

ROLE OF THE IRISH IN WW2

by CON McGRATH

“A LITTLE after midday Dec 17, 1944, Company E advanced combat-ready into the woods. I heard an explosion in front of me. Lt. Thomas of Madison, Wisconsin had stepped on a mine which threw him into the air. Company Commander Lt. J Lennon of New York City yelled out “he is dead, keep advancing.”

Soon we came to a small road and all hell let loose. German and American artillery were shelling us. German snipers and machine guns raked the area. Many brave and good men gave their all that Sunday. This gave us the resolve to fight for victory. A day or two later we left the woods, vowing to remember our comrades who died in the Saar Basin.”

These are the words of James Patrick Hennessey of Bayonne, New Jersey, USA, who served in the European Theatre of Operations, participating in many engagements, most notably the Battle of the Bulge.

“I was born on November 24, 1925. Three girls were born after me, giving me 6 sisters altogether. My sisters were not involved in the war but of my 3 brothers, Tom was flying in a B17 on D-Day, and Edmond received medical discharge health reasons.”

“My Dad, Patrick Hennessey who was from Co. Westmeath, was drowned in an accident at work on June 7 1930, leaving my Mother a widow with 10 children.”

ASIDE FROM his Irish-born father, James Hennessey has many other Irish links, including his mother who was born Margaret O'Neill and his grandmother whose maiden name was Nugent married to Terrence O'Neill.

“I went to St. Mary Parochial School (NUNS) Kindergarden to 8th grade, then on to Bayonne Technical High School. When I turned 18 they drafted me out of high school, 3 months before I was due to graduate; my diploma they later gave to my Mother.”

I remember - Before leaving home to get my army training my mother said in Irish humor, 'you'll get 3 meals a day now!'

Jim entered the Army in March 1944, training at Camp Croft in

Private First Class
JAMES HENNESSEY
with roots in Co. Westmeath, who served in Patton's Third Army, recalls his experiences at the Battle of the Bulge



Spartanburg, South Carolina, then proceeded to Ft. Jackson S.C. where he was assigned to Company E, of the 345th Regiment in the 87th “Golden Acorn” Infantry Division, under the command of the charismatic General George S. Patton.

The 87th passed through his hometown when they were shipping out via Camp Kilmer. On the voyage over to England, “I saw Ireland from Queen Elizabeth as we sailed up the Irish Sea at dusk.”

JIM'S MOST memorable battle experiences occurred during the Battle of the Bulge (16 December 1944 - 25 January 1945). This decisive battle came about when Adolf Hitler launched his last great gamble, a vast counter-attack in the Adrienne forest region of Belgium, the idea been to split the Allied Lines and take Antwerp.

Though German troops lacked supplies and essential air-cover, Hitler hoped that the suddenness and speed of such an attack would prove successful especially as the Allies could not use their own superior air power against his troops due to the dreadful weather conditions.

In the first few days of the Battle of the Bulge the Allies suffered massive casualties, while other Allied Forces were surrounded at

Bastogne. It looked like Hitler's plan might work, hence General Eisenhower anxiously sought an Allied counter-attack which might repel this German advance and reach the beleaguered 101 Airborne before they were captured or killed. As Hennessey explains, “we were in the Saar Basin, we were one of the Divisions Patton promised IKE.” to relieve the siege of Bastogne.

TODAY AT age 87, Hennessey talks about the campaign as if it happened yesterday. “They put us in open trucks, no canvas covering, to get us up to the front - North to Bulge area, and boy was it cold! This was during one of the worst winters in decades - I'd never seen grown men crying before but did then - because of the cold.”

“Then they threw us into battle, just west of the Saar Basin, and in our first engagement with the enemy - Dec. 14, 1944 - we had 60 percent casualties,” Hennessey recalled, “I saw my first lieutenant die 10 feet in front of me after stepping on a land mine as we were slogging through the woods.”

