

Sergeant
HERMAN JOSEPH ERNSPIKER
April 6, 1921 to December 13, 2002



*17th Armored Infantry Battalion Company C of the 12th Armored Division
Machine Gun Squad an original HELLCAT*

Medals Awarded

EXPERT INFANTRY BADGE
COMBAT INFANTRY BADGE
CARBINE EXPERT
PURPLE HEART X 2
BRONZE STAR

HERMAN JOSEPH ERNSPIKER

Memoirs

I, Herman Joseph was born on APRIL 6, 1921 to **THOMAS AND GERTRUDE ERNSPIKER**.

My young life was spent on a truck and dairy farm. Everything was done manually, horse and mules, milked cows by hand. I stayed on the farm until I graduated from Jeffersontown High School on **May 19, 1941**. I played as a running back on the football team. In 1940 and 1941 we went undefeated, 10 games in a row [each season] and won the NCKC (North Central KY Championship). I made ALL CONFERENCE Running Back and was offered a scholarship at WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY - turned it down. I was tired of going to school on a shoe string; times were very hard, money scarce. The whole family had to work hard just to make a living.

I thank GOD for a very special Father and Mother. They would insist that we went to HOPEWELL BAPTIST CHURCH and accept Christ and live a Christian life and love our neighbor as our self. I never had the desire to drink alcohol or beer. I did like girls and dated several. One in particular, a little red head, she was very pretty and nice. We had good times together, she fell in love with me and I liked her a lot but never loved her.

On **September 6, 1941** I met the girl of my dreams, **HAZEL WOODS**. She was the most beautiful, nicest, gentle and had high morals. We fell in love soon after our first date. I forgot all the other girls and it was the same for Hazel and her other boyfriends. We only thought of each other. Hazel said I was the only boy she let kiss her on the first date.

I have always believed that GOD intended for us to be partners for life and we were. She gave me the most love and joy for the 53 almost 54 years of love for each other. She is the only girl I ever really loved or ever will. I will continue to thank GOD every day as long as I live for giving her to me as my mate. She was the best wife in the world. She will always live in my heart. There will always be a special place in my heart for her, she gave me 4 children and 5 grandchildren plus 5 great-grandchildren which we both love with all our hearts.

Hazel was born into a good family but most of them drink alcohol. She hated drinking. I never took her places where there was a lot of drinking, as I hated it too. I think that caused us to fall in love so soon. Not long after we started dating, riding in the back seat of a car on Frankfort Ave. I asked her if she would marry me. I told her to take a week before she gave me her answer, as she was young and to give it a lot of thought. The next week Hazel said "YES, I love you with all my heart and I want to spend the rest of my life with you".

We both had to have our parents consent to get married. My parents loved her and said yes. Her Dad said yes but with her mother it wasn't easy. Her mother asked a lot of questions and she knew I would have to serve my time in the Army. WORLD WAR II was really getting hot - a lot of boys were losing their lives. I had to agree with her mother, I thought it would be best to wait until I put in my time with the Army and "IF" I could make it back then we would get married. I knew we would wait for each other but Hazel insisted that we get married.

Once before, she (Hazel) had said "The way we are now it would be as hard to lose me as it would be if we were husband and wife". I tried to tell her that it would make a difference if I never made it back. She would be a widow with a full life ahead of her. She wanted to take that chance. I wanted to marry her so much because I loved her with all my heart and I knew she was a very special girl. So we agreed to go ahead and get married on the **31st December 1941**.

After a few weeks we rented a 3 room apartment at 1622 Story Ave. We shared the bathroom with two other couples. We paid \$16.00 a month rent.

I worked at the LOGAN COMPANY - second shift for \$24.00 a week for 50 hour work week.

October 15, 1942. I was sworn into the Army. Left on October 29th for **FORT BENJAMIN HARRISON** in Indiana. I stayed about a week then was sent to **CAMP CAMPBELL** [now FORT CAMPBELL] Kentucky. I was attached to the **12th ARMORED DIVISION** which was being activated from the Horse Cavalry. All the Cavalry men had been in the Horse Cavalry. All the men were good.

N.C.O. (Non Commissioned Officer) Trained. We worked awfully hard in the field. At this time the Armored hadn't proved itself. So we had to train to fight *Mounted* and *Dismounted*.

July 5th, 1943 Barry (first son) was born. I was in the field and got an E Furlough for 7 days to come home to see Hazel and baby.

I had to go back to go on **TENNESSEE MANUVERS** (war training from Sept. 3, 1942 – Nov.12,1943 in the 56th Armored Infantry Regiment prior to consolidation of several Regiments into the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion) until November. Left Watertown, Tennessee for **CAMP BARKLEY** Texas just outside the city of Abilene, TX.

