

After battles in Europe, City of Tonawanda native returns home to become a builder



Bill Young, wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, required “about 36 penicillin shots to stop infection.” After the war, he and his brother formed a homebuilding business. Mark Mulville/Buffalo News on May 8, 2016 - 6:34 PM



Bill Young, 93

Hometown: City of Tonawanda

Residence: Grand Island

Branch: Army

Rank: Private first class

War zone: Europe

Years of service: 1943-46

Most prominent honors: Purple Heart, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge

Specialty: Infantry

By Lou Michel News Staff Reporter

Bill Young always wanted to make something of himself. After high school, he took a job making chains at the Columbus McKinnon factory on Fillmore Avenue in the City of Tonawanda.

The teenager often walked to work from his home on Fletcher Street, following in the footsteps of his dad, Frank Young, who also had worked at the plant.

“We used lathes to put chains together and make hoists. We also made chains that wrapped around car tires in the winter for traction before we had snow tires,” the 93-year-old Young recalls.

But all that changed for him when he was drafted into World War II and assigned to the Army’s 44th Armored Division. In September 1944, he arrived in France, a few months after the invasion by the Allies on D-Day at Normandy.

The Germans lost their strategic and heavily fortified coastal advantage, but they still had plenty of fight left in them.

Young found that out in the Battle of the Bulge during one of Europe’s harshest winters. His unit was stationed on the Luxembourg side of the Our River during the battle, which lasted from Dec. 16, 1944, to Jan. 25, 1945.

“I remember it was cold and wet,” he says. “Every night, the Germans would bomb us. They fought hard to stop us from crossing that river into Germany. We probably were stuck there a good month.”

When the Americans finally made it to the other side of the river on a temporary bridge that had been rebuilt after being blown up, the Germans continued their attempts to halt the advancing troops. It wasn’t enough. Supported by artillery, U.S. soldiers kept moving forward, but at a price. Many were killed and many others wounded, Young among them.

“Being in an armored division, we had halftracks, and they would lead the way,” he recalls. “As infantry, we were basically there to knock off any Germans who got through. I was wounded in that period.”

Struck in the left leg below the knee, he collapsed to the ground.

“It happened in the early morning,” Young says. “The Germans were throwing everything they had at us. I was hit either by a bullet or shrapnel; I don’t know.”

What he does recall is that it seemed like forever as he was lying and waiting for the medics, though it was probably only a few hours.

“They bandaged me up, and I was transported in a halftrack to a field hospital,” he says. “I was there maybe two or three weeks and received about 36 penicillin shots to stop infection. Then I went back to my company.”

By this time, he says, the Germans were on the run.

“I remember we were in Frankfurt. There was a lot of destruction,” he says. “But the German people were very friendly, at least the ones that I met, though we certainly didn’t mix with them. Then, all of a sudden, a bunch of us were sent back to France.”

For about four months, he remained there and took in the sights.

“We would get passes and go to Paris, Luxembourg, anywhere you wanted to go,” he says.

But in the back of Young’s mind, there was always the gnawing thought that he might be sent to the Pacific to fight against Japan.

“I was in Le Havre when they dropped the atom bombs on Japan, and that ended the war,” he says.

“I was positively relieved.”

In the fall of 1946, Young returned to the City of Tonawanda, eager to make a success of himself.

“I went into business with my brother Ray building homes. We formed a corporation and called it Young Brothers,” he says. “I bought two lots, and we started building.”

After constructing 300 homes in Riverview Heights and the Delawanda Park sections of Tonawanda, the business expanded across the Erie Canal into North Tonawanda. The brothers again repeated their successes, building about 250 homes. They then turned their attention to apartment buildings along a newly constructed Robert Drive, where they built about 270 units.

“The best project we had was back in the City of Tonawanda in the 1990s. I was involved with three other builders with River Edge, which was the old Continental Can site along the Niagara River,” Young says. “We put in 67 townhouses.”

And while he found success in business, he says, his greatest achievement in life was marrying Renee Mahl and together raising “four lovely daughters: Pauline, Cathy, Colleen and Bernadine.”

Colleen, Cathy and Pauline followed in his footsteps and work at the family business.

As for the war, Young says he rarely thinks about it, although he is proud to have had the opportunity to serve.

He also says he does not envy those in the military these days because of the unconventional ways of terrorists.

“When Germany surrendered, you knew the war was over,” he says. “Today, you don’t even know who your enemy is.”