

Behind enemy lines

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 11 November 2010 14:19 - Last Updated Thursday, 11 November 2010 14:23



POW tells story of survival 66 years later.

Albert Connolly always thought he'd make it home.

But sometimes he wondered . . .

. . . when shells whizzed too close to his head and exploded nearby.

. . . about the time, deep in Nazi territory, he found himself looking down the barrels of German guns.

. . . on the long march across Germany as fellow, starving Americans dropped dead in the snow.

His blue eyes clear on a bright November morning, 91-year-old Connolly finally shared the remarkable story he lived behind enemy lines during World War II.

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"I figured if I'm ever going to tell a little about what happened, I'd better be getting it done," he said.

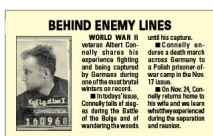
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Connelly was born at home in a remote valley between Snell Canyon and what is now Jeffrey Lake.

Although his father, a farmer and stockman, moved the family around, the area southwest of Brady is what Connelly calls home.

He attended country schools, through the eighth grade, and then took up ranching, putting up hay and breaking colts.

"It paid one-and-a-half the wages of the other fellas," Connelly said about breaking horses for a living.



In August of 1942, he married Dora Carver who grew up in the same area.

Two months later, he was drafted into the U.S. Army.

After training as a gunner with the 119th Armored Engineers, Connelly joined a division of the 81st Combat Engineers.

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“We instructed the new guys and did just about everything—loading belts for machine guns and repairing them,” he said.

His unit shipped off to England and then to Rouen, France, where they rode landing ship tanks onto the beach—the same watercraft that carried Allied troops to the beaches of Normandy on D-Day the previous June.

Unlike D-Day, there was no resistance at first.

But four days later, Connelly remembers his first encounter with the enemy.

“I had the hell scared out of me,” he said. “Anyone who said they weren’t scared either wasn’t there or is a liar.”

From that experience, he said he learned to control his fear.

During the war, his battalion, made up of 670 men, was sent to “hot spots.”

One of those spots was in Auw, Germany, where members of Connelly’s unit learned they were supposed to crack the Siegfried line.

Historical sources describe the line as a system of pillboxes and strong points built along the German western frontier in the 1930s. Expanded in 1944, German troops retreating from France used it as a barrier against Allied troops.

Connelly said the Germans had dug tunnels into the hills and reinforced them with up to 18-feet of concrete.

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While waiting for supplies, his company lived in a couple of houses near Auw where he said they tried to figure out how to put “beehives,” or rocket-propelled explosives, on the Siegfried line to blow it up while avoiding enemy fire.

“One day, three German tanks rolled up and cranked their cannons and blew up the house I was in,” Connelly said.

Connelly and others saw the tanks coming and dashed out into the snow and over a hill to hide in trees before it exploded.

“There were still men inside,” he said.

Hidden by timber, Connelly and the other survivors received a radio message from headquarters telling them to go to St. Vith, Luxemborg, which he said was about 60 miles away.

“We didn’t get any vehicles out with us and we were in a place covered with Germans,” he said.

Despite captured American trucks and jeeps, driven by Germans, rumbling through the area, Connelly and his comrades encountered an American-driven truck that chugged up behind them.

He and about 10 other Americans climbed aboard.

It was night as Allies behind enemy lines knew better than to drive during the day.

Connelly remembers the driver as one of the bravest men he’s known, telling how the soldier

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would drive slowly and stop as German tanks backed off the road into trees.

Eventually the truck ran out of gas and they abandoned the vehicle.

But, by the grace of God, they made it to St. Vith and regrouped.

Through radio messages, they were told to hold an important crossroads—an account written about by William Baldwin in “Engineers in the Battle of the Bulge.”

With Allied forces advancing across France, Baldwin describes Hitler’s offensive plan to crash through an 85-mile area of the Ardennes in Belgium to split British and American armies.

At St. Vith, he describes the 81st as holding its position against German attacks from Dec. 17-21, 1944.

Connelly said they didn’t have anything with which to fight tanks but “we did the best we could.”

Finally, they received a message to “give ’em hell as long as you can.”

Then, all contact ended.

“We just got kind of numb,” Connelly said.

Baldwin writes: “During that afternoon, a heavy German assault, led by tanks and accompanied by intense artillery, rocket, and mortar fire, overran the exhausted American defenders. Colonel Riggs ordered his men to break up in small groups and attempt to escape to the rear.”

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Connelly said the commander told them to find their way back to Allied lines.

In the middle of the night, Connelly set off with a fellow engineer he'd worked with and trusted—Orville Perry from Reston, VA.

“But we had no idea where to go,” he explained. “The only way to go was where there was a lot of action and we were pretty close to the front lines.”

They soon were befriended by three other engineers wandering in the woods who were confused and lost and “begged to go with us.”

While separated from the main unit, Connelly and the group survived on

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