

# V-E Day 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Profiles in Rockbridge Courage

Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society  
with World War II Memoirs by Prof. John Gunn

May 8, 1945: 75 years ago, today.

The end of War in Europe: V-E Day.



... Even as American, Virginian, Rockbridge eyes looked next and directly to the Pacific, in the continued campaigns.

May 8 cues a specific, significant commemoration. At the same time, it heralds a summer of sustained battles that lay still ahead, while also summoning memories of those five bloody years before.

In that shared look back and look forward, the Rockbridge Historical Society takes its own cue here to our own summer run of retrospectives, in due witness. Mindful that Memorial Day itself will still require its distances this year, we'll be gathering together and virtually sharing a variety of histories from Rockbridge residents, from VMI and W&L, in order to newly revisit the complexities and accomplishments of the deadliest war our world has seen. And in leading toward the war's commemorative close on August 12, we're well-poised to mobilize RHS' range of Programs, Publications, and Partnerships that have served the Rockbridge community since our founding in 1939, the very year that World War II burst forth.

Some of these perspectives will be more broadly patterned, to provide a more general overview. Some, highly personal: framed by telling artifacts in our Collections; by family witness and bequests that have been donated and entrusted to RHS' Archives. Today and ahead, we can even share oral histories and autobiographical memoirs from living veterans, themselves, from our area, and across America.

To punctuate today's 'first wave,' one of those living histories is featured below, and attached in fuller autobiographical write-up. These first-person accounts draw from a series of conversations just this week – socially distanced but historically intimate – that I was fortunate to share with a local veteran. In his detailed recollections, you can read your way through his own march to V-E Day, in the long arc from Lexington, and eventual return.

[*Spoiler alert*: wait for the dramatic punchline when this young G.I. helped to capture and unmask a German spy ... capped by the canny expertise of a young U.S. intelligence officer (of German ancestry, himself), who would later become one of the world's most noted leaders in American diplomatic and military affairs.]

Together, we hope this range of witness will echo some familiar chords, in ritual reverence, while also revealing new discoveries and more uniquely local contexts. We further hope they'll continue to highlight the many ways in which a Local Historical Society can serve, steward, and newly stake those legacies, for generations ahead: whether here in Rockbridge, or shared with other institutions and homes from those personal ties, from the lived past.



On today's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of V-E Day, we join with the Smithsonian, and Virginia Tech's extraordinary, crowd-sourced transcription project, [The American Soldier](#), in their shared launch of media resources opening up to the broad fronts of war, while honing in on the final European Offensives, that closed with the surrender announcements of May 8, 1945.

Airing tonight, and then beyond, the Smithsonian Channel broadcasts its hour-long feature, driving to V-E Day, "[The Race to Victory](#)" (click for [Trailer](#)).

Today's ceremonial run of livestreams from [The American Soldier](#) (also permanently archived on their [Webpage](#)) illuminates the lives inscribed in 65,000 uncensored documents, written in soldiers' own hands. Remarkably, they've been transcribed over the past two years by thousands of online community volunteers, with V-E Day 2020 as a finish-line just impressively met. Above and beyond our many personal and regional connections to Virginia Tech – and the shared model between public history, higher education, and lifelong that sustains our mission – this project highlights how individuals without formal training can not only become contributors of materials, but collaborators in preserving and promoting those histories. We hope you'll [Contact RHS](#) to discuss such opportunities with us locally, whether related to World War II, or across the four centuries and more of Rockbridge history we chronicle and interpret.

V-E Day certainly brought its excitements, most famously in the cheering crowds of Paris and London. But the iconic photo of the "[Times Square Kiss](#)" would have to wait until V-J Day, three months still ahead, and wholly uncertain. Archival footage shows troops in Europe warily watching the news-reels that showed the bloody destruction in Okinawa, and prospects for a Japanese invasion ahead. For many Americans in the field, and families at home, V-E Day hardly looked like the end.

Indeed, many Allied troops – like Corporal John Gunn, whose more detailed account you can read in the appendix that follows – had already been held waiting on the German frontier for weeks, allowing Soviet troops to arrive in Berlin (given the terms of the Yalta agreement). Whatever pause and relief that may have brought, it also brought heavy occasion to think on what they'd most immediately survived. Although D-Day stands as its own tragic and most-fully remembered benchmark of the Allied campaigns through Europe, prizewinning historian [Rick Atkinson provides a more sobering assessment of the final month's march to V-E Day](#), in 'slowing the roll,' and felt momentum, to some inevitable victory.

