



Thursday, December 25, 2014 www.gainesville.com 75¢

Islamic State captures coalition pilot

The Associated Press

AMMAN, Jordan — Islamic State militants captured a Jordanian pilot after his warplane crashed in Syria while carrying out airstrikes Wednesday, making him the first foreign military member to fall into the extremists' hands since an international coalition launched its bombing campaign against the group months ago.

Images of the pilot being pulled out of a lake and hustled away by masked jihadis underscored the risks for the U.S. and its Arab and European allies in the air campaign.

The capture — and the potential hostage situation — presented a nightmare scenario for Jordan, which vowed to continue its fight against the group that has overrun large parts of Syria and

Iraq and beheaded foreign captives.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

Jordan's military said only that the warplane went down in Syria. A coalition official told The Associated Press that there were no immediate indications it was shot down. The official, who was not authorized to discuss the episode publicly and spoke on condition of

anonymity, said the pilot was in an F-16 fighter and was able to eject.

But Jordanian Information Minister Mohammad Momani told the AP that the plane was believed to have been shot down.

"It is our expectation that the plane went down because of fire from the ground, but it is difficult to confirm that,

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WORLD WAR II, 70 YEARS LATER

A CHRISTMAS AT WAR

Area veterans tell their stories of finding themselves far from any peace on Earth



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A photograph of Frank Towers at a farmhouse in Beverce, Belgium, on Dec. 24, 1944.

By Michael Stone
Correspondent

Soon around the Nation
The children would play
And grown-ups would celebrate
On a bright Christmas day
They all enjoyed freedom
Each month and all year
Because of Marines
Like this one lying here

— James Schmidt

The jeep carries Lt. Frank Towers, the driver, and Towers' two guards along the shortcut: a logging trail that takes them directly over the hill instead of the circuitous route around.

For 27-year-old Towers, a liaison officer in the National Guard, it's one of many trips from 30th Division headquarters, four miles in the rear, to Malmédy, Belgium, named from the Latin A malo mundarum, "the place of bad confluence," where floodwaters long ago leaped over banks and pounded into the city.

There in Malmédy, home to 3,000, is a hotel, the setting of a big feast to come. Soldiers holding positions around the town are to be rotated in for the treat, a break during this special time from canned meat, chocolate bars, powdered drinks and cereal bars — some of the ingredients in a balanced but unlike-home K ration box.

At the hill's summit, Towers and his men hear planes soaring overhead



DOUG FINGER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

sometime near 3 p.m., nothing unusual for a war-torn continent. A total of 18 U.S. heavy bombers. A wonderful sight to behold. The Germans, who eight days earlier threw no fewer than 200,000 of their countrymen forward in a desperate final offensive, are going to catch hell.

But these bomb-bay doors open far too early to hit any Nazi targets, and the bombs fall out of the planes' bellies too early, as well.

The German lines are indeed bulging forward and are pounding within a mile of Malmédy's doorstep, just as they are 30 miles to the southwest at the encircled town of Bastogne. But

both towns, in the face of invasion, remain in American hands, as they have since September.

The lead plane drops smoke into Malmédy to mark the target, prompting a captain to yell "Take cover!" from inside the town. Towers watches helplessly from atop the hill.

"I saw those bomb-bay doors open. 'What the hell? They're dropping them too damn early.' I could see the bombs drop out, and they went right down in front of me and right down in the valley to Malmédy. Wiped out the center of the city."

In the confusion of the surprise German advance, word was spreading

Editor's note: Seventy Christmases ago, American soldiers, many fresh out of high school, were struggling for survival against a darkness that would not relent, even in the face of great loss. In Europe, Germany launched a surprise attack mainly through Belgium's southeastern forests that would become the bloodiest battle in the European Theater. In the Pacific, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and other engagements still needed to be won, at great costs. As North Central Florida pauses today to celebrate, two Alachua County veterans recount their memories of Christmas during World War II and beyond, reflecting on how the difficulties of commemorating the holiday in wartime have given it extra meaning today.



ROB MACK/STAFF GRAPHIC

WWII Army veteran Frank Towers poses at his home in Brooker on Dec. 18.

that the Nazis had taken back Malmédy. Unfortunately for the Americans, today isn't the only friendly lashing from the air: The day before also brought a misplaced strike, and the day after will, too. The new name of U.S. air forces: the American Luftwaffe. From today on, Towers will duck upon their sight.

In this friendly offensive, the explosions spark fires, build craters, burst water pipes and shred buildings, forming an early grave around civilians and GIs alike. Two hundred or more civilians. A number never tallied for the Yanks. Then and later, this

CHRISTMAS on Page 8A

TODAY: Not as warm. 15% chance of rain.	HIGH 66	LOW 41	TOMORROW: High: 71 Low: 53 10% chance of rain. 5-day forecast, 8B	BUSINESS 3B CLASSIFIED 7D COMICS 5D	CROSSWORD 2D LOCAL 1B LOTTERY 2A	INDEX OBITUARIES 4B OPINION 7B PEOPLE 2A	SPORTS 1C SUDOKU 3D TELEVISION 3D	© 2014 The Gainesville Sun Gainesville, Florida, Vol. 142, No. 161, five sections	For Home delivery call: 378-1416 Toll Free: 1-800- 443-9493	
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A CHRISTMAS AT WAR: WORLD WAR II, 70 YEARS LATER

CHRISTMAS: A close view of utter destruction

Continued from 1A

bombing of Malmedy is a story seldom told or heard.

