

## **34th Infantry Division Association Reunion Memorial Service**

### **Chaplain Leighton McKeithen**

In the course of a lifetime we are favored to come into contact with individuals whose personal courage overwhelms us. In my ministry it has been a constant source of encouragement and challenge to me to see how persons can stand up against the most crushing odds and come off "more than conquerors though Him who loved us and gave Himself for us."

After returning home from Italy in 1945 I spent some months visiting families of our comrades who did not return to their homes. From the home of 18 and 19 year-olds where we got out high school annuals, to city letter carriers where I walked their route with their widows and sometimes their dogs, to the family of one of our Congressional Medal of Honor recipients in the back-country swamp of South Carolina, I traveled almost the entire Atlantic coast and on into Tennessee and Kentucky.

As some of you know, we have just returned this summer from a sentimental journey to walk with comrades of our 34th Infantry Division over some of the grueling battlefields from the Volturno and Rapido Rivers to the plains of the Po and ultimately to the border of Switzerland.

As we walked and as we rode with a bus driver who knew no barriers to taking us into the highest elevations of the Apennines, our thoughts and our conversations went back more than a half-century - to a day when we were much younger and eminently more flexible in body and mind, - to hills we climbed with little thought for how steep they were then, but which we would not even attempt today, - to rivers we forded with ice floes in them in the winter, with no thought of pneumonia or hypothermia, - striding easily down narrow streets where in earlier years we darted from one house to another, routing out the enemy and hoping he had scrambled away before we got there.

Standing by the Polish cemetery at Cassino we recalled how the Polish Army, exiled from their own country, took such a terrible beating before the monastery was bombed, and then continued to suffer severely as the Nazis were routed from the rubble even months later. The courageous General Anders, who commanded the Polish troops in exile, made it known that when he died his mortal remains were to be returned to Cassino and there interred with his men. In solemn assembly we gathered at that first grave of all those on the perfectly-manicured hillside, and remembered the bravery of the Polish General and his men.

At Alife and Cassino and Nettuno and Barberino we followed the trail of you who went in '97 to place the name of the American 34th Infantry Division before the eyes and in the hearts of the people we helped liberate from the fanatical and schizophrenic little mustached corporal from Germany.

The event of that morning of June 4th, 1944, as we wrested from the enemy the first European capitol to be liberated from the Nazis, came to mind. Although our accomplishments there were obliterated from the minds of most Americans by the great invasion two days later at

Normandy, the world was at least aware that the Allies were making strides in what Sir Winston Churchill had called "the soft underbelly of Europe".

General William Yarborough, retired, is our neighbor over at Southern Pines, North Carolina. In writing about the war that we fought together, he says that General Mark Clark told him and other officers that the Allied invasion force at Anzio simply had to hold the beachhead, or else, because there would be no reinforcements coming.

Our own Ernie Pyle, who understood the pathos and the depressive situation facing us in Italy, wrote just before leaving us to pick up the war in England and through the Continent, "... on the whole it has been a bitter war. Few of us can ever conjure up any pleasant memories of the Italian campaign. The enemy has been hard, and so have the elements. Few of us can ever conjure up any truly fond memories of the Italian campaign. The enemy has been hard, and so have the elements. Men have had to stay too long in the lines. A few men have borne a burden they felt SHOULD HAVE BEEN SHARED BY MANY MORE." Perhaps I should leave off the last sentence of Ernie Pyle's words, for there are some of here still suffering from the loss of dear ones. Ernie says, "There is little solace for those who have suffered, and none at all for those who have died, in trying to rationalize about why things in the past were as they were."

Bill Yarborough, a life-time career soldier, who during the war commanded a regimental team of the 82nd Airborne Division, says the Italian campaign was the hardest part of World War II. "Just the rain and the mud and the casualties and the lack of a real hope of anything dramatic that was going to change the situation" is the way he described the debacle. He saw American bravery in the hard-fought victories at Anzio and at Cassino.

But - lest it all be gloom and doom - let's look at a report that still sees something good in all the suffering and pathos of our war in Italy. Following Ernie Pyle's evaluation of our Italian campaign, he filed with the news service that he represented these words:

"I look at it this way - if by having a small army in Italy we have been able to build up more powerful forces in England, and if by sacrificing lives here this winter we can save half a million lives in Europe this summer - if these things are true, then it was best as it was." Then he concludes his filing like this: "I'm not saying they are true. I'm only saying you've got to look at it that way or else you can't bear to think of it at all. Personally, I think they are true. ..."

An to those of us who are still in grief over a loss or losses in our war, you will remember that Ernie Pyle, a real admirer of the 34th Infantry Division, was killed himself. His mortal remains lie in a little island of the Hawaiian group.

At this Memorial Service you and I can, on our own and on behalf of our comrades who have departed this life to be forever with the Commander-in-Chief of the universe, look with pride and gratitude to the part we had in freeing the human race from the struggle most fierce in our time or in all times. The events from December 7, 1941, through the summer of 1945 rank as one of the great turning points in world history.

On Tuesday night, June 6, 1944, Franklin Delano Roosevelt went on the radio to lead our nation in asking God's blessing on our sons, our husbands, our fathers, our brothers, and us. He knew something of the horror we had already faced, and that more of it awaited many more thousands of us.

So thus he prayed: "Almighty God, our sons, pride of our nation, have set upon a mighty endeavour. Lead them straight and true. Give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith. They need thy blessings. Their road is long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed. They are and will be sorely tried by night and by day. The darkness is rent by noise and flame. Men's souls are shaken with the violence of war."

Then he asked guidance for those, like himself, who had to watch from home: "Give us faith in Thee, faith in our sons, faith in each other, faith in our united crusade."

William Manchester, writing of the American soldier in "The Glory and The Dream" says: "they were perhaps the best prepared generation ever to go to war willingly. They went willingly only because they knew the job had to be done. It was a dirty, nauseating job, but they knew they had to do it because honorable men were unwilling to turn the world over to Hitler."

We are not saints - far from it. We wept and cursed and hated and killed, but we were willing to give our lives for the cause of right, for a cause which Dwight Eisenhower properly called "a great crusade". When we dare to face all the foes of life like we faced the evil Nazi war machine, we hear words of assurance like these in the hymn "How Firm A Foundation": "Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed; for I am thy God, I will still give thee aid. I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand."

From *Romans 8:31-39* there is one verse that speaks loudly and clearly to you and me, as we hurt over the losses we incurred, and as we look at this complex world of which we are a part. That soul-stirring sentence, taken from the marvelous 8th chapter of Romans, is this: "In all these things (in all that we have to face in life, in all the adversities and disappointments of life, in all the trying circumstances that beset us) we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us and gave Himself for us."

If we can believe that strongly enough to stake our very lives on it, we can never be ultimately defeated.

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes. That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

I was reminded of this everlasting and comforting truth when I walked this summer with my comrades of more than a half century ago over roads and fields and hills in putting down the evil that troubles men's souls.

*Source: Memorial Service Sermon. Chaplain Leighton McKeithen. 34th Infantry Division Association, Tri-State Chapter Reunion. 9 July 2000*  
*Originally posted to the internet by Pat Skelly, Association Sr. Historian.*