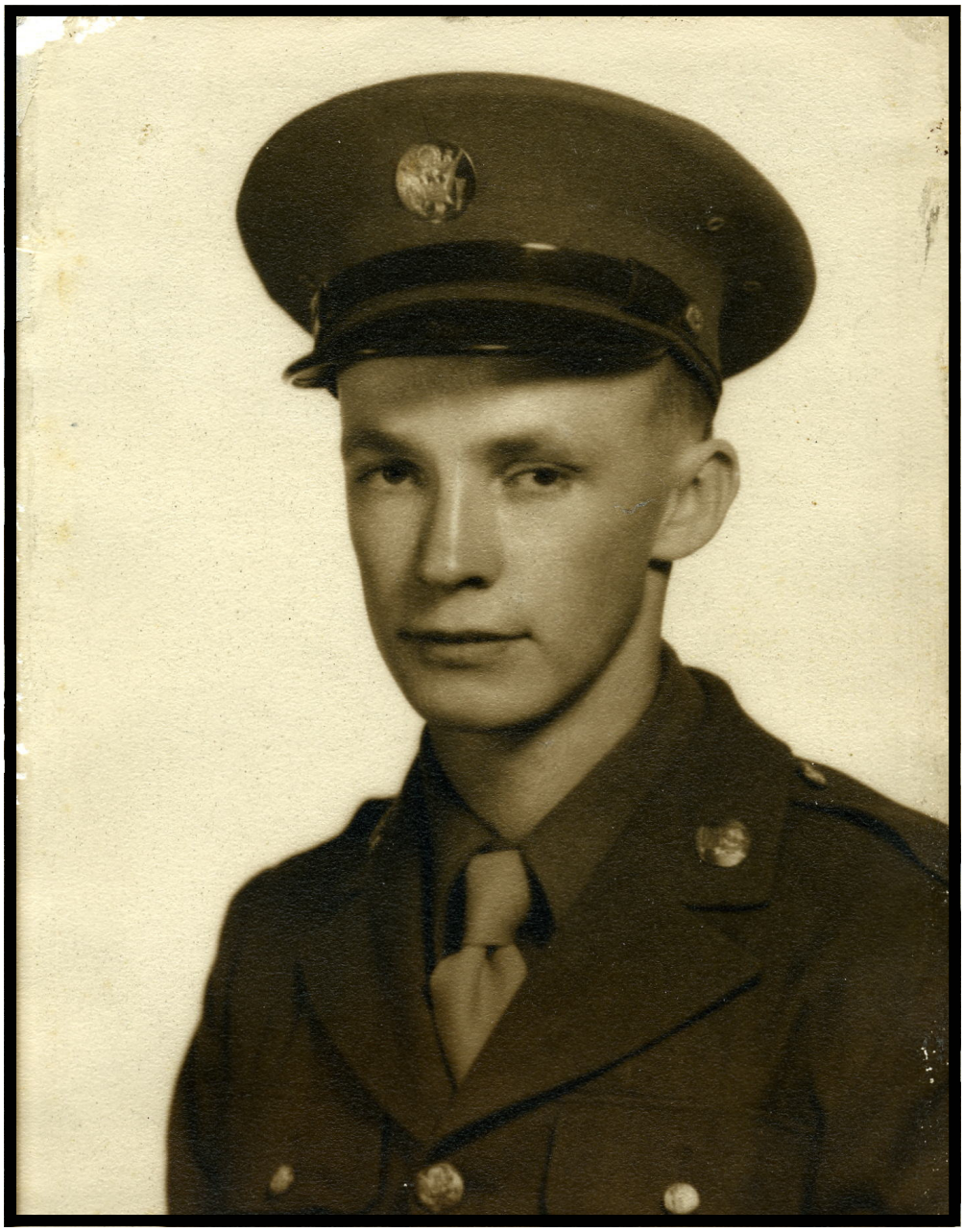

An Ordinary Hero

And The Extraordinary Season That Shaped His Life

By Ron Eckberg

Dedication

Everything a writer writes – at least his best work -- should be a “labor of love” because writers invariably write out of a compulsion to explore a topic or tell a story.

Some works are just so deeply personal, so personally compelling, that they rise even above the ‘labor of love” category.

Such is this work. As imperfect as it may be it was done with the deepest of respect for the story, for the times and people it describes, and certainly with the deepest of love for the man who is the centerpiece of these pages.

I dedicate this work to my father, Harold Albert Lincoln Eckberg, who, along with his generation, has shown us what true greatness and heroism are.