From his hilltop position, Towers takes a few photos, black-and-white snapshots of what could be mistaken for a forest fire, before rushing into the town and directing those in need of medical attention.

All is not lost; buildings are spared. A church. A hospital. The city hall, headquarters for the 120th Regiment, Towers' original destination. The landmark 18th-century cathedral loses only its windows.

But not the hotel, and not the three kitchen teams inside, and not the turkey dinners that were to be served in the Christmas feast.

"That hotel was completely obliterated," remembers Towers, now 97, from his quiet, country home north of Gainesville, where war keepsakes dot walls and shelves. Towers' wife — also a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother — is busy in another room.

There's a knot below the left corner of Towers' mouth, a reminder of the German mortar that landed on a nearby tank and earned him the Purple Heart.

"There were 25 men in that group in the kitchen (making the Christmas meal). Completely evaporated. They never found a trace of them. So we ended up eating K rations. There was no turkey left. Everything was wiped out."

The mother of Pfc. Earl Bohrer, a cook's helper, received this, among other consolatory words, six months after the bombing: "It may be of comfort to you to know that the blast of the bomb was such that it is evident that he died quickly and painlessly."

This was Dec. 24, 1944, Christmas Eve, amid the cold, close-quartered Battle of the Bulge, a hell on earth. What was to be a reminder to front-liners of the hope, joy, goodwill and peace that the holiday should represent, but was shattered in a storm of accidental American infernos and the final breaths of Hitler's Germany, 70 years ago.

The United States had its last somewhat normal Christmas a few weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, before the truest reality of war, a lengthening casualty list, had fallen into rows of white crosses and six-pointed stars.

After the 1941 holidays, it could be hard to find the spirit of the season in the States. Bright cities forced into darkness from blackout laws. Rationing of material goods needed at the line, with some even fully prohibited from consumer purchase. Japanese-Americans spending three Christmases in prison camps. Service banners hanging in mothers' windows with hopeful blue stars and heart-wrenching gold ones — another casket for a son lost too soon.

By September 1944, American hopes are centered on victory and heading home by Christmas.

"The majority of the American soldiers and officers, and Allied soldiers and officers, thought the war was pretty much winding down," describes Leo Barron, author of "No Silent Night: The Christmas Battle for Bastogne."

But such hopes are shattered on Dec. 16, 1944, when the Battle of the Bulge takes the American lines by surprise. Fueled by propaganda that hasn't let go of the thought of victory, the Germans push forward with their last great offensive, primarily in the forests of southeastern Belgium.

For the Americans, this counter is a sudden realization that there's still a lot more fighting, a lot more dying to come. The month-plus-long effort to repulse the Nazis comes at a cost of almost 20,000 American lives and many more captured and wounded, combining for the most U.S. losses of any battle during the war.

"If it hadn't been for the fighting, that would have been ... the most beautiful Christmas," one U.S. soldier wrote during the Bulge. "The rolling hills, the snow-covered fields and mountains, and the tall, majestic pines and firs really make it a Christmas I'll never

forget in spite of the fighting."

Death doesn't block the fighters from re-creating the pleasant yuletide of yesteryear. In bunkers, groups of soldiers huddle together for prayer and song. Makeshift Christmas trees and wreaths, adorned with gloves, bottles and cans as substitute ornaments, stand beside foxholes and hang in hospitals.

At the front line, white blankets the ground from a Dec. 22 snowstorm, and the cold Yanks hear German soldiers singing "Silent Night." Risking his life, one German runs from his unit, confined to a farmhouse, to fetch a Christmas tree. But all Deutschland action is not as warming.

"There's that famous story from World War I where the soldiers got together to celebrate Christmas Day from both sides," Barron details. "That did not happen in the Second World War. Nothing even really close to it. ... The Germans bombed Bastogne on Christmas Eve night."

It is apparent the war isn't going to write its final chapter before Christmas 1944. So soldiers are still guaranteed one gift: the mail supply line.

A year earlier, in 1943, state-side families were handed the promise that their mail would make it to the recipient by Christmas Eve as long as it was mailed by Oct. 31. An extended shopping season. A tradition into today.

For Christmas 1944, U.S. women and men in Europe are graced with 30 million letters and packages, crammed aboard freighters with ammunition, food and other supplies. For the first time, ships are packed with nothing but mail.

When the service members write back, their return address reads "Somewhere in Germany."

There have been several, not countless, books about Christmas during World War II, filled with photos of evergreen trees and soldiers drinking coffee in snow-surrounded foxholes. The biggest problem about gaining a firsthand approach to wartime holidays is that most vets will tell you they don't have anything close to a recollection.

"Some guys do remember it, if something special was done on that day," Barron explains. "And then in other cases, because nothing special was done on that day, it all kind of runs together. If you were in the foxhole on the perimeter, there really wasn't much you did other than the hot meal."

