

# *The BFC at War*

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According to National World War II Museum (New Orleans) figures, there are less than a million surviving U.S. World War II veterans; the men and women who served our country from 1941-45 are dying at an alarming rate. “Approximately every three minutes a memory of World War II – its sights and sounds, its terrors and triumphs – disappears. Yielding to the inalterable process of aging, the men and women who fought and won the great conflict are now mostly in their 90s. They are dying quickly – at the rate of approximately 492 a day, according to U.S. Veterans Administration figures.”

Not long ago, almost every Bible Fellowship Church had its veterans. Some would talk about their experiences. For others, the pain and images cut too deep, and they largely kept their experiences to themselves. But now most are gone. What journalist Tom Brokaw coined “The Greatest Generation” (Brokaw wrote, “It is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced”) is disappearing. Their stories need to be told before their voices are silenced.

This paper has its limits. It is impossible to tell every story. Many of our faithful servicemen and their stories are now gone. I think of Earl Leaser. Growing up at Bethel-Cedar Crest, I knew him. I think I even knew that Leaser was a World War II veteran. But I never talked to him about his experiences, and Leaser has been home with the Lord for years. Only in researching for this paper did I learn that Earl Leaser had been a B-17 (Flying Fortress) bomber pilot, and that he had flown 18 missions over Nazi-held territory in Europe.

Finally, like many U.S. bomber pilots, Leaser was shot down and found himself a prisoner of the Nazis. He was a POW at *Stalag Luft Drei* (3) in Bavaria for a time. If that doesn't ring a bell, it should – it was the setting for the classic Steve McQueen film “The Great Escape.” The film was indeed based on a true story, but one that took place before Leaser entered the barbed wire fences of the camp.

According to World War II Prisoners of War data files, Leaser was a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, flying in a squadron that was part of the mighty U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force out of England, at the time his plane was shot down. I later learned – from one of Earl's old friends, Royal Kramer of Cedar Crest – that he spent 28 years, in all, in the Air Force and attained the rank of Colonel.

Earl's B-17, Royal told me, was shot down on March 31, 1944. Years later, Earl expressed embarrassment about the notion that he had been captured because his aircraft ran out of fuel. But that wasn't really the case. Kramer relates what he later learned: “I asked him how that happened [that Leaser's B-17 had run out of gas] and he said that as the German anti-aircraft guns were firing at their plans, he got a direct hit from flak in his wing, where the gasoline was, and he lost it all and didn't have enough to get back to his base in England.”

Leaser's plane crashed and he was eventually captured by the Germans. For the rest of his life, he specifically singled out April 29th. For not only was April 29, 1944 the day of his capture; he was liberated from *Stalag Luft Drei* on April 29, 1945 – yes, exactly one year later – when American infantrymen came through the camp and freed all the prisoners. So Leaser's

approach later in life, Kramer learned, as that every April 29, when he awoke, he asked himself, “Will I have a good day or a bad day?”

Leaser’s story is one of many that could not be told because the subject is no longer living. This does not pretend to be a complete short biography of the stories of all our veterans – men and women – who are still alive. Call it a representative cross-sample, and the author’s hope is that what is provided here provides an accurate *feel* for what our men and women experienced in their youth. As more veterans’ names are made available to me, I hope to conduct more interviews and add to the biographical sketches that are found in this presentation.

At least while there’s still time.

Before I became a pastor, I had the privilege of interviewing several World War II veterans as part of my responsibilities as sports and features editor for *The News-Herald*, a weekly newspaper based in Perkasio, PA. I was honored to spend time with survivors of Pearl Harbor, Iwo Jima and the Battle of the Bulge – a wonderful counterpart to growing up down the block from a Guadalcanal vet and having an uncle who had fought in France.

Some interviewees were difficult subjects, and not surprisingly so, for they had watched buddies die in horrible ways. I still remember talking to Claude Nase, who at the time was Perkasio’s Chief of Police. He had been on the deadly black-sand beaches at Iwo Jima. While he agreed to an interview, he couldn’t bring himself to go into detail, even a half-century later.

For those who did talk, there was a consensus: *We’re not heroes. The real heroes never came home. We just did our jobs.* But at the same time, there was a pride in having served, in having done their duty for their country.

The fact that many of our young men and women went off to war represented a *de facto* change in our forerunner, the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, PA Conference. Traditionally, we were pacifists, and at the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many of our clergymen were still actively discouraging military service.

Others, like F.B. Hertzog, did not encourage their young people to go off to war, but Hertzog never lost sight of the fact that many young men and women in his congregation were indeed serving their country that way, and so he wrote regularly to them, as in this letter dated Dec. 1, 1944:

“Though you are many miles away from your home and your church, I can assure you that you are not forgotten here at home. It would, I am sure, greatly encourage your hearts if sometime you could step into our weekly prayer meetings and hear the many earnest prayers offered up in your behalf. These praying fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sweet-hearts and friends of you boys, have in the spirit of their Master given a generous offering to make possible a Christmas gift for each one of our boys whose name appears on our Service Honor Roll.

“Enclosed please find your gift in the form of a money order worth five dollars. With this gift come our prayers that God shall continue to bless and keep you, and our sincere wish that you may enjoy a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, wherever Christmas and the New Year may find you.”

While World War II officially began with the German invasion of Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, America steered a path of uneasy neutrality through more than two years. All that ended on Dec. 7, 1941, however, when the Japanese launched a massive air strike from six aircraft carriers and managed to attack an unsuspecting U.S. Pacific fleet based at Pearl Harbor.

A day later, in his “date which will live in infamy” speech, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war on both Germany and Japan. Suddenly, we were at war. For many of our young men, the question of serving was never in question. They would go, and many would not wait to be drafted.

The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church had an official position, one that was reinforced after the formation of a three-man committee back in October, 1939. Its stated purpose was “to compile a statement of our attitude and belief relative to war and military service and present this statement to the Executive Board for printing and distribution among our members.” Longtime MBC pastors C.H. Brunner, E.N. Cassel and T.D. Gehret – the latter a Conscientious Objector in World War I – were selected by Chairman H.B. Musselman.

The committee produced a pamphlet called *A Summary of the History and Faith of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Pennsylvania Conference Relative to War and Military Service*. In it, they largely rehashed our past Mennonite opposition to war while supporting two then-Articles of Faith, # 22 “Civil Government” and #23 “Self-Defense.” They concluded with seven summary points that largely continued the denomination’s support of non-resistance. Their conclusion: “Our conviction on the doctrine of non-resistance remains unchanged. Should the United States at some future date unhappily find itself again plunged into the throes of war, we must be true to our God-given convictions and refuse to bear arms. We must also refrain from serving under the military arm of the government, whether that be designated either as combatant or non-combatant.”

But when the Japanese attacked our Pacific Fleet on Dec. 7, 1941, and with the very-real threat of German aggression know to all (mutual declarations of war between the U.S. and Germany quickly followed Roosevelt’s Dec. 8, 1941 speech to Congress), many would not stand by. The decision to fight was an easy one, as the late Bob Kauffman of Emmaus explained. “Our Pastor, Pastor [F.B.] Hertzog, would take us aside and lay out the reasons for that particular [pacifist] doctrine. He urged us to apply for a Conscientious Objector status, but there was absolutely no coercion and for that I applaud him,” Kauffman wrote in his self-published book *The Replacement*. “My generation of young men, with only two exceptions in our congregation, could not abide by that doctrine.”

Oh, there were those who stood by the MBC’s position. T.D. Gehret’s son Robert, for instance, was drafted but served as a Conscientious Objector in Alternate Service, spending his wartime years in an office. After the war ended, he delivered animals to war-ravaged Europe under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee.

Years later, in an interview with Harold Shelly, Bob Gehret reiterated the position he held at the time of the war. “I don’t think there is any thing as a righteous war...I think there will be a time when we fight with Christ against...Satan, but until that time I don’t think war serves any useful purpose. We teach our kids not to fight, not to hit, and then, when they grow up, we say ‘kill them.’”

There was the official position of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, and there was reality. For the first time, our young people were serving in large numbers, our country was overwhelmingly in favor of fighting the Axis powers, and there was genuine tension between following the wishes of the Pennsylvania Conference and following the call to take up arms for one's country in what was clearly delineated as a war against evil enemies. A lot simply depended on where you went to church.

