

January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022

I am Suzi Terrell from the La Center Historical Museum and I'd like to tell you a story, a story that I feel very privileged to have been a part of and one I think is pretty incredible. I've looked for duplicates of others who may have had this same experience, but so far haven't found another like it.

You see a year ago on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 we got a surprise inquiry on our museum's website that set off all kinds of red flags and had warning alarms ringing! Now that might be a bit of an overreaction on my part, but for me it put my guard up and I went into a very protective mode that took me a while to ... relax, trust and enjoy the events caused by it.



So let me back up just a minute and give you a little background by introducing the central character of this story, Mr. Kenneth Viles. He grew up in La Center and has lived here most of his life. I had the pleasure of recording an oral interview with him several years ago and hearing firsthand the story of him being captured by the Chinese on his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday during the Korean War. We posted the transcript of this interview on the museum's website and that's when this story began.

Here is the page that drew the attention from China with that first initial email. The senders name was Bing Xi and he was writing hoping I would put him in touch with our local POW Private Kenneth Viles because he had an item of his from the war that he wanted to return. Well I was very protective of "our" Ken – I thought of him as a courageous survivor of an awful war who may not want old memories surfacing.



So rather than providing Ken's contact information I asked Bing exactly why he was trying to connect with Ken so I could approach Ken to see if he was open to or wanted the attention. Being the skeptic I am, I also asked if there would be money involved to have the item returned.

Now to go back and explain my "overreaction" - when I first saw where the email was from ... it was of all places - the People's Republic of China. After we'd just gone through one of our darkest years in world  
(@) Suzi Terrell

history in dealing with COVID and knowing where it was thought to have originated from ... I was immediately “put off”.

Then Bing immediately wrote back -

*Dear Suzi*

*Thank you so much for your help! I live in Beijing and am writing trying to find Mr. Kenneth with our true respect, and we heartfully wish that everything is very well with him.*

*The reason I am looking for him is that one of my friends, Mr. Liu has his soldier ID (his service number is 19405177) which was captured in the early 50's in Korea when Mr. Kenneth was a POW. Please see attached picture of the ID and the badge. We are so much concern about the badge with a bullet hole on it. We are eager to know if Mr. Kenneth was wounded on the arm?*



*It all happened 70 years ago and as the new generation I feel it would be a valuable memory for both of us and what we hope is to heal the open wound, not at all for a cent. We will not sell it. The badge and the ID are at my friend home. Mr. Liu's father was an army man in the Korean War and got them there. His father passed away years ago, no one ever noticed those until last year.*

*We really care about him and wish everything going well with him. We must admit that the past Korean War was a tragedy for all involved and no one else would like to have it again now or in the future.*

*Today most of army men who attended that war are pass away in China and I believe the same in USA. Those who still alive are the witnesses of it, they would not forget the time and the experience they had in the battlefield. Finding the soldier ID is just like opening the cover of the memory box. We pray for peace, we pray for every best to him.*

*Thank you again,*

*Xi Bing*

After reading Bing's response, I contacted Ken and told him about the emails. I was surprised at Ken's willingness and interest in hearing more. I showed Ken the photo of the items in question and he recognized right away saying his ID card was taken from him when he was captured. But he said the patch was not his as he didn't get one like it until he was released plus - *he wasn't shot!!*

Ken's excitement level heightened. He was eager for more information and further contact. So when Bing wrote "*We have got Kenth's photo from website but Mr. Liu asked if Mr. Kenth could send him some more recent ones.*" we gladly sent a few photos.

Within days Bing wrote again –

*Dear Suzi*

*Please allow me to reconfirm that the purpose I contact Mr. Kenneth is not for any money, not a cent. This is the history both of our people together made and we would like to see it ended.*

*My friend's father passed away with some small things left with his own life. It will be a good news some day we can find the original owner. But I have to make it clear that the tag and the ID are not mine they belong to my friends. I wrote theses letters just to help him make contact with Mr. Kenneth. So as how to deal with those items will be his decision. One thing I can certainly say is "NOT FOR MONEY". We are here for friendship.*

*He feels very happy now when got to know the news that Mr. Kenneth is still there. Thank GOD!*

*With my best wishes.*

*Xi Bing*

These reassurances put both Ken and I more at ease, if not enthusiastic for more information and we were eagerly awaiting their next messages.

So I'd now like to take a moment and introduce the young child in this photo. Pictured is Liu Puliang with his parents ... Mr. Liu (the father) was then a commander of Chinese Volunteer Army fighting battles in Korea.

*Hi Suzi*

*I passed your letter to my friend Mr. Liu with Kenth's photo. He is very emotional. He told me that ever*



*since he was a little boy he had the wish to get to know the owners of the items.*

*Around Sept. to Dec. 1951, his father led his troops joined the battle of Tiewon, Korea. The battle was very hard and cruel that so many soldiers died or wounded. The patch and the card were all from there.*

*My friend said it is his wish for years after he got to know the story from his father to find the owners and return these items to them.*

*It is 70 years since Kenth joined US Army, took the trainings and arrived in Korea battle field, at the same year, had his new experience with Chinese Army. No one would ever forget that but we as the new generation would hope the history will not happen again.*

*With our good wishes to Kenth and thanks to you.*

*Xi Bing*

That boy is now grown and Bing said *is now a documentary film director working for China Central TV the national TV station and once said to me that he had a strong willing to make a piece of video program about the items as a historical memory for both of his father and his own children.*

