

Family reveals Korean War POW story - Sgt. Robert T. Hesselink

By Mardi Suhs CADILLAC NEWS
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Sgt. Robert T. Hesselink's widow Beverly Strom, 88 and his daughter Dawn Van Amberg of Commerce Township, shared the story of Hesselink's capture and treatment during the Korean War.

On a crisp fall day in 1953, Beverly Mischler met a blind date at Johnny's Restaurant in Cadillac. Her girlfriend, Ardath Williams, couldn't wait for her to meet the tall, handsome man her husband Dale had met during the Korean War.

Six weeks later Beverly and Robert T. Hesselink were married. Thirteen years and seven children later, Hesselink died of injuries sustained as a prisoner of war in Korea. Williams and Hesselink met in North Korean prison camps. They were each held almost three years.

HOW MUCH SHOULD I WALK TO LOSE 45 LBS ACCORDING TO MY AGE?

HEIGHT	WEIGHT	LEVEL	GOAL WEIGHT	AGE
5'0"	215	BEGINNER	108	64
5'1"	250	INTERMEDIATE	136	65
5'2"	260	ADVANCED	144	66
5'3"	285		154	67

CALCULATE

Hesselink volunteered for service in January 1949. Five months later the war began between North and South Korea. He was taken captive by the Chinese on Nov. 28, 1950.

When he finally came home, he didn't discuss the war after the first flurry of newspaper interviews. He just wanted to start living his American dream. He fell in love with his blind date, married and began raising a large family.

Beverly Strom, 88, Hesselink's widow, along with her daughter Dawn Van Amberg, brought photos and yellowed newspaper stories to recount his story.

Hesselink told his wife that after a brutal attack on Nov. 27, 1950, half of his unit was wounded or killed by the time the officers shouted, "Every man for himself."

See He suffered on page V-7

He was captured the next day and forced to walk a 'death march' to prison camp. Prisoners who fell behind were killed. Men died of starvation and dehydration every day.

Hesselink arrived at the "Death Valley Mining Camp" in North Korea on Christmas night. After one month he was marched further north to Pi-Tong, where he stayed nine months. From there he was marched to Camp No. 3, Chiang-Song until the truce was signed in July 1953.



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At the camps, Chinese propaganda blasted through speakers to convert the GIs to their cause. Those who resisted faced harsh repercussions, including hard labor and torture. There was little food and no warm clothes in sub-zero temperatures during winter months. Many died of malnutrition.

"He told me one time they put him in a hole with a grate," Beverly said. "He was 6-feet, 2-inches tall. They took bamboo sticks and beat him on the head."

When he wrote home, Hesselink painted a cheerful picture of warm clothes and food. All lies. The letters were censored. Truth was not allowed.

Married Life

Hesselink's wife and seven children had no idea how much he suffered from his war injuries. And after his release in 1953, he never complained.

"He hid it all," said Van Amberg, 64. "He loved to take the kids fishing but he suffered in silence."



Life was good for the young family. They made their first home in Cadillac, then Big Rapids followed by a move to Florida, where he was the production superintendent for a manufacturing firm.

But as their family grew, Beverly observed behaviors that made her realize he wasn't well. He began to drink too much. And he had angry outbursts.



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"My grandfather had a photographic memory which probably caused him to drink," wrote granddaughter Denise Hesselink in a 1997 school assignment. "I imagine that every time he would start to picture those three years he spent in hell... he had to relive the same pain and torture..."

"When my grandfather came back... he only weighed 90 pounds," she wrote. "He also had heart and lung problems. He never regained his strength. My grandfather grew very ill a couple of months before his 37th birthday. The cause of his death was related to... the Korean War."

When his autopsy was released, Beverly needed a nurse to explain all the conditions listed. But the main cause of death was cerebral edema, swelling that occurs in the brain after traumatic brain injury. That injury caused his heart to fail.

While the family was living in Florida, Hesselink had knee surgery. His wife learned later that the doctor told him that he didn't have long to live.

"He knew he was dying but he didn't tell us," Van Amberg said. "He wanted to come home before he passed away to be near his parents."

The family moved into the old Pleasant Lake school house. Hesselink filled all the kids' bedrooms with new furniture and made sure they spent lots of time together.

"One day he wasn't feeling good," Beverly recalled. "I took him to the doctor and he was admitted to the hospital where he died in a matter of days."



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"We had everything," Van Amberg said. "But we didn't have a phone. And we had a knock on the door. That's when we learned that our father had died."

"The biggest thing is — how can somebody go to war at such a young age, survive the abuse of 999 days of imprisonment, meet the love of his life, raise 7 kids in 13 years," she added. "And then pass away not knowing you would die at such a young age as a result of the war."

“What meant the most to me during those years we had together, is that he was a very good father,” Beverly said. “He loved his children with a passion.”

Beverly and her daughter Van Amberg shared memories of the man they loved who was taken too soon. But they are thankful for the recent recognition given to him and Dale H. Williams on September 16, during the POW/MIA Recognition Day.

“My father was finally recognized for what he did and how he served this nation,” Van Amberg said.

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