



SERGEANT WILLIAM STRATIS UNITED STATES ARMY WORLD WAR II

Newburgh, New York. Located on the Hudson River's west bank, its grounds are filled with history dating back to the American Revolution and beyond. This is the location where General George Washington, upon defeating Cornwallis' elite British Army at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, chose to make his headquarters, in the bluffs overlooking the Hudson River, to guard against a possible British attack from Sir Henry Clinton, fortified in New York City while the peace treaty in Paris was being negotiated. It was here, in Newburgh, New York, that Washington created the Badge of Military Merit in August of 1782. This badge is known today as the Purple Heart.

Bill Stratis was born May 25, 1926, in the city of Newburgh, the son of George and Josephine Stratis. Bill's father had been born in Turkey, of Greek parents whose land was confiscated by the Ottoman government, forcing them to flee. Bill's mother was a native of New York City. Bill's parents were both in the restaurant business, working seven days a week. As a result, Bill was raised in large part by his maternal grandmother, who was from southern Germany. From her, Bill learned to read and speak German.

Bill remembers the Newburgh of his childhood as a beautiful small city of red-brick colonial and Victorian architecture, prosperous shops and businesses, and well-kept neighborhoods. His family lived in a Victorian house in Washington Heights, a short stroll away down Liberty Street from the old Dutch farm house built in 1750, owned by Col. Jonathan Hasbrouck, where Washington stayed for 16 months before making his triumphal entry into New York City on November 25, 1783.



Bill recalls the fun of riding the ferry back and forth across the river for only a nickel as long as he wished. From Beacon, he would often take the train into New York City with his grandmother to go shopping for special articles and to see the sights. As a child Bill thought "Beacon must be Heaven because the ferries came from there." Schoonmaker's

Department Store on Water Street in Newburgh was also a special place, especially during the enchantment of Christmas time.

As a teenager, he worked at times in factories and in a shoe store evenings and Saturday, before taking a job as

a floor boy in a factory. When the Great Depression hit America, Bill's family was spared the fate of many of their neighbors. They were always able to find food for the table. Upstairs lived his grandmother, his Aunt Betty, and his mother's cousin Josephine. They were sitting in the living room, listening to their old Atwater Kent floor radio on December 7, 1941, when the newscaster announced that Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

Bill finished high school at Newburgh Free Academy, graduating in 1943. He recalls anti-German sentiment affecting his family, particularly his grand-

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mother and aunt. They ignored it as best they could. In August 1944 he enlisted in the United States Army, and was sent to Basic Training at Camp Croft, South Carolina. Upon his graduation from Basic Training, he was given a few days to spend with his family, but very quickly he received orders to ship out. He was assigned to Charlie Company, 60th Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, First Army. His unit landed in Scotland. From there, they went down into England and crossed the channel into France, which by then had been liberated by the Allied Forces.

Stratis and his company moved across Europe, from France into Belgium, taking over towns that had been occupied by the Germans since the war had first begun. On one such attack, Stratis describes heavy fighting with the Germans. "We were on a combat infantry patrol. It was during the night, almost early dawn. We were going along, when all hell broke loose, machine gun fire started up out of nowhere in the dark.... I took a step forward, when I saw tracer bullets hitting the ground and going right between my legs. If I had thrown myself down to the ground like you normally do the bullets would have hit me all over. As it was, I only got hit in the left knee." Luckily for him, the bullet missed the bone and did not hit an artery. Stratis bandaged the wound himself and re-joined the fight. His captain and sergeant were not so lucky, as they were struck and killed.

From Belgium they prepared to proceed into Germany across the River Rhine. It was March 1945. Allied troops by now occupied the western banks of the Rhine separating them from Germany. Through the bravery of the 9th Armored Division the Ludendorff Railway Bridge at Remagen was captured under heavy fire. The German defenders tried to blow up the bridge but failed. The road into Germany from the west was now open.

For some reason Bill never knew, tank units had tastier rations than infantry. Just before crossing the bridge Bill saw an opportunity to correct this injustice, and borrowed an armful of food from an armored comrade's kit while its owner's attention was elsewhere. Now, the bridge had been heavily bombarded. Bill was so intent on his catch that he failed to notice the giant hole he was about to step into. Bill had a choice: he could drop his ill-gotten gain into the Rhine, or he could hang on to his rations and enjoy a tasty dinner in the river. He chose to make it across the bridge high and dry, but still hungry.

One night they came into a town and as Sergeant Stratis rounded a corner he came smack up against some German

soldiers. He disarmed them and turned them over to another soldier to be taken back to the rear. He continued a few feet down the street when all of a sudden there was an explosion behind him where he had just been standing. He was blown into a cellar door, receiving a concussion. A dollar-size piece of shrapnel hit him, searing his pants and leg but doing no more damage.

On another occasion he found himself crawling through German trenches. He came upon two German infantry men relaxing, eating a snack. They were as surprised as Stratis to see each other, but Bill was the first to raise his rifle and he took them prisoner.

Sergeant Stratis was captured along with his men after taking a German village. "Unbeknownst to us, when we broke our squad up to find shelter, and three or four of us went into a house, women and children tried to hide in the basement.... A little later the Germans counter-attacked with tanks." A half track and a tank came up to the house where Bill and his men, along with the German family, were hiding. The muzzle of the tank cannon pointed at the house and Bill heard " 'Raus! Kommt 'raus!' " The tank cannon crashed through the window and pointed into the room. "I didn't know what to do," Stratis recalls. "I prayed to God for guidance... as sergeant, I was responsible for my men, and for the German civilians too. My prayer was answered when my men suggested that they surrender." They threw their guns out the window and themselves after, with their hands raised.

