



Rainier Oregon Historical Museum

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FROM COLUMBIA RIVER TOWBOATS TO SOUTH PACIFIC TANKS

by

William O. (Bill) Harrison

RUHS Class of 1956



(a)

KEITH DANIEL McMILAN was born at home in Rainier, Oregon, on September 3, 1908. He spent the first 18 years of his life in Rainier, where his father, James William (J.W.) McMilan was Postmaster for several years. His extended family, most of whom had moved from Floyd County, Virginia, were members of the Methodist Church in Rainier, participating actively in Church functions.

Keith attended grade school and high school in Rainier, graduating from newly-constructed, newly-organized Rainier Union High School on East E Street, in 1926. To quote one of his journals, written some fifty years after the fact:

“[Rainier] was a good place to be born and raised”



(b)



(c)

From his journal: “By present-day standards we were poor, but so were most of the other people in town ... nobody felt deprived, because that’s just the way things were ... the only rich people we saw were the passengers ... on the SP&S passenger train from Portland to Seaside (at least, we thought they were rich).”

During and after high school Keith worked on the river in towboats for Captain Milton Smith and, later, his son Wilbur. From his journal: “I was [one of] his first deckhand[s] on the Warrior, Wilbur’s first diesel-powered tugboat.... Wilbur and I did not get along well.”

Jobs became scarce as the Great Depression arrived. Keith enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and served for three years as a flight dispatcher, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He was offered the opportunity to go through pilot training, but, his journal says, “I don’t know now why I didn’t.”



(d)

After leaving the Army Air Corps, Keith was unable to find full-time work. When the Civilian Conservation Corps was formed in 1933, he joined. He became actively involved with the Medical Supply Section, which provided the medical commodities needed for the CCC camps to operate. He showed talent in the medical field and was encouraged by the Camp Commander to finish college and go to medical school.

Keith enrolled at the University of Oregon; after graduation, he attended Oregon’s medical school. He graduated from the University of Oregon School of Medicine in 1941, and began an Internship at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital in Los Angeles in July, 1941. From his 1941 daily journal of patients seen and events: “December 7, 1941. War with Japan. Japan [will be] whipped by June, ’42.”

In June, 1942, Keith finished his internship at Hollywood Presbyterian, and was recalled to active military duty, this time as Captain, Army Medical Corps. He reported for duty to the Training Battalion at Ford Ord, California. Again, from his journal: “So all we did was train, train, train, until it got to be a chore.”

Nineteen forty-three was also spent in training and maneuvers at several different bases in Oregon and California, preparing for the invasion of Japan. Finally, in March, 1944, the Regiment sailed from San Francisco to the South Pacific. Thirty-three days later they landed at Milne Bay on the southern tip of the island of New Guinea. The Regiment bivouacked there and settled in, but Keith and another doctor volunteered to join the 41st Infantry Division, then in active combat further north. A long day’s journey later, he landed on Biak Island, after traveling via General Krueger’s personal B-17; an Army landing craft; a Navy Auxiliary Seaplane Tender; a Catalina PBV amphibian; and a Navy landing craft.



Keith attached to the 41st Infantry Division as Battalion Surgeon, and set up his battalion aid station in a coral cave above the beach at Biak. The Japanese possessed the island; the Americans were assaulting it in several waves, including light tanks and 105mm howitzer artillery. From Keith’s journal: “That was when I got the Silver Star.”

(e)



(f)

To quote the Silver Star citation:

“By direction of the President ...a Silver Star decoration is awarded to ...Captain Keith D. McMilan ... for gallantry in action at Biak Island on 7 June 1944. Captain McMilan, surgeon of an infantry battalion, was with an aid station which had been established in a cave in a coral cliff overlooking the beach. In the afternoon of this date, [US] landing craft were moving in to the shore to discharge tanks. The enemy fired on the craft from the ridges behind and either side of the aid station. The landing craft returned fire which was directed into the aid station. When the tanks moved from the craft toward the aid station constantly firing, Captain McMilan, disregarding the danger to himself, left his covered position and, using a piece of white [bedsheet] as a signal flag, turned the tanks and the fire of the landing craft into the enemy position.”