Bethel MBC in Emmaus, pastored by F.B. Hertzog, had men who took differing positions. Ernest Hertzog went the noncombatant route. James Koch was a Conscientious Objector. But Bob Kauffman went into active service, and with little resistance from his home congregation. "I was a member of our church since I was at least twelve years old," he remembered. "There was really not much discussion among the membership about nonresistance. Pastor Hertzog told us of the position of our denomination, and the position of our local church, but that was it. There was no coercion, simply a statement of fact."

Many, like Kauffman, took up arms and went to war. Again, it largely depended on where you went to church.

R.C. Reichenbach was pastoring our church in Staten Island, NY, and his congregation was fairly characteristic. While Ralph Cole was a Conscientious Objector, another congregant went into the Army and another chose the U.S. Navy. After the D-Day invasion in June, 1944, it was noted in a Jewish-based newspaper in New York City that local Mennonite boys who had served as medics were being rejected by their churches at home. The paper called Reichenbach and asked for his perspective on the matter. His explanation: "We back our young men whatever they choose. We do not throw them out of membership of the church."

Cole, for instance, returned to the Staten Island church after serving for one year as a Conscientious Objector and was immediately accepted by his brothers and sisters; he later spent many years as Staten Island's delegate to Annual Conference. Reichenbach, for his part, noted that while he largely left the decision up to the individual, there were others in the MBC who were much more vocal in their opposition to active service. He said T.D. Gehret "strongly pushed that you did not go into military service."

On the whole, though, Reichenbach said the decision "was not rammed down people's throats." Part of the reason, he suggested, was that the press was so adamantly pro-patriotism, pro-service that anyone who adopted an opposing position was seen as less-than-American. Given the obvious evil the Axis represented, it was hard for the public to see why Mennonites acted as they did. "It was not popular," Reichenbach said of our official stance as pacifists. "The pressure of the service was strong enough to do away with that position."

And, he added, increasing interaction between church and culture played a role, too, in a gradual swing from a non-resistance position to a position supportive of military service. "The church mingled in society and mingled with other churches," he noted. As such, our people were aware of public sentiment and, fed by that sentiment, began to back away from our traditional non-resistance stance."

For Byron C. Cassel, the influence of his father, MBC pastor E.N. Cassel, weighed heavily upon his decision. According to Byron's son Carl C. Cassel, when it was time for men

to register for the draft, E.N. Cassel wrote his son, asking him to consider being a Conscientious Objector. “Dad did not explain to me the basis on which his father made this appeal, but Grampa did close the letter saying something like this: ‘Your decision will depend on how much of the love of God has been shed abroad in your heart.’”

“When my Dad told me this,” Carl Cassel explained, “He also said, ‘Pop never asked me what my decision was.’” Byron Cassel was never called for military service; he did receive training and served as a neighborhood monitor for air raid practice blackouts during the war.

Bryan Schaeffer, the brother of longtime BFC missionary Doris Hoyle, was attending Bethel Church in Allentown when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Seventeen years old at the time of the attack, he did what many other young men from Allentown did – he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. The news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Schaeffer said, led to a conversation with his parents, who encouraged him to enlist and helped him to do so. With so much anger directed against Japan following the sneak attack, Schaeffer said he couldn’t concentrate on his school work and enlisted before graduating.

Schaeffer said he was never approached by his pastor (B. Bryan Musselman) to see if he wanted to become a Conscientious Objector. “Everyone was gung-ho to enlist and join the war,” he stressed. There were other incentives toward active military service, he added. Part of his training gave Schaeffer two years of college credits, and he received his G.E.D. because of his Navy training. It was through the popular G.I. Bill that Schaeffer prepared for his career as a commercial pilot.

Roy Gaugler, raised in the Graterford Church, volunteered to join the U.S. Merchant Marine as an 18-year-old in 1945, when the war was winding down. He did so despite the advice of his pastor, Rev. Rudy Gehman, who privately told Gaugler not to go into military service. Gaugler, however, was not the only active participant from the Graterford church. Roger Detweiler had been drafted and served in the Panama Canal Zone. Roger’s older brother Ray enlisted in the Air Force at the beginning of the war. He survived the war but was killed in an airplane crash a few years later while flying passenger planes.

And so, in a sense, the tide was turning against our traditional non-resistance position. For the first time, our men were going off to war without pressure or shame from their home congregations. It’s not too much of a stretch to say that one event in history – the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – eroded decades of a position of non-resistance.

When our young people went off to war, they trained in an almost countless number of camps, depending on which branch of our Armed Forces they had joined. Training was desperately needed, too, since when America entered the war, our armies were especially ill-prepared for war. In late 1941, the United States was tied with Romania – Romania! – for 18<sup>th</sup> position, numerically speaking, among the world’s armies. The United States Marines reported just one division as being combat-ready. By comparison, Germany listed well over 100 veteran, battle-tested divisions in its *Wehrmacht*.

So training was, in many cases, accelerated because our troops were needed – everywhere. President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and their respective military advisors quickly decided upon a “Germany first” approach to dealing with the Axis. As

such, most of our young men found themselves headed for Europe, while a lesser number were sent to Pacific locales to fight the Japanese.

War and military service, they discovered, is a mixture of boredom and terror. The greater percentage of servicemen found themselves well behind the lines, in duties that helped support our front-line forces. As such, they experienced a variety of enemies. “Wounds and death in battle were hazards faced by a minority of servicemen who saw combat,” noted Ronald H. Spector in his excellent book *Eagle against the Sun*. “Less dramatic but far more common were the hardships of boredom, isolation, and loneliness. These were enemies faced by almost every soldier, sailor, or marine: at times they could seem more terrible than combat.”

Said one G.I. who was stationed at a remote weather station in the Aleutian Islands, “Day after day, week after week, my only companion on the long night shifts was the wind. There were times when I had to smother an impulse to stand in its full blast and scream.” (*Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 385)

That quote alone shows that the elements were often a much-feared enemy. Our servicepersons battled the extreme cold of Belgium in December, 1944’s Battle of the Bulge and the extreme heat of Pacific islands like Iwo Jima and Tarawa. They succumbed to illnesses, especially in the Pacific tropics, where malaria, dysentery and dengue fever were rampant. Bad or inadequate food – mostly canned – was the plight of most. This was life in war.

All the same, the experiences our men and women experienced represented the great adventure of their lifetimes. All returned changed in some way or another, as this sampling of stories indicates.

## **James Madara, Shamokin**

### ***Saw Pacific island action***

James Rawlings Madara was known to Calvary Bible Fellowship Church of Shamokin as a quiet man, a behind-the-scenes kind of guy who, in his older years and until his death in 2012, led song services and loved his fellow congregants. “He loved people, and people loved him,” recalled his son, current Calvary BFC pastor Ferd Madara. “He gave everyone a sense of stability and being able to tough-it-out no matter what.”

There were reasons the elder Madara could do that, of course. In his youth, he had seen everything the world could dish out – horrors almost beyond imagination.

He was only 17 at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor – a year too young to serve. But that was only a minor roadblock; Madara lied about his age and joined the Navy. Like the other branches of the United States military service, our Navy wanted to hit back at the Japanese as soon and as hard as possible even though our enemies had devastated the U.S. Pacific fleet and had overrun several American, British and Dutch possessions throughout the Pacific.

The first American offensive took place nine months after Pearl Harbor – in August, 1942 at a then-unknown island named Guadalcanal, part of the Solomon Islands chain. Madara was there. Before he was old enough to vote, James Rawlings Madara was operating twin .50-caliber machine guns on Landing Craft Control boats that would ride toward the beaches ahead of the landing forces – part of a unit connected with the Attack Transport *USS President Adams*.

That’s how Madara fought first at nearby Tulagi, then at Guadalcanal before his unit retired to Hawaii for rest and refitting. “Wherever there was a Japanese occupation is where the

*President Adams* fleet sailed,” Ferd Madara explained. “The *President Adams* was an older boat equipped with black powder guns, but had immense firepower. My Dad recalls the fleet firing continuously on an island until nothing was left except smoldering landscape.”

What our servicemen learned over the course of the war, however, was that appearances were usually deceiving. “Still, there were Japanese in the caves and holds that would survive,” his son said. As our Marines soon learned, they had to be rooted out, cave by cave.

