



Jake

Name: Jake • Born: 1915 • Location: United States

Early Years:

I was born in Chicago to working class parents. My grandfather and father worked together in their jointly owned clothing manufacturing company. My mother was a homemaker and insisted that my siblings and I all finish our high school education. As devout Catholics, we valued our close family relationships and both our secular and religious education. When I graduated high school, I joined

the men in my family business. I had always been told that I was a great communicator and that I could make any product seem honestly appealing. My business ventures were exciting, and I felt that my grandfather developed a new respect for me due to my sales ability once I joined the business. It was finally apparent to all the members of my family that I truly did have something unique to offer the family business.

1940-1944

My siblings and I avidly listened to the radio and had been keeping track of the war in Europe. With the establishment of the US draft laws in 1940, I was quite sure that I would be drafted. In January of 1943, I enlisted in the United States Army and immediately began training. Missing my family and missing out on business opportunities plagued me during these first few weeks. However, once we received news that we would be deployed by ship to England, my feelings changed. I saw myself on a mission, and our battalion was enlisted to take part in an important operation. I also developed relationships with the other men who came from all over the country and had lived very different lifestyles from the middle class life I had known. From late 1943 until April of 1944, we spent our days in England sending false messages and signals to the Germans on the other side of the English Channel. This operation was vital to the outcome of D-Day, since we tricked the Germans into thinking that the United States

was planning to attack the Germans who were stationed in Calais, France. In reality, the United States Army was planning its attack at Normandy.

In the summer of 1944, I was sent to France in preparation for the upcoming invasion. We served as the communication unit on the ground for some of the US planes that were scouting out the area and mapping out German installations. We awaited the return of these planes. Their flight path was risky and on several occasions the planes did not return. These were the first losses of war that I personally felt. I didn't know the men from the other groups well – but the loss was tangible and intensified as the invasion approached.

June 6, 1944 marked D-day. Planes covered the sky as they began the liberation process. This lasted until August. The most difficult phase was the infamous Battle of the Bulge in the freezing weather of December 1944. Many of our soldiers spent the Battle in foxholes shooting at the enemy. My division spent the time in Eastern France, acting

as decoys so the German army would think that an Allied division was in the vicinity. We were attacked and shot at but miraculously, we all survived.

After the Battle of the Bulge we were attached to Patton's Third Army. The division that had entered Buchenwald before us warned us, that the scene ahead was going to be difficult. The men coming out of Buchenwald would not talk about what they had witnessed. Our unit was to establish radio systems and wires in Buchenwald.

As we drove up a path covered by trees, we entered a completely unimaginable world. We were initially faced with an electrically charged barbed wire fence that had been de-activated by the soldiers who had initially found the camp. I quickly scanned the area. I noticed buildings with tall chimneys, rows of barracks, and piles upon piles of dead bodies. Prisoners wearing striped uniforms roamed around the camp. The ones walking around were the healthier ones and even they were nothing more than skin and bones. They could barely hold themselves up. Some prisoners approached our trucks asking for cigarettes. We gave out whatever cigarettes we had. Medical units had already begun removing the most sick and frail prisoners from the barrack bunks. I briefly entered one of the barracks and was horrified by the conditions and the horrible smell that pervaded the living space.

Our unit's first day in Buchenwald was frightening and unnerving. After finishing our evening shifts, many of us huddled together talking about what we had seen. We could not sleep. We could not eat. We needed each other's company to somehow cope with the reality of what we were witnessing.

The next day, in spite of all the help we could provide to the survivors, we all agreed that the survivors needed more. They needed people to talk to, people who would listen to their stories. Many survivors spoke

broken English, some better than others. Over the next few weeks we would be privy to the stories of survival and strength by some of the most heroic individuals I have ever met in my life. As we brought food, medicine, books, Jewish religious items and leaders to the camps, the former prisoners came back to life. This was my biggest success and greatest contribution to the entire war effort.

After the War

Ever since my deployment to Europe as a young adult, I suffer from nightmares on so many nights. Usually, I am one of the prisoners in the camp, or I am an American soldier trying to help someone whose hand I cannot reach. However, my most frightening nightmare is when I am a German soldier guarding the camp. I often think about my German great-grandfather and the decisions that he made to bring his family to the United States in the late nineteenth century. I wonder what he would have been like had he stayed in Germany and what type of German citizens my family would have been. And what role would I have played in Hitler's war against the Jews of Germany? I search my soul in believing that I am the type of person who does not follow the crowd and trusts my own opinion for choosing right from wrong.

In the years following WW II, many soldiers didn't talk openly about the atrocities they had witnessed. The details seemed too gruesome, and other people could not help heal the emotional wounds in our young hearts. I kept most of my experiences to myself and would only really talk about them with my army friends. My relationships with family and former friends definitely changed as a result. I saw the world and humanity differently than I had before my deployment.