photograph in history.

James Bradley’s four-year journey began shortly after his father died in 1994, when the family was looking for his will. Instead, they discovered three cardboard boxes hidden way where they found photographs and documents that told a story he had seldom spoken of. James Bradley’s journey to learn more about his father and the other flagraisers finally ended as he, his 74-year-old mother, and three of his brothers followed the footsteps of those men up the 550-foot volcanic crater.



BRADLEY FAMILY VISITS IWO JIMA



Read the book yet?
Find out why everyone's talking about it.

After 27 rejections by publishing houses, the resulting book, “*Flags of Our Fathers*,” co-written with journalist Ron Powers, was published in 2000. It topped the best-seller lists for weeks, and DreamWorks’ Laurie MacDonald and Walter Parke made a preemptive six-figure bid for the film rights.

Clint Eastwood, 75, also expressed interest in the story early on. He tried to acquire the rights but discovered that Steven Spielberg already owned it. He has since teamed up with Spielberg to produce and direct, along with DreamWorks and Warner Bros. This month, the movie’s journey began filming and will travel to New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Hawaii, Iwo Jima, and Iceland, which will stand in for the beachhead on Iwo Jima. With a budget of \$80 million and a three months shooting schedule, this represents the biggest film Eastwood has ever been involved in.

“*Flags of Our Fathers*” is not the first filmic telling of the battle of Iwo Jima . This first, “*Sands of Iwo Jima*,” released in 1949, starred John Wayne as the fictional Marine, Sgt. John M. Stryker. The three survivors of the real battle, Doc Bradley, Ira Hayes, and Rene Gagnon, played cameo roles as themselves.

Of the three, the most tragic was undoubtedly Ira Hayes, who was arrested more than 50 times for drunkenness, and died in 1955, of hypothermia after passing out in a ditch. He is also the only one of the three who had a film made about his life during and after Iwo Jima . “*The Outsider*” was released in 1961, and starred a very non-Native American, Tony Curtis.

Since “*Flags of Our Fathers*,” Bradley has penned another best seller, “*Flyboys*,” which Steven Spielberg/ Tom Hanks/HBO bought the rights to film. He is presently working on his third book, “*Imperial Voyage*,” which is due out in 2007.

Raised in Wisconsin, Bradley studied at the University of Notre Dame, Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan, and graduated with a degree in East Asian History from the University of Wisconsin. He produced corporate films, and is now a motivational speaker. He has traveled the

world, living and working in more than 40 countries for nearly a decade. He has run companies in five countries. He has jumped out of airplanes at 15,000 feet, has scuba-dived in deep waters worldwide, trekked to Mount Everest's base camp and walked among lions in Africa. He is an avid reader of history, enjoys discovering exotic cuisine, cliff diving, golfing, and snow skiing.

I caught up with Bradley as he was touring the Philippines promoting "Imperial Voyage," and had a chance to ask him a few questions, via e-mail, about "Flags of Our Fathers." As might be expected, he has been sworn to secrecy when it comes to details about the film, but I thought it might of interest to those who visit this site to know a bit about the devoted son of a flagraiser who took his own story of bravery and glory to the grave.

It seems obvious that the subject of his books is a result of both his interest in his father's wartime exploits and his educational background. As a freshman at the University of Notre Dame, he wanted to study overseas. He thought that as an American, he would be able to tackle Europe later in life, and Japan wasn't on anyone's radar screens, so he chose Notre Dame's program at Sophia University in Tokyo , Japan .

"After one year there, I was hooked on Asia, and took a year off to travel overland from Japan to Paris, through Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, and then across Europe," he says. "When I returned to school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I wanted to study about the people and places I had experienced over the prior two years."

He says that it took four years to get the answers that resulted in the book. He describes it as a fascinating journey because everyday he learned something he didn't know about his father's past. For one thing, he learned for the first time that his father's first press conference took place in the Oval Office of the White House.

"I couldn't wait to find an interview in which he described his feelings meeting President Truman," he says. "Also, it was gratifying to learn more about the

three flagraisers who didn't come back, Mike Strank, Harlon Block, and Franklin Sousley."



But when he began his research, he wasn't thinking it would result in a book at all, much less a best seller. "In the beginning, I didn't set out to write a book, I set out to find out why my father had been so silent about his experiences. It was only after speaking to many Iwo Jima veterans and relatives of the flagraisers that I thought of writing the book."

His goal was to "de-heroize" the flagraisers. "The people who knew them don't see them as bronzed heroes different than us," he explains. "To me, the beauty of the photo is that they *are* us—ordinary American boys doing their duty."

Bradley now feels he knows why his father never spoke of his experiences. "My father was a corpsman. He was constantly running from one broken body to the next. He probably held 200 young boys in his arms as they were dying. He had a lot to not talk about."

While he did have help from Ron Powers in writing, "Flags," he flew solo with "Flyboys," a very dark and disturbing story of brutality and cannibalism. He describes his writing process: "There's a tremendous amount of research, which entails reading and reading for days and days. When I am ready to write, I get to bed early and start at my desk at 5 AM. I write until early afternoon and then stop before I force it. Then I exercise and relax, and get ready for the next day. Also, I write seven days a week. I find that a weekend break causes me to lose too many threads."

His writing regimen has paid off with two best sellers and two film projects based on his work. He says he is most gratified, though, that people were finally learning about the lives of "...these six nice young boys. This was not a case where my book drove interest in the flagraisers. This was a case where the immense popularity of the flagraising photo drove interest in my book."

After “Flags” hit the marketplace, he went on a national book tour, which included a number of media appearances. But he quickly buckled down to writing *Flyboys*. “The few minutes spent on TV make an author’s life seem interesting, but believe me, it’s mostly about months and months of solitary hard work.”

Bradley has visited Iwo Jima four times now. Each time he has marveled at how small the island is, considering 100,000 combatants fought for over one month. He describes it as an “island of agony.”

Bradley will say little about the upcoming film, but he explains how the book caught Spielberg’s attention. “As I understand it, a friend of his recommended the book. He [Spielberg] read it and contacted my agent. I think that says a lot about the excellence that Sir Steven (knighted by the Queen) has shown throughout his career. He didn’t need committee meetings and advisors. He read a book, liked it, and went for it.

“As you know, *Flags of Our Fathers* is more than just a book to me. It’s my testament to the flagraisers, one of whom was my dad. I felt it was my responsibility to hand the book off to the best possible person for the movie version. And whom better than Mr. Spielberg, the all-time number one moviemaker in the history of film. I, my mother, and family, and the families of the other flagraisers were honored that he would be interested.”

Bradley is probably the only best selling author on the planet who could care less about branching out into screenwriting. I asked if he had any desire to be involved in transforming the book to script. “It never occurred to me,” he says. “And I’m sure it never occurred to anyone at DreamWorks—to have me write the script.”

In addition to being pleased by Spielberg’s involvement, Bradley also admitted his pleasure at the choice of director. “Clint Eastwood!” he exclaims. “The flagraisers’ families and I are so proud and happy that such a distinguished actor and director is involved in

bringing the six flagraisers to the big screen.”

And, yes, he did get to read the script by Paul Haggis (who has written everything from episodes of “The Love Boat” to his most successful venture, “Million Dollar Baby”). “Paul Haggis is a master who has captured the essence of the book. When I read the script, I cried. When I read it again, I cried again.”

John Chadwell is a Northern, CA-based freelance writer and scriptwriter. Visit his [website here](#).