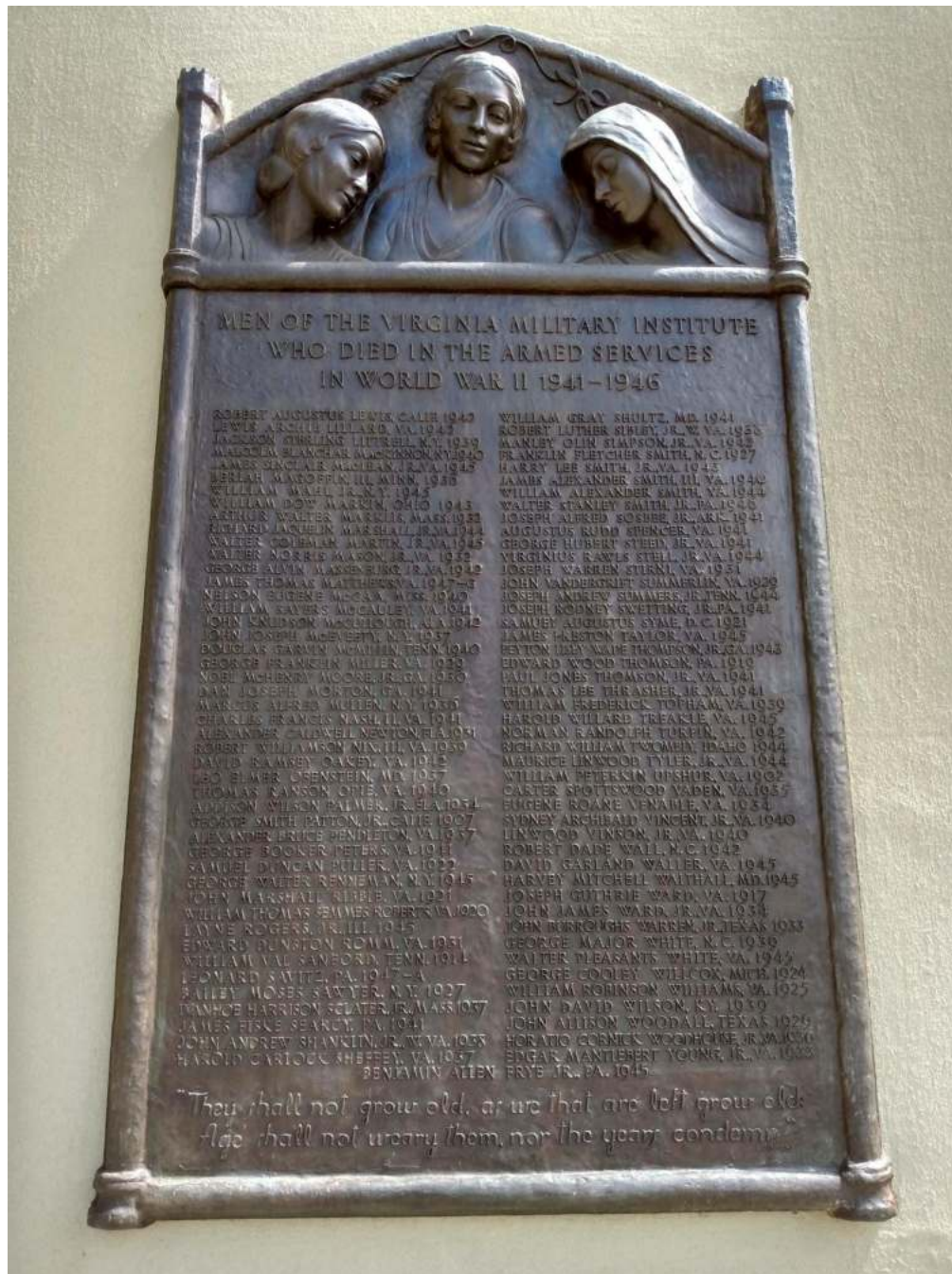
**10,400 Americans were killed in action in Germany in April 1945, the last full month of the war in Europe, which has almost as many as were killed in June 1944, the month of invasion. The war was awful until the very end, virtually to the last gunshot. Many people know that the invasion occurred in June 1944 and then something nasty happened at the Battle of the Bulge that winter. But for the most part, they believe there was a glide path to victory.**

