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GI never expected to see his old duffel bag again

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EVENDALE - Every GI slogging through Europe during World War II traveled with two constant companions, death and a duffel bag.

Robert Hoeweler cheated the one. He survived a battlefield wound and the horrors of a German prisoner-of-war camp.

Recently he was reunited with the other.

Sixty years after the war's end, Hoeweler's long-lost duffel bag appeared in the mail at his Evendale office. The reunion - courtesy of a French physician, Dr. Pierre Kristiansen, and his patient, Julien Ledig - triggered a flood of memories.

The 82-year-old former GI vividly recalled a long-ago battle - "I got shot in the back and captured during the battle of Steinwald Woods" - and a Thanksgiving homecoming.

"My last meal as a soldier was on Thanksgiving 1945, in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania," Hoeweler said. He sat at his desk in the offices of his firm, Aluminum Extruded Shapes. "The next day, I was on a train heading for home."

Hoeweler's homecoming came as a great surprise to his mother. She never received the telegram stating that her son was a prisoner of war. All she knew was that he was missing in action and presumed dead. Sick with worry, her weight plummeted from 120 pounds to 80. "She was standing at her kitchen window when she saw me walking up Gray Road in Winton Place," Hoeweler said. "She was very happy to see me."

He was thinner, too.

"I lost 30 pounds in the prison camp. That war was tough on everyone."

As Hoeweler spoke, he patted his duffel bag, touching it as he would the shoulder of an old friend.

"To a soldier, a duffel bag is like a friend," Hoeweler said. "It's something you carry around with you forever."

They first met at an Army camp in Texas. That's where he stenciled his name and serial number on the side of the olive drab canvas bag.

Holding his dress uniform, extra shoes and socks, the bag accompanied Private First Class Hoeweler, Hughes High School class of 1941, when the 68th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 12th Armored Division rode the rails to New York before shipping out for England and then, after the D-Day invasion, across Europe.

The bag, slightly faded with his stenciled name and serial number still visible, did not look the worse for wear after being missing in action for 61 years.

"The last time I saw this bag was in December of 1944," he recalled. "They collected our duffel bags and put them in a barn outside Luneville, France."



Photos by Jeff Swinger/The Enquirer

Robert Hoeweler of North College Hill stenciled his name on his duffel bag before shipping out as a soldier in World War II. He left it in a French barn in 1944. A French doctor



Hoeweler's outfit was ordered to launch a surprise attack on the Germans in January 1945. He was wounded, captured and held in a prison camp until April.

With stunning clarity, Hoeweler explained why the soldiers were separated from their bags.
"You don't carry them into battle."

The 12th Armored Division, known as the Hellcats, made it to the Rhine River. Hoeweler's outfit was ordered to launch a surprise attack on a German position in the Steinwald Woods.

The battle began early on the snowy morning of Jan. 16, 1945. The Germans weren't surprised.
"We got caught in a machine-gun crossfire," Hoeweler said, his strong voice softening. "We lost 110 men in 10 minutes, 49 were captured."

One of the prisoners of war was Private Hoeweler. And he was wounded.

"A bullet creased my back. A few inches higher and I would not be telling this story."

He lay in the field among the dead and the dying for eight hours. German troops scraped 8 inches of snow from his body. Then they shipped him to a prisoner of war camp, Stalag 11-B.

In early April 1945, the war was nearing its end. Hoeweler and his fellow prisoners could hear the advancing Allies.

Prison guards ordered them to march east on April 7, 1945. After eight days of marching, the prisoners stopped. They were exhausted. For months, they had been living in unheated barracks, unable to bathe, battling lice, and starving.

"We ate one meal a day, water that passed for soup with ersatz bread," Hoeweler said with a wince, "that looked and tasted like sawdust."

The prisoners told their guards they would march no more. Sick of Hitler's war, the guards turned their guns over to their prisoners. The group did an about face and marched toward the sound of gunfire. A day later, they were in the hands of British troops. A month later, Hoeweler was on a ship bound for America. He was carrying a new duffel bag.

But he always wondered what happened to the old one.

One spring day in May, he came into his Evendale office to find an e-mail from Dr. Kristiansen.

Kristiansen lives in LeRaincy, France, a suburb on Paris' east side. Once a month, he sees a World War II veteran, Julien Ledig. During one visit, the patient presented three pieces of war memorabilia to the physician.

One was Hoeweler's duffel bag. Ledig did not recall how the canvas sack came into his possession.

After seeing Hoeweler's name on the bag, Dr. Kristiansen went online. He Googled "Robert F. Hoeweler" and reunited a man and his bag.

"Getting this back is a miracle," said the old soldier.

Tapping his finger on the canvas, Hoeweler said, "If only this old guy could talk. He could tell me where he's been all these years."

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