



From the Executive Director

February 29 is leap day, a date that occurs only every four years. A person born on February 29 may be called a “leapling” or a “leaper” according to Wikipedia. I hope you have been leaping around yourself, making plans to use that extra day to make a veteran’s day brighter by making a Quilt of Valor.



*Ann Rehbein,
Executive Director*

Many exciting events are taking place in February. Our third Annual National Sew Day was February 6, 2016. Registrants numbered 1,887 and hundreds of QOVs were reported

being made. Thank you to everyone who participated. Over 100 names were drawn for prizes, and the grand prize winner was Anne H. from Indiana. She won free admission to the QOVF Annual Conference, America Quilts Expo, its special events and more, coming up May 24–28, 2016, in Des Moines, Iowa.

And don’t think just because you didn’t win the grand prize, that you too can’t join in the fun! Registration is now open for the QOVF Annual Conference. It’s being held in Des Moines, IA, on May 24–25, 2016. Visit the QOVF website www.QOVF.org and click on the EVENTS tab (in the red bar at the top) to register and find payment and housing information. We’d love to see you there!

In other very exciting news—drum

roll please—the foundation’s web site has been redesigned and revamped! Check it out at www.QOVF.org and let me know what you think. We welcome your thoughts and ideas. One great feature I want to call your attention to is that groups that wish to be listed can be found easily by clicking “Who’s in my Area” located in a blue box at the bottom of the home page. This will help newcomers to the organization and/or individuals relocating to connect with other QOVF volunteer groups. (NOTE: If your group isn’t yet listed, and you’d like to be, please contact Jackie Dudek at jackie.dudek@QOVF.org with the information you want listed.)

As we head toward spring, quilt with peace and happiness knowing you are making a difference—in leaps and bounds—with every quilt.

SUE REICH JOINS BOD

*By Walt Davis, Acting Chair,
QOVF Board of Directors*

On behalf of your Board of Directors and the QOVF, I’m proud to announce Sue Reich joined our QOVF Board this month.

A resident of Connecticut, Sue is a retired registered nurse of 43 years, a life-long quilter—and a Gold Star Mother who understands unequivocally the impact of our mission to recognize and comfort our veterans and service members touched by war.

As an author of popular books and articles on quilt history, a sought-after national lecturer, and a curator and consultant for quilt exhibits, Sue brings extraordinary experience to our foundation. Please join me in welcoming Sue Reich to the QOVF team.

WALT STRAKA: THE LAST VOICE TO TELL THE STORY

By Zach Kayser, reprinted with permission from the Brainerd Dispatch.

Ninety-six-year-old Walt Straka of Brainerd, MN, is the last voice left to tell the story of his unit’s part in the Bataan Death March.

World War II killed half of the 64 soldiers from Brainerd’s A Company, 194th Tank Battalion. Thirty-two—Straka among them—made it home. But as the years went by, the men who hadn’t died from starvation or malaria or Japanese bayonets began to die as they aged. For better or for worse, the memory of the march itself will soon die, as there won’t be anyone left who actually took part in it.

Like the rest of the 194th, Straka was part of the Minnesota National Guard when he was federalized—put into the regular U.S. Army—in February of 1941. They shipped out to the Philippines that summer, six months before the war began. However, they were far from prepared from the invasion that was expected to take place soon.

“We never saw our tanks ‘til we got off the boat,” Straka said. “That was the first time that we knew what kind of tanks we were going to use, we’d never seen them before.”

Straka got the chance to visit Pearl Harbor on the way to the Philippines, and go among the pride of the U.S. Navy, the warships docked at Battleship Row. He even got a chance to tour the

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Walt Straka, Bataan Death March survivor, talks about his experiences from his South Brainerd, MN home. Behind him in the photo is his QOV, awarded in 2014 by the Brainerd QOV Group. (Photo: Brainerd Dispatch/Steve Kohls)

U.S.S. Arizona, only months before it would explode and account for nearly one-half of the 2,403 Americans killed in the attack.

