

Coal Miner's Son in the Battle of the Bulge

Entering the Army at 17, Don Burgett spent time in the cold Ardennes Mountains on the Western front

BY TAMMY CHEEK
STAFF WRITER, July 1-2, 2009

Growing up active in the outdoors of rural west Pennsylvania helped Don Burgett when he fought during World War II, but he recalled, "I don't think anything can prepare you for what was going to happen."

What would happen is Burgett would be fighting at the Battle of the Bulge, or the Ardennes Offensive of December 1944 through January 1945.

Burgett, 83, a Tellico Village resident for 17 years now, grew up in the coal mining areas of Pennsylvania, his family following the coal mines town to town. His father was a coal miner, his grandfather was a coal miner, and his uncles were coal miners.

In 1943, he was 17 when his father told the youth he got Burgett a job in the mines.

"My dad called me after I'd graduated from high school and called me to come to the house and talk to my new boss," he recalled. "I didn't quite understand what he was talking about because I had been delivering papers and didn't have a job as such.

"And it turns out, there was a straw boss in the mine, and my dad had talked to him and told him I was old enough to go into the mine and he had a job for me," Burgett said. "I told dad that I couldn't because I had enlisted in the Army."

Burgett admitted his enlistment was a lie. His father told him he couldn't because Burgett was not old enough, but Burgett countered by telling his father he forged his father's signature.

"And he said, 'You know you can go to jail for something like that,' and I said, 'Well, not if I'm in the army.' He said, 'Well, you have a point.' So that was the end of that discussion."

The next day Burgett enlisted, lying about his age, in the U.S. Army.

He would turn 18 three months later.

Burgett entered the Army at a time when patriotism ran high. The attack on Pearl Harbor occurred only two years before.

"I was gung-ho," he recalled. "I just felt we ought to kick the Japs."

Ironically, though, he would be sent to Europe to fight against Germany. His ancestors came from Germany to America and fought in the American Revolution.

"They couldn't speak English," he related with a laugh.

Burgett trained in Indiantown Gap, Penn., and Fort Meade, Md., as an infantryman.

"As an infantry, you're really not trained for anything except firing a weapon," Burgett said. While he admitted the training was tough, it was also familiar to him.

"I was brought up with weapons," he explained. "I had camped and trapped and hunted as a youngster. I ran a trap line before I went to school in the morning."

"I felt very comfortable," he added. "I was a good shot, and it just came natural to me."

Burgett would take that training with him to the forested Ardennes Mountains region of Belgium on the Western front, where the Battle of the Bulge was being fought.

The battle was a major German offensive launched through the Ardennes Mountains region of Belgium and more specifically of Wallonia; France; and Luxembourg. The "bulge" was the initial incursion Germans put into Allies' line of advance. While the offense took the Allies by surprise, the Allies prevailed. Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army in the south, centered around Bastogne, attacked north and British Gen. Bernard Montgomery's forces in the north struck south, and the two forces met at Houffalize.

Burgett was 18 when he was shipped to Belgium that January, just before the battle was over. He went there as a replacement rifleman.

"I went in right after the bulge had started," he said. "The Bulge started in the middle of December, and I didn't get there, thank goodness, until January."

He said he remembered being cold and scared ... "something that I would not want any of our kids to be involved in, but it was something that you took care of your friends and your friend took care you."

He observed war is like TV, when one see whole war. He said remembered he couldn't see the enemy or battleground. He could only see his buddy standing next to him and feel the cold and snow.

For Burgett returning to civilian life was not difficult.

"I think back about the way we were treat as veterans and the way many of the ex-GIs have been treated," from other conflicts like Vietnam observed, he observed.

"They fought just at as we did, had just as much in the way of hardship etc., and yet we received, if you will, a hero's welcome.

