

World War I veteran ponders meaning of the flag

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Robert Benedict, a resident at St. Ann's Home/The Heritage, sat in his chair and looked out the window at a U.S. flag blowing in the breeze in front of the facility.

As he drew on his pipe, the 95-year-old Catholic Marine veteran rhapsodized about his love for the flag and what it represents.

"I wonder how the flag goes," said Benedict. "And when it's not flying, I'm wondering."

Part of the reason the flag still flies is due to men like Benedict, who served during World War I. The son of a Utica tailor, he enlisted in the Marines in 1917. Benedict was wounded at Belleau Wood, a small forest outside of Paris, France, where allied and German forces battled in 1918.

As pipe smoke ringed his face, Benedict recalled the day when the enemy injured him twice.

Early one morning during the course of the battle, a fellow Marine pointed out to an unaware Benedict that he had just fallen victim to sniper fire.

"Someone said, 'Bennie, your face is covered with blood,'" Benedict recalled. "There was blood between my fingers. I looked up and there was a hole through my arm."

The bullet had passed clean through Benedict's left bicep. By rights, the young man should have sought immediate medical attention. Instead, he continued battling the Germans throughout the day, only to encounter the enemy once again that afternoon.

The machine gunners nearly cut



Robert Benedict enjoys one of his favorite activities in retirement — smoking his pipe. The 95-year-old Catholic war veteran lives at St. Ann's Home/The Heritage with his wife, Mary.

Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

down the Marine when their fire hit his left thigh. The bullets tore open most of the young Benedict's upper leg.

"I had what they said was the longest and largest wound in the service," Benedict remembered.

His doctor considered amputating the leg, but was fearful that once the leg was gone Benedict might experience further complications. So they left his leg intact, but Benedict was now a disabled veteran.

"I came back on a hospital ship," he said. "In fact, I was on crutches two-to-three months."

Part of his convalescence was spent

showing his wound to medical students and other physicians, he added with a smile.

"They took pictures of my leg, and passed them around," he said.

After the war, Benedict trained in clothing design with an organization for disabled vets. In fact, he spent most of his post-war career in the clothing-design business.

He also worked for a veteran's relief agency that employed his future wife, Mary H. Benedict, who in 1927 became a caseworker for the agency.

Mary and Robert met again about 10 years through Robert's niece, who served as Mary's anesthesiologist dur-

ing an operation. The couple's marriage is the second for both.

Mary, however, didn't recall her second husband being that interested in her the first time they met.

"He wouldn't look at me," Mary joked. "He says he gave me a ride home once."

At that time, Mary had just completed public welfare studies at the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Md. Looking back on that decade, Mary said during one of her vacations to Atlantic City, she saw Alfred E. Smith, Catholic governor of New York, walking along the boardwalk.

And in this presidential election year, Robert reflected on Smith's Democratic presidential candidacy in 1928, the first ever for a Roman Catholic in the United States.

"He got licked — and licked pretty bad," Benedict remembered of Smith's landslide defeat to Herbert Hoover.

Politics, however, didn't interest Benedict as much as veterans' rights, for he which he has worked continually most of his life.

"I was involved with helping other veterans get what they had coming," he said.

And now, when he smokes his pipe and ponders the flag that waves over his current home, the memory of what he and his fellow vets accomplished comes back to Benedict.

"I look at that and I'm so happy," Benedict said of the flag.

Then, pausing a moment, he remembered what else it means to sit and watch it.

"A lot of the fellows you were with didn't come back," he concluded.

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