On New Year's Eve, Hennessey had a very close call when “an 88 shell landed between me and my buddy but, thankfully, it was a dud,” he said. “I was scared - we took a shellacking”

Eventually the allied forces evened the score and were able to form a

united front that began the final push into Germany. The end of the Battle of the Bulge marked the start of Hitler's Final 100 Days.

"It's a credit to those guys with the 101st Division who caught the initial onslaught while they were surrounded and outgunned," Hennessey said. "They gave time for the Third Army to get up there and help out."

During the battle, it is estimated that about 19,000 Americans were killed and about 61,000 wounded or captured. On the German side, 30,000 died, 40,000 were wounded and 30,000 taken prisoner.

However the intense fighting and dangers were far from over, as Hennessey would soon find out.

ON FEB. 26, 1945, Hennessey, along with his outfit, was in an attack near Neuenstein, Germany, "when we were caught in the middle of an open field and I got hit in the neck by a sniper."

"I walked to aid station alone, and was sent to a hospital in Paris."

As Hennessey explained to this writer: "a sniper bullet struck my steel helmet and pieces of steel were imbedded in right side of my neck and near skull but did not penetrate skull bone. Still have a few pieces. Doctor said to risky to remove, let well enough alone."

"It was rough on a 19 year old who didn't smoke or drink and not too fond of chocolate ... don't know



James with his wife Dolly holding a symbol of a golden acorn.



The US Liberators: James and fellow wounded GI's. On tour as guests of the Mayor of Paris - September 1945. Jim is bottom row, third from left.

how I was able to recuperate."

Several hours after being shot, Hennessey remembers praying while holding onto a scapular, "which a girl cousin of mine had sent me in mail, it was red and white photo of sacred heart," Jim added, "It's been in my wallet ever since, still means a great deal to me."

Jim was discharged from the Army on December 15, 1945 at Camp Upton, Patchogue, Long Island. On April 24 1949, he married Dolly Tagliareni. They have two sons, (names if you wish) and two grandsons. In 1982 Jim retired after 35 years work as a mailman for the Bayonne Post Office.

AWARDED THE Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Combat Infantry Medal and Presidential Citation, Hennessey says it's important for today's generation "to realize what a past generation went through to give them what they have today."

"One time, in the 1990s, I spoke to school kids about the war with a Vet from 101st. His name was Bill Druback (DECEASED)."

Hennessey is one of 42 Bayonne veterans who have recorded their memories of combat on audio cassettes through a project sponsored by the Bayonne Public Library, which set up an exhibit marking the 60th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge. Members of the public are welcome to listen to the recordings.

Two weeks before Jim Hennessey was suffered his neck wound in combat, his commander Henry Compton was also injured. Though good friends through-out their shared wartime experiences, it would be another 28 years before they would ever meet again. This

occurred in 1973 far from the battlefield, at a Golden Acorn reunion in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. "It was instant recognition," Hennessey said. "Hank said, 'Hey I know you!'"

Reunited again they were in contact with each other until Lt. Compton passed away in 1984 at the age of 64.

WHILE VISITING his grave in 1999 Jim was interviewed by The Herald-Palladium of St. Joseph, Michigan, about the bonds between soldier and commander and why they stayed so strong, and for so many years, even after one man's death?

It may be something only a soldier can know, Hennessey said: "You lived together, and you could have died together," Hennessey said. "It was a buddy system. See [the film] 'Saving Private Ryan' and you'll see what I mean." Kneeling beside Henry Compton's grave at Casco Township's McDowell Cemetery Jim had a flash of insight: "It's ironic," he said, nodding to the beautiful fall foliage. "The trees were just like this in the Ardennes."

On the 60th Anniversary of Battle of the Bulge Mayor Joseph V. Doria, Jr. issued a proclamation which stated: "The period of the Battle of the Bulge was an extremely difficult time for Allied troops. Fighting in the midst of winter, they struggled valiantly to maintain Allied positions on the Western Front. Thanks to the heroism of such American soldiers as Jim Hennessey of Bayonne, the Allies were able to turn back the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge." ■

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