I had been promoted to Sergeant and was making more money so when I got another furlough I rented a large one room cabin, came home and took Hazel and the baby Barry back there to live with me. I never got to spend as much time with them as I would have liked to. I had to spend 10 days and nights in the field each month. Hazel was pregnant with Carol (first daughter). They stayed with me until July 1944. I had to bring her and Barry home (KY) we were shipping out for *Overseas*.

Carol was born three weeks after I got back to Texas. I never got to see even a picture of her until I came home from the war on the 15th October 1945.

Each night as Hazel put the babies to bed she would read the Bible and have a prayer for Daddy and the other soldiers. Then she would have them kiss my picture, so when Carol saw me for the first time she hugged my neck, kissed me and called me Daddy. She was the best mother and wife a man could have. She wrote me a letter about everyday I was Overseas. There were times I had to miss a few days writing her because of fighting the Germans.

On January 16, 1945, one of the coldest winters in Europe, at **4:00 AM** as I was leading my machine gun squad in the WORST battle {**HERRLISHEIM, France**} we fought.

[Battle known as Bloody Herrlisheim or Little Battle of the Bulge against Germany's 10th Panzer Div. and the German 553rd Volksgrenadier Division. The date may have been the 17th or 18th of January. Company C was attached to the 56th A.I.B. during this battle. See battle map]

My company, C Company, was attached to the 56th Infantry Battalion. When my company of 254 men reported to the 56th Btn. there were only 99 men in the whole 56th Btn. left alive. A 2nd Lieutenant was the Battalion commander so our Captain became our Battalion commander.

We were caught in a German F.P.L. (Final Protective Line). They had us outnumbered 3 to 1, in an open field, lots of snow and very cold. One section of my MACHINE GUN SQUAD turned the wrong way, the artillery and machine gun fire was very heavy. The Platoon SGT. told me to get down and move with the rest of the squad. As we were crawling forward, all of a sudden a GERMAN MORTAR came in and hit me, knocked my steel helmet off and my carbine (rifle with a short barrel) out of my hands. Shrapnel hit me over the left eyebrow back to my ear and tore 2/3rds of my muscle out of my arm. My eyebrow was hanging down on my cheek. I couldn't see out of my left eye and thought it put my eye out. I found out later it was the blood causing me not to see. My whole front of my clothes was soaked and my boots were full of blood. I fell over the machine gun, I saw a lot of stars and was in A LOT of PAIN. I told the assistant squad leader [Harlan Showers] to take over and I had to find a MEDIC.

We had white sheets covering us so we could blend in with the snow. I got the sheet tangled in a barbed wire fence, it tore it off and I fell over the fence. Part of the fence was stone wall. I fell into the Company CP (Commanding Post) which was behind the stone wall.

A lieutenant took me to the Field Medic. First Aide was applied with bandages and pressure to stop the bleeding, he gave me the sulphur powder. My clothes were soaked with blood and my boots were full of blood.

The Medic said there was no way they could get the wounded out of *theater*. They had tried unsuccessfully to get the wounded out using Tanks (43rd tank btn.) and other armored vehicles but the Germans were blowing them up. They (Medics) said the only way we were getting out alive was to walk out about a mile to the FIRST AID station where the doctors were. A Lieutenant from another outfit said he could walk out he had been hit in the arm by rifle fire. I then told them that I could walk.

We left the building to heavy machine gun gunfire, bullets and artillery shells falling all around us. As we started out of the courtyard heading to the road I lost the use of my legs and fell face down in the snow from shock setting in due to the loss of so much blood, Hazel and the babies flashed through my mind. [According to military records there were 6"- 12" of snow in HERRLISHEIM during this battle] I prayed, "Please Lord, not here". Suddenly the strength came back to my legs. The Lt. reached down and helped me up from the ground. We continued to walk for a long time in pitch black conditions under heavy artillery and machine gun gunfire until we came to a Calvary of our own tanks moving up to the front line.

We asked the first tank commander where the aid station was and he said he didn't know. The Lt. started to get rattled and I told him to calm down that we would make it. The second tank commander, against orders of *not to move*, got down from the tank and took us up an alley to a dark building with the [medic] flag. He knocked on the door and they let us in. The extreme cold weather had stopped the bleeding. The medics gave us a cup of coffee and I smoked a cigarette.

The Doctor [82nd Medical] checked me out and said he couldn't give me anything for the pain because I might have a fractured skull.

