

Retracing Dad's steps in the Bulge

As Veterans Day approaches, a USAG Stuttgart employee rediscovers father's part in WWII

Story by and photos provided by John Davis
Special to The Citizen

My father was my hero growing up. He did all the things a son could admire in a father. He left a secure position as an FBI Special Agent to join the United States Army during World War II because he loved his country.

As a boy, my father told me many stories of his experiences in the war — the ferocity of combat in eastern France, acts of courage and sacrifice by his fellow Soldiers, his eventual capture and treatment in a German POW camp and his liberation by Soviet forces.

He reflected on the war a lot. It wasn't ever in a manner of boasting, but in an effort to make me aware of what happened.

We often went for walks together. I think walking outside, especially in the winter, would somehow trigger his mind to reflect back on the brutal winter weather during the Battle of the Bulge.

I had always wanted to visit this terrain with him, but my father passed away in 1995.

Though he provided me with a vivid oral history, the memories faded with time. Recently, however, I re-discovered an assortment of notes and handmade diaries within an old Phillie's cigar box.

The box also contained several keepsakes, such as a pyramid-shaped Seventh Army patch, a Combat Infantryman badge, dog tags, ribbons, a few medals and several faded black and white photos. My father's handwritten notes, combined with several published accounts of my father's Division, have allowed my children and I the opportunity to re-discover his part in American history.

What renewed my interest the most, however, came with my assignment to Stuttgart, Germany, last year.

As a Foreign Service Officer, I am presently assigned to U.S. European Command, serving as a Liaison Officer for the U.S. Department of State. Now, 65 years after my father fought in Europe, I am retracing his wartime experience with my children.



Durley B. Davis, 1944



John Davis and his daughter, Lydia, 10, pose for a photo outside of a pillbox in Phillipsbourg, France, where the 70th Division "Trailblazers" defended the Falkenberg mountain.

A mission to no-man's land

My father, Durley B. Davis, Jr., or "D.B.," enlisted in the Army in May 1944.

He was assigned to the 70th Division, known as the "Trailblazers." Within the 70th, my father was part of the 275th Infantry Regiment, Baker Company. He was 27 years old.

The 70th landed in Marseilles, France on Dec. 15, 1944. Shortly before New Year's Day, Baker Company had advanced to the small town of Philippsbourg, the location of a key road network through the Vosges Mountains in eastern France. The Maginot Line runs through this area, and my father would often recall the concrete pillboxes that dot the area.

It was just a few kilometers outside the town that Baker Company would witness a dramatic counterattack known by its German codename, "Nordwind."

Baker Company was given the task of se-

curing the southwest slope of the Falkenberg Mountain. This position would control a key road intersection critical in thwarting the enemy's advance. However, shortly after taking up their position, Baker Company's radio contact with the 275th Regimental Headquarters failed, cutting off communications.

Moreover, weather conditions were severe, with record snowfall and sub-zero temperatures. Many Soldiers, including my father, had not yet received winter fatigues. Without gloves, my father paid a village woman to sew a thumb and trigger finger into a pair of socks.

"War is not as it is depicted in the movies," my father would say to me. "It is sheer hell."

He would describe to me the terrifying sounds of the German rockets, nicknamed "screaming meemees," and the white phosphorous artillery rounds that burst at tree top level.

"You couldn't extinguish the phosphorous once it landed on you," he would say. He would recall the muffled "thump" of distant mortars and the pungent odor of cordite. He recounted the unique staccato report of the German "burp gun" (MP40 machine gun), which added to the terrifying cacophony of battle.

Many of his comrades were cut down by these weapons. Countless bodies of German and American troops lay frozen in the snow, in this no-man's land around Philippsbourg.

It was a frightening and ghoulish scene, one that would inhabit his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Reading a letter he wrote to his parents from the front only days before battle, I see no fear expressed — only a desire to reassure his family. Yet, between the lines, it is clear that with the battle's proximity and the evidence of significant casualties, he knew this was something he might not return from.

