

My American Hero

A Survivor's Story



Written by,
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This story is dedicated to my grandfather, and all who have honorably served our great country.



Foreword

World War II was a global military conflict, which involved the majority of the world's countries. The culturally diverse, and globally separated nations, were divided into two separate alliances known as: the Allies and the Axis. The war included over one hundred million military personnel from the various countries, which were mobilized throughout Europe, and Japan. This fact made WWII, the most widespread war in history.

During the war, the participating countries faced many obstacles which they needed to overcome, in order to help the war effort. America imposed rules and regulations on the people at home, in order for the soldiers overseas to receive everything they needed. The people remaining at home (known as the home-front) had to abide by these stipulations, along with helping the war effort anyway possible.

The United States utilized its economic, scientific, and industrial capabilities' in an attempt to win the battle. Majority of the U.S. factories utilized their facilities in order to build tanks, airplanes, and anything that was needed. The United States government applied limits on the amount of gasoline, energy, and food that people could use, and sent all the rationed supplies to the soldiers fighting the war. The government also came up with a way to raise money in order to help the war effort; this was done by selling "War Bonds"

The war began in September 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland, and came to an end in September 1945, when Japan finally surrendered. Nearly 70 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives, which made it the deadliest conflict in human history.

Before The War

August 23rd, 1925:

George Arthur Thomas was born in a small house on Route 107 in Jericho, New York; he was delivered by Dr. Burke, and weighed ten pounds even. This was where and when the life of my American hero began. George was one person in a family consisting of eleven, and at the time of his birth the small house was already overcrowded.

Throughout the early years of his life the world was going through a great depression, and his family like most, struggled to survive. From a very young age, George had to perform various jobs in order to help his family get through the tumultuous times.

At the age of four, George and his family moved to the town of Hicksville, Long Island. This was where George grew up, and went to school. He lived in Hicksville for the majority of his life, and still resides there nearly eighty years later. People around the town knew George as a rambunctious child, who was always getting into trouble. George would fight with the kids in his neighborhood, and fathers of the children would continuously be chasing after him.

While George was attending Hicksville High School, the Second World War had commenced. George knew that at the time of his eighteenth birthday it would be his time to serve. Although some people were apprehensive about joining the army, George was willing and anxious to help. He graduated from Hicksville High School, and was immediately drafted into the army.

Becoming a Soldier

March 17th, 1944:

After being drafted into the army, he left his home for the first time in his life. George was sent to Camp Upton, in South Carolina, where soldiers underwent the required basic training. The training was easy for George, because of his athletic background and physical physique.

Some of the soldiers were older and out of shape, and they struggled to complete the necessary training. George took notice of the older, less athletic members of the unit, and wanted to transfer to a different division. It was then, when army officials came around asking people to volunteer for the paratrooper division. The incentive was higher compensation, fifty dollars more a month, which was roughly double what he was getting paid for basic infantry. He decided that going into the paratrooper division was a better option for him, so he signed up.

Upon the completion of basic training in South Carolina, he was required to attend additional training for paratroopers in Georgia. George had already been training for several weeks and he wanted to go home but he was not permitted. He was sent to Fort Benning in Georgia, where he underwent several additional weeks of paratrooper training. They taught him everything that a paratrooper needed to know, and put him through several mock jumps, and a numerous real jumps. As the preparation came to an end, he was finally permitted to go home for a brief period of time, before he was sent overseas.

Entering the War

October 1944:

While at home, George was very eager to fight for his country, and wished that he could be sent overseas right away. His wishes came true; he left New York on a troop transfer ship which was named the "Louie Pasteur", with his team of the 101st Airborne. As World War II was in its final stages, George arrived in England, and then was transferred to France, where he underwent further training to stay in shape until it was his time to fight. While in France, the Battle of the Bulge had already started in the Ardennes Forest on the German-Belgium border.