The GIs say they instead were too busy overcoming the "Krauts" and the "Japs," clinging to what life they could find in the shelling and mud and beaches, watching their buddies get ripped through and blown all to pieces.

Towers remembers, because his 1944 Christmas falls in line with tragedy before his eyes.

But Pfc. Bob Gasche doesn't. At Camp Pendleton in southeastern California during the 1944 holidays, Gasche was eating turkey, probably, and maybe some caroling, and "drinking, yeah, drinking took place."

Despite such assumptions, "it wasn't really a big celebration of any kind," remembers Gasche, who enlisted in the Marines in March 1943, shortly after his 18th birthday. "I don't recollect it at all."

Preparing for combat and removing the Japanese threat in the Pacific, where there are no snowstorms of the season, is instead what matters. Island X will come to matter.

The boys of Gasche's 5th Marine Division, part of an eventual force of 110,000 Marines, are on their way to this mystery place in the Pacific in February 1945, waiting in long chow lines, stacked five high in canvas bunks.

"Now hear this, now hear this," the intercom often demands. "Clean and sweep down here and aft."

February 18. The men in arms know tomorrow will be combat, death.

"I was so tense," Gasche recalls, "I couldn't even think of home. And then I realized that my home was the squad of Marines I was with. That was my home."

Aboard the USS Darke,



PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY FRANK TOWERS



ROB MACK/Staff graphic

Gasche is among the young patriots making pacts: that the parents of the fallen one will be visited by the survivor. Later, Pfc. Harvis McDonald won't need to visit Mr. and Mrs. Gasche in Coral Gables, but Gasche will have to make the trip to the farm country of Alabama, welcomed but amid heartbreak.

This Island X has been bombed for 72 straight days, so "some officers were saying, 'Well, there won't be much left there; there couldn't be with all the bombardment.'" Others are circumspect. And rightfully so.

Waiting, burrowed in caves and tunnels, are about 25,000 ruthless soldiers, most of whom will take their own lives over surrendering. They are well organized under their deft commander, Gen. Kuribayashi, who tells each man he must kill 10 Americans before the end of his own life.

February 19. They arrive at the island before dawn. Gasche is well trained and patriotic. Ready, as the other Marines are, to follow an order that could mean the end.

Anchored off the island, following the traditional steak-and-eggs breakfast, Gasche is not in the morning's first waves but prepares to head in during the afternoon, while the battle is still fresh. He climbs down 40 feet on the shipside cargo net into a rocking Higgins boat, holding 36 Marines.

Zooming across sea to chaos, the nervous men around Gasche clinch their M1 Garand rifles, hoping for fortitude in the steel.

"I saw guys that I felt they were just searching inside themselves, looking for something that would give them some strength. Most of those guys didn't make it."

The coast looks a mix of junkyard and graveyard. Kuribayashi had allowed for a more peaceful settlement to pour onto the beach before unleashing instruments of execution. American jeeps and trucks and tanks rest helpless, mired down in coffee-ground, traction-less sand. There are bodies, and maybe worse, body parts.

But the most horrific, the most vivid in Gasche's mind after 70 years, is a specific Marine, still moving, rolling, but only because he had been cut down at the shoreline, where waves give him the motion his heart no longer can.

No time to tend to the bodies of fallen brothers. As Gasche lands, the beach remains under pressure by gunfire and mortars. His orders are straightforward: Get off the beach.

Easier said than done. The Marines want to fight back, want to use their Garands, but they can't spot their killers, hidden in pillboxes and bunkers and caves and tunnels. The invasion quickly turns into a battle of inches, Marines dying at every progress.

This was Gasche's welcome to



ABOVE: Malmedy, Belgium, in smoke and flames immediately after the first bombing by U.S. heavy bombers in error on Dec. 23, 1944.

AT RIGHT: 1st Lt. Frank Towers in Francorchamps, Belgium, on Jan. 1, 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge.

Island X. Eight square miles of volcano. lo-to. Sulfur Island. Iwo Jima.

■■■

Atop Mount Suribachi, on Feb. 23, 1945, AP photographer Joe Rosenthal snaps the photo that would become the symbol of American determination and sacrifice from the war. In recognition of the raising of the Stars and Stripes after four days on Iwo Jima, soldiers shout, guns fire into the air, ships off the coast sound their horns.

Gasche is very glad — one of only two happy moments on Iwo, the other being the arrival of his mother's fudge. But there's no time to lay down arms and celebrate, for the battle is far from won.

"We were pretty busy, moving up and trying to stay alive and survive."

Gasche's combat clock in WWII would total only two weeks, what he considers his worst time ever "because death was imminent." Every day, there's a close call, a bullet or grenade at life's doorstep that could kidnap him into darkness without warning.

At the base of Suribachi, a mortar shell falls next to his and a fellow Marine's foxhole; the soft, black volcanic ash absorbs the whole explosion, peppering their rifles, hair and face.

Again in a foxhole, a yellow and black Japanese grenade lands two feet from his upper body; he ducks just in time as the explosion blows overhead.

