

William H. Mueller

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Bill Mueller says World War II infantry soldiers like him knew death would come calling. They just didn't know whom it would visit.



It snatched away a man who had been a near constant companion since their first frightened days at boot camp. One day they were sitting together in a snow-choked Belgian forest. The next, Mueller was alone amid war's tumult and fury. He was a very good friend who went through basic training with me, a young man from Alabama called Maurice Fuhr," said Mueller, 90, speaking with the halting deliberateness of long-ago memory. A German artillery battery had intentionally targeted the pines that loomed above them. A strike had sent showers of wooden daggers screaming through the forest like sightless messengers of death. "I was alongside of him when an artillery burst hit a tree," said Mueller, a retired Grumman aerospace engineer. "And all I know is I heard this thump, and there was Maurice laying on the ground." "It hit him in the head."

He continued, wearily. "That brought the realization to me, very strong at that time, holy Christmas, one can get killed here. Infantry soldiers -- troops who go into battle on foot -- typically endure a disproportionately large share of military casualties, said retired Army Lt. Col. Russ Eno, editor of *Infantry Magazine*, an Army publication based at Fort Benning, Georgia. "The infantry fights the last 100 yards, so they are face-to-face with the enemy," Eno said. "Throughout history, infantry has always suffered the highest casualty rates in the military." "Infantry doesn't guarantee you're going to get killed," said Eno, who served as an infantry lieutenant during the Vietnam War. "But the fact is, the closer you are to the enemy the greater chance you have of being wounded."

Iconic World War II battle correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was killed by machine-gun fire while covering an infantry invasion of Okinawa in 1945, wrote reverently of World War II foot soldiers, praising them above generals and presidents as indispensable to victory. "I love the infantry, because they are the underdogs," Pyle wrote, according to Pyle biographer James Tobin. "They are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts ... and in the end, they are the guys that wars can't be won without:"

Mueller survived the war, earned a degree in aeronautical engineering from New York University and worked on such Grumman projects as the lunar landing module and the F-14 "Tomcat" fighter plane. He bought his Levittown home in 1951. But these years later, memories still cut at him like the shards of the tree that had burst overhead more than 70 years ago.

Mueller had been a foot soldier with the Army's 106th Infantry Division in Belgium's Ardennes Forest when Nazi troops unleashed a devastating attack in mid-December 1944. Surrounded, half of the 106th's troops were killed or captured within the first days of what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge -- the largest infantry engagement in American history."

"We were sitting together and eating something, I remember that," said Mueller, recalling the final moments of his friend's life. "And you could hear these shells going over - boom, boom - but you knew they were going way the hell past you."

"And all of a sudden, one was ... oh, Jesus! And before we could react there was a tree burst and I could hear the shrapnel hitting the trees and what not. And I turned and Maurice was over. That was it. Just like that. Bingo." "I called the medic. They checked him and said, 'gone.' "

"Tell you the truth, I was scared," Mueller said, taking mental inventory of emotions logged long ago. "But after Maurice got killed, I don't know. I have to say I might have even had the thoughts of better him than me: Eventually it all comes down to 'I' or ego or something." Mueller said the incident left him wondering whether his life as an infantry soldier would have any meaning if he were to be killed.

"I don't know if everybody would have the same thoughts, but my one worry was would anybody even know I had been there," Mueller said. "Would I just disappear in a cloud of smoke?"



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