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For God and Country



President Ronald W. Reagan:
**A Grateful Nation
Remembers**

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A Little Bible Story

How God's Word traveled with a family through three wars

This letter was written by Legionnaire Walt Behrens of Averill Park, N.Y., an Army Air Corps veteran of WWII, to his grandson.

I hope it is not too late, Michael James.

When I retired 10 years ago there was this fear of not having enough to do. So I planned to do some writing for my grandchildren.

Somewhere along the way, however, I picked up a paint brush. Five canvases later my painting of Aunt Barbara in Doin's pasture (called "Hay Day") won a ribbon and \$40 at Saratoga, and my dreams of being another Raymond Chandler or a William Manchester dissolved in tubes of paint and turpentine. Until now.

Sometime ago I stumbled across a new bookbinder just getting started in North Greenbush. Independent bookbinders are rare birds, so I retrieved from your father the worn Bible he had carried in Vietnam and had the leather cover replaced.

It is a small book, less than four inches by six inches, and fits comfortably in a man's hand. Originally, the cover folded down around three edges, for protection, but now it is smart and crisp in black, with "Holy Bible" in bright gold letters on the spine. It looks very modern, until the book is opened and one sees the penciled Spencerian inscription, "J. Niles Co. K 39th U.S.V."

That penciled notation identifies the 39th U.S. Volunteers, the infantry regiment known as "Bullard's Indians," that fought in the Philippines from late in 1899 to 1901. Your great-grandfather, Otto, was in Company K, one of many units fighting the Philippine insurgent forces of Aguinaldo to prevent the establishment of a separate republic.

Records show that on Sept. 30, 1900, the insurgents surprised K Company scouts, and a skirmish developed near Tanauan, south of Manila. Your great-grandfather and his Army buddy, Jack Niles, were in that skirmish, and were near one another when Jack was "shot through the left breast," as it was reported in those days. He fell, mortally wounded. I never learned all the particulars of Jack Niles' passing, but my father kept the Bible in memory of his buddy. He kept it well protected for the next 41 years, until World War II broke out.

One of the anecdotes my father told me about his Philippine service came to mind recently when I was framing his medals and insignia. With no radio or TV, Michael James, the soldiers of Company K would, from time to time, provide their own entertainment. On one occasion, in training at Vancouver Barracks, with most of the soldiers sitting on the ground in a loose circle, boxing gloves were handed to a soldier

at random, with instructions to pick an opponent.

Your great-grandpa circled the group with his extra pair until he stood in front of his sergeant, Emmet Kelso, and dropped the gloves in his lap. Some "ohs" and semi-suppressed sounds of anticipation followed, because the sergeant was known to be good. Now I can't write that your great-grandfather was an instant Jim Corbett. He would only admit that he "did all right," to the surprise of many.

Nearly 50 years later, when my father died, a man came to the services and introduced himself as Sergeant Kelso. He said simply that he had soldiered with my father. To me, that was a greater tribute than any framed medals.

A month after Pearl Harbor, on January 8, 1942, I was called into service for WW II. With an unaccustomed economy of words, my father said, "Take this with you," and gave me his little Bible from the Philippines.

Chance sent me to the Pacific for 31 months in World War II. After two years of duty in places with strange

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names like Lae, Nadzab, Biak and Owi, I arrived in the Philippines in time of war, like my father had four decades before. With the 54th Troop Carrier Wing, my job involved the inspection of Air Force units, and there was only one way to go—by air.

On one occasion our C-47 dropped into this Philippine airstrip on a routine inspection, and I ran into "Big John" Quarantiello, an old chess-playing buddy from Port Moresby and other places.

"Big John" was a medical administrative officer of giant proportions, built like former heavyweight champion Primo Carnera. In civilian life he or his family had invented a tenderometer, a device for testing the tenderness of garden peas. He was offended at first when I laughed at the image of a giant testing the tenderness of peas, but later he laughed, too. I think he was amused at the irreverence of a city fellow who didn't understand a lot of things about farm life.

"Big John" had his tent situated on the edge of the strip, and it made for convenient goodbyes at the end of my day of inspection. I prepared to depart with my few belongings, including the Bible in a rucksack, and turned to run toward the plane warming up a short distance away.

John shouted for me to wait. He had an idea, saying there was an extra bunk, and he looked forward to resuming the chess rivalry. I told him staying overnight would put me behind schedule, but he was persuasive, saying I could make it up. Besides, there was some booze.

I waved the C-47 off, walked back to the tent, and took off the rucksack. We watched the plane "rev" up, taxi a short way, and then roar down the strip. It gained altitude quickly, banked and headed toward a near range. We watched it diminish and merge with a misty mountain mosaic.

We hadn't even set up the chess board when the shocking report ricocheted through the unit. The plane I had been about to run for had flown into the side of the mountain. All were lost.

A quarter century later, to the surprise of the entire family, your father left Oswego College, and enlisted in the Air Force to "get into the action" in Vietnam. Before he went overseas, I gave Michael L. the Bible, not with any profound pronouncements, but

with what I could recall of its history. By 1969, Michael James, your Dad was at the Phan Rang air base.

One memorable night his unit came under attack by Viet Cong mortar fire. A direct hit on an F-100 plane revetment exploded ammunition and bombs, some of them napalm bombs. Your Dad was about 100 yards from an explosion when a frightening concussion lifted him off the ground and into the air. He was shaken, but unhurt. Incidentally, he later got to the Philippines on a brief assignment from Vietnam. He came home after his service, went back to college, and finally got his degree.

This is our own little Bible story, Michael James. There may never be another military "chapter" or "verse" to add. I pray there will not be.

But then again, in your lifetime, much of the world may have to protect the way of life that is written in the little book.

I hope it is not too late, Michael James. ☺

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