



(John A. Pildner, Sr. and Her Highness, Queen Mathilde of Belgium)

Private First Class John Pildner Sr. of the 290th Anti-Tank Company, 75th Infantry Division and a survivor of the Battle of the Bulge was born in January 1926 in Erie, Pennsylvania. After being drafted into the U.S Army, he was sent to Camp Rucker, AL and was assigned to the 66th Division. Then, PFC.Pildner's orders changed; he was assigned to Camp Breckenridge, KY, where he was to the 290th Anti-Tank Company. While overseas, he and his Company traveled through Luxembourg heading to Operation: Market Garden in Belgium. PFC.Pildner never forgot walking over bodies while laying mines in Lamour Hill during the Battle of the Bulge. He participated in the 75th Anniversary Commemoration of the Battle of the Bulge in December 2019 in Bastogne, Belgium. PFC.Pildner was given the privilege of going to Pearl Harbor for the 80th anniversary of the attack. By interviewing him, I'm glad that I increased his sense of hope for the future of America.

I was born on 16 January, 1926 in Erie, Pennsylvania to Edward and Kathryn (Bretz) Pildner. I grew up 7 miles south of Erie. Growing up everyone was in the same position as I was since we were all very poor. I had 1 brother and 2 sisters. My mother passed away when I was nine and my father tried to make a living with a small sawmill. I worked with my dad in the sawmill,

falling trees and cutting wood into lumber to sell. During the cold winter months, my teacher at Hill School, a one room school for grades 1 through 7, paid me to come to the schoolhouse 1 hour early every morning to start a fire in the potbelly stove that heated the school room. I went to Academy High School in Erie, Pennsylvania. My wife and I met and got married after I returned home to Erie, Pennsylvania after being honorably discharged from the Army.

I was drafted into the Army when I was 18 years old. I was sent to Fort IndianTown Gap near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where I was inducted into the Army. I was then sent by train to Camp Wheeler in Georgia. During my basic training, I held the rank of Private. Next, my orders took me to Camp Rucker, Alabama which was an infantry replacement training camp. It was here that I was assigned to the 66th Division, which was the Panther Division. I was only at this camp for a few weeks. My orders then were changed, and I was assigned to accompany seven Non-Commissioned Officers to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky. Here, I was assigned to the mine platoon of the 290th Anti-Tank Company. Following my response shared above, I was next sent by train to Camp Shanks, New York for debarkation to Swansea, England. My platoon and I were sent to Porthcawl in South Wales where we received several weeks of additional training and it was here that I earned the rank of PFC. We were then sent to South Hampton on the coast of England. Next, we boarded a ship which took us to Le Havre, in Northern France. During my time in Le Havre, my platoon and I camped in pup tents that were situated in a muddy field. After this, the Company I was assigned to, went by truck to a train station and were loaded into boxcars that were called "40 and 8s," which meant that each boxcar could accommodate 40 men or 8 horses. We traveled through Luxembourg heading to Market Garden in Belgium where we were to relieve a British Military Unit. While we were on our way, and with the Battle of the Bulge in full force, our orders were abruptly changed and our company was reassigned to the north side of the "Bulge." Our platoon was billeted in Nye, Belgium.

Our duties now included clearing the roadways in the area of mines placed there by the enemy. During this time, a Battalion from the 290th Infantry took a hill called Lamour and because they were low on ammunition, they lost the hill and then had to retake it. It was then that we placed a minefield between our position and that of the enemy. It was very frightening being able to hear commotion from friendly troops and enemy combatants as we were located in between. On our trip back through the American lines, my platoon leader was unable to provide the correct password (which was changed on a daily basis). The American troops had their rifles trained on us until I was able to provide the correct password and we were cleared to pass through to retrieve additional mines. Some time later as we were clearing more roads near Burtonsville, Belgium, a German soldier on the edge of town fired a pistol. We heard engines start up in town and feared that they were coming out to get us. In the meantime, we hit the ditch which was filled with snow. About that time, the enemy started dropping mortars where we were. The fellow behind me was killed when a piece of shrapnel pierced his helmet. It was during the Battle of the Bulge on 16 January, 1945 that I had my 19th birthday.

When the Bulge was finally over, we were sent back to an area located between Germany and France that was called the Colmar Pocket. Our trucks were parked in a wooded area and a

roadblock was located where a small road connected to a main road. The roadblock was made up of several German anti-personnel mines located in the surrounding area. An American tank had its tracks blown off when it crossed the roadblock. After we cleared the rest of the mines from the area, some of which were "S" mines that we referred to as "Bouncing Betsy's," another tank approached our position and proceeded to pull the disabled tank off the road. When pulling the disabled tank off the road, enemy mortars that had been zeroed into that location, exploded all the while we were carrying active mines that we had retrieved to dispose of them. There were no injuries during this fracas except for one soldier who was hit in his backside. Later on, as we were going out to continue to clear the road from Appenweier to Andolsheim in the Colmar Pocket, we worked in two-man teams: I was using the mine detector while my partner, Donald Yack, carried a rifle. We went a short distance when my buddy got shot by a sniper. I found safety behind the biggest tree I could find. We finally got him to an aid station.

