

The Story of Otto Erler, WWII POW

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Not many of us have seen the colors struck. No, not retired. Not simply lowered at the end of the day, but deliberately pulled down. World War II Marine, Otto Erler, did from his foxhole on Corregidor.

Knocked unconscious by a Japanese mortar shell, Erler came too just as Japanese troops swarmed over him. Corregidor had fallen. As Erler looked up past a Japanese bayonet, up the barrel of the weapon, and over the shoulder of his captor . . . he saw a tattered "Old Glory" coming down. In his head were the words of a poem: "A moth-eaten rag on a worm-eaten pole. It doesn't look likely to stir a man's soul . . ." But it did. Oh, how it did stir Erler's soul. In that flag he saw America folding, America coming down. And that 20-year-old Marine from Dallas, Texas cried.

Later, under guard on a dock in Manila, enroute to a prisoner of war camp, Erler snuck away into a small, empty office building on the pier, in search of - of all things - toilet paper. In rummaging through the place, he found none. But in a corner, in a dark closet, he found an American flag. It grabbed him by the throat . . . it was a piece of home. It was something he could have faith in. He didn't stop to think that prisoners were shot for less.

He snuck back into the ranks of prisoners and quickly hid the flag in his duffel bag. Transported on prisoner ships, Erler kept the flag hidden, and for the first time brought it out for a comrade's burial at sea. Done with permission from his captors, Erler's flag draped the lead-filled, canvas body bags of several who died on the trip.

When leaving the transport and heading to a more permanent camp, Erler was able to smuggle the flag off the ship. He carried it with him and kept it in his pillowcase. Eventually it was found and taken from Erler who, with the ranking American officer, bravely told the Japanese as he handed it over, "This is an American flag. We expect it to be treated with proper courtesy and to be returned when we leave."

They reluctantly agreed, but not without penalties: rations would be halved for thirty days, no cigarettes, and lights out at 9:00 p.m. In early 1944 Erler was transferred to a lead mine in Japan. As he prepared to depart, he bravely asked for the return of the Flag. It was given over to him.

At the lead mine he was allowed to keep his flag, but only for burials. For use in any other way, he would be held responsible. It found use ten times in sixteen months. Then in August of 1945, after more than three years as a POW, peace was at hand. The war was over and it was Erler's turn to strike the colors. Down came the rising sun and up went the Stars and Stripes.

Through his years as a prisoner, Erler's flag buried 25 men and raised the spirits and gave hope to thousands. That 42-star flag is still around. It resides at the Dallas Historical society. It is tattered and torn. It's one of those things best described by British General Sir Edward Bruce Hamley:

"A moth-eaten rag on a worm-eaten pole,
It doesn't look likely to stir a man's soul;
'Tis the deeds that were done 'neath the moth-eaten rag
When that pole was a staff and the rag was a Flag."