

# FOR US, THE LIVING

Donald F. Hetzler

## Memorial Address

86th Infantry Division Reunion

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Mr. President, with last night's banquet, the Division Association has once again fulfilled its first purpose, namely, to continue friendship among Blackhawk veterans, and now, of course, welcoming the families who have come escorting veterans. Now we turn to the second purpose, which is to remember former comrades-in-arms, honoring both the battle-fallen and friends recently deceased. I'm honored and grateful for the invitation to assist.

This morning we recall the faces and the voices of the friends we answered roll call with, marched with, lived beside and endured the fortunes of war with. As we pay a tribute to them today, we become once more aware of the enduring life-long influence of things and events from that distant past that are still with us.

In these moments of memorial words are what we have to give expression to the gratitude we feel. Our words are never so solid, so permanent, as the bronze statue of the charging Blackhawk rifleman, carved by Dick Behrends, for the planned 86<sup>th</sup> Division monument at San Luis Obispo to be dedicated there at our final reunion.

Fragile as they may be, the words still forcefully summon images which, taken together, shape our own war stories as we tell what we saw and how we understood what we saw and what we did. Words form the many stories we've told time after time and some we've never told -- and never will.

Most of our war stories begin with the words, "I'll never forget the time that ...." Isn't that so? Such tales relate not only our experience but also reveal the profound influence that the Second World War continues to have in our lives.

I recall the cashier at the old Abbey Victoria Hotel in Manhattan more than once loudly declaiming to a lobby full of people waiting to check out, "If you ask a man for the most important event of his life, he'll say it's his marriage. That's a lie. It's the Second World War." It was a long time before I dared tell my wife about that. When I did, she agreed. "He's right," she said.

One more thing. At some point, or maybe several points, in our military adventures we had compelling reason to acknowledge God's part in the risks we were running. We consciously accepted that his benevolent hand was active and available in our moments of need. That's no mystery. Any veteran of war would recognize God's grace and availability even if God's purposes were unclear at the moment. (1)

My good friend who survived the initial landings on Omaha Beach and who later won a Silver Star, asked many times in his latter years, "for what purpose was I spared? Why did I live when others didn't?" We have no answer to that now.

I want to invite you to revisit few scenes from the 86<sup>th</sup> Division's history as the context for remembering our brothers-in-arms. One year and one week after Pearl Harbor the 86th Infantry Division was activated at Camp Howze, Texas. December, 1942. The 86th served loyally and honorably during the Second World War.

Camp Howze. February 1943. Here are seemingly endless rows of tarpaper-covered barracks tethered to the Texas plains by guy wires against the northern wind. This inhospitable place was our home for ten months. Along the roadways stride long lines of marching men laden with packs and weapons.

Next are the piney forests of east Texas and central Louisiana where the 86th conducted winter maneuvers. We celebrated Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years there in the woods and slept on the ground for nine weeks straight before leaving in February. That was a campaign!

At San Luis Obispo we learned how to go over the side of the ship and climb down landing nets into a landing craft bobbing down below in the ocean. Then, stinking of diesel exhaust and pitching in the waves, the boat cruised around Moro Rock and lined up for a run at the beach. That was a practice amphibious landing: you jumped into the water when the ramp at the front of the boat dropped down and ran forward - - or did the best you could.

The 86th had orders to sail combat-loaded from Seattle in January 1945 for an island called Iwo Jima. That order was cancelled. Because of the need for reinforcements in Europe, the 86th was hurried to the European theater instead. We missed the horror of Iwo Jima because of the severity of the Battle of the Bulge. (2)

In action in Germany the 86th helped to close the Ruhr Pocket by swift and aggressive action. Afterward we stormed southeast, leading the Third Army into Bavaria halting our drive in Austria. Troops of the 86th were the first across the Danube.

Back to the United States in June the Division regrouped for redeployment to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan. With the sudden end of the war in the Pacific, the Division was once again hurried this time to San Francisco port and committed to the Philippine Islands. We missed the bloody prospect of the invasion of Japanese home islands because of the atom bomb.

Units of the Division were dispersed from Mindanao in the south to Luzon in the north. Soldiers will recognize the names of Batangas, Corregidor, Davao, Marikina, Manila, Legaspi, Rosales and others as the posts where they served in the Philippines.

1945 was quite a ride. (3)

Most memorable of all, however, are the men whose names even now we can remember. Our officers and sergeants taught us close order drill, military courtesy, our General Orders and read us the Articles of War and immediate obedience to orders. They had the task of making soldiers out of recent high school graduates. We hated the inspections, the boredom, and the army chicken shit. Remember the "simon says" drills?

What stands out now, years later, are the other guys. The one you shared a shelter half with and who you looked out for. It was called the buddy system. Your buddy was your friend, your confidante who was there for you with encouragement and help, which you were glad to give back to him in your turn.

The most enduring images are of the guys we soldiered with. Have you noticed that telling your war stories the point is mainly about what someone said or did; a colorful character or what you yourself and someone else were up to? Not to mention other serious matters that are hard to talk about without choking up.

We parted very quickly from each other at the war's end. We were eager to get home and pick up civilian life again. In these latter years, however, we feel the urge to get in touch once more. So we have reunions. The purpose of reunions is to find out what has happened to people we remember and care about. It's easier together with others to recall the friends whose faces and whose walk we'd recognize anywhere -- but who we'll never see again. Even though we've changed - greatly -- bits of the intimacy and mutuality of life as we knew it in the 86th floods back freshly like a tide, mixing happiness with mourning and wonder.

We remember and pay our tribute to friends killed in war or departed in the many intervening years. My friend's question remains: for what purpose do we now still live and move? Remembering the dead presses that question for us to ponder. We may have our hunches but we don't know for sure.

I don't intend this to be an answer - it's a suggestion to ponder.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, there's a story about a general whose army is surrounded, outnumbered and outgunned by the enemy. (4) In such a fix he does what we all did, maybe more than once, even if we don't exactly recall.

He prayed.

He said, "O Lord, we don't know exactly what we should do, but our eyes are on you."

As you ponder and remember someone today, I wish you grace and peace.

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(1) "No atheists in foxholes" etc.

(2) Some contend that we were slated for Okinawa, not Iwo. I decrypted a secret and urgent order from Washington in the middle of the night in January 1945 (after a late Saturday night party at the Falcon Club). That order contained the surprising cancellation of our sailing order from Seattle and ordering us to Boston POE instead. I misdelivered that secret message that night. By 7:30 the next morning (Sunday, at that) Colonel Charles P. Jones, the General's Chief of Staff was on the telephone promising that we'd be hearing more about my disobedience of orders. That's a long, separate story.

(3) Not all wars need to be fought. World War II did. Living through that experience and seeing the incredible waste and destruction as we did in both Europe and Asia should have taught us to be advocates for peace and against war's thrilling seductions.

(4) II Chronicles 20:12