

John Elex Best
K Company, 424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division
Unknown POW Camp



John Elex Best
1925-1945
(Written May 2007)

Finally. Memorial Day weekend. The unofficial start of summer. The Indy 500. Preparations and celebrations for high school graduations. A day off work. Gatherings with family and friends. Cookouts. Campouts. Decorating graves. Memorial Day was actually decreed to be a day to remember those who died fighting in wars throughout the history of our nation. And as if this weekend wasn't busy enough, congress sent to President Truman in 1950 a proclamation to make Memorial Day a day to pray for peace. One more thing to do this weekend. This should be a very busy holiday weekend indeed.

For many reasons, this week my attention turned to Ed and Bashia Best. Ed and Bashia were married in 1920 when Ed was 39 years old and Bashia was 36. Five years after their marriage when Ed was 44 and Bashia 41, John Elex Best, their only child was born. John grew up here in Winchester, helping his parents in the Best Grocery store, attended meeting for worship here occasionally, and was an outstanding trumpet player. He graduated from Winchester High School in May of 1943.

In December of 1943, towards the end of World War II, John decided to join the army. I don't know what his parents thought of this decision, but it had to be an incredibly difficult thing for them to see their only son go off to war. In January of 1944, John left for basic training in Camp Croft in South Carolina, then went on to Camp Shelby in Mississippi and finished his training at Camp Atterbury.

(John Best was in the 106th Infantry Division)

In November of 1944 John left for Europe, and within a month was in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge, the bloodiest battle American forces experienced in WWII. There were almost 20,000 Americans killed in the battle, almost 50,000 wounded, and Johnny Best was one of the 23,000 who were captured or went missing during the battle. The Battle lasted from the middle of December until the 25th of January 1945, 5 weeks. On January 16, 1945, almost exactly a year after their son went off to war, Ed and Bashia were notified Johnny was missing in action. I can't imagine the grief experienced by this 64 and 61 year old couple. After seven weeks of not knowing what happened to their son, they received a letter from Johnny, written from a prisoner of war camp in Germany.

While Johnny was in that prisoner of war camp, the Yalta Conference took place. Shortly afterwards the fire bombing of Germany began. On March 31, 1945, thirty six British aircraft led by a Major Taylor bombed Halle, Germany from an altitude of 25,000 ft. Flak was meager and inaccurate and all the aircraft returned safely to base with no casualties.

Except that Johnny Best was in a prisoner of war camp in Halle, Germany and unbeknownst to Ed and Bashia, Johnny died that day in the allied bombing. He died one month before Hitler's death. He died two months before the end of the war. When Johnny did not come home at the end of the war, Ed and Bashia went to post-war Germany and spent 2 months searching for him. They were not able to find his body and Ed and Bashia never really gave up hope that he might still be alive. Five years after the end of the war, the remains of Johnny Best were finally identified and brought back to Winchester. Ed and Bashia buried their only son at Fountain Park Cemetery in September of 1950. Ed and Bashia discovered that only five or six of the group of Americans with Johnny that day in 1945 made it out of Halle alive.

I am sure that when Johnny Best graduated from high school, Ed and Bashia did not anticipate their time with their son would be so short. I am painfully aware that some of our most important relationships in life are shorter than we desire. In remembering the life of Johnny Best, I've thought a lot about the stewardship of life and the stewardship of relationships.

Winchester Friends is now a steward of the life of Johnny Best. When Ed died in 1968 and Bashia in 1972, they left a third of their estate to Winchester Friends. For the last 7 years, almost \$90,000 of the surplus of the annual distribution has been given away outside of the walls of this church to make a difference in our world. I believe that Ed, Bashia and John would be at peace knowing their legacy, their love for their son, is still active and still touching hundreds, and hundreds of people all around the world.

Here at Winchester Friends, we are again celebrating the graduation from High School of more young adults. Yet again, our nation is at war. We don't know what the future holds for them, neither do their parents, but we all are too aware of how short our time with them has been, we are all too aware of the shortcomings of the world we are sending them into. I would like to remind you that we are also stewards of their lives.

When the apostle Paul wrote to his friends at Philippi, he reminded them that he thanked God every time he thought of or remembered them. Stewardship requires that we continually give thanks every time we think of these lives and relationships entrusted to Winchester Friends for these short years. We should continually pray for them. And I suggest pray that God will grant wisdom and strength to face the shortcomings in our world, to help them in their short lifetimes to leave our world a better place, and to make a difference in our world for Christ.

This will be a busy weekend. There are a lot of things for all of us to do. I somehow think in light of the life and death of Johnny Best, in light of all men and women throughout the world today who are dying in wars and violence, we would be good stewards of life, good stewards of these young lives before us today, to pray for peace on this Memorial day.

Lives Not Forgotten - <http://livesnotforgotten.blogspot.com/>



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James D. West
www.IndianaMilitary.org