So when news of Pearl Harbor reached the men in the Philippines, and Straka's comrades held out hope the Navy would come to save them, Straka knew better.

"I said, 'Hell, the Navy is gone,'" he remembered. "That kind of doomed us. I knew we'd never get out of there."

Despite the hopelessness seeping into his mind, Straka still had a job to do: lead his crew as they operated a M3 "Stuart" light tank. A good portion of A Company was comprised of people Straka had gone to high school with.

"Kind of a hard thing to live with, to see those guys go," he said.

In one incident, Straka's commander assigned two tank crew members to fight as infantry, putting them in an exposed foxhole by a river. They disappeared.

A Company did more than its share to fight off the Japanese ground invasion, gradually being pushed back toward the sea as supplies began to dwindle for the cut-off Americans. The tanks would cover the retreat so other units could form a new defensive line. After holding off the Japanese as long as possible, they would retreat themselves, so on and so

on, as the Army gave up ground on the Bataan Peninsula. Straka got two hours of official rest during 91 days of fighting.

"I should have been dead a thousand times," he said. "That 91 days, I was in range of getting killed every minute."

At several points, Straka, too, was required to fight as an infantryman. Another crew in his unit had abandoned their tank in the mud, but a colonel wanted them to go back and secure it before the Japanese could capture it. The tank happened to be the responsibility of one of Straka's best friends—so Straka volunteered to go along on a patrol to secure the abandoned Stuart.

They found the tank and Straka climbed in to try and start the engine, to no avail. The sound of the engine turning over made a lot of noise, though—and they soon had company.

"All of the sudden, I heard 'Ping, ping, ping,'" Straka remembered. "They were firing at the tank."

Straka looked around for his buddies, but they had left him there. Luckily, one friend had waited, with another vehicle to take Straka back. Had he not gotten help, Straka would have been done for, he said.

As rations and ammunition dwindled down to nothing, American commanders on Bataan realized the situation was hopeless.

"An army travels on its stomach," Straka said. "When you don't have supplies, you don't have food—you don't have an army. You're down to nothing. We just got down to nothing."

THE MARCH

After they became prisoners, the Japanese forced-marched Straka and his comrades to prison camps more than 60 miles north, in an excruciating ordeal later dubbed the Bataan Death March.

"If I sat here for three months and tried to think of something more horrible, I couldn't," Straka said.

The killing factors were disease, starvation, thirst, exhaustion, and the Japanese themselves.

Straka's captors gave him one soup can's worth of rice for nine days of marching and nothing else. Had Filipino civilians not illicitly thrown food to the prisoners—at the risk of being murdered by the Japanese if they were discovered—Straka would have starved.

When Straka tried to get water from a fountain, he was struck with a rifle butt in his back for his trouble. He knew he couldn't stay down on the ground, because men who went down on the march were assured of death. However, Straka's friends saved him by carrying him for hours as he recovered from the shock of being hit in the spine.

When they got to the town of San Fernando, the Japanese loaded the prisoners onto boxcars to ship them to Camp O'Donnell, a former Filipino base the Japanese had taken over.

Straka said his time in the camp was the only time in his life that he ever contemplated killing himself.

Inside O'Donnell, there were no latrines, so feces were scattered everywhere. Men had to wait in huge lines just to get a sip of water. Mosquitos dogged the prisoners constantly, infecting them with malaria and keeping them from sleeping.

Straka's efforts to get away from the hellish conditions ironically ensured that he, too, got malaria. He signed up for a work detail that took him back to Bataan, was forced to sleep in an open yard exposed to hordes of mosquitos and four days later, he got sick.

He had contracted cerebral malaria, which the Mayo Clinic defines as

parasite-filled blood cells blocking blood vessels to the brain. It can cause brain swelling, brain damage or a coma.

The Japanese moved Straka's group from O'Donnell to a different camp at Cabanatuan, which was "10 times better," Straka said. They received rations of cooked rice twice a day, and Straka slipped out of consciousness.