James Madara’s LCC was a basically an ironclad version of the better-known PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat. The *President Adams* would lower his and other LCCs into the water from its deck, and then Madara and his fellow crewmen (each LCC boasted an 11-man crew) would head toward the beaches, where they would attempt to find relatively safe places for the Marines to land.

Unlike some veterans, James Madara talked about his role in the war; Ferd Madara was not left wondering about his father’s role. “He told me they could see the Japs in their bunkers and pillboxes, but they would seldom fire on the LCCs, because they knew this boat meant troops would be coming after they (the LCCs) returned to the fleet.

“Very often landing craft filled with soldiers never made it to shore,” he added. “My Dad experienced all this before he was 20...He watched a lot of landing craft destroyed before reaching shore, and many men die.”

Not all the threats Madara faced came from the islands themselves; his machine guns were often employed against the dreaded Japanese fighter plane, the Mitsubishi A6M, more commonly known as the Zero or Zeke. “During his tour in the Navy, Dad saw many terrifying battles from the sky,” his son said. “The twin fifty calibers he shot were mostly used in defense from Japanese Zeros, and of course kamikazes [late in the war, with the Japanese running low on resources and trained pilots, they intentionally sent bomb-laden aircraft plunging into Allied ships]. Amazingly, he and his crew arrived home safely.”

While many men relied upon their faith in Christ, Madara was not yet a believer. His parents had raised him in the Methodist church. Upon returning from action over Christmas, 1944, he married Margaret Cooper – in front of the fireplace in the home in which Ferd now resides. “Two preachers officiated, and Dad went back to finish his term,” his son said.

But James Madara did come to saving faith after the war, hearing the gospel and responding to it at Bethel Chapel in East Cameron. “He was a religious man in the Navy, but a Christian in name only, like many men,” Ferd Madara said. “God preserved his life, for which I am very grateful.”

Coming from the coal region had its drawbacks; James’ skipper used to call him “Hunky.” “A hunky was common slang for someone who was Polish, which a greater part of Shamokin was and still is.” Ferd Madara explained.

Not all of James Madara’s memories were horrifying; indeed, the friendships he made lasted for the rest of his life. “Dad spoke mostly of the ‘fun’ memories and only mentioned briefly the battles,” Ferd Madara said.

Upon the end of the war, James Madara left the Navy, although not without regrets. He spent the remainder of his life in the building and heating trades. “Seldom did a week go by that

he didn't mention his crew," Ferd recalled. "The final years of his life, Dad spent with us, and nightly he would speak of the islands at the table.

"It seemed like the older he got, the more he remembered about his buddies. One by one, they would pass away, and he would no longer hear from them. He related that he hadn't heard from Shorty for a while, or that he hadn't heard from the LCC reunion this year."

When Ferd Madara officiated the funeral of one of his father's high school buddies, who had served as a Marine, James Madara drove his motorized scooter to the casket, managed to stand, and then saluted his old friend Charlie's remains. "I will never forget Dad at Charlie's casket – two great men that so many never got to know," Ferd said. "Charlie was always a Marine and Dad was always a sailor."

In some ways, Ferd Madara didn't realize how much he missed his father until he took the time to put some thoughts on paper. "Heaven holds so much that we will only know when we see it," he said. "I think my Dad had hoped, when he stepped on shore, that the Lord would have an LCC boat set to sail and a homeland to defend. I'm sure he wasn't disappointed either way."

"He is sadly missed by me and Mom, who is still living with us at 90," Ferd Madara concluded. "We know we will soon be reunited. I expect a salute."

## **Charles Newton, Graterford**

### ***Pilot in Canada's Air Force***

It must never be forgotten that World War II was a *world* war, and by the time the United States declared war against Japan, Germany and Italy, war had been raging for more than two years – ever since the Germans invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939.

And so while hundreds of thousands of Americans fought against the Axis, our neighbors to the north were involved longer than we were. Canada declared war against Nazi Germany on Sept. 10, 1939 and, though it had enjoyed full legal autonomy with Great Britain in 1931, Canadian armed forces largely fought alongside Britain in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters.

Charles Newton, born and raised in Canada, served four years in the Canadian Air Force as a pilot instructor. A native of Toronto, he was attending college in Hamilton, Ontario when he was enrolled in the COTC (Canadian Officer Training Corps). He quit college in order to enlist, and remained in active service through war's end. While he never went overseas, he played a role in training pilots for battle against the *Luftwaffe*, the German air force.

Newton admitted that, when American involvement in the war was slow in coming – due to a large isolationist contingent, which had strong support in the political arena – Canadians were critical. But as Newton related in a March, 2015 interview, "The U.S. was not ready" for war. And Newton was right, as evidenced by several early-war setbacks suffered by American forces.

Newton was already a follower of Jesus Christ when he entered the military, and he met other Christians and developed Christian friendships while he served his country. Because his duties kept him moving from base to base, Newton increasingly missed his home church.

Upon Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945, Newton signed up to go to war against Japan. By then, the battle for Okinawa, in the nearby Ryukyu Islands, was already raging, and the knowledge that the Japanese would likely defend their home islands to the death caused great consternation among the Allies, and certainly likely with Newton.

God intervened, however. On his way to prepare for the invasion of Japan, Newton was allowed to spend some time in Alberta, Canada, and while he was in Alberta, he accepted a

service position doing weather checks. “Other people did not want that assignment because it meant doing checks early in the morning and late at night.”

Newton, however, accepted that duty...and that’s as close to Japan as he got. Japan surrendered unconditionally on Sept. 2, 1945, and Charles Newton was spared the horrors of a battle that military experts have estimated may have caused 1,000,000 Allied casualties.

## **Ralph Mann, Coopersburg**

### ***D-Day paratrooper***

Ralph Mann’s D-Day story gained a wide audience on the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy landing, courtesy of an interview that appeared in the Allentown *Morning Call* newspaper. But the article itself was no mere courtesy; it told the thrilling tale of a paratrooper who entered enemy territory before our troops landed at Omaha and Utah beaches.

Mann, then a 21-year sergeant in the headquarters company of a regiment attached to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, three years after he graduated from Coopersburg High School. Prior to his military service, Mann worked in a lumber yard.

Mann never really wrestled with the decision to serve despite the MBC’s official position. F.B. Hertzog, his pastor at Coopersburg in 1941, didn’t push Mann toward a Conscientious Objector position. In a 2012 interview, Mann said it wouldn’t have mattered if Rev. Hertzog had done so; he was intent upon fighting in the defense of his country. Two of his buddies from the Coopersburg church, Paul Shelly and Leroy Knipe, went the C.O. route, but Mann never considered it seriously.

While many others went into infantry units, Mann found himself lured by the adventure – and the higher pay – of paratrooper service, and one month into boot camp, he signed up to jump out of airplanes and was assigned to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment. His first jump, not surprisingly, was terrifying. “It was scary, but once you got used to it, it wasn’t scary,” he said. By June, 1944, Mann was well-trained and ready for action.

As told to *The Morning Call’s* David Venditta, Mann’s D-Day story actually began on D-Day-minus-one, June 5, 1944: that’s when he and others in his unit learned that a break in the weather on June 6 would allow for the long-anticipated Allied landing in France. “We finally got the word: June 6, it’s a go,” recalled Mann, who died this past February.

Ralph Mann, who grew up in the Calvary-Coopersburg church, wasn’t the only Mann boy in the service; indeed, he ended up running into his brother Ray after the latter had landed on Utah Beach on June 6<sup>th</sup>. Ralph, however, went in before the landing – as a paratrooper, just like the famed Easy Company, 506<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division did on the TV series “Band of Brothers.”

“The main parachute was on our backs, over a map case,” he explained. “In front we had the reserve chute, and below that a canvas bag with a raincoat, extra underwear, socks, towel, soap, toothbrush, razor. On our heads, a wool cap and a helmet with a liner and a chin strap.

“You needed the chin strap to keep your helmet on when you were going out of the airplane at 90 mph,” he told Venditta.

In addition to his pack and what he wore, Mann was well-armed: he carried a .30-caliber folding-stock carbine with 200 rounds of ammunition, along with two grenades. He also jumped

equipped with a Mae West life preserver, a Kodak camera and a New Testament in his right upper pocket.