The Battle of the Bulge:

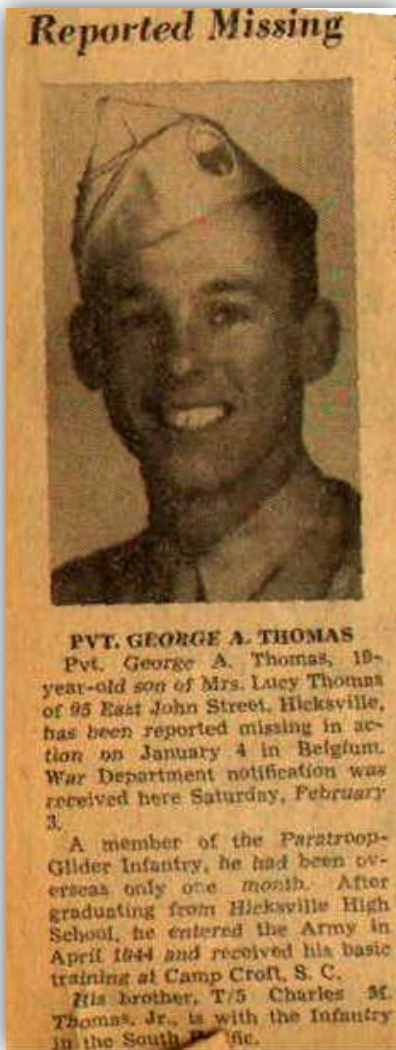
The Battle of the Bulge in its entirety was the worst battles in terms of loss to the American troops. The battle consisted of over one million men, fighting throughout the forest in the coldest and snowiest winter ever recorded in Europe. There were over one hundred thousand German casualties, wounded or captured soldiers, and nearly eighty one thousand American casualties. The "Malmedy Massacre" was the worst act of violence committed against American troops during the course of the war in Europe. The German army captured eighty six American soldiers and murdered them, instead of taking them prisoners.

Sent Into Battle

George and the rest of the 327 Glider outfit of the 101st got sent into the very heart of the already in progress Battle of the Bulge. He remembers being in the back of a truck and jumping off with the rest of the men. As soon as they got off the truck they were in the thick of the battle. "We took jump training for weeks, and all we did was jump off the back of a truck" he has stated. Throughout the ordeal, George had very little contact with his family, and they weren't sure where he was.

The city of Bastogne was surrounded by German troops, and George was patrolling the forest for two weeks with his team. The German troops were scattered throughout the forest, and they were usually dressed in a white uniform, which made them blend in with the snow.

Five kilometers north of Bastogne was a village called Longchamps, which was where George eventually ended up after the two weeks of patrolling the Ardennes Forest. A crew of twelve men which included George was sent to relieve a squad who were in foxholes throughout the day. The crew was required to stay for the nightshift. The foxholes were situated in a horseshoe pattern, and each hole contained two soldiers. The squad was situated on a plateau, and they had German troops below them. Gunfire was continuously going back and forth throughout the course of the night. The Germans down below were firing mortar shells, and heavy artillery toward the men, and they were retaliating with their rifles, and hand grenades. As the night turned into day the heavy gun fire seized, and the men faced a situation with catastrophic consequences.



January 4th, 1945:

At that moment, the German troops situated three tanks behind the foxholes. The Germans fired their machine guns in an attempt to have the men come out and surrender. George's sergeant knew that they could no longer fight, and decided to admit defeat and yield to the Germans.

As they got out of their foxholes the German soldiers patted the men down, and confiscated all of their belongings. When it was time to search George, the soldiers were in for a pleasant surprise. George's pockets were always filled with candy and cigarettes, which were two items that soldiers from all countries longed for. Although George was not a smoker, he used the cigarettes to trade with others in his squad, and received food and other goodies in the barter. He remembers the German soldiers being ecstatic when they confiscated the items; he referred to their actions as being like a child on Christmas morning.

The Germans left George with the clothes on his back, and three pairs of wool socks. After they finished searching the men, they were corralled into a snow bank. Remembering the Malmedy Massacre from a few weeks back, George knew that the Germans weren't taking any prisoners; he was sure that his life was going to end on that day in that very spot. The German tank drove up and turned the machine gun on the men. George looked down the barrel of the machine gun and thought he would never see his mother or family again.

At that very moment the sergeant of the squad fell to his hands and knees, and tried to plead with the Germans. To this day George insists that he wasn't braver than any of the other men, but he did not approve of the sergeants actions. He believed that if they were going to die, that wasn't the correct way to go.

