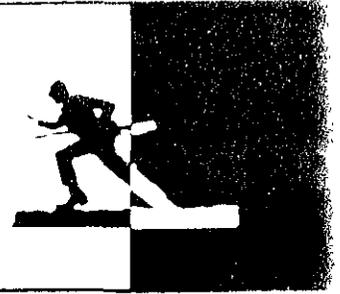


FORUM & FEATURES



Don't Forget the Privates

MAJOR GENERAL ALBERT H. SMITH, JR., USA (RETIRED)

On Wednesday, 8 May 1985, much of the world will commemorate the 40th anniversary of VE (Victory in Europe)-Day, and will heap praises on those World War II political and military leaders who directed and led the Allied armed forces to victory in Europe.

This is as it should be, I suppose. But on this day I want the world to remember that Infantry privates also won the war in Europe. Of course the Army Air Force, the Navy and the Coast Guard contributed mightily to the final victory in Europe. And in his own way every man in uniform helped defeat the German armed forces. Infantrymen, though, did more than all the others, and young infantry privates proved to be the cutting edge of the U.S. war machine — the teeth of the shark, the claws of the tiger. In fact, if it were not for their courage, determination, initiative, and sacrifice, we might not have a VE-Day to commemorate.

Ernie Pyle, the beloved war correspondent who died on a small Pacific island in 1945, probably best described these low-ranking, rough, tough warriors when he wrote:

The front-line soldier I knew lived for months like an animal, and was a veteran of the cruel, fierce world of death. Everything was abnormal and

ate if and when, slept on hard ground without cover. . . . The front-line soldier has to harden his inside as well as his outside or he would crack under the strain. . . . A front-line soldier has to fight everything all the time.

Major General Ernest N. Harmon, a tough man in his own right who commanded armor divisions in North Africa and in northwest Europe, notes this difference between tankers and infantrymen.

It must be a point of honor with every tanker that he never permit an infantry unit to be overrun by enemy tanks. . . . I always insisted to my tankers that in their rolling fortresses they were secure from most of the hazards of battle, and post-war casualty figures for the European Theater of Operations bore me out; infantry divisions suffered 70 percent of the casualties, armored division 10 percent.

I have talked with many soldiers during the past few years and have found them interested in the lessons we learned during World War II. Junior enlisted men in particular seem to enjoy hearing about their counterparts of 40 years ago — what part they played in the fighting and what they accomplished. In fact, after I would tell them that I believed the privates also won the war in Europe, invariably some would approach me

and ask if I could prove it.

This challenge eventually triggered on my part a concentrated research effort. I was hopeful that this research would prove my contention that low-ranking combat infantrymen won the battles that led to ultimate victory in Europe. I believe it has.

My research plan was simple — I would start by investigating Medal of Honor statistics and then focus on Medal of Honor awards at the division level and Distinguished Service Cross awards at the regiment level.

In analyzing all of the Medal of Honor awards made to Army and Army Air Force personnel during World War II, for example, I learned that 77 of the 292 medals awarded had been won by privates. Put another way, 26 percent of all Army Medal of Honor winners came from our lowest enlisted grades.

In considering just one infantry division — the 1st — I discovered that during its eight World War II campaigns, 16 of its soldiers had been awarded the Medal of Honor. Five of the 16 (31 percent) were awarded to privates. Here are summaries of those five citations:

Private Carlton W. Barrett. St. Laurent-sur-Mar, France; 6 June 1944. On the morning of D-Day Private Barrett, landing in the face of extremely heavy fire, was forced to wade ashore through neck-deep

water. Disregarding the personal danger, he returned to the surf again and again to assist his floundering comrades and save them from drowning. Refusing to remain pinned down by the intense barrage of small arms and mortar fire poured at the landing points, Private Barrett, working with fierce determination, saved many lives by carrying casualties to an evacuation boat lying offshore. In addition to his assigned mission as guide, he carried dispatches the length of the fireswept beach; he assisted the wounded; he calmed the shocked; he arose as a leader in the stress of the occasion. His coolness and his dauntless, daring courage while constantly risking his life during a period of many hours had an inestimable effect on his comrades.

Private Robert T. Henry (Posthumous). Near Luchem, Germany; 3 December 1944. He volunteered to attempt the destruction of a nest of five enemy machineguns located in a bunker 150 yards to the flank which had stopped the advance of his platoon. Stripping off his pack, overshoes, helmet, and overcoat, he sprinted alone with his rifle and hand grenades across the open terrain toward the enemy emplacement. Before he had gone half the distance he was hit by a burst of machinegun fire. Dropping his rifle, he continued to stagger forward until he fell mortally wounded only 10 yards from the enemy emplacement. His single-handed attack forced the enemy to leave the machineguns. During this break in hostile fire the platoon moved forward and overran the position. Private Henry, by his gallantry and intrepidity and utter disregard for his own life, enabled his company to reach its objective, capturing this key defense and 70 German prisoners.

