

POW 'human skeleton' shares his story with teens

JON BRINES jonathan.brines@journaltimes.com Apr 14, 2017 2



Wisconsin native Joe Demler talks with students at Racine Lutheran High School Thursday about the conditions in a German POW camp during WWII. He wanted them to have a good attitude in life and never be defeated.

JON BRINES, jonathan.brines@journaltimes.com

RACINE — The American prisoner of war known as the “Human Skeleton,” whose starving body was the subject of a 1945 Time magazine photo, shared his harrowing World War II story Thursday at Racine Lutheran High School.

Pvt. Joe Demler, 91, was a guest of the school and Bob Morrison from Stars and Stripes Honor Flight, who introduced Demler to the school children as a dedication.

“When I read about WWII it seemed like ancient history, but I want you to understand these are real people. They went through a lot of pain and heartache and they prevailed for our country,” Morrison said.

Demler was 19 when he survived combat in the historic Battle of the Bulge, was captured alive and sent to work as POW for the notorious German Stalag 12-A camp in Limburg, Germany.

Demler said the enemy thought they were expendable and forced them to work, including fixing train tracks damaged by Allied war planes in the middle of the night.

Terrifying experience

“The bombing and strafing was terrifying at night,” Demler said.

He vividly remembers seeking refuge in a cemetery along the tracks. The glow of the tracer bullets danced across the ground and ricocheted off of the headstones where he and his fellow POWs hid.

“People asked me why I didn’t try to escape. It was below zero and the way they fed us ... there was no energy ... you were good as dead,” Demler said.

Demler told of eating bread made from a rye flour, leaves and sawdust.

“They expected us to work. The Germans took everything, even personal stuff, and they stole our Red Cross rations. We had nothing,” Demler told the kids. “A guy was sick and the guard shot him dead right in front of us. He wanted us to know he was in charge.”

Demler said getting there was tough enough and remembers being stuffed into box cars shoulder to shoulder with other POWs, with a bucket for a bathroom, left for days without food or water.

“They guy next to me died and we couldn’t do anything for him,” Demler said. “Prayer was very important to me.”

After starving for three months, near death at just 70 pounds, Demler was liberated by the U.S. First Army’s Ninth Armored Division in March of 1945. But the worst was not over.

“I was about three days from death,” Demler said.

The doctors, concerned putting him under sedation could stop his heart, chose to operate on him with light pain relief, removing four liters of pus from his chest. They packed his collapsed lung with medicated gauze. He remembers the pain vividly.

“My salvation was that I was young. The older guys had more trouble recovering. The ones who survived, you could count on your hand,” Demler said.

Advice for students

He also took the opportunity to share advice with the teens for their lives ahead.

“What I want to tell you is if anything ever happens to you, you always have to have the right attitude. That’s one of the big things.”

He told them they should never give up and feel defeated.

During the speech, Demler went into graphic detail at times describing what he endured, and the crowd of students sat in silence, completely riveted.

Junior Bradley Bosak appreciated meeting Demler in person.

“It puts a good image in your head about the POW camps, working so hard for morsels of food. It’s good to see the actual victims of the atrocities committed still living. We should take the time to appreciate him,” Bosak said.

After the war, Demler retired after working 37 years for the United States Post Office. Demler and his wife Loretta have two sons and a daughter, and three grandchildren. His message to the students was simple: find out what the veteran in your own family did for our country before he or she passes away.

“If they don’t, it is gone,” Demler said.

Freshman Jake Tietyen, 14, is concerned his own grandfather, now 97, may never open up about his war experience.

“He was in the Army. I’m not sure where,” Tietyen said. “He’s still alive but he won’t tell me about it because he said, ‘you’ll be too scared. You won’t like it.’ “

For that, Demler said Tietyen should keep trying, but also do his own research on his grandfather’s service from public records.

“They need to go to the National Archives and find out yourself,” Demler said.



Jon Brines @JonBrines · 13 Apr 2017

72 years after Joe Demler was rescued as POW after fighting in the Battle of the Bulge today told his story to kids at Racine Lutheran HS.



Joe Demler 1945 POW



Joe Demler today with students

