

JOHNNIE EDWARD PRUTSOK

1925 –1945, WORLD WAR II

U.S. MARINE CORPS, PRIVATE FIRST CLASS

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Johnnie Edward Prutsok was born on

March 4, 1925, in Century, West Virginia, a small town in Barbour County. Johnnie had two brothers, Stephen and George Prutsok. All three boys were born in the United States, but the Prutsok family itself had emigrated from eastern Europe in the early 20th century.

Johnnie's mother, Steffina Zilinski Superfesky, was an immigrant from Lithuania. Hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians fled political oppression, economic turmoil, and war in the 1910s and early 1920s. Steffina's family settled in Old Cumnock, Scotland, but Steffina left for New York at age 17 and boarded the SS *Columbia* on March 9, 1921. If she had arrived even a few months later, Steffina might have been denied entry per the Emergency Quota Act passed by Congress in 1921.

She arrived, alone, at Ellis Island, but was met in New York by her uncle, Antanas Rudzevicius. Rudzevicius brought her to Century, where she soon met John Prutsok. John's family were of Austrian immigrant stock, but had settled in Pennsylvania some generations before. John served in World War I, fighting with the 80th Infantry Division in the Meuse-Argonne.

John and Steffina married in Century on May 29, 1921, just 60 days after her arrival on U.S. soil. Century Coal Company, the town's namesake, was headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, and owned more than 10,000 acres in Barbour, Harrison, and Upshur counties in north-central West Virginia.



Johnnie Prutsok's 17-year-old Marine Corps headshot from boot camp. *National Archives*

Though the entire population of Barbour County amounted to fewer than 20,000 residents, Century was home to large numbers of immigrant miners and their families. Workers from Poland, Austria, Italy, and Russia lived and labored in the Century Coal mines alongside native-born West Virginians.

John worked with his stepfather, stepbrother, and, later, with his sons and brother-in-law.

Little Johnnie Prutsok was born three years into his parents' marriage, and only four years before the Great Depression ravaged the global economy. Jobs and wages sunk after the 1929 stock market crash, leaving millions unemployed across the United States. Century was not immune, and Johnnie had to work in the mines with his father, uncles, and brothers when he was old enough. The boys picked slate out of the mine cars before each load of coal was sent to the surface.

Like many coal mines, Century sometimes went idle when the company judged the price of coal too low for profit. With so many family members employed in the mine, closures hit the Prutsok family hard, and they often rented out rooms to supplement their income. In 1930, John and two boarders reported being out of work for over half the year. In February 1934, John filed an application for veterans' compensation per his World War I service—many veterans did during the Depression's hardest years—but he probably did not live to see it arrive. He died of a heart condition in August 1935.

The three Prutsok brothers and their mother kept on as best they could. Johnnie, who was only ten when his father passed, started high school in 1939. He played varsity baseball, softball, and football, and graduated with excellent marks in 1943. Along the way, he found time to hunt and fish for fun.

His mother remarried midway through Johnnie's high school years. In July 1941, Steffina wed Mike Superfesky, another Century coal miner. Like Steffina, Mike was an eastern European immigrant, but he hailed from Poland. The Prutsok boys' new stepfather was a more recent arrival in Century, having moved there only after working in a glass plant in neighboring Harrison County.

World War II broke out during Johnnie's freshman year, though the United States did not officially become involved until the Japanese attacked Pearl



Coal company barracks in Century, West Virginia. *West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries*

Harbor in December 1941. Johnnie's older brother Stephen joined the U.S. Army Air Forces in mid-1941 and eventually achieved the rank of technical sergeant. The boys' uncle Levonas joined the Army in September 1942. After Johnnie became the family's 1943 inductee, his younger brother George joined the Army in 1944.

Fresh out of high school at the age of 17, Johnnie enlisted with the Marine Corps in Charleston, West Virginia, on February 20, 1943, but was placed on inactive status until he turned 18. That May, he reported to the 1st Recruit Battalion at Parris Island in South Carolina.

