

A TWIST OF FATE

by John Brattoli

April 17, 1945, morning. The three of us, members of Company C, 119th Regiment, 30th Infantry Division, were on the second floor of a house on the outskirts of Magdeburg, Germany. Before our unit withdrew back two miles, our officer ordered the three of us to remain behind for two hours and prevent anyone from leaving or entering our area. A strange assignment, it gave us an eerie feeling to be left alone without any support. It was the beginning of a day that would change my life.

I was born the fourth son and seventh child of Italian parents; my father had emigrated from the province of Bari, Italy, and my mother was the daughter of Italian immigrants in Brooklyn, New York. During the 1930's we lived in a small city in south central Ohio and it was a struggle for my parents to raise a family of seven boys and four girls, especially during the depression years. As we neared the turn of the decade there was some improvement in the quality of family life.

Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941, I accompanied some of my older siblings to watch our brother play in an eighth grade football game. As the game progressed, there was a buzz of excitement among the spectators; people were passing along the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor -- where is it and what significance did it have to the United States? Later at home we gathered around the radio and heard President Roosevelt declare that a state of war existed with Japan. What would the war mean to us? It was about to change our family life.

First, Steve was drafted by the army, trained as a medical technician and served in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Then Joe was drafted by the airforce, trained as a mechanic and served at an airbase near Manchester, England. When Dan was drafted by the army, he trained as an amphibious engineer; however, just before his outfit shipped overseas, his transfer request to the airforce was approved. Dan served as a fighter and reconnaissance pilot in the Philippines.

I became draft eligible as a highschool senior with a deferment until graduation. Two days after my graduation, I was on a bus to Cleveland and sent by train to Fort Benjamin Harris, Indiana. From there the army assigned me to Fort McClellan, Alabama, where I was to train as a company clerk since I had some typing skill. However, there was a critical need for infantrymen because of overseas casualties. When I completed my infantry training, I was granted a furlough and afterward reported to a camp in Mississippi. Next, we went by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and from there to the port of New York for overseas shipment.

I arrived on the front lines in late December, 1944, joining the 30th Division and engaging in combat for the first time near the end of the Battle of the Bulge. In our next major campaign, the Rhine River crossing, I was in the third wave of infantrymen; the first two waves had been decimated by heavy artillery fire. After that successful venture, our division progressed across Germany until we arrived at the outskirts of Magdeburg. There we were to mount a major offensive on the city and meet the Russian army at the Elbe River.

So the three of us were on the second floor of this house anxiously waiting for the two-hour assignment to end; fortunately, there were only two civilian incidents. When we rejoined our unit, they were deployed in a truck garden area awaiting the signal to attack. The infantry were to climb on tanks and ride into the city until they met some resistance. As the tanks neared the house where we had been that morning, the Germans attacked with a heavy artillery barrage. The infantrymen jumped off the tanks and ran helter-skelter seeking some kind of cover.

As the machine gun sergeant ran toward the house, I followed thinking that he may need support. As I was running, the rope on my blanket roll came loose. I reached back and caught it against my lower left leg. Suddenly there was a loud explosion behind me and the concussion threw me to the ground. There was a searing pain in my left foot; I looked back and saw a bloody stump where my left forefoot had been. I called for a medic but none responded. I got up and was hopping on one leg toward the house when the sergeant came out to help me. Inside the house he gave me a shot of morphine and placed a temporary bandage on my wound.

Two medical corpsmen came, placed me on a litter, and laid me across the hood of a jeep; they drove me to a triage area where a doctor made a brief inspection of my wound. They then transported me to a field hospital where I received a series of penicillin shots; from there I went to an army hospital in Paris where a cast was applied over my foot and leg just below the knee. I was then transported to an airfield, placed on a plane and flown to LaGuardia airport in New York.

Following my return to the U.S., I spent approximately six months in army hospitals for surgeries and convalescing. Back home I took algebra and geometry night courses to qualify for college admittance. As a disabled veteran under the G.I. bill, I earned a bachelor's degree in commercial teaching at a private university with all expenses paid. As I reflect on my 32-year career in the education field, 12 as a highschool teacher and 20 as a community college professor, I wonder what direction my life would have taken if not for the twist of fate that afternoon, April 17, 1945.