While the sergeant pleaded with the men, George recalled that some people at Malmedy survived by hiding under dead U.S. soldiers. He thought he might have a chance to survive if he performed this very act. This probably would not have worked because there were only twelve men, and the Germans would be able to see every move that he made. After realizing this he knew it was his time, and simply said "So long mom" in his mind.

The Germans just about heard enough of the pleading sergeant, and were ready to carry out what they had in mind. It was then when a German infantry officer came up and told the soldiers not to shoot the men. They were speaking in German so George did not clearly understand what was being said, all he knew was that he was saved for the time being. The reasoning behind this he did not know, but he would soon find out what was in store for him and the rest of the men.

Throughout the battle, George and his squad wounded numerous soldiers. Since the Germans had injured men, they needed people to help carry them to headquarters; this is where the new prisoners came in handy. They were required to carry the wounded men through the forest until they reached their destination.

As stated before, 1944 was the coldest, snowiest winter ever recorded in Europe, and George was carrying a wounded soldier on a blanket with other members in his crew. The snow was knee high, and the wounded man on the blanket would moan every time they hit a bump. Whenever the man would let out a groan, a German guard who was following the men would point a gun at them. As the walking continued George realized that in one of his socks he had a hand grenade that the Germans did not find. He told the others that he still had possession of a hand grenade, and they insisted that he got rid of it.

They laid the man down, and George took out the grenade to show the guard. When the guard was shown the grenade he did not realize what it was. The guard was very young, which was probably why he didn't recognize what an American grenade looked like. George tried to explain that if he took the pin out it would explode; upon the realization of this, the guard became frightened and put his gun to the side of George's head. Having no intent to make the grenade explode, or to lose his life, he threw it away in the snow and they continued to walk. The others in the group, who had more experience than George, told him that if they found that on him they would have killed him.

Upon the completion of their journey, the men were at German headquarters in the middle of the woods. A German commanding officer put the men under intense interrogation, and tried to find out how many men were in the entire unit. American soldiers were not supposed to tell Germans anything if they were ever captured besides their I.D. number. Everyone was well aware that when you responded to a German question with your I.D. number you would get hit. So George tried to explain to the officer that he didn't know anything because he was just a Private. The officer took that as an acceptable answer and moved on.

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Becoming a Prisoner

After being captured, George and other prisoners had to constantly perform jobs for the Germans throughout various towns, and cities. He never spent time in a prison camp; he would walk with the Germans, and repair railroads, buildings, and other structures that were damaged in the war. The Germans didn't treat George and the other prisoners like they were people, they treated them as if they were nothing. The men rarely slept, and when they enjoyed the luxury it was usually in abandoned factories, barns, small basements, or out in the cold.

As a prisoner of war they didn't have a change of clothes, the men wore the same outfit they were captured in until they got released, or died. The second option was more common; most of the people that the Germans captured didn't make it out alive. The most common reasons for dying were starvation, and something known as frozen feet. George was lucky because the Germans left him with three pairs of wool sock after being captured, so his feet were in pretty good shape. The others, who didn't have superfluous socks, would be left on the side of the road when their feet were frozen. If a prisoner had frozen feet they could no longer walk and they would be left to die in the cold.

Starvation was the most common reason for dying as a prisoner, because the Germans didn't care about the prisoner's health at all. The majority of the nights the prisoners would be fed a piece of bread for dinner and nothing else; George remembers eating snow for water, on numerous occasions. George enlisted into the army with an athletic, muscle filled physique weighing nearly one hundred eighty pounds. Throughout the course of his imprisonment he lost roughly half of his body weight, and became a mere shadow of what he used to be.

One Man against the World

No one cared about the prisoners, they were treated like dogs, and when they came into contact with German civilians they were reminded how they felt about them. Weak and tired from the time of torture, they would walk through the towns and get verbally abused, and embarrassed. The people in the towns would curse, and throw things at the men as they walked and they couldn't retaliate or they would be shot.

George remembers being so weak that he struggled to carry the things the German soldiers wanted him to carry. The children in the town saw how weak and thin George was, and they took what he was struggling to carry, and ran around with it. This embarrassed George, and it made him realize how weak he actually was.

