

WITNESSES

to

WAR

COLLEGE, ALBION, MICHIGAN



They've been called "The Greatest Generation."

They grew up during the Depression and fought to defeat Fascism all over the globe. Now in their eighties, these veterans are losing their comrades in arms at the rate of more than 1,400 per day. *Northwest Quarterly* recently asked some local veterans to share their memories of war.





Kaare (pronounced CORY) **Nevdal**, Rockford, Ill., was just 19 when the Germans invaded his homeland of Norway on April 9, 1940. Life in his small, west coast village near Bergen soon became intolerable under the occupation. By the following spring, he decided to escape to England.

"I couldn't stand not to be free," recalls Nevdal. "We had to carry identity papers everywhere, and someone was always watching us. If I stayed much longer in Norway, I knew I would end up in jail."

After one escape attempt was thwarted by a North Sea storm, Nevdal succeeded in reaching the Shetland Islands by fishing boat on March 15, 1941. He went to London to enlist in the Royal Norwegian Air Force, and the Norwegian government-in-exile sent him to Toronto, Canada, for training.

While in Canada, Nevdal visited his aunt in Rockford, who sent a picture of the two of them to Nevdal's family in Norway, claiming it was her and her son, in order to fool German censors. This was the first

indication his family had that Nevdal was still alive. He also met his future wife, Muriel, in Toronto.

After completing his training as a radio operator/gunner in 1942, Nevdal was sent to Iceland where he joined the 330th squadron of Coastal Command. He flew on long, tedious anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic, first in N3PB Nomads, then in PBY Catalina float planes.

In March of 1943, Nevdal was transferred to Scotland in the Shetland Islands. From there he flew patrols along the Norwegian coastline in huge, four-engine Sunderland flying boats. The Germans called them "flying porcupines" because they had so many guns (18) on board. One purpose of these flights was to keep German submarines from surfacing, thus slowing them down and making it difficult for them to attack Allied shipping on their way to Russia. But in May of 1944, Nevdal's plane caught one on the surface.

"We dropped depth charges on the sub from about 50 feet above the water," recalls Nevdal, "but it took two attacks. All the time they were shooting at us and we were shooting at them. The nose gunner was killed during the battle."

The attack was successful, and on May 16, 1944, the U-240, a type VIIc German submarine, sank to the bottom with all 50 crewmen.

Later that year Nevdal was again re-assigned, this time to a special unit which flew civilian aircraft in and out of neutral Sweden. His unit carried VIPs, spies, and important documents between Stockholm and St. Andrews, Scotland.

"We had BOAC uniforms and British passports," says Nevdal. "Sometimes we even transported escapees from Norway."

Since Sweden was neutral but blockaded by belligerents, some consumer goods were available in Stockholm that were unattainable in war-rationed Scotland. Nevdal's cousin's wife asked him to bring her a girdle on one of his flights.



Kaare Nevdal was in Norway when the Germans invaded his homeland in 1940. (Jon McGinty photo)

"I had to smuggle it out by wearing it under my uniform," says Nevdal. "It was very uncomfortable. I gained lots of sympathy for ladies who wore them."

Nevdal recalled a Norwegian poem he copied when he reached England the first time. Its meaning could speak to the motivation for many veterans of World War II.

*Kjemp for alt som du har kjart
Do om see det jelder
Da er livet ie saa svart
Doden ikke heller*

*Fight for all that you hold dear
Die if it's that important
Then life will not be so hard
Neither will be death*



Nevdal's Aunt in Rockford, Ill., sent this photo of the two of them to Nevdal's family in Norway to let them know he was still alive.



Sam Berchiolli,

Rockford, Ill., was a hard-hitting Marine who survived three Pacific island invasions and three courts martial (he had a bad habit of insubordination). Although married with one child and another on the way, “Berch” enlisted in the Marine Corps in November, 1942, at the age of 22.

“Everybody else was joining up, and the Marines were the only service that would take a married man,” Berchiolli says.

After “almost” completing basic training (that was the first court martial), he was sent to

New Caledonia in the South Pacific, then to New Zealand. Trained as a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) gunner, Berchiolli was eventually attached to G Co., 2nd Btn., 8th Rgmt., 2nd Marine Division.

On Nov. 20, 1943, he was part of the initial invasion of Betio Island in the Tarawa Atoll, the first major island invasion of the Central Pacific Campaign. With the probable exception of Iwo Jima, Tarawa was the most heavily defended piece of real estate in the entire Pacific war.

