

“FREEDOM IS NEVER FREE”

“For he has rescued us from the one who rules in the kingdom of darkness, and he has brought us into the Kingdom of his dear Son. God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins.” Colossians 1: 13

As we honor those who served and remember those who are serving in the US Military, we have been reminded that freedom...is never free! May those who live under the flag of the freest country in the world be ever mindful that row upon manicured row of tombstones line national cemeteries across this great country! Therein lay the remains of men and women who paid the supreme price for our freedom. Therein lay the hopes and dreams of families left behind who grieve the price paid for our freedom. May all who enjoy the freedom bought by the blood of patriots, never forget. Here's the story of a man who never forgot.

It was gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them by hand, from his bucket.

Often his mind wandered; back many years to October 1942. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour, which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life.

Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, until the men were left with no option but to ditch their plane in the Pacific Ocean. For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The largest sharks . . . ten feet long.

Of all their enemies at sea, as the days wore on, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," that was the B- 17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off."

"I don't know how much later, but something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, no one moved; but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant... food . . . if I could catch it." ... And the rest, as they say, is history.

Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish, and theirs to catch more. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically, hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice.

You know that Captain Eddie made it. And now you also know that he never forgot. Because every Friday evening, until his death in 1973, about sunset, on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast, you could see an old man walking . . . white-haired, bushy-eye browed, slightly bent. His bucket was filled with shrimp to feed the gulls, to remember that one, which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle.

Eddie Rickenbacker never forgot the gull that gave its life; we should never forget the soldiers of our country who gave up their lives. Because that sea gull gave up its life, Eddie got a second chance at life, and because many brave men and women have died in the armed services fighting for our country's freedom, we too have a chance at life – a life of freedom.

Both freedom and life never come without a price. The blood of many fine soldiers paid for the freedom that we have today in this country; but that's only half the story. The blood of God's own Son has purchased our ultimate freedom, and secured the forgiveness of our sins, and we must never forget.

It's no news really, but there are many living free in this great country that are still in bondage to sins of every kind. To name any would be to forget some, and leave some off the hook...but none of us are off the hook; all of us are sinners, until we have been set free in Jesus Christ! All of us are drifting aimlessly in oceans of indulgence, fighting off temptations and distractions, until we are set free in Jesus Christ. All of us need something...someone to offer their life for ours, their blood for our sin...and that is exactly what God has done in Jesus Christ...and we better not forget it!

On Nov. 19, 1863, Pres. Abraham Lincoln stood on the battlefield at Gettysburg to dedicate a portion of that land as a national cemetery. The featured speaker of the day was Edward Everett, acclaimed as possibly the greatest classical orator of his time. A former United States senator, Governor of Massachusetts, & President of Harvard University, he spoke for more than two hours to an audience of over 25,000 people. His was a masterful address, broad in its scope & dramatic in its presentation.

Next was a musical interlude by the Baltimore Glee Club. And then, finally, Pres. Lincoln was formally introduced, & the people settled back down in their chairs & on the grass to listen to him. Lincoln spoke simply & clearly, & startled the people by the brevity of his remarks.

"We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting & proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living & dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here; but it can never forget what they did here.

"It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, & that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Gettysburg does not stand alone in our memory. I would fail my task if I failed to mention such places as Valley Forge, Flanders Field, Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima, Pork Chop Hill, the Mekong delta, Baghdad, Afghanistan – and ... Calvary...what scenes of courage & carnage!

But folks, we must realize that if freedom is to be carried on from generation to generation - if our children & our grandchildren are to enjoy and appreciate freedom - then we must be willing to pay the price, to help them remember, to make them never forget... "freedom is never free."