While on the journey, the German soldiers had to find places for the prisoners to sleep. Sometimes they would ask civilians if they could sleep in their basements, but many of them refused so the prisoners usually ended up in a barn or out in the cold. On one particular night, which George calls "the best night of sleep ever" he slept in a barn, surrounded by cows. He fell asleep in the hay, and dreamt of being home, eating some of his favorite things. This was George's last good memory of being a prisoner in Germany.

As a prisoner you begin to think that no one cares about you at all, and that was mostly true. If it wasn't bad enough that you were being punished by the German soldiers and civilians, you were also facing hardships from your own country. While on the roads, fixing the damaged German property, the United States Air Force would come by and shoot at the men. The Air Force couldn't tell if the men they were shooting at were Germans or American prisoners, so they would often be shot at. Along with being shot at, the Air Force made the prisoners lives and jobs harder. The Air Force would damage the towns, and the prisoners had to clean up the rubble.

George and Bernie

The group of soldiers that George originally got captured with got split up throughout the ordeal. At times the German troops would add prisoners, and other times they would take prisoners away. Since the beginning of the ordeal, George knew one man pretty well, and his name was Bernie. The Two men, who were captured on January forth, formed a friendship throughout the misery.

The men would always talk to each other, which would keep their minds from going insane, and they usually worked on the same projects. Bernie was a young Jewish man, who could understand the German language, so he always knew what was in store for George and himself. Bernie was always worried that the German soldiers would find out that he was Jewish and kill him. He was well aware of the terrible things that Hitler was doing to the Jews, so he feared for his life.

Bernie was a student at Chicago University before he entered the war, and he planned on becoming a doctor upon his discharge. As a student who aspired to become a doctor, Bernie knew a lot about diet, and nutrition. He was aware that the human body could not survive on bread alone, no matter how much they received. He would tell George that they needed some protein, and sugar in their diet or they were going to die from starvation. The two men were in really bad shape; they had lost all of their energy, and were slowly starving to death. If they weren't rescued soon, or received more than bread they would not live much longer.

The men walked across Germany and reached the Rhine River, which was where they received a ride on a freight car to Frankfurt. This freight car was known as a 40/8, which meant that it could fit forty men or eight horses comfortably. Well the Germans didn't care about the prisoners comfort, and George and Bernie were stuffed into the car with over eighty men. The men in the car were from a wide range of countries. The prisoners were locked in this car for hours with nothing to drink, and nowhere to move.

George doesn't recall the exact date that they rode in this car, because his malnourished mind began to lose track of the time. George estimates that it was sometime in March of 1944. It is still bitterly cold in Germany during the month of March, but that was not the case inside the freight car. George remembers the car as being unbearably hot, due to the amount of bodies stuffed into a small confined place. The heat in the car became so dangerous to the prisoners that some men died inside of the car. George and Bernie were a little lucky, because they had a "window seat". Well it wasn't much of a seat, for the majority of the trip George was standing on one leg, until they got to their destination.

The men reached the city of Frankfurt and they had to walk over twenty miles to a prison camp. When they got to their destination, George remembers facing one more obstacle, a large hill. He had to climb the hill in order to get to the prison. He dragged himself up the hill, and collapsed in the corner of a jail cell. Since all the beds were occupied in the cell the corner was where George and Bernie would have to remain throughout their stay.

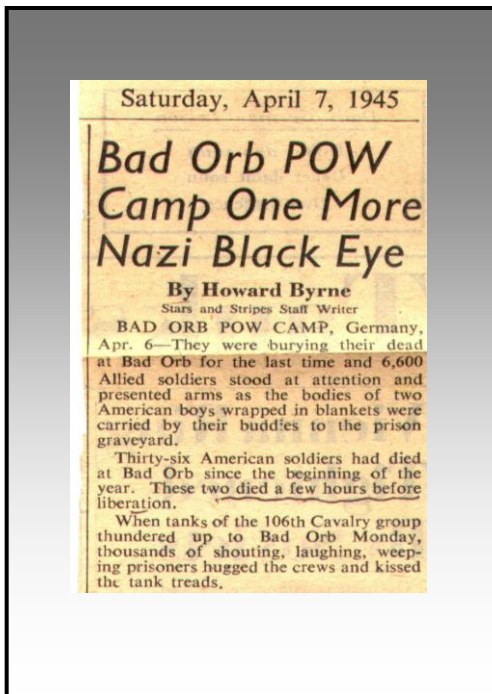
George did not really recognize how bad his health was, but he knew what Bernie looked like, and he estimated that they weren't going to make it much longer. At this time the men had gone without a shower or a change of clothes for nearly three months. Their bodies were filled with lice, and they had an illness called Dysentery. Dysentery is a disease of the intestine caused by bacteria, and parasites; the two men had severe diarrhea, and they started to pass blood and mucus through their system. Due to this Bernie lost his appetite to eat and his chance of surviving the ordeal was over. Bernie passed away inside of the jail cell, while resting his head on George's chest.

