

# I DIDN'T DIE IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

*Because...*

- I went to Townsend Harris
- I went to City College
- I was drafted into the army just after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday having completed two years of an engineering curriculum was beaten up by a Jew-hating Sergeant infirmary basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia and hospitalized for three weeks in the middle of basic training.

This is the executive summary-the story is longer.

## ***THE STORY***

I entered THHS just after my 13th birthday and could barely swim or take photographs. As part of the PT program under Mr. Kahn, I learned to swim and took and passed a lifesaving course. In the summer of 1943 I took a test to become a lifeguard for the City of New York. I ranked 82 out of 500 and served as lifeguard on Bays 2 and in Coney Island for the great pay then of \$35 weekly.

As a member of the photography club, under Dr. R. A. Wetzel, I was trained to take pictures and establish my own darkroom. He made salon prints of two of my negatives that won me prizes at Macys and a show in Pittsburgh. One of my dear friends and supporters was Seymour Schwartz. I was chronically naive and very young and needed all the help I could get in non-academic areas. In academic areas, I was just fine since I was smart, quick and curious and THHS rewarded these traits. The obiter dicta became important.

I entered CCNY at 16, taking an engineering course in which I acquired the skills of surveying, drafting and became manager of the varsity swimming team when Radford J McCormack, the coach said to me, "Davy, a good big man will beat a good little man and you're a little man -be manager." And so I did. I was manager and "one point diver" (Each team had two divers and points were issued to the first, second and third. If the other team had only one diver, we were guaranteed one point for third if we had two divers. (I had five dives that I could do and that was enough!). This was all during my my 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> years.

Just after my 18th birthday, I was drafted into the army and sent to Fort Beoning, Georgia for infantry basic training. Where, due to Mr. Kahn's training and my daily lunch hour one mile swim - 72 pool laps- I was able to hold my own, except for Sgt Noel Chapman, who was an ex-lumberjack and hated Jews. I was the right size to hate and got picked on (too stupid to notice) and finally got into a fight with him which put me in the hospital for three weeks. I don't know what was wrong with me but I remember being in traction for several days. I was quite distracted by an army nurse who appeared to be the incarnation of Zola's Nana. They asked if I wanted a discharge and I demurred saying that everybody was here and that's where I wanted to be! Puck must have had me in mind when he uttered his "what fools these mortals be."

## ***NOW THE STORY COMES TOGETHER***

Because of the three week absence, I had to wait for another basic training group to reach the point at which I left the original group and join them to finish the 13 week course. Meanwhile, my old platoon, as a group, went to Europe. This was the end of 1943 and they went to the Battle of The Bulge *as a group* where my bunkmate--I was in the upper bed and he the lower bed--Danny Dahlen was killed by a mortar shell while on line for breakfast. He was very punctual and we ate together.

When my new platoon graduated, we were sent to a Replacement Depot in Pennsylvania near Warren, Ohio where we were individually interviewed for our talents because we were now *replacements*. Mine were two years of engineering study, a photographer, and a surveyor. They gave me an MOS (military occupational specialty) of 152 - photographer. I then had to wait for an engineering group that needed a photographer! And so I missed the European Theater and The Battle of The Bulge which I participated in vicariously as a rec hall orderly who moved the battle lines on the map.

I was then sent to Montana State College in Bozeman" Montana where we were for 5 weeks when we were sent to the 1298<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion and put into training maneuvers on the Hunter Leggett Military Reservation in the hills of California near the Hearst Castle. From there we took a 35 day sea voyage via Hawaii to Manila (this was the spring of 1945). A highlight of the trip was that three bridge players needed a non-existent fourth and asked if I would learn which I did and have become quite proficient and have played ever since.

From Manila, we went to North Luzon and were stationed at Tuguegarararo which is half-way between Manila and Aparri where our unit built bridges and roads and I had a darkroom in a tent and took and developed pictures of the work being done. My buddy and I did capture a sniper who couldn't walk so we had to carry him back to camp. Only one from our group died.

I was discharged with 32 points in March 1946. This was just before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

## ***CONCLUSION***

As you can see my THHS experience paved the way for my survival in an era when it was easy to die. It is only right that I memorialize my friend who didn't make it.

David Blanksteen  
THHS 1941 CCNY 1941