

Day of Reverence

By Jenny Kirk

This Memorial Day marked a special place in the Balaton community history books as the first prisoner of war medal was awarded posthumously to LeRoy McDonnel. And while an exceptional effort was put forth to rightfully recognize a man who gave so much, speakers at the American Legion Stone and Groeneweg Post 237 Memorial Day program on Sunday at the Ralco gym said respect and honor is also directed at hundreds of others from the Balaton area who served their country.

"On the monument downtown, there are 317 names and every one of them has a significant story to tell," retired U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Duane Loeck said. "Most notable, we think about all the veterans that came back from their tour of duties and helped fill in the Balaton community, how they made the Balaton community strong. These people who came back took employment in machinery dealers, dry cleaners, local businesses, in the schools, mechanics, truck drivers, farmers, and I've been told I need to say post office, as well."

Loeck said some of the same individuals, when they came back, volunteered



Balaton's Class of 1969's Brad Knudson plays Taps near the conclusion of the Memorial Day program on Monday.

for significant positions throughout the community.

"LeRoy McDonnel is an example of that," he said. "He was a member of the school board and the Rock Lake Township board."

Loeck added that the wives and mothers of servicemembers also deserve a lot of credit.

"It's the wives and mothers that balanced the checkbooks when we were away," Loeck said. "And far too often, it's the wives and the mothers who bear the grief when things go wrong. They carry that grief with them their entire lives."

Balaton Legion members Lew Roberts and Lynn Wichmann spoke the names of everyone listed on the Roll Call of the Dead.

"As Duane mentioned, Balaton is indeed steeped in military tradition," said Roberts, who also served as emcee for the Memorial Day program.

Just inside the doors to the gymnasium, two tables were set up.

"One has a lot of artifacts from our recipient — our guest of honor — from his military time," Roberts said. "The other is called the POW/MIA table."

Roberts eloquently explained the meaning behind the second table.

"Those who have served and those currently serving in the uniform services of the United States are ever mindful that the sweetness of enduring peace has always been tainted by the bitterness of personal sacrifice," he said. "We are compelled to never forget that while we enjoy our daily pleasures, there are others who have endured and may still be enduring the agonies of pain, deprivation and imprisonment. Before we begin our activities, we pause to recognize our POWs and MIAs. We call your attention to the small table, which occupies a place of dignity and honor. It is set for one, symbolizing the fact that members of our armed forces are missing from our ranks."

Roberts said the table is small, symbolizing the frailty of one prisoner alone against his or her suppressors.

"The tablecloth is white, symbolic of purity and their



American Legion Auxiliary member Caroline Dobberstein shares a response reading to "In Flanders' Field" that is called "We Shall Keep the Faith."

intentions to respond to their county's call to arms," he said. "The single rose in the vase signifies the blood they may have shed in sacrifice to ensure the freedom of our beloved United States of America. The rose also reminds us of the family and friends of our missing comrades who keep faith while awaiting their return."



Ryan Fricke respectfully looks over photos and military artifacts belonging to POW medal recipient.

Roberts continued: "The red ribbon on the vase represents an unyielding determination of a proper accounting of our comrades who are not among us. A slice of lemon on the plate reminds us of their bitter fate. Salt sprinkled on the plate reminds us of the countless volunteers



Balaton Legion member Larry Sloan salutes the flag during the playing of the National Anthem at the start of the Memorial Day program.

of families as they wait. The glass is inverted. They cannot toast with us at this time. The chair is empty. They are not here."

In addition, Roberts said, "The candle is reminiscent of



Ellie Crumrine, Balaton Legion's Girls State representative this last year, reads "In Flanders' Fields" by Eric Strom at the Memorial Day program.

the light of hope, which lives in our hearts to illuminate their way home, away from their captures and to the open arms of a grateful nation. The American flag reminds us that many of them may never return and have paid the supreme sacrifice to ensure our freedom. So, we pray to

the supreme commander that all our comrades will soon be back within our ranks. Let us remember and never forget their sacrifice. May God forever watch over them and protect them and their families."



Col. Kyle Nordmeyer, command inspector general joint forces headquarters, Missouri, joins emcee and Balaton Legion member Lew Roberts in showcasing replicas of the military medals POW medal recipient LeRoy McDonnel received.

POW Medal

Continued from page one

started researching LeRoy's story, it came to light that there's about six other POWs in the Balaton area whose stories also need to be told."

McDonnel served in the U.S. Army from Mar. 22, 1944, until Sept. 1, 1945.

"LeRoy was assigned to the 110th Infantry Division, when it broke down into the 28th Infantry Division," Loeck said. "A lot of history books talk about the 110th, but really, it was the 28th that did all the dirty work for the 110th."

The Siege of Bastogne — an engagement in December 1944 between American and German forces at the Belgian town of Bastogne — was part of the larger Battle of the Bulge, which took place from Dec. 1944 to Jan. 1945.

