

# Learning to Love and Respect Our Flag



By Daris Howard

Some of the older men in our community felt we scouts were not performing our responsibilities in handling the flag as respectfully as we should. Therefore, just before the Fourth of July, we found ourselves in a meeting where a gentleman had been invited to talk to us about it.

"Great!" Lenny quipped, looking at the man who was waiting for his

turn to speak. "Just what I wanted to be doing on a Tuesday night. Sitting around and listening to some old guy I don't even know talk about the flag. The flag just isn't that big of a deal."

We all nodded our heads in agreement. It was a beautiful, clear evening, just right to be swimming, or playing baseball, or anything out of doors, not the kind of day to be spent in a meeting.

The man that was going to talk to us really wasn't that old; he was probably in his late forties or early fifties, but to teenage boys, that is ancient.

When it was his turn, he looked at us and smiled. "You know, I can't instill in you a love for the flag and a feeling of respect. I can only tell you why I love it." He then proceeded to tell us a story that enthralled us.

As a young soldier, he had been assigned to the Philippines during the beginning of World War II. That was where he was when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He described how only a little more than a week later the Japanese attacked the Philippines. With the United States' ships destroyed, there was no means to receive supplies, and within only a few months, there was no option except surrender.

He then described the Bataan death march, and what it was like to watch many of his friends die from disease, starvation, and the guns and bayonets of the Japanese. He said there were many times he wished he could die too, rather than endure the atrocities. When they reached their destination, the camp they were interred in was not much better. Food was scarce and less than adequate. Many more died, and those who lived seemed to lose hope. They were not told of anything going on in the outside world, and they began to think they had been forgotten.

But after a couple of horrible years, some British soldiers, that had been captured in fighting in Australia, were brought as prisoners to their camp. Everyone learned from them that the Allied forces were moving island by island, and coming toward the Philippines. Excitement and hope soared as the dream of possible deliverance grew brighter. But then, just when they could hear the bombardment and knew the Allied forces were approaching, many of the prisoners were loaded onto ships for transport to prison camps in Japan.

They found themselves in the hot, humid hold of a Japanese ship that was full of foul smells that burned their eyes and choked their lungs. They were packed so tightly that they were forced to stand 24 hours per day. As they heard the continuation of the bombardment from the American planes everyone cheered, even though they knew their own ship could be inadvertently sunk by a stray bomb. As the days grew long, and more people grew sick and died in their floating prison,

when bombs would be heard around them, some men would call out, "Hit us! Hit us!" hoping to die instead of endure any more.

When they reached the shores of Japan, they were herded into a prison camp where they found other emaciated inmates. They received very little food or water, and disease and death continued to be their constant companions. However, after some time, their treatment began to improve. Word was that it was because the Japanese were beginning to fear retribution as their loss in the war seemed more and more imminent.

He told us about the day an American plane flew overhead and dropped food into their camp. He said seeing the flag on the side of the plane thrilled him as much as the food. "But," he added, "nothing will ever compare to the day we saw a contingent of men approaching holding the American flag."

His voice choked as he continued. "That flag symbolized the freedom I had always taken for granted when I was young, and had only learned to cherish when it was no longer mine. I will forever love it. I know you can never feel the same as I do about it, at least not unless you experience the loss of your freedom that it stands for. But I hope in some small way, you can learn from those of us who have been there how valuable that freedom is and the flag that symbolizes it."

And we did learn. And every time I see that beautiful flag, I imagine myself imprisoned, and seeing it once more, and I know I will never think of it in the same way again. And even more, I pray that it will wave free and strong forever.

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