

Drasal awarded Legion of Honor

By Clinton Gill, Staffwriter | Crossville Chronicle | April 24, 2014

CROSSVILLE — About 10 years ago, the French government decided to recognize all of the veterans who contributed to the liberation of France during World War II. Since then, hundreds of veterans from across the U.S. have received the Legion of Honor, which is the highest award France can bestow. It recognizes those who served their country with distinction. The Americans who received the medal all fought on French soil in 1944 or 1945 during the liberation from Germany. Crossville is home to two such men, Bill Drasal and Ed Lansford. What follows is a series of articles offering a glimpse into the extraordinary lives of these two men who helped write American history. The second installment of this series, featuring Ed Lansford, will run in the Friday edition of the Chronicle. Bill Drasal was born on Dec. 26, 1923. He grew up in the streets of Chicago, working as a "Jack of all trades" during the Great Depression. In March 1943, he was drafted for service in World War II, and at 19, he went to infantry basic training at Camp Roberts, CA. From there, he was bounced all over the United States before finally boarding a cargo ship destined for Europe, in the spring of 1944.

"I still remember that ship, it was built by Kaiser. He was great at building cargo ships. He could build a whole ship in a week. But he built them so that, if they did get hit, they would split in half, and both halves would float. It took us 18 days to get over there on that crazy thing." Drasal joked, "I told my buddies, 'if this thing ever gets hit, you want to make sure you're on the back end, because that's where the engines are.'"

Private First Class William F. Drasal was in London on D-Day. After being fully trained and prepared for the greatest invasion of all times, Drasal's group crossed the English Channel to France as replacements for units that suffered heavy casualties during the invasion. Drasal was assigned to Company "E," 117th Infantry

Regiment, 30th Division, and was eventually involved in four major battles – Mortain, the Maginot Line, the



Bill Drasal of Cumberland County was recently honored by the French government for his service in the U.S. Army during World War II and the liberation of France. For his honorable service, he was presented the Legion of Honor.



Pictured is a rare photo of Private First Class William F. Drasal in Germany. "Nobody had a camera to take any pictures," said Drasal. "The only reason we got some of those pictures taken is, after we'd take a town, why, maybe somebody borrowed a camera. I don't want to say 'steal' but, we borrowed a camera ... 'acquired' is a good word," he joked.

Seigfried Line and the Battle of the Bulge – with several small skirmishes and hedgerow fighting in between. "Mortain was the first big one we got into. That was right after St. Lo. Before we got to St. Lo we heard about this city. They said it was bombed to what you would call 'nothingness,' and when we got there, they weren't lying. There wasn't a brick standing in that whole city," said Drasal. Drasal was ordered to set up his .30 caliber machine gun in an overwatch position with clear lines of fire into the city.

"We were on what we called 'Hill 315,' and we got surrounded," he said. "The lieutenant came by, he said 'set your machine gun up on the crest of the hill up there in that hole.' So I did."

Not long after Drasal had set up his position, the lieutenant sent someone up the hill to get him for chow. Eating K rations from a tin can in a trench, he watched on as the Germans tested his luck.

"While I was down there, the Germans were on this bluff on the far side of this town. They got zeroed in and hit that hole with the machine gun, right smack in the hole."

If Drasal had been in that position, he would have most assuredly been killed.

"I lucked out twice," he said. "I should have got killed twice, but I didn't. I came home without a scratch, so I guess I was one of the lucky ones."

The 30th Infantry Division was actually a unit from Tennessee, nicknamed "Old Hickory" after Andrew Jackson, but it became known as the "Workhorse of the Western Front" during World War II. On the German side, it was referred to as "Roosevelt's SS Troops," because of their ferocity and constant pressure they brought to bear on Hitler's 1st SS Division. This elite German force was the main body of resistance just prior to the breakthrough at St. Lo, and again at Mortain, which the 30th Infantry Division "literally tore to shreds," thereby allowing General George Patton's armored Third Army forces to push forward and race across France, and thereby shortening the war by many months.

After Mortain, the 30th Division kept in the forefront all the way, pushing through the Maginot Line into Belgium. The Maginot Line was built along France's northeastern border after World War I. It was designed as a defense against Germany, but when the German army invaded France in 1940, they simply flanked and bypassed the line's defenses. However, even though the Maginot Line was designed to withstand attacks from Germany, it could still be defended against attacks from the rear. Consequently, the 30th Division had no easy task fighting their way through in the push to the heart of the Third Reich. By October 1944, the 30th Division had advanced through to the Siegfried Line, which was the mirror of the Maginot Line on Germany's border. The battle that ensued in this confusing, heavily forested area claimed the lives of 24,000 Allied troops, plus 9,000 non-battle casualties. The German death toll is not documented. On Dec. 16, 1944, the Germans launched a massive surprise offensive campaign along the western front. The assault would later become known as the Battle of the Bulge. "When the Battle of the Bulge happened, we were down in southern France with Patton's Third Army. Patton got word and we had to go up there. We walked 72 miles," said Drasal. "We did a lot of walking. We didn't stop too many times. We just stopped long enough to take a 10-minute break, have a cigarette, or stop for lunch, but we did this all on the run." Drasal carried a .30 caliber M1919 Browning machine gun, which weighed 31 pounds, not including ammunition or his other gear. It was winter in Germany, and the conditions were brutal. The snow was deep and the supplies ran thin.

The Battle of the Bulge was the largest and bloodiest battle fought by the U.S. in World War II. More than 19,000 Americans lost their lives. However, in other parts of the world, life was just beginning. It was in the midst of this battle Drasal was notified of the birth of his first child – a daughter.

“I had just started digging my foxhole, and the sergeant came out and said ‘the captain wants to see ya.’ I thought, ‘well, what did I do now!?’ Anyway, I went in there, and he shook my hand. He said ‘Congratulations! You’re the father of a bouncing baby girl.’” But with that news, the war didn't stop, and Drasal continued to fight.

"We were in Germany, and it was getting close to the end of the war. Hitler was getting desperate. He was getting the old men who were officers in the first World War, and little 11, 12, 13-year-old kids that were in the Hitler Youth. They were arming them with rifles and would give them three shells. And he says, 'we don't care, as long as you shoot Americans and you wound them,' well then they're out of the battle, they're useless. Anyway, my assistant gunner on the machine gun got hit in the ankle, but it didn't go in, it just grazed his ankle. He saw where the shot came from, so he ran over there and grabbed this kid, who was only 11 years old, picked him up by the scruff of the neck, and said "Damn you! Does your mother know you're out here shooting people?"

"Even in war time, we found little incidences to laugh at," said Drasal.

Victory in Europe was achieved on May 8, 1945, but war is something you never forget. Nearly 69 years later, Drasal's memories still stir deep with emotion.

“A lot of the guys we had didn't make it. I remember when we came home – we came home on the Queen Mary – and the fire boats were all around there squirting their water cannons up, you know and the band was down there, they start playing 'Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here.' The captain on the Queen Mary got on the horn and he told them, he says, 'Don't play that song. The gang is not all here.' So they changed. Whatever they were playing, I don't remember." The nation welcomed its heroes home with open arms, and got back to the business of peace.

“It was a great country to come home to,” he said.

War is a terrible thing, but sometimes it is necessary to maintain the balance of peace. Throughout history, few men have been willing to bear that burden, and we honor those who do. PFC William Drasal served in World War II; his father served in World War I; he had a brother in the Navy who barely missed Korea; his son-in-law was in Vietnam; his grandson served in Iraq; and his granddaughter is currently serving in the Army.