

Lawrence Pankratz

Nominated by his daughter, Mary Tollefson

Dad, your story begins and ends each day in my heart. How I wish I could see the sparkle in your eyes and hear you speak of your day's happenings again.

To the readers of this article, I will offer facts and tributes about my Dad, Lawrence Pankratz, but my heart is telling me to write this from deep within myself. Dad is now lost to the world here but, in return, heaven gained a good man of character as well as a good soldier, husband, father, and grandfather.

My father was reunited with my mother, Olive, and my brother, Jim, when he died March 4, 2020. He was never a person to celebrate a specific date, as he would say, "A day is another day, a date goes by." For my family, there is no celebration of loss, but I can share some of the gains in my time with my father.

Dad had an impressive record of service during World War II and a 75 year record of service with the American Legion Post 54. The world and I were blessed that he shared many stories of his military service. Yes, there were times when he was silent, but through my persistence and love of history, he shared his journey. I was not going to let him have a war within himself nor was I going to lose a history that truly needed to be preserved. With the help of Shirley Mook, Don Schnitzler, PBS, and those special comrades at Post 54 American Legion in Marshfield, we have his recorded story.

Dad left Marshfield with the Red Arrow Division, Company C for training in Louisiana and then was sent to the WWII Pacific Theatre Campaign and the Philippine jungles. He left his family and wife to be, Olive Goldbach, a strong lady with the words, "I want to come back." His determination to come back became stronger each day of his five years in a war zone.

Dad fought in the Battle of Buna and others. He was hit by a sniper's bullet, which he told me, spun him right around a tree. The bullet gave him a first class trip to Australia on General McArthur's plane for medical care and recovery. It was just by chance that McArthur was visiting the battlefields when dad was shot, but he was proud to have ridden in this plane. After what probably wasn't a long enough recovery, Uncle Sam said you need to go back to your platoon. Physically healed, returning to the front lines still had to be frightening, but he knew he was needed there.

In July 1945, he got his ticket back home and to a waiting Olive. They married on April 24, 1946 starting a legacy of four children, eight grandchildren and nineteen great-grandchildren. Sadly, Mom died on January 11, 2011.



After their marriage, Dad started with a small 60-acre farm with 20 cows, two horses, and an old Ford tractor. Today the farm is a third generation-owned family farm, known as Pankratz Farms, milking 300 cows, with an army of machinery and many times more acreage.

My father took great pride in the American red, white and blue flag. As a child, I could fold a flag before a washcloth or towel -- and do so perfectly as he guided. The honor guard was Dad's mission for over 70 years. I asked him one day why his heart turned to this priority in life. His response was given very strictly, "Every soldier deserves to be honored in life but in death the honor is even more important. I can only give these soldiers a salute, but they gave all of us a future when death came." This is a strong lesson in respect from a man who had a hidden courage.

I realize this may be a somewhat different Marshfield's 150: Heroes and Leaders nomination article, but the truth is I miss my father and mother, and to me it is important to share these memories and remember the good and warmth this world needs any time of year. My parents gave me that lesson.

Lawrence Pankratz was one of the 123 members of National Guard Unit, Company C, 128th Infantry, 32nd Division which left Marshfield for Camp Beauregard, Louisiana on October 21, 1940. Nineteen of his Company C comrades gave their lives in the service of their country during World War II. Lawrence was the last surviving member of that unit until his passing in 2020 at the age of 100 years old.

On Veterans Day, as the nation honors military veterans — both living and dead — it is appropriate for the Marshfield community to remember the heroic service given by its men and women who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States.