

Armando DeVito
Company B
106th Infantry Division

November 9, 2006 - Far from home: Belmont veteran remembers battles

It's a little incongruous, sitting in Armando DeVito's living room on Hill Road, surrounded by photos of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as he talks of starvation and despair.

He knows it, too. "We came back and told our stories. And then we stopped, because no one believed us," he said.

DeVito was 25 when he joined the 106th Infantry Division, Company B, in 1944. On Dec. 16, 1944, he was in a forest along the German-Belgian border, fighting in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge - the bloodiest battle of World War II.

Over 7,000 Americans were taken as prisoners of war in that battle. DeVito was one of them.

He was marched across Germany for weeks, walking long distances each day without food or water.

"There was nothing. We ate snow just to get something wet in our mouths. We dug in the snow in orchards, looking for a frozen pear or apple. We turned into animals. We fought each other for a crust of bread," he said.

At some point they were transferred to boxcars, which were so full that the men couldn't lie down. The trains moved slowly, pulling into sidings while the U.S. Air Force bombed the rail lines.

"The Air Force was bombing anything and everything, even a mouse," DeVito said with a laugh. "But we managed, somehow."

He and his fellow prisoners arrived at Camp 4-F in Germany sometime in the new year, though he's not sure when. Conditions didn't improve much there.

DeVito remembers helping an elderly Jewish man carry a heavy load, managing to get both of them beaten in the process.

He talks of eating a bowl of soup at night, and splitting a loaf of bread between eight men, each slice cut in two for dinner and breakfast. A few soldiers tried toasting the bread, only to find it disintegrated in the flames - likely because the main ingredient was sawdust.

DeVito said he dropped to about 100 pounds and was crawling with lice when his camp was liberated.

"They took us to Camp Lucky Strike, burned our clothes and gave us new uniforms. I don't remember how many kitchens the camp had, but we hit every one," he said.

He was discharged in 1945 and came home to his wife, Frances, and their four children. The family had moved from Belmont into an apartment in Cambridge with no

heat save the kitchen stove. DeVito said the bathroom floor turned to ice from the dampness of the unfinished basement.

He turned to the veterans' agent in Belmont, telling him his wife had not received any payments from the government while he was away and the children were often hungry.

"He looked me in the eye and told me he couldn't do anything for me. I felt like someone hit me with a sledgehammer," DeVito said.

The story was the same at the VA hospitals and from the politicians. The POWs were pariahs, traitors and deserving of their suffering.

DeVito worked for years to get benefits for himself, his family and other veterans in the area. Over the years, the status of POWs in society changed and became easier, but DeVito said it's still hard for families of prisoners of war to receive their benefits.

After the battles he fought in Germany and the ones he fought here, Veterans Day is important to him. At the O'Neil Building, where a POW support group meets on Thursdays, the nursery school children make cards for the veterans and the parents bake cookies. DeVito's card last year was signed by Liam, one of his 33 great-grandchildren.

"Honest to God, it makes your day. It's beautiful. All the POWs just light up. It's nice to be remembered," he said.

Cassie Norton, Belmont Citizen-Herald - Lexington, MA, USA

Note: He lists the German POW camp as 4-F. I include it here, in Camp IV-B as it is the only diary for 4-F



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