"The Battle of the Bulge was the coldest German winter on record at minus 20 degrees," Loeck said. "Some of the history books refer to the Battle of the Bulge as 'The Frozen Hell.' It was not pretty. We lost 19,000 American soldiers in five weeks. It was the bloodiest single battle in World War II."

Including those killed in action (KIA), missing in action (MIA) or prisoners of war (POW), Loeck said the number of casualties rose to 89,000.

"LeRoy was a POW from Dec. 16, 1944, to the end of May 1945," he said.

Loeck said McDonnel was captured on the first or second day of the Siege on Bastogne.

"In October and November, LeRoy's 28th Division had been in battle up in the Hurtgen Forest, about 50 miles away from Bastogne," Loeck said. "We did not win that battle and the 28th came back from the battle bruised and bloody. The Division, which came back at 25% strength, was assigned to Bastogne to regroup for more battle next spring."

Having given all their excess ammo, rifles, communication equipment to the folks still fighting, Loeck said a surprise attack by the Germans on the early morning of Dec. 16, 1944, tested the soldiers to the max.

"The soldiers in the 28th were told to defend Bastogne at all costs," he said. "Do not let it fail. The reason Bastogne was so important was because there were roads and railroads going through town that the Germans wanted to occupy. The men of the 28th fought for three straight days and nights, until the 101st Airborne Division arrived."

And while the 101st got the Presidential Award for preventing Bastogne from falling, Loeck said General Omar Bradley recognized the efforts shown by the 28th.

"Bradley made a statement that nobody had outshone the broken and bruised 28th," Loeck said.

Once captured, Loeck said McDonnel and his fellow

comrades were marched to the prison train headed for Stalag 4B POW Camp.

"As they were being marched to the prison train, they passed some fields and some farmers carts that had dropped carrots and potatoes into the street," Loeck said. "LeRoy and some of his comrades picked them up and that was the only thing they had to eat on the prison train to Stalag 4B, which was in the middle of Germany. At its peak, about 30,000 POWs were there. It was the biggest prisoner camp in Germany."

When he arrived at the camp, McDonnel was in tough shape.

"He suffered from severe frostbite in both his hands and his feet," Loeck said. "The same comrades he shared carrots and potatoes with had to feed LeRoy as a POW because he didn't have enough strength in his hands to even break apart the bread they were fed. But LeRoy, in his leadership capabilities, which we saw later on in Balaton, inspired his fellow prisoners to fight back, resist and survive on starvation rations."

McDonnel was among those liberated by the Red Army. He was then assigned to Camp Carson, which is now Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"He was there for several months to be treated for the frostbite in his hands and feet," Loeck said. "While at Camp Carson, LeRoy was awarded the Purple Heart, which is a big deal."

Roe said her father was never really a well man physically after his time in

the first time he met his soon-to-be father-in-law, LeRoy McDonnel.

"We came down here on a Sunday, for me to meet (Glenda's parents) for the first time," Roe said. "We're sitting down about to have the noon meal and we're talking. We have the option of getting married here or in the Twin Cities — and I know 'the Cities' is a swear word. There's this moment of silence and LeRoy looks around and says, 'So, where are you going to get married?'"

Roe said he knew they had the wrong answer as soon as McDonnel said it.

"Glenda said, 'the Cities,' and there was this pause for a minute," Roe said. "LeRoy finally says, 'Have you told my cows that?'"

As a dairy farmer, McDonnel spent a large chunk of his time milking, which also kept him close to home.

"(My mother-in-law) Ruby brought the meal in, LeRoy unclipped his tie and we started to eat," Roe said. "There was never another mention about where the wedding was going to be. Obviously, they got somebody to take care of the cows because they were (at the wedding)."

Becky (Buesing) Swanson heard Roe talking about the memory and said she is pretty sure her dad (Von Buesing) was the one who pitched in to help.

"We lived about a mile and a half from there, so it was probably my dad," she said.

Along with the POW medal and Purple Heart, McDonnel also earned the European African Middle Eastern



Family members of LeRoy McDonnel exhibit pride as their loved one was posthumously awarded the POW medal.

captivity. Duane McDonnel noted that the family might not have moved to Balaton from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, had he not been a POW.

"He was a meat cutter in Sioux Falls, but because of the damage to his feet, he wasn't able to work on a concrete floor anymore," McDonnel said. "He decided to be a farmer and since he had family (in Balaton), he decided to come there and farm."

Jon Roe, a longtime Star Tribune sportswriter, recalled

Campaign medal along with two bronze service stars. Replicas of all his military medals were placed in two separate shadowboxes that were handcrafted by Loeck and then presented to the families by Col. Kyle Nordmeyer, the son of Janice and the late Richard Nordmeyer and a 1985 graduate of Balaton High School.

"Balaton is rich in military history," Loeck said.



LeRoy McDonnel. Memorial Day attendees join together in song.

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