

## War Era Story Project 2012

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Being the family historian that I am, I decided to learn more about my uncle who died in 1945, in World War II, at the age of 21. Since I was born in 1961, I never had the opportunity to meet him. His death brought the family pain and sorrow so deep that little was ever spoken of him, at least not to me. This is said not to cast blame, since at the time when I could have asked my grandmother (who is now deceased) for more information, I was a young man with little interest in such things.

So, being the patriotic person that I am, I wanted to write something to honor him and to read on a day when we honor our war heroes: Memorial Day. As good fortune would have it, I was able to locate Howie's platoon leader in November 2002, nearly 57 years after Howie's death! This short story, in part, recounts some of my conversation with him.

### **A tribute to my uncle, Howard Franklin Carr, Jr., written in first person.**

Happy Memorial Day! I think it's great that America has set aside a day to remember its heroes of freedom. The only problem is, I'm not sure how many people really stop to think about the significance of the day. After all, it's spring and there is so much to do around the house and in the yard! I'm sure the barbeques and cookouts are great too, especially when families and good friends get together.

There have been so many people that have served in the military to further the cause of peace that you enjoy today. In the history of our country alone, over two hundred years, there have been times of war and peace. There have been countless battles waged (many you have forgotten) and countless lives laid down in the cause of freedom. Yet, you rarely stop to give thanks for the freedom you enjoy. I was no exception.

I'm no special person. I guess you could say I'm just your average guy, with all the same hopes and dreams of any 21-year-old, college bound guy. After graduating from Fairview High School in June of 1941, I spent a year studying at the University of Dayton. The next year, I transferred to Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware Ohio. But by the following year, with the Great War still raging, I was drafted into the U.S. military. I attended the Army Officer Training at Cornell University in Syracuse, NY during the school year of 1944, and by autumn I was sent to Fort Breckenridge, KY for boot camp.

Serving in the military just seemed inevitable; many of my friends had already joined up! Some had joined the service a year after graduating from high school. I even thought then that maybe I should join up with them. You know, it just seemed like the thing to do. Like a lot of other things in life, you can get caught up in the excitement of the moment, encouraged by the influence and prodding of your friends. After all, we all felt invincible and ready to take on the world. But like most young guys, we didn't think much past the excitement of the moment, certainly not considering the absolute horrors of war. We just

had no idea. We were, for the moment, naïve to all of that. But as with most naivety, it eventually dissolves into the realm of reality.

In October of that year, 1944, the men of the 291st Infantry, I included, were all shipped over to England. We left out of New York harbor aboard the transport ship *Edmund Alexander* on a Sunday, October 22nd. After 12 days at sea, we landed in Wales on November 2nd. This was our home for the next six weeks. Little did we know what we were in for. We had been told that we were to be “Occupational Forces,” which I thought meant we’d help keep relative peace in areas the infantry had already won. But what we were really headed for was “the worst of the worst” – the front lines and hand-to-hand combat in the hills and thick forests of Belgium, Germany, and the surrounding area. So on December 13th, 1944, we left England and entered France through the port of LeHarve. But in the next week, everything would change.

We were supposed to take-up with the Ninth Army, but Hitler had already ordered his men to begin an all-out offensive in Belgium. This was his final push, a “do or die” offensive. You may know this battle as “The Battle of the Bulge.” Later I heard it was claimed by many to be the most horrific and brutal days of the war.

After leaving France and heading for Belgium, we spent the next four weeks – during Christmas I might add – fighting our way into Belgium. The weather was cold. No, it was downright freezing! Western Europe had the coldest winter on record that year, and the snow was knee deep. New Year’s Day came and we were miserable; it was so cold. My friends were complaining that they couldn’t feel their hands and feet.

After some small skirmishes that took our first casualties, we got ready for the ensuing hell. At times, we marched all night through snow as deep as two feet. We were headed for the small Belgian village of Grand Halleaux. The stage was set; we had to gain this area and beat down the German forces. Little did I know that after this two-day blood bath, I would not continue on with my friends. Little did I know that I would meet the enemy face to face, but the enemy was not the German military. It was death.

I made it through the first day, the 15th of January. It was a night without sleep. At 6 o’clock the next morning, we were ordered to advance. Our objective was to take a field of over 400 yards of bare, open ground, which was swept by well-hidden enemy machine gun and sniper fire. My commander, Sam Cathcart, described the scene to Phil Denlinger, my nephew, 60 years later this way:

“At daybreak (6am) on January 16th, the 3rd Battalion was given the order to advance, and to try to take the next ridge. It was especially tough because the Germans were entrenched on the ridge in the thick woods. It was tough to know where to shoot, since all you could see was trees. The German artillery barrage lasted between 30-40 minutes. Our troops would race forward from trench to trench, dig in when necessary, then get up and advance again. The 3rd Battalion was able to do what the 2nd Battalion couldn’t do the day before, but it came at a high price. That morning, the 3rd Battalion lost 50 percent of its men, including Howie. Howie made it about half way across the valley field before being shot.

“As I made it to the tree line on the top of the opposite ridge, I turned back to look over the field. The field was black with smoke from artillery and mortar fire, and was covered with injured and dead. I saw several of my comrades on the ground who had been hit by German sniper fire, and I went back for them. I went to Howie, but he was already gone, killed instantly by a bullet shot to his neck. Since Howie was the BAR rifle man (the only one in my platoon), I took his gun, figuring we would surely need it later. But when I went to use it, I realized that it had been damaged by a mortar shell, because it would not fire. I remember disassembling Howie’s gun, and laying the pieces into my men’s freezing hands to hold as I was trying to figure out what was wrong with it. I never was able to get it to work, as it was too badly damaged. As I said earlier, one-half of the men in my battalion perished that day trying to take the next ridge. Howie’s platoon fared much worse, as most of those 36 men died.

“That was the worst battle of the whole war for Company I. I remember it well. You would think that after 60 years, the memories would begin to fade. I guess that some things are written onto our mind so indelibly, that they will never fade.”

Well, I guess that’s how it was! You’ll have to read the rest in the history books, because unfortunately I wasn’t there for the final days of that war! I leave you with these parting thoughts: We all must die; you just never know which day will be your last. It’s just that my time has come already, and yours is yet to come. So savor your days! Live each day to the fullest, but know too that you are not invincible. And neither was I.

Since today is Memorial Day, please take a moment to think about those of us who gave our lives, so that all of you might enjoy freedom. And most of all, be thankful. Unfortunately, freedom today is taken for granted. I know I did so; but I don’t anymore; it came with a huge price. So be thankful today; After all, that’s what Memorial Day is all about.