“I remember getting out of the Higgins boat into the water,” recalls Berchiolli. “I saw the palm trees ahead, the explosions, wading towards shore. Then it’s a blank until the next day. I was standing next to the Captain by a pillbox when I got hit on day two.”

Berchiolli woke up 11 days later in a hospital in Hawaii, recovering from wounds to his head, arms and

legs, as well as internal injuries from blast concussion.

“I never knew what hit me, but it killed the Captain,” he says. “They were still picking sand granules and shrapnel out of me in 1981.”

Berchiolli’s late wife, Nellie, received an erroneous letter informing her that her husband was missing in action. It took two months before she learned that he was alive but wounded.

After recovering from his wounds, Berchiolli was put to work for several months training recruits on the shores of Oahu. In June of 1944, he rejoined the 2nd Marines as they invaded Saipan in the Marianas. It was there that “Berch” experienced some of the most intense fighting of the war, attacking Japanese in pillboxes and caves, sometime in



Bethesda, Md. Finally diagnosed with “shell shock and battle fatigue,” he was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in January of 1946.

Even though Berchiolli still suffers from his wounds, both physical and mental, the Veterans Administration denied him most of his disability benefits until 2001. In 2006, after a letter of explanation from his daughter to Rep. Don Manzullo, (R-Ill.), Berchiolli was awarded the combat medals he earned in the Pacific more than 62 years ago, during a small ceremony in Rockford.

Left: Berchiolli waited more than 62 years to receive his combat medals from the Marine Corps.

Below: Sam Berchiolli survived his wounds from three invasions in the Central Pacific. (Jon McGinty photo)

hand-to-hand combat. They took few prisoners.

“The stench from burning flesh was awful,” he remembers. “It made me sick to my stomach.”

Berchiolli was wounded twice more in battle, and spent several days recuperating in a field hospital from shrapnel wounds incurred while reconnoitering a beachhead on nearby Tinian.

Because of his wounds, Berchiolli was sent back to the States, but instead of being discharged, he was reassigned to guard duty in





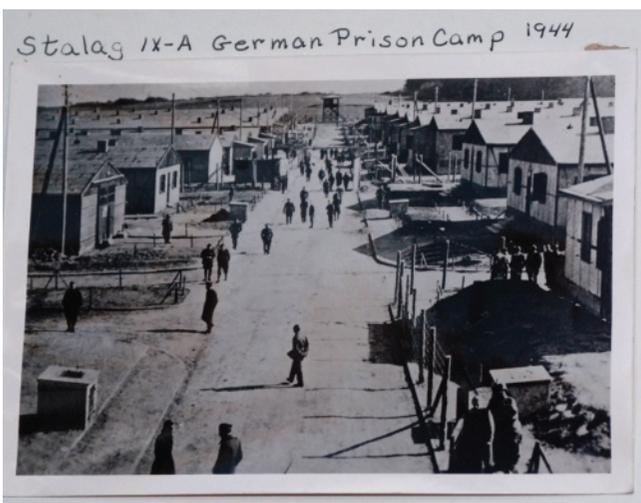
Drafted into the Army in 1943, **Harold Babler**, Monticello, Wis., was trained to be a radio operator/company clerk for the 590th Field Artillery Btn., 106th Infantry Dvn. His job was to ride in a jeep with the forward observer ahead of his own troops and call in artillery strikes from their 105 mm howitzers onto enemy positions.

Babler's unit landed in Le Havre, France, on Nov. 20, 1944. Less than two weeks later, they were deployed along a 21-mile stretch of the front lines near St. Vith, Belgium, in the Ardennes Forest.

"They called it the 'ghost front' because it was so quiet there," recalls Babler. "There was no action going on, so they thought it would be a good place for a 'green' unit like ours."

All that suddenly changed on the misty morning of Dec. 16 when the Germans launched what became known as the Battle of the Bulge. The 106th was one of the first units to be completely surrounded by the rapidly advancing enemy troops. After four days of intense fighting, many casualties, and no re-supply or reinforcements, the division surren-

Stalag 9A German prison camp, 1944.



dered. It was the largest mass surrender of Allied forces in the European Theater.

"The Germans knocked us about, took our watches and overcoats, everything," says Babler. "Then they marched us off to an open field where we spent the night in freezing weather."

After another 40-mile march in the snow, Babler and his fellow prisoners traveled in railroad boxcars, 60 or more per car, for five more days and



Above: Recently liberated POWs at Stalag 9A gather around a 3rd Army lieutenant to receive rations and cigarettes. Below Right: Harold Babler was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and spent four months in captivity.

nights. At one rail yard, their train was bombed by Allied planes, killing four Americans and injuring 11.