George refers to this point in time as his “breaking point”; over sixty five years have passed since Bernie died inside of the cell, and George can still be brought to tears thinking back to that day. He remembers the guards carrying Bernie away in a body bag, and George knew that he would soon find himself in a similar bag.

If it wasn't bad enough that his one and only friend died, he was aware that when the guards carried a body out they received a reward. The will to survive was all George had left, and that was running low on fuel.

April 1st, 1945-Easter Sunday:

General Patton's army broke through the cell at Bad Orb, captured the Germans, and set the prisoners free. The American troops set up an office inside of the cell, where they got basic information about the prisoners before sending them home. George was in line waiting to tell the Americans his information, eager to head home, see his family, and get healthy. While on the line, George collapsed, and he was sent to the infirmary. They flew him to a hospital in England, where he would receive a few weeks of care. Someone who grew up with George was in the same hospital, and once he heard that George was there he went to go visit him. The man's name was Andy Scheffler, and he walked down the aisle looking for George. He walked passed George and didn't recognize him, so George called out his name. Andy turned around and said “Is that you George?” George was so thin that he was practically unrecognizable.



When someone can't recognize who you are, and they ask “is that you?” it becomes clear how sick you really are. While at the hospital the doctors and nurses would come around checking on the patients, when they got to George's bed they couldn't believe that he was still alive. The doctors estimated that George's weight was ninety five pounds, which was nearly half of what he weighed before he enlisted in the army.

The hospital gave George food, thinking that would help him gain weight, what they didn't realize was that he couldn't hold the food down. When this type of situation happens now, nutritionists know what people can eat, and what they can't eat. So they put them on a specific diet, and slowly get their bodies used to food again. Back then they just kept feeding him food until he started to gain some weight back. When he reached a weight of one hundred and twelve pounds he was sent back to America. He took a plane to Scotland, transferred in Iceland and Greenland, and then finally arrived at Mitchell field on Long Island, which was very close to his home. George left the field and tried to hitchhike home. As stated before during that time people at home

received a rationed amount of gas, so there were not many cars on the road. One man was driving by on his way to a nearby town; he stopped asked George a few questions, and decided to drive him home.

Home Safe

George arrived at his front door, and he saw his family for the first time in almost a year. He wasn't able to communicate with his family at all when he was a prisoner. The only thing his family received was a western union telegram stating that George was missing in action. When he got home, they could not believe how thin he was, or that he was even alive. After spending the night at home, his family told him that he needed to go back to the base, and go to the hospital. He found a ride back to Mitchell Field, and was sent to a hospital on Staten Island. He stayed at the hospital for eight months, while he slowly gained weight and strength.

When George was at the hospital recovering from his imprisonment, he got a visit from a few girls that he grew up with. The girls were visiting their uncle who was at the hospital as well, and they wanted George to go and get ice cream with them. He was reluctant to go because he was embarrassed of how he looked; but after some convincing he decided to go and eat with them. It was then when Frances Caruso, one of the girls that he knew, told him to visit when he was released from the hospital. Since George received a "Dear John" letter while overseas, he was a single man and could not wait to go and visit her. After George gained some weight, he was permitted to travel home on the weekends. When he was home he would go to her house and visit; after a while a relationship formed between the two, and they got married a few years later.

