



World War II

World War II started in 1941, and it ended in 1945. In 1945 I was 11 years old. Up until that time there were several things that we could do as young boys and girls growing up in Saxton to help out the war effort. One of the things we did was we collected tin cans and metal objects and turned them in at the local churches. They called it scrap drive—scrap metal and then they'd have a drive to get all they could gathered up—and then this material was sent off to factories, where it was melted down and made into guns and jeeps and material useful in the war effort. It helped an awful lot I guess if you had all the communities and towns in America with young kids gathering up tin cans and different metal materials that were useful.

The Methodist church in my home town had a scrap drive on continually, and someone organized it in such a way that the more tin cans you brought in, the more rank you got. For example, if a young man and a young boy brought in a box with let's say 50 cans, they might make him a private first class. And they would give you a little pin to wear on your shirt that said you were a private first class. If you got another 50 cans you got to be a corporal. If you got maybe another 100 cans you got to be a sergeant.

Well, I was going to see how high up the rank I could go, and what I did was I went around to all my grandmother Eichelberger's friends and told them that I would come by their house once a week and pick up their tin cans and take them to the church for them if they would open both ends of the cans, which you had to do, wash off the bottom, top, the insides, get the label off, and then smash it with your foot—smash it down nice and flat. Well, some of these older ladies I said, if you'd just wash out the can, put it in a box, I'll smash it and deliver it. And I had a pretty good thing going. I'd pull a wagon and I'd go from house to house throughout the week and I'd gather up these cans, and I'd bring them home and I'd smash them on the back porch and put them in boxes, and at the end of the week I'd take them up to the church and I'd usually have enough to advance another rank. I don't know if I got to be a lieutenant or a captain or how high I got, but I moved a lot of cans up to the church. And that was one of the things we did to help out the war effort. That must have been when I was about 10 years old.

Some of the people in my family, and of course there were people that I knew in town, were

away at the war. There were men who had left town, who went off to fight in Germany, in the Irelands, in Italy, and in different places. For example, my father's brother, Uncle Eli, was a medical doctor and he served in the Medical Corps in World War II. He got some special training in Washington and Louisiana, and then they sent him to the Philippine Islands, where he served down there in a field hospital as a medical officer and spent the last 2-3 years of the war in the Philippines patching up and fixing and bringing relief and aid to wounded GIs in the South Pacific. The Japanese had occupied the Philippines, they were our enemy, and they had taken over the Philippines and the American soldiers had to come down and drive the Japanese off the Philippines. Once they got the Japanese off the Philippines, then the Americans could establish a hospital there. Then as fighting occurred in Borneo and Burma and other parts of the South East, the wounded soldiers were flown to the Philippine Islands, where they were provided with medical aid by men like my Uncle Eli.

The Philippine Islands is a group of islands with thousands of islands, and some of them were still controlled by Japanese, while the Americans controlled others and had their field hospitals on them. While Eli was working there as a Captain in the US Army Medical Corps, he was injured at one time and had to be hospitalized himself. To me, Eli was a hero. He was out fighting for his nation. He was doing the best thing he could. At the end of the war he returned home as a Major. Believe me, I felt a great, great deal of pride the day that one of my uncles went over to Altoona and met the train and brought Eli over to the house and we had a family reunion in the back yard of my grandmother's house, the house I was growing up in. All the family was there. There was Uncle Eli in uniform and his wife, Charlotte, his two boys and lots of aunts and uncles and cousins gathered to honor this guy when he finally got back home from the war. What a great day it was!

Another member of the family that was in the military that we don't often hear much about was from Bedford, Pennsylvania. He was a cousin of mine, Bill Heckerman, William Sweet Heckerman. Bill was one of two boys. He has an older brother, Calton. Bill Heckerman went into the Army at age 17 1/2, right out of high school, and was assigned to an infantry division as an enlisted man and went off to Europe. He joined one of the most prestigious fighting units that America had in the ground war in Europe. They were the Timberwolves.

I don't remember the number of their unit, but the Timberwolves were a very, very highly regarded fighting machine and they scored many, many victories in Europe in the land war as the World War II progressed toward its end. The tragedy of young Bill Heckerman was here was a young man who had risen to the rank of Corporal in the field fighting, very young, tough, good looking guy, had a girlfriend back home, and really a nice family, Aunt Martha and Uncle Calton, couldn't wait until the war was over and Bill would come home. Sure enough, in Europe the Germans surrendered in the spring of 1945 and we were certain that meant good news for the whole family, that at this point with its surrender everyone would be home safe and there would be no more fighting in Europe, just on the Japanese side.