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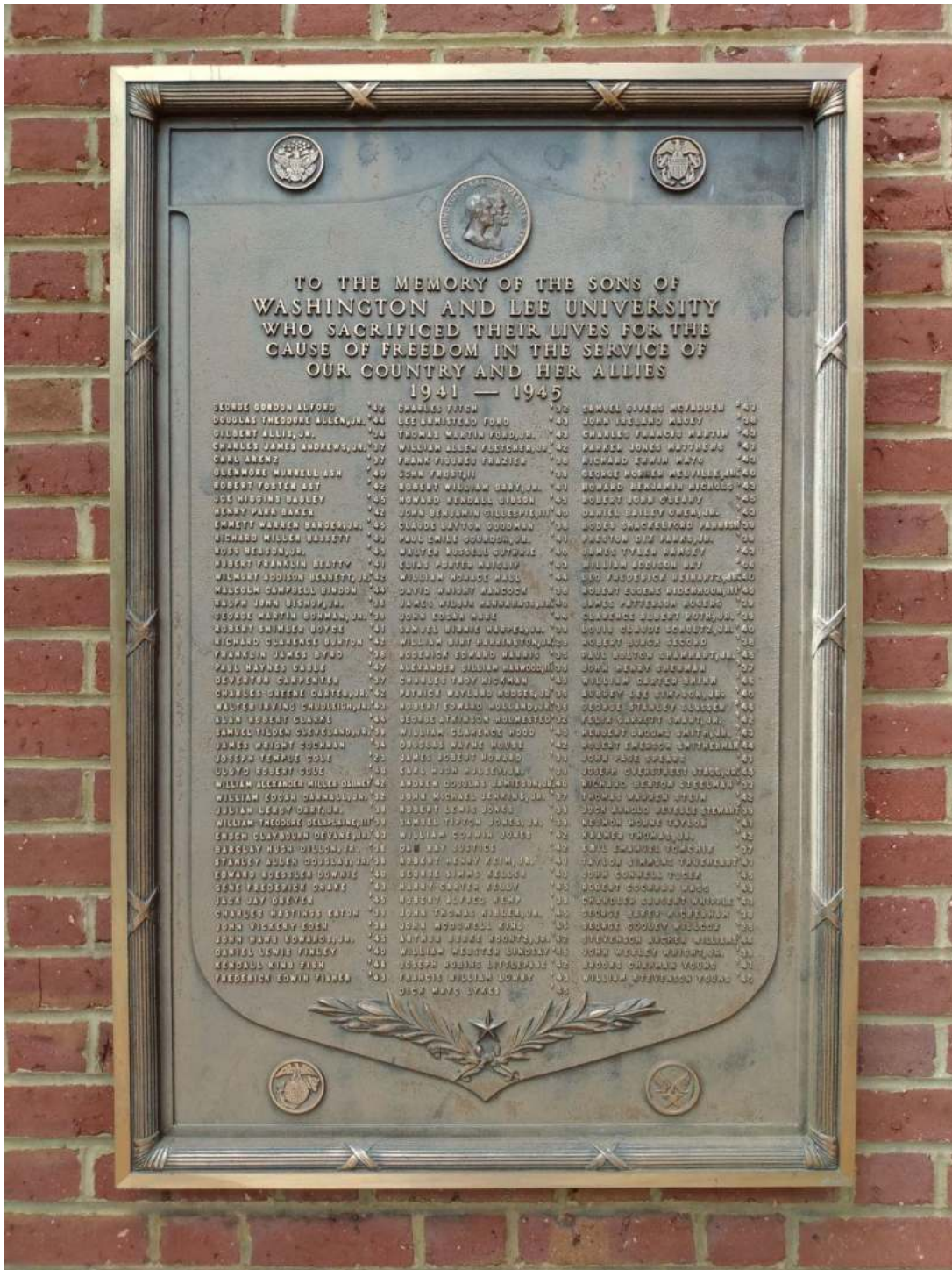
Within that broader landscape of leadership and loss, it's fitting for an organization like RHS to narrow the lens more locally, in order to illuminate and honor the experiences of those who served and sacrificed, and to learn from some who survived: not just in Europe, but globally.

Many of the local memorials pictured here in Rockbridge are well known. Some, somewhat overlooked, even when regularly passed. Some designate the specific and full names of relatives, neighbors, classmates, comrades. Some are more anonymously if deliberately designed to collectively conjure what Shakespeare's King Henry V would call, during another famous invasion of France, "a royal fellowship of death."

