

# Ronald Calvin Sparks

*106th Infantry Division  
Stalag 9-B*

September 23, 2007 - **Hero finally gets his due - Ronald Sparks was injured and captured in Battle of the Bulge.**

Cones of fire sailed across the pre-dawn sky as Army Pvt. Ronald Calvin Sparks crouched in the Ardennes forest.

It was 5:30 a.m., Dec. 16, 1944, in Luxembourg, somewhere along the 80-mile western front between the Allies and Nazi Germany.

What had been a picture-postcard scene of snow-laden firs exploded as Nazi mortars hit treetops. Splintered wood and metal rained in every direction.

It seemed to Sparks, 19, that the entire German army started firing at once. He hadn't eaten breakfast and wouldn't get to.

What followed was the bloodiest battle of World War II, and events that led, 63 years later, to a special honor.

For his bravery in this battle, which would be known to history as the Battle of the Bulge, and later in a Nazi prison camp, Sparks has been nominated to join the ranks of the famed Knights of the French Legion of Honor.

The designation, shared by many war heroes who helped liberate France, is to be officially bestowed upon him Monday at a ceremony in Bradenton, led by the French ambassador Jean-David Levitte.

"Well, I always just felt so lucky to be alive I didn't need to be getting anything else," said Sparks, 81, of Orlando.

His son, Ronald Ellis Sparks, instigated the research that resulted in his father receiving the award.

"It's like being knighted," the younger Sparks said.

Napoleon Bonaparte, as emperor of France, started the order in 1802.

The senior Sparks was modest about the knighthood, but said his thoughts these days often turn back to his time in the Army's **106th Infantry Division**.

He recalled the day the battle started, in the coldest winter Europe had seen in 50 years. When the mortars began exploding, "the Captain yelled for everyone to get moving."

Sparks obeyed, loading a six-pound shell into the anti-tank gun. He and the nine-member artillery crew waited for the flash of an enemy gun so they could take aim. They'd get only one shot before they'd have to move, as the shot gave away their position.

"It'd take a Tiger Tank about a minute to move its turret at us," Sparks said. "We had that long to move everything."

For three days and nights they fought nonstop, until they were out of ammunition. They were moving to get re-armed when a shell burst the radiator of the truck, driven by his friend Pvt. Paul Hartz, then 29.

"We ran it until the engine burned up," Sparks said. "Then we headed out on foot, trying to get to our lines."

That's when a bomb burst nearby and shrapnel sliced through his helmet, right arm and both legs.

Hartz pulled shrapnel from Sparks' wounds and tried to stanch the blood.

"Yeah, I guess I did save his life," said Hartz, now 92, of White Haven, Pa.

Hartz helped Sparks limp along until they were surrounded by Nazis.

"Our regional commander said, 'That's it, boys. We're out of ammo. No sense in dying. Lay down your guns and stand up.' "

They were captured and marched all night on frostbitten feet, away from a battle that eventually left about 39,000 soldiers from both sides dead.

Loaded into cattle cars, he and his surviving friends wound up in the infamous **Stalag IX-B** in Bad Orb, Germany.

"I lost 65 pounds in 100 days," Sparks said. "If you weren't in good shape going in, you never came out."

Sparks and his fellow soldiers survived on a thin broth, and once shared a dead horse with about 2,000 other prisoners.

"I also got into some trouble too. I was just a sure-fire kid, so I ran my mouth some. I didn't speak German, but a lot of them could speak English."

Sparks had a small Bible he hid away for comfort. Hartz and other soldiers collected names of POWs, including signing every inch of a dollar bill, in hopes someone would know they were there.

Sparks didn't know that back home, his family had received a telegram from the Red Cross saying he was in a POW camp. He wrote home often; however, he never received any of their letters back.

But on April 1, 1945, American tanks rolled into the prison camp, freeing Sparks and the other survivors, as their former guards fled for their lives.

A Red Cross telegram told his family in the U.S. that he was alive and rescued. Sparks would soon return home, and eventually raise a family in Florida.

Now he's making room for one more medal to put in a display case his grandson made,

next to his Bronze Star, Purple Heart and Combat Infantryman's Badge.

His family, including grown children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, plan to be on hand for Monday's ceremony.

When Hartz learned of the ceremony, he quipped, "Hey, why don't they give me a medal?"

"I probably saved him [Sparks] a couple of times. He's a good friend of mine."

But he doesn't begrudge his friend any honor.

"He's a good guy; we're old friends," he said.

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