

MEDIC

By James Collins.

The Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 was brutal. Europe experienced the worst winter in a century. The participants experienced every curse a bad winter could bring; bone chilling cold; blizzard like snow; wicked winds, snowdrifts waist high and fog. Death was everywhere, and the ground frozen over a foot deep. You had no place to hide when mortar shells and artillery shells started to fall around you. Night and day, you could hear artillery fire in the distance. Sporadic rifle fire and machine gun fire was heard around the clock.

Bob Keating, the medic, never wanted to carry a gun. A college graduate, he had joined the Army in 1942 and enlisted in the medical corps. He just turned 22, and carried plasma, bandages, sulfa powder, morphine, and hope. Everyone felt less stress when the Red Cross armband and helmet was visible in the area, because Bob would risk his life to get to them if they were wounded. He was a true angel of mercy. This was the fifth day after the Americans were surrounded and Bob was in the front lines going from foxhole to foxhole in the deep forest. He was checking for wounds, shock and trench foot. As he raced out to a forward, listening post, he came across an abandoned, wounded, German infantryman. The young German soldier had a sucking chest wound and was leaning against a tree. His blood was coagulating in the cold but the bleeding had to be stopped or he wouldn't last another fifteen minutes. Bob opened his kit; tore open the soldier's jacket applied sulfa powder to the injury and opened his largest bandage to cover the gash. He was startled to hear a loud voice shout, "Achtung." Bob turned to see the largest German soldier he had ever encountered waving a Mauser pistol, which look like a toy in his massive hand. The German soldier was all dressed in black, which indicated he was probably a tanker. He stood fully 6 foot eight and over 300 pounds. A veritable giant was threatening Bob. The German's size and his scowl were imposing; his uniform was menacing; but the SS insignia was truly frightening. A few days earlier, more than 80 American soldiers were executed at Malmedy. It became known to history as the Malmedy massacre. The SS were the executioners and everyone on the front lines knew it.

"Common zie hier," was the command as the German waved the pistol at him and pointed in the direction the German had come from. It was obvious the German did not have any English. Bob was showing him the injured German soldier and his bandage and was giving motions to show that he wanted to help him. "Nein," was the response from the massive enemy soldier. He grabbed Bob by the back of his tunic; yanked Bob to his feet; reached down grabbed the medicine knapsack and slammed it into Bob's chest. He then kicked the unconscious German in the side so he rolled off the tree onto the ground. Then he spun Bob around so he was facing in the direction the big German had come from. He pointed to his tracks in the snow, heading back to the German lines and shoved Bob in front of him. Bob knew he was in real trouble. He figured the Nazi needed medical attention for one of his wounded comrades. Once that was done, Bob's survival was questionable. Bob knew he had to escape and was looking for an opportunity but the man was massive, the snow was deep, and there was always the pistol. Fully 10 min. passed as they slogged through the snow towards the German lines. The track, they were following in the snow crossed a large downed tree. Bob was in front and had to cross it first. He

figured this was the place to make his move. As the German straddled the tree to get across, he put his hand and the gun down on the tree. Bob, standing in the snow, hauled off and punched him in the face with all his might. The German looked surprised, shook his head, but was obviously unhurt. He smiled said, "Ho, ho, ho," brought his other leg over the tree cocked his fist raised it back and swung at Bob's face. To Bob it looked like a sledgehammer coming at him. Bob instinctively ducked and the German's fist hit the top of Bob's helmet, driving it down onto Bob's ears and Bob's face into the snow. Bob was stunned, saw stars and felt blood running from the side of his head. The Nazi was stomping around yelling bloody blue murder in German while holding his hand. Luckily, for Bob the impact to his helmet had broken the man's hand, and the German had dropped the gun. Bob rose; picked up the gun; pointed it at the German and directed him back along the trail to where they originally started.

As they came up to the foxholes on the front line, the American troops recognize the red armband and watched Bob bring in the SS tanker. "Shoot the Kraut now. He's one of those SS bastards." Bob ignored them all and waved, as he escorted the prisoner far behind the front lines. He felt that if he had turned him over to the frontline troops they would kill him out of hand. He turned the prisoner over to an officer and went back to helping the people in the front line.

30 years later as Bob recounted this story to me; he was able to show me the scars on both sides of his head right in front of his ears where the helmet had gouged out his skin. The German probably also survived the war because of Bob's concern that the man would be killed in height of emotion.

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