Then came our first and only email from **Liu Puliang**

*Dear Suzi and Ken,*

*I want to tell you what that after receiving the reply from Mr.Kenth, there are some clear pictures emerged in my mind:*

*A sunny morning, the forest covered with the veil of mist, Mr. Kenth stands at the doorway of the La Center Museum with a warm smile on his face. A car reaches slowly and stopped nearby, door opens, I get out of the car. I hold the green color soldier ID walking forward in a faster pace to him and then hand it solemnly to Kenth. We shake hands and embrace with each other. White pigeons are flying around.*



*A dream that never happened - Thx you AI*

*I firmly believe that both of Chinese people and American people are great peoples, I would like to reach out my hands, crossing the vast pacific ocean, to hold his hands, returning him personally the soldier ID which was lost for more than 70 years.*

*I especially wish that I could tell the touching story to everyone who are kind and peace lovers around the world by means of a documentary film.*

*My best wishes to Mr. Kenth and you all.*

*Truly Yours*

***Liu Puliang***



Ken was very excited over all of this especially when Bing sent this picture of Mr. Liu. As soon as I showed it to him he said “That’s him! That’s the man who captured me! Well again being the skeptic that I am, I questioned – was he sure? After 70 years could his memory be playing tricks on him. Ken looked at me a said “without question – you do NOT forget a man who held you at gun point marching you through his lines of Chinese soldiers, who then saved your life not once but twice ... you don’t forget his face. This man threw me down into a rice paddy and covered me with his own body as American planes zoomed overhead hurling fire at the troops below. We were face to face in the mud –you don’t forget that!”

I felt humbled by Ken. He’d been through so much in the war and I knew so little. In fact all I’d really known about the Korean War was from the old TV series of M\*A\*S\*H with Radar and Hot Lips Houlihan!! So I was truly gratefully for everything I was learning through him and these many correspondences.

One of which was “why” the officer had saved Ken’s life when he was holding him captive. Ken said there was a very strict policy after WWII. You could work prisoners (and boy they did!) but it had to be done with a humanitarian spirit, and in accordance with the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war.

The other big surprise was when Bing started sending me many articles, some translated some not, but these about Olympic style games between POW camps really fascinated me.



The POW camp organized the "Olympic" games, and the competitors included prisoners of war from 11 countries including the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Australia, the Netherlands, South Korea, the Philippines, Belgium, Greece, and Poland. The competitions included football, basketball, volleyball, and baseball. American football, track and field, gymnastics, boxing, ~~and other~~ ~~forms of events~~.



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The Olympic Games in the POW camp lasted two weeks and ended in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere.

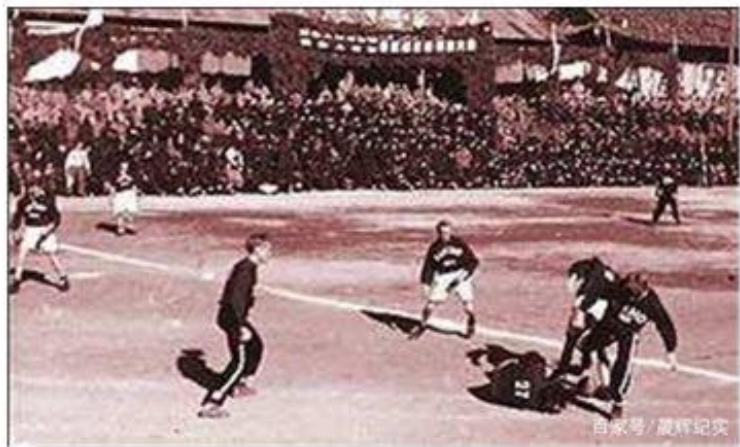


The parallel bars performed by the prisoners of the South Korean Army in gymnastics are amazing.

My first thought was it was pure propaganda, but Ken said, “No it was true! They were great! The best things that happened. It was the POWs who came up with having them. Each camp had their own teams in basketball, football and soccer. They were great because it meant POWs went from camp to camp and got to talk with each other and see what theirs was like. Unfortunately, it was these games that gave us POW’s a bad name – other survivors said we weren’t real soldiers – that we had just been in a type of ‘summer camp’ while they were our fighting and dying. Well let tell you – “I” wasn’t in a ‘summer camp’ ... I was in hell! I almost died several times and wanted to many other times.”

Moving forward:

I started wondering if other POW's had ever been contacted like this or had their items returned to them, so I hunted and asked questions on several military social media sites ... but never found another. People have been amazed as I have been and in awe of these events. One I am proud to be a part of!



British prisoner of war Paohok Ryan is an all-rounder who participated in 100-meter, 200-meter, and 400-meter hurdles and long jump competitions. Finally participated in a football match.

This story eventually became known to the four of us as *Finding Private Kenneth* with emails being sent back and forth at furious speeds at times ... until one day they stopped. Three months would go by before we might get just a 2-3 sentence hello, and then another in 3 more months ... until they completely stopped in November. But for Ken and I, though the story was short lived, this exchange between strangers putting us together with a momentous and meaningful bond that we’d never ever expected or hoped for, was “enough”.

So in closing, I want to express a very heartfelt **Thank You** to Bing Xi and Puliang Liu but especially to Ken Viles. At one point I wrote to Bing that I thought he and I were kindred spirits (Zhìqù xiāngtóu??) as we both love history and are immersed in helping our friends connect to each other. It's been my pleasure meeting you! I feel quite honored to have shared in and made this incredible journey with each of you.