

## —Normandy

hundred feet or yards. Over the centuries, these rows had grown up with vegetation. Marvin recalls that they stood five to eight feet high. The 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry was tasked with going hedgerow by hedgerow to remove the Germans from their defensive strongholds. This was a harrowing challenge.

"The first artillery barrage I was in was the worst thing that could happen to anybody. I never prayed so hard in my life as I did in that barrage. I was so frightened, and you couldn't stand up as the shells were coming in so fast. I was doing my best to squeeze down under twigs and grass. You couldn't get close enough to the ground to get away from that. The Germans could see any of these hedgerows and pinpoint and then lay any amount of guns on that spot that they could. Here we had our highest casualties but fortunately I did not get hit. We left the count to the medics and grave registrars."

The Allies won the hedgerow battle after aerial bombardment of the Germans in Operation Cobra. The Allies then liberated most of lower Normandy. Marvin continued with the 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry down the coastline into Brittany. "After all those weeks in Normandy where it was so close and deadly and the weather was so bad, the weather here was like turning a page into a heavenly forecast. Everything was so clean and clear. The war hadn't touched them there yet, but it was about to. We moved westward. Each day was a new adventure. Each day there was death. Each day there were prisoners taken and received."

In one village along the Loire River, for example, Germans opened fire on a house Marvin had helped to set up as an OP or observation platform. Under a barrage of gunfire, Marvin escaped even though, as he explains, bullets were "ricocheting off a stone wall and kicking up the dirt around us."

He would experience many situations like this.

When I met Marvin at his home at Riverstone Retirement Resort near Zona Rosa in Platte County, he showed me his souvenirs from the war to include maps, books, 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry "Spearhead" newspapers, a Nazi flag and items that once belonged to German POWs. These included a rabbit-fur hat worn in frigid weather such as at the Battle of the Bulge which the 83<sup>rd</sup> engaged in Belgium.

Another souvenir was a book titled "Adolph Hitler," it was printed as propaganda by a German cigarette company that sold pictures (for the book), with cigarettes. Years later, Marvin read the English translation of this book by Albert Speers, a member of Hitler's inner circle who spent several decades in prison for war crimes. Marvin wrote him a letter in 1974 and Speers sent a reply. Marvin carefully preserves this with his collection.

Perhaps Marvin's most prized possessions, however, are his diary about his experiences in the 83<sup>rd</sup>, his dog tags and a cross with five jewels, one given to him for each year that he sang in a church choir as a boy. He kept the cross throughout the war. He believes that it might have brought him luck as what most surprises Marvin about his service is that he survived.

Martin tells of an especially poignant incident when he light-heartedly spoke with four soldiers in a jeep that passed him on a road. Moments later, after the jeep crested a hill, Marvin heard an explosion. The men had been killed by a German anti-tank gun. "Just a minute before," says Marvin, "we were having a great conversation."

From one of his books on the war, Marvin showed me a picture that holds great symbolism. It was of a sign in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane where a few days after D-Day the Germans massacred

civilians. Six people survived to tell the story. The sign presented only two words, one in French and the other its translation in English: "Souviens-Toi Remember".

In December 1945, Marvin was honorably discharged as a corporal, T5 (technician, 5<sup>th</sup> grade). For his meritorious service in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany, he received five Bronze Stars, a Bronze Star Medal, and a Good Conduct and Combat Infantry Badge.

After the war, Marvin became a music teacher for Kansas City Public Schools and enjoyed many years of marriage to Evelyn Gerding, who passed away in 2001. Marvin has lived in the Kansas City Northland since 1962, most of this time in Platte County.

In 2024, we honor centenarian Marvin Blakeman who 80 years ago this June was part of the Invasion of Normandy and the subsequent Allied victory in Europe.