An Ordinary Hero

Introduction

Perhaps no other event in our nation's history has produced more heroes than World War II.

Few of those heroes returned home to become entertainment giants, sports superstars, or business tycoons. Few built empires, placed their names in the record books, or discovered cures for any of mankind's many diseases.. Few returned to find their pictures emblazoned on the covers of Life or Saturday Evening Post.

They were common, ordinary men who came from common, ordinary backgrounds. They were ordinary men who had ordinary dreams for ordinary lives. They left those ordinary lives to do an extraordinary duty then returned once again to their ordinary lives. They left behind cornfields to trudge the world's battlefields, then returned home to become carpenters, farmers, laborers, husbands, fathers, and friends.

Nevertheless, they will forever remain imbedded in our nation's consciousness as heroes. They will be remembered as such because they lived in a time that placed incredible demands upon their simple lives. They will be remembered as heroes because they answered the call of their country in the time of their country's need. They will be remembered as heroes because they did the job set before them without hesitancy, without complaint, without question.

Journalist and author Tom Brokaw called them the "greatest generation" and that designation has deservedly stuck. Thier greatness was most certainly demonstrated on the battlefields of Europe, Africa, Asia and across the Pacific. It was demonstrated on the ground, in the air, upon the great seas and under those same seas.

But their heroism didn't stop at the edge of the battlefields. No, it continued to be demonstrated throughout their lives as they came home and got down to the work of building a better world one family and one community at a time. The battlefields had shaped these young lives, turning them into disciplined men who would become the leaders of a post war world that would shape the lives of countless million others.

I was fortunate to have spent my entire life knowing some of these heroes. I have

watched them, I have worked with them, and I have grown up with them. They are the men whose sacrificial service helped to preserve the many freedoms that I and my generation bask in.

Webster defines a hero as, "A man noted for courageous acts or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his life" and the men who so gallantly served our country during the World War II years qualify beyond all question and without exception. They sacrificed the best years of their youth. They left sleepy, isolated places like Walnut, Illinois only to wind up in places they had never before heard of, places like Normandy, Bastogne, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Sicily. These places, as well as countless others, would soon be indelibly etched in their minds, their memories, and even in their nightly dreams.

They would leave their homes little more than boys, but would come back battle hardened men. They would celebrate their ascension to manhood under horrible and gruesome baptisms of fire. They would watch their comrades and best friends die on the field of battle. They would witness things that no human beings should ever have to witness or be party to.

The fortunate ones would return to resume their simple lives, but they would return as men changed for life.

What follows, then, is a tribute to their sacrifice as demonstrated in the story of one hero who I know very well. I grew up watching him work hard to raise a family and build a life for them. It is my hope that this one story will serve in some small way as a reminder that heroism can not--and should not--be measured by one's talents or abilities, by one's success in accumulating or generating wealth, or by one's athletic prowess.

The standard by which we define heroism is instead included in these pages. It is a standard set by one ordinary man in an army of many ordinary men who did extraordinary things.

It is the story of an "Ordinary Hero".

An Ordinary Hero

Baptism by Fire

This certainly wasn't the way a birthday was meant to be celebrated. Instead of cake and candles, laughter and gifts, this birthday would be marked by darkness and confusion, fear and artillery fire. For my father, Harold Eckberg, this was his introduction to war, a true baptism by fire. Nothing he had been taught could ready him for this moment, a moment that would only serve as a violent prelude to many more such moments to be endured over the next seven months. It was "day one" on the front lines. It was October 23, 1944.

Dad's experience during that night and throughout the next seven months was an extraordinary one, but not a unique one. It was shared by millions of young men like him from every corner of the United States. America and the world needed them and they answered the call. Perhaps a few understood what lay ahead of them, most could not. Few probably had any idea of the depth of the experience they were about to embark on.

Ahead of them lay a time that would mark each man deeply with memories and scars that linger until their dying day.

Ahead of them lay a time that would produce some of the greatest and most confusing ironies imaginable. It would be both a horrible and yet strangely wonderful time.

Ahead of them lay a time that would prove to be both costly and priceless.

It was costly in that it exacted from each and every man who served and fought a price impossible to calculate. It cost many their very lives. From Pearl Harbor to Sicily to Iwo Jima to Normandy to Berlin and to the threshold of the island of Japan, young men fought valiantly and died gallantly for the cause of freedom.

It cost others arms or legs or basic abilities that others of us take for granted. For my Dad that long winter in Europe would exact a painful toll on his hips and legs, inflicting damage to bones and tissues that would torment him for most of his adult life.