"Gasche, move out!" a sergeant yells — an order Gasche unquestioningly follows, his legs moving and zigzagging without hesitation. He scrambles forward 100 yards — the longest of distances on Iwo — to advance the Marines' line.

To his left and to his right, no one. He's alone before the enemy — for maybe 15 minutes, the deepest Marine into Japanese territory.

"My running through — and not getting stitched — is where the line was started, and we stayed there for two or three days where I had started to dig in." As Gasche shovels out a new foxhole, a Nambu machine gun opens up, punching holes in both the canteens he had set on the ground. He dives to safety, and still alive, his first thought is anger not because of the bodily threat but that he's now waterless in a tropical sauna.

Gasche also swings the reaper's scythe toward the Japanese: In his sights 200 yards away is an officer, in full uniform, holding a map case and binoculars, plain as day. Headshot. No hesitation or guilt for taking a life.

"I had no remorse. I was looking for more targets. I would have gladly shot them if I had saw any more. I had seen too many of my buddies die right

there in my outfit."

Good fortunes, though, don't last long on Iwo. Shrapnel from a Japanese mortar finally sneaks its way into Gasche's Marine but fragile skin.

He's not looking good. The bleeding from his gut persuades the stretcher bearers to slip on a green tag for "Critical."

He's carried to the beach, covered with other ransacked American bodies, and eventually gets to the USS Hope, where the doctor shoves a cotton wad laced with ether in his face.

After a couple weeks of two-hour sleep rotations and being attacked even when pulled into reserves, Gasche finally gets some rest and peace.

■■■

The holiday season is a time for Towers, not Jewish himself, to send out Hanukkah greetings to Jewish people around the world, in Australia, Israel, Switzerland and so forth. He has contacted 275 of them at least once, holding onto a unique bond.

The greetings are nothing fancy: some actual mailings to those he's met in person, but mostly a simple "Happy Chanukah" over email to those he hasn't. Many write back, thanking Towers for thinking of them.

"They came up from the ashes; they had absolutely nothing; they were nobody. Probably 90, 95 percent of them have risen up to become professional people and part of our culture and our society. It's rewarding to me to see that happen."

En route to take the central German city of Magdeburg on the Elbe River, Towers' 30th Division goes through the small town of Farsleben unopposed. On the other side of town, on April 13, 1945, they spot a train with maybe 40 cattle cars sitting idle. The Nazi train crew has not remained to confront the Americans.

One group of prisoners, somehow outside the train, approaches the Yanks, cautiously. Some know broken English, and they're able to relay the situation. All 40-some cattle cars, it turns out, are hauling prisoners, 2,500 of them, and most of the cars are securely locked. The prisoners are jammed in like sardines, no exaggeration, because sitting or laying isn't physically possible.

The GIs work to free the prisoners, some of whom are, miraculously, in good shape. But many others, hardly able to talk or move, collapse out of the cars as zombies in a near-death state. "They were next to skeletons," Towers recalls, "and they just fell out the doors."

They were starved by the German guards, who offered a cup of soup once a day made of water and, if they were lucky, one or two peelings from a potato, turnip or sugar beet.

A CHRISTMAS AT WAR: WORLD WAR II, 70 YEARS LATER



DOUG FINGER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

WWII Marine Corps veteran Bob Gasche poses on the porch of his northwest Gainesville home on Dec. 18. He is seated next to flags he's collected for his disposal program.



PROVIDED BY WWII MARINE CORPS.

ABOVE: A photo of U.S. troops taking a beach on Iwo Jima with Mount Suribachi in the background.

AT RIGHT: A photo of WWII Marine Corps veteran Bob Gasche.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB GASCHE

The car openings are accompanied by a putrid smack equivalent to leaking sewer and strewn trash in an unkempt morgue. The prisoners have been riding inside for six days, with only one bucket per car for a bathroom. The bucket fills quickly, and those on the opposite side can't maneuver the bodies to reach it. So waste falls in stance.

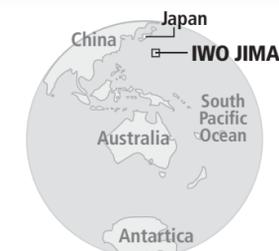
"If you could imagine days of that — the stench that came out of those cars ..." About 20 dead bodies split among the cars don't help, either. GIs whip around and release their stomachs.

Separated by language, nationality and often faith, the

emerging survivors want to show their appreciation by embracing their liberators, but the soldiers resist. There's no way of knowing what diseases they might have — indeed, typhoid and typhus — and lice and fleas are crawling on their clothes and hair.

For Towers and the other men of the 30th, this isn't something for which they are ready. Killing, certainly, and their respective jobs. But being the first contact in the transition to a free world from slave labor, starvation, abuse and mass executions?

"Back in the States, we never heard the word 'concentration camp'; we never heard the word



'Holocaust.' We heard a little bit of rumblings that the Jews were being mistreated in Germany. There were just little small articles in the newspaper about the Jews being not tortured but mistreated."

