

# WWII paratrooper surprised by party in his honor

By **KATHY ANEY**  
STAFF WRITER

Walt Liebe's family yearned to know more about his time as a World War II paratrooper. For years, Liebe kept most of it to himself.

His grandchildren didn't know about how Liebe and other members of the 11th Airborne Division liberated 2,147 prisoners from a Japanese internment camp during the Raid on Los Banos in the Philippines. Or about serving on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Honor Guard on the USS Missouri. Or the nitty gritty about his time in the glider infantry and later as a paratrooper jumping from C-47 military transport planes.

Lauded as the Greatest Generation, Liebe's generation might also be the humblest.

The country is losing WWII veterans like Liebe at a dizzying pace. As of 2018, fewer than 500,000 of the 16 million who served in the war still lived. Honoring these veterans and coaxing them to tell their stories before they are gone is taking on more urgency for groups such as the National WWII Museum, which conducts oral histories and produces exhibits. And for families, such as Liebe's, the clock is ticking.

Family members and friends recently showered the 96-year-old Hermiston veteran with appreciation — and plenty of questions — during a surprise gathering Aug. 10, 2019. Linda Stark, who attends church with Liebe, spearheaded the gathering.

He thought he was going to lunch at Denny's. His son, John, missed the turnoff, or so Liebe thought. John turned instead onto Airport Way and continued to the main airport building. He ushered his father inside to a room adorned in red, white and blue balloons



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

**World War II paratrooper Walt Liebe answers questions about his war experience during a surprise party in his honor on Aug. 10, 2019, at the Hermiston Airport.**

and toy WWII-era airplanes. A cake proclaimed in red icing: "Our Thanks to Walt Liebe: Honorable WWII Veteran."

The elder Liebe reacted with incredulity.

"He was surprised and a little choked up," John said. "He had no clue."

Over the next couple of hours, Liebe received accolades and a Quilt of Valor draped around his shoulders. He answered questions about his time in the military. The veteran said he went on four maneuvers with the glider infantry and later made 10 jumps from C-47 transport planes.

"Gooney Birds, they were the workhorse of the South Pacific," he said of the C-47s.

A grandson asked about the

weapon he carried and so Liebe described a .30 caliber Browning Automatic Rifle, which weighed more than 20 pounds. The gun provided quick bursts of automatic fire, but required a lot of ammo. Ammunition bearers jumped alongside.

During the 1945 Los Banos prison camp raid, members of the 11th Airborne conducted a daring rescue of American and Allied civilians. Some soldiers parachuted in while others, like Liebe, came on amphibious vehicles. The mission went smoothly.

"Everything just clicked," he said. "Everything went as planned. It was a perfect operation."

Listening, Liebe's grandson Matt Gettmann shook his head.

"He was involved in one of

the most successful operations in world history, but he never told us about that," Gettmann said.

When pressed, Liebe told the story about stopping over on the island of Okinawa to refuel on the way to Japan. Whoever fueled the aircraft forgot to put the cap back on.

"We were airborne when someone looked out and saw gasoline splattering out of one of our engines," he said. "We landed, put on the gas cap and went on our way to Japan."

At times during the party, Liebe went silent. His son, John, filled in blanks.

"At the end of the war, he was selected to be with General Douglas MacArthur in his honor guard on the USS Missouri," John said.

"Those are pretty high accolades, Dad."

Indeed. On Sept. 2, 1945, the Japanese formally surrendered aboard the Missouri and the general's honor guard was aboard.

Liebe didn't elaborate on his son's remarks, which his family says is typical.

"He's the quietest, most humble person I've known," Gettmann said of his grandfather.

At war's end, Liebe returned home a 23-year-old with a lifetime of experience.

"He came home a very old young man," said younger brother, Bill Liebe, of Pilot Rock.

"We're glad you made it home in one piece," said Ron Linn, sitting at the opposite end of the table.

Liebe concurred. He described arriving back in the states by ship, passing under the Golden Gate Bridge.

"It was the most wonderful feeling," he said. "I was glad to be home."

After the war, Liebe learned to fly on dirt runways at the Hermiston Airport using GI Bill benefits to pay for the lessons.

"I learned to fly in an old tail-dragger," Liebe said.

The veteran had a long career at the Umatilla Chemical Depot.

Mark Gettmann, of Seattle, marveled at his grandfather, lamenting that someday he will no longer be around to share his rich history.

"He's a treasure we're not going to be able to enjoy forever," Gettmann said.

Before heading out from the airport, Liebe got into airport board member Mike Martin's Ford Ranger and was chauffeured into a hangar where he feasted his eyes on a variety of airplanes.

Though lunch at Denny's had gone bust, Liebe seemed happy with the alternative destination — and the avalanche of appreciation and curiosity he found there.

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