It cost them peace. It cost them a sound night's sleep as, for years and even lifetimes to follow, their nightly dreams would be invaded by memories of the horrors of the battlefield.

It cost every one of them something else that was priceless. It cost them some of the best years of their lives. It cost them the years of innocence and experimentation and the joyous discoveries of manhood. Instead manhood was thrust violently upon them, often marked by a single day in the horrible, uncertain line of fire.

It was priceless, however, in its own way. As one WWII veteran expressed it; "I would not take a million dollars for my experiences, but I surely wouldn't want to go through that again for a million dollars."

It was priceless for the camaraderie that grew amongst men from all parts of the nation, from all different walks and stations of life, a camaraderie based on knowing that ones very survival depended upon the man next to him.

It was priceless for the friendships developed in training camps, on the battlegrounds, and in foxholes, friendships that would last a lifetime because they were based on a bond that few ever experience outside the realm of war.

All that lay ahead of my Dad as he hit the front lines on that dark October night in 1943.

Early Years

Harold Eckberg, like so many of America's fighting sons, was the product of simple yet demanding times. He grew up one of 11 children to a father who had sailed the great seas with the Swedish navy before immigrating to America. His mother was resourceful, as were most moms of the time. Farm life was a life of hard work and responsibility. It was a life of duty and sharing and dreaming. It was the depression and everyone did their part to carry the family's load.

He spent his time as all children did in those times of economic hardship. He dreamed. He would study the latest Sears "wish book" and do just that – wish for the things he would like to have but knew his family could never afford. He would scavenge for parts of discarded bicycles hoping to find enough parts to build one usable bike.

He went to school in a one room schoolhouse – Maple Grove School, to be exact -- just down the lane from the family farm, then on to Wyanet, Illinois High School. He had no dreams of greatness or fame or fortune. He dreamed instead of the simple life of a farmer but

history had other plans for him. The world that seemed so distant from the heart of Illinois was exploding and edging ever closer to what would become a global war.

He graduated from High School and watched as, one by one, the remainder of his 8 brothers left the family farm, four of them to enter the military. He could have perhaps argued his case for a hardship exemption since he alone remained to help his father with the farm operations, but a larger voice called.

"I wanted a uniform," he says candidly.

On a cold February day in 1943 he got his uniform as he and a Wyanet High School buddy, Max Hamrick, reported to Peoria for their induction. Soon they found themselves riding an electric train that would take them to Camp Rantoul. Their journey was underway.

He was soon assigned to the 324th Regiment of the 44th Infantry Division. It was a regiment with a long and illustrious history, having served with distinction in WWI during the defense of the St. Die sector of Lorraine, France. Ironically, the new 324th would soon find itself in deadly combat just a few miles from that site.

Dad would see the country and, step by step, receive the training that would ultimately save his life on the battlefields of Europe. From Rantoul it was on to Fort Lewis in Washington, through Louisiana Maneuvers in February 1944, and on to Camp Philips, Kansas.

Early in these first months of training a small I & R squad (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) was formed. Key among those who would serve in this small but important unit were three men who would become best of friends – James Renfro, Joseph Panamas, and Dad.

Their friendship – a friendship that would last even to this day for two of the men – was formed in part because of the odd number of men in their unit. This particular I & R squad began with seven men and they were issued three two man "pup tents". It fell to Dad, Renfro, and Panamas to share a two man tent, thus cementing their relationships.

In August, Dad and the rest of the 324th were alerted for overseas deployment and soon boarded a troop train that would take them from Camp Phillips to Camp Miles Standish outside Boston. As would often be the case, rumor and speculation would abound, as anxious GIs tried

to guess when they would move out and where that movement would take them.

In the meantime there was the usual assortment of Army duties to be carried out, including KP.

"All I can remember is cracking eggs, dozens of them, into a big vat, rotten ones and all," Dad says as he remembers his one and only time on KP duty.

The rumors and speculations and questions that burned like wildfire through the men of the 44th would soon be answered. On the 5th of September orders were given to dress "battle ready" with a full pack, rifle, helmet and all the other necessities of the infantry soldier. From that moment on, combat pay was issued to each GI, meaning a whopping $10.00 increase in their paycheck.

The big adventure was about to begin.

The Ocean Journey

In Boston Harbor, on September 5, 1944, the 324th Infantry Regiment boarded the U.S.S. Gordon, the ship that would ferry them from the safe confines of the United States to the European Theater of war. As the soldiers walked up the plank the Red Cross gave them a life insurance policy -- an ominous reminder of the task ahead of them -- and a carton of milk.