Private First Class Francis X. McGraw (Posthumous). Near Schevenhutte, Germany; 19 November 1944. He manned a heavy machinegun emplaced in a foxhole near Schevenhutte, Germany, on 19 November 1944, when the enemy launched a fierce counterattack. Braving an intense hour-long preparatory barrage, he maintained his stand and poured deadly accurate fire into the advancing foot troops until they faltered and came to halt. The hostile forces brought up a machinegun in an effort to dislodge him but were frustrated when he lifted his gun to an exposed but advantageous position atop a log, courageously stood up in his foxhole and knocked out the enemy weapon. A rocket blasted his gun from position, but he retrieved it and continued firing. He silenced a second machinegun and then made repeated trips over fireswept terrain to replenish his ammunition supply. Wounded painfully in this dangerous task, he disregarded his injury and hurried back to his post, where his weapon was

showered with mud when another rocket barely missed him. In the midst of the battle, with enemy troops taking advantage of his predicament to press forward, he calmly cleaned his gun, put it back into action and drove off the attackers. He continued to fire until his ammunition was expended, when, with a fierce desire to close with the enemy, he picked up a carbine, killed one enemy soldier, wounded another and engaged in a desperate fire-fight with a third until he was mortally wounded by a burst from a machine pistol. The extraordinary heroism and intrepidity displayed by Private McGraw inspired his comrades to great efforts and was a major factor in repulsing the enemy attack.

Private First Class Gino J. Merli. Near Sars la Bruyere, Belgium; 4-5 September 1944. He was serving as a machinegunner in the vicinity of Sars la Bruyere, Belgium, on the night of 4-5 September 1944, when his company was attacked by a superior German force. Its position was overrun and he was surrounded when our troops were driven back by overwhelming numbers and firepower. Disregarding the fury of the enemy fire concentrated on him he maintained his position, covering the withdrawal of our riflemen and breaking the force of the enemy pressure. His assistant machinegunner was killed and the position captured; the other eight members of the section were forced to surrender. Private Merli slumped down beside the dead assistant gunner and feigned death. No sooner had the enemy group withdrawn than he was up and firing in all directions. Once more his position was taken and the captors found two apparently lifeless bodies. Throughout the night Private Merli stayed at his weapon. By daybreak the enemy had suffered heavy losses, and as our troops launched an assault, asked for a truce. Our negotiating party, who accepted the German surrender, found Private Merli still at his gun. On the battlefield lay 52 enemy dead, 19 of whom were directly in front of the gun. Private Merli's gallantry and courage, and the losses and confusion that he caused the enemy, contributed materially to our victory.

Private James N. Reese (Posthumous). Mount Vassillio, Sicily; 5 August 1943. When the enemy launched a counterattack which threatened the position of his company, Private Reese, as the acting squad leader of a 60mm mortar squad, displaying superior leadership on his own initiative, maneuvered his squad forward to a favorable position, from which, by skillfully directing the fire of his weapon, he caused many casualties in the enemy ranks, and aided materially in repulsing the counterattack. When the enemy fire became so

severe as to make his position untenable, he ordered the other members of his squad to withdraw to a safer position, but declined to seek safety for himself. So as to bring more effective fire upon the enemy, Private Reese, without assistance, moved his mortar to a new position and attacked an enemy machinegun nest. He had only three rounds of ammunition but secured a direct hit with his last round, completely destroying the nest and killing the occupants. Ammunition being exhausted, he abandoned the mortar, seized a rifle and continued to advance, moving into an exposed position overlooking the enemy. Despite a heavy concentration of machinegun, mortar, and artillery fire, the heaviest experienced by his unit throughout the entire Sicilian campaign, he remained at this position and continued to inflict casualties upon the enemy until he was killed. His bravery, coupled with his gallant and unswerving determination to close with the enemy, regardless of consequences and obstacles which he faced, is a priceless inspiration to our armed forces.