4,099 men who had attended VMI served in World War II, across six branches of American and Allied command. Among them, names of the 185 who died are cast into two plaques that flank Barracks' Washington Arch, directly facing the statue of America's first commanding general, George Washington.



At the foot of the Washington & Lee Campus, at the entrance to Lee Chapel's Visitor Parking, stands the University's Memorial Arch. This gateway was first built to commemorate those who'd died in World War I, but now stretches to those lost on September 11, and through Afghanistan (the history of this arch, and other campus memorials, was featured in [Lynn Rainville's 2017 RHS Program at Lee Chapel](#), as part of our [World War I Centennial Programming](#)). On the left side of the arch, a plaque painstakingly nominates the 136 "Sons of Washington and Lee who Sacrificed their Lives for the Cause of Freedom in the Service of our Country and her Allies, 1941-1945."



One block away, at Lexington's central intersection by the Old County Courthouse, the Rockbridge Veterans Plaza, similarly honors the local dead across a vast stretch of war, starting there with the Civil War, running through the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan. This community-centered memorial – site to annual Veterans Day and Memorial Day observances – does not specifically name those who died. Like many others of a more comprehensive type, it is fronted on Main Street with military-issue plaques that serially recognize the conflicts that have killed local soldiers over 150 years, with haunting space left open for conflicts still current, and ahead.

One particular voice is featured, however: that of General George C. Marshall. With his own deep institutional and [personal ties to Lexington](#), his [tenure as a VMI Cadet](#), and the [Marshall Foundation and Museum](#) established here in 1964, the quotation on the memorial's World War II plaque spoke specifically to its legacy, addressed on Memorial Day, 1950. But Marshall's salute also came right at the time in which a new generation of citizens and soldiers were taking responsibility to help re-build Europe, through the "[Marshall Plan](#)" that famously bears his name.



Richmond's [Virginia War Memorial](#), refracted through glass and etched into marble, calendars the overpowering list of Virginians who've died in service, in and beyond WW II. The chronicle of names is both subdivided by military campaign and distinguished by every City and County in the Commonwealth. With extra punch, it emphasizes not only lost ancestors, but near-neighbors.



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So within these local cohorts, on V-E Day specifically, it's all the more fitting to seed this series with profiles of three men who will help us to re-view "Rockbridge in Europe"

Together, they triply represent:

**Those who were killed in Europe**

**Those wounded, who made it home to Rockbridge**

**Those even still surviving, here ... and still sharing their stories**

There will be more to come (and [RHS Newsletters and Displays past](#)) detailing their lives during and beyond the War, beyond the thumbnails below: their artifacts and decorations, their time in high school and in college here, the photos and news articles that summon their lives from decades ago.

We will also share a wider range of stories to broaden these 'Profiles in Rockbridge Courage' (with a tip of the hat to United States Navy Officer John Fitzgerald Kennedy). Some will speak to intergenerational service: fathers, sons, daughters, passing the torch. Some will bring to light the two lesser-known training programs established at VMI and W&L, their proven precedents during WW1 making Lexington a ready magnet for Valley mobilization, despite its small size. We're positioned to note examples of local women's leadership within and beyond military units. Other records, newspapers, scrapbooks, and anecdotes can speak to home-front experiences and wartime adjustments here in Rockbridge, and to lives in the War's wake, as families re-joined, or were forever torn apart.

We lead the way with these three area veterans, then, both to signal their representative variety, and also to credit the recent bequests to our archives. In witness to that trust, those donations also model that stewardship opportunity for others.

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**Leroy Miller:** Rockbridge native, graduate of Natural Bridge High School, U.S. Airman shot down during a Bomber Raid over Germany. In January 2019, RHS was honored to accession to our collections a family gift including Miller’s Purple Heart medal, his official service citations, and an elegantly framed portrait of him in uniform. The value of these artifacts was enriched – as with so many contributions to local history archives – by articles and obituaries from local newspapers. His younger years, and peers, were more brightly lit by Miller’s middle school graduation certificate, and high school ceremonial programs that were included with the bequest. All these comprise the rich range of materials that adds distinctive texture for community memory: kin, neighbors, alumni all.