As Mann was about to enter the C-47 transport plane that would take him to his drop zone, he remembered yelling to his friend Jack Willis, who was headed to another aircraft, "See you on the ground!" Mann's aircraft, nicknamed Rambling Wreck No. 2, carried a stick of 16-20 paratroopers, their faces and hands blackened so they wouldn't stand out in the darkness. "It was hard to walk, at double our normal weight with all the equipment," Mann explained, "so climbing on the plane was tough. The door had been removed. As the No. 2 man in the stick, I sat close to the opening. The fresh air kept me from getting airsick."

Upon taking off, Mann looked down and saw the vast invasion fleet that was already heading to the Normandy landing beaches. Not surprisingly, he spent much of the flight lost in thought. "Everyone was quiet," he said. "We had time to think. I prayed a little bit, but my nerves had me so I couldn't concentrate like I should. I wondered, 'What's going to happen to me?' I tried to get a little sleep, but that didn't work. I looked up and down the rows at each of the guys – is he going to make it?"

As Rambling Wreck No. 2 neared the landing zone, it came under heavy German anti-aircraft fire. "Ack-ack fire came up as we hit the coast, and it sounded like rain on the outside of the plane," Mann recalled. The red light came on, and the jumpmaster shouted, "Stand up. Hook up." Mann and his fellow paratroopers hooked a static line to a steel cable above their heads, patted each other on the back to show their link-ups were proper, and prepared to jump.

It was 2 a.m. on June 6<sup>th</sup>. The landings were still four hours away, and Mann was jumping into enemy-held territory. "We got the green light and out we went, each of us pushing the man in front," he said.

Upon jumping, Mann found himself heading for a small orchard at a greater rate of drop than had been anticipated. "We were trained to jump from 1,200 to 1,500 feet, but this was lower, 500 to 600 feet," he said. "Over my left shoulder, I saw a flare making daylight over a farm. In the distance, tracers from German machine guns were coming skyward. You knew that between each red-hot bullet there were about eight black ones."

Mann "hit like a ton of bricks," missing the orchard. He was alone somewhere near St. Mere-Eglise. "No one was there but me," he said. "I got out of my chute as fast as I could, then went to a hedgerow and into another orchard in the next field." He clicked his "cricket," a small toy which was designed to help paratroopers find each other. No double-click response followed, but Mann saw another paratrooper and rushed over to him and helped him out of his chute.

Picking up fellow G.I.s, most of them from other units, as he went along, Mann crawled into a ditch until dawn approached. From there, he looked inside a house that was serving as a first-aid station. While he was there, a firefight took place across the road at a farmhouse where several German soldiers were being billeted. "It was over in minutes, and quiet when I got there," Mann remembered. "The enemy surrendered."

There were plenty of enemy troops in the vicinity, however; Mann saw several as he looked across the Merderet River, which had been flooded by the Germans; several paratroopers landed in the river and were drowned.

Shortly thereafter, Mann found his regimental commander and several soldiers from his unit, but his bliss was short-lived. Enemy troops across the Merderet started shooting across the river, both with small-arms fire and with projectiles from one or more of the dreaded German 88 mm artillery pieces. “As the shells hit, we ran across a field and hid behind some trees in a fencerow overlooking a railroad,” he said.

That was Ralph Mann’s D-Day experiences. Of course he faced many more encounters. Mann was wounded in mid-January, 1945 – hit near the heart by a bullet that ended up in his left shoulder, smashing the camera he kept in his vest pocket. He was evacuated to a hospital in France and then to another hospital in England.

While medical personnel removed remnants of the camera from his wound, the .30-caliber bullet remained lodged in his shoulder for the rest of his life. He later learned – in 1982, at a reunion – that he had been a victim of friendly fire, shot accidentally by a soldier getting on a nearby truck. “His carbine went off while he was slinging it over the tailgate,” Mann said.

Mann’s wound, by the way, led to something positive. After rehabilitation, Mann was assigned as a bodyguard to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allied Supreme Commander and future U.S. President.

According to Venditta’s blog, Mann wrote a book about his experiences at the urging of his sister, Fern Mann. The book was entitled *A Red Devil from Coopersburg, PA* – Mann’s unit, the 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, was nicknamed the Red Devils.

After the war, he settled down nicely, again working at a lumber yard and also selling insurance and real estate. He married the former Josephine Gruber, raised a daughter, Kathleen, and remained active in his church. But he never forgot.

“Some nights I can’t sleep,” he said in 2011. “Toward the end of the war, I just happened to look across a battlefield and see our dead being loaded onto a truck stacked high with bodies. One body slipped out of a guy’s hands and fell to the ground. I thought to myself, ‘That’s a heckuva way to go.’”

“Things like that, you just don’t forget,” Mann noted. “I still see it in my dreams.”

## **Levi Wegman, Fleetwood**

### ***Witness to Buchenwald***

Levi Wegman knew about the concentration camps, which were a poorly-kept secret by early 1945. But Wegman, who served as a Signal Corpsman, wasn’t prepared for what he saw upon his entry into Buchenwald. But of course, who could be fully prepared for such a thing?

*Konzentrationslager* Buchenwald, not a death camp like Auschwitz or Treblinka but nevertheless a place of death and one of the largest concentration camps on German soil, opened in July, 1937 – more than two years prior to the start of the war and 4 ½ years before Pearl Harbor hastened America’s entry. It remained in operation until April, 1945, and estimates place the number incarcerated there at more than 238,000, with perhaps 56,000 deaths, among them many captured Allied airmen.

Buchenwald was liberated in stages by American troops on April 11, 1945 – apparently before German S.S. troops were able to execute its prisoners. At the last minute, some of Buchenwald’s Communist inmates also rose up against their captors using arms they had been secretly collecting since 1942.

Edward R. Murrow's April 15 radio report for CBS became one of his most famous broadcasts: "I asked to see one of the barracks," Murrow announced. "It happened to be occupied by Czechoslovaks. When I entered, men crowded around, tried to lift me to their shoulders. They were too weak. Many of them could not get out of bed. I was told that this building had once stabled 80 horses. There were 1,200 men in it, five to a bunk. The stink was beyond all description...As we walked out into the courtyard, a man fell dead. Two others, they must have been over 60, were crawling toward the latrine. I saw it, but will not describe it." (source: Wikipedia article on Buchenwald)

Wegner, part of the 3186 Signal Service Battalion, entered Buchenwald a week later. His small communications unit consisted of two Protestants and four Jews. "We set up a station in Buchenwald," he recalled. "All the people were gone – except I met one man. He was very thin and weak." The former prisoner also informed Wegman that the Russians would be there soon.

Wegman, along with his two brothers, traveled to Europe several years after the war and toured Dachau, another camp in Germany. "Basically, Dachau was almost the same setup as Buchenwald." And it was a long, long world away from where Levi Wegman grew up.

Wegman was a high school student on Dec. 7, 1941. "I was up here on the hill riding bicycle" when he heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. While many enlisted immediately, Wegman knew that, as a student, he wouldn't be called that early. He graduated from high school in 1943 and was inducted into the U.S. Army that December, reporting for duty at New Cumberland, PA and spending that Christmas day on KP duty.

Wegman knew that he didn't want to go into the infantry, but his plans to join the Army Air Force were foiled when he failed the eye test. So he went into the Signal Corps, and it was as a Signal Corpsman that Levi Wegman arrived in Liverpool, England in 1944 – about the time of the Battle of the Bulge. After crossing the English Channel, his unit was trooped on a 40-and-8 (40 men or eight horses) boxcar that went across France until his arrival on the Rhine River as part of General Courtney Hicks Hodge's First Army – a gargantuan unit made up of 18 divisions.

Because most of the bridges across the Rhine had been destroyed, Wegman crossed into Germany on a pontoon bridge and immediately got to work establishing communications links. "We were in six-man teams," he explained. "Within 2-3 hours, six men would set up a relay station or a communications station."

As an FM unit, they would establish straight lines, requiring them to go to the highest peak in each area. "Then you'd beam to the next highest area, maybe 40 miles away," Wegman said. "That's how we communicated. And as the army advanced...they would tear the back station down and put a new one up front. So we were constantly moving."

Wegman, as such, wasn't directly engaged in combat, but he was close enough to the front lines to hear artillery fire and see the flashes at night.

