

2006 Silver & Gold Award

Dr. Jack Comstock

Each year, exceptional School of Medicine alumni are nominated for the Silver and Gold Award, the CU Medical Alumni Association's highest honor. Selecting one recipient from a pool of such distinguished candidates can be a difficult – and frequently agonizing – task. Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I present the 2006 Silver and Gold Award to two outstanding individuals.

It is common to use the term “hero” to describe those we admire. But it is rare that an individual lives up to the term as much as Dr. Jack Comstock, a member of the School of Medicine's class of 1938.

A Colorado native, Dr. Comstock majored in chemistry at CU-Boulder prior to enrolling in the School of Medicine. Upon graduation from medical school, he completed an internship at New York City Hospital before joining the Army in 1941. After a stint as ward surgeon at Fitzsimons Army Hospital, Dr. Comstock was assigned as attending surgeon at a hospital on the Bataan peninsula in the Philippines in May 1941. What initially seemed like an enviable post for a young man craving adventure and international travel quickly became a nightmare when Pearl Harbor was bombed. When the Allied forces surrendered to the Japanese, the men stationed on Luzon Island – Dr. Comstock included – became Prisoners of War. Those who survived the brutality of the ensuing Bataan Death March were greeted by fresh hell once they reached the POW camps.

From April 1942 until his rescue by American troops in February 1945, Dr. Comstock endured inhuman conditions alongside his fellow prisoners. As an attending surgeon in his camp, however, Dr. Comstock struggled to save lives and alleviate suffering among the POWS while simultaneously fighting for his own survival. His actions as surgeon could be deemed heroic but it is Dr. Comstock's spirit that is truly remarkable. In the face of death, torture and disease, Dr. Comstock's faith never faltered. His compassion, courage and resolve inspired those around him, during WWII and until his passing in 1986.

After the war, Dr. Comstock resumed his medical career in the U.S. Air Force serving in a variety of posts including that of medical observer at the first hydrogen bomb test in 1947. Ten years later, he retired as a colonel and returned to Colorado to live with his family. Even as his own health failed, Dr. Comstock never ceased caring for others: When his eyesight made driving impossible, Dr. Comstock made rounds on his bicycle, checking on elderly friends and neighbors with his dog Chloe in tow.

On the eve of his departure from the Philippines on Feb. 22, 1945, Dr. Comstock made this diary entry: “We are supposed to leave in the A.M. ... Future looks rosy for us from here on out.” Despite all he had endured, Dr. Comstock never succumbed to bitterness or despair. ***Instead he chose to focus his life and his life's work outward for the benefit of others. Like a true hero.*** It is that indomitable spirit and positive outlook we celebrate and recognize this year by presenting the 2006 Silver & Gold Award for Excellence in Humanitarianism, Citizenship and Professionalism to the late Dr. Jack Comstock.