

"I decided I was going to die and just accepted it": Local vet recalls World War II

Jon Wysochanski | The Chronicle-Telegram
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Charles Pritt, a WWII veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, holds up a case of medals he received while serving in the infantry.

CARLISLE TWP. — Charles Pritt spends most of his days at home with Joan, his wife of nearly seven decades, either watching television or looking out the front window toward his quiet street.

At 93, Pritt no longer drives, and he doesn't get out much. He has two daughters. One lives in New Mexico and one is a teacher for Midview Schools. By all appearances, he is your typical elder.

But as many folks his age do, Pritt has a story — living in West Virginia during the Great Depression, serving in the Army during World War II and fighting during the Battle of the Bulge. He crossed the Rhine in Germany, was wounded several times and served as a guard at the Nuremberg trials.

"I saw all those men who were on trial for all the evil that they did," he said during an interview at his home. "But it's been so long I can't remember all of them."

Pritt, who said he was born in a small Pennsylvania town and raised in a smaller West Virginia town, really had no family other than his mother because his father left the family when he was 3.



Glenville High School Class of 1941

He entered the Army when he was 20, went to boot camp in Florida and was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division.

“I thought I was going to be a telephone operator,” Pritt said. “I was just a young kid with no sense.”

In the fall of 1944, Pritt boarded a ship headed for France. It wasn't long before he was in the thick of fighting, and he never forgot the first time he stepped across a dead German soldier who looked to be about the same age he was.

“I thought the Army would be like hunting squirrels or something,” he said. “Going out to fight for a little bit, coming back to sleep and then fighting some more the next day. I didn't know you fought all day and all night. But I was just a country boy who didn't know much about what was going on.”

Pritt was wounded by shrapnel to his right eye within days of entering the front, but as soon as he was treated and feeling better, he was sent right back to the front.

Pritt recalled seeing a German machine gunner wearing sunglasses and not moving. As he approached, Pritt realized the German soldier was dead, so he stole the man's mirror and looked in it for the first time in months. He said he didn't recognize the bearded and dirty face as his own.

During the fighting, Pritt was wounded again by shrapnel in his ankle and legs. That time he was sent to a tent hospital where a young nurse told him to disrobe.

“She was the nicest-looking girl you'd ever seen,” Pritt recalled. “You've got to remember I was a young man not used to being around a woman. She told me to take my clothes off, and I didn't know what to do with her there looking at me. I stood there for a bit and she said, ‘Take those damn clothes off, I've seen a million of them.’”

After being treated in the tent hospital, Pritt said he was flown to a hospital in France. After a few weeks there, he was sent back to fight.

Back in Germany, Pritt caught the flu. At that point, after being wounded twice and seeing a tremendous amount of death, he said he realized he might not make it home.

“I decided I was going to die, and I just accepted it,” Pritt said.

After Germany surrendered in May 1945, Pritt said he was preparing to be sent to Japan, but the United States dropped atomic bombs and brought the war to an end.

“I sent those guys who dropped the bombs a letter thanking them,” Pritt said.

After the war

Pritt said deaths from artillery fire and mortars, in which he sometimes saw five or more men blown up, bothered him for many years.

Although it hasn't happened in some time, there were many nights early in his marriage when Joan would try to calm him after a nightmare.

"It ruined my life for a long time," Pritt said. "I used to dream a lot, and I told my wife never to get close to me."

John Lescher, 68, a Vietnam veteran who served in the Army infantry carrying a radio in the 101st Airborne Division from 1971-72, said a couple months ago Pritt donated a German rifle to the Grafton Veterans of Foreign Wars post's military museum.

Lescher said he first met Pritt at a Memorial Day parade in Elyria, and Pritt talked to him about his experiences in the war.

Lescher, who also serves as a trustee for the Grafton VFW Post 3341 and as the commander of the Soldiers of History group, said people like Pritt need to be recognized.

Lescher said without stories from people like Pritt, the history of United States military campaigns might be forgotten or relegated to a few paragraphs in a history book.

"Those are the patriots of our society," Lescher said. "You get to talking to someone like Charles Pritt, and you are just in awe. The true heroes of our society don't wear capes or a mask, they wear dog tags."

Lescher, who said he wasn't allowed to join a local VFW post when he returned from Vietnam in the 1970s, said he's pleased that his own time in the service is now appreciated by the public at large.

"I get comments all the time when I wear my Vietnam hat, 'Thank you for your service,'" Lescher said. "I'm so glad times have changed. When someone thanks me for my service, I give them a small flag pin and thank them for remembering us."

Back home

Pritt said when he returned to West Virginia, a sharp-dressed man who looked like a lawyer shook his hand. But after that day, he was back to his old life of struggling to find work and trying to make ends meet.

Pritt said he didn't learn anything in the war that helped him in civilian life, and he ultimately went to college for a teaching degree, although he never became a teacher. Pritt worked jobs in manufacturing, social work and with the Soldiers and Sailors and Relief Commission.

After all these years people tend to see the war through a lens of good versus evil, but Pritt said he still finds himself wondering why millions of people worldwide had to die.

He said he'll never forget being in Germany and seeing orphaned children running around. By the war's end he didn't ask anyone's name because he figured it didn't make sense to get to know someone who would probably die.

But the faces of the children and the dead German and American soldiers are something he said will always remain.

“I don’t understand it at all,” Pritt said. “Here you kill millions and millions of people and to me, it just seems like an insane war.”

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