Germany's military back was essentially broken by the Battle of the Bulge. Wegman said once his unit advanced to the Elbe River, they "knew it was a matter of time, because we were moving pretty fast." Upon first entering Germany, they witnessed villages that had been decimated by action. "But as we advanced, there were towns that weren't touched, because we just advanced too fast."

Wegman's units eventually linked up with Russian soldiers as the Soviets advanced from the east. Just a few weeks later, he was shipped out to a staging area in France and eventually left Europe on the *USS Monterey*, a converted luxury liner that carried 5,000 troops. He went through the Panama Canal with the understanding that seeing action in the Pacific was a very real possibility.

Three days out of Panama, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The Japanese surrendered less than a month later.

After the war, Wegman served for a time in the Philippines – in Manila, right on Dewey Boulevard. He was moved in November, 1945 to Yokohama, Japan. As it turned out, the trip to Japan was more difficult than the duty. “We went through a typhoon...on an LST (a Landing Ship Tank, a landing craft not ideally suited for long-distance ocean travel). An LST has a flat bottom. Those big waves, you'd go up in the air 50 feet.”

In Japan, Wegman came in contact with many Japanese civilians and used an interpreter to converse with them and get them to engage in work projects. “It was after the war, so they had no work,” he said. “It was like one of the WPA programs (the Works Progress Administration, one of the “alphabet agencies” designed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to ease the effects of the Great Depression); everybody had to work...They had very little equipment; they had to do everything by hand.”

He spent his time in Japan serving as a liaison between the U.S. Army and the Japanese people; he had 1,000 men for whom he was responsible for assigning work while also providing food for them. “I can still smell that fish,” he said.

Wegman said he was already a believer in Jesus Christ when he went off to war. He grew up in the Lutheran Church before becoming a member at our Fleetwood Church (in 1978; along with Clayton Weber, he was a founding member of New Life BFC, Oley). “I had no trouble going into the service,” he said. “Clayton Weber, however, became a Conscientious Objector.”

Now 90, Wegman said his wartime experiences did not shake his Christian faith. “It didn't change anything,” he said. “In my outfit there were six men, and I had my Bible. Every night I would read it. It didn't persuade any of them, but after they got to know me, it was my daily routine, and I think I was respected for it.”

## **Joe Wire, York**

### ***Danger without leaving our shores***

There was never really much question, when war came, that Joe Wire would serve his country, for Wire's pastor at York, W.F. Heffner, seemingly never preached anything from the pulpit about taking the non-resistance route that other MBC pastors were espousing. So while two other men from the York church adopted a Conscientious Objector position – and Wire remembered they later regretted their decision because others in their unit proved to be “wicked men” – Joe Wire left high school in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and joined the U.S. Army Air Corps.

Not that Wire was unaware of other Conscientious Objectors. He knew that many movie actors had gone that route because they didn't want to place themselves in danger. And he knew the stigma that went along with being a Conscientious Objector. Doris Wire, Joe's wife, said, “They were accused of being afraid to fight.” Others, it was felt, didn't love their country enough to sacrifice their lives for the U.S.

Not Joe. He spent three years in active service, and although he never traveled overseas, Wire still found his life endangered.

The fact that Wire never went to a foreign theater can be attributed to a hernia he had when he reported to the Army Air Corps Training Center in Wichita Falls, TX. It was then that his hernia was discovered, and Wire was told, “We’ll operate on you, send you home for 15 days, then ship you out overseas.”

No, Joe replied. No surgery. And so he was given a home assignment: Wire was responsible for setting up ammunition demonstrations for officers. Munitions and weaponry improved over the course of our involvement in the war, and so there were always new “improvements” to be demonstrated. Wire’s job involved showing officers the effects ordinance had on our weapons. In other words, he got to blow up new tanks and other vehicles.

As you might imagine, his duty was not without danger. One day, as some of Wire’s fellow soldiers were sent to clean up debris after a demonstration, Joe was held back, for some reason. Moments later, an explosion ripped through the demonstration area, killing a sergeant and wounding several others. It could have been Wire, but God’s providential hand placed him out of harm’s way.

When the war ended and Joe Wire’s term of service was fulfilled, he went home to York and got a job. There was no fanfare, not that he recalls. While others were greeted with parades, Wire simply returned to York and carried on with his life.

### **Lyell Stengele, Bethel (Allentown)**

#### *Faithful medic in two theaters*

Between October 1942 and December 1943, all three Stengele boys from Bethel MBC in Allentown found themselves drafted: drafted at a time when the war’s direction was still very much in doubt. But while some Mennonite Brethren in Christ pulpits remained neutral – at least publicly so – Bethel pastor B. Bryan Musselman wasn’t afraid to speak his mind; he counseled Bethel’s young men to stay true to their pacifistic roots.

And so Lyell Stengele, and his brothers, were enrolled as Conscientious Objectors. But while that meant they were not allowed to bear weapons, the Stengele boys weren’t far from major events. Kermit Stengele served as a medic, offering front-line care to soldiers in five major battles in the Pacific. Laird Stengele, also a medic, treated wounds suffered by servicemen fighting the Japanese in Burma.

Lyell also became a medic. But while his brothers headed for the Pacific, Lyell went to England. Only late in the war did he join his brothers in the Pacific theater.

Drafted in May, 1943 – just over a year before the Normandy invasion – Lyell participated in boot camp in Little Rock, AR, and received further training at Camp McCoy, WI. By October, 1943, he was en route to Europe, traveling from Nova Scotia on the famed liner *Mauritania* (sister ship of the ill-fated *Lusitania*, whose sinking helped herald America’s entry into World War One), watching his convoy zig-zag to avoid German U-boats.

The six-day voyage ended on England’s southeast coast; Stengele’s military base at Checkendon, near Reading, housed a transitional hospital; Lyell Stengele found himself treating German soldiers injured in the fight against the Allies. It is an understatement to say that

Stengele's service at Checkendon was an active one: the hospital had 1,115 beds and served an average of 650 men per day, with a staff of 41 doctors and 62 nurses.

Stengele often found himself driving a truck or ambulance filled with wounded soldiers from the railroad station in Pangbourne to the hospital; at other times he oversaw guard duty in the hospital's guard towers – supervising men who had two-hour guard cycles, after four hours off-duty, within an ongoing 24-hour cycle.

It wasn't easy duty; Lyell remembers his company commander and his first sergeant both harassing him for his honesty and morals. But Stengele also remembers the military buildup before D-Day, seeing multitudes of warplanes filling the skies around Checkendon. And on a clear day, he could make out the Normandy Coast, which lay just across the English Channel.

There were challenges aplenty to Lyell Stengele's faith. There were no organized religious services at his camp, and he doesn't recall any Bible studies led by evangelical servicemen. But he clung to Bible verses he had memorized, including his "key verse" – Matthew 6:33 – "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Stengele's faithfulness to his responsibilities saw him rewarded with a promotion to corporal during his time in the United Kingdom; he served until his hospital closed on July 5, 1945 – almost two months after the end of the war in Europe. At that point, Stengele was shipped to the Pacific and was assigned the task of handling supplies that were no longer needed in Europe but were in demand elsewhere.

His voyage, however, was interminably long: a three-month journey on the Liberty Ship *J.B. Weaver* from Barry, South Wales, across the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal and eventually to the Philippines. Lyell spent a short time on the island of Luzon and then worked six weeks unloading ships in New Guinea.

By then, of course, the war had ended, and Stengele – who had plenty of free time in New Guinea – found himself thinking about home. But how? God arranged it. One day Lyell Stengele met a naval officer who offered him a place on the troop transport ship *James B. Lanier*. Within 24 hours of that meeting, Stengele was headed for California – on a journey that began Dec. 19, 1945 and ended five days after New Year's Day, 1946. A train trip from Los Angeles to Fort Indiantown Gap, PA later, Stengele served until his discharge in April, 1946.

Back home, like others, he made his plans, one of which included a Nov. 26, 1948 wedding as he married Violet DeLong in the first such service performed by C. Leslie Miller at Bethel. By the grace of God, Kermit, Laird and Lyell Stengele all returned safely home, resuming their lives in Allentown. The prayers of their parents and the Bethel congregation were answered.