The U.S.S. Gordon was a brand new liberty ship, fresh out of the shipyards, having just returned from its shakedown cruise. So new was the ship that the paint was still wet in places. Harold Eckberg spent his sleeping shift in a bunk about halfway down from the top of the ship, somewhere near the waterline. The Gordon traveled in a convoy of ships that stretched as far as the eye could see. The troops aboard were allowed on deck in the daytime but confined below decks after dark and total blackout was rigidly enforced.

"I don't think any of us gave a thought of what could happen out in that big ocean," Dad remembers, "There were German U-boats but not as many as before because our destroyers and planes had sunk a lot of them."

"We were young," he recalls, commenting on the danger of the journey, "We weren't thinking about what could happen. It was just a big adventure to us."

There was no doubting the threatening presence of the submarines, however.

"Every once in a while you could hear a ping, if you were in your bunk. It was the sound made by destroyers dropping 'ash cans' (depth charges) full of explosives."

For Dad and his fellow soldiers the Atlantic crossing was mostly uneventful. The men were fed twice a day according to numbers assigned them but eating – especially G.I. food – was often an unwelcome thought. Seasickness was common, since a great many of the men had never before been on a boat of any kind. Somehow Dad escaped the malady though he did on occasion experience light-headedness.

"That's a big ocean out there," Dad says of the crossing, "I'm glad we weren't sunk because we would have drowned like rats in that cold water."

Once, as he stood on the deck looking over the railing he had the rare experience of seeing a giant turtle "about the size of a small car".

After approximately 10 days at sea someone called out "England"!

"I went on deck and sure enough to the left side of the ship was land. It was England! I know enough GIs went up on deck that the ship started to lean and we were told to scatter."

The convoy sailed on past England and it soon disappeared behind them. On the 15th of September, the Gordon dropped Anchor off the coast of France at Cherbourg. Docking in Cherbourg's port was impossible due to its virtual destruction by the Germans.

The men of the Gordon and the rest of the convoy were unaware that their landing would have historic significance, as the 44th would be the first combat division to make the journey directly from the United States to France.

Orders were given to disembark. Dad and the others put on full battle dress which included helmet, full pack, and rifle with ammunition. A cargo net was thrown over the side of the ship, which would serve as their ladder to the waiting transfer boat.

"There was a trick to that because it wouldn't stand still" Dad recalls, "Some guys got their whole leg in a hole and couldn't pull it back out. I managed, but that's about all."

The transfer from the Gordon to the shore was made in an amphibian vehicle known as a "D.U.K" which carried 25 to 30 GIs.

His next steps would be taken on French soil.

France

Harold Eckberg's first memory of France has been a lasting one.

"All I can remember about our landing was the destroyed harbor," He remembers, "It looked like a giant junk pile. We unloaded and as we marched to our transportation I remember the large sign engraved in the wall that said CHERBOURG."

During the next part of their journey they would be introduced to the famous hedgerows of the French countryside. These hedgerows were the distinguishing mark of the terrain, and had played a huge part in the battle for Normandy that raged from June 6th on.

The 324th was now at the threshold of war. Just a few miles inland from Cherbourg the regiment gathered at the Normandy Base Section Staging Area and for the first time Dad and the rest saw evidence of the savage fighting that had taken place in the hedgerows just weeks before.

"Now we could see that a war was going on," Dad recalls, "There was destruction all around and rifles with a helmet on top marking the grave of a German soldier."

"These were the killing fields of a good many GIs," says Dad of the hedgerow country, "The Germans easily defended them. Thank God I didn't have to fight here."

Word was given that there were still enemy stragglers and snipers in the vicinity so nervous GIs kept their rifles loaded and on guard all the time.

Once again, rumors would abound concerning the destination and mission of the 324th. One speculation involved the possibility of containing a large force of Germans cut off at the west port of Brest.

"We thought maybe we were destined to clean them out," Dad says, "but it didn't happen."

Sometime around October 13, 1944, under a shroud of secrecy, orders were given to prepare for deployment.

The official combat history of the 324th details the preparations for deployment.

"The preparations for movement, though many and varied, were accomplished rapidly. Packing vehicles, breaking camp, clearing the area of latrines and refuse, returning the area completely to its pre-occupation condition marked the time before H-hour."

Soon the regiment was placed in motion. Two trainloads of soldiers, each consisting of ap-

proximately 1,500 men, loaded at Valognes, France.

Few would ever forget the trip. The accommodations left much to be desired as the men were loaded into boxcars painted with the words "40 Hommes au 8 Chevoux", which translated to "40 people or 8 horses." With full battle dress, only about 30 GIs could occupy a car. Even then it was crowded.

