

War Era Story Project 2012

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Morris Sonenstein and I were combat medics with the 3rd Battalion, 101st Infantry Regiment of the 26th Yankee Division, serving with General George Patton's 3rd Army, engaged in the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. During a break in the fighting, our battalion was temporarily relieved and relocated in a farm house not far from the front lines. We received mail from home as well as supplies and rations. While eagerly reading our mail, Morris, or "Sonny" as we called him, came over and showed me a small photograph he had just received showing his wife holding their one-and-a-half year old son. Shortly after I returned the photo, he was returning to his company when a German artillery barrage struck our position and Sonny was killed. I survived this as well as the rest of the war, and I was determined to notify his wife so I could tell her about the last moments of his life.

I am submitting an article entitled, "Israel Morris Sonenstein," written by his son, Marc S. Bendesky.

Israel Morris Sonenstein
1921 -1944
Killed in Action
Battle of the Bulge WWII

(By Marc S. Bendesky)

My name is Marc S. Bendesky and I never knew my father. I was less than two years old when my dad, Israel Morris Sonenstein, was killed near the small town of Bastogne on December 27, 1944. He was killed by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

Morris was born in 1921 and raised in Philadelphia. He lived with his parents, Michel Sonenstein and Ester Welt (who immigrated to the U.S. from Romania), his sister (Yetta) and three brothers (Ben, Phil and Lou). Sonny (Morris' nickname) graduated Overbrook High School in 1939 and, in 1941, married my mother Frances Snyder. In 1942 he enlisted in the US Army, was a technician fifth grade medic, and was assigned to the 26th Infantry Division (the Yankee Division), 101st Infantry Regiment. I was born in July 1943. Our family lived near Sonny's training camp in Fort Jackson, SC, before he was shipped overseas in September 1944. His division was assigned to Patton's Third Army. I was a year and half old when my father was killed. He was 23.

After the war, my mother married Jack Bendesky, who adopted me and gave me his name. My mother gave birth to another son, Alan in 1947, and to a daughter, Lyn in 1952. When I was 12, my parents told me about my father, Morris, and played a record he made for my mother and me shortly before he was

killed. They also gave me the Purple Heart medal and certificate he was awarded and a memorial signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

As I grew older, I decided to learn more about my father's military life and untimely death. I studied the war and the Battle of the Bulge where my dad was killed. My wife Eileen and I went to Europe in 1990 on our 25th wedding anniversary and we toured the town of Bastogne, Belgium, and the area where Morris was killed. My research taught me a lot, but a major piece of the puzzle eluded me. For all my efforts, I was not able to locate anyone who had served with and knew my dad.

I am grateful to report that changed on December 26, 2004, when almost exactly 60 years after my father's death, the telephone rang at our Bendesky home. It was a call I'll never forget.

The call was from Emanuel "Manny" Marks, an Army medic who had been with my father the day he was killed. He had been trying for some time to track down my mother and me. His search bore fruit when he spoke to a veteran's organization. Unfortunately my mother died a few months before he made the call, but he did find out that she had married again and her name was Frances Bendesky, with a last known address of Lutz, FL. A call to Lutz information for anyone named Bendesky was all it took to locate me.

Manny told me that he and Sonny became good friends during the few months they knew each other. Both were medics, but according to Manny, Sonny had the much more dangerous job. Sonny was a platoon medic attached to an infantry company during battle. He would care for the wounded in the field. Manny took over thereafter and carried the wounded from the battlefield to aid stations. In Manny's words, Sonny was a real hero to the soldiers of I Company.

Manny had one longing desire: to locate Sonny's family. That was prompted by the events of the day Sonny died.

The Yankee Division had fought in France and Belgium for four months before reaching Luxembourg when the Bulge began on December 15. Eisenhower was in charge of the allied troops and soon thereafter asked Patton to provide help to the allies stationed in the small Belgian town of Bastogne, about 50 miles away. Hitler had been pushed back into Germany during the previous six months and was losing the war when he attempted one last offensive. He gathered all available troops in an attempt to divide the allied forces in two. To accomplish this, he needed to control Bastogne, as it provided the best road network to the east. But the 101st Airborne was in the small town and put up a formidable defense. Time was running out and they desperately needed help. The Yankee Division was in the thick of it as they marched toward Bastogne. During a break in the fighting, the division was reading Christmas mail in a farm house, with the Germans nearby. During the break, Sonny approached Manny to show him a card he received that included a picture of me and my mother. Manny says he will never forget that encounter with Sonny, as moments later a mortar shell landed in the barn killing him almost instantly. He remembers how proud Sonny was showing off his family to his good friend.

Patton and his troops relieved Bastogne on December 26, and the Battle ended in mid-January. In 2006, Manny vacationed in Florida with his wife, Shirley. We met for the first time and he told me more about

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Sonny and about his life. Manny was also from the Philadelphia area before the war. He earned an engineering degree and had a successful work career in Cincinnati, where he raised a family. When we met, Manny gave me a handful of citations, a chronology of the Yankee Division's days while in Europe, the Bronze Star and other medals issued for Sonny's heroics.

My search is now complete and I feel very grateful for the contribution Sonny and others made to his country. War is a terrible event and impacts the lives of many Americans.

I have much to be happy about. I grew up in Philadelphia and Edgewater Park, NJ, and graduated from Burlington HS and Rider University. I had a successful CPA career and worked as a corporate executive for several companies. I married Eileen Jastrzemski in 1965 and have two married children, Damon and Nicki, and two grandchildren, Sydney and Eva. I am looking forward to retirement and spending more time traveling and working on my family tree (which currently has 370 relatives). I suspect I will find time to learn even more about Sonny and get to know Manny better.

In May 2007, Manny completed his Memoirs of a Combat Medic- "War as It Really Is," which he dedicates to the combat infantrymen and the platoon medics who died taking the high ground. It is a very thorough writing of his Army life and includes many maps, pictures, awards and related military documents of the Yankee Division. It also has details of my father's death. That section reads: "One of my most devastating experiences occurred ... when an extensive artillery barrage screamed in on us. Sonny suffered numerous shrapnel wounds and bled to death. Sonny had, in performance of his duty as a company medic, lived with an infantry company confronting danger every moment of the day and had earned the respect and admiration of his fellow soldiers and, in particular, we litter bearers." Having read his memoirs I can now envision much of my father's days in the war as Manny and Sonny were not far apart throughout much of their enlisted days. Thank you Manny.