



Medal of Honor Recipient, D-Day Veteran Laid to Rest

By Sgt. Daniel Stoutamire

Walter D. Ehlers, the last surviving recipient of the Medal of Honor from the Normandy campaign, was laid to rest Saturday, at Riverside National Cemetery in Riverside, Calif., in a ceremony attended by family, friends and admirers who came to pay their final respects to a great man.

Ehlers died Feb. 20, at the age of 92.

“It is our duty to honor his faithful and heroic service and to recognize his true place of distinction in the great Army story,” Lt. Gen. Perry Wiggins, commander of U.S. Army North and commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division from July 2008 to March 2009, said. “His service is a chapter in the fabric of our Army, which will endure long after we are done here today.”

In a legendary five-year military career, Ehlers was awarded the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and three Purple

Hearts in addition to the Medal of Honor, which he earned for his actions in Normandy, in June 1944, as a staff sergeant with the 1st Infantry Division’s 18th Infantry Regiment.

“He was one of the most decent men God has ever made, and he did live a good long life,” former California Gov. Pete Wilson said. “This is a celebration of his life, a life extraordinarily well-lived.”

The memorial ceremony was a testament to that. More than 500 were present around the picturesque Medal of Honor Memorial site at the cemetery, which Ehlers played an essential role in creating.

“He had one heck of a sense of humor,” friend and fellow Medal of Honor recipient Retired Marine Col. Jay Vargas said. “If he was here right now, he would probably be whispering in my ear, ‘Jay, what the heck are all these people doing here?’”

Soldiers from Ehlers' beloved 1st Inf. Div. served as pallbearers, on the honor guard and fired the salute volleys. A C-17 Globemaster transport plane from nearby March Air Reserve Base flew over the site in tribute.

Current and former service members of all branches of the military were in attendance, as well as those Ehlers personally inspired.

"I wanted to show my respect for him, to honor him and all those who serve and have given the ultimate (sacrifice) for their country," Denis Jana, a professor of history at Orange Coast College who attended the memorial, said. Ehlers once spoke to Jana's class.

"I remember how forthright and gentle and approachable he was. He was the quintessential hero of heroes," he said.

During the service, those close to Ehlers remembered his courage, commitment to duty and fierce warrior spirit, but also his love of family, his modesty and his humanity.

"This was a man who was a warrior," Wilson, who got to know Ehlers through his work with veterans' groups, said. "There's no doubt about that, but this was also one of the most gentle, kindest, most modest human beings I've ever encountered."

It was the nature of this Kansas farm boy's personality to never seek the spotlight and to downplay his own achievements. He always maintained that his brother Roland, who died on Omaha Beach on D-Day, was the real hero.

"Walt was simply and without any reservation the most decent, modest and unassuming man I've ever met," Ted Weggeland, a longtime friend of Ehlers, said.

Ehlers' modesty was such that colleagues at the Veterans' Administration who worked with him for more than a decade were surprised to learn they stood alongside a Medal of Honor recipient. Ehlers simply had not felt the need to advertise it.

He served tirelessly his whole life for veterans and veteran issues, and was often approached to speak about his experiences for newspapers and television. He was the keynote speaker at the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings in 1994, where he was in front of many world leaders.

"He delivered the most memorable speech of the day and his life," Weggeland said, "and I know with absolute perfect confidence that it never once occurred to him that the audience at that moment was sitting in awe of him." ■



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