From June 1942 until December of that year, Straka has no memories. He figures someone fed him the entire time, or else he would have starved.

"I must have had an angel next to me, taking care of me," he said.

Straka woke up from his stupor and began walking around for exercise. He would pass by a particular prisoner every day at the hospital. Straka thought he looked familiar, but he couldn't quite place how he knew him. It took a week before Straka finally approached him and asked his name—he was one of Straka's neighbors from Brainerd who had joined the Marines.

"He lived across the street from me," he said. "The guy (had) weighed about 280 ... he was down to nothing. I don't think he weighed 100 pounds. But through all this, I still recognized the guy, and he recognized me. Two days later, he died."

The prisoners had the chance to go to Japan on special work details, the prospect of which terrified other soldiers, but intrigued Straka. He switched places with another soldier who was all too happy to let him go instead. He convinced an Army doctor to forge medical records for him so he wouldn't be barred for not being able to prove he didn't have dysentery. But he came to regret his eagerness.

"After I got on that ship, I knew why nobody wanted to go," he said.

The sea journey from the Philippine Islands to Japan took 41 days, in a hold so cramped that Straka had to go near the "slop bucket" where the POWS relieved themselves if he wanted to rest—it was the only place where there was room enough to lie down. When men suffocated or died from dysentery, they were thrown overboard.

However, Straka discovered an unexpected windfall when he found a store of dried fish by sticking his hand through a gap between two wooden slats. After about a week of working at

the lid of the container, he managed to get it open, but he didn't dare eat in front of the rest of the emaciated POWs or tell them about it.

"It'd be a mob scene, we'd all be dead," he said. "So what I did, I just took a few out, and I'd eat them at night."

One night, the Japanese shifted the engines to All Stop, and as the ship lay idle in the water, the POWs felt a massive shock wave rattle everything around them. Straka assumed they had been hit by torpedo, and that he'd have to swim for his life. Later on, it became apparent that an Allied submarine was stalking the boat, and the vibrations were from Japanese depth charges trying to sink it.

As it turned out, the ship Straka was on was the last vessel carrying prisoners to Japan not sunk by Allied patrols with the friendly POWS still aboard, he said.

THE STEEL MILL

The Japanese put Straka to work in a steel mill at Kokura. The POWs who didn't perform received half rations—and the full rations were "nothing," Straka said.

Regular American air raids sent the workers at the mill, Japanese and American alike, fleeing for cover. However, by ignoring the air raid sirens, Straka found yet another opportunity to nourish his starving body with food obtained on the sly. He had found out where a group of Japanese women hid their rations. The next time an air raid came, he seized his chance.

"That was the first time I was full in 43 months," he said.

Straka was nearly killed by one of the most important air raids of them all in 1945. Kokura was the primary target for the second atomic bomb, which the U.S. dropped on Nagasaki instead because of inclement weather.

At a veterans' gathering years later, Straka met the navigator of "Bock's Car," the B-29 Superfortress bomber that almost dropped a plutonium bomb on him.

"I just want you to know how lucky you were," Straka recalls him saying.

He distinctly remembers the day he found out the war was over. Inside the steel mill, there was a row of switches the POWs were instructed never to touch. One day, a guard approached Straka and told him to shut the switches off. Straka was suspicious.

"I thought, 'To hell with you!'" he remembered.

Then the soldier threatened Straka with his bayonet if he didn't shut them off—so, he complied. A short time later, the Emperor came on the radio to inform the Japanese people of the surrender.

But Straka didn't know Japanese. All he knew of what was going on was that bells were ringing and all the Japanese had stopped what they were doing and bowed for some reason. He guessed the war was over, but couldn't know for sure. It wasn't until he got back to camp that an interpreter confirmed what had happened.

"I got up in my bunk and I laid there for an hour and a half," he said. "I just couldn't move, I couldn't believe it."

After Straka was freed from captivity, he visited Nagasaki for 18 hours before moving on for more processing. "These 10-story buildings were melted down like a candle, just like a wax candle," he said.

