

All is Well, Safely Rest: Reflections on Capt. (Ret.) Robert W. Matje, Sr., USA

By Michael Bennett, Troop 78 Alumnus

I first met Mr. Matje in the spring of 2006, shortly after I had joined Troop 78. One of our first interactions, if not the first, came that June when he did my Tenderfoot board of review. I remember Mr. Matje being thorough in going over each requirement, fair in evaluating my Scouting acumen, and very calm throughout a process that I, a rookie Scout, found a bit stressful. In hindsight, all three traits were hallmarks of Mr. Matje and how he bore himself.

The Tenderfoot board marked the start of my supremely good fortune in getting to know Mr. Matje. I have many memories of him, all enjoyable, from both during and after my days in Troop 78. I was privileged to join Mr. Matje several times on the hoagie fishing trip, during which he talked baseball with me and helped me catch several delicious flounder dinners. (As for his angling luck, I distinctly recall him reeling in some previous fisherman's sinker.) I also got to join Troop 78 several times at Mr. Matje's farm in Pennsylvania's Endless Mountains region. Seeing him hold court there was always fun and entertaining, especially when he recited to us boys his famous Matje Farm speech: "I have 150 acres here. If you have to go Number 1, use the woods. If you have to go Number 2, come in the house."

It was, perhaps, over Mr. Matje's military service that I got to know him best. I learned early in our acquaintance that Mr. Matje had served in the US Army in the Vietnam War, and I got to interview him about his military experiences for my Eagle Scout project. Some of Mr. Matje's memories were joyful, such as the thrill of speaking to his wife, Peggy, from Vietnam over a patched-in field telephone the day they welcomed their son Bob Jr. and became parents. Others were somber, such as when he had the painful yet proud honor of accompanying the casket of a friend and fellow officer, one who had fallen in combat, home for burial. As Mr. Matje shared that story, the occasional tremble in his voice and his momentary pauses drove home the stark realities of war far more eloquently than any documentary or history book ever could. Vietnam-era exposure to Agent Orange undermined Mr. Matje's health in later years, but never shook his conviction that he'd do it all again if his country called him once more.

Years after our interview, Mr. Matje and I discussed how he had kept himself moving forward following his experiences in Vietnam. He explained that he, after leaving his Army missions behind, had adopted the mindset that his new mission was to provide and care for his wife and family. Everyone who knew Mr. Matje can agree that, as he had in the Army, he ably accomplished that mission. At work, he compiled a distinguished career in the pulp and paper industry. At home, Mr. Matje had an even more impressive resume which included a 58-year marriage to Peggy, three children, and six grandchildren. He also made time for decades of volunteering with Troop 78, starting with his sons' Scouting days and continuing through his involvement in the Brandywine Conservancy's annual Radnor Races fundraiser.

On several occasions, Mr. Matje told me how blessed he felt his life had been. What he always overlooked – out of his characteristic modesty, no doubt – was that those of us who knew him feel equally blessed. Mr. Matje has left behind a solid legacy through his family, his Scouting family, his

military service, and his mentoring to hundreds of Troop 78 alumni, including me. The lessons Mr. Matje taught me and countless other alums are invaluable ones upon which we'll draw for a long time. *Prioritize your family. Respect the chain of command. Have a plan but be prepared to think of contingency plans. Travel the world to enrich your life and broaden your perspective.* One could hardly find better guidance for navigating life's challenges, triumphs, and uncertainties.

During the 1961-62 collegiate year, Mr. Matje represented the University of Rhode Island, where he was a senior, at the US Military Academy's annual ROTC leadership conference. In a twist of history, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur also visited West Point that school year to address the US Corps of Cadets and, given his ailing health, bid them farewell. It seems fitting that MacArthur's remarks during his May 1962 visit also describe some of the key principles by which Mr. Matje lived his life:

"Duty, honor, country: Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying point to build courage when courage seems to fail, to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith, to create hope when hope becomes forlorn."

Thank you, Mr. Matje, for being a good husband, father, friend, and mentor, for serving our country, and for leaving us with so many wonderful memories.



The author and Mr. Matje revel in a catch during Troop 78's hoagie fishing trip, June 2007.