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After Memorial Day, what should be remembered?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The day after Memorial Day, I got out a little box that I keep in my sock drawer. Inside are my father's two WWII shoulder sleeve insignias.

I figure there's value in remembering after the official remembering is over.

The smaller patch is for the 3rd Army—a white "A" on a blue disc inside a red "O."

The other is the first design for tank destroyers—an orange disc with a black border. It shows a white-eyed head of a black panther with bared fangs chomping into an eight-wheeled tank.

Tanks of this type were American, not German. Private Seltzer did not point this out to his commanding officer. Later patches had fewer wheels.

He was called in 1942 and first assigned to the Georgia National Guard—the only confessed Yankee in his unit. He had 13AAAA feet; he was issued 11Ds. After basic training, the Army decided he was best suited to biting tanks in half since he now had trouble walking.

America's first tank destroyer was a 37-mm, rear-facing gun stuck into the bed of an unarmored, three-quarter-ton truck—little more than a stretch Jeep. The 37-mm shell could not penetrate thin wood at 100 yards. Large numbers were ordered, probably, it was reported, to appease powerful Congressmen. This gun was widely considered to be effective against off-base lemonade stands whose proprietors feared retaliation for selling mostly vinegar.

Its successor -- a French 75-mm gun mounted on a slow, thinly-armored open halftrack -- was no match for German tanks with their 88s. Our troops called it "the purple-heart box."

After one instruction session at Camp Hood, Texas, my father finally piped up: "How are our halftracks going to beat the Panzers when they have bigger guns, thicker armor, better maneuverability and far more experienced crews?" His instructor sneered at this Yankee-type question. "We win, Seltzer, because we're smarter."

Private Seltzer had his doubts. He put in to transfer to Officer Candidate School so he could learn to perform reconnaissance in a Piper Cub. Flying required less walking than tank-destroying, and there was always the chance

that he might move up a size.

Halftracks like his were clobbered in Tunisia at the Kasserine Pass in February, 1943. Had he been there, I doubt that I would be here.

Fortunately for both of us he had injured his back in a night maneuver accident. He came to in a hospital where doctors needle-pricked each of his arms about 50 times for three days in a row. Not one to challenge officers, particularly doctors, he went along with this treatment until curiosity forced another question: “Sir. Why are you sticking my arms every day when it’s my back that’s injured.”

“Back! You’re in the allergy unit. And you are severely allergic to everything in the Army—dust, smoke, grease, pollen, wool, animals, food, you name it.”

He finally had an explanation for his constant itching, sneezing, coughing and rashes. Allergies kept him out of North Africa and led to his discharge. They stayed with him as did his bad back. I remember having to tie his shoes when he couldn’t bend over.

Bob was a nice guy who would have needed his wife, Rena, to help him push in a thumbtack. It’s hard to imagine him destroying a tank, even hypothetically. Like others, he would have tried.

In 1944, he got a quality-control job in a steel mill where he angered management for rejecting too many shells. He didn’t think defectives should be sent to our soldiers, even if we were smarter.

The day after Memorial Day I also remembered the legless vet who sold pencils from a cup in front of Mansmann’s department store on Penn Avenue in East Liberty where my mother shopped and gave me, a six year old, a quarter she probably couldn’t spare to drop in whenever we passed him; a high-school golden boy who, upon his return with a head wound, was employed by sympathetic neighborhood merchants putting nickels into parking meters in front of their stores; a bomber pilot who we knew not to get angry; and an uncle who operated a machine gun in the Battle of the Bulge.

And then there was the one-time law student who strung barbed wire behind his city patio where the junky sumac trees began. His sister, my high school social studies teacher, never married, never allowed visitors to her house and always claimed that her brother was an important lawyer in Detroit. I discovered him on the day of her funeral, wearing a pith helmet in his backyard Burmese jungle camp where he had spent the previous 50 years waiting for another Japanese attack.

Wars, even the most necessary and successful, don't end when they're over.

When I polish these memories from the sock drawer, I think, first, about who fights and then about why wars are fought.

Those in North America since 1492 and most of those that America has fought in other places seem to have been about land—who owns it, or controls it, or decides how it's used, or benefits from it or which beliefs prevail in it.

America's history is that of extending our land base, starting from the toe-grip settlements in Jamestown and Plymouth 400 years ago. In the 19th Century, extension meant possession. By the second half of the 20th Century, it more meant shaping events in foreign lands to our national liking.

We were not alone. Many countries sought land through conquest, purchase, settlement, commerce, colonies and influence. All had rationales based in religion, ideology, nationalism, security and improving their own fortunes.

Even in the Internet Age, we fight over the control of land -- Iraq and Afghanistan being the most recent examples -- rather than control of software, research and technology. Excellent reasons for fighting are always present. The world certainly has its share of leaders who should be locked into a cartoon where they can't hurt anybody.

When I was a graduate student, I took a seminar on the causes of war. One cause might be our basic human nature. Another arises from the fact that we organize ourselves into groups, from tribes to nation-states. Then there are reasons of ideology and competition for resources.

Over the years, I've settled on controlling land as the common element in most wars.

I remember the argument that every side in every war claims to be fighting for freedom—freedom from or freedom to—it just depends on your perspective. While this is true as far as it goes, it doesn't go far enough. We are not a world without some standards of right and wrong.

Why soldiers fight has little to do with what causes nations to go to war.

Had he been placed in a different hospital bed, he would have been shipped to North Africa where he would have developed an allergy to sand. An orderly's mistake probably saved his life...and gave me mine.

Every shoulder patch carries a story, even if it's just a little one. Behind the who of war on Memorial Day it's worth considering some of the whys.

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