

GIFTS FROM HEROES

Retired Maj. Gen. C. Emerson Murry, former North Dakota adjutant general, enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1942. He later served with the 17th and 82nd Airborne Infantry Divisions in the European theatre during World War II, including the Battle of the Bulge in 1944.



Bill Prokopyk

Maj. Gen. (Ret.) C. Emerson Murry delivered the following speech as the special guest speaker at the North Dakota Veterans Cemetery on Memorial Day, May 31, 2010. He served as the N.D. National Guard adjutant general from 1975 - 1984:

Today we pay tribute and honor past and present members of our Armed Forces who have done so much to build our country and keep it free. It is also the 65th anniversary of our victory in World War II — our largest war in our history.

It seems fitting to dwell a bit on this war and its Veterans since they are a rapidly passing generation and are typical of the finest in American character we find in our Veterans of all wars.

Few people remember the heritage that the World War II generation inherited. It included the poverty of the greatest depression in world history and it demanded of them more commitment, courage, faith and dedication than any generation in history in fighting a war that encircled the

entire globe. Soldiers were not given a short term assignment overseas or limited combat rules. They did not enjoy a break in the demands of war. Many fought an almost endless series of battles from one country or one island to another without leaves or rotation. But they earned recognition as the most compassionate men and women to serve in war.

You may look at the living Veterans of World War II and see only men whose hair has gone or is gray; men who have spreading stomachs and bent shoulders. These are the wounds of time — a foe no man has ever conquered.

But I see real men. I see many who are heroes. I see them with smooth faces, clear eyes and flat stomachs. I see them hanging out of the windows of troop trains, waving good-bye to those they left behind. Our country was made safe because of these men who put their bodies and their lives between those at home and two powerful war machines that were intent on destroying this nation. These men bought a future for us.

Many of them were magnificent. Some of them had never been more than 200 miles from home. (America was a land of homefolks then.) Many had never seen the ocean, much less a battleship. Some

had never driven a car, much less flown an airplane.

What did they know about world politics that brought on wars? Almost nothing.

What did they know about the enemy? Only that he was an enemy.

What did they know about weapons, tactics or strategy? Nothing.

If you asked them to describe Japan, show you Guadalcanal on the map or tell you where the Kasserine Pass is, you could have written a familiar story about the deficiencies of our public education system.

They sailed into the storm through the Atlantic and the wide Pacific with a minimum of training and often with inadequate or inferior weapons. Their aircraft in early years were not a match for the enemy. They took their ridiculously high-profiled, lightly armored, under-gunned Sherman tanks against the veterans of the German Panzer Corps. The Germans would kill four tanks and four tank crews, but the fifth that hadn't stopped coming would get them.

And so it went, in the Pacific jungles, in the African sands and in the European snows. They slugged on and on, making up with guts and blood what they and their officers who led them lacked in experience. In the end, their guts, endurance and ingenuity defeated the Samurais and the professional Prussian generals.

Most World War II Veterans were not given a hero's welcome on their return. They received few parades or special recognition. They simply received their discharge papers and returned home the best way they could — by train, bus, even hitchhiking. But it still may well be this country's finest hour — a time when everyone cared, everyone shared and the responsibility and concerns encompassed a whole generation. Never has the support of this country been mobilized in such a single-minded way for a single purpose.

I had the circumstance in life to be one of those men in World War II. I sensed the pride in self and unit and in our friends — a pride that developed within our platoons, companies and squadrons. As happened to almost everyone at some point as we moved along some road to one of the countless training areas, a strange new emotion swept over me. I looked at the long files of bobbing helmets and the familiar sweat-stained Soldiers bent beneath the dead weight of mortars, machine guns and full packs. I suddenly realized that I would go anywhere in the world, to

the very gates of hell if necessary, for the people of this platoon and company. To be a member of this brotherhood filled me with a sense of belonging to something that transcended petty profit, greed and jealousy. We seldom have experienced quite the same feeling again.

I know those Veterans who served in World War II join me in saying they can never forget this glittering hour in American history. This generation literally saved the free world from the yoke of slavery. Some of them sleep forever in the dark, dank jungles of the Pacific islands. Others fell liberating the ancient cities of Europe. Many living Veterans of this, and of other wars, still bear the scars, both mental and physical, and will carry them to the end of their days.

But, to all Veterans of all wars who are still among the living, our obligation to our country and to those who sleep beneath the flags — both here and around the world — is not yet over. We must stand for the things that will continue to keep this country free, and pass it on with its freedoms to generations to follow us.

While our Armed Forces must, of necessity, be smaller, they can in no way be permitted to deteriorate and to be anything less than a hard-hitting, lean, effective force that is so strong that any potential enemy dares not try us.

We must remember that freedom is

never free, and that we must allocate a sufficient amount of our resources, our interest and our money to maintain a security force that will keep us free and will give no hope to our potential enemies that they could prevail over us.

But again, returning to those Veterans of World War II who sleep beneath flags, to those who stand here today and to the current members of our Armed Forces, I would like to quote the British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, when he discussed war and man. He said, "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of all things; the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing is worth a war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing that he cares about more than his own personal safety; is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself."

Those standing here today, members of our Armed Forces and the Veterans of World War II are among those better men and women who have kept us free.

To be born free is an accident. To live free is a responsibility. To die free is an obligation; for if we do not die free, we have not fulfilled our obligation to those we honor today, and we certainly will have failed our obligations to those who follow after us. ■

Members of the N.D. National Guard's Ceremonial Platoon render a 21-cannon salute during the Memorial Day service at the North Dakota Veterans Cemetery with a French 75 millimeter cannon. Using the theme "Still Serving," retired military members fulfilled key roles during the program including keynote speaker Maj. Gen. (Ret.) C. Emerson Murry and Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Robert Udland, former N.D. National Guard assistant adjutant general — Army (2005-08), who emceed the event. Retired Chaplain (Maj.) William Rushford was also in attendance to offer the opening prayer while Col. (Ret.) Curtis Juhala, U.S. Army Reserve, sang the national anthem.



Sgt. Ann Knudson