He eventually returned to his original outfit, and proceeded to follow in the wake of subsequent invasions of New Guinea, the Philippines, and Okinawa. His only other serious life challenge during the war came while he was on New Hollandia. While sitting at a makeshift mess [dinner] table, he felt a tap on his combat boot. Looking down, he saw a medium-sized cobra striking at his foot. A pistol-shot ended that hazard. Keith skinned and tanned the cobra, and kept the hide for many years.

Keith was discharged from the Army in 1946, and moved with his family to Eugene, Oregon, where he joined a Pathology practice established by the same doctor who encouraged him to attend medical school years previously. Keith practiced medicine there for many years, becoming Oregon's first Forensic Pathologist. He served as President of the American Association of Blood Banks for a number of years, as well as many other state and local positions, particularly with the First Presbyterian Church in Eugene.

Captain McMilan, as did many other American soldiers in the Pacific War, acquired a combat trophy. This trophy was a Japanese battle flag that had been inside the helmet of an enemy soldier who was killed on Biak Island. As was the custom of the time, the flag had been inscribed with the name of the fallen soldier, his family, and other information. The flag hung in Keith's den for many years; I remember seeing it there when a college student at U of O, and asking about it. His answer was very brief and non-committal.

Many years after the War, Keith arranged for the Japanese Consul in Portland to attempt to contact the family of the fallen soldier. They were successful in doing so, primarily because a friend of Keith's son, Hollis, was able to translate the information written on the flag. The friend accompanied the flag to Japan to return it to the soldier's family. They were deeply grateful to receive this memento of their son. Thus ended the combat story of the tugboat deckhand who risked his life on a foreign island.

[The Silver Star is the third-highest personal decoration awarded for Valor in Combat in the U. S. Military, falling below only the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Crosses. Fewer than 150,000 have been awarded in the century since it was established.]

Notes: William O. (Bill) Harrison, MD is the nephew of Dr. Keith D. McMilan

(a) Smith towboat Warrior. (ROHM collection). (b) Keith and his family (Bill Harrison collection). (c) Keith as Uncle Sam; 4th of July, 1916 (from KDM's journal; by permission of Hollis McMilan). (d) Pre-flight at March Field, 1928-29; (from KDM's journal; by permission of Hollis McMilan). (e) Attack on Biak Island. (from KDM's journal; by permission of Hollis McMilan). (f) Keith's personal Silver Star medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign ribbon with three individual action stars; Combat Medic badge. Photo courtesy of Hollis McMilan (son of Dr. Keith McMilan).

Contact information:

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ROHM Vice President Duane Bernard: 503-556-9661
ROHM Historian Mike Clark: clarkmikew@aol.com

OUR NEWEST MEMBERS

4-11-20 through 8-8-2020

We have 190 members now.

Dale Beltz	Penny Karnoski
June Burnham	Barbara Larsen
Danny Clouse	Chris McDonald
Mike Clouse	Karen Alley Neal
James & Elaine Coffman	Rainier Auto & Truck Rainier Cemetery District
Jack & Nancy Cramer	
Ron Greer	Rainier Eagles #4022
Karen Holmberg	Doug & Judy Reid
Connie Budge	Barry Sather
Jane Sheldon	

LIFE MEMBERS

Lawrence (Buzz) and Alice Beck
Mike Avent
Harold & Elaine Davis

HONORARY MEMBERS

Steve and Jan Oliva
Carl Pellham
Columbia County Museum Association
Vernonia Pioneer Museum Association

Cemetery Fund Doners:

Teresa Bentley	Joyce Guasch	Willard & Kathryn	Terry Parrott
Duane Bernard	Carol Girt (twice)	McCollam	Carl Pellham
Janice Blahm	Vern Grimshaw	Carl Nys	Nola Russell
Sherry Evans	Kay Heflin	Paul & Judy Nys	Marilyn Van Natta
Cpt. Carl Ferguson	Rosalie Herstrom	Leona Wittwer	Robert Van Natta
	Judy Lepin	Ogren	Jan Wolz
			Connie Budge

President's Report and Museum News

By President Kay Heflin

Our museum continues to work to preserve Rainier's history. The grant for the Cemetery headstone repairs at the Woodbine and the Knights of Pythias Cemeteries was awarded to us and the Rainier Cemetery District. Repairs to 37 headstones will soon begin, and they are scheduled to be completed in September. Before and after pictures of the headstones will be in our next newsletter and a listing of new names of the donors. We sincerely thank our members and non-members who made donations to the cemetery fund. Your donations will allow two more headstones in the Neer City Cemetery to be repaired. Continued donations will allow the Rainier Cemetery District to make additional repairs where needed. You can make donations to the Cemetery Fund by sending a check to ROHM, PO Box 762, Rainier OR 97048. Note "cemetery fund" on your check.