The Americans' only prior experience with Jewish people in concentration camps was Buchenwald 90 miles southward, liberated on April 11, only two days prior to the train. This gave little time for word to spread among American forces or for the full extent of the Holocaust to be known.

The decision is made to shuttle the prisoners to the U.S.-controlled city of Harsleben, where they can clean up, receive medical attention and stay in the hospital, barracks or houses. Towers is part of the convoy of maybe 50 vehicles making two or three trips to transport all 2,500.

The Red Cross is waiting with clothes collected from the town, to replace the prisoners' covered in insects, urine and feces. Showers are of course needed, too. But there's nervous hesitation from the prisoners, aware by now that showers had

become their faith's worst enemy, spitting not water but the poison Zyklon B.

Servicemen strip down to their underwear and let the water run over themselves, showing the afraid they aren't being murdered. The freed prisoners have their filthy rags burned, and for the lice and fleas, they're dusted with DDT, its adverse health effects not yet known.

And so begins their road to healing, physical in the short term and mentally for life, these Jewish prisoners who were being transported to Teresienstadt concentration camp from Bergen-Belsen ahead of the advancing Allies.

Growing to be scientists, doctors, lawyers and engineers, the 275 survivors Towers has made contact with from the train's original 2,500 tell him one motto kept them empowered through it all: "Tomorrow is going to be better. Tomorrow is going to be better."



Christmas Day 2014. For Gasche, a retired history teacher living in Gainesville, it means traveling to his daughter's in Ocoee to exchange gifts with a dozen or so family members. His wife, Carol, has prepared ostrich-sized eggshells to give as gifts to each child there. Last night, Christmas Eve, the couple attended a candle-lit ceremony of Silent Night, Holy Night at Gainesville's Faith Presbyterian Church, where Gasche, active in church most of his life, is the last attending founding member from 30-some years ago. A week before, Dec. 17, Gasche celebrated his 90th birthday.

Gasche joins the many veterans — of Iwo and the Bulge and other World War II battlefields around the world — who have already rolled into their 90s, the final stages of their lives. Today, roughly a million GIs, mostly teenagers and 20-somethings then, remain from the original 16 million participants, more than 400,000 of whom never made it home.

There is only a small handful of WWII veterans groups left in Alachua County. The biggest, the D-Day veterans who meet at Conestoga's Restaurant in the city of Alachua once a month for lunch and chatter, has fewer than 20 members, down from its peak of 63 in 1997.

"Today, it's an expanded membership of World War II vets (instead of just those in D-Day) because they're all passing away so fast," explains the group's organizer, Bryan Walker, 54, who isn't a veteran himself but helped found the

How we got the story

Much of the historical information about Malmedy, Belgium, came from the city's website, written in English. Specifics from the Malmedy bombing not provided by Towers were found in Associated Press and Chicago Tribune archives. The letter to Earl Bohrer's mother is posted to a website commemorating the National Guard's 30th Infantry Division, OldHickory30th.com. Many of the specifics of wartime Christmas came from the Library of Congress book "I'll Be Home for Christmas," including the description of the snow, fields and mountains from a U.S. soldier. Some specifics about the Battle of Iwo Jima came from the Army's website. Surviving veteran totals are from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

group because it was just "something I wanted to do."

Gasche and Towers, both members, were in attendance for the November lunch, which brought the surprise of being free, thanks to Conestoga's owner.

For Gasche — a leader of one of the other local WWII groups, the Iwo Trio — age and retirement certainly haven't succeeded in bringing him to a halt. A bulging bag of American flags, noticeably used, sits on a bench on his front porch, part of a program that collects such flags for proper disposal. There's also the Marine-led Toys for Tots program at Christmas. Though not currently active in the program, Gasche once helped local Marines in collecting new toys for needy children, assembling them at a warehouse, dividing them by appropriate gender and age, and giving a bag full each to several hundred Alachua County children.

"It is very heartwarming to see the looks in their eyes, and sometimes tears, when they get that bag of toys," he says. "It's something I feel we have the right to be very proud of: to help needy children in this manner and make their Christmas really a Christmas."

Perhaps most importantly, at least from a historical perspective, Gasche still tours the country, telling his story to schools, reporters and other groups. He spent a year in Korea, too, but that was just cold, nothing compared to his two weeks on Iwo.

He's had the opportunity to return to the island, all expenses paid. But to him, seeing the positions of 1945's foxholes and machine-gun nests, it would only be reliving combat, death. No catharsis. No enjoyment. "I realized, no, I cannot. I lost too many buddies in that battle. It could not occur for me to undergo the trauma of returning to that island where I had been so close to death."

Others have gone back, even stood on Mount Suribachi and shook hands with descendants of Japanese soldiers who looked down their sights and pulled the trigger.

"I would be hesitant; many are not," Gasche says. "It changed so much. It's a different world. But the memories do linger."

Lingering too are fragments from the Japanese mortar that got him the "Critical" pass off Iwo, once even triggering an airport metal detector in Atlanta.

Living through the bloodiest battle in Marine history, he considers a survivable blow to the stomach lucky, as lucky as such can be. A hanging flag on the front of his house, military and American stickers across the back of his truck, a "Proud to be an American" sweatshirt shielding his arching upper body, his patriotism is unrelenting now, as it was in 1945 even after he was hit.

