

The News-Herald (<http://www.news-herald.com>)

Willoughby WWII veteran remembers action at Battle of the Bulge

By Elizabeth Lundblad, *The News-Herald*

Monday, November 11, 2013



A conversation with Edward “Feeney” Acton is like reading a history book without the eye strain.

Acton, a combat veteran of World War II, walks through his five months spent on the front lines in France and Germany with a touch of incredulity.

“When I see it now on television, I can’t believe I did that,” he laughs from his Willoughby home, the History Channel muted on the television set. “It’s true. I mean, they’ve got pictures of the second world war and you see how many towns we took. I can’t believe it. Was I crazy enough to do that? Run down them streets with a god-

(expletive) rifle shooting people through the windows and trying to stay alive?”

For everything he’s seen, Acton is a jovial 90-year-old with a rampant sense of humor. Friend and fellow veteran Ralph Salvatore says catching Acton at home is a rare occurrence as the nonagenarian likes to meet friends for meals and hang out with fellow crooners to sing at local establishments.

“People ask him, ‘How come you’re never home?’ ” Salvatore said. “Feeney always says ‘When the Grim Reaper comes a knocking that’s the first place he looks.’ ”

Acton earned his paratrooper wings jumping with the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the same group that gained pop culture reference status with HBO’s 2001 miniseries “Band of Brothers.”

“I jumped with them in 1942, but I wasn’t in combat with them,” he said. “I was in combat with the 104th (Infantry Division). I spent five continuous months on the front lines in combat.”

Acton enlisted in September 1942 and was discharged in November 1945 from the U.S. Army. He was at the Battle of the Bulge, a German offensive campaign near the end of the war that took Allied Forces by surprise.

“I was on the front line at the time when they broke through below us,” Acton said. “We had to fall back. That’s what the Bronze Star is for — for the Battle of the Bulge. We crossed the Remagen Bridge, that was another historic place in the second world war ... I was on the front line when the war ended. We were on the Elbe River, meeting the Russians.”

The Bronze Star, which is awarded for acts of heroism, merit or meritorious service in combat, is one of several military medals Acton has displayed in his home. Others include the World War II Victory Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal and many more.

For Acton the medals may commemorate or honor his service, but he said he didn’t speak about the war when he came home, not even with his three children.

“My son, Dick, is 65 and I don’t believe when he was growing up I ever discussed the Army or what we did or anything,” he said. “There’s nothing to it. We just went in there, did our thing and came home.”

Acton said he came out of the war without a scratch, at least physically. Mentally it was a different story.

“I slept with a gun for probably a year after. You just couldn’t get used to it. We would go to sleep at night and the enemy was only maybe 1,000 yards in front of you,” he said. “We’d get into a town and be in a little house, and you try to get some sleep but you’re nervous because you know they could shoot you through the window or throw a grenade in there. So you don’t really get any good sleep. It was the same when we came home. And I was drinking too much, too. I couldn’t get settled. I was always on the alert for a while after the war. Some of us got over it. A lot of guys didn’t.”

A retired structural iron worker and building inspector for the State of Ohio, Acton said he’s been asked to talk

about his experiences to school classes, but it's not something with which he's entirely comfortable.

"I have a niece, my sister's daughter, who has been trying to get me down in Georgia for at least 15 years," he said. "She says, 'Oh, you've got to come down and talk to the kids.' But you kind of push it out of your mind. A lot of things happened."

One of those things was the April 1945 liberation of Nordhausen, a concentration camp, by the 104th division. The camp, formally called Dora-Mittelbau, was north of the town of Nordhausen near the Harz Mountains, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website.

"We took that town, and there were the prisoners dying right in front of us. They were just starving them to death," he said. "They were Russian laborers and people they had captured early in the war. They made slaves out of them. ... Naturally you see somebody that hungry you want to help but the doctors came in and said, 'Don't feed them, you'll kill them. We'll take care of them and feed them slow.' Like those pictures you see (in history shows), they was nothing but skin and bone. ... There's a lot of things you don't even try to remember, but that's war."

Though he's a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion associations, Acton said he's fallen out of touch with most of his former brothers in arms. The 104th used to get together more often, but after so many years and deaths not many come anymore.

Though the memories aren't pleasant, Acton doesn't dwell on the atrocities he witnessed. Asked about his reasons for enlisting, he shrugs his shoulders and lets out a mellow chuckle.

"I wanted to be a hero, maybe? Well, I don't know I was just a kid. I was 18. We all had to go to war. That was a big war and everybody was going. It's the same as when kids get a certain age and everybody gets married. There was a war going on. We had to get there."

URL: <http://www.news-herald.com/general-news/20131111/willoughby-wwii-veteran-remembers-action-at-battle-of-the-bulge>

© 2017 The News-Herald (<http://www.news-herald.com>)