

No more wars for Issaquah hero

By Dave Hansen

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I first saw him through the living room window of a modest, comfortable house on Dogwood Street. He was sitting in a high-backed chair next to a lamp peering out at me, probably trying to figure out which side of the family I fell on.

Ray Robertson was having his 97th birthday party, and I was there to cover it for the newspaper. He was, after all, Issaquah's oldest known living World War I survivor and also a heck of a guy, I was told.

So I met Ray for only about 30 minutes and he was, indeed, a remarkable person — generous, clever, happy. I left the house and eagerly wrote a short story that appeared in last week's issue.

But I don't believe he ever saw the article. Ray Robertson died peacefully last Wednesday morning, the day the newspaper came out.

Throughout the rest of the week in an ironic twist of timing, his optimistic words echoed on the pages of the newspaper:

"I feel good," he said.

Maybe he did. Maybe after all these years, through all the wars since 1914, maybe the last days were the easy part.

But death never happens the way it should. It doesn't. No matter the age, the preparation, it still hits like a cold, black storm, taking your wind and spirit with it.

And with the passing of a man like Ray Robertson, there is a great loss of spirit in Issaquah.

I know because I met the men who were touched by Ray's life. Six former commanders of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, all present at Ray's 97th birthday, each called him an inspiration.

I'll never forget the expression on Ray's face when the VFW commanders first arrived, walking up to the house with their decorated hats on straight and proud.

Ray was beaming, clearly relishing the comradery.

He tried to get out of his chair, even though he really couldn't, hoping to greet his buddies with a proper salute or an unofficial military greeting perhaps.

But after his oxygen tube caught him short — and a slight rebuke from a family member — Ray was content with sitting on the very edge of his chair, shaking the commanders' hands, one by one.

I remember standing quietly in the corner, looking at Ray's shining face, wondering what experience could cause a man to have such joy. What event of war could cause such bonding and respect. I could only guess.

Later, when I had a minute alone with Ray, many war-related questions came to mind but I couldn't bring myself to ask them. Instead, I just sat for a few minutes, trying not to be a reporter.

After a while I asked him how he felt, and he told me he was going to live until he was at least 100. And I believed him. After hearing stories of his 10-mile run at age 90, who wouldn't?

But I guess there will be no more races to run, no more wars to fight.

Ray Robertson fought for the last time.

And Issaquah is left with the memories of a great soldier.

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