## **Bryan Schaeffer, Bethel (Allentown)**

### ***Battled German U-Boats***

When Bryan Schaeffer joined the Navy in April, 1942 – just five months after the attack on Pearl Harbor – little did he know he was starting a military career that would lead to action in two wars, not one, and would carry him to places he had never heard of? But then again, at age 17, how could Schaeffer know such things? And it was probably good that he didn't, for like so many others, his life was endangered on many occasions.

When Schaeffer sought to enlist in the U.S. Navy, his situation was a complicated one. He was old enough to volunteer, but his adopted parents, the R. Paul Schaeffers, thought he was too young. So he got his biological father to sign the papers, and Schaeffer's military service began with eight weeks of basic training and eight additional weeks spent learning radar-sonar operations.

Schaeffer was immediately assigned to the *USS Cowie*, an American destroyer. His world in some ways became very small as he joined 16 officers and 260 sailors on duty on board the 2,395-ton Greaves-class destroyer named for Thomas Jefferson Cowie, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. Rear Admiral. The *Cowie* was a relatively new ship when Schaeffer joined her crew. Launched on Sept. 27, 1941 at Boston Navy Yard, she boasted four 5-inch guns and was capable of speeds of up to 35 knots, with a range of 6500 nautical miles.

As Schaeffer soon learned, the *Cowie*, with him aboard, was destined for dangerous waters as it supported landings in North Africa and Sicily and also protected Allied and civilian shipping off the North American coast.

According to Schaeffer's own memories, Schaeffer and the *Cowie* were just 20 nautical miles off the eastern tip of Long Island in the Spring of 1943 when a German U-boat, damaged by a depth charge, surfaced and began firing its deck gun at the *Cowie*. The *Cowie* couldn't depress its own guns enough to hit the submarine's low profile, and Schaeffer, while firing one of the 20 mm. guns, found himself a target of the U-boat's deck gun. Though he received a shrapnel wound in his groin, Schaeffer avoided a worse fate; his gun-loader was killed instantly.

In the end, Schaeffer said the *Cowie* rammed the German sub, sinking it. Wounded seamen were transported to a naval receiving station and were then moved to St. Alban's Naval Hospital on Long Island. St. Albans was Schaeffer's home for the eight weeks of his convalescence; during his time there he received a visit from his cousin Bill Heffner. Heffner was serving at the MBC mission church on Long Island.

Upon returning to his ship, Schaeffer found himself at a wide variety of destinations ranging from Murmansk, the Russian port above the Arctic Circle, to Oran in Algeria. But while convoy duty was always dangerous, especially in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic, Schaeffer said he never feared death, because he and his mates were simply too busy to think about such things.

While Schaeffer was recuperating from his wounds, he received training in deep-sea diving on the French liner *Normandie*, which had been taken possession of following the fall of France in 1940 and was docked at Pier 92. At one point, he was called upon to cut away one of the ship's cables that had become wrapped around a propeller.

Having also received training at Key West, FL as an electronic technician, Schaeffer was assigned to the *USS Wheathear*, a minesweeper that was docked in Cleveland but soon sailed through the St. Lawrence River to Boston. Schaeffer's new ship's duty was to sweep East Coast ports of German mines, but Schaeffer in Feb. 1945 found himself off the coast of Malta at the same time President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were meeting in conference to determine the final direction of the war.

Bryan Schaeffer was discharged in April, 1946. By that time, he was a husband, having married Angeline Missura on Dec. 28, 1945, while he was on leave. After his discharge,

Schaeffer helped F.M. Hottel reopen Mizpah Grove (which had been closed for four summers during the war). At Bethel, he became active in Christian Service Bridge and at Camp Bethel, the church's rustic camp property. In 1967, he and Angeline were charter members of Bethel's daughter church, Cedar Crest.

But as it turned out, Schaeffer's military service did not end with World War 2's end. He remained an active member of the Naval Reserve; following the war, he used the G.I. Bill to learn to fly at Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton Airport and served with the U.S. Air Force's Auxiliary Civil Air Patrol. In that capacity, Schaeffer, who attained the rank of Major, assisted in several search-and-rescue operations while also teaching other young men to fly.

Schaeffer gained employment as a pilot with United Airlines, primarily flying to cities on the East Coast. But when the Korean War began in 1950, he was called into active service, and from 1950-51 he flew F4U Corsair naval fighter planes off the aircraft carrier *Midway* (named for a key air-sea battle fought in 1942, one which cost the Japanese four of the six aircraft carriers that had bombed Pearl Harbor). Over the duration of the war, planes from the *Midway* flew 250,000 sorties, suffering the loss of 541 aircraft and airmen.

Spiritually-speaking, Schaeffer soldiered on largely without human assistance during World War 2; the *Cowie*, for instance, had no chaplain. His Korean War service on the *Midway* provided the blessings of Sunday worship services and chaplains for the carrier's 4500-man crew.

Schaeffer credits the prayers of his family and the people of Bethel Church for keeping him safe through two wars. The Schaeffers adopted twin baby girls in 1965. Angeline Schaeffer was called home to glory in 1985; Bryan married Harriet Kleckner, who had roots in the South Allentown BFC congregation, on Nov. 22, 1986.

## **Arden Gackenbach, Allentown/Bethlehem**

### ***Shot in both thighs***

Arden Gackenbach landed in France, at Normandy, after D-Day, and immediately he found himself grateful for small things. For as Gackenbach looked up the cliffs at Pont du Hoc – cliffs that American Rangers had to scale, under fire, on June 6, 1944 in order to lessen German attention on the beaches – he recalled, “I remembered looking up at that cliff, and I thought to myself, ‘Am I thankful I don't have to fight up this.’”

But Gackenbach's life would be endangered before too long. The front line, after all, wasn't far away, and shortly after he landed on the mainland, he found himself in the Normandy hedgerows. And the hedgerows, as many Allied troops discovered the hard way, was a dangerous place to be.

But first things first. Arden Gackenbach went to France as a replacement. That means he took the place of a soldier who had paid a high price. And from the moment he landed in Europe, Gackenbach was a long, long way from an idyllic life in Allentown.

As he recalls, Gackenbach was leaving Bethel Church in Allentown on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941 and was walking down the street when he heard the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. “I was walking down the street, down the steps, and this guy pulls up in his car and says, ‘Hey, I heard Pearl Harbor was bombed,’” he said. Like most others, Gackenbach probably didn't know

where Pearl Harbor was – it had only become the permanent base for the U.S. Pacific Fleet the previous February.

Gackebach, now 91, was already a Christian, having come forward one summer at Mizpah Grove, and his roots in the Mennonite Brethren in Christ were deep. His great-grandfather, after all, was William Gehman – Father Gehman. He was encouraged not to bear arms by many, including their parents, but the draw of serving his country was a strong one.

“I was determined that I wanted to do the Lord’s will,” he said. “I know my parents were disappointed with me. So many guys were going non-combatant. At least they wore a uniform.”

Gackebach’s inner argument dealt with whether it is ever OK to kill, and he found himself thinking about the Old Testament, and the many pagan peoples who were obliterated as Israel moved into the Promised Land. Then he wondered what would happen if he chose not to enlist. “I thought, ‘If everybody in the world sits back; if they say, ‘We’re not going to fight the war,’ Hitler could come over here,’” he mused. “No way am I going to do that.

“I figured God could take care of me no matter whether I was in combat, or peeling potatoes, or whatever I’m doing...I felt it was my duty, and I was not going to ‘bug out’ because I was afraid to get hit.”

Gackebach found himself in the army, in the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which served as part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division. The regiment originally landed at Utah Beach in Normandy on July 4<sup>th</sup> – just under a month after D-Day – and attacked to the south, advancing into Brittany and fighting on the Crozon Peninsula. In late September, the 28<sup>th</sup> was moved to Luxembourg, and by late November, it was poised to fight its way into Germany at Aachen. This brought Gackebach and his buddies into the Hurtgen Forest, site of some of the most brutal fighting in the Western Theater.

On Dec. 1, 1944, Gackebach’s unit was about 25 miles west of Cologne, Germany. It was early in the morning as the Americans began to advance, only to run into a German machine gun. It opened up on him, and its bullets found Gackebach, who had by then risen to the rank of sergeant, in both thighs. Gackebach was hit around 7 a.m., and he lay on the field until 9 p.m., when he finally received medical attention.

