

Paul P. Blitz

Longtime Essex resident was a World War II radio operator who fought at the Battle of the Bulge

By Frederick N. Rasmussen



Paul P. Blitz, a decorated World War II veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, died from complications of pneumonia Oct. 19 at Franklin Square Hospital Center. The longtime Essex resident was 95.

Born in Monessen, Pa., the son of Finnish immigrants, he was six months old when his family moved to Weirton, W.Va., when his father went to work for Weirton Steel Co.

In 1920, they moved to the St. Helena neighborhood of Dundalk, when the elder Mr. Blitz took a job with Bethlehem Steel Corp. at Sparrows Point.

Mr. Blitz attended schools in Sparrows Point and Hampstead Hill Junior High School. After dropping out of school, he worked at Bethlehem Steel before taking a job at Crown Cork & Seal Co.

In 1943, Mr. Blitz was drafted into the Army and completed radio school at Fort Benning, Ga., and during the war years, served as a radio operator with the 69th Infantry Division and the 30th Infantry Division.

After being shipped to Massachusetts in June 1944, Mr. Blitz and his fellow soldiers boarded the Cunard liner RMS Aquitania for a voyage across the U-boat-infested North Atlantic to England.

In the fall of 1944, Mr. Blitz joined the 117th Infantry Regiment of the 30 Infantry Division, which was preparing to cross the Roer River into Germany.

In the early dawn of Dec. 16, 1944, Mr. Blitz and his unit were informed that they were pulling out.

"We assumed we were going to cross the Roer River but we were heading west. I was in the back of a truck seeing French road signs and thought we were heading back to France," Mr. Blitz recounted in a story published in the Essex Avenue News in 1994. "Then, the Germans were firing flares into the air and lighting up the skies. They spotted our convoy and started firing at us," he said.

After abandoning their vehicles and seeking safety in a nearby orchard, the men were ordered to re-board their vehicles, and the convoy resumed its journey.

"On the way, we encountered some MP's who told us we were going to Malmedy, Belgium. The Germans were spearheading an advance knowing that new, green inexperienced troops were in the Ardennes Forest," he said.

They were billeted in a large building that was also used as a first-aid station.

"We were given blood-stained cots and blood-soaked blankets. I went exploring in the building. I went across the hall and saw the body of a woman with her leg blown off," he said. "I closed the door and went to bed."

The next morning, Mr. Blitz and his comrades, while moving by truck to Francorchamps, Belgium, witnessed infantrymen digging holes in the frozen earth.

"As the mist was lifting, we saw dozens of American soldiers' bodies in the new frozen snow. American soldiers were digging them out for burial," he recalled.

"These dead soldiers were from the famous Malmedy Massacre, whereby Hitler gave orders to shoot and kill all American prisoners," Mr. Blitz said. "Seeing this had a real effect on us."

Mr. Blitz spent that Christmas with a Belgian family.

"We were there from Christmas Eve until after New Year's Day," he said.

One day, a buzz bomb landed near the house where Mr. Blitz was staying. "I watched it hit the ground, and the explosion knocked me off my feet," he said. The Battle of the Bulge raged from Dec. 16, 1944, to the end of January 1945, when the German stranglehold along the 60-mile front was finally broken.

"The Battle of the Bulge ended around my birthday. I was never happier than to see it end. It was a nice present. General Sherman was right, war is hell," Mr. Blitz recalled. "I was lucky that I was not wounded or killed in the war."

Discharged in 1945 as a technician grade 5, Mr. Blitz' decorations included the Bronze Star for "heroic and meritorious achievement," Combat Infantryman Badge and the Belgian Fourragere.

Mr. Blitz returned to Crown Cork & Seal, where he worked for the next 39 years as a shear operator until retiring in 1976.

His son, Paul M. Blitz, said his father waged two other successful battles during his lifetime.

"Twenty years ago, he successfully battled lung cancer, having half of his lower lung removed, and 15 years ago, he successfully battled prostate cancer," Mr. Blitz said.

Mr. Blitz enjoyed hunting and fishing until he was well into his 80s, and he liked crossword puzzles.

His wife of 20 years, the former Eleanor Lubinski, died in 1959. His second wife of 34 years, the former Pauline H. Polciennik, died in 1995.

Mr. Blitz, a longtime active member of the Essex-Holly Neck Memorial VFW Post 2621, was honored earlier this year as the oldest living Essex World War II veteran at the Essex 100th Anniversary celebration at the Essex Day Festival.

He was a communicant of St. Clare Roman Catholic Church in Essex, where a Mass of Christian burial was offered Oct. 22.

Also surviving is a sister, Velma B. Salmi of Jessup.

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