Taken prisoner

On December 31, the German counterattack "Nordwind" suddenly swept through the Vosges, accompanied by tanks and an incessant barrage of artillery. Baker Company, dug in on Falkenberg's southwest slope, became surrounded by German units from the battle-hardened German infantry division, the 256th Volks-Grenadiers.

The Company commander ordered that no fires be lit. Even cigarettes were off-limits for fear of giving away their position. Food rations were depleted. Ammunition had nearly run out.

For six nights, the Company held off the German advance, but casualties continued to mount through spontaneous wildfires. Even the commander was seriously wounded, his arm riddled by rounds from a burp gun. My father described a medic who bled to death while helping others.

German troops dressed in white fatigues —

snow camouflage — would rattle cans with pebbles in them as they circled the forest, in an effort to unnerve the Americans. On Jan. 5, the Company commander gave the order to surrender the remaining force to the Germans. A handful of German soldiers that Baker



The Liberty ship "Excelsior" took Davis and other Soldiers home in 1945.

Company had taken as prisoner earlier carried the white flag down the mountain.

By one estimate, Baker Company had 90 percent of its force killed, wounded or captured as a result of the German attack.

My father would spend the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war at Stalag 4B, the largest of all German POW camps, located in Muhlberg, Germany.

65 years later ...

My father's battlefield is 90 miles from my home in Stuttgart. Philippsbourg and the nearby Falkenberg mountain are easy to find with a GPS. In less than two hours, I can drive from my home to the main street in the town of Philippsbourg.

The first time my family and I visited the battlefield area, I was overwhelmed with emotion. I'm 50 years old. I had always wanted to see this site.

We parked the car and walked the length of the street. It is a quaint little town that doesn't look like it has changed much from the period of the war, save for the fact that the buildings have been restored.



Durley Davis, center left, plays cards with other Soldiers on a makeshift table at Camp Lucky Strike in 1945. The camp was one of several U.S. facilities in France named after cigarette brands to receive and treat the masses of liberated American POWs.



Durley Davis, left, poses with other Soldiers under a sign reading "Through These Portals Pass the Best Damn Soldiers in the World," likely at Le Havre, France, the port city that served as a main debarkation point for American Soldiers at the end of WWII. Signs like this one were seen frequently at various port terminals, where American POWs boarded liberty ships and set off for home in the summer of 1945, once they had been processed at one of the cigarette camps.

The church and its unique spire are absolutely stunning. It was a field hospital during WWII, used by both sides, depending on who had possession of the town.

Having heard my father's stories and read numerous written accounts, I could almost imagine the town as it was during the December of 1944.

We made our way to the small visitors' center and found the monument to my father's Division: 70th "Trailblazers."

I took a picture of my sons inside the bunker, one of the remaining fortifications of the French Maginot line.

We have now made several trips to this picturesque farming village, so typical of the Alsace-Lorraine region.

With my kids, I take inventory of the densely-forested hills. We clamber up the logging roads that spiral around the Falkenberg, until we reach the 1500-foot summit.

We stumble into now-shallow, leaf-filled foxholes and explore the small caves on the mountain's slopes. We take pictures next to pillboxes on the roads below the mountain. I read to them passages from various books written on the battle and share the stories my father passed down to me.

It is this exact spot, the steep southwest slope of the Falkenberg Mountain, where

my father and Baker Company withstood the prolonged six-day German counterattack of Nordwind. The country charm defies the carnage that once took place here.

What was, for him, a life-changing experience, is now being revisited through the eyes of his grandchildren.

The place is precious to us.

Though my children and I are reliving one Soldier's unique wartime experience, we are also exploring the magnitude of this great battle.

In the process, we are not only honoring the memory of their grandfather, but also learning about the contributions of thousands of Americans who held the line in the winter of 1944.

Information for this article was obtained through Durley Davis' diaries and oral history relayed to his son, John, as well as various written works and histories contained within the 70th Division Web site, www.trailblazersww2.org.

The opinions expressed in the article are those of the author alone and not of the U.S. Department of State.

[Above left] Davis' good conduct and POW medals.



Davis' dog tags from WWII.