Finally an ambulance arrived to take out the most seriously wounded soldiers, I was one of them. The ambulance had to drive without lights through rough country as fast as he could go. It's a wonder we all didn't get killed in a wreck. The further we traveled the sounds of incoming shells started to fade. After a while we came to a pretty good size town, the wounded were unloaded and placed on stretchers.

I was reaching for a cigarette and one of the Medics took a cigarette, lit it and handed it to me. Then he pitched two packs of smokes on my stretcher. Still, nothing for pain, I was sure hurting. A little while later they loaded us up again to move us to a larger town further back from the front lines. We finally got to the hospital around noon. They were serving chow but they told me I couldn't have anything to eat because they had to operate on me right NOW.

The Medic asked if we had any ammunition in our packs which was left in the lobby. Another Medic came up to my bed carrying a hand grenade. The doctor and I told him not to pull the pin. Told him to take it outside to give it to an M.P. or a field soldier but get it away from the Hospital because if detonated it would burn the hospital down very quick.

A nurse came in to give me a shot. “*OUCH*”, my feet tingled and my stomach burned. Then they rolled me into the operating room and gave me the “*BIG*” needle I was out cold at the count of three. I didn’t come to until around 8:00 PM. When I woke up I wasn’t hurting but I was starving. I had a cast on from my head to my shoulders.

I asked the Medic for something to eat and was told that chow was over. After I told him I haven’t had anything to eat for over 24 hrs he went to the mess hall and got me a big *Spam Sandwich* and a cup of coffee. I gulped it down and asked him to give me a piece V Mail (the V stands for Victory). I wrote my sweet wife hoping I could beat the War Department Telegram.

I told her that I had been wounded but I would be okay and for her not to worry as long as my letters were coming from the hospital. Then I passed out again slept until the next morning.

When I awoke I had wounded soldiers all around me. After a few days they transported me to another hospital where they talked about putting me on a plane and flying me to a hospital in Italy. Instead they chose to put me on a train to the **62nd GENERAL HOSPITAL** in Paris, France. This was a very large hospital real close to the *Eiffel Tower*.

I was put in a ward with 15 other wounded soldiers. After a few days went by the doctor came in to remove the cast. Then the doctor asked me if I thought my arm was going to be okay. I told him I didn’t know but I knew we were getting a bad odor from the cast. He told me they haven’t done anything but cut the shrapnel out of my arm and forehead. They had put stitches in my head and only left them in for a few days since I was bed ridden. He explained that they would take them out so it wouldn’t leave a bad scar. After the Doctor cut the cast off he told me NOT to look at the injury. That it would make me sick. He left the room. When he returned he brought a whole team of doctors back with him. They all discussed the injuries to my arm and a few of the doctors said “Let’s Amputate” the arm. There was one doctor, a big man, said he would like to try to save my arm. I don’t think they really thought that they could save my arm. He was of high rank, specialized cat. So they agreed to let him try.

They took me back to the operating room later in the evening and operated. I don’t remember anything until the next morning at about 9:00AM. The other wounded soldiers in the ward said I screamed in pain all night long. The nurse kept coming in throughout the night to give me a shot to knock me out again. The surgeon came in said “don’t blame me for all the pain. You had a very rough night”.

I told him I never knew anything about last night and I wasn’t hurting too much at the time.

The surgeon had told me that he didn't think the surgery had gone very well and didn't think the procedure would hold. He said he went down in my arm all the way up into my shoulder to pull the bicep together with a lot of big stitches but the gash so wide and deep that he didn't think that it would all hold together. He said that if the shrapnel would have broken the bone they wouldn't have even tried to save my arm. Thankfully the shrapnel just grazed the bone. He stated that I have a strong muscle and big arm and my weight was good. I weighed around 175lbs. Had I weighed 140 to 150 lbs I would not have been strong enough to go through this type of surgery. They wouldn't be able to save my arm.

After several weeks in the body cast they cut the cast off and my arm had grown (healed) to my chest. The doctor had to pull on my arm to separate it from my chest and it hurt so bad that I almost passed out from the pain. Once they got my arm where they could see it the Doctor brought the whole team of Doctors in again to look it over. They all said it was a miracle that the muscles held together. They started therapy in the whirlpool and then massage therapy. The therapy was going along pretty well but I had very little strength in the muscle. I couldn't even pick up a pencil with it at the time.

The Doctor that repaired my wound said that at some point in my lifetime the repair would snap. As I write this I am over 74 yrs old and it hasn't snapped yet.

One day, shortly thereafter, the staff of Doctors came in to explain to the sixteen wounded soldiers in the ward that fourteen of them were ready to go back in the field. Another soldier and I weren't physically ready yet. The next morning the staff came in and got the other soldiers and they left the Hospital.

