



GRADUATING IN STYLE – Members of the Swinomish Canoe Family lead tribal La Conner High School graduates, dressed for success, to the annual Cedar Hats and Eagle Feathers ceremony at Swadabs Landing Park. The honored guests received prayers and words of encouragement from multiple speakers.
– Photo by Bill Reynolds

Cedar Hat and Eagle Feather program honors Swinomish grads

By Bill Reynolds

High school and college graduates always look sharp this time of year in their caps and gowns.

But for true style points, it is hard to beat La Conner’s Swinomish high school graduates, who were decked out in colorful blankets, traditional cedar hats and eagle feathers for special pre-commencement ceremonies at Swadabs Landing Park last Wednesday.

There was plenty of substance, too.

Prayer warriors and Swinomish senators provided congratulations and words of encouragement to the community’s 2021 graduates, who will join their La Conner high classmates for commencement exercises this Friday at Whittaker Field.

Barb James addressed the graduates as both a tribal senator and prayer warrior at the annual Cedar Hat and Eagle Feather presentation.

“You’re blessed,” she told the Swinomish teens. “Your graduation is so special to yourselves, your families and your community. Looking at each of you now, my heart feels very proud.”

James shared a prayer of her late grandmother saying no matter where Swinomish grads go

in life to make their respective marks on the world, they can count on an unwavering support network at home.

“The moment you were born,” she reminded them, “there were smiles on people’s faces. When you have those challenges in life, know that I’m on your side hoping you make the right choices.”

“Please know that you’re loved,” James said, “because I feel reassured that each of you have someone looking after you.”

Doug York prayed that the tribal graduates be blessed with hope and bright futures.

“Let them go boldly and cheerfully into the future,” he implored.

Joe McCoy of the Indian Shaker Church praised the Swinomish graduates for their academic achievements thus far and said they have the good fortune of carving out further academic success and accomplishments while still in their youth.

McCoy, by contrast, had to wait until he was a senior citizen before enrolling in college, graduating at age 70.

“I had a grade point average of 3.7,” he recalled. “I shocked myself and couldn’t help but wonder what I could’ve accomplished if I’d had that opportunity when I

was younger.”

Speaking to parents and grandparents in the audience, McCoy harkened back to words he heard while growing up.

“Enjoy your children while they’re young,” McCoy advised. “When they’re grown, that’s when you pray.”

Swinomish Senator Brian Porter encouraged the tribal graduates to embrace the future knowing the ones that love them have their backs.

“We’ve all been through this,” said Porter. “We call it commencement. It’s the end of one thing and the start of something else.”

“Everyone sitting here is your community,” he added. “We will always be here for you. I went to school in Kansas – a long way from home. But know that home is always here.”

Senate Chairman Steve Edwards sent the grads off with counsel designed to last a lifetime.

“Always look forward,” he said, “in order to be successful. Don’t ever doubt yourself.”

There could be no doubt, of course, that on this day the Swinomish grads were dressed for success.

Book review: ‘The Medic: A World War II Story’

A medic’s survival through prisoner of war hell

By Ken Stern

“War is hell,” U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman said late in life. He had proved it in 1864, laying waste to a swath of Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah, helping to shorten and win the Civil War. War became more hellish in the 20th century, proven very specifically by the Japanese Imperial Army’s treatment of allied prisoners of war in the Bataan Death March after the Philippines fell in 1942.

Yet men do remain humane and compassionate through unimaginable deprivation and the hell of being a prisoner of war and a slave laborer in a mine in Japan. Henry Chamberlain probably survived his capture in April 1942 and over three years as a prisoner of war because of his humanity. Chamberlain, a greater La Conner resident, tells his story in “The Medic,” Shelter Bay author Claire Swedberg’s new book, just published by Stackpole Books.

Subtitled “A World War II Story of Imprisonment, Hope, and Survival,” hope – and generosity – are the remarkable traits that brought a small town Nebraska 19 year old through the war, a military career, a 2017 visit to the mine in Japan and to recounting his story to Swedberg, who has written two other World War II prisoner of war histories.