The train journey to the front lines is best described in Dad's own words;

"We rode for about three days and nights through unbelievable devastation and grief on our part. We got very little water and ate K rations or C rations. The train never fully stopped. Some guys had to relieve themselves on the run, pulling their pants and clothes over themselves as the train kept rolling at a snail's pace. It seemed like everyone had dysentery ('GI Shits')".

After 3 grueling days the troop convoy arrived at Luneville, France, on the eastern front.

"We unloaded at about 1:00 a.m. in pitch darkness," Dad says, "How we ever kept in our own groups I'll never know."

Here the 324th bivouacked in the nearby woods and were attached to the 7th Army.

Dad recalls the first shock of war.

"I can remember when we were marching to our area when all of a sudden explosions erupted and everybody hit the ditch", he says, "It was, however, our artillery firing on the Germans. We were just a few yards from the front lines!"

The Front

The first task facing the 44th Division upon reaching the front lines was to relieve the battle weary 79th Division. For their part, the 324th was to relieve the 313th Regiment of the 79th. On October 23rd, Harold Eckberg's 23rd birthday, the 324th moved to the front under the cover of darkness and Dad's 2nd Battalion Headquarters set up shop near a devastated town called Embermenil.

"I remember I was put in a hole in front of the CP and I was cold and hungry," he recalls, "I wished I had gotten the name of the 79th Infantry GI I had relieved."

Dad's first night on the front line was an uncomfortable one for more than one reason.

"I had dysentery real bad and dirty pants for a long time. German shells were flying overhead and landing very close. I would wait till one would land and explod, then quickly get out of my hole and relieve myself""

The 324th held their position on the front line for three weeks. Dad's I&R platoon would run patrols at night through no man's, occasionally reaching the German lines. Other times they manned the O.P. (Observation Posts) in front of the American lines which was a most dangerous place to be.

"We were out there all alone…usually two of us," he recalls, "and if you listened, sometimes you could hear the rattle of equipment the Germans were carrying. You just hoped they didn't stumble on your hole."

Maintaining a defensive posture was not without its cost, however. Just two days after reaching the front, the 324th's commanding officer, Colonel Thatcher Nelson died after mistakenly entering a mine field. Nelson was among the first of nearly 500 men of the 324th Regiment who would give their lives in combat over the next months.

After three weeks in the defensive mode, during which the numerous German attacks were repelled, the 44th Division, including Dad's 324th Regimen went on the attack, taking on the enemy in the Vosges Mountains.

Just before Thanksgiving the 2nd Battalion of the 324th – Dad's Battalion – was attached to the French 2nd Armored Division who had fought its way up from a landing on the French Rivera. Under the command of French General Philippe LeClerc the combined Allied forces were to eastward and take Strasbourg situated on the Rhine River at the border with Germany.

During that campaign Dad learned some important lessons about tank warfare.

"I remember riding the tanks (Shermans) and waking between skirmishes," he remembers.

"Once as we were riding, this tank came to a sudden stop and before I could get off he fired his gun and it knocked me down. The con-

cussion almost killed me. I thought my ears bled. I rolled over into the ditch and looked up, and all I could think of was, 'I hope he doesn't back up or I'll be part of the track".

The tank commander knocked out the anti-tank gun and Dad and the others continued on, walking behind the tank. They entered into some woods and as they came out the other side into an open field a German tank was waiting.

Dad has a vivid memory of that moment.

"(He) fired from about 1000 yards, and I'll never forget seeing that red ball of fire coming at us and landing about 100 feet away."

The Allies were on the march and one by one the occupied French countryside was being liberated. In a short time the Germans were pushed from Deutch-Avricourt, Rechicourt, Igney, Foulney, Repaix and Gogney.

On November 20th -- Thanksgiving Day – Saarebourg was liberated. Once again, Dad holds an indelible memory from that day, one that he has shared many times with children and grandchildren.

"(At Saarebourg) we had our hot meal. I sat on a dead horse eating mine.".

The Americans moved on, taking Strasbourg on the 23rd of November. Great pride is taken in the fact that soldiers of the 44th Division were the first Allied soldiers to reach the Rhine and fired the first shots across the great river.

Upon entering Strasbourg, Dad's platoon was ordered to pick up the town's Mayor and bring him in. After breaking down a few doors they reached his bedroom but he and his wife were already dead from what appeared to be self-inflicted gunshot wounds. A Nazi sympathizer, he died with his Nazi Armband on.