They were taken to a German prison camp under guard. Along the way, a German guard was prodding the prisoners to move faster, and in doing so, jabbed Sergeant Stratis in the arm with his bayonet. Cold and famished, they marched several days through hamlet after village. One night they were put up in a church and made to sleep sitting up in the pews. Bill saw potato peels and bits of turnip on the floor. He stuffed as many handfuls as he could into his pockets. Staying once in a bombed out factory, lying on the floor, a German guard kept on cocking and uncocking his weapon, staring menacingly at them. One G.I. became hysterical, thinking they were about to be murdered.

They found themselves another night at a slave labor camp for Polish prisoners where they finally received some food, a small bowl of potato soup and a baked potato or two. Bill found out that the best way to learn to like any kind of food was to go four or five days without any. To this day he still loves potato soup.



They finally reached their destination, Stalag 6A in the Ruhr Valley near Dortmund. The prison camp was full of Russian and Polish POWs. The Americans were housed in an old gymnasium and kept separate from the POWs of other countries, and were treated decently. They had showers and soap to kill the lice in their hair. Bill had a bunk with wooden slats and straw mattress and blanket. Soup, bread and cheese made up their diet. Bill used the time to re-read the New Testament.

For the most part they were treated well. Most of their guards were "older wounded German soldiers too disabled to return to the front." Stratis wondered if their kind treatment was due to the Germans' knowledge that soon their captives would become their captors.

Sergeant Stratis cannot recall the date he was liberated. As the American Forces entered the town where Stratis and his men were held prisoner he heard gunfire, and "the guards all fled, and we just walked out." He recalls picking up a German carbine, walking through the village and into a house, whose inhabitants shared their meal with him.

Sergeant Stratis was sent back to France. He shipped back to the States out of Le Havre, where the first thing he did upon returning home to Newburgh was to see his mother, grandma, and aunts, his father having passed away. With the creation of the G.I. Bill, Stratis returned to college, graduating after three years. He was immediately accepted at IBM, where he worked for several years, supporting his mother,

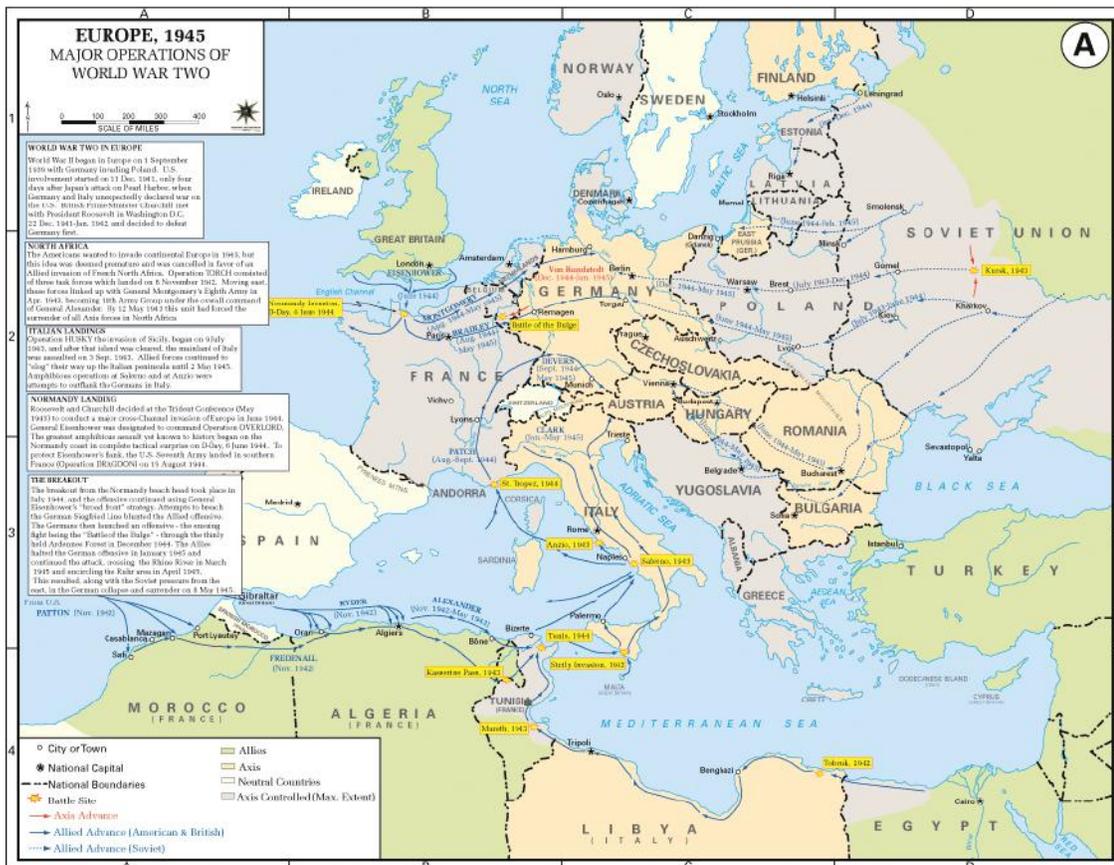


The Ludendorff Railway Bridge at Remagen

little sister, grandmother, and aunts.

Today Bill lives in Cornwall, New York, with his wife Joyce, and they have four children, all girls. His daughter Leslie is a lawyer and a former judge; Heidi is a nurse in Pennsylvania. Wendy has a business in Orange County, and daughter Stacey lives nearby as well. Bill is also the proud grandfather of seven grandkids, as well as two great-grandchildren.

Sergeant William Stratis is proud to have served his country. He is happy, however, to have nothing more to do with guns, German tanks, or army meals. His only tangible souvenirs from the war: his bayonet, and his Purple Heart. And his love for potato soup.



Maps courtesy of Department of History, United States Military Academy at West Point.