The tragedy is that, after all the light and happiness and joy of the surrender of Germany, within days a telegram was received by Bill's mother, Aunt Martha. I was home one day and I didn't know about the telegram until my Uncle Dick came down to my grandmother's house and he said he wanted to talk to the whole family. He wanted us to gather in the living room because he had something very important to share with us. Well, I was 11 years old and I wasn't too sophisticated. Frankly, I had never been invited in to anything the family was doing that was very important, so I took it as a pretty significant event and I attended this family meeting. Uncle Dick said there was some bad news from Bedford and he had to share it with all of us, and he unfolded from his pocket a telegram which basically informed Aunt Martha that Bill Heckerman had died fighting for the US Army. It was probably 3, 4, 5, 6 days before the surrender of the Germans. He was 19 years old, not quite 20, and he had died in Holland. The sadness of it was that here he was within a week of the end of the war whenever this young man had to give up his life for his country. Obviously it was a very sober moment for everyone in the room, and for me, I couldn't imagine someone who was so young having to die for the country.

Later that year, when the war was over, one of the school teachers in the elementary school who had been away in the war returned back to Saxton to begin teaching again. His name was Blair Conrad. I read where he was returning and he had been in the Timberwolves. My thought was maybe Blair had knew Bill Heckerman. Well, I had no idea how big an Army unit would be like the Timberwolves. It took all the courage I could muster to go see Mr. Conrad and ask him if he knew my cousin. Sadly, Mr. Conrad told me that he did not know Bill Heckerman, but he said every man that he fought with in the European theatre with the Timberwolves were men to be very

proud of. He left me with a very good feeling about my cousin.

Losing Bill Heckerman in our family was a great loss, mostly to his mother, my Aunt Martha. Aunt Martha was a wonderful woman. She had volunteered her time for any effort that was going to help out the United States in World War II. She sat for hours and made gloves and she made headbands that would keep soldiers' ears warm. There were many women that did these kinds of things. Contributing money—they would buy savings bonds. They would work as I did on scrap drives and things like that that would help the war effort be more successful for the United States. Dear Aunt Martha, after Bill's death, went to Holland, visited the cemetery where he was buried, met the family that was responsible for caring for the cemetery, and she sponsored that family, paid for them to come to America to see what a grand country America was and to visit Bedford, where Bill had grown up. They became very good friends, Aunt Martha and the family of people in Holland who had responsible for the cemetery. Years later, Aunt Martha was able to arrange to have Bill Heckerman's body transferred and removed from Holland to Bedford, Pennsylvania. I think that gave her a great deal of joy.

Later in the summer of 1945 the new President of the United States who took over after Mr. Roosevelt died, Harry Truman, allowed the US military to use the atomic bomb for the first time ever in military use, and they bombed two cities in Japan and forced the Japanese into a surrender situation. That was in August, 1945, and by the middle of August the Japanese had agreed to an unconditional surrender which really brought the whole World War II to an end. It was a great moment for us in America.

As a kid I can remember the tremendous outpouring of patriotism and love for America. In the town people came out from the fire company, they drove the fire trucks up and down the streets of Saxton and blew the horns, people celebrated and they waved the flags, the high school band came out and they played, and they really made everyone in town feel very, very special. Finally, the war was over and our guys would come home, and no longer would we have to fight and sacrifice to stop the Germans and the Japanese from their expansion.

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the war was over and our guys would come home, and no longer would we have to fight and sacrifice to stop the Germans and the Japanese from their expansion. It seemed so beautiful and yet so poignant that at the end of the war everyone was so happy, but yet everyone was crying. I guess I realized that it was a very significant point in history. We had the President of the United States who had been president elected four times who died that year. Then we had these other activities that were going on. The end of the war in Europe. The end of the war in Japan. Of course, the news about the loss of my cousin. The return of Uncle Eli. All these events seemed to swirl around in 1945. By the time the year was over, I guess I didn't think back on it at that time, but the year I was 11 years old there just seemed to be an awful lot of very emotionally charged activities going on in my life. I was probably glad that 1945 had ended and that I could get on with 1946 and 47 and the other things in my life because I have some other stories that I want to tell you about when I was a boy growing up in Saxton.