By the time Johnnie reported to boot camp, battles like Wake Island and Guadalcanal had already cemented their place in Marine Corps history. Difficult lessons learned in the Pacific's harsh jungle environments were drilled into Johnnie over eight weeks of grueling basic training, after which he transferred to Boston in July 1943 for still more training. Following a five day furlough home in December, he returned south to North Carolina's Camp Lejeune in 1944.

By then, another Pacific island had been added to the Marine Corps' battle honors: Tarawa. While technically a victory, the bloody battle for Tarawa atoll in November 1943 was a traumatic lesson for the Corps that further training, better planning, and improved amphibious tactics were needed to

Marines storm
ashore on Iwo Jima.

National Archives



win the war without costing the United States a generation of young men.

In January 1944, Johnnie advanced to the rank of private first class. He trained stateside in various specialties, expressing a desire to be a machine gunner or aerial gunner, through nearly all of 1944. Finally, he boarded the *MS Bloemfontein*, a Dutch passenger ship commandeered by the United States to use for troop transport duties, on November 9, 1944, and headed to the Pacific.

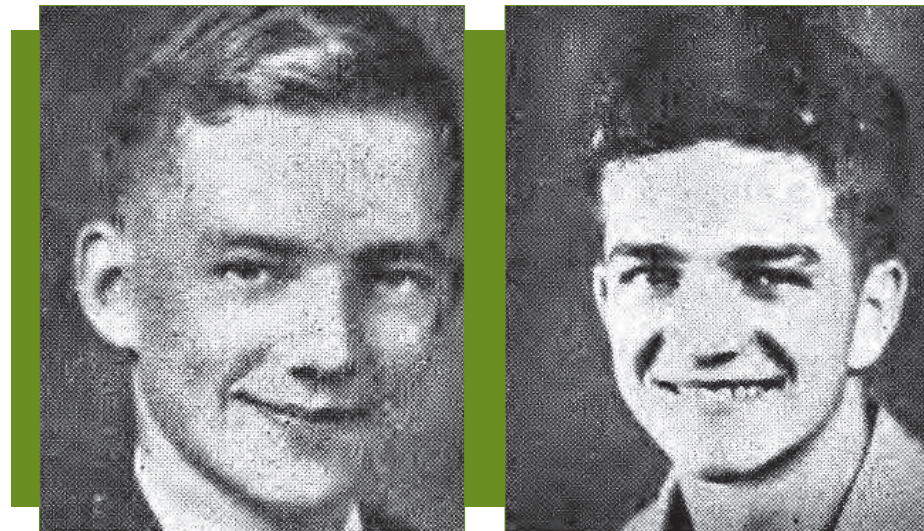
The *Bloemfontein* crossed the International Date Line deep in Pacific waters on November 23, and by December Johnnie was on Guam with his unit: Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division.

Guam had only been back in American hands for a few months, but now boasted huge airfields from which Army Air Corps B-29 Superfortress bombers set out daily to devastate the Japanese home islands. As the war ground into its final months, some of the bloodiest campaigns were still ahead

on Okinawa and Iwo Jima. These two islands were considered the last stepping stones required to launch a full-scale invasion of Japan.

The 9th Regiment trained through January 1945. Johnnie was expected to learn quickly from the veterans of Company C as they prepared for combat on Iwo Jima, including an amphibious landing exercise observed by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet. Nimitz had recently moved his headquarters to Guam in preparation for the upcoming campaigns, and the scale of these operations spotlighted U.S. commitment to ending the war. A total of 70,000 Marines, supported by 40,000 sailors and over 500 ships, were tapped for the Iwo Jima landings.

The 3rd Division arrived offshore of Iwo Jima on February 17 and took their place in the floating reserve comprising just part of the vast invasion armada. Initial combat landings had begun the day before. Johnnie probably experienced a mix of fear and excitement, watching from his ship as Marines from other divisions landed on the black volcanic



Johnnie's two brothers, Stephen and George, who joined the Army in 1941 and 1944 respectively. Both returned home to Century after the war.