**Eugene Kyle Sweet:** born in Steeles Tavern, raised in Walkers Creek. He fought his way through Sicily and the Italian campaign, decorated for heroism at Anzio in November 1943 when, according to his official Silver Star citation: “Staff Sergeant Sweet personally destroyed two hostile machine gun nests and inflicted many casualties on the enemy. After successfully taking their objective, S/Sgt. Sweet and his squad were subjected to an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage which killed one man and wounded every member of the squad with the exception of S/Sgt. Sweet. Despite the heavy hostile fire, he administered first aid to the wounded and assisted in carrying them back to safety, finally leaving him alone in the position. He continued to maintain his position until other squads arrived to support him in defending the area.”





Sweet's injuries brought him back from Europe in April 1944. And while recovering in a hospital in White Sulphur Springs, Gene married sweetheart, Mae Smith. Pictured below, as part of the family's donation to RHS, a V-Mail Christmas card he sent Mae from Italy (Santa's gondola, backed by the Leaning Tower of Pisa, signals just how far from Rockbridge he was reaching). Registered as 60% disabled from his wounds, Sweet would nonetheless spend the rest of his life working for Gulf Oil. In 2017, his descendants reached out to donate these materials to RHS, responding to our call for such bequests as part of [Virginia's WW1 & WW II Commemorative Commission](#).



**John Gunn:** In a series of phone conversations, over the past two weeks, Dr. Gunn shared with me a range of his own memories from his fighting in Europe in the war's last six and still-brutal months. Several hours of oral history were also complemented by some strikingly detailed written accounts from his memoirs that he shared thereafter. John has graciously allowed us to share excerpts with you here, appended below. The final account focuses on the broad push of the war's last months, its trials and contradictions. The first, in dramatic leadoff, details his role in the capture and exposure of a German spy. Captured in the uniform of an American pilot, armed with impeccable English, his slip in responding some questions about his "native" Chicago, the Cubs, and Benny Goodman led to his being cleverly unveiled. He was baited by a question, snap-asked in German, that was put to him by a young intelligence officer: PFC Henry Kissinger, eventually United States Secretary of State through the Vietnam War.

As I asked him about the local dimensions of his preparing for war, Gunn reflected on the reserve training that he and many fellow Washington & Lee students had undertaken, having matriculated in 1941, just before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After his call up in February 1943, months of engineering training at Virginia Tech would further prepare him for deployment to Europe. In the fall of 1944, Corporal Gunn would cross to Normandy as part of the 84<sup>th</sup> Division: soldiering through the Battle of the Bulge as a medical technician, crossing the Rhine, and pushing rapidly East as the retreating Wehrmacht collapsed. V-E Day, oddly, almost anticlimactically, would arrive only after that multi-week hold on the banks of the Elbe. He and his comrades were haunted by the wondering of ‘*What’s Next??*’ even with the announcement of the Fuhrer’s death, and the fall of the Reich. To hear more on this stretch, in his own proud but humble voice, click here for a [TV Interview](#) on V-E Day itself, in extending our conversations.

There’s much to gain in reading John’s written recollections, both in historical insights and educational purpose. In parallel, you might also appreciate the ways in which he’s still relating his experiences with US History classes at Rockbridge County High School, aligned with RHS’ own cross-generational efforts with local schools and lifelong learning (click on this link to read how one student journalist captured his visit, vividly, in the [RCHS School Newspaper](#)). A lifelong educator, he’s continued to ‘pay it forward’ with both younger and more senior audiences: at Lylburn Downing Middle School’s Veterans’ Tea (where many readers here have also annually contributed). To mark the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Pearl Harbor, he also contributed to the statewide rollouts of the [Virginia WW1 & WW II Commemoration Commission](#). Nearly eight decades beyond his fighting in the field, his spirited & welcoming witness offers one still-vibrant model of how to understand these histories today, and share them forward.

Fifteen years after he’d left to fight for his country, Gunn would return to the school where he was first educated and trained. Hired by Washington & Lee as a Professor of Economics in 1957, Dr. Gunn would teach generations of students and serve and lead university committees for 50 years, even after his formal retirement. John still lives in Lexington, active and thriving in the Kendal community ... spiritedly sharing his wisdom through our run of phone calls, voice mails, and emails, even in the midst of this quarantine.

In 2000, an endowed scholarship in Gunn’s name would recognize his commitments to building student and community capacities to advance a positive, stable, and just role in national and international affairs. He is pictured here last year with the [Recipients of the John D. Gunn International Scholarship, stretching from 2010-2020](#).



