

Richard Idstein

Unknown Unit



Richard Idstein, 94, was only 19 during that key World War II battle.

WARWICK — Each year, Richard Idstein reunites somewhere in the United States with other World War II veterans who fought at the Battle of the Bulge.

A few days ago, the annual ritual brought the 94-year-old Illinois man, a retired teacher, to Rhode Island.

Here, in a richly carpeted gathering space just outside the Patriots Room at the Crowne Plaza hotel on Saturday, Idstein casually sat on his scooter and told a story that brings his daughter to tears.

At the request of The Providence Journal, he recalled his experiences in western Europe in 1944 and 1945, just after he and other men who served in both the U.S. Army's 106th Infantry Division and 104th Infantry Division held religious services.

The stories of Idstein and the men he regards as his brothers are appearing in many forms these days, from books to memoirs to diary entries posted on the internet.

Their numbers are dwindling, and only seven Bulge veterans from the 106th Infantry, including Idstein, could make the trip this year.

The prelude to Idstein's wartime experience was a childhood in Chicago and his deployment to the thickly wooded Ardennes area in eastern Belgium.

In mid-December of 1944, as the Germans gauged the vulnerabilities of U.S. forces, Idstein says he and other infantrymen had slept in a house. They had received supplies, as well as Christmas goodies, he recalls.

On two occasions, just before the Germans' Dec. 16 offensive, Idstein says he felt lucky to attend a Catholic Mass celebrated on the hood of an Army Jeep by a priest from his own Chicago parish.

Idstein, who was 19 at the time, carried an M1 rifle with no side-arm. He was in a reserve company.

When the Germans broke through, he says, his company embarked on a foray to help another company.

After a firefight with the enemy, he says, his platoon made a charge.

Eventually, his company rescued captured members of the other company. The German captors became prisoners themselves, he says, and were ordered to carry the injured.

He says it took three days to rejoin the U.S. forces who had not been captured.

In the days after that, Idstein was part of the defense of St. Vith, which was seen as an important strategic objective of the Germans in their push to sever Allied forces and take control of Antwerp, a port city.

On Dec. 21, he says, a lieutenant told him to check out a small bridge that crossed a creek. A burst of four or four shots came his way. He hit the ground.

A bullet had burrowed through his shoulder and out his upper shoulder.

Within months, he was back with the 106th. He participated in mop-up operations and, after the Germans surrendered, he helped maintain a large prisoner of war camp.

Later that year, he was on a small troop transport bound for the Pacific theater when the Japanese surrendered. The boat rerouted, jubilantly, for New York City, carrying Idstein on a path that led to fatherhood and a career as an elementary school teacher.

It later led back to Belgium, where he met a German soldier who had been on the other side, and then to Florida, where the same two former enemies saw manatees together and toured Cape Canaveral.

"It's one thing to say that you're an American and speak about patriotism," says Idstein's daughter, Kathleen Lyons, also of Illinois. "It's another thing to do it. Actions speak louder than words."



James D. West
jimdw@centurylink.net
www.IndianaMilitary.org
added 11/22/2019