

SATURDAY, JULY 4, 2009

His Last Fourth

(This article about our friend Steve was on the front page of our local newspaper. I couldn't think of a better post for today as we celebrate Independence Day! God bless you Steve! We love you!)



Cliff Jette/The Gazette

Vietnam veteran Steve Power beams while sitting with the flags on the First Avenue Bridge in Cedar Rapids. Power, dying of an inoperable brain tumor, has helped put up the flags on the bridges for years, missing only Memorial Day and the Fourth this year because he's now partially paralyzed and going blind. At this point, he says, he's grateful he's lived to see the flags he loves fly once more.

His last Fourth

A veteran who supported other vets gives a final salute

By Tom Fruehling

Freelance writer

Steve Power's dying wish was to help raise the American flags over the Cedar Rapids downtown bridges just one more time.

For the first time in more than 20 years, he missed putting them up for the Memorial Day holiday weekend.

“Yeah, and some of my vet buddies said they just didn’t look right,” he jokes.

Told in January that a brain tumor would probably kill him in a matter of weeks, he never figured he’d make it to the Fourth of July.

He is paralyzed on his left side, and his right arm and leg are pretty shaky, too. He’s blind in one eye and losing sight in the other. When he’s not in bed at the Manor Care nursing home, he’s in a wheelchair. But his mind is right. And his patriotic spirit is as high as ever.

He knew his longtime buddy and fellow Vietnam veteran Richard Becker would have to carry on without him, assisting the city crews with Fourth of July flag duty. So his family did the next best thing, making sure Power at least got to see the Avenue of the Flags, perhaps for the last time.

It was an impromptu little ceremony Thursday afternoon, on a bright sunny day in a shady corner on the west side of First Avenue.

Two of Power’s three adult children were there, along with two sisters and their husbands and his 80-year-old mother, Pat Power.

Daughter Alissa had brought her dad’s red, white and blue cap. Power, in his wheelchair, was wearing a shirt with a flag. A lot of tears were shed. “This is a great day,” Power said. “Thanks for doing this for me.”

Power says he’s always been a patriotic guy. He enlisted in the Army right out of Kennedy High School in 1969 and was sent to combat in Vietnam in July 1972. He volunteered to stay six months beyond his one year tour of duty. He was in military intelligence, interrogating enemy captives and plotting troop movements.

Like thousands of others who served, he was exposed to the toxic Agent Orange defoliant while in the jungles of the Central Highlands. Doctors think that may have caused his brain tumor.

While he married and divorced and raised three kids, he worked steady manufacturing jobs in Cedar Rapids all his life. He also stayed close to veterans.

Now 58, he even tried to re-enlist in the military after 9/11. He says he was disappointed when a Marine recruiter turned him down.

In addition to putting up flags on the bridges, Power has, for at least the last 10 years, delivered bronze grave markers to the survivors of veterans who die. Frank Nosek of Cedar Rapids had done it for years, and his daughter, Pam, promised him that someone would carry on after he was gone.

“I kept them in the trunk of my car,” Power explains. “And when I’d see a vet’s obit in the paper, I’d take a marker for the family to the funeral home. Sometimes I’d have six or seven in a day. “But I think it meant a lot to the families.”

Don Tyne, who’s been close to Power since taking over the office of Veteran Affairs, says few match his friend’s dedication. “He’s one of those guys who does things for people behind the headlines,” Tyne says. In fact, Tyne says, even though Power lost his home and everything in it in last year’s flood, he was more concerned with seeing what he could do for other flood victims, especially veterans who were down and out.

When Power started having problems standing at work in January, Tyne insisted on taking him to Iowa City to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. A biopsy revealed an inoperable brain tumor.

“I woke up, and I was paralyzed,” Power remembers. “They don’t know what caused it, maybe just bad luck. But they told me the bright side was I had three or four weeks of quality life with my family.” So Power, not one for self-pity, is living — not dying — one day at a time.

He’s been an active volunteer and member of the Mission of Hope congregation since it formed several years ago. Two months ago, he invited his family to go with him to hear the gospel music group he’s asked to sing at his funeral. Power even gave a little talk, telling his friends and family how much they meant to him. And he said he was ready to die.

According to his pastor, Barb Furman, who founded Mission of Hope, “Steve has a real compassion for others. And he has a wonderful attitude about dying. . . . He knows he’s right with the Lord and is grateful for what the Lord has given him.”

At the very least, Power says, he’s lived to see the flags he loves fly once more. “The way I look at it,” he says, “I was told a long time ago I had a few weeks to live. So every day I wake up, I make the best of it.”