

Tribute to a War Hero – and His Love for the Word of God

June 3, 09

Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I received this from Bob Williams, President of the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, and member of our congregation. Bob recently lost his friend, Mel Nesteby, and thought I would be encouraged by the following tribute. I was, and thought you would be too.

Tribute to Mel Nesteby

Duty. Honor. Country.

These words were etched in the very soul of Mel Nesteby, of DuPont, Washington, longtime (Evergreen Freedom Foundation) EFF supporter who survived the 1941 Bataan Death March and four prisoner of war camps during World War II. Mel died May 16, 2009, two months shy of his 89th birthday.

For 155 days, Mel's unit fought heroically against the invading Japanese on the island of Bataan until his unit surrendered. He was held in the Bataan camp, then Bilibid camp, then the infamous Cabanatuan camp which was described graphically in the book, *Ghost Soldiers*. He was then taken to Japan in the "Hell Ship" Maru Nagota where he spent twenty-four months in captivity in Harihata Camp B-12. For three and a half years, he had no soap, towel, newspaper, radio, pencil or paper. He had no change of clothing. The men were subjected to various forms of physical and mental torture. Deprived of nutritious food, they were given weevil-infested rice and forced to work every day. The death toll was constant.

Mel spoke emotionally of the day he was liberated in 1945. He said, "We were all walking dead men." When the Japanese guards opened the prison gates and marched out, the realization that they were free came slowly. Two days later, he said, the American troops arrived and his dearest hope became reality. He was free! At six feet tall, he weighed 117 pounds.

It took four long years for Mel to recover from injuries and illnesses he suffered during the war and as a POW. He re-enlisted in the Army. Later he served in the Korean War for one year and on Occupation duty in West Germany for three years. He was awarded the Purple Heart with three Oak Leaf Clusters; two Bronze Stars; three Presidential Citations; The Combat Infantry Badge and seventeen other medals.

Although Mel never fully recovered, he never complained, greeting each day with joy and happiness because he was a free man. He always told me, "Let no force ever take Old Glory down again with rifles and bayonets!" He loved America and our flag.

Following the war, the Surgeon General gave a report to Congress and the President on the Bataan POWs and said there was no human reason that the POWs survived. Mel said

he survived because of his Bible. Following is a synopsis of an essay Mel wrote, entitled, “*My Bible.*”

“My Bible and I were in all 50 states and 12 foreign countries during my 21-year service to my country. It was my closest companion, friend and counselor. Its words and message are etched in my heart forever and ever. We traveled together to the Philippine Islands. When Pearl Harbor came about, I was given battle gear and placed my little Bible in my shirt pocket, close to my heart. I felt super strong with it there, as though the hand of Providence was directing me.

“My Bible was with me at Bataan when we were completely surrounded by enemy foot troops and our options were to surrender or die. For 100 days, we tried to stall the offensive war machine from taking over Bataan. Alas, we could not. The American flag was taken down and another flag put in its place. My Bible was taken from me when I was wounded.

“Some 18 months later, I was lying on my plank bed, recovering from a Malaria attack when a voice asked if I was Mel Nesteby. He said, “I have something for you” and laid something in my hand. It was my long-lost Bible. To me, that was a true miracle. I told a fellow prisoner about it. He told me that this Bible was found in the camp after the surrender – in the Zero Ward where prisoners were taken to die. Hundreds and hundreds had their final moments holding my Bible.

“My Bible stayed with me as I boarded the Japanese “Hell Ship” to be taken to Japan to a prisoner of war camp called Hirahata. In the two long years there, I kept my Bible hidden in a rafter overhead and feared all the time that it would be taken from me again.

“My Bible and I witnessed the Hiroshima bomb drop 33 miles away, the surrender of the Japanese government, the Japanese troops surrendering the POW camp, the rickety train ride to Yokohama, Japan where we were processed back into U.S. control. Then came that wonderful trip home, passing under the Golden Gate bridge.

“My Bible was with me during a four-year struggle to regain my health. My Bible and I have seen the best and the worst of mankind during 42 months as a prisoner of war. Only God knows the truth.”

Mel’s small Bible (the New Testament) was donated to The Army Historical Foundation. It is tattered and broken in places, but revered as a Divine instrument in one man’s survival of unspeakable trials, by the Grace of God.

EFF honors the memory of Mel Nesteby – an American hero. An American survivor. And a dear friend.