Babler arrived in Bad Orb, Germany, on Christmas Day and was marched into Stalag 9B, along with 1,270 other POWs—American, British, Russian and French Moroccan. The 18-year-old was allowed to send a postcard home to

his family in Bellville, Wis., to let them know he was alive. There he stayed until Jan. 25, 1945, when he was moved to another camp, Stalag 9A, deeper in Germany.

"The Army taught us how to shoot and fight, but they never prepared us for life in a POW camp," says Babler. "Your life was no longer your own.

Someone else determined how you lived—or died."

The men were housed in tarpaper barracks, more than 500 men per building. Each barracks had only two small wood-burning stoves for heat. Prisoners were given only two armloads of wood per day to burn, and no blankets. The meager diet of thin soup, dark bread and ersatz coffee caused Babler to drop from 140 lbs. to 80 lbs. in four months of captivity. Malnutrition and dysentery were commonplace.

On Good Friday, March 30, American troops liberated the camp after the Germans abandoned it the day before. By the end of April, Babler was back in the States. When he stood in his first chow line in the United States, German prisoners were handing out the food.

Babler later got married and settled in Monticello, Wis., where he and his wife, Wanda, live today. About 20 years ago, he went back to Germany and visited the old camps. Stalag 9B was a children's summer camp and Stalag 9A was a senior citizen retirement home.



Jon McGinny photo

"I'm not a hero," says Babler. "The real heroes are the ones that never came home, or were wounded for life. I'm just a survivor."



On that same Christmas Day of 1944 that Babler was entering a POW camp in Germany, **Ray Leech**, Freeport, Ill., was sailing out of a U.S. port on his way to France with his unit, the 310th Infantry Regiment, 78th Division.

"We became replacements for soldiers killed in the Battle of the Bulge," recalls Leech.

Before going into combat, an officer from Patton's 3rd Army briefed the recruits on what to expect. He told them that, if they could survive the first three days of fighting, their chances were good for surviving a few more months.

Leech's first combat came on Jan. 29, when his anti-tank unit participated in breaching the Siegfried Line, the fortifications on the German border just south of Aachen. That was followed quickly by the battle for the Rohr River dams on Feb. 5. It was there that Allied forces entered the Hurtgen Forest to capture the dams before the Germans could blow them up and flood the First Army below.

"We were often ahead of our ground troops, guarding road junctions," says Leech, "but our AT guns weren't very effective against the German armor."

On March 7, much to everyone's surprise, elements of the 9th Armored Division captured intact

the Ludendorff railway bridge at Remagen, crossing the last major natural obstacle to the German interior, the Rhine River. The following evening, Leech's battalion became the first Allied infantry unit to cross the Rhine. They were deployed on the hills east of the river to defend against German counterattacks.

Over the next few weeks, the Germans used every possible



"We heard those shells whistle just over our heads on their way to the bridge," remembers Leech. "They told us not to lie down on the ground, or the concussion could injure us. It wasn't until about five years ago that I could sleep through a thunderstorm."

The war in Europe ended on May 8, while Leech was guarding prisoners captured earlier during the battles for the Ruhr. Leech went on to meet the Russians at the Elbe River and then to relieve the 82nd Airborne as part of the army of occupation in Berlin.

After the fighting stopped, Leech witnessed a simple event that touched him deeply. It was a column of trucks descending a hill, all with their lights on.

"After all those months of black-outs and fear of attack, that was a sight to see," he says.

Never wounded, Leech was discharged from the Army on March 22, 1946, but his wife, Margaret, was unsure when he would return to their Pennsylvania home, since their correspondence was frequently delayed.

"I went around with my hair all dolled up and makeup on for two weeks," she recalls. "When he finally arrived, my hair was up in curlers."

Left: Leech's son-in-law, Tom Moll, built this cabinet for Leech's war memorabilia. (Jon McGinty photo)

Below: Ray Leech recalls his combat service by sharing his unit history with his wife, Margaret. (Jon McGinty photo)

weapon to destroy the bridge and prevent the Allies from crossing, including dive bombers, V-2 rockets, frogmen, and huge 540 mm howitzer guns that fired two-ton shells from more than 20 miles away.





When **Sulo Arola**, Freeport, Ill., was drafted in July, 1943, his induction officer gave him something few others received: a choice. Arola chose the Army Air Corps, and by the time he was commissioned in August, 1944, he had become a trained bombardier in B-17s, using the secret Norden bombsite.

