

2LT Edwin James Betts 1917 to 2013

Early Years and Enlistment

Edwin James “Jim” Betts was born May 6, 1917, in Rochester, New York, to Benjamin Butler Betts and Irene Belle Hill Betts. He was the youngest of three children. His father was a police officer in Rochester. In 1922 the family moved to St. Petersburg, Florida. In 1927 Mother Irene died and two years later the family moved back to New York state, settling in Syracuse. Jim graduated from Syracuse Vocational High School in 1935 and began the hard work of finding a job during the Great Depression.



On June 8, 1936, unable to find steady employment, Jim enlisted in the United States Army. After basic training, Private Betts was assigned to the 11th Combat Engineer Regiment in Corozel, Panama Canal Zone, where he served for two years. When his first enlistment was up, he visited his family in Syracuse, New York, then re-enlisted in the United States Army on November 10, 1938. He was sent to Fort Ontario, New York, and assigned to Company L, 28th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division. In September 1940, Jim’s Army unit was assigned to the newly re-activated Eighth Infantry Division at Camp Jackson, South Carolina. Jim was now a Sergeant and his job at Camp Jackson was to provide basic training to new inductees.

SGT Betts’ second enlistment was due to end on November 10, 1941. Because he was out on maneuvers on that date, he was not discharged until December 6, 1941. Pearl Harbor was attacked the next day and the United States entered the war. Jim visited his family and considered his options. He found out he would be drafted despite his recent military service. He returned to Camp Jackson, re-enlisted as a private, and returned to his prior assignment. He was promoted back to Sergeant shortly after his re-enlistment.

World War II Service

In January of 1942 SGT Betts applied for Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was accepted into the three-month program, which he began in July 1942. On October 2, 1942, Jim was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. He spent most of the next year at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, a training camp established in 1942 to provide combat training for the United States Army. He was finally assigned to the 45th Infantry Division and in

September 1943 was sent to join the division in Italy. At that time the 45th Division, having landed at Salerno, Italy, in Operation Avalanche, was pushing northward, had crossed the Volturno River and taken the town of Venafro in early November 1943. Jim joined the Division in Venafro.

In January 1944 the Division was moved briefly to a rest area, then was assigned to participate in the landing at Anzio on January 22, 1944. 2LT Betts was a weapons platoon leader, Company G, 157th Infantry Regiment. In February 1944 his unit relieved British troops on the Anzio beachhead line. Their orders were to hold the ground at all costs. Jim's section of the line was attacked and ultimately overrun by German troops and he was captured on or about February 12, 1944.

Prisoner Experience

Jim and his fellow captives were marched from Anzio to the outskirts of Rome, where they were loaded on trucks and taken to PG 82 Laterina, a former Italian prisoner of war camp. The camp was now operated by the Germans and used as a transit camp. Eventually he was loaded on a freight car and delivered to Oflag 64 in Szubin, German occupied Poland, arriving on April 21, 1944.

Life inside Oflag 64 was confining and boring at times. When Jim first arrived, the Germans allowed groups of men to take two-hour parole walks outside the camp. The walks stopped when the Germans required the Kriegies to sign a pledge to not hamper German war efforts as a condition of parole. No one would sign. Because of inadequate food, Jim went from 170 pounds to 134 pounds in the year he was a prisoner. But at least there was news from the smuggled radio. After dark, an officer would come to each barracks and read the BBC daily war news.

The Long March and Liberation

On January 21, 1945, Jim began the Long March from Szubin to Parchim. He was one of a trio, marching with Thomas J. "Tommy" Bugg and Johnny Kowosky (spelling of last name uncertain). They shared their blankets and slept three abreast, rotating positions every hour to take turns in the middle position, trying to keep from freezing in the night. Jim suffered frostbite to both his hands and his feet. Jim was the scavenger for the trio, finding whatever he could to supplement their meager rations. Carrots and potatoes meant for animal feed were common items. His daughter Jeanie Betts Cospere recalled the following story:

I remember once he told me while on their march they were going through a village. He felt a tap on his shoulder and a man from

the village was motioning him to come in his home. He led him down the hall and he and probably his daughter sat my father down and fed him a bowl of soup. He said he wished he could go back and thank them for that bowl of soup. When he told me this story, I remember thinking to myself “big deal, a bowl of soup”. Needless to say he had never mentioned that they were not being fed on a regular basis if at all while they were on the march. ...I then realized that that simple bowl of soup was comparable to a king’s buffet to him at the time. Post Oflag 64 Item, 2007—Summer, p 15.

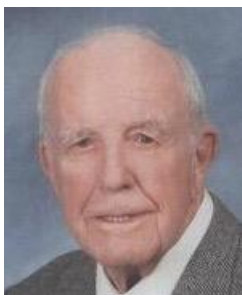
From Parchim Jim was transported by rail to Oflag XIII-B, Hammelburg. He was there during the “Abe Baum” raid and spent a couple of days of freedom roaming the area. Unable to find a way to reach the Allied lines, he (and many others) returned to the Oflag. This Oflag was promptly evacuated and Jim found himself in a boxcar again, destination Stalag VII-A near Moosburg. In Nuremburg, after a night sleeping on the ground, Jim joined a march group and walked the rest of the way to Stalag VII-A. On April 29, 1945, Stalag VII-A was liberated by Allied forces.

Return Home and Post War Career

Jim was processed through Camp Lucky Strike in France and returned to the United States by ship, landing in Boston, Massachusetts. He visited his family in New York and then was assigned to Camp Wolters, Mineral Wells, Texas, a large Army training center. His friend and Long March companion Tommy Buggs was assigned to Camp Wolters as well. Tommy introduced Jim to Mary Jo St. Clair of Mineral Wells on June 28, 1945. They were married on April 26, 1946.



Jim chose to make the United States Army his career. Shortly after his marriage, he was sent to Adak, Aleutian Islands, for five months. The family was living in Beaumont, Texas in 1950 when daughter Janice was born. Jo Ann was born in 1952 in Meridian, Texas, and Jeanie in 1954, while Jim was stationed in Nuremberg, Germany. Jim served over 20 years, retiring in 1957 with the rank of major.



After retirement from the military, Jim became a civilian employee of the United States Air Force, becoming the Supervisor on Military Contracts. This job took him and his family to Fort Worth, Texas, to Alamogordo, New Mexico, and to Wichita, Kansas, where he retired, again, in 1979. He and Mary Jo first tried living in Fort Worth, Texas, but then moved to Clifton, Texas to be closer to family. While in

Alamogordo, in 1961, Jim joined the Church of Christ, an important part of his life from that point onward.

Mary Jo died in 1990. Jim died on April 4, 2013, and was buried in the Meridian, Texas, cemetery with full military honors. In his war time journal, Jim wrote the following:

From my war time experience I have learned quite a bit. What a great country we live in and the peace and freedom we enjoy. The good Lord was with me every step of the way and for that I am most grateful. In reminiscing I am reminded of one of my favorite hymns "There is a God. He is alive. In Him we live and we survive." How true.



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