In the matter of DSCs, and again considering just one unit — the 16th Infantry Regiment — my research turned up the fact that 87 DSCs (our second highest combat award) had been awarded between November 1942 and May 1945 to 42 officers and 45 enlisted men of the regiment. Of that total number, 17, or 20 percent, went to privates. (Twenty-three of those DSCs were awarded to members of the regiment for their extraordinary heroism at Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944. They received their awards from General Dwight Eisenhower during a special ceremony on 2 July 1944. Three of those soldiers were privates.)

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Aside from the awards for valor, there is abundant evidence that Army privates can do it all. Take, for example, Private Clarence R. Huebner. A business college graduate, he left a good railroad job to enlist in the Army at 22 years of age. The year was 1910. Shortly afterward, he became a top-notch soldier and was his regiment's best rifle shot. He was commissioned in 1916, and his distinguished service in World War I earned him two DSCs and the command of a regiment in the

1st Infantry Division. During World War II he commanded the division and, later, the V Corps. He retired as a lieutenant general and was then commanding the U.S. Army in Europe. He received many accolades, but he never forgot to give credit to our infantry privates. Under his leadership, they had fought and won his battles.

Another of my favorite soldiers is Private Ted Dobil. Now a retired command sergeant major, he enlisted just before World War II when a private's pay was only \$21 a month. Serving as a squad leader and then as a platoon sergeant in the 26th Infantry Regiment during its eight European campaigns, he earned a reputation for coolness and courage under fire. His battalion commander described him as "the bravest of the brave."

Following World War II, Dobil's outstanding professionalism was recognized when he was selected as the Army's first command sergeant major. He served as the 1st Division's CSM until his retirement. But that did not end his service, for he visited the "Blue Spaders" when they fought in Vietnam and later when they were in Germany. This past April, our Secretary of the Army honored CSM Dobil by inviting him to Washington for the planting of D-Day commemorative trees. That's the road to follow: Private to command sergeant major to national hero.

Two privates I particularly appreciated in 1942-1943 when I commanded my first company in combat were a Private Plotast and a Private Martin; they were my most important and trusted assistants. Plotast (my runner and enlisted aide) unfailingly delivered my orders and instructions to the platoons. Martin (my jeep driver) was always able to find his way along unfamiliar North African roads and through German minefields, and he always managed to get us where we had to be. Both saw that the "old man" had something to eat and a place to sleep; they also guarded our company CP.

There is little question that privates distinguished themselves in the fighting on D-Day. One young infantry-

man, however, a Private First Class Milander, contributed to the Division's success without firing a shot. After his unit, Company L, 16th Infantry, had fought its way off the beaches and secured certain critical high ground on the Division's extreme left flank, Milander led a three-man reconnaissance patrol southwest to the fortified village of Cabourg. The threesome failed to return because (as we later learned) a platoon of enemy defenders had quickly surrounded them. During the night, Milander somehow talked the Germans into sur-



Infantryman peeks over hedge-row toward German positions near Brest, 24 August 1944.

rendering and took them prisoners. Next morning, American troops holding the town of Colleville cheered three weary GIs bringing in 52 of Hitler's finest. Everyone was happy that Cabourg had fallen without a fight and without another casualty.

The above examples could be multiplied many times over. As I said earlier: Army privates are special soldiers.

In his 1943-1945 Biennial Report, General George C. Marshall, the Army's World War II Chief of Staff, provided the following totals on Army decorations for gallantry during the war: 3,178 Distinguished Service

Crosses, 52,831 Silver Stars, 189,309 Bronze Stars. With the infantry receiving 34.5 percent of all decorations for valor, and with privates earning one of every four awards, it is evident that our young infantrymen distinguished themselves many times throughout the war.

The evidence clearly shows that American privates during World War II were rough, tough warriors who rose to the occasion. Our infantrymen did what needed to be done to accomplish the mission. Their initiative, drive, and ingenuity were unmatched by their counterparts in other military forces.

TODAY'S ARMY

Today's infantrymen, as I have come to know them over the past year, are better prepared for combat than we were at the start of World War II. They can face any military challenge with confidence. If ever a doubt should cross their minds concerning their performance under fire, they need only look back on their proud regimental heritages for assurance. They'll see that other young soldiers during our past wars overcame their fears when the chips were down and accomplished the seemingly impossible. They'll also recognize that American privates are great soldiers — they always have been; they always will be.

Thus, on 8 May 1985, as the world commemorates the end of World War II in Europe and toasts Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin along with their military leaders, Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Zhukov, let's also raise our glasses to the privates. Without their contributions, there would be no victory celebration.



Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr., began his Army career in 1940 and served for more than 33 years. Much of this service was with the 1st Infantry Division, either in World War II or in Vietnam. He is now Honorary Colonel of the 16th Infantry.