In March of 1945, Arola was deployed to Foggia, Italy, as part of the 429th Squadron, 2nd bomb



Group, 15th Air Force. From Foggia, he flew frequent missions over northern Italy, bombing communications lines, supply depots, railroad marshalling yards and bridges. His plane dropped mostly thousand-pound HE bombs from about 27,000 to 30,000 feet up, and flew in formations with hundreds of other aircraft. "Sitting in that Plexiglas nose, I had the best view in the airplane," he recalls.

Because it was late in the war, Arola's bomber was seldom attacked by fighters, although anti-aircraft

guns were always a problem.

"It sounded like metal hail hitting the plane," says Arola. "I used to put an extra flak vest under my seat, just to be safe. We also had good fighter escorts most of the time, sometimes from the Tuskegee airmen in their red-nosed P-51 planes. One

of our ships was attacked by the first jet plane I ever saw, a German Me-262."

On one occasion, Arola recalls, someone stole the parachutes from a bomber, probably intending to sell the silk on the black mar-

Arola was injured after the war when a student pilot crash-landed their aircraft.

ket. To hide the theft, the thief stuffed the packs with newspapers. When the plane was later shot down, the crewmen fell to their deaths,

followed by a stream of floating paper.

Arola was never shot down, but he was injured after the war ended. Invited to observe a check-ride by a new pilot

Sulo Arola served with the 15th Air Force in Italy as a bombardier in B-17s. (Jon McGinty photo)



Arola (R-standing) and his flight crew pose in front of their B-17G at Foggia in Italy.

in a B-17, Arola wrenched his back while crawling out of the wreckage after the would-be pilot pancaked the landing and crushed the landing gear.

Arola was released from active duty on Jan. 1, 1946, but he stayed in the inactive reserves for eight more years. A few years ago, the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) flew a restored B-17 into Albertus Field in Freeport, and Arola went out to take a look at the old bird and to show it to his youngest son, Gary.

"I was surprised at how small the plane was," he says.





Richard

Hughes, Rockford, Ill., enlisted in the Navy in February, 1944, and trained to become a quartermaster for LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank). The LST was a big, flat-bottomed ship designed to transport vehicles and troops across long ocean distances and then land them directly onto a beach.

Hughes left the United States via New Orleans later that year with a small flotilla of other ships. They refueled in Cuba, transited the Panama Canal, and joined the 7th Fleet in the New Hebrides 31 days later.

Hughes was involved in several major invasions in the Pacific, including New Guinea and the Philippines. During these invasions, his assault ship transported Marines, soldiers, tanks, jeeps, weapons carriers, surveillance air-planes and other landing craft.

The invasion of Biak off the northern coast of New Guinea was the first time Hughes was under enemy fire. The invasion was intended to destroy anti-aircraft guns which the Japanese hid deep in large caves.

"The Marines were using flame throwers to get at the enemy in those caves," he recalls. "We could see burning Japanese soldiers running about. I was worried my family might never see me again."

An intelligence officer told Hughes they discovered a cave on Biak that was filled with ice skates. When asked why they had ice skates in the South Pacific near the equator, the Japanese claimed they had been told they were on an island off the coast of California. The skates would be useful after the invasion of the United States later that year.

On Oct. 22, 1944, General Douglas "I shall return" MacArthur and the Sixth Army invaded Leyte in the Philippines, and Hughes' ship was there, unloading Marines. The landing fleet was attacked by bombers and, for the first time, by Kamikaze suicide planes. Hughes saw several ships blow up, although his escaped damage.



Richard Hughes was a Navy quartermaster aboard an LST during several Pacific invasions.

The second invasion of the Philippines took place at Luzon on Jan. 9, 1945, and Hughes was there as well. He remembers unloading several DUKWs, those amphibious trucks now used to transport tourists around the Wisconsin Dells. These "ducks" were off-loaded at night, and went on a mission to rescue POWs from the Japanese camps.



Hughes' ship transported troops and supplies while under attack by Kamikazes.

"When the DUKWs hit the water on their return trip, the POWs became frightened they were being drowned," says Hughes. "Several weaker ones died of heart attacks as a result."

In April, Hughes was on his way to join the invasion of Okinawa when his flotilla was hit by a typhoon. Several ships were sunk, and his LST was damaged and forced to return to Subic Bay in the Philippines for repairs.

After the war, Hughes' ship transported personnel and supplies to the occupation forces in Japan. Once while on shore leave, he visited Nagasaki, site of the last atomic bomb explosion in the war.

"The devastation was unbelievable," remembers Hughes. "There were wounded people all over. I never saw anything like it." ■

*Reprinted by Permission of
Northwest Quarterly Magazine*