While attached to the French Armored Division the rest of the 324th regiment was put in reserve. The 2nd Battalion was to help spearhead the advance, guard prisoners, and protect the flanks. The Germans were taken by surprise all the way to Strasbourg so there were a great many prisoners to deal with. Most of them were glad to give up.

The people of Strasbourg were overjoyed to see their own countrymen and the American troops enter the town. The second battalion took up positions all over town, including establishing a command post (C.P.), which Dad's squad guarded.

The men found welcome relief in Strasbourg.

"We got to sleep where it was warm and clean for at least a night or two," Dad recalls, "The

town was not damaged very much so people were going to work and the stores and restaurants were open again.

On the 27th of November the 2nd Battalion's mission with the French Armored was completed and they rejoined the rest of the 324th helping to guard the long supply line.

In spite of the rapid successes, the fighting was no where near over.

"We didn't know it but we were close to being annihilated by the build up of German forces," says Dad. A German Panzer Division was threatening to overrun a crucial Allied held pass but their efforts were soon thwarted.

On the 27th of November, after some fierce battles, the order for relief came in the form of the 100th division. Many more battles were fought throughout November and December in towns and cities such as Otwiller, Waldhambach, Diemeringen, Maierhoff, Petit Rederching, Welschoff Farm, Lkeinmuhl, to name but a few.

Even though the Allied troops were making substantial progress in pushing the Germans back the coming of the new year only promised more fighting and bloodshed.

It started early.

At the midnight hour of the New Year, American troops fired their weapons to celebrate. Little did they know that Germans dressed in white were ready to attack.

The 44th Divisional History recounts the German attack this way;

"The Kraouts had been given and extra ration of Schnapps and were inflamed with alcoholic dreams of victory and lot. They swung along almost shoulder to shoulder shouting, 'Happy New Year, Yankee Bastards.'

Without artillery support to prepare their assault the Germans, even though outnumbering the 44th three divisions to one, were doomed.

"They came at us in droves and ended up as corpses," Dad remembers, "You could hear

them groaning, the ones that were wounded, for the rest of the night. The morning came and our medics took their lives in their hands and moved out to take care of the wounded."

There had been attacks all along the line that New Years night and the 2nd Battalion had bore the brunt of it, but the 44th had prevailed, with only modest losses and deaths.

January was a cold, wet, and snowy month as Europe suffered through the most severe winter in 100 years. And no one suffered more than the infantry soldier.

Dad remembers it well.

"It seemed like your feet were always cold. You were so tired and had just had it. There were times you wished the end would come, but you kept fighting."

That Night

One unknown writers reminds us; "There is a defining moment in every person's life. Within that moment everything that person is shines the brightest."

For Harold Eckberg that moment would come on a dark and dangerous hillside on a March night in 1945.

March was a defensive month for the 44th Division, 324th Regiment, 2nd Battalion. There was little movement except for forward patrols during the night.

These patrols, however, were anything but routine as Dad and his buddies would soon find out.

Dad's squad was an "I&R" (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) squad, made up of a Sergeant (Panamas), a Corporal (Renfro), plus Dad and seven other Privates. Their work was perilous work, slipping behind enemy lines under the cover of darkness to determine German defensive positions as well as to provide protection for their own command post.

When on patrol, squad members would take turns at the point, the most dangerous position. The point man, being at the head of the patrol, was most likely to be gunned down or step on a mine. Dad recalls one of the many patrols on which he walked point.

"We got out in 'no man's land' and all of a sudden I heard the world 'Halt!' and a flair lit up the sky. I was about 20 feet from a German in his hole. All of a sudden, grazing fire from a machine-gun went over our heads. We couldn't get our bodies in the ground far enough, but after it subsided we carefully pulled back suffering no casualties."

On the morning of March 11th, at 0230, Dad's squad received orders were to seek out enemy positions in front of the 2nd battalion. They were given a password (Which Dad can not, to this day, remember) and were issued ten-cent clickers as signals in the event they became separated.

"One thing you never wanted to forget was the password because when you came back through your lines, you could be shot by your own troops if you don't know it." Dad says. For obvious reasons, GIs on the lines took no chances.

Harold Eckberg's defining moment was upon him.

"We moved to a hill in front, checked a hedgerow and found no Germans. Moving a little farther down hill someone in the patrol tripped a wire, which alerted the enemy. Flares went up and lit the sky like daylight. Everyone hit the ground until the flares went out. Sgt. (Joseph) Panamas and James Renfro and the rest moved forward to within about ten yards of an enemy machine gun. We opened up with our guns, as did they, wounding Panamas. The rest and I unloaded our grenades (I had three), picked up our wounded Sgt. and managed to carry him a mile back to our lines and to our command post."

