

## THE CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Long ago and far away Brighton Township resident Ray Custard was one of the many young soldiers serving his country and saving his country. The long ago was 1944 and the far away was war torn Europe. Like many other Americans in his age group, he had to abruptly discontinue his future personal plans. As part of the aptly named "Greatest Generation," Ray and his peers were thrust into mass mobilization brought about by World War II. A natural youthful optimistic view of the future was now facing the war time reality of mortality. During his overseas military involvement, Ray had a chance encounter. Although this accidental encounter was a brief and fleeting moment in a life span, it remained in Ray's memory a lifetime. Indeed, quite a chance encounter of a lifetime.

Although our focus is centered on a brief event during combat, a wider perspective enhances our narrative and understanding the challenge of an individual soldier in the American army at that time and space. The Allies, with the D-day invasion, gained a foothold in Europe. Once across the English Channel a gateway was opened for the Allies. Just establishing a foothold on the European continent was a monumental task. The next major task was to liberate an entire continent from Nazi domination. Ray was attached to the Cannon Company, 347<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment 87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. As part of an entire combat division, he and fellow soldiers traveled and fought through France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany and Czechoslovakia. To later generations of Americans, famous movies and history books popularized and chronicled towns and places named Metz, Saarbrücken, St. Vith, Koblenz, Bastogne to name a few. Ray and his outfit fought there. His unit crossed the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, natural defense lines en route to Germany. He also crossed the infamous Siegfried Line guarded by the 11<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. His unit was redirected to bolster U. S. forces at the Battle of the Bulge. Ray's unit liberated the unspeakable Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Ray chooses not to discuss the vivid and shocking details of combat. They are bad memories created by worse events locked away forever as a faded part of a distant past.

**The Encounter** -While in Germany it was time for a night patrol. The platoon set out with Ray in the convoy as a radio operator and machine gunner in the last vehicle. A jeep mounted with a .30 caliber machine gun facing forward was Ray's combat assignment. Night patrols were not uncommon but posed a bit of a dilemma for vehicle drivers. In order to maintain concealment from the enemy, normal driving lights could not be used. So vehicles in this mode used diffused lights, referred to in military jargon as "cat eyes." Cat eyes were mounted to the back of every vehicle in line. Just follow the dim light ahead and you will be safely in line.

So in the dark of night, in a war zone and in harms way, Ray as gunner and the jeep driver move along a deserted rural roadway. Along the convoy route the lone jeep eventually falls behind the vehicle ahead of it. The cat eyes ahead dim and suddenly disappear. Fortunately, they dimly reappear further up the road. Now catching up to the other vehicles in procession the driver fails to realize the convoy just passed through an "S" turn in the road. Hence the disappearing light was the result of the turn rather than distance. As the cat eyes reappeared the vehicle was actually emerging from the turn. The jeep driver now sees the cat eyes and assumes the road to be a straight line. In short order he hits a wall on the side of the road. Ohhhnooo!

The two young GIs are fortunately okay. But the front side of the jeep is heavily damaged and not drivable. Of course. The jeep is now resting in a ditch. Of course. The convoy

unaware of the accident disappears into the darkness. Of course. They do have a radio which they quickly realize is in pieces. Of course. Now all they can do is wait and hope for help. Hopefully, the help isn't a Nazi patrol. They mount the machine gun on the side of the road and wait and wait. The third morning after the mishap they finally hear the unmistakable sound of tanks roaring and rumbling in the distance. As the column approaches, the fellows are relieved to recognize the tank silhouettes as American. As time passes the tanks come closer into clear view. However, leading the battle ready tank column is a reconnaissance vehicle. The M-80 was a vehicle built high off the ground with a gun turret perched higher on top, providing a clear view for shooting or observation. Distinctive to this particular M-80 were two red flags, one on each front fender. Emblazoned on each flag were three stars. Ohhhnooo!

The two weary disheveled privates stand at attention and salute, with their battered and broken jeep as a backdrop. The recon vehicle slowly approaches and stops beside them. The entire tank column comes to a halt. Standing high above Ray in the turret peering down on the scene, complete with his famous pearl handled pistols was none other than General George Patton. Momentary silence prevailed as the General surveyed the scene. Then the General spoke. "Son what the heck are you doing in that ditch?" Ray's response, "We wrecked the jeep. We were with the 347<sup>th</sup>." The general, "Oh you are with Colonel Bottner. You were lucky, he went up the road and got all shot up." Still assessing the scene from high on the turret, General Patton quizzically inquires about the machine gun pointed down the road. Ray said, "It is to kill the Nazis if they come down road, sir." Again, deafening silence. Finally, General George Patton clearly and loudly shouts, "Good!!"

Then Patton picked up his radio microphone and called the recovery unit. "Come out and get these two doggies from the 347<sup>th</sup> and their wrecked jeep. Take care of them, they did a good job." General Patton and the tank column simply continued on their way. A chance encounter long ago and far away.

The Brighton Township Historical Society is grateful to Ray for taking the time to share his story. After his military duties he graduated from Purdue University and earned an advance degree from Harvard University. Ray and his wife, Peggy, have been married 63 years and raised two sons and a daughter. Ray left the American military with the rank of Corporal. The following are his military awards: Combat Infantry Badge, Bronze Star Medal, Good Conduct Medal, European Theater Ribbon with three Campaign Stars, Army of Occupation Medal, a Presidential Unit Citation, Marksman M1 and Carbine and two Overseas Bars & Hash Marks. Ray, the BTHS honors your service to our country.



*During his service Ray Custard also collected military patches, some of which are shown here, and were displayed at a prior Historical Society program.*