The Coronavirus did not stop Rainier from having the Rainier Days Parade. ROHM sponsored the Rainier Days Grand Marshall, Loyed Rea. We had a safe and fun “Meet and Greet” for Loyed and his family and friends outside the Rainier Senior Center directly after the parade on July 11th. [picture by Robert Van Natta]



Bill Scholten driving Grand Marshall Loyed Rea to the meet and Greet at the Senior Center at the end of the Rainier Days parade.

Our museum continues to be opened every Saturday (except holiday weekends) from noon until 4:00 PM, with social distancing and masks required.

We have an announcement to make. Steve and Jan Oliva have donated a parcel of land to the Rainier Oregon Historical Museum located on West A Street just past the city treatment plant. We are very grateful, and we can't thank Steve and Jan Oliva enough for their generous gift that will have a huge impact on our museum and its future. If you would like to donate to our building fund, you can send a donation to ROHM, P.O. Box 762, Rainier, Oregon 97048. Make a note on your check that it is for the Rainier Museum building fund.

On August 5 our board members met with Margaret Magruder and Casey Garrett to walk to Little Jack Falls to continue efforts for the Rainier Oregon Historical Museum to work with Columbia County to build a historical bike and walking trail from Little Jack Falls Road to the Falls, following the original Columbia Rvr. Hwy.



Pictured from Left to Right: ROHM Vice President Duane Bernard; President Kay Heflin; ROHM Director Delyla Laughlin; Columbia County Commissioner Margaret Magruder; ROHM Secretary Sherry Evans; Casey Garrett Director, General Services, Columbia County Parks Dept.; and ROHM Director Rick Burnham in the back. . [Picture by Martha Van Natta]

This issue of our newsletter was paid for by members Dr. Bill Harrison, his wife Dr. Mary Harrison and brother, Bob Harrison. We thank them, and we hope that other members will step up and accept sponsoring a newsletter issue.

ROHM's Annual Meeting is Saturday, September 10, starting at 1:00. Our annual meeting is open to all our members. Voting may need to be done by ballot with limited groups allowed at a time, per spacing requirements due to the Covid 19 guidelines. We will be voting to fill the Treasurer position and a Director position. Delyla Laughlin, director #3 position is expiring. Delyla is an invaluable Director and she is always willing to step up and work where needed. Martha Van Natta has offered to continue as our Treasurer for another four years. Martha has been a very dependable and hard- working Treasurer. We need more people like Martha and Delyla as volunteers. If interested in being a volunteer or being on the board, please contact us or attend our annual meeting on September 10.

ROHM's bylaws as amended, will be voted on at ROHM's annual meeting on September 10. All Oregon Nonprofit organizations were directed to revise and amend their bylaws according to the Oregon Revised Statutes Chapter 65. The Rainier Oregon Historical Museum Bylaws Committee worked very hard combing through their bylaws making procedural changes. The proposed amendments of ROHM's bylaws are printed and at the museum available for your review before the September 10 annual meeting, and it can be viewed during museum hours which are Saturdays (except holiday weekends) from noon to four. Our contact information is on the membership page of this newsletter.

Our yearly Veteran's event is tentatively scheduled for Saturday, November 7, from noon until 4:00 PM. It will depend on restrictions imposed by Covid-19 cases in Columbia County at that time.

Rainier Museum Missing yearbook list as of 8-07-2019

No copies for; 1927, 1930, 1932, 1934, 1994, 1988, 2008, 2011. Our goal is to have two copies of each yearbook which will allow us to have one copy to archive and another copy to be available for visitors to look at.

Need second copies of yearbooks for; 1920, 1923,1924, 1926, 1927,1928, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1943, 1951, 1959, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012 thru 2018.

Missing one copy for 1991 middle school.

If you have a yearbook listed here and would like to donate it to our museum, you can send it to ROHM, PO Box 762, Rainier, OR 97048, or drop it off at the museum on Saturday, from noon to 4:00 (except major holiday weekends).

Rainier Oregon Historical Museum

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