

Flag Tribute 2022 – Stephen L Barkley, AGP

Sisters and Brothers, the American Flag carried in today is very special. You see, I sent that flag to someone deployed in Afghanistan and it has flown over that base; a reminder to the soldiers, each day, that they represent freedom in a place where freedom is hard fought and comes at a high price. You can see on the monitors that this flag was also used for the reenlistment ceremony, in a helicopter, for a young man who was willing to once again raise his hand in defense of our nation. I thank him and all our military, past, present and future, for their service and their sacrifice.

But today, I want to share with you a reading. This was penned by someone for whom the flag meant more than most of us can ever comprehend. This individual was a prisoner in Dachau, one of the infamous death camps of the Nazi Regime. Here is his story:

Fifty years ago, American soldiers saved me from the hell of Dachau. They nursed me back to health and restored my will to live. Yet, what I remember most of my liberation is my tears being spilled on a small American flag. From that day to this, my love for our flag has never faltered.

My story begins in 1940. When I was nine years old, the Germans took me from my home in Krasnik, Poland. For five years I was a prisoner of the Nazis in 10 death camps, where I saw thousands of men, women and children brutally murdered and starved or worked to death by the Nazi's death machine.

I lived on breadcrumbs, sawdust, human remains and one small prayer for redemption or death, whichever was quicker.

My prayers were answered on April 29, 1945, when the 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions of the U.S. 7th Army liberated me from Dachau. We were nursed for several days by these war-weary, but compassionate men and women until we had enough strength to travel to Munich for additional medical attention.

As we walked ever so slowly and unsteadily toward our salvation, a young American tank commander -- whose name I have never known -- jumped off his tank to help us in whatever way he could.

When he saw that I was just a young boy, despite my gaunt appearance, he stopped to offer me comfort and compassion. He gave me his own food. He touched my withered body with his hands and his heart. His love instilled in me a will to live, and I fell at his feet and shed my first tears in five years.

He kneeled by my side and gently wiped them away with his handkerchief. It was only

later, after he had gone, that I realized that his handkerchief was a small American flag, the first I had ever seen. It became my flag of redemption and freedom.

For more than 50 years I have cherished that flag. It represents the hope, freedom and life that the American soldiers returned to me when they found me, nursed me to health, and restored my faith in mankind. That is why today, I am working to help pass an amendment to the Constitution to protect our flag from physical desecration.

The memories of those heroes who liberated me will forever be a part of me. I show my gratitude to them for delivering me from hell every time I salute the flag that was theirs, and today is mine.

Even now, 50 years later, I am overcome with tears and gratitude whenever I see our glorious American flag because I know what it represents not only to me, but to millions around the world.

Perhaps only those who have had their humanity brutally torn from them as I did can fully appreciate this great country and what its flag represents. Yet every American, out of deference for the sacrifices that purchased and maintain their freedom, should revere and honor our flag.

Protest if you wish. Speak loudly, even curse our country and our flag, but, please, in the name of all those who died for our freedoms, don't physically harm what is so sacred to me and to countless others.

(The Citizens Flag Alliance – 2022)

Remember, Sisters and Brothers, that Freedom is a precious gift. It is paid for in blood and sweat and tears. Remember those who have laid down their lives. Remember those for whom all hope was lost until that flag appeared on the breast of someone willing to sacrifice their life to share that precious gift of Freedom.