Veteran who saw flag raised at Iwo Jima dies on ship sailing to D-Day events

I wanted something to pay tribute to the events of D-Day 80 years ago. This is sad, in an inspiring sort of way.

[Robert Persichitti, who served with the US Navy](#) in the Pacific, died at 102 as he travelled to the Normandy commemorations.

He witnessed the raising of the US flag at Iwo Jima, one of the most iconic moments of World War Two, and survived the bloody campaign in the far east against the Japanese.

Mr Persichitti attending an Iwo Jima reunion in Japan in 2019 | CREDIT: Mark Gibson/US Marine Corps

But Robert Persichitti never lived to fulfil his last mission — to pay tribute in Normandy to his fellow soldiers, sailors and airmen who risked all to free Europe from the Nazis.

Instead, Mr Persichitti died at the age of 102 on his way to take part in [the events commemorating D-Day](#). With a history of heart problems, he suffered a medical emergency on board a

ship sailing through the North Sea towards the French beaches.

Mr Persichitti, from Rochester in New York state, had travelled to Europe with a group from the US National World War II Museum, determined to visit the beaches where so many of his countrymen fell, storming the German defences.

"I'm really excited to be going," he told WROC-TV in Rochester the day before he left the US, saying his cardiologist had encouraged him to make the trip.

Mr Persichitti served in Iwo Jima, Okinawa and Guam as a radioman second class on the command ship USS Eldorado, and was named in the New York State Senate's Veterans Hall of Fame in 2020.

Mr Persichitti was on the deck of the Eldorado when he witnessed the raising of an American flag atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima on Feb 23, 1945.

It was a moment captured by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal in one of the most famous images of the war. Mr Persichitti recorded what he had seen in his diary. He returned to Mount Suribachi in 2019, telling the US military newspaper Stars and Stripes: "When I got to the island today, I just broke down. They were like kids. They put 'em out there, 17 or 18 years old. A lot of 'em never even made the beach."

During the trip he recalled seeing some of the terrible injuries suffered by the Marines who were brought on board his ship.

Following the Allied victory over Germany and Japan, Mr Persichitti became a carpentry teacher in Rochester. Long after his retirement, he would visit classrooms to pass on his experience of the war to new generations. "It shouldn't be forgotten," Mr Persichitti would say, when asked why he wanted to revisit those experiences.

He enjoyed a few last moments of peace when a doctor played his favourite music on her mobile phone, before he was airlifted to a German hospital, where he died shortly after.

"The doctor was with him. He was not alone, he was at peace and he was comfortable," said one of Mr Persichitti's friends and fellow veterans, Al De Carlo. He added: "She put his favourite singer, Frank Sinatra, on her phone and he peacefully left us."

Pastor William Leone, who had known Mr Persichitti for nearly half a century, said: "It was a privilege to know him, and I will miss him. He had a real zest for living."

His family will miss him, but I can think of worse ways to go.