

2LT Rupert D. Starr

1922

(Age 101 as of 2023)

EARLY YEARS

Rupert, the youngest of three brothers was born and raised in Mount Sterling, Ohio. Known then as now as village, Rupert's father was the village dentist and his mother was a teacher of home economics and world history at the local high school. Rupert graduated from this hometown high school in 1940 and was admitted to Ohio University, his major, Business Administration. It was the policy during this time period that male college students join ROTC and in January 1945, just six months before he was to graduate, he enlisted voluntarily into active duty with the U.S. Army.

MILITARY LIFE

Sent to Ft. Benning for Infantry School, he was commissioned as a 2LT and assigned to the 106st Infantry Division.

Shortly thereafter, as war encompassed the whole world, Starr, a liaison officer with the 422nd Regiment of the 106th, boarded a troop carrier on the East Coast in October 1944, bound for England then to Lt. Vith, Belgium.

Germany was losing the war but in a desperate military effort, the German Armies engaged the Allies in one of the most desperate and costly battles of the war—the Battle of the Bulge (also called Belgium Bulge or the Battle of the Ardennes). Having lost the winning edge of pushing Allied forces off the beaches at Normandy, Hitler's army then surprised the American forces in the Ardennes forest area. The battles raged from 16 – 25 December 1945. The prize would include the capture and occupation of Antwerp and its highly accessible harbor.

Subzero temperatures and mounted snow drifts ensured difficult battle positions on both sides. These conditions, combined with the cloud cover, prevented Allied air strikes against the enemy.

‘The attack was a total surprise and at first achieved astonishing success. However, the Americans around the crossroads town of Bastogne created a bristling hedgehog position, and the offensive slowly began to lose steam. Eisenhower sent Patton to relieve Bastogne, whose commander, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, had answered a German surrender demand with the now famous laconic reply, “Nuts”. What became known as the Battle of the Bulge, because of its initial dent in the Allied line, petered out in a succession of sharp counter attacks. The

Germans, faced with no alternative to disaster, drew back inside the Reich in January, 1945.' (Sulzberger, pp. 485 +)

Rupert was among those soldiers sent to reinforce the weary, wounded, and deceased who were holding Allied positions. Their specific mission with the 106th Infantry was to relieve the 2nd Infantry Division in their defense opposite German front lines.

According to Rupert, often called Twink because of the twinkle in his eyes, *'My education may have well saved my life.'* This statement is based on his assignment by the Division Colonel that his college courses included his studies in Business Administration; thus, he was transferred from the front lines to Division Headquarters (HD) 30 miles away where he was given the responsibilities of a Captain as Regimental Administration Officer.

Twink was to retrace this path a short time later when informed that DH had lost contact with the 106th. With knowledge of its location, he and his driver used his jeep on a suicide mission to reestablish contact with DH, which was completed. However, while preparing for his return to HD, German units had surrounded the 106th and communications were cut off again. At Officers Call that night, Twink volunteered to risk another suicide mission to HD concerning the situation. Traveling under the cover of darkness in thick woods, he located the US 7th Armored Division and was with them for the night before a dawn departure when he noted the approach of German soldiers. Declaring, *'I am not surrendering,'* Twink was headed out of the encampment but was quickly captured.

CAPTURE AND CAPTIVITY

Daylight found Rupert and fellow soldiers walking toward Germany from Belgium. Boxcars called "forty and eight" (used during WWI to carry either 40 men or 8 horses) was their next mode of travel. They were crammed inside with 100 men per car—hardly enough room to stand, much less sit—so fellow POWs traded turns. They spent the next eight days with no food or water, barely surviving and praying for relief. When asked by the interviewer about the morale among the soldiers, Rupert recalled that it was very high. *'We were young men—21-22 years old and because of our army training and youth we were strong.'*

Twink would spend the next four months in German prison camps, one of them being Stalag 4-B in Germany (Stalag for enlisted men). They camped for one night and were given a mug for their use the next morning. It is German made with the date 1940 stamped on the bottom and decorated with a swastika. He kept it through his imprisonment and now uses it as a shaving mug. The next day, they were also given a piece of cheese, meat and a teaspoon of sugar. Preparing for the next train ride, the officers were separated from the enlisted men and 85 officers boarded a better boxcar than the one they arrived in. This one contained a heating stove and eight bunks with straw for sleeping. They were also given German Officer rations, but

Rupert stated that these were meager as the Germans were running out of funds with which to feed even their own officers. Arriving in Poland, the 85 American officers were placed at Oflag 64-Z because the main camp, Oflag 64, was overcrowded with the arrival of other prisoners from the Battle of the Bulge.

THE LONG MARCH

As the Russian armies advanced and the Germans retreated, POWs in Oflag 64-Z were notified that they were being walked back to Germany from Poland. The Schokken group, as they were called marched out of Oflag 64-Z with American officers and orderlies, a cadre of 100 Italian Generals, 5 Italian Admirals, and 1 Italian Field Marshal. The winter was harsh with temperatures below zero. Starr remembered that he wore two shirts, two pairs of pants and mittens which kept his hands from freezing and sleeping in a farmer's barn with potatoes being offered—a standard and much appreciated supper. Eventually, they arrived at Wugarten, a march of 122 kilometers in eight days. They were boarded in a school, away from other POWs, arriving on March 15. The Americans sailed on the HMT Circassia on 25 March, arriving in Boston Harbor on April 20, 1945.

AWARDS

In recognition of his bravery and courage within battle field conditions, 2LT Rupert Starr received a Bronze Star and a Combat Infantry Badge. For his own book collection, Rupert purchased a book on the Ardennes Battle for \$200 as the one in the Ohio University could not be checked out. *'I am quoted on one whole page, and it is important for family history. They do not even teach history in school anymore. My mother taught world history and she would not be pleased.'*

RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Homecoming was a very special time. Rupert remembers hugging his mother as they both cried for joy and he said to her, *'Every day is a free day and I will use it to accomplish something.'*

After his release from military service, Rupert Starr returned to Ohio University and graduated in 1946. After brief employment with Procter and Gamble, he became a successful real estate broker under the mentorship of John Galbreath (also from Mount Sterling)—a well-known commercial property developer and owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Being service and civil minded, Starr served as President of the Columbus Board of Realtors, including senior advisory positions on many business and civic organizations in Columbus, Ohio. Other activities included those with the Log Cabin

Republicans and as a member of the First Congregational Church UCC Columbus.

In 1954 Rupert met interior designer Allan Wingfield and they spent 53 devoted years together until Allan's death in 2007 at the age of 80. Starr was an LGBT (an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) activist and appeared in a documentary film, *Courage Under Fire*, by Patrick Sammon which supported the repeal of DADT (Don't Ask Don't Tell), the 1993 policy overturned in 2011.

Continuing his active life, Rupert "Twink" Starr was chosen to be the 2009 Grand Marshall of the Stonewall Columbus Pride Parade for his activism and honorable service to his country during WWII.

SOURCES

Veterans History Project Interviews. Subject: Rupert Starr

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