A few minutes later they came in for me and the other guy. We were sent to the supply room to receive *full field equipment* and rifles. They said they knew we were not ready, or well enough to leave but "your outfit is extremely short on men and the unit is going to make a DRIVE across the RHINE RIVER so I have to send you back to the front line, good luck".

[I believe this was around March 12, 1945 according to the time line when the 12th Armored Division spearheaded General Patton's 3rd Army as THE MYSTERY DIVISION. The campaign began on March 17th and they crossed the RHINE on March 21, 1945.]

It took about three days to get back with my outfit on the front. As soon as I got back to the unit I had to check in with the 17th Battalion (12th Armored Div.) Doctors to get their okay for me to return to duty. The Battalion Doctor was a Major and after he read my orders he threw a fit, cursed and stomped his feet he told me I wasn't near well enough to fight but since the officer that sent me back held rank on the Major, there was nothing he could do but send me up to Company C and see if there was something Light Duty I could do. Of course there weren't any Light Duty jobs. So I had to do the best that I could.

MARCH 17 - 21, 1945

The 12th Armored Div. spearheaded **General PATTON'S Drive across the RHINE RIVER.**

- **Armor Blazes Path to the Rhine**

The "Mystery Division" of Gen. Patton's Third Army took the spotlight today by reaching the Upper Rhine, entering the important chemical city of Ludwigshafen and penetrating to within seven miles of the ancient cathedral city of Speyer, the chief community of the Bavarian Palatinate. It was a good day's work...

— N.Y. HERALD TRIBUNE, MARCH 1945

We were overwhelming the enemy and capturing a lot of German soldiers. This is when the 12th Armored Div. became known as the Mystery Division.

[HITLER dubbed the 12th as the SUICIDE DIVISION after one of his best fighting forces, the 10th PANZER SS DIV. had previously fought the 12th Armored at the "BLOODY HERRLISHEIM BATTLE"]

On April 12th President Roosevelt died and Truman took over the presidency and became the Commander-in-Chief.

APRIL 25, 1945

On April 25th was a very sad day for me. One of the men in my squad, **RICHARD R. CARROLL** was killed on his 21st birthday.

It was a sunny Spring day and Richard was excited. He said if he could make it through his 21st birthday that he would be good. It looked good for him because we only met light fighting throughout the day.

Along about 1:00PM in the day we pulled into a small town where we were told we would probably be for a day or two. But within a couple of hours things had changed. We were told to "*Mount UP*" that we were going to cross the **DANUBE RIVER**. We moved out in a column for a tree covered road going through the bottom land to the river.

The Commander ordered us to stop and wait for the Engineer Btn. to finish the pontoon bridge across the river. As soon as the engineers got the bridge finished the Germans blew it up. The Germans started firing anti-tank guns at our Tanks and the Halftrack I was in. We were staged by a large tree and we decided to dismount and move to a building about 100 yards away. We went down the bank crossed a barbed wire fence. As we were running towards the building a shell came in and hit the tree. A piece of

shrapnel hit me in the **Left hand** and my **back** spinning me around and knocking me down.

As I was falling down more shrapnel passed within a foot of me and CARROLL. His face got most of the load. His face turned black and he hit the ground. I checked him out and saw that he was dead. I ordered the rest of the squad to move on to the house. They sent in 3 or 4 of our P 51s (planes) to knock the German guns out. {**AWARDED BRONZE STAR** for his actions saving the rest of the squad}

As we were standing in the building the MEDIC was working on the wounded Fulson from the 2nd platoon saw the blood running down my hand onto the floor. I saw tears began to run down his cheeks and he said "Please Herman not you again". I told him I was okay but in a lot of pain. The metal was burning its way through my hand and was burning bad in my lungs area. They removed my jacket, shirt and undershirt. All it did was make a large blister on back and the shrapnel never penetrated into my lungs.

Evacuated in an ambulance we traveled until we came to a field hospital in a large tent. They gave me a shot and operated on my hand to get the shrapnel out and it swelled a lot. This all happened about two weeks before the **Germans Surrendered on MAY 7, 1945 VE-DAY.** [VICTORY in EUROPE DAY]

[Early May "SPEED IS THE PASSWORD"]

MAY 7, 1945

They sent us to a repel depot (tent city) in **WORMS, GERMANY.** We had a parade in Worms and none of us wanted to march but the officers insisted that we march. We just walked a route and stopped.

After a few days I joined my company in Augsburg Germany. Augsburg was a nice town. We guarded a hospital, supply warehouse and displaced persons camp [Concentration Camp survivors]. We played ball games, went to the movies, ate real good and had all the candy & cigarettes we wanted.