The truck we had previously parked in the wooded area held about 250 mines in the truck bed in the truck bed in addition to about 500 mines on the trailer it was pulling. That night as I was sleeping in the truck bed, artillery and/or mortars hit the area, and I never heard a sound even though the tarp covering the back of the truck had many holes through it! From here, our Company was sent back to the Ruhr Valley in the Ardennes to a town called Hohenlimburg. Office buildings here held the records of the Ruhr Valley steel production. Officials from Washington, D.C. were sent there to search these records. It was during this time that the War in Europe ended. I was sent back to Reims, France where I was relocated to a redeployment camp. Since I didn't have enough points to be discharged to return home, my new assignment was to be assigned to the 612th Quartermaster Corps for grave registration. My first duty was to be assigned to the Cadre of the Epinal Cemetery in France. I was sent into Germany where I was assigned to ask each local German Burgemeister the location of any Americans who may have been buried in their cemeteries and if so, to remove their remains to be returned to an

American cemetery in France, Belgium, or Holland. In retrieving bodies, I got an infection in my left hand. The infections traveled up my arm. As a result, I was sent to Wurzburg Army Hospital. The hospital had been taken over by the Americans. I was treated and recovered. When I left the hospital, they left it up to me to find my unit. The unit was moving northward through Germany. I hitched a ride and found my unit about 50 miles away. After enough time performing this duty, I was sent to a redeployment camp where I was then sent back to the United States aboard the U.S. George Washington. During the time that I was laying mines on Lamour Hill (mentioned previously), I vividly remember walking over bodies and I wasn't sure if they were American or German.

I didn't really get a chance to celebrate. I simply returned home. I was discharged from the United States Army on 3 May, 1946. I received the "Ruptured Duck" pin, given to WWII veterans upon their discharge from the military; 7th Infantry Division shoulder patch; Combat Infantry Badge, received for being in combat overseas; 66th Infantry Panther Division shoulder patch; Firearms Qualification Badge; WWII Commendation Medal; Bronze Star issued for service in the "Battle of the Bulge;" European Theater of Operations (ETO) Medal; Small stars:

Battle of the Bulge, Colmar Area, Ardennes; German Occupation Medal; European Shaff shoulder patch; and the WWII Good Conduct Medal. I also received the French Legion of Honor, the highest distinction that can be conferred in France on a French citizen as well as on a foreigner to reward eminent military and civil merits in the service of France (in this instance, the liberation of France from Germany).

I found meaningful work first in Erie, Pennsylvania. First, at a warehouse loading stoves and refrigerators into boxcars; second, rolling copper that was cut into strips and made into parts for generators and DC Motors; third, making slot dies which started me out as a Class C toolmaker; and after finishing my toolmaker classes, fourth, the Ashtabula Bow Socket; and, eventually I became owner of Austinburg Machine Company, Austinburg, OH. During this time while still working in Erie, I met and married my wife, Lynetta M. Fenner. We had seven children, 16 grandchildren, and 17 great-grandchildren. My wife passed away on 10 November, 2019. I had the honor and privilege of participating in the 75th Anniversary Commemoration of the "Battle of the Bulge," also called the Battle of Ardennes 11 December, 2019 through 17 December, 2019 in Bastogne, Belgium. I, along with two other veterans who also fought in the Battle, assisted at the laying of the wreath at the Mardasson Memorial in Bastogne where we were invited to place a red rose on the wreath during the ceremony. At a reception, I was able to meet Her Highness, the Queen of Belgium who was very nice. In our conversation, she was eager to know what service I performed in Belgium and as we talked she listened very attentively.

I was very surprised that I was invited to attend the 80th Pearl Harbor Anniversary Observance and that all expenses for flight, lodging, and food were to be paid by the Best Defense Foundation and American Airlines. I am grateful as well to have received a special commemorative publication from the Best Defense Foundation and American Airlines on this observance of the 80th Anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. I had a big choice to make because I had two big trips to decide between: this trip or my 75th Army Division Reunion in Houston, Texas. I knew I could only take advantage of one of these opportunities. Eventually, I chose to take the trip to Pearl Harbor. I chose my son, John Jr., who is a Navy veteran to travel with me. We were treated like royalty. I really had a nice time and made many memories that I'll always appreciate and never forget! Before I left on this trip, I had to put together my Army uniforms to wear while traveling to Hawaii and to wear during activities that were scheduled. The trip was very well planned and included events to attend every day. We were also provided some Hawaiian clothing to wear on certain occasions. Everything went well. We visited the cemetery where those who lost their lives in the attack on Pearl Harbor were buried. Everyone of us Veterans was provided with a wheelchair. We participated in a parade over 1.6 miles long. People lined both sides of the street and cheered us on. We all enjoyed our week there very much. It was humbling to attend this 80th Anniversary Observance and I felt remorse for all the lives lost of those who were unable to return home like I did when World War II ended. I was honored that day to be part of this great and wonderful ceremony and to know that I was a part of the "greatest generation" that served to preserve, protect, and defend the freedoms and liberties all Americans enjoy. I would certainly feel honored and privileged to take part in

another ceremony if it was to take place and the Good Lord willing, I am able. I am grateful for this opportunity and want to express my gratitude to the sponsoring groups for the time, energy, and financial support they provided to make this wonderful trip possible. All they did to so significantly honor the Veterans who lost their lives at Pearl Harbor, also honored and gave recognition to the group of Veterans who were so graced to be able to attend this observance this year.

Of my military service, I was, and still am, proud that I served my country. And, I tell everyone that I would still serve my country this way again. As I conclude my story here, I would share this quote from an unknown source:

“A soldier doesn’t fight because he hates what is in front of him.
He fights because he loves what he left behind.”



(John A. Pildner, Sr.’s Host Family in Belgium: Allaine and Muriel Pierre and Son)



(John A. Pildner, Sr. assisting at the Laying of the Wreath at the Battle of the Bulge 75th Memorial Celebration in Belgium, December 2019)