



## Obituary

**Born:** Friday, December 15, 1922

**Died:** Saturday, June 8, 2019

LOLO — On Saturday at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Missoula on June 22 at 2 p.m., Montana will say goodbye to one of its true heroes. Surrounded by his loving family and dear friends, John Nelson of Lolo, Montana, passed away to heaven peacefully, Saturday the 8th of June at 6:12 p.m. John was 96 years old. John never considered himself to be a hero and if you did not know him when you met him, you would probably see him as just a sweet, gentle, cowboy with a great smile and a gruff voice. Deep inside however, was the heart of a true warrior and a valiant hero of the Second World War, who fought in some of the most legendary battles this world has ever seen. John began his life on a cold morning on Dec. 15, 1922. He was born at home a few months premature and at first it was doubtful he would even survive. His mother, ever the resourceful and strong woman, had his father build a fire in the wood stove in the kitchen to get their humble little home as warm as possible. John was so tiny that she was able to put him in a shoe box and she gently placed that box in the warmer of the oven with the door open so it would act as, possibly, one of the first post natal incubation devices in Wisconsin. Thus began John's first battle for his life. John's mother's ingenious idea saved John's life and before they knew it, Alfred and Anna Nelson were enjoying watching their first of seven children run around their tiny home in Superior, Wisconsin. When John was 5 years old, Alfred and Anna moved with now also, John's brother Robert (Bob) and James (Jim) and sister Ruth to Philipsburg, Montana, where Alfred had been placed as a pastor in what is now known as the St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. They later moved to Missoula, Mand lived for many years on Phillips Street across from the Missoula County School, now known as Lowell School where John went to grade school and then later attended Hellgate High School. Alfred continued to serve the Lord as a minister until his untimely death on May 10, 1939. John was drafted into the Army in mid-1942. He served in the 1st Engineers Special Brigade and landed on Sugar Red on Utah Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. He later transferred to the 249th Engineers Combat Battalion and fought in the Battle of the Bulge and then built bridges across rivers helping to keep General Patton on the move. One area on the Rhine River has a monument on it marking the spot where John and the rest of the boys in the 249th accomplished the impossible, building a 1,000 foot bridge across the Rhine in less than 24 hours and doing it all in silence just 400 yards from the enemy. John was also involved in helping to liberate a concentration camp, a memory that was seared into his mind for all time, but was very difficult for him to talk about. John said of the memory, "I felt so horrible for those poor people. We had heard the rumors of those camps but nothing prepared us for what we

## Service Summary

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### Celebration of Life

2:00 PM Sat Jun 22, 2019

### First United Methodist Church

300 Main Street

Missoula, Montana 59802

saw. The damn Krauts had just locked them all up and left, I suppose, when they heard we were coming weeks prior. They were all in terrible shape and when we cut through the barricades to get to them they all just clung to us. Some were so far gone from the lack of food and water that they passed the next day even though we did all we could to save them. It was just horrible. I remember General Patton was so mad that he had a bunch of us go into the town next to the camp and round up as many of the civilians as we could find. He wanted them to see what they had pretended was not happening, I suppose. It was then that I realized what they meant by saying this was a war between good and evil. I wish we could have saved them all, we tried so hard." John was involved in many other heroic accomplishments across Europe until he was severely wounded and ended up in a hospital in Germany for six weeks before he got to return home to Montana. Ever the humble soul he never stuck around to receive his Purple Heart Medal as he felt he needed to get home as soon as he could since his Mom was a widow raising several of his younger siblings by herself. As he put it "I heard that I would have to wait an extra day or two to get it and I just figured Ma needed my help more than I needed the medal, so I just went on without it." John returned to his beloved Montana after the war to a career as a heavy equipment operator, helping build Hungry Horse Dam and every Interstate 90 bridge between Missoula and Lookout Pass as well as many other projects. Late in life for most folks of that time John met the "love of his life" Amy Vinson in the early 1960s. They were married on May 4, 1963. They had one daughter when John was already 42 years old, the apple of his eye, Jeanie Ann Nelson. Jeanie said of her Dad, "I was so lucky to have John W. Nelson as my Dad! He was always there for me, never missing a ball game or other date that was important to me. He taught me so much, how to work hard, how to respect others, and most of all how to love. He loved my Mom so much, called her his Amy and would do whatever it took to be there for her and he also loved the older children of Mom's whom she brought with her into her marriage to Dad. What a man, what a life. I love you Daddy." John, Amy, Jeanie and a few of the younger stepkids eventually settled in Lolo, Montana, where John built his own home and later developed two trailer court communities on his land that Jeanie has operated for him for many years now. John loved to spend his retirement years puttering around his land with his backhoe. He loved to dig in the dirt and when he wasn't doing that he loved to sit and chat for hours with his dear and special friend Kathy Ogren, or chat on the phone with his great friend, actor Treat Williams, who everyone hopes will play the role of John Nelson in a movie about him someday. A book about John was started just before John's passing. Another of John's favorite things to do was to watch baseball with his son-in-law Dale Moore and chat about what was in the news. When Dale could persuade him to John would also talk about his time in WWII. John and Dale would later spend time together