They started issuing whiskey to the officers and non-commissioned officers. Sergeants were to get a fifth of whiskey at a cost of .30cents a piece. I never drank so the boys in my squad that did drink would give me .30cents and take my allotment.

[**MAY, JUNE, JULY, AUGUST, SEPTEMBER 1945** served throughout Germany in Occupation Duty]

SEPTEMBER 1945

Sometime in early September the military started a point system to discharge some men with the highest points.

I earned 88 points. The point system rewarded points for having a wife and 2 children each month served in the states and each month served overseas. I received points for the two PURPLE HEARTS and BRONZE STAR awarded. So I was in the first group to leave.

OCTOBER 1945

They sent me home with the 7th Armored Div. around the first of October 1945. We left EUROPE on the **E.B. Alexander Troop Ship**. It took eight days on the troop ship to arrive in New York. [September 28th]

When we arrived in the harbor a show boat came out and circled the troop ship, one of the movie stars was singing "Sentimental Journey Home". [October 8, 1945]

When we came down the long plank (disembarking the ship) a large crowd was cheering us on. No words can explain the joy we had. We had finally made it back.

There were sad moments even with our joy. We would see all the young ladies holding a little boy or girl by the hand watching us come down to the pier, then they would start crying and older women would be crying. They were looking for a miracle, thinking the War Department had made a mistake. Thinking their son or husband would be walking down. As I walked by them with tears in my eyes I would say to them, "I am Sorry".

They moved us to Camp Kilmer New Jersey for a couple of days. I called home on Sunday evening [October 7th]. The operator came back on the phone and told me my wife and children were at my mother's house in the country, did I want to speak to my mother in-law? I told her no, I wanted the first person I talked to be my wife Hazel.

I was then sent to **Camp Atterbury** Indiana (near Edinburgh) One Sunday evening I called and got Hazel on the phone. [Oct. 14, 1945] I said, "Hi darling, it's me Herman" she said "Hi" and started sobbing I said, between sobs, "Hazel I love you so much and I can't wait to hold you in my arms and never let you loose." She said "me too" then started crying again. I told her I would be discharged Tuesday Morning [Oct. 16] and would be home Tuesday evening and for her to stay at her mothers. They had to get our uniforms and paperwork ready for discharge.

I went to bed, didn't sleep. Got up, hadn't shaved or taken a shower yet. I never knew anyone there in the barracks. A jeep driver came to the door and asked if there was a Sergeant Ernspeker in the barracks? I said "Yes that's me" he said your wife and family are here to see you. I told him that couldn't be and he said "All I know is there is a young lady with two small children that said she was your wife. I told him I had better go with him to see if they were in the guest area.

Sure enough, there was my beautiful wife, Barry & Carol, Mom & Dad, Roy & Della.

Words will never explain our feelings. I was trembling all over. Hazel and Mom were checking me out to see if I was okay and that I had recovered from my wounds but I was fine.

As I held Barry and Carol, I kissed them. Baby Carol hugged my neck, kissed my cheek and said “DADDY”. That was the first time we had seen each other. Hazel had sent me many pictures of Carol but they (Censorship office?) would take them out. Through the prayers, tucking the babies in at night and kissing my picture caused Carol to know I was Daddy. That proved what I already knew, that she was the best wife and mother in the world.

Every day of the 53 years, 6 months and 10 days we were together we shared our love with each other. I thank God everyday several times a day for the special mate he gave me. Even though I can no longer see her she is with me, she has a special chamber in my heart and she will remain there as long as I live. The night God called her home, (*Hazel M. Ernspiker b. Aug. 4, 1924 d. July 10, 1995*) she knew that everyone loved her and she loved us. Hazel wouldn't want me to mourn my life away. She would want to go on and share my love with my children and grandchildren and all of those around me. I will just have to hang in there, and it won't be easy. I will depend on God to keep me going for whatever time he has left for me. I believe in the words of the scripture that says “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Some day we will meet again.

There were a lot of times I was so mentally and physically hungry, cold, sleepy, and in a lot of pain that I could have just given up and let Death take over but because of my strong faith in God and the deep, deep love for Hazel and family I would fight that feeling and go on.

I was asked the question by a friend in his 50's who had watched the war chronicles of WWII in Germany, he said “tell me how any of you could live through that?” I told him I wondered that many times. The only thing I knew was that it had to be God's Will. I owe all I have and ever will have to Him. He is the Greatest. It is my prayers and request that my entire family and friends surrender their lives to him.

HJE



12th Armored Division Patch



EVIL MUST BE DESTROYED
17th Armored Infantry Crest