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Whether through the profiles of these local veterans – or those newly to hand through the thousands of first-accounts now scanned and catalogued by the National Archives and Virginia Tech (and released on this V-E Day Anniversary in [The American Solider Webiste](#) – RHS and other partner institutions will continue to work for you on these fronts, in months and years ahead, well beyond the landmark anniversaries.

Armed conflicts call on extraordinary collective action, coordination, and communication, not merely by combatants. In a more remote but still vital campaign, we hope you'll think purposefully and presently in your own right, as to how best to register such actions, anecdotes, and archives: whether with local historical societies, educational institutions, veterans' posts and museums, such as the [Virginia War Memorial](#), the [National Museum of the Marine Corps](#), or the nearly completed [National Museum of the United States Army](#), all here in Virginia.

Of course, with new capacities to digitally scan or 3-D image the most meaningful of family papers or artifacts, these opportunities can now supplement, rather than supplant, your continued generational relay and more personal displays. While preserving such records securely, and offering them for broader public reach, you can still keep your own originals, or professional copies, to share at reunions, in social or spiritual congregations, and through candid conversations with kin.

[Contact RHS](#), to let us know your stories, and why they still matter to you, and to others.

And through all their variety, color, and diverse forms and formats: help RHS to “enlist” them, again, in our mission to “*Preserve and Promote the Histories of the Rockbridge Area.*”

**Eric Wilson**  
- May 8, 2020



*See pages following for the WW II Memoirs written by Prof. John Gunn*

# Capturing a German Spy

John M. Gunn

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1944 the Wehrmacht, acting on direct orders from Hitler and against the advice of most of his generals, launched their last major offensive of the War on the Western front, attacking a thinly defended line along the Belgian/German border. Supreme Headquarters had assigned troops there thinly, believing the combination of forested mountains, few and poor roads, and extreme weather made it an unlikely place for a rapidly failing German Army to attack.

Two days later, on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the northern-most of the 61 divisions of the Army of the United States that was stretched from the Swiss border to a point Northwest of Aachen, Germany, attacked in full division strength into the “elbow” of the Siegfried Line. An attack in full division strength against a defended position is a very large and complex operation. 72 hours later we had been withdrawn from the attack, moved about 75 miles over crowded, narrow roads, most of them not paved and frozen to a depth of several inches, and were dug into defensive positions in front of the key Belgian town of Marche. Marche was a small town but located at the intersection of several highways, small by most standards but significant there in the Ardennes Forest. It was the first, interim objective of an attack aimed at Liege and ultimately to the coast, cutting off all the British and Canadian troops from a functioning port. We took the point of the German attack and turned it back.

There was no air support. It was the beginning of a severely cold winter in Europe (the following winter was worse), and the fog was so dense that visibility was limited extremely. Then on Christmas Eve the morning broke in one of those splendid winter morns, crystal clear. By mid-morning the sky was packed with aircraft, British and American bombers, supported by fighter planes and attacked by the Luftwaffe. Around 11 AM in half an hour I counted more than 3000 aircraft, observed dozens of dog fights, and saw at least a couple dozen of aircraft come down, both bombers and fighters.

In the aid station where I worked as a medical technician we had 20 or more airmen come through, some wounded, some injured when their parachute jumps didn't go quite right. Soon I was assisting my platoon commander, a young surgeon just out of medical school and in effect doing his residency in the Army, in combat, but a very fine physician. We were treating an American fighter pilot, a first lieutenant whose ankle had been injured in his parachute landing when he was shot down.

We determined quickly that his only injury was a damaged ankle and went to work. After a time I realized that Lieutenant Biasini was stalling. I didn't understand. I knew him well. We worked together every day, and that was so unlike him. After a time he caught my eye and signaled for me to step away from the make-shift examining table on which the lieutenant lay—he wanted to speak to me.

“Corporal Gunn,” he said quietly, “Without telling anyone what you are doing, go back to company headquarters. Tell the first sergeant you need to call Division headquarters. Ask them to send a counter-intelligence team down here. Tell the first sergeant then that they are coming and that when they arrive he should send them to you. Then get a carbine, put a cartridge in the chamber, and without letting this man see you take a seat behind him and don't let him move.”

(over)

I have no idea what made him suspicious. We had heard rumors of German spies, masquerading as American servicemen, parachuting down during air battles in order to get behind the American lines, but beyond that fact I had no clue.

