

Hack Brauer

106th Infantry Division

November 11, 2005 - Startling survival marks memories of Battle of the Bulge

When a soldier survived a mortar round that shredded his uniform and destroyed his equipment but left him intact during World War II, he said something Hack Brauer remembered to this day.

“Lt. Brauer, this war is pretty serious,” he said to the Olney resident during the Battle of the Bulge nearly 61 years ago.

Brauer laughed about the comment and is still in awe that the man survived the blast. “I don't think he had a scratch on him,” he said.

Brauer didn't end up unscathed like his fellow soldier. He was part of the Army's [106th Infantry Division](#) and earned three Purple Hearts after the battle, which left him wounded and in the hospital for a year.

He was a Prisoner of War and was in a hospital when it was accidentally bombed by the British. The explosion threw him from the third floor to the first and he hardly remembered anything for a month after that.

“I'm lucky to be here,” he said.

The Battle of the Bulge began in December 1944 when the Germans started their Ardennes Offensive. The offensive, which was fought in the Ardennes Forest, became known by United States forces as the Battle of the Bulge after the Germans only succeeded in creating a bulge in the American line.

After several weeks of fighting, the bulge ceased to exist while the Germans and Americans were hit with many losses.

Brauer joined the military in 1942 while he was in college and joined an anti-aircraft artillery unit. He later joined the infantry because he wanted a promotion and to be able to see some action.

“I got the promotion and too much action,” he said.

In the summer of 1944, he left for Europe and spent a month in England.

When the Battle of the Bulge started on Dec. 16, 1944, the Germans plowed through American forces that were thinly spread because commanders believed Ardennes Forest was the least likely place for an offensive.

“They just pushed right through them,” Brauer said of the Germans. “You were just fighting for your life.”

There was no time to be scared or hurt. It was all about survival even as shrapnel cut into Brauer's body.

“In a shock like that, you don't really feel pain,” he said.

Brauer and other soldiers found themselves surrounded. Knowing they would be captured, they destroyed all their equipment so the Germans could not use it.

The soldiers were taken to a POW camp. Brauer had been wounded in three places during the battle.

He was placed in a civilian hospital in Gerolstein, Germany. Several days later, the British were attempting to bomb a nearby railway when the hospital was hit.

Still a prisoner and wounded, he was then taken to a hospital that was once an insane asylum in Heppenheim, Germany, near the Rhine River.

Prisoners were hardly fed, but when they were, their meals consisted of a piece of bread, cabbage stew and coffee. Brauer's weight dropped from 168 to 109 pounds.

The beds were infested with lice, the rooms were freezing cold and although there was no physical torture, German soldiers came into the hospital rooms to curse and yell at the prisoners.

Some of the older guards were pleasant because many of them had relatives in America. “They weren't too bad,” Brauer said.

Brauer was still injured and there was only aspirin and paper bandages available for the “walking wounded” like himself.

He was a POW for four a half months before the 3rd Infantry Division liberated the prisoners.

Brauer remembers a chaplain coming to his room. He asked if he knew Jack Bauman, who went to high school with Brauer and was from Olney.

The chaplain said he knew Bauman, who was part of the 3rd Division. Bauman visited Brauer and gave him large chocolate bars.

“I always say Jack Bauman liberated me,” Brauer said.

That day still thrives in Brauer's mind. “It just seemed like Christmas morning,” he recalled, smiling.

More than 1 million men fought at the Battle of the Bulge. There were more than 100,000 Germans, 81,000 Americans and 1,400 British killed, wounded or captured.

After the POW camp where Brauer was located was liberated, he was flown to Paris. He was then taken to Cushing General Hospital in Massachusetts and was a patient there for a year.

He underwent multiple surgeries for his wounds and was presented his Purple Hearts during his stay. There were many wounded men at the hospital.

“That's a debilitating scene,” Brauer said. “It makes you appreciate life.”

Despite the hardships he endured, he is satisfied with his experiences. It made him

proud to be American and able to live in a free country.

It distresses him that many people do not realize the sacrifices that have been made by others to keep America going. "This country is so great," he said. Kevin Ryden, Olney Daily Mail - Olney,IL,USA

Note: We assume that Hack Brown was in Stalag XII-A Limburg, Germany.

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