George enlisted into the army in March 1944, and was honorably discharged in November of 1945, after spending eight months in the hospital. Throughout that brief moment in history, George's life changed in many ways. He received medals for his courageous actions in the war which include the Purple Heart, and Bronze Star. His life was transformed; he went from being a normal teenage boy, into an American hero. George's life was not the only life affected by his time spent in the war, my life, and anyone who has heard his story has also changed.

When it comes to me, I think of what he did, and what all of the American heroes' did, I can only be thankful. After learning about my grandfathers experiences in the war, and understanding how he survived on the will to live, I learned many life lessons. It is hard for me to complain about anything that goes wrong in my life, knowing what my grandfather went through. When my grandfather was my age he already went to war, and became a prisoner. I owe everything I have to my grandfather. The person I am now, and the man I will become in the future, can be directly attributed to the events that he went through in his life.

Many people who go to war and face similar situations, come back and are bitter and hold a grudge against their "enemies". This is not the case with my grandfather, I confidently say this because his daughter, and daughter in law (my mother) both work for a German airline. He is by far the best person I have ever met in my life, and I wish that I could become half the man that he is. No single person or event has had an effect on my life like my grandfather. My grandfather is a great family man, who has had a great life; and he is the type of person who makes others happier no matter what the situation is. He is my grandfather, my role model, and most importantly my hero.

Final Chapter

On February 12th, 2013, George was admitted to the North Shore Hospital in Manhasset with a broken hip after falling in the house while recycling cans. At eighty seven years old, this type of injury is difficult to recover from; the ability to come back to a normal life is a struggle. George has never been classified as your ordinary type of individual; he is part of the “greatest generation” which exhibits super abilities in time of need. He faced numerous challenges in his life and had death at his door many times.

While in recovery, George would revert back to his days as a prisoner and he would reflect on his past personal experiences when he was captured. He was always concerned with maintaining his weight, loss of appetite, cold winters, and being depressed and confused while in a hospital environment. George suffered from post traumatic stress that would reactivate when he was in a hospital or a situation where he could potentially lose weight. When he was feeling down in the hospital, George would reflect on his experiences with Bernie Rudman who died on his chest in the prison camp. George developed a sense of survivor’s guilt throughout the years because he never contacted the Rudman family after the War.

During a hospital visit on March 10th, 2013, George was saddened and he started to speak about Bernie and how he regretted never reaching out to his family. George’s family became troubled with the grief he held onto for so many years; this prompted a search for closure. Using many technology tools via the internet, we were able to identify that Bernie had a brother “Norman” who was five years younger. This clue led our family on a chase to find Norman Rudman. We discovered many records including the shipping of Bernie’s body from Germany to California in 1948, an obituary record of his burial, and many facts on his brother. The hunt was on, records were researched and phone calls were made in search of Norman.

Our research paid off and we were able to positively connect Norman to Bernie and my father placed a call to Norman nearly sixty eight years after the passing of his brother. The only information the family had was that Bernie was captured on January 4th, 1945 and that he died on March 27th, 1945. The Rudman’s had no idea our family knew details about Bernie’s life, imprisonment, and death through the survival of George. We had additional conversations with Norman and we shared stories about George and Bernie. In a single day, we changed two lives directly related to the casualty of war. Both George and Norman had new perspectives on Bernie’s life, and a sense of closure was felt by two families. There were plans to have George speak to Norman when he was well enough, but he never got that chance. George died on March 20th, 2013 seven days earlier than the sixty eighth anniversary of Bernie’s death.

This story is about two men who came from different backgrounds and fought to stay alive in terrible conditions to make life better for others. To me, this is heroism and I will always remember my grandfather’s life through this story which I am proud to share with others. He was also very proud of this story, which I wrote for a class while attending Hofstra University. I always thought he gave me too much credit for writing this; he would tell me “you’re getting famous from your story” and I would reply “this isn’t my story, this is your story, I just put it on paper”.

To the greatest man I will ever know, you will live on forever, and I will always love you Poppi.



Medals received for service:

Combat Infantry Badge, Purple Heart, Bronze Star, POW Medal, WWII Medal, Good Conduct Medal, NYS Conspicuous Service Medal, Parachute Jump Wings, Marksman Bar Medal, Sharpshooter Medal, European African Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, American Campaign Medal.