In about twenty minutes a jeep pulled up near the tent where we were working and two men got out. I think one of them was Fritz Kraemer, an erudite Nazi refugee held both a doctorate in political science and a law degree, who had been a legal adviser to the League of Nations, and who became a famous adviser to generals and cabinet members for the next 30 years, with an office in the Pentagon, but who at this time was a private first class whom the Commanding General had found in the ranks and pulled into division headquarters. He travelled around the division giving lectures on why were fighting, the progress of the war, etc. He served also as one of the 5 members of the division's CIC team. It wasn't until years later that I realized the identity of the other one, also a private first class.

We spoke no words. I simply pointed to the man on the litter. They took up positions, one on each side, the second man taking over the interrogation. The "fighter pilot" was good. His story was plausible. He was from Chicago. He had graduated from New Trier High School. Soon thereafter he joined the Air Force, applied for flight training, and was accepted. His English was flawless. His uniform, his papers, everything about him was perfect, almost too perfect.

The interrogator was also good. Some of the first questions were simple—I think the CIC must have used a set of these routinely. Things like "Who is the left fielder for the Cubs?" Sing us your high school fight song. Who is Benny Goodman's girl singer? I could see the airman growing more and more anxious.

After a time, in a voice that changed in no way, a voice in the same pitch, same tone, same volume, same quality altogether (and in a voice that once you have heard you can never again forget), Pfc Henry Kissinger asked a question in German.

The perfect American began to answer. He caught himself quickly, but it was too late. The game was up. He jumped up and tried to run, but he could not.

That injured ankle in fact was broken. He could neither stand nor walk on it. Moreover, I was sitting about 15 feet away from him with a carbine pointed at his heart.

Kraemer and Kissinger broke out handcuffs, cuffed him, brought their jeep up and took him away.

Technically he could have been shot, legally under the rules of war, but to my knowledge the United States Armed forces shot no spies during World War II, at least not in the European theater. I am confident that Army Intelligence in rear echelon questioned him until they had all the information they thought they could get from him, then that his ankle received first class medical attention, he was fed better than he had been being fed for months, and shipped to the United States to be interned in rather comfortable conditions until the end of hostilities.

It has struck me as ironic that I think there is a real possibility this handsome and clearly intelligent young man became a prominent citizen of Chicago—"his hometown."

John M. Gunn  
309 Med Bn, 84 Inf Div

# Crossing the Rhine River and the End of World War II on the Western Front

John M. Gunn

During the Second World War after the Wehrmacht's final, desperate offensive attack against the Western Allies in the Battle of the Bulge had been defeated and turned back, preparations began for a coordinated crossing of the Rhine River, the last significant line of defense for the Germans on the Western front.

These preparations were massive, the next-largest coordinated attack of the war on the Western front, next after D-Day itself--supplies and arrangements for the continuing supply of 61 US divisions, lined up from the Swiss border to the "elbow" of the Siegfried line, a little North of Cologne--If the divisions had been at full strength that would have been about one million US soldiers. My division, the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, was at the extreme left flank of US forces, with Field Marshall Montgomery's Army of British and Canadian troops on our left.

There had been 28 vehicular bridges and 22 railroad bridges across the Rhine River, but as the Allied forces approached the river the desperate Wehrmacht had systematically destroyed all but 2 of them. One of these, located at Remagen, was one of 3 railroad bridges built during World War I to facilitate movement of troops and supplies to the German army fighting near the French border. It was a "big" bridge, double decked, with defensive towers at each end, large enough to store large amounts of arms and ammunition and to house as much as an infantry battalion. The bridge had been built with the capacity to destroy it built into it, cavities in the piers into which explosives could be placed, with electrical wiring back to the control rooms.

In the spring of 1945 the bridge had been armed fully with explosives, but somehow on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March when an attempt was made to destroy it only part of the charges exploded and the bridge remained standing. Soldiers of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, then attached to General Patton's Third Army, reached the bridge and found it intact. I have no good evidence that the following story is true, but it went up and down the front.

