



LEE HENKLE WITH HIS PARENTS, ZOE AND EDWARD HENKLE, OUTSIDE HIS CHILDHOOD HOME IN SUNNYSIDE, WASHINGTON.

The Quiet Hero

A Life and Legacy of Helping Others

The modest home in rural Sunnyside, Washington, belies the remarkable person who lived inside its walls for so many years. Edward “Lee” Henkle was a quiet hero who served his country during World War II, a farmer who worked the land, and a mountaineer who rescued and recovered those who were lost on the unforgiving terrain of Mount Rainier. He lived simply, without seeking accolades or fortune.

At the time of his passing in January 2015, Henkle had made sure that his life of service would continue on in perpetuity. He gifted his estate—estimated to be worth between one and two million dollars—to several Yakima-area organizations, including Heritage University and Yakima Valley Community College.

“His life was invested in service to others,” said Max Amundson, whose father, also a decorated WWII veteran, had been Henkle’s best friend since their youth. “Lee’s opinion was that the wealth provided toward education would multiply itself many, many times.”

Henkle directed his gift to Heritage to provide scholarships for students.

“It was Lee’s wish,” said Amundson, “that the recipients would use the education they will receive at Heritage to better their lives and better the lives of a great many.”

Henkle was born eight years before the Great Depression in Sunnyside, Washington, on a farm located just one mile from where he passed away some 93 years later. His parents raised beef cattle and grew corn and asparagus.

“He had great respect for their way of life, as well as for the work migrant workers did. It was backbreaking, and what they did was not lost on him,” said Amundson. “His respect for them is reflected in the gift to the university. He hoped to help the students—some the children of migrants—that Heritage serves.”

Life during the Depression taught Henkle a self-sufficiency and a selflessness that would stay with him his entire life.

Amundson explained, “There’s an old saying: ‘Use it up, wear it out, make do or do without.’ That exemplified the way they lived their lives. You did your best. You helped each other.”

At the age of 20, Henkle entered the Army Air Corps, and his ROTC training led him to become a pilot. During World War II, he flew a P-38 Twin Tail fighter plane.

“He was to strike ‘targets of opportunity,’” said Amundson.

On April 15, 1944, he was on a mission near Dummer Lake in Germany en route to a German air base when his plane was shot down by Luftwaffe fighters. With his left engine disabled and his aircraft in flames, and with extensive burns on the upper part of his body, the



One cold January night, thousands of imprisoned British and American soldiers at Stalag Luft III began a forced march. The Russian offensive was coming from the east. On the direct orders of Hitler, prisoners were evacuated and forced to march in bitter cold, with little food. The Long March, as it would be known, stretched over three months and across three countries: Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

On April 29, 1945, the soldiers were liberated by the United States Third Army. Henkle returned to the United States. He was awarded a Purple Heart and joined the Air Reserves, serving as a lieutenant colonel until his retirement.

The effects of his wartime experience never left him. He suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including depression and nightmares. Previous frostbite left his feet often numb or painful.

He returned to farming and, beginning in the 1960s, found some measure of peace in the solitude of the Cascade Mountains. He served as a U.S. Forest Service ranger and advanced mountain rescue medic in the summers. Ski patrol at White Pass Ski Resort was his winter job.

“Mount Rainier is unforgiving,” said Amundson, “but he’d jump out of a helicopter onto a glacier if he needed to save someone.

young pilot struggled to climb in elevation in order to have sufficient altitude to parachute down.

He managed to engage his parachute and landed in the water. Local fishermen rescued him and brought him to shore. But fear of being shot for protecting the enemy led them to turn him in to the German military. Henkle spent the next 12 and a half months as a prisoner of war (POW).

Life was excruciatingly difficult for POWs. Crowded into dilapidated barracks, the emaciated prisoners had little food. The “lucky” ones slept on gunnysack mattresses infested with fleas and lice; the unlucky ones slept on floors, tables or the ground. Dysentery was rampant.

“The Germans were particularly tough on Lee for not being loyal to the fatherland,” said Amundson.

“He’d jump out of a helicopter onto a glacier if he needed to save someone.”



HENKLE, PICTURED WITH HIS MOTHER, ZOE HENKLE, SPENT HIS SUMMERS AS A PARK RANGER AT MOUNT RAINIER.

“The snow caves were a favorite place. He’d go in there with a foam pad and sleeping bag and melt snow for water.”

Henkle climbed to the summit of Mount Rainier 53 times.

Amundson followed in Henkle’s footsteps as a mountaineer. They shared a special connection in that way, said Amundson.

“He was known for his independence and for his stoic personality, and that’s how I knew him,” said Amundson.

Though reserved, Henkle was known for his dry wit.

Describing a postcard Henkle once sent from the Middle East showing a large crowd prostrate in prayer, Amundson said Henkle wrote on the back “As you can see, the locals have turned out in mass for my arrival.”

Amundson said it was directly related to his PTSD that Henkle never had a family of his own.

Though Henkle spent holidays and other special times with the Amundsons, there was much Max Amundson never knew about his friend.

“Going through his house after he passed away, I learned more than half of what I know about him.

“He lived a careful, thoughtful life. He was a man who experienced a great many stresses and challenges in life, both delivered upon him and those he chose for himself.

“I miss his presence.

“He had no survivors other than friends and one cousin. But he touched all he helped, and he helped many.”



HENKLE WAS PART OF MANY RESCUE AND RECOVERY MISSIONS ON MT. RAINIER, INCLUDING THIS 1981 TRAGEDY WHEN 11 MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS WERE BURIED UNDER AN AVALANCHE OF ICE AND SNOW.