

World War II vets remember - and hope others also do

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The host of a small gathering was 18 when he parachuted onto Utah Beach, played dead and endured a sinister trek.

Seven World War II veterans got together Saturday to eat a little, drink a little and reminisce a lot about their experiences during the horrific but finally victorious Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes forest.

"Why are we doing this?" said Bill Priest, obviously puzzled that anyone would even ask. Then, as he began to answer, his voice choked and his eyes filled with tears.

"It's because of the guys we left over there, blown to bits, that we will never see again. People here forget. They don't know what the Battle of the Bulge was. Over there in Europe, even the young people remember," said Priest, 73, who lives on Snell Isle.

Four years ago Priest was one of hundreds of World War II veterans who returned to Normandy, France, to re-create their parachute drops during 50th anniversary commemoration. He hopes to return this year, jump from a plane again, and revisit the Belgian city of Bastogne, which he defended during the Battle of the Bulge.

He was only 18 when he parachuted onto Utah Beach during the June 1944 D-Day invasion of Normandy. Six months later he found himself in the midst of a battle that was to claim 77,000 American and Allied lives and change the course of the war.

After months of training with the 101st Airborne Division - he was "captured" during every exercise - Priest found himself miles short of his intended target in the village of Ste.-Mere-Eglise.

His plane had come in too low and dropped its troops too soon. Instead of landing inland to help sabotage German emplacements and hinder resistance to the coming invasion, Priest found himself only yards from the edge of Utah Beach hours before the actual invasion.

Priest's landing was cushioned by soft sand covering a hidden German pillbox.

"I heard someone coming from the back of the pillbox. I didn't want to be captured again. I had plenty of practice with what not to do, so I just played dead," Priest recalled.

"I kept my eyes closed even when the German pulled my helmet off. I guess he thought I had been killed and didn't want to risk exposing his position by shooting me to make sure."

After the German soldier went back into his pillbox, Priest crawled to the nearby woods and began a trek through enemy lines, over barbed wire fences, and through mine fields to reach his intended drop point.

That was only the beginning of a war that was to change Priest's life forever. The experience is why Priest joined the 101st Airborne Association when he returned to the United States after the war. It is why he continues to meet with other World War II veterans, to remember and hope that their experience - and their sacrifice - will be remembered by others.

Saturday's Battle of the Bulge reunion was impromptu. With only two days' notice, Priest invited everyone he could think of who served and fought in the Ardennes during the harsh winter of December 1944 and January 1945.

Seven men, most accompanied by their wives, arrived at Priest's house dressed in their carefully preserved - and sometimes replicated - parachutist uniforms. Several wore their screaming eagle red berets and soft leather jump boots.

"Fred never wanted to go back to Europe. He was wounded everywhere he went," said Jenny Smith. She met her husband, former Pfc. Fred Smith, 54 years ago when he returned to Boston on an ambulance ship. "We nurses had the best opportunity with these guys," she said with a laugh.

Mrs. Smith showed a copy of her husband's Silver Star citation, won when he was wounded during the Normandy battle in June 1944. He asked to be left behind to cover his unit during a break-out rather than be a hindrance to his buddies. "As a result of his actions, the enemy was prevented from assaulting the rear of the group and these men succeeded in reaching our lines. His conduct was in accordance with the highest standards of military service," the citation reads.

During the siege of Bastogne, Smith was wounded again, but not until after he crawled around a hill with a bazooka to take out one of three approaching tanks.

Priest was in Bastogne on leave the day the Battle of the Bulge began. He remembers getting orders to report back to his unit. While posing for a picture in his newly dug foxhole, Priest remembers his "grease gun" going off accidentally when he shoved the muzzle down into the snow.

Priest does not talk much about the battle itself - other than remembering that he was tired, cold, hungry, out of ammunition, and scared much of the time.

One incident is crystal clear. When Priest heard that Gen. George Patton was breaking through, all he could think of was finding his brother, James, who was serving with Patton's army.

"The guys covered for me. I stole a chaplain's jeep and drove for two hours, faking my way through roadblocks, and found my brother," Priest said. "He died several years ago."

Illustration

Caption: Bill Priest, 73, returned to Normandy for the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge.; Cpl. Bill Priest heard that his brother, James, was arriving with Gen. George Patton's troops, so he sneaked away from his unit and tracked James down.; Photo: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Special to the Times

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