Chamberlain’s military career

started with his request to transfer from his rifleman position to medical training. “I don’t want to kill people,” he told his sergeant. He told Swedberg, “Somewhere in my religious training I’d learned that much.” Never. It wasn’t right,” though he was the top sharpshooter in his training class. As a boy, medicine was his aspiration, his empathy raised by weeks in the hospital with diphtheria. Trained as a medic and

surgical technician by the U.S. Army, he was sent to the Philippines in October 1941. From that December, when the Japanese invaded the Philippines, through late 1944, he worked at field hospitals, first for the army, then in POW camps.

The prisoner hospitals from the war’s start were overcrowded, understaffed and not equipped with medicine, supplies or tools for the most basic bandaging of wounds, much less any surgery. There was no electricity and water was in short supply. Without anesthetics, a patient was held down by a group of men and only stopped struggling when passed out from the pain. Surgeons strived to finish before the patient recovered consciousness.

The Japanese deliberately withheld life’s necessities: food water, medicine, shelter, clothes and healthcare.

The prisoners lived a cruel irony of wasting away from starvation rations of rice balls and little water and walking and sleeping in layers of excrement, urine and vomit. Everyone was starving. Everyone was sick with malaria, parasitic worms, diarrhea and dysentery. Sores and open wounds were common and flies, mosquitoes and maggots swarmed onto the men. Their ordeal only worsened as the years advanced.

The medical staff were weak from the same illnesses. You wonder how they kept going. Chamberlain’s training informed his self-care. Once, dizzy and queasy, “he fought for his balance and climbed to his feet. He knew one thing – getting up, moving his muscles, circulating his blood – was the only way he would stay alive.”

We understand Chamberlain’s perseverance through short back-

story chapters. His upbringing, alone with his mother and in poverty, made him resilient and resourceful, critical qualities for survival as a prisoner of war.

His story is one of incredible inventiveness and ingenuity, from keeping a folding razor knife hidden from prison guards to using it to carve sandals, ladles and plates and for shaving heads. He grew a “dandelion farm,” the seeds creating new generations of plants for harvesting. He salvaged small cow bones, dried and pulverized them and saved and shared pinches as calcium-rich nutrients.

However graced by it, he had a special quality of empathy that fit him to his vocation. He volunteered for the “death detail,” which carried dead patients to burial pits. He reflected “he had often been the last to speak to the man when he was living, and now he would be the last to see him to his grave. He had been physician, minister and undertaker.”

War is hell created by a society’s leaders. The Japanese guards that brutalized their prisoners with beatings, kicks and slaps were treated that way by their superiors. They gave back worse to the prisoners, bayoneting them with slight or no provocation. In the merch to Bataan prisoners were forced to walk barefoot on jagged stones. When they fell, guards kicked them and let them lie. Many died en route.

After guards ransacked his possessions and took photos of his mother and girlfriend, Chamberlain attacked the guards. In turn they beat and kicked him and burned him with lit cigars, injuries that took weeks to heal.

The chapter of being sent to Japan is titled “Hell Ships.” Life became even worse for the prisoners

Nine vehicles prowled

In less than two hours, between 6-8 p.m. last Wednesday afternoon, June 9, there were nine vehicle prowls at the south parking area of the Padilla Bay trailhead. Skagit County Sheriff’s Office deputies found passenger windows were broken on all nine vehicles and items were stolen out of three vehicles. The stolen items only included purses and credit cards. Deputies were alerted that some of the stolen credit cards had been used at the Burlington Fred Meyer. Deputies are working with Fred Meyers loss prevention staff to try and identify a suspect.

Sheriff’s Office staff strongly urges people using trailhead parking areas to not leave any personal items or valuables in their unattended vehicle or lock those items in a trunk if possible.

The Sheriff’s Office has bright yellow rearview mirror hangers

that let passersby know there are no valuables in the vehicle and a reminder message on the back side on how to not be a victim of vehicle prowls.

Source: Sheriff’s Office

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