Burgett served between, 1944 and 1950 in the U.S. Army with Fox Company, 110th Battalion, 28th Infantry Division; the 689 Anti-Aircraft Artillery; 708th Anti-Aircraft Artillery; 1st MSL Battalion, 176th Artillery; and Co. B, 167th Quartermaster Battalion. After serving in Europe, he would serve in Korea and become a lieutenant.

He would serve 14 more years in the Army Reserve and become recalled, serving with an anti-aircraft outfit. After the war, veteran, Burgett received an opportunity to go school with the GI bill.

"I went to pharmacy school and worked as pharmacist after I got out," he related. He then got job with the pharmaceutical company, Parke-Davis.

"I had a very good 30-year career," he said.

While overseas Burgett met a man who was in the 109th Infantry while I was in the 110th.

"That's the 28th Infantry Division," he said. "I ran into him in Pittsburgh. He was the chief resident of surgery at West Penn Hospital, and I was a hospital man for Parke-Davis.

We wound up reminiscing about old times and became very good friends, and he introduced me to a gal who was chief X-ray technician. Her name was Joan Theresa Jochum."

She happened to be the woman he would be married to for 48 years.

"If it hadn't been for the association with Andy I don't think I would have ever met Joan," he said.

Joan was well-known in the Tellico Village community for her involvement in boating and the Pontoon Picnics. She passed away five years ago. The couple have three children — Bill Burgett, 52, who is serving in the U.S. Navy; Lee Ann Burgett, a teacher at Fort Loudoun Middle School; and Rick Burgett, 45, an engineer in Chicagoland. The Burgettes also have two grandchildren.

Even now, Burgett continues to serve his community. He is active with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 1733 in Knoxville, sergeant-at-arms with American Legion Post 256 for Tellico Village and Rarity Bay. He is also a life member with VFW and the American Legion. He also serves as sergeant-at-arms with Loudon County Honor Guard, which consists of different posts of the American Legion and VFW.

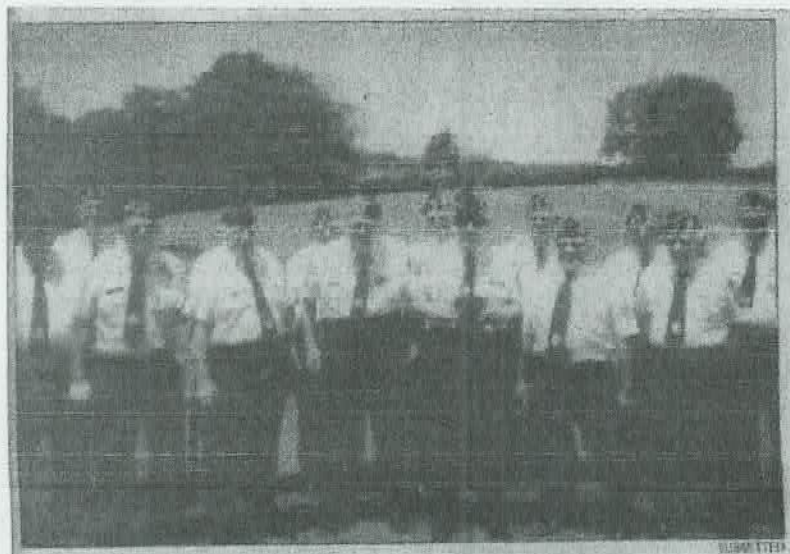
Besides his veteran service affiliations, Burgett is an active member of Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, and he founded the Tellico Boaters Assistance Response Team (T-BART), which assists stranded boaters on Tellico Lake.



For Don Burgett, a Tellico Villager for the past 17 years and a World War II Veteran, serving his country extends to serving his community through his involvement in veterans' and other organizations.



In 1944, Don Burgett (left) was in the 28th Infantry Division, Fox Company, of the U.S. Army when the photo was taken with a fellow infantryman.



Don Burgett (fifth from left) serves on the Loudon County Honor Guard, which consists of American and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) members.