“When I got hit, it had been a little wet, and I was in a hole,” he remembers. “While I was lying there, I saw that the water in the hole was getting red, and I thought, ‘That’s coming from me; I better get out of here.’”

But he soon found he couldn’t walk, so Gackebach slowly, painfully, dragged himself by his elbows to a nearby barn, where he was discovered by a fellow soldier who Gackebach had described as a “goof-off.” “He had no business being back there, but God put him there, because he’s the only man who knew where I was.”

When Gackebach finally woke up, he had two litter-bearers with him, and he was transported by jeep to a little village that provided safety a few miles behind the front lines. He awoke again to see two doctors standing over him, and shaking their heads. They had examined his leg wounds, and he heard them saying, “I don’t understand it. I don’t believe it.”

Gackebach had been hit in both legs. A bullet went clearly through his right leg and his left leg was badly damaged. “But no bones were hit, no arteries were hit. Otherwise, I would have bled to death,” he said.

“By the time it came out the last leg, it (the bullet) was pretty well flattened out,” Gackebach explained. “It tore the living daylight out of the muscle in my left leg.”

Gackebach, a hiker all his life, was fearful that he would lose his legs. “When I got hit, I lost all feeling from my waist on down, and I thought, ‘Oh, no.’ I looked down and saw my feet and my legs, and I was so happy.”

But at least he would keep both legs, although the rehabilitation would be long and painful. He was hit on Dec. 1. He was still in rehab the following Easter. “I was in the hospital for a long, long time,” he explained.

If Gackebach had had any fear of dying, it was long gone by the time he was hit. “I had no fear,” he said. “I was not afraid of dying. I had no care at all. There was a very that I used to repeat to myself time and again, ‘Whether we live, we live unto the Lord. Whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.’”

That said, he saw a lot of the horrors of war, and without his faith, Gackebach might have despaired. That was often the case with soldiers in war. It was learned – and re-learned – that men could only spend so many weeks on the front lines before they lost their combat effectiveness. The brutality of war took a heavy toll upon the psyche.

Take the time, in the Hurtgen Forest, when Gackebach’s unit encountered a three-man German patrol and only took out two of the three. That set up a German assault that was countered with machine gun, BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) and mortar fire. “We were lobbing mortars right in front of them, and we just decimated the whole gang,” he said. “It was terrible.”

All it takes, however, is a little carelessness, and the Germans got off one machine pistol shot – just one – before the mortars opened up. That one bullet was enough to hit Gackebach’s squad lead, a worrywart who was always expressing his fear of being hit. “It hit him right through his head,” Gackebach said. “It spun him around. He gasped a couple of times, and he died right by my side. “Boy, that’s...oh, man,” he said before falling silent for a moment.

At the same time, Arden Gackebach considers himself blessed, for there were many times when he could have been hit, when he could have been killed. He still thinks about the time, in France, when the 28<sup>th</sup> was attacking an airfield and, as Gackebach ran through a ravine, a German sniper got a bead on him. “Those guys had a reputation,” he notes. “He missed the first shot; it went right by my head. Well, he fired two more shots and he missed every one of them. They could have hit me; they never missed. But they missed this time.”

Times like those convinced Gackebach that the Lord had a plan for his life that went beyond the battlefield. “I kind of fantasize about these things,” he said. “I’m thinking, ‘Here’s this GI laying out in the field for 14 hours. God looks down and He says, ‘I’ve got plans for that guy – big plans that include kids and grandchildren. I’ve got to get him out of there.

“It’s just remarkable,” he adds.

When Gackebach was fully recuperated, he rejoined his old unit in Germany. With the potential for an invasion of Japan looming over the horizon, his division was the first to leave Germany, with the idea of training for action in the Pacific. Before then, though, they took

thousands of German prisoners. “The Germans were giving up,” he explained. “They knew the war was over.”

Given leave before turning his attention to the Japanese, Gackenbach was allowed to go home to the U.S. He was at his home in Allentown when the news came that an atom bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, and then another on Nagasaki. He returned to his home base – to Fort Leonard Wood, MO, for the war was not yet over. “We went through the motions of retraining,” he said. But September came, and the Japanese surrendered before it was necessary to ship out again.

After the war, Gackenbach worked at Bethlehem Steel, and at the Steel, he ran into an old friend, Irv Zettlemoyer. That gave Gackenbach the opportunity to ask about the status of an old “crush,” a girl named Eleanor – a girl he had not previously pursued before going off to war. He asked Zettlemoyer if Eleanor had ever gotten married. No, she hadn’t. “That was all I had to hear,” he recalls. “I was on the phone that evening, asking, ‘Can I see you?’”

Arden and Eleanor were married in September, 1947, and remained for 57 years before her passing – a good, long, fruitful marriage, by all accounts. Having married a Bethlehem girl, he joined our Bethlehem church and later served as an elder at Ebenezer.

Looking back on his experiences and even on his wounding, Gackenbach knows God was – and is – in control of his life. “It’s a miracle I got hit where I did,” he said.

## **Bob Kauffman, Emmaus**

### *The replacement*

Bob Kauffman stayed active and kept his World War II memories alive until the end of his days. He spoke. He traveled. He visited. He made relationships – even with former enemies. Kauffman was an excellent story-teller. Of course, it helped that he had quite a story to tell, one which led Kauffman – now with the Lord – to write a self-published book, “The Replacement,” several years ago.

Kauffman, like many others, was shocked to hear about Pearl Harbor. “This particular Sunday was Communion Sunday, and since our church [Bethel-Emmaus] was part of a three-church circuit, the service would be held in our Macungie church. Then came the thunderbolt: Pearl Harbor had been attacked!

“Throughout the nation there was absolute shock that the nation of Japan would have the cowardly audacity to attack the powerful American Naval Base. There was great outrage and the call for immediate revenge.”

Japan’s air assault, however, had devastated the U.S. Pacific Fleet; aside from the absence of the American aircraft carriers at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, there was no other good news. But Kauffman had to wait his turn; in 1941, he was too young to fight. Kauffman graduated from Emmaus High in June, 1943, and his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was Aug. 7, 1943. By September, he received notice to report for a physical examination in October. Despite a weak right eye, he was not rejected; Kauffman reported for induction on Nov. 1, 1943.

Growing up, and reading story after story about World War One, Kauffman developed a strong affinity with the infantry, and so when he learned that he was headed to Infantry Replacement Training Center in Florida, Kauffman found himself delighted. “Infantry was the

‘Queen of Battle,’ and so when I saw the word ‘Infantry,’ I just felt that this was where I belonged.”

Kauffman was initially part of a heavy weapons company. His instrument was the .30 caliber Browning machine gun, and Kauffman also trained on the 81 mm mortar. Once his training was completed, he and his unit left Brooklyn for England in April, 1944 – two months before Normandy.

Kauffman did not participate in D-Day itself; he crossed the English Channel after the Allied invasion...as a replacement. He soon found a home with a rifle squad in the 36<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division. But again, Kauffman was a replacement. That means he took the place of someone who died, and that “someone” was not anonymous. “It was very sobering when I was told that I was replacing a man by the name of John Bateman,” Kauffman remembered. “He was killed in the first action of the Division.”

His baptism of fire took place in the hedgerows, and he soon learned that the Germans were largely combat veterans, having practiced their craft for the better part of four years. “The Germans seemed to be masters at utilizing every terrain feature to their advantage, and the hedgerows were prime means of stopping our advance,” he said.

The enemy used skillfully placed machine guns, supported by mortars, to stymie the American advance. “We infantry would take shelter behind the tanks to escape the machine gun fire, but the mortar rounds were not easily defended against in the open fields,” Kauffman said. “Their anti-tank guns took a horrible toll of the tanks.”

War was nothing short of brutal, Kauffman found. Machine guns tearing through infantry. Mortars lobbing killing rounds over the Americans’ supporting tanks. German Panzerfaust anti-tank weapons turning American Sherman tanks into flaming pyres. Kauffman saw it all; he saw men on both sides die, although his first brush with death certainly left an immediate – and permanent – mark on his psyche.

As Kauffman and a buddy made a dash from one hedgerow to another, the other soldier opened up, hitting a German as they advanced. The victim was right there next to Kauffman, and he watched life ebb away. “He was moaning quietly and I was sure that he was dying,” Kauffman noted. “I was completely mesmerized with my first encounter with battlefield death. Lying just a few feet from me, I could see the color slowly drain from his face. He was gone.”