Renfro, now living in Washington, recalls that night.

"There were six or seven of us on the patrol that night. Panamas was at the point when a flare went off. He hit the ground and all the rest of us hit the ground. We didn't know how close we were to the Germans but we were right on top of them."

"Panamas saw their position and threw a grenade then was hit by machine gun fire. He yelled out 'Help, I can't move my legs.' Harold and I both heard him and crawled to get him."

In spite of Dad and Renfro's heroic efforts in rescuing their wounded friend, Panamas died of spinal wounds before they could navigate the mile back to friendly lines.

Dad's buddy, James Renfro

For their efforts that night, both Dad and James Renfro were awarded Bronze Stars. Dad's citation describes the action;

"For heroic service in action on the

11th of March, 1945, in Eastern France... When his patrol leader was wounded in a fire fight deep in enemy territory, Pfc. Eckberg, though only 20 yards away from an enemy position, moved to his assistance and helped carry him a distance of over a mile to our lines. Private Eckberg's courageous and unselfish action is in keeping with the finest tradition of our fighting men."

Relief at Last

After being in combat for 144 days the 100th division passed through the 44th Divisions lines and went into the attack. Harold Eckberg was finally "off the line".

On March 16th the Division found its way back to Willerwald, France for a rest. Here the 2nd Battalion set up tents.

"For the next 10 days we rested," Dad remembers, "We showered for the first time in two weeks, cleaned equipment, and saw a stage show with Marlene Dietrich. The Red Cross girls entertained us with food snacks, the 44th Band played, we saw several movies."

The respite was short-lived.

"As soon as we got to feeling good, they started drills and firing range action again. Still, It was a great ten days. We felt like maybe the war was closer to being over and we might just live through it."

The Allies pressed forward, gaining momentum with each passing day. The 3rd and 45th divisions penetrated Hitler's vaunted Seigfried line. They pushed the enemy from all points west of the Rhine River.

Now the 44th waited and wondered how and when they would to cross Rhine. That crossing would come at the city of Worms on the 27th of March under a screen of smoke. The 44th was now in Germany in an assembly area, but only a short time.

The attack was joined at Heddesheim and on across the Nekar river.

In one of many towns taken during this time, Dad faced another of many "close calls".

"We had settled down for the night only to awake to the sounds of German tanks rumbling up the street, firing into our house. However, they were quickly killed by some of our battalion personnel."

The 44th took Neckarhousen on the river and then relieved the 63rd Division. The taking of Neckarhousen paved the way for the taking of the cities of Heidelburg and Manheim.

Once again Dad faced a close call.

"I remember coming in from the north of this city in an open field when the enemy fired their rockets at us," Dad recalls, "You first heard a screeching noise but by then they had already landed and you were either wounded or covered with dirt. Once again I dodged the bullet."

Yet another time the Germans fired rockets on a little town Dad and the 324th had taken.

"I just happened to be in a cemetery so I hid behind a big tall marker. There again it was close. This little town was burning because the people were told to scorch everything by Hitler. I don't know where they thought they would live when they got back."

Skirmishes continued as the 44th marched on to Ulm on the Danube River. Dad's battalion crossed the Danube in a rubber raft with the German rear echelon still firing at them.

Dad recalls Ulm and the Danube.

"The Danube was not blue like you have heard and the only thing left standing after the air raids was the Cathedral with all windows blown out. Here we picked up more prisoners, some only 12 to 15 years old. We entered Ulm under heavy artillery fire at about 11:00 a.m. and crossed the river about 8:05 p.m..

After a couple of days in Ulm the 44th moved on to Kempton and Berg and the hill country. The division with all its regiments moved on to the Alp region, with small battles and skirmishes being fought as the Germans continued delaying actions.

The end was now near. The 44th crossed the Austrian border on May 4, 1945 at Imst and Yils at 4:25 p.m. German prisoners were surrendering in droves and on the 5th of May the word was passed along that there was to be a cease fire at 6:00 p.m.

"My squad was sent on patrol that night just to see what was going on," says Dad, "We didn't go very far because we didn't want to be killed in the last hours of the war."

The Armistice was signed on the 6th day of May and the war in Europe was at last ended.

An Appointment In Japan

The armistice in Europe meant the end of the fighting and dying in that part of the world but there was still another battle, and even more ominous one, waiting on the other side of the world. Harold Eckberg, my Dad, along with many of the European Theater veterans would be asked to take their experience to the Pacific and participate in the invasion of the home islands of Japan.

