

The Greatest Generation

Lowell Bjella '43

Lowell Bjella grew up five miles east of Bemidji, Minnesota. Lowell skied the two miles to the one room schoolhouse. When it came time for high school, Lowell attended Bemidji and then when his parents went to Phoenix for the winter, he went to Phoenix Union High School before coming to Crookston. Lowell considers the opportunity to attend the Northwest School of Agriculture (NWSA) as "one of the best things that ever happened" to him. "It was so helpful in adapting and adjusting to real life," Lowell says. He had many good friends, enjoyed wrestling, and lettered in football. "I had opportunities I would never have had in Bemidji," Lowell recalls, "I just didn't have access to transportation and the NWSA had so much to offer."

As a member of the 503rd Parachute Regiment and



The 503rd Parachute Regiment and Combat Team served in the Philippines.

Combat Team, Lowell E. Bjella served in the Philippines. He was stationed on Los Negro's Island. He entered the service May 7, 1944 at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Here is his story:

The first week in May 1944, I was inducted into the army. I was thankful that I had the opportunity to complete high school; many of my friends who did not attend the NWSA were not able to finish before being inducted into the service.

In May of 1945, our demolition team was given orders to escort a supply train of about forty Filipino civilians over the mountains on the Negro's Island. We cut cards to see who would stay back at camp. Col. Jones of the 503rd directed us to space ourselves so that everyone was protected. Halfway up the mountain, we were ambushed by the Japanese, as the farther they retreated back in the mountains, the more scarce food became and many of them were starving.

Colonel Jones directed someone to remove the bodies of Americans along the trail who had been deceased for some period of time. We arrived over the mountain and down in the valley where a major was stationed at an outpost. After a short discussion our colonel advised us that we would return after leaving the rations, but the Filipinos would stay with one armed guard, in case it was necessary to carry back any wounded.

Sgt. Bronoman held in his

hand six straws and whoever drew the shortest straw would stay until the major advised us to return. Yours truly drew the shortest straw.

A patrol did not return, but the major, after a few hours, advised us to go back to camp and we were told the war in Europe had ended. Now, if only the Japanese would surrender.

We had fought the Japanese in the mountains of the northern Philippine Islands. When the war ended, I weighed just 108 pounds, but I put 40 pounds back on within four months.

It was the first week in September 1945 when I was advised by my company commander, Lt. Sullivan that I was to escort 36 Japanese prisoners by air transport from Los Negro's Island to Tacloban on the island of Leyte. The Japanese were sending ships to pick up troops that had surrendered and Tacloban was the only place close that had a stockade and port facilities.

The Japanese prisoners were all very humble and polite, and they bowed frequently. They looked emaciated, but overall I think they were fairly healthy. After the prisoners were on the plane and in flight, I recall they were advised, in not very friendly terms by some of the American soldiers, that if any of them became ill they would be asked to exit.

While flying over Leyte, we could see armored equipment and supplies of every description as far as the eye could see. It had been stockpiled for the planned invasion of Japan,



Lowell Bjella '43, nicknamed "Bubbins" in the 1943 Aggie yearbook.

which was no longer necessary because of the atomic bomb.

Upon landing, when every prisoner was finally off the plane, I ordered them to follow me, and I heard the words "non ge deska" which means "do not understand." When I said we were all going to dinner, they followed me like sheep. They understood me when I told them it was time to eat.

After the Philippines, I was eventually sent to northern Japan where another paratrooper and I volunteered to be ski instructors near Moryoka. I was finally discharged in May 11, 1946.

Lowell spent 1 year 2 months and 23 days serving in the southern Philippines as a demolition specialist. He received the army occupation ribbon (Japan) Asiatic-Pacific Theater Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal, and the Philippine Liberation Ribbon with a bronze star and seven parachute jumps in flight. Total service: 2 years, 4 days, 14 hours, and 12 minutes. ♦

