

By TERESA FOSS
Community News

Fifty years ago, Vernon King was a young, fearless soldier, caught up in the fervor of the war, feeling excitement at the controls of a 500-horsepower tank maneuvering in formation.

"It was a new challenge," he recalls. "It was exciting in a way. I can't say I was never scared, but a lot of times, I didn't think about it. People of that age are, fearless."

The boy of 20 who saw his tank commander killed, and saw the deaths and serious injuries of countless of other boys and young men, is now a man of 70. Though he won three purple hearts, he kept the injury-earned lapel pins tucked away in boxes, just as he kept much of his experience at the Battle of the Bulge tucked away in the private areas of his memory.

Even his wife, Ruth, knew little of the battle that took place when she was very young. She and Vernon didn't talk about it much. "I was a child," she says, "and I didn't want to hear sad things."

So, for most of their married life, the Kings set aside that part of Vernon's youth. They were busy with their family, their community, their careers.

But this year, 50 years after the historic, deadly, and highly successful land battle - the Battle of the Bulge, Vernon and Ruth King stood face to face with the past. At the sites where the beginning of peace came at last in Europe, they found peace of their own.

For nearly two weeks, the Kings toured Europe, following the path Vernon took 50 years ago as part of the 8th Armored Division. He had served with the 80th Tank Battalion's 'C' Company.

During the tour, King visited three of the men under whom he had served. Only one was living - Colonel Austin Walker. Col. Walker was 30 years old when King last saw him. The older soldier - now 80 - was with him one morning when their tank was hit. The medics took him from the field, and King never knew what happened after that.

It didn't take long for the two men to become reacquainted. As it turned out, Walker was in the hospital for two and one-half years. After that, he became a school administrator in Indianapolis, Ind.

Even now, Walker bears deep scars on his left arm and elsewhere, a testament to his valor in service.

Others were not so fortunate.

A visit to General Patton's grave site was one stop along the anniversary tour.

** newspaper picture caption for 80c_p05.jpg **

Vern King, left, renews acquaintances with his old commander, Col. Austin Walker, after 50 years. At right, King, in a photo taken, during the war. King and his wife, Ruth, recently re-visited the battle fields.
**

Also lost was King's company commander, Harold Smith.

When Commander Smith died, King assumed his position at the controls of the tank. This year, King visited Smith's grave.

"I feel so fortunate," King said again and again. Though injured, none of his wounds were life threatening. And, he lived. So many did not. There were 76,000 Americans killed, said King. Some veteran's groups put the number at 81,000. 120,000 Germans were killed.

It was America's greatest land battle, taking place from Dec. 16, 1944 through Jan. 25, 1945, in the bitter cold and snow of the heavily-forested Ardennes Forest of Belgium and Luxembourg. More than one million young men took part in the bloody World War II battle - 600,000 of them American.

King compares it to D-Day, which involved some 10,000 casualties: "It was more intense, more vicious. There were more experienced fighters." The German SS troops were involved in the Battle of the Bulge. "It was their best we were fighting. It was the last big effort for the domination of Europe."

The 8th Armored Division ("one of several divisions over there") formed in Louisiana, where King started training as a tank driver.

From there, the Division left to join the war., Soldiers landed at La Havre, France, and then went to Paris and then to Metz, France. From that point, they entered the Saar-Moselle Triangle and were joined by the, 94th Infantry as they drove the 11th Panzer Division from the area.

When the Kings visited this war site in Luxembourg in July, they attended a reception and luncheon with German veterans; celebrating five decades of peace.

Then, they continued to follow the path to Venlo, Holland and to Belgium.

There were thousands and thousands of simple stone crosses marking the graves of American soldiers.

For Ruth, who had not yet met Vernon when he was in the war, it was especially emotional. She thought of the parents, grandparents, wives and girlfriends, who must have grieved at the word of each death. "It was

touching," she said. "I didn't know any of these people, but I thought of all those who did."

Vernon relived the losses he felt, also. "It brought back a lot of memories. It made me feel so lucky just that I could survive.

** newspaper picture caption for 80c_p06.jpg **

Vernon King kneels by the stone cross which marks the site where his tank commander, Harold Smith, was buried. King took Smith's place as company commander during the Battle of the Bulge.

**

His Division was part of the northern arc of the Ruhr pocket which moved around to meet the 3rd Armored Division east of Paderborn, closing the final trap. He was a part of the greatest capture of enemy vehicles and prisoners to that date. They were to take Berlin, and then Eisenhower called General Simpson to his headquarters in Reims France to tell him that the Russians would now move in to take Berlin.

The 8th Armored Division left to go to Czechoslovakia. That is where King first met members of the Russian Army. "They were a very modest, a very reticent people," he said. And the men were ragged and motley, having lived off the land for several years with no supply line to their ranks.

He remembers one Russian soldier in particular. The young man was friendly, wearing loose-fitting garb. Reaching into the folds of his clothing, the soldier brought an egg out in his hand, held it toward King and said the only word both men could understand in one another's language: "Comrade!"

In Czechoslovakia, said King, the 8th Armored Division was disbanded for all practical purposes. Though they began training on amphibious tanks and the carriers that were to go into the Pacific, the bombs that marked the end of the war were dropped, and the victory was claimed.

It took several months to get all the soldiers out of Europe, and it was spring when King returned home. Servicemen were offered several bonus opportunities, and the one he chose was to go to college. He earned his degree after four years at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, and then worked with his father for a time in a farm supply business at Lawson. After several years as a home builder, King was elected to represent this district in the Missouri House of Representatives, where he completed three terms. Since that time, he has operated a machinery business south of Excelsior Springs and is now in partnership with his son, Cordell.

Last year, he had hip replacement surgery, and for a time, King feared he would not be able to make the anniversary tour because of his health. But, the joint mended, and with great support from his wife, he was able to return to Europe to share this part of his life with her.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," he said. "I feel very lucky... I am so fortunate."

**** newspaper picture caption for 80c_p07.jpg **

King (second from left) earned three Purple Hearts during his time in service to his country.

**