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E.V. Cain students get firsthand history lesson

Retired Navy commander recalls 1943 rescue mission with JFK

By: [Andrew Westrope](#), Staff Writer



Eighth-graders at E.V. Cain STEM Charter Middle School have come across a number of heroes in literature over the course of their studies, but on Monday they were acquainted with one in person.

English teacher Suzanne Scotten's class gathered in the band room for the guest speaker, equipped with microphones and video cameras to record the

occasion for a documentary they would make later.

A diminutive figure, who proved to be a clear and vital speaker at 94 years of age, was introduced to them as retired Lt. Cmdr. Ted Robinson of the U.S. Navy. He was the author of the memoir they'd been reading, and the hero of its pages – the one about the Navy PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat that rescued John F. Kennedy after a skirmish stranded him on an island in Guadalcanal in 1943, among other things.

Robinson is no stranger to speaking engagements, and Scotten said she recruited him to talk to her students after seeing his presentation in Sacramento. She assigned her eighth-graders to read chapters of his memoir, and they'll use footage from his talk on Monday to make a documentary for Scotten's website as part of this year's installment of "The Heroes Project." The program is an annual search for unsung heroes, which she organizes for the Lowell Milken Center in Fort Scott, Kan.

"(Students) have been studying and researching him. We're actually going to enter a national contest and present him as an unsung hero. So they've been reading parts of his book, studying Guadalcanal, studying different parts of World War II and the Great Depression in preparation for his visit," she said. "The objective of the program is to get them outside the scope of themselves and their own little community and reality and make them aware of

history and the issues of the world, and have them think about what kind of footprint they are going to make as they grow into adulthood.”

Robinson, now an active volunteer and resident of Sacramento, shared 90 minutes of anecdotes from his life. He recalled surviving the Great Depression by winning money from speech contests, and then becoming a spokesman for AT&T and the Sacramento Tree Foundation.

He sold magazines to afford Duke University when it was brand new, and its tuition was only \$795 a year. He signed up for the Navy in the summer of 1941 after a stint in Wall Street banking, and ascended the ranks by being the last man standing as most of his company was killed in action in the South Pacific.

Robinson also believes himself to be the last man alive who can personally attest to the courage of John F. Kennedy, whom he knew as “Jack” and was a tent mate at the time, as a selfless and fearless lieutenant of a PT boat in World War II.

After Kennedy and his crew had been left for dead following the bisection of their boat by a Japanese destroyer, Robinson said he personally intercepted a message delivered by island natives and carved into the shell of a coconut: “Nauru Isl commander/native knows posit/he can pilot/11 alive need small boat/Kennedy.”

Robinson took a boat to rescue the future president and found him burned, starved and permanently crippled by a spinal disk injury, and gave him a cane that would appear in several photographs years later.

“When we showed up, this guy says, ‘Where the hell have you guys been? I’ve been at this bus stop for a whole week,’” Robinson said. “Still kidding! Burned, dying, hungry and he was the same old Jack, trying to keep the nerve of his men up.”

But the presentation never strayed into flag-draped sentiment to glaze over the most horrific experiences of Robinson’s life, and that realism is what Scotten wanted her students to hear – not only words, but a voice.

“It makes it real, to see his emotion when he’s speaking ... when you see somebody talk about the actuality of what war is, it’s pretty potent stuff for eighth-graders, or anybody for that matter,” she said. “But he’s had an amazing life of service. The Kennedy thing makes him sort of a hero, but his life of service to his country and community is just outstanding, and he’s a great role model for all of us.”

Scotten’s eighth-graders spent the period recording footage, taking notes and listening in relative silence, and some said the presentation made an impression.

“He describes it in a lot of detail. It’s been so long, and yet he can remember so much,” 14-year-old Mallory Cutler said. “He’s a great subject, since he was one of the people who helped save (John F. Kennedy) ... it helped a lot because it’s firsthand, eyewitness.”

Thirteen-year-old Tristan Hegseth, a classmate, agreed Robinson was an ideal subject for an educational project to honor little-known heroes.

“It’s a project to discover heroes who haven’t been discovered yet and make them well-known,” he said. “He did save a president who founded the Red Cross and a bunch of other things, so that makes him a hero, plus he was in the war.”

Ryan Hill, 13, said he and his classmates will spend the next few weeks assembling the footage for documentaries to be posted on Scotten’s website, www.mrsscotten.com.

“Usually we do individual heroes projects, but our teacher decided this was too big of one, and decided we should do it as one giant class project,” he said.

After the war, Robinson was involved with Kiwanis, took up caring for friends in need and volunteered in several capacities over the course of his life. When a student asked what he most wanted the class to take from his presentation, he pointed to a habit shared by all the heroes of his own story.

“I grew up in real poverty, so I made up my mind (that) if I ever amounted to anything, I would help others,” Robinson said. “If you want to be happy with yourself, help others. I know a lot of you do that already. Don’t just look after yourselves. Start helping others.”

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