



INDY'S WEEKLY ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER HIGHLIGHTING ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Gus Potthoff Day

BY MARC D. ALLAN

In the opening of *Lest We Forget* (next Wednesday, Dec. 27, 8 p.m., WFYI Channel 20), Kim Hood Jacobs introduces Gus Potthoff as “a survivor ... from hell. Hell of man’s making, in a place far away, in a war long ago.”

And if that doesn’t intrigue you, the subsequent 29 minutes and change will.

Lest We Forget traces the life of Potthoff — a Columbus, Ind., resident since the early 1960s — from his birth in Indonesia to his enlistment in the Netherlands Army in 1941 to his becoming a Japanese prisoner of war during World War II.

As a POW, Potthoff was among the hundreds of thousands forced to build what became known as “the Death Railway” extending from Thailand to Burma in support of the Japanese occupation of Burma. More than 100,000 people died during the construction. Those that survived worked 17 or more hours a day under brutal conditions — wicked heat, little food, vicious captors who routinely beat or killed the men who wouldn’t or couldn’t work.

After the war, Potthoff returned to the Netherlands. A church group brought him and his wife, Adele, to America, and they settled in Columbus. Potthoff never spoke much about the war, but after retiring, he picked up a paintbrush and started to create art informed by his experiences. His paintings — Hood Jacobs says they’re properly called “visionary folk art” — portray haunted memories of the dead he left behind.

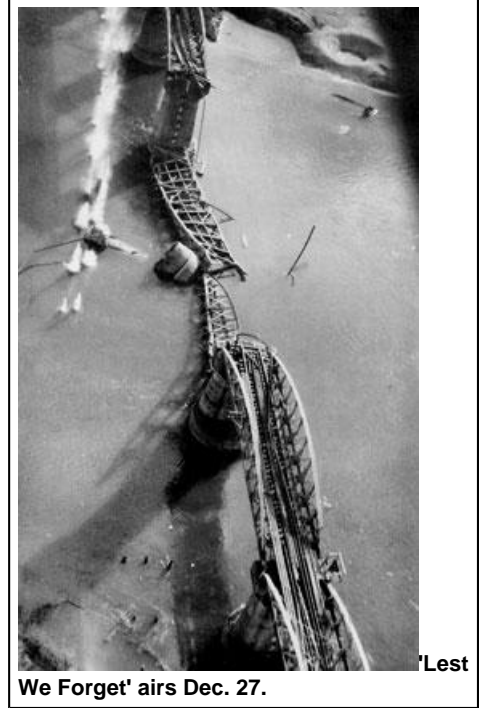
“He’s forgiven,” she says, “but he doesn’t want people to forget.”

Potthoff’s story took several years to complete. The original production was started by some Indiana University graduates who went so far as to follow Potthoff’s return to Thailand. They abandoned the project but left behind the tapes, which ended up in the hands of Channel 20 executive producer Clayton Taylor.

A fund-raising campaign in Columbus helped finance a viable budget to complete *Lest We Forget*, which will premiere Thursday when Potthoff’s adopted hometown celebrates Gus Potthoff Day.

“He’s sweet,” Hood Jacobs says. “He’s a kind man. He’s someone you want to know. And I can see why the city of Columbus loves him.”

“Once you get to meet this guy,” Taylor adds, “you want to share his story.”



Lest We Forget 'Lest We Forget' airs Dec. 27.