The invasion of Japan, codenamed "Downfall", was expected to be the most costly battle the world had ever known. Conservative estimates suggested that no fewer than 1 million casualties would be suffered by the United States alone. Two million Japanese defenders as well as 30 million civilians brainwashed into dedicating themselves to defend their homeland to the death awaited any attempt at invasion.

Dad arrived home in July for a scheduled day furlough after which he would ship out for the invasion and he was resigned to his fate.

"I told my mother that I wouldn't make it through this battle," he says.

Fate, American scientists, and Harry Truman intervened, however, and the dropping of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at last broke the enemy's resolve to fight to the death and in mid-August Japan surrendered.

Dad, and the rest of the surviving members of the 44th Division, 324th Infantry, 2nd Batallion, now had a future to look forward to.

The Aftermath of War

Probably no human experience produces as wide a range of reactions among its participants as does war.

Harold Eckberg spoke little of it for many, many years. For those many years I thought it was perhaps too painful a memory so we never probed the subject. Only now have I discovered his silence to be more a matter of his character than anything else.

"I figured if you were talking about it, you were bragging." He has remarked, and Dad certainly was never a bragger.

Still, the war experience left and indelible mark on my Dad's life.

It left behind friendships that are as deep as friendships can possibly go because they were forged in the deepest and darkest of human experiences.

James Renfro, Dad's buddy from the earliest days in basic training and the one who, with Dad, carried a lifeless Joseph Panamas back to the front lines, describes my Dad and their deep, deep sense of camaraderie.

"'Oley' (That's the only name I really knew him as) was a good soldier", remembers Mr. Renfro. He continued, describing the special bond of the combat soldier, "When your life and the life of the guy next to you depend on another guy, you all get pretty close."

How close? When I called James Renfro to talk with him, after the initially pleasantries he asked how my Dad was doing. Dad had just gone through a little downturn and I said, "Not too well."

There was a long pause. At the other end of the line I could hear the sniffles of a weeping man, still moved to tears about the plight of his friend 62 years removed from the battlefield.

The war certainly left its scars on Dad's body and most definitely changed the way he saw the world and life. It left him with memories that would cause grave concern over any of the numerous "wars", "police actions", and battles that his country has fought in the preceding 60 years and what they meant to the young men and women who, like him over 60 years ago, would be called to pay the ultimate price..

One of the most profound statements my father has made over the past few years leaves little doubt that he sees war neither as noble nor glamorous.

"If mothers only knew when and where and how their sons died," he would say, "There would never be another war."

The deepest mark the war left on my father, however, was a sense of pride. No matter what price the war exacted from his youth as well as the rest of his life, he was truly proud that he had served his country.

"If you don't remember anything else," he once told me, "Remember that your Dad fought in the war….and make sure your children know that their grandfather was a soldier."

I am grateful that Tom Brokaw brought the nation's attention to bear upon my Dad's generation in his wonderful book, "The Greatest Generation". And I'm equally grateful for Tom Hanks and Stephen Speilberg and "Saving Private Ryan" for their part in raising the consciousness of our country toward the sacrifices made by ordinary heroes like my Dad.
I am grateful, as well, for the many books that now populate the bookshelves describing the people and the battles of that pivotal moment in world history that we call WWII..

Most of all, I am grateful to my dad and the ordinary men like him who left ordinary lives to undertake an extraordinary task. That task finished, they returned to ordinary lives, in a world that would be, as a result of their sacrifices, a better, safer world.

A few months before writing this piece I stood at the foot of my Dad's hospital bed. He was extremely ill and overcome with discouragement. He had fallen asleep and I was about to leave him for the drive back to my home, knowing that every time I left him could be the last time I would see him alive.

As I stood there my thoughts went back to a time long ago that has remained firmly etched in my memory. The scene was the driveway between our farmhouse and the garage. Nailed to the wall was a bushel basket put there by my dad as a target to enable me to practice my pitching. That was not a big deal, just an ordinary thing fathers do for their sons.

As I stood at my Dad's bed, however, I thought of that basket. I wondered how, just a few scant years removed from the challenges, the danger, and the horrors of the battlefield, does one return to the normal, mundane activities of an ordinary day? How does one reconcile the two? How often do those sights, and sounds, and smells come crashing into your consciousness to ruin an otherwise peaceful day?

I have never experienced those times so I will certainly never know. I do know that somehow my Dad and millions others like him did so and their extraordinary heroism and very ordinary lives produced all of what the generations to follow enjoy.

May God bless my Dad and all his brothers in arms.