There was an order from Supreme Headquarters that no one was to cross the river until the coordinated crossing, scheduled for the end of the month. When the platoon commander of the first unit to reach the bridge saw it intact, however, he took his platoon across and radioed back to his company commander something like, "I am on the East bank of the Rhine River with a platoon in secure positions. What should I do?" According to legend, at least, a couple more levels of command took the troops across and sent similar messages. By the time they reached a level where anyone was willing to raise holy Hell about it an entire regiment was safely dug into defensive positions on the East bank of the Rhine River. The Germans immediately began trying to destroy the bridge with artillery shelling and aerial bombs, but it took ten days before the bridge collapsed from its successive damages, and by that time (and this is firm data now) 25,000 American troops, 800 tanks, and hundreds of artillery pieces had crossed the river.

It is well known that there was a strong rivalry between General George Patton, commanding general of the US Third Army, and General Omar Bradley, commanding general of the US First Army Group. Bradley was a quiet man, highly respected by his men (of whom I was one). Patton, of course, was at least publicly, flamboyant and feisty, often reckless in public statements. He sent a telegram to General Bradley that said something like, "On this date the US Third Army, without benefit of aerial bombardment, massive artillery barrages, . . . , crossed the Rhine River." (He also claimed to have urinated in the river as he crossed it.)

On the first of April the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division crossed the Rhine as part of the coordinated crossing on the entire Western front. Beginning about midnight the sky was lit like I have never seen it before or since, with aerial bombardment and shelling by 16 battalions of artillery in our direct support, our own 4 battalions plus 12 others detached from other units—I think that was more than 1000 artillery pieces. We were subjected also to heavy incoming artillery fire. I literally read a newspaper by that light just after midnight, until I became too busy to do any reading. At dawn the first boats were launched, driven by combat engineers. The next 12 hours involved some of the most intense and bloodiest fighting by our division in the entire war, with some of the heaviest casualties, but then it became very quiet. We had a secure position on the East bank. I don't think I crossed the river until the next day; my memory is not clear, but what I do remember is that I crossed the river on a pontoon bridge the engineers had in place in a remarkably short time.

After the massive crossing of the Rhine River by the entire American and British fronts the Wehrmacht just collapsed. The Germans were beaten thoroughly, and they knew it. We (the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division) went from the banks of the Rhine to the banks of the Elbe River in just 13 days, riding on various vehicles, on good roads, almost all the near-300 miles. We encountered only occasional pockets of resistance. Stop the convoy. Unload a company or a battalion, whatever it took. Knock out the pocket. Get back on our trucks, "liberated" school busses, motorcycles, almost anything with wheels and a motor, and keep moving. Whereas in the previous Fall attacking the Siegfried Line at its "elbow" a day's progress was measured in yards, or more significantly in number of pill boxes knocked out, now we advanced by more than 20 miles a day. We liberated several prisoner-of-war camps and some small concentration camps. One of the POW camps contained members of our division who had been captured during the Battle of the Bulge. I was not at that point but I was told that when the prisoners saw trucks approaching with the Railsplitter insignia on the front bumpers a shout went up that was heard all the way back to Manhattan.

My division was credited with capturing 61,000 German prisoners in those 13 days, but "capture" was hardly the word. Entire regiments were surrendering without a fight. We didn't even attempt to guard them. "Stack your arms and keep marching—that way."

[To the West] They wanted to surrender to Americans rather than be captured by Russians, and they were hungry. They expected to be fed by the American Army, and they were, as soon as they reached secure areas where their care could be organized. After we reached the Elbe at least a dozen German soldiers drowned, trying to swim across the river, just in our sector, to give themselves up to Americans.

We were on the West bank of the Elbe River, at a point Northwest of Berlin, essentially bivouacked and just waiting for the surrender, three weeks later. There was hardly any opposition remaining, only an occasional few shots from an isolated German soldier somewhere. We, the Americans, could have captured Berlin, but it had been agreed by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, that the Elbe River would be a dividing line between Russian troops advancing from the East and Allied troops advancing from the West. The Russians wanted “the honor,” or the strategic advantage and public relations, of capturing the German capital—that “honor” cost them several thousand troops killed in action. The Elbe River then became the dividing line between East Germany and West Germany for the Cold War.

But it was not just the Wehrmacht that was collapsing.

The entire German nation was collapsing. Everyone was hungry. Everyone was cold. Everyone was dispirited, hopeless. Confused. It was a pitiful sight, a mass of pitiful sights. One felt sympathy for the people, even though they were a people who had been seeking our own violent destruction for many months preceding.

On the Western front the War in Europe ended like the world in T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*, “not with a bang but with a whimper.”

John M. Gunn

309 Med Bn, 84 Inf Div