Young American Patriots,
Ancestry.com

sands of the island under skies filled with naval gunfire and aircraft. He may have written some letters home while the 9th Regiment waited in their transports. Both he and his brother Stephen had made a habit of writing short notes to their mother when their duties allowed.

After five days of sitting in reserve, the 9th Regiment was called into action. They landed on the beach and pushed northward. Johnnie and the 9th were ordered to clear the northeast Motoyama Plateau. Japanese forces were heavily entrenched all across the island, but the high ground near unfinished Motoyama airfield proved a focal point of fierce fighting. On February 25, 9th Marines passed through the front lines on the southern edge of Motoyama Airfield No. 2 and into the attack. Johnnie's 1st Battalion was soon in the thick of the action.

Japanese defenders in 3rd Division's sector held strongpoints on two adjacent hills, named Peter and 199 OBOE by American commanders. The 9th Marine's 1st and 2nd Battalions assaulted Hill Peter and overran the summit. As the Marines moved down into the trough between Peter and 199 OBOE, however, they were pinned down by heavy fire. It took three more days and reinforcements from the 21st Marine Regiment for Johnnie's 9th to complete the capture of both hills.

The 9th Marines only rested for two days before receiving orders to clear out Japanese resistance

east of Motoyama. For several more days, they fought through a maze of caves, pillboxes, dug-in tanks, and trenches that checked any rapid advance. The 9th fought bravely, pushing forward under unrelenting fire despite heavy casualties. On March 4, in this desperate killing ground, Johnnie turned 20 years old.

Two days after his birthday, the 9th Marines launched an attack before dawn and broke through the Japanese defenses. Success was often illusory on Iwo Jima, however, as the Japanese had built miles of interconnecting tunnels that allowed them to double back underground and shoot advancing Americans in the back. The 9th Marines—and Johnnie Prutsok—discovered this the hard way.

While clearing tunnels on March 8, 1945, Johnnie was brought to the battlefield aid station with multiple wounds and first degree burns. Twenty-year-old Johnnie Prutsok, an immigrant's son from Barbour County, West Virginia, died on the distant island of Iwo Jima. A few weeks later, Marines completed its capture after more than a month of fighting that cost the Corps 7,000 casualties.

Johnnie had only a few personal possessions with him when he died: a prayer book, several small photos, a mess ticket, and close to \$100 in cash. The Marines interred Johnnie's remains in the 4th Marine Division cemetery on Iwo Jima, Plot 1, Row 39. For over three years, he remained buried in the volcanic soil of Iwo.



Helping a wounded Marine to the rear on Iwo Jima the day Johnnie Prutsok and the 9th Marines landed, 25 February 1945. *National Archives*

Johnnie's mother Steffina received the news of his death by telegram on March 23, 1945. An official letter from the Marine Corps arrived soon afterward. Since Johnnie never married, having spent all his brief adult life in the Marine Corps, Steffina eventually received his Purple Heart, Victory Medal, Presidential Unit Citation, and Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal.

Both of Johnnie's brothers returned home from the war and moved back in with the family. Steffina and Johnnie's stepfather welcomed another son, Michael, in July 1945. It all might have seemed normal, if not for the letters back and forth with the government, arranging Johnnie's return home. The repatriation of remains for tens of thousands of American veterans was a monumental task, and many families did not see their loved ones returned for several years after war's end.

Johnnie Prutsok came home at last in 1948, the most common year for such remains to return stateside. He was reinterred in the Grafton National Cemetery on April 3, where he remains close to his Barbour County native soil.



PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION A
SITE 155



A far less famous photograph than the iconic Joe Rosenthal image of Marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi.
National Archives

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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As home to one of the nation’s first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America’s veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year’s parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School, among many others.

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For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers’ Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a “living bibliography” of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project’s webpage under the “Programs” tab at www.wvhumanities.org.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit www.vlm cem.va.gov.