THE TASTE OF WAR

Straka remains very bitter. Like some other veterans, he resents Douglas MacArthur, commanding officer of the Philippines during the Bataan campaign.

For a while after he came back from the war, he also deeply resented the Japanese for what they did to him.

"If anybody asked for a bomb, if anybody ever asked for destruction, they asked for it," he said. "When they hit Pearl Harbor like that, they asked for it."

He can forgive the Japanese, but the raw wound of the war still survives in Straka's mind.

"You can forgive, but you can't forget it," he said. "How could you forget it? How could you forget it? I wish I could. I wish I didn't wake up at night."

Quilts Reported

2012: 6,169

2013: 12,314

2014: 17,373

2015: 18,772

2016: 1,453

Total: 132,907

(as of 31 January 2016)

SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT WORDS?

Looking for a way to invite someone to join QOVF but struggle with just what to say? QOVF Board Member Marianne Fons shares her approach to inviting others in this open letter to a friend. Adapt her message to your invitation to someone.

Dear Melinda,

It was great to see you at yoga class yesterday. I love our coffee klatches afterwards. Thanks for asking me about QOVF and for telling me about your father's service in the Navy—it seems like everybody has some sort of connection to the military. If your daughter goes ahead and joins after she graduates, you'll be even more

connected. In my opinion, every man, woman, and child in America should make a Quilt of Valor, even if they make only one quilt their whole life.

If you'd like to make a QOV for your dad, or that neighbor you mentioned who served in Vietnam, just say the word and I'll help you. Believe it or not, I've heard recipients say their quilt means more to them than the medals they received—because their QOV was made by a civilian, especially for them, not just an object turned out in a factory. I've even read a letter from a recipient that claimed his Quilt of Valor saved his life. It's amazing to think a quilt can be that powerful.

Getting back to your dad, you've heard me talk about our local group. Two of the girls

are working on QOVs that don't have designated recipients—I'm sure one of them could go to him. Plus, I always bring my mother's old Singer Featherweight along to sew days, so if you want to stop by next Saturday, you could even sit down and sew if you want. Believe me, patchwork is not as hard as it's cracked up to be!

Thanks again for listening and sharing yesterday (also for splitting that cinnamon roll with me—that thing was huge!). Oh, and before I sign off, if you want to know more, check out QOVF.org. The foundation's website just got redesigned, and it's great!

Namaste,
Marianne

QOVF Founder and Board Member Emeritus
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Sue Reich

Executive Staff
Ann Rehbein, Executive Director
ann.rehbein@QOVF.org

Ginger Fondren, Assistant Executive Director
ginger.fondren@QOVF.org

Jackie Dudek, Director of Membership
jackie.dudek@QOVF.org

Elayne Gassett, Longarm Coordinator
elayne.gassett@QOVF.org

Deanna Bryce, Destination Coordinator
deanna.bryce@QOVF.org

Debra Coppa, Coordinator of Individual Requests
debra.coppa@QOVF.org

Jeff Thorne,
Director of Donor Relations
jeff.thorne@QOVF.org

Suzanne DiCarlo,
Information Desk Coordinator
suzanne.dicarlo@QOVF.org

Special Events Coordinator
Position Open, apply to ED

Jennifer Keltner, Managing Editor
jennifer.keltner@QOVF.org

Betty Tenon, Coordinator of Quilt Shop
Relationship Development
betty.tenon@QOVF.org

Ginger Fondren,
Director of Software Management
ginger.fondren@QOVF.org

Mailing Address:
Quilts of Valor Foundation
PO Box 191
Winterset, IA 50273

For more information about QOVF, see www.QOVF.org

For more information about the BOD, the QOVF staff, and how to contact your State Coordinator (SCs) go to <http://www.qovf.org/content/about-us.html>.



Newsletter

Ann Rehbein, Editorial Director
Jennifer Keltner, Managing Editor
Tony Jacobson, Graphic Designer

QOVF Core Values

- Treating people with respect
 - Promoting excellence
- Valuing service over self
 - Being accountable