

Hugh Shearin

*First Platoon, Company A, 424 Regiment
106th Infantry Division*

TAPS

'Greatest generation' marches into history'

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He got there just in time.

Staff Sgt. Hugh Shearin, then 20, had barely been on the front lines two weeks before his unit, the 106th Infantry Division, was overrun by German soldiers in December 1944 at the Battle of the Bulge. In his division, two of the three regiments, about 8,000 soldiers, were surrounded and surrendered.



Telegram photo / Joel Hodges

Hugh Shearin talks about how he was a military policeman during World War II. Only 2.8 million veterans of the war are still alive.

Shearin and other members of his 12-man unit were cut off from his regiment the first night of the attack. They wandered through the Ardennes Forest of Southern Belgium in freezing weather with no food for three days before they found the 9th Armored Division. By then, only Shearin and three others remained.

It was a savage introduction to war, and as Shearin, now 83, describes it, the details are so sharp it is hard to believe 63 years have passed. It is not a pleasant memory – no war is – but he knows it is important to remember what happened on those battlegrounds.

He wishes more people would.

"I don't expect anything special from the war, but I just don't think the people are remembered for what they did and what they went through," said Shearin of Rocky Mount.

Time is running out. Only two U.S. soldiers from World War I survive today, said Jim Benson, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington D.C. All too soon, people will say the same of soldiers who fought in World War II.

An average of 973 Americans who served during World War II are expected to die daily this year, Benson said. As those men and women die, the country also is losing its last links to one of the most significant events of the 20th century, he said.

The death rate is down from a year or two ago, when estimates were as high as 1,100 and 1,200 deaths a day, Benson said. As of Sept. 30, the department estimated that fewer than 2.8 million World War II veterans still are living.

"Each one takes their personal story with them, and together that is quite a significant loss of corporate cultural memory and personality," Benson said.

Most of those veterans are in their late 70s and early 80s, said W.B. Bullock, the Rocky Mount city councilman who headed up construction of the new downtown veterans' memorial. Many have outlived their friends and families. Now, men who survived bullets, mortars and horrendous living conditions are being lost to illnesses, accidents and natural causes.

"These people sacrificed a lot, and I just admire every one of them and appreciate them more than anyone would ever know," Bullock said.

On Dec. 21, only a few days after joining up with the 9th Armored, Shearin was wounded in the face and chest by a mortar shell that exploded in front of him. By Jan. 18, he was back with what was left of the 106th, now less than a third of its original strength. The men fought as a regiment for the next several months, relieving others on the front lines.

"It is just unimaginable to people who don't know, who haven't experienced it. There is no way they can know what it is like – shells falling all around you and dirt being knocked in the hole on you. You are thinking, 'Is the next shell going to be my shell?' It is just a horrible thing to go through," Shearin said.

It is a feeling George Daniel Boone of Rocky Mount remembers. Boone entered the Army on Jan. 24, 1941, when his mother lied about his age to allow him to enlist at 16. After war broke out, he was shipped overseas in mid-1942 and served in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France and Belgium.

At the end of it, he walked away with only a burn on his arm from artillery shell. He had some close calls, but he credits his training with getting him home safely.

"Most people didn't get no training, maybe four or six weeks. I had approximately two years of training before (entering) the war," said Boone, now 83.

Stories such as Shearin's and Boone's are just as important as what people can read in the history books, said Bob Patrick, director of the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress American Folklife Center. The facts always will be there, but the people who lived them will not.

"When we lose that last one we just lose that connection, that physical connection – someone who was there, who saw it, experienced it and can talk about it," Patrick said.

Capturing these stories before it is too late is the purpose of the Veterans History Project, which gathers firsthand stories from soldiers from World War I to now, Patrick said. Veterans can record audio and video accounts of their experiences and donate pictures and memorabilia from the wars.

For more information about participating in the project, call 888-371-5848 or go to loc.gov/vets.

"We hear it time and time again from families, particularly when they hear about this project; they say, 'Oh my gosh, I wish I had known that when my dad was alive so I could have him sit down and record his stories from the war,'" Patrick said.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, Shearin was working as a guard at a prison camp for about 100,000 German soldiers. Based on a point system that depended on a soldier's service, he was sent home on leave and then to the Pacific to fight the Japanese.

On Aug. 6, when his ship was still several days out of New York, the United States dropped "Little Boy," the atomic bomb, on Hiroshima. Three days later, "Fat Man" fell on Nagasaki. Japan soon surrendered.

"If I hadn't already been on the way after they dropped the atomic bomb, I would have been on the occupation force, and they would have sent the real old guys home first. So I was just lucky to be home at that point," Shearin said.

After a 30-day leave, Shearin served in the military police at Fort McPherson, Ga., until he was discharged on Nov. 15.

Journalist Tom Brokaw described the men and women of Shearin's era as the "greatest generation." Bullock thinks he hit the nail on the head.

"Lots of people don't know anything about what they did 60 years ago. Life was just so much different than what it is today. Certainly every person who serves their country is to be commended, but these guys, there is no doubt in my mind, they were the greatest generation," the councilman said.

By Laura McFarland, Rocky Mount Telegram - Rocky Mount, NC, USA



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