Kauffman’s turn came soon enough – in July, 1944, was he faced enemy fire in a hedged field near St. Lo, France. Standing to the right front of the lead tank in a column, he faced a raking machine gun fire that sent lethal projectiles across their line. That fire provided enough of a distraction for a German Panzerfaust to fire on the Sherman tank. “The explosion of that round against the tank caught me like a wallop” Kauffman related. “The blast was so powerful that it felt as though someone had slammed me across the front of my body with a 2 x 4.”

Kauffman immediately knew he’d been hit. “My neck and chin were bloody and burnt, and my field jacked was almost shredded,” he said. But he was at least mobile and was able to make his way back to a medic to receive emergency care.

His mind was filled with thoughts and fears. “One of the great dreads that I had was how I might respond when I might be hit,” Kauffman explained. “When I saw some men, who were

not that seriously wounded, carry on and cry and curse, I feared that I might respond the same way. I did not want to disgrace myself, my family or my God with such conduct.”

He needn't have worried; God provided Kauffman with a great peace as he lay in a ditch, awaiting aid. Not that his injuries were minor, however. His neck and chin were severely burned, and Kauffman had considerable shrapnel wounds. But he was soon to learn something perhaps more stunning. After he was treated, Kauffman found a medical packet tied around his neck. When he checked its contents, he found a rifle bullet inside...meaning that, in addition to the wounds he suffered from the Panzerfaust projectile, he had also been shot – apparently at exactly the same moment.

“To be hit twice and simultaneously by two different weapons and still be alive,” Kauffman mused. “That was the miracle. I had shrapnel and burns to my chin. Supposing the blast had been five inches higher, I could also have been blinded.”

But God hadn't allowed that, and Kauffman could only marvel.

Kauffman was evacuated to a landing strip near Omaha Beach, and was then flown via C-47 hospital aircraft across the Channel to southwest England. He was safe – “a tranquil interlude,” Kauffman called it – “but he was also facing a long time away from his buddies as he continued to recover at a hospital near Hereford. Indeed, Kauffman wasn't ready to return to action until November, 1944.

It was at that point that he caught a break. Normally, recovering troops are placed in whatever units needed them. Kauffman, however, was allowed to return to Co. D, 36<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry – his old unit. “Where I belonged,” he said.

By mid-November, Kauffman's unit was in Germany, just inside the Siegfried Line near Stolberg. He witnessed a buildup of German air power – what was left of it – just prior to the Battle of the Bulge. And it was in that area – in a courtyard in Belgium – where Kauffman was wounded a second time, this time in a one-on-one scuffle with a German soldier who had supposedly surrendered but had yet to be disarmed. Kauffman reached for his enemy's right arm – the arm that held a pistol – and the two men tussled, both fighting for life. In the end, the pistol went off, hitting Kauffman in the hand. Despite feeling numbness in his wounded appendage, Kauffman kept struggling until his fellow soldiers were able to dispatch the German.

Again, Kauffman was evacuated – this time to Paris. He recalls the setting this way: “Seventy-two hours after the incident in the Belgian courtyard, lying in a Paris hospital, between something as unfamiliar as two white sheets, my experience was reminiscent of the Scriptural allegory of moving from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, since I had been transported from the dirt and death of the battlefield into the antiseptic serenity of a hospital room.”

All told, Kauffman was hospitalized for three months. As he was traveling back to his unit, Germany surrendered in May, 1945. But just because V-E day was now past, Kauffman couldn't think he was free to go home. Japan was still an enemy.

Like most other European veterans, he never made it to the Pacific. He was even injured a third time – this time in a vehicle accident. Instead of going to a field hospital to wait for the injury to heal, he was discharged and returned home. “Because of the discontinuity of my service due to my several injuries, I was still a Private First Class,” Kauffman explained. “But I

was older and wiser in so many ways – ways that would help to shape my life during the next 60-plus years.”

Kauffman would keep in touch with soldiers from both sides for the rest of his life. He returned to Europe and toured many of the sites where he saw action. He died on June 2, 2013 – after having many opportunities to talk about his wartime experiences.

## **Gil Rayne, Quakertown**

### ***Rear gunner on a torpedo plane***

The way 17-year-old Gil Rayne reckoned – and the way he explained it to his parents – if they didn’t let him enlist, his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday would bring bad news: Rayne would be drafted into the U.S. Army. “I didn’t want to go into the Army,” Rayne, now 89, explains. “I wanted to go into the Navy.”

And that’s how he got his father’s signature, allowing Rayne to enlist at age 17.

Gil Rayne was a Pennsylvania boy, having spent part of his formative years in Philadelphia before later attending – and graduating from – Ambler High School. Joining the Navy sent him to places he would never have considered: places like Norman, OK, where he attended flight crew school.

Rayne served as the rear gunner on a Grumman TBF Avenger, a carrier-based torpedo plane that served as the primary carrier torpedo bomber for the last half of the Pacific War.

Flying for the first time – in a trainer aircraft – provided quite a thrill as Rayne found himself catapulted airborne at 100-120 mph. While he never had the opportunity to take off or land on an aircraft carrier, Rayne spent a good deal of time airborne. “I can’t say I was afraid,” he said. “I wanted to be there (in the air). I really wanted to be there.”

A Christian before entering military service, Rayne tried to find a church wherever he was stationed and largely managed to do so. He also enjoyed many of the experiences associated with serving in different parts of the U.S. – like the time a “little old lady” in Norman gave him a rose. Rayne’s squadron had another distinction: its insignia was designed by Walt Disney himself. “It was a tiger on the back of a barracuda,” he said. “The tiger was hanging on.”

Japan’s surrender following the dropping of two atomic bombs prevented Rayne from leaving for combat zones. “We were excited about that,” he recalled. Once his service was completed, Rayne enjoyed a profitable 30-year career with IBM, repairing typewriters and other office equipment. He also married his sweetheart, Sue, and enjoyed a wonderful, long marriage before Sue went home to be with the Lord a few years ago.

## **Phoebe Derr, Coopersburg**

### ***Followed her father’s example***

Phoebe Derr’s father served as an ambulance driver in France in World War I. She never forgot his faithful service, so when war came, Derr looked at an example from her own family and enlisted in 1944 as a WAVE – for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service.

The WAVES, established two years earlier, offered a regimented training period – basic training, just like other branches of U.S. military service. By war’s end, 80,000 women had served as WAVES. Derr’s basic training sent her to Hunter College in the Bronx, NY. From there, she went to mail school in Samson, NY and was assigned to the U.S. Pacific Fleet Post

Office in San Francisco, where she rose to the rank of Mailman Second Class. At the time, women were not allowed to serve aboard combatant ships or aircraft, and it was not legal for them to serve outside the continental United States.

Phoebe's late husband, Jennings, known as "Jack," also served in the U.S. Navy from June 1944 through March 1946. Her term of service matched his, although they did not marry until 1947. A native of Vera Cruz, Lehigh County, Jack Derr enlisted in the U.S. Navy at age 19 and served on the destroyer tender USS *Melville*.

A destroyer tender's purpose is to repair damaged ships, and Jack was stationed in England. The *Melville* came under fire while in harbor: a German shell went over his head, hitting and damaging the ship and wounding several of his fellow sailors.

No one was killed in that instance, but Phoebe wasn't spared the pain of death, which of course was all around her. One of her girlfriends was engaged to a paratrooper. When he landed in France just prior to the D-Day landings, his parachute got caught in a tree. Hung up, helpless, he became a target for German soldiers who shot and killed him. As Derr recalls, it took her girlfriend a long time to get over the pain of her loss, although she later married and helped raise a family.

A longtime member of Calvary BFC in Coopersburg, Phoebe's Christian experience began in childhood as she attended catechetical classes and Sunday School at St. John's Reformed Church in Emmaus. She knew of Jesus and said she believed in Him. But it wasn't until after the war, as she and Jack attended Mizpah Grove, that she responded to an altar call. She credits Nevin and Lorraine Shelly of the Zionsville Bible Fellowship Church for befriending her and being influential in her Christian development.

When asked, "Do you think of the war today?" Phoebe responded, "My generation tries to forget the war."

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