going to various speaking engagements to talk about D-Day and other historical accounts of the war. John would always say to Dale "I don't know why folks want to hear from an old duffer like me." Dale would always reply "because folks don't get many chances to meet an old duffer like you, that has done so many incredible things." That was usually followed by a "Well, I don't know about that" from John. Dale said of his times with his hero John, "I guess I was kind of his road manager. People just loved talking to him. He never seemed to understand why, likely because he was so humble. He would always say things like, 'I was not being heroic, I was just trying to stay alive' or he would say, 'I did not do any of that stuff to be a hero. I did it cause Uncle Sam asked me to, anyone else would have done the same damn thing!'" Dale mentioned with a chuckle of some of his appearances with John, "sometimes it was almost like I was walking into a place with Elvis. People would just flock to him and want to thank him for his service and even ask for autographs. John didn't like all the attention much but he went to those events because he did not want people to forget what happened. He wanted them to remember those who lost their lives fighting for us all and he wanted folks to hear some of the tough stuff so they would do all they could to never repeat what he and his brothers in arms went through. He would say, 'God help us all if we have to go through that again.'" He especially wanted the folks to honor what our military is doing now every day. He would say, "Take care of our boys and girls doin' what they have to do now, God please be with them always!" John was preceded in death by his mother Anna, father Alfred, brothers Paul, David, James and Robert and his dear wife Amy V. Nelson, and grandchildren Travis James and Jade Davis. John is survived by his by daughter Jeanie Ann Nelson (Dale Moore), grandchildren Savanna Freeman (Chance), Austin Cook (Aimee Irvin), Kelsey Paintner (Phil), Kyle Davis (Krystle), Brandon Hearn (Keisha), Cody Hearn (April), daughter-in-Laws Kathy Palanuk (Ken) and Carrie Anderson (Mark), as well as numerous great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews and many others all of whom John loved so dearly. Services for John Nelson will be held Saturday, June 22 at 2 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church located at 300 East Main St. A military honor service for John will be held at a later date. The general public is invited and encouraged to attend the Church Service. The honorary Pallbearers for the service will be John's favorite nephew Kelly Brown and his dear friends Freddy Deschamps, Mark Glaser, Wayne Hiett, Howard Lemm and Jim Spooner. Also participating in the service will be John's dear grandsons Brandon and Cody Hearn and Austin Cook, his granddaughter Savanna Freeman and his wonderful "friends like family" Curtis Phelps and Terry Eggleston. The Nelson Family would like to thank Bill and Helen Kropp of the Whitesitt Funeral Home in Stevensville for their loving care of John after his passing. The Whitesitt Funeral Home invites all who would like to send flowers or to offer condolences to the family and/or to

share their memories about John Nelson to do so at their website [whitesittfuneralhome.com](http://whitesittfuneralhome.com). The Nelson Family would also like to thank Pastor John Daniels and the First United Methodist Church for helping to keep God in John's life and for helping to plan his funeral. Flowers are welcome and if anyone would like to donate to a charity to honor John the family recommends any of John's favorite charities such as the St. Jude's Children Hospital, The First United Methodist Church in Missoula, or Heroes and Horses.