"Here are young men facing fire that dealt death," Gasche explains, "and yet when the word came out, 'OK, move out,' they moved out and into that fire where there's a Nambu machine gun and an Arisaka rifle — whatever it was, they did what had to be done."

Christmas or not. But today, these last veterans of World War II can have a hot meal to remember because of the family and peace around them, not the troubles that once roped the harmonious occasion of Christmas into a fury of prolonged battle and blood, 70 years ago.

A World War II Christmas, 70 Years Later

Published: Thursday, December 25, 2014 at 6:01 a.m.

Editor's note: Seventy Christmases ago, American soldiers, many fresh out of high school, were struggling for survival against a darkness that would not relent, even in the face of great loss. In Europe, Germany launched a surprise attack mainly through Belgium's southeastern forests that would become the bloodiest battle in the European Theater. In the Pacific, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and other engagements still needed to be won, at great costs. As North Central Florida pauses today to celebrate, two Alachua County veterans recount their memories of Christmas during World War II and beyond, reflecting on how the difficulties of commemorating the holiday in wartime have given it extra meaning today.



Doug Finger/The Gainesville Sun
 WWII Army Veteran Frank Towers poses at his home in Brooker, Fla., Thursday, December 18, 2014

By Michael Stone

Correspondent

Soon around the Nation

The children would play

And grown-ups would celebrate

On a bright Christmas day

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Each month and all year

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Like this one lying here

— James Schmidt

The jeep carries Lt. Frank Towers, the driver, and Towers' two guards along the shortcut: a logging trail that takes them directly over the hill instead of the circuitous route around.

For 27-year-old Towers, a liaison officer in the National Guard, it's one of many trips from 30th Division headquarters, four miles in the rear, to Malmedy, Belgium, named from the Latin *A malo mundarum*, "the place of bad confluence," where

floodwaters long ago leaped over banks and pounded into the city.

There in Malmedy, home to 3,000, is a hotel, the setting of a big feast to come. Soldiers holding positions around the town are to be rotated in for the treat, a break during this special time from canned meat, chocolate bars, powdered drinks and cereal bars — some of the ingredients in a balanced but unlike-home K ration box.

At the hill's summit, Towers and his men hear planes soaring overhead sometime near 3 p.m., nothing unusual for a war-torn continent. A total of 18 U.S. heavy bombers. A wonderful sight to behold. The Germans, who eight days earlier threw no fewer than 200,000 of their countrymen forward in a desperate final offensive, are going to catch hell.

But these bomb-bay doors open far too early to hit any Nazi targets, and the bombs fall out of the planes' bellies too early, as well.

The German lines are indeed bulging forward and are pounding within a mile of Malmedy's doorstep, just as they are 30 miles to the southwest at the encircled town of Bastogne. But both towns, in the face of invasion, remain in American hands, as they have since September.

The lead plane drops smoke into Malmedy to mark the target, prompting a captain to yell "Take cover!" from inside the town. Towers watches helplessly from atop the hill.

"I saw those bomb-bay doors open. 'What the hell? They're dropping them too damn early.' I could see the bombs drop out, and they went right down in front of me and right down in the valley to Malmedy. Wiped out the center of the city."

In the confusion of the surprise German advance, word was spreading that the Nazis had taken back Malmedy. Unfortunately for the Americans, today isn't the only friendly lashing from the air: The day before also brought a misplaced strike, and the day after will, too. The new name of U.S. air forces: the American Luftwaffe. From today on, Towers will duck upon their sight.

In this friendly offensive, the explosions spark fires, build craters, burst water pipes and shred buildings, forming an early grave around civilians and GIs alike. Two hundred or more civilians. A number never tallied for the Yanks. Then and later, this bombing of Malmedy is a story seldom told or heard.

From his hilltop position, Towers takes a few photos, black-and-white snapshots of what could be mistaken for a forest fire, before rushing into the town and directing those in need of medical attention.

All is not lost; buildings are spared. A church. A hospital. The city hall, headquarters for the 120th Regiment, Towers' original destination. The landmark 18th-century cathedral loses only its windows.

But not the hotel, and not the three kitchen teams inside, and not the turkey dinners that were to be served in the Christmas feast.

"That hotel was completely obliterated," remembers Towers, now 97, from his quiet, country home north of Gainesville, where war keepsakes dot walls and shelves. Towers' wife — also a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother — is busy in

another room.

There's a knot below the left corner of Towers' mouth, a reminder of the German mortar that landed on a nearby tank and earned him the Purple Heart.

"There were 25 men in that group in the kitchen (making the Christmas meal). Completely evaporated. They never found a trace of them. So we ended up eating K rations. There was no turkey left. Everything was wiped out."

The mother of Pfc. Earl Bohrer, a cook's helper, received this, among other consolatory words, six months after the bombing: "It may be of comfort to you to know that the blast of the bomb was such that it is evident that he died quickly and painlessly."

This was Dec. 24, 1944, Christmas Eve, amid the cold, close-quartered Battle of the Bulge, a hell on earth. What was to be a reminder to front-liners of the hope, joy, goodwill and peace that the holiday should represent, but was shattered in a storm of accidental American infernos and the final breaths of Hitler's Germany, 70 years ago.

The United States had its last somewhat normal Christmas a few weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, before the truest reality of war, a lengthening casualty list, had fallen into rows of white crosses and six-pointed stars.

After the 1941 holidays, it could be hard to find the spirit of the season in the States. Bright cities forced into darkness from blackout laws. Rationing of material goods needed at the line, with some even fully prohibited from consumer purchase. Japanese-Americans spending three Christmases in prison camps. Service banners hanging in mothers' windows with hopeful blue stars and heart-wrenching gold ones — another casket for a son lost too soon.

By September 1944, American hopes are centered on victory and heading home by Christmas.

"The majority of the American soldiers and officers, and Allied soldiers and officers, thought the war was pretty much winding down," describes Leo Barron, author of "No Silent Night: The Christmas Battle for Bastogne."

But such hopes are shattered on Dec. 16, 1944, when the Battle of the Bulge takes the American lines by surprise. Fueled by propaganda that hasn't let go of the thought of victory, the Germans push forward with their last great offensive, primarily in the forests of southeastern Belgium.

For the Americans, this counter is a sudden realization that there's still a lot more fighting, a lot more dying to come. The month-plus-long effort to repulse the Nazis comes at a cost of almost 20,000 American lives and many more captured and wounded, combining for the most U.S. losses of any battle during the war.

"If it hadn't been for the fighting, that would have been ... the most beautiful Christmas," one U.S. soldier wrote during the Bulge. "The rolling hills, the snow-covered fields and mountains, and the tall, majestic pines and firs really make it a Christmas I'll never forget in spite of the fighting."

Death doesn't block the fighters from re-creating the pleasant yuletide of yesteryear. In bunkers, groups of soldiers huddle together for prayer and song. Makeshift Christmas trees and wreaths, adorned with gloves, bottles and cans as substitute ornaments, stand beside foxholes and hang in hospitals.

At the front line, white blankets the ground from a Dec. 22 snowstorm, and the cold Yanks hear German soldiers singing "Silent Night." Risking his life, one German runs from his unit, confined to a farmhouse, to fetch a Christmas tree. But all Deutschland action is not as warming.

"There's that famous story from World War I where the soldiers got together to celebrate Christmas Day from both sides," Barron details. "That did not happen in the Second World War. Nothing even really close to it. ... The Germans bombed Bastogne on Christmas Eve night."

It is apparent the war isn't going to write its final chapter before Christmas 1944. So soldiers are still guaranteed one gift: the mail supply line.

A year earlier, in 1943, stateside families were handed the promise that their mail would make it to the recipient by Christmas Eve as long as it was mailed by Oct. 31. An extended shopping season. A tradition into today.

For Christmas 1944, U.S. women and men in Europe are graced with 30 million letters and packages, crammed aboard freighters with ammunition, food and other supplies. For the first time, ships are packed with nothing but mail.

When the service members write back, their return address reads "Somewhere in Germany."

There have been several, not countless, books about Christmas during World War II, filled with photos of evergreen trees and soldiers drinking coffee in snow-surrounded foxholes. The biggest problem about gaining a firsthand approach to wartime holidays is that most vets will tell you they don't have anything close to a recollection.

"Some guys do remember it, if something special was done on that day," Barron explains. "And then in other cases, because nothing special was done on that day, it all kind of runs together. If you were in the foxhole on the perimeter, there really wasn't much you did other than the hot meal."

The GIs say they instead were too busy overcoming the "Krauts" and the "Japs," clinging to what life they could find in the shelling and mud and beaches, watching their buddies get ripped through and blown all to pieces.

Towers remembers, because his 1944 Christmas falls in line with tragedy before his eyes.

But Pfc. Bob Gasche doesn't.

At Camp Pendleton in southeastern California during the 1944 holidays, Gasche was eating turkey, probably, and maybe some caroling, and "drinking, yeah, drinking took place."

Despite such assumptions, "it wasn't really a big celebration of any kind," remembers Gasche, who enlisted in the Marines in March 1943, shortly after his 18th birthday. "I don't recollect it at all."

Preparing for combat and removing the Japanese threat in the Pacific, where there are no snowstorms of the season, is instead what matters. Island X will come to matter.

The boys of Gasche's 5th Marine Division, part of an eventual force of 110,000 Marines, are on their way to this mystery place in the Pacific in February 1945, waiting in long chow lines, stacked five high in canvas bunks.

"Now hear this, now hear this," the intercom often demands. "Clean and sweep down fore and aft."

February 18. The men in arms know tomorrow will be combat, death.

"I was so tense," Gasche recalls, "I couldn't even think of home. And then I realized that my home was the squad of Marines I was with. That was my home."

Aboard the USS Darke, Gasche is among the young patriots making pacts: that the parents of the fallen one will be visited by the survivor. Later, Pfc. Harvis McDonald won't need to visit Mr. and Mrs. Gasche in Coral Gables, but Gasche will have to make the trip to the farm country of Alabama, welcomed but amid heartbreak.

This Island X has been bombed for 72 straight days, so "some officers were saying, 'Well, there won't be much left there; there couldn't be with all the bombardment.'" Others are circumspect. And rightfully so.

Waiting, burrowed in caves and tunnels, are about 25,000 ruthless soldiers, most of whom will take their own lives over surrendering. They are well organized under their deft commander, Gen. Kuribayashi, who tells each man he must kill 10 Americans before the end of his own life.

February 19. They arrive at the island before dawn. Gasche is well trained and patriotic. Ready, as the other Marines are, to follow an order that could mean the end.

Anchored off the island, following the traditional steak-and-eggs breakfast, Gasche is not in the morning's first waves but prepares to head in during the afternoon, while the battle is still fresh. He climbs down 40 feet on the shipside cargo net into a rocking Higgins boat, holding 36 Marines.

Zooming across sea to chaos, the nervous men around Gasche clinch their M1 Garand rifles, hoping for fortitude in the steel.

"I saw guys that I felt they were just searching inside themselves, looking for something that would give them some strength. Most of those guys didn't make it."

The coast looks a mix of junkyard and graveyard. Kuribayashi had allowed for a more peaceful settlement to pour onto the beach before unleashing instruments of execution. American jeeps and trucks and tanks rest helpless, mired down in coffee-ground, traction-less sand. There are bodies, and maybe worse, body parts.

But the most horrific, the most vivid in Gasche's mind after 70 years, is a specific Marine, still moving, rolling, but only because he had been cut down at the shoreline, where waves give him the motion his heart no longer can.

No time to tend to the bodies of fallen brothers. As Gasche lands, the beach remains under pressure by gunfire and mortars. His orders are straightforward: Get off the beach.

Easier said than done. The Marines want to fight back, want to use their Garands, but they can't spot their killers, hidden in pillboxes and bunkers and caves and tunnels. The invasion quickly turns into a battle of inches, Marines dying at every progress.

This was Gasche's welcome to Island X. Eight square miles of volcano. Iwo Jima. Sulfur Island. Iwo Jima.

Atop Mount Suribachi, on Feb. 23, 1945, AP photographer Joe Rosenthal snaps the photo that would become the symbol of American determination and sacrifice from the war. In recognition of the raising of the Stars and Stripes after four days on Iwo Jima, soldiers shout, guns fire into the air, ships off the coast sound their horns.

Gasche is very glad — one of only two happy moments on Iwo, the other being the arrival of his mother's fudge. But there's no time to lay down arms and celebrate, for the battle is far from won.

"We were pretty busy, moving up and trying to stay alive and survive."

Gasche's combat clock in WWII would total only two weeks, what he considers his worst time ever "because death was imminent." Every day, there's a close call, a bullet or grenade at life's doorstep that could kidnap him into darkness without warning.

At the base of Suribachi, a mortar shell falls next to his and a fellow Marine's foxhole; the soft, black volcanic ash absorbs the whole explosion, peppering their rifles, hair and face.

Again in a foxhole, a yellow and black Japanese grenade lands two feet from his upper body; he ducks just in time as the explosion blows overhead.

"Gasche, move out!" a sergeant yells — an order Gasche unquestioningly follows, his legs moving and zigzagging without hesitation. He scrambles forward 100 yards — the longest of distances on Iwo — to advance the Marines' line.

To his left and to his right, no one. He's alone before the enemy — for maybe 15 minutes, the deepest Marine into Japanese territory.

"My running through — and not getting stitched — is where the line was started, and we stayed there for two or three days where I had started to dig in." As Gasche shovels out a new foxhole, a Nambu machine gun opens up, punching holes in both the canteens he had set on the ground. He dives to safety, and still alive, his first thought is anger not because of the bodily threat but that he's now water-less in a tropical sauna.

Gasche also swings the reaper's scythe toward the Japanese: In his sights 200 yards away is an officer, in full uniform, holding a map case and binoculars, plain as day.

Headshot. No hesitation or guilt for taking a life.

"I had no remorse. I was looking for more targets. I would have gladly shot them if I had saw any more. I had seen too many of my buddies die right there in my outfit."

Good fortunes, though, don't last long on Iwo. Shrapnel from a Japanese mortar finally sneaks its way into Gasche's Marine but fragile skin.

He's not looking good. The bleeding from his gut persuades the stretcher bearers to slip on a green tag for "Critical."

He's carried to the beach, covered with other ransacked American bodies, and eventually gets to the USS Hope, where the doctor shoves a cotton wad laced with ether in his face.

After a couple weeks of two-hour sleep rotations and being attacked even when pulled into reserves, Gasche finally gets some rest and peace.

The holiday season is a time for Towers, not Jewish himself, to send out Hanukkah greetings to Jewish people around the world, in Australia, Israel, Switzerland and so forth. He has contacted 275 of them at least once, holding onto a unique bond.

The greetings are nothing fancy: some actual mailings to those he's met in person, but mostly a simple "Happy Chanukah" over email to those he hasn't. Many write back, thanking Towers for thinking of them.

"They came up from the ashes; