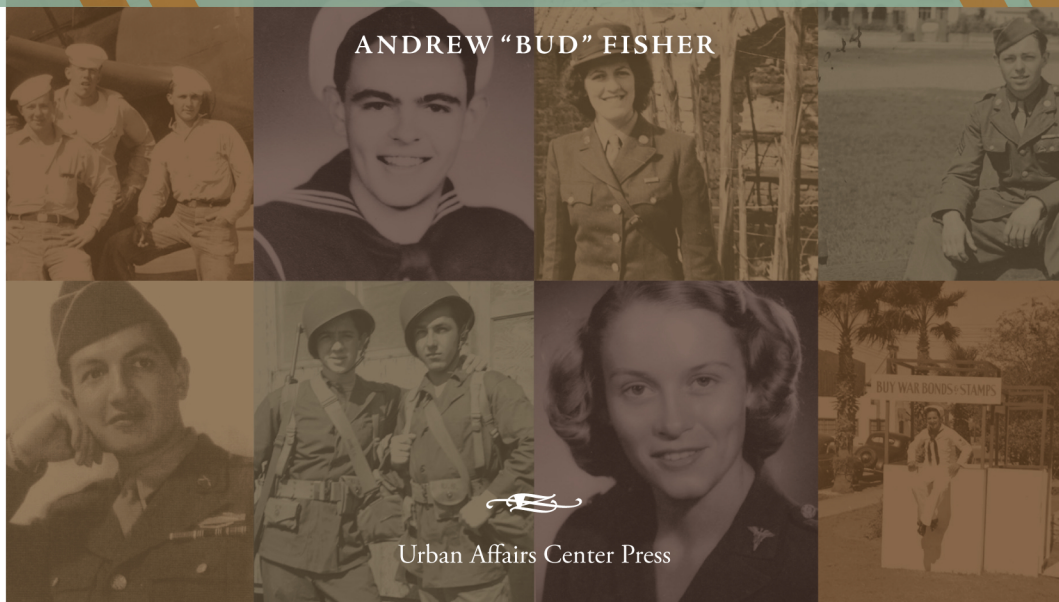




WHAT A TIME IT WAS

INTERVIEWS WITH
NORTHWEST OHIO VETERANS
OF WORLD WAR II

ANDREW "BUD" FISHER



Urban Affairs Center Press

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NORTHWEST OHIO VETERANS
OF WORLD WAR II

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
ANDREW "BUD" FISHER

The University of Toledo Urban Affairs Center Press
Thomas Barden, Joel Lipman, Molly Schiever, editors

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Urban Affairs Center Press

<http://uac.utoledo.edu/Publications/uac-press/uac-press.htm>

Second printing, December 2009

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What a Time It Was
Interviews with Northwest Ohio Veterans
of World War II

The publication of this book was supported in part by donations
from the following organizations and individuals:

The University of Toledo Army R.O.T.C. "Rockets"... Proud to Be!

Vietnam Veterans of America – Chapter 35 [Toledo, Ohio]

The University of Toledo Military Services Center

Front cover photos:

The cover photos are of World War II veterans from Northwest Ohio who were interviewed by Veterans' History Project volunteers. The interviews are archived in the Canaday Center of the University of Toledo's Carlson Library. A complete listing of the more than 500 interviews can be found in the third appendix of this book.

Book design by Amanda Russell, The University of Toledo

Project assistance by Ramona Dumitrascu, The University of Toledo

ISBN 0-932259-09-X

DEDICATION

*to the men and women of Northwest Ohio
who answered the call to duty*

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FOREWORD

Lloyd A. Jacobs, M.D.

President, The University of Toledo

November 2009

What A Time It Was is a book about courage. The courage portrayed in it is indigenous in the American people and characteristic particularly of Midwesterners. Many of the courageous people in the book still live in northwest Ohio and are a source of pride to those of us who make the western shore of Lake Erie our home. We will ever be grateful to the heroes of World War II.

Courage is one of the virtues listed by Aristotle. When he begins his discussion of the virtues, he talks about courage first. He makes it clear that courage is not an abstract, but a pattern of behavior. It has to do with measuring and reacting to fear. He admits that there are various forms of courage, not all of them positive. For example, he speaks of a defective courage born of ignorance of the consequence of one's actions. However, a perusal of *What A Time It Was* shows immediately that our heroes of World War II did not act out of ignorance of the consequences. Donald Applegate of the U.S. Army assumed command of his company after it had been overrun and all of the officers killed. He could not have been ignorant of the consequences of his assuming this responsibility. (pgs. 9-10)

Further on, Aristotle speaks of rash foolhardiness as another form of defective courage. Again, a reading of *What A Time It Was* shows that this description does not apply to our World War II heroes. Orval Kornrumpf, born in Toledo, Ohio, has reminiscences which speak of carefully planned campaigns even though they were dangerous. He recalls: "We began to build an airstrip while the Marines were still fighting the Japanese on the island. The airstrip was for B29 bombers which ... low on fuel or damaged, that couldn't make it back to Tinian ... I was strafed, shot at by a sniper ... but I was never injured." (p. 165)

Ultimately, Aristotle discusses real courage in terms of altruism and ethics. He concludes that the courageous woman or man acts as she or he does because it is "fine," or right, and that the conscious decision to risk one's life is, finally, a form of giving. Aristotle's discussion of courage presages the views of the protagonist's mother in *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane. The marks of courage are not, she asserts, the praise of peers or even a sense of pride, but are characterized by a sense of responsibility and sacrifice.

Throughout *What A Time It Was* we sense that this definition of courage is fulfilled by the men and women whose narratives are recorded. For example, Sgt. Alex Drabik demonstrated himself to be a true humanitarian. After risking his life to secure a disputed and critical bridge over the Rhine River, he protected a German prisoner he had taken in his own foxhole. Nearly unbelievable altruism!

Why should we read *What A Time It Was*? First, of course, it should be read as an act of gratitude to the heroes in it. We are reminded that peace is not merely the absence of war, but also the remembrance of war and sacrifice. Peace without that remembrance is empty. But secondly, we should read *What A Time It Was* as self-examination, asking ourselves questions about the value of our own life projects in light of what these heroes have given us.

Paul Tillich in his book *The Courage to Be* demonstrates that living can demand as much courage as dying. He made clear that if it's not worth dying for, it may not be worth living for, and that courage for the life well-lived is as much a necessity as it is a necessity for heroism on the battlefield. The heroes of *What A Time It Was* inspire us to live courageously.

We live in a perilous time. In recent months we have seen an unprecedented unraveling of the certainties of American life. The very foundations of the American Dream — for which the women and men listed and quoted in this book sacrificed — are threatened. It is indeed a time for courage, and this book should arouse in us not only gratitude, but passion. If you believe in the American Dream, if you believe that the men and women who fought in World War II made worthwhile sacrifices, be passionate in your commitment. Learn from their courage to rally your own.

INTRODUCTION

In December, 2002, The Blade ran a story describing the Veterans History Project of the United States Congress and noted that Thomas Barden, of The University of Toledo, was the local coordinator. The project's mission was "... to collect the memories, accounts, and documents of war veterans from World War I, World War II and the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars and to preserve these stories of experience and service for future generation." That sounded interesting to me. I had sold my business and had been retired long enough to know that playing golf was not what I wanted to do. I had always been a volunteer, at church, community, or the industry I represented. I met with Dr. Barden and we agreed I should try doing a few interviews. "A few" eventually turned into six years of work and over 500 interviews.

Armed with my tape recorder, I was ready, but first I had to find some veterans to interview. Approximately 42,000 men and women from northwest Ohio served in WWII, but few were coming forward to talk about their experiences. So I went to find them. I gave talks at Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, American Legion posts, Disabled American Veterans, and the local WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services) organization, senior citizens organizations and retirement homes. The Way Library in Perrysburg encouraged Perrysburg veterans to participate. The Blade and the newspapers in Sylvania and Perrysburg were generous in giving publicity. Eventually, the veterans learned that this was a worthwhile project with no strings attached and when we offered them a copy of the interview tape for their families, they recognized how important the interviews would be to their families. The interviews were informal. It was really just two former service people talking, as I, too, had been in the military, on occupation duty after WWII. The European Theater veterans knew I had knowledge of the geography and the progress of the war. I had read a lot about World Wars I and II in Europe and the aftermath of both conflicts. All of this background proved helpful in the interviews. For the Pacific war interviews, I carried a map of the Pacific and followed along as we discussed the various islands and sea battles.

The interviews began with the veteran's entry into service, adjusting to basic training or boot camp, the joys of life on a troop ship, their experiences in combat, and their return to civilian life. They could last from 45 minutes to two hours and would often bring laughter or a tear to the eye of both interviewee and the interviewer. There were many surprises along the way, often when interviewing female veterans. None of them had to be there, but they were dedicated to serving their country — the nurse tending to the wounded on Anzio Beach with shells exploding all around her, or on Kwajalein, a tiny atoll in the Pacific, working 18-hour days without a day off for months, tending to the wounded who never stopped coming. I was impressed by the willingness of the African-American servicemen, who served with dignity in spite of the segregation in the Southern training camps. They had to watch German and Italian prisoners of war being treated with more respect than they were. The Tuskegee Airmen, two of whom I was privileged to interview, had to prove that an African American was more than equal to the task of flying. They distinguished themselves in Italy and were proud to say that they never lost a bomber they were escorting to and from its target.

I learned so much about America and Americans in my six years of interviewing. I marveled at the bravery of the medics, saving lives with bullets whizzing overhead, and the Merchant Marines, plying the oceans, often all alone, knowing that death was a certainty if a torpedo found them. I was surprised at how many women worked in the plants and how proud they were of their contribution to the war. They were truly a secret weapon in the Arsenal of Democracy. Rosie the Riveter was a name of great respect in WWII. It didn't take long for me to realize how important the Veterans History Project was. The once young men and women who served their country in WWII are now in their eighties and leaving us at an alarming rate. Their stories are too important to be lost to history although, sadly, many will be. I interviewed a man who died the next week; but his family will always have the story of his military service, in his own voice. One interview had been moved up a week to accommodate a sick man, but was cancelled that day because he had died. The history of northwest Ohio is enriched by the many real-life stories of its veterans. They can now be found at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., The University of Toledo's Canaday Center, and the homes of the veterans. I have selected a representative group of these stories, including all the branches of service, men and women, black and white, and several whose occupations were home-front related.

And finally, I must say I did not realize when I signed on to the Veterans History Project that this would be such an emotional experience. We laughed together and shed a tear together as they remembered the good times and the bad, a time when they were young and strong and sure that they were immortal. In over 500 interviews, I have learned that talking to veterans can evoke memories long suppressed, memories of the hell that is war, memories of their deceased buddies who would forever be 20 years old and memories of a time of great patriotic spirit. Not having been in war, I could never fully grasp the depth of their emotions, but having been in the service, I realized that there is something compelling about serving one's country. It is exciting and very different from the civilian life that one leaves behind. It is a life one remembers forever. Once, at a talk I gave, I was asked why I thought Americans made such good fighters in WWII. I said it was because they were children of the Great Depression — tough kids raised in tough times. They learned to work hard for what they got and to make do and do without. They were the citizen soldiers who their enemies thought would be too soft to fight. There is a common thread obvious in these many interviews. It is love of country. Whether they served in the heat of battle, behind the lines or on the homefront, their love of country was apparent. They are proud they served, proud their contribution led to the ultimate victory, and proud that they can tell their children and grandchildren about it through the VHP. I will remember for the rest of my years what a privilege and an honor it has been to help preserve the memories of these men and women of northwest Ohio who served in the greatest patriotic effort in our nation's history.

WHAT A TIME IT WAS

There is an ancient Chinese curse that says, “May you live in interesting times.” The years of the Great Depression and World War II that followed World War I and the Roaring Twenties could certainly be called interesting. WWI ended with a resounding victory for the United States and its allies. The doughboys had gone “over there” and shown that America was a country to be reckoned with. Then came the 1920s, a time of bathtub gin, flappers, speakeasies and stock market fortunes. Everyone was buying on margin and everyone had a tip on a sure thing. Those who bought on margin lost it all when the market crashed on Black Friday, Oct. 29, 1929. An economic catastrophe that came to be known as the Great Depression settled upon the land. Homes and savings were lost as banks failed and jobs vanished. President Franklin D. Roosevelt came along in 1932 to see us through those troubled times. He started federal work projects to provide jobs and the Social Security system, but most of all he offered hope for a brighter future.

As bad as it was, in some ways the Depression was a good thing. People learned to value family. They learned to pool meager resources, sometimes living three generations in one house. Whatever it took to survive. And survive they did; adversity made them strong and resilient. Everyone’s backyard was their fruit and vegetable market. They had grape arbors and tomato plants, cherry trees and pear trees. Whatever could be canned was in order to see them through the winter.

As a child of the Depression, my playgrounds were the streets and the alleys. We played handball and baseball with old tennis balls and baseballs covered with black tape. No one had a bicycle, but we made scooters out of orange crates and old roller skates. We didn’t have much in the way of clothes and just one pair of shoes, which we would repair with glue-on soles that came loose and flapped when we walked. We couldn’t afford vacations, but we would visit relatives. If we could afford the gas to get to their house, we would stay with them for a week. Then the next year, they would come to visit us. It wasn’t like going on a cruise or going to a resort on a lake, but it was with family and that brought us closer together. When I look at those old family vacation pictures my mother took with her Brownie box camera, I think back to those wonderful years when we had nothing but each other. What a time it was.

As the long years of the Depression finally seemed to be coming to an end, we suffered another blow. Could the weary nation summon up the strength to fight a world war? The war did catch us unprepared. Our Army was woefully under strength, our Navy lay in ruins in Pearl Harbor, yet we had to face enemies on two fronts — the mighty German Army of professional soldiers along with the battle-tested Japanese Army that had been fighting since the 1930s and their navy, which

ruled the Pacific. President Roosevelt promised the American people that we would win the ultimate victory. He promised that the great Arsenal of Democracy would produce the weapons necessary to defeat the enemies of democracy, and he called upon young men and women to leave their jobs and postpone their educations to defend their country as citizen soldiers. Fifteen million answered the call. Fifteen million recruits learned to be soldiers and sailors, airmen and nurses. And behind them stood a new kind of worker called Rosie the Riveter. She would build the weapons of war.

On the home front, rationing began. Ration stamps were used to buy meat, sugar, and other things thought necessary to the war effort. And the Depression-hardened families accepted rationing without complaint because they had made do with so little for years. Automobile production ceased as the plants converted to war work, but it didn't really bother us. We'd never had a new car anyhow.

The war did not go well at first. American forces were overwhelmed in the Philippines and on the Pacific Ocean, while German U-boats prowled the Atlantic, sinking American ships at will. But the Arsenal of Democracy and the men and women who had been born into the hardships of the Great Depression, and toughened by those hardships, did bring victory to America as Roosevelt promised that they would.

World War II was the great patriotic war. While brothers and uncles were somewhere fighting for a cause in which they believed so strongly, people back home were doing whatever they could for the war effort. They were saving scrap metal and buying war bonds. My mother was working for the Red Cross and my father was building engines for PT boats. It was a wonderful coming together of people of all races and creeds, all social levels. Men, women and children all joined in a common cause. Thinking back to those years of the Great Depression and the close-knit families that lived through it, and to the war that separated families but engendered such patriotism, and especially to the glorious victory that finally followed, I can truly say, "What a time it was!"

— *Andrew "Bud" Fisher*

The Veterans History Project (VHP) came into being in October 2000 when then-President Bill Clinton signed U.S. Public Law 106-380, the authorizing legislation. The project, whose mission is “to collect the memories, accounts, and documents of American war veterans from WWI, WWII, and the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf Wars, and to preserve these stories of experience and service for future generations” has now collected more than 64,500 interviews. The national VHP organization is paired with state groups, including historical societies and arts councils, to find local partners.

Timothy Lloyd, professor at Ohio State University and executive director of the American Folklore Society, became the Ohio VHP coordinator. He contacted University of Toledo professor Tom Barden, who became the regional coordinator for northwest Ohio. Dr. Barden arranged for the Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections in The University of Toledo’s Carlson Library to oversee the regional effort and house copies of the interviews and paperwork. Original interview recordings and other materials are forwarded to Washington, D.C., where they are archived at the Library of Congress, while copies are maintained at local sites for easy public use.

Once this structure was in place, the call went out for volunteer interviewers. Among the local responders was Andrew “Bud” Fisher, who started interviewing in 2003 and worked steadily at it for six years. Along the way he conducted more than 500 interviews, becoming not only northwest Ohio’s most prolific VHP volunteer, but one of a handful of the most active VHP participants in the entire country. He tells some of this in his introduction, but he modestly left out the fact that he was celebrated by the national VHP leadership in Washington, D.C., in 2005 for his indefatigable effort.

In 2008, when he decided to stop interviewing at this daunting pace, he conceived the idea of publishing a sampler of interviews that focuses on World War II. He reviewed all the WWII interviews and selected 80 that he considered representative not only of the military services but also of the home front. These form the core of *What A Time It Was*. A 1939-1945 timeline that gives the scope and extent of the conflict as it was fought around the world is included. And to avoid having to re-identify certain historical personages in each entry, a list of important historical figures has been added so readers can find names, full titles, and important dates.

The book is divided into two main sections — the European Theater of Operations and the Pacific Theater of Operations. Within the two sections, the veterans’ stories are listed alphabetically. Following those are sections on the WACS, WAVES, WASPS, and USMCWR, and those who served at home. The complete list of all the veterans interviewed in Northwest Ohio is included at the end.

One last note — readers may wonder why so many interviewees point out that the retreating German soldiers greatly feared the Russians and would try to surrender to the Americans instead. The European Theater was fought on two fronts, the Western where American and British troops moved across France and Belgium into Germany, and the Eastern where the Russians battled the Germans, who had begun a massive invasion of the USSR in June, 1941. The Eastern Front was infamous for its brutality, accounting for more than 30 million of the estimated 70 million WWII dead. Millions of German and Russian soldiers fought along the broadest land front in military history.

As Time magazine said in its May 23, 2008, issue: “By measure of manpower, duration, territorial reach and casualties, the Eastern Front was as much as four times the scale of the conflict on the Western Front that opened with the Normandy invasion. The Nazis’ initial invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa, involved 3.2 million German troops and 3,000 aircraft, and even after the U.S.-led invasion of Western Europe, the vast majority of German military resources remained deployed against the Soviets.” While most of the Allied POWs held by Germany were released, captured Soviet troops were often shot in the field or sent to concentration camps where they were executed.

Information presented at the Nuremberg trials indicated that 1.2 million Russian citizens were killed during the 27-month-long siege of Leningrad, the largest number of civilian deaths in a single city. The combined damage to the Soviet Union alone included the complete or partial destruction of 1,710 cities and towns, 70,000 villages/hamlets, 2,508 church buildings, 31,850 industrial establishments, 40,000 miles of railroad, 4,100 railroad stations, 40,000 hospitals, 84,000 schools, and 43,000 public libraries. Seven million horses, and 17 million sheep and goats were also slaughtered or driven off. Faced with the choice of surrendering to Russian soldiers who might be looking for revenge, it is little wonder that German soldiers preferred to surrender to the Americans.

—*The Editors*



EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS

Donald Applegate

U.S. Army

Interviewed Jan. 10, 2006



Rare are those who earned the Distinguished Service Cross, our nation's second highest medal for bravery in action. Rarer still are those who earned not only the Distinguished Service Cross, but also the Silver Star, the third highest medal for bravery in action. Donald Applegate of Toledo, Ohio, was the recipient of these two medals and two Purple Hearts for being twice wounded in action in the European Theater of Operations in WWII.

Donald Applegate was a student at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, when he received his draft notice. He had the option of completing college or going into the service immediately. He chose to postpone his education and report immediately. After basic training and Officer Candidate School, he was sent to the European Theater. After a time in Britain, he went to Le Havre, France with the 75th Division. They were in Holland on Dec. 16, 1944, when the surprise German counteroffensive in the Ardennes, known as the Battle of the Bulge, began.

The Germans overran the American positions in and around the town of Bastogne in Belgium. They made a bulge in the American lines, hence the name, the Battle of the Bulge. It was a last-ditch effort on the western front by a desperate Adolph Hitler. He hoped to split the Allied armies, capture the port of Antwerp, and perhaps sue for peace. Although the German offensive failed, the American army suffered its greatest losses in the European campaign. Applegate's unit was sent to Liege, Belgium, on the north end of the counteroffensive.

How long did it take you to get from Holland to Belgium?

We were able to get there and into our defensive position in one night. Our immediate objective was a town 30 kilometers west of Bastogne, the important crossroads town of the battle.

[At the town of Malmedy, Americans who had been captured and disarmed were massacred. One hundred or more were shot down by the SS and left to die in the snow. After the war, those responsible were tried and convicted.]

When you got into the battle, had the Germans been slowed down?

No, they still had momentum and we were overrun on Dec. 21. An American Sherman tank came toward us, which we were glad to see, but it was a captured American tank and was followed by six German Tiger tanks, which ran through our lines. Every officer in my company was either killed or wounded and evacuated. That night, I became the Company Commander. A full company would be 180 men,

but we were down to 70 or 80. Although our casualties were enormous, the attack was stopped by one of our men with a bazooka, an anti-tank weapon. The mud roads in the Ardennes Forest were so narrow that when he disabled the lead tank, the others behind could not advance.

The German attacked your position with tanks. Did you have any tanks to stop them?

No, but nothing could stop those German tanks; they were far superior to anything the Americans had. We sometimes had tank support, but the American 75-mm guns were no match for the German 88-mm guns, the best all-purpose weapon in WWII Europe.

Were you wounded at the Bulge?

Yes, I was hit by an 88.

Were you evacuated when you were wounded?

No, I just went to the field hospital for a dressing and returned.

How long were you on the line?

All the latter part of December and all of January.

Were you aware that General Patton was on the way to the Bulge?

We heard all kinds of stories, but our objective every day was to stay alive. Our main adversary was the weather. It was below zero and we were sleeping on the ground or in cellars.

Were you dressed for the weather?

No, our combat boots were porous and the number of men lost to frostbite and trenchfoot was enormous and we had to wear our overcoats in combat. We did very well, though, and in January we went over to the offensive. The tide probably turned on Christmas Day, when the skies cleared and we had air support.

Didn't the Allies always have air superiority?

Yes, but they couldn't use it during most of the Bulge because of the weather. First there was the fog and then the heavy snowstorms. On Dec. 26, the skies cleared and the C-47s came over dropping supplies.

Were you running out of food and ammunition?

No, we were all right. We had plenty of food and we had gotten ammo from our retreating troops. Of course, the food was uniformly awful because it was C rations and K rations, which we had to eat cold.

It was said that the Germans were running out of gas and had tried to capture American fuel dumps.

There was a huge dump not far from us that they tried but failed to capture.

Where were you on Feb. 2, 1945?

The Bulge was over and we were on our way to eastern France. An action developed there called the Battle of the Colmar Pocket. Our job was to drive the Germans across the Rhine into Germany. They were the last Germans to be on French soil and they were very good SS troops.

I'm looking at an award from the 9th Army headquarters for the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award given to a soldier. How did you earn this award?

It was for an attack on a small town near Colmar and the Rhine River, which was the escape route for the Germans. We were pinned down in an open field by tank fire and we called in artillery fire and the Germans withdrew. We went into town fighting house to house and were then counterattacked by German troops and tanks.

The citation reads that you directed your unit to fall back, while you remained behind with one platoon to cover their retreat. You blasted a hole through the wall of a building with a bazooka and led your men through and stopped the counterattack. It further says, "the extraordinary heroism and courageous action of Lieutenant Applegate reflects great credit on himself and are in the highest traditions of the military service."

Did you cross the Rhine?

No, I was wounded again and was evacuated and put in a Paris hospital for two or three weeks. I rejoined the unit after they had crossed the Rhine. While I was in the hospital, the unit was mostly engaged in patrol duty until the crossing.

Now that you were on the German homeland, did the Germans fight more fiercely?

Sometimes, but sometimes there were mass surrenders, especially by older men and those foreigners who had been pressed into duty. This was called the Battle of the Ruhr Pocket.

They realized that the war was lost and it was better to be captured by the Americans than the Russians coming from the east.

Where were you on April 4, 1945?

I was at the battle of Heinrichsburg, Germany, a town in the Ruhr Valley near the autobahn, and in the industrial heart of Germany.

I have a citation for a Silver Star awarded to Captain Donald Applegate. To have both a DSC and a Silver Star is indeed rare. The citation says that your unit was surrounded and the Germans demanded your surrender. What happened then?

We were able to radio a unit to support us by firing on the Germans.

The citation reads that you braved the intense enemy fire and captured three artillery pieces and over 170 prisoners. The war was to be over in just a month and you had made it this far, but now you were in serious trouble. You saved your unit once more and you were again recognized for your heroism.

We came to a bridge that would have to be crossed and I had to pick the platoon to cross. I knew it could be mined, but we had to cross. Before the first platoon I had chosen to cross the bridge got there, it blew up. They were just moments away from death. That incident was to be the end of our combat. From that time on it was mainly occupation duty.

Were the Germans surrendering in large numbers?

Yes, there was this problem with the Russian bear. They were coming from the east, so there was mass surrender to the Americans.

I see that when you were awarded the DSC, you were a first lieutenant and when you got the Silver Star, you were a captain.

I was promoted while I was in the hospital in Paris. It is usual that a company commander is a captain.

Where were you when the war ended?

In the state of Westphalia [Germany] on occupation duty. I was in charge of five towns and five or six prisoner of war camps, one of which was a Jewish labor camp. When anyone was no longer able to work, [he] would be sent to a death camp.

Did you liberate these camps? What were the conditions in the camps?

Yes, we and the British liberated the camps and the conditions were dreadful. At that time, we did not know about the Holocaust.

Were you able to do anything for these people?

Yes, we brought food and sanitary equipment. We scoured the countryside for fresh vegetables and whatever we could find. In the Italian prisoners' camp, I remember there was one water faucet for 700 prisoners. They had separate camps for Poles, Russians, Dutch, and French.

How long were you in charge of these camps?

From May, 1945, until the late summer, when we went to France to ship out. We were expected to ship to the Pacific, but the atom bombs ended the war in the Pacific. ©

With the war over, Captain Applegate returned home, returned to college and a civilian career. Sixty years later, he returned to the small town near Colmar where he had earned his DSC. As he was looking around the town, he was greeted by the mayor and invited to his house to meet his wife. He soon discovered that the mayor's wife, as a girl of eight, had lived in the house where Lt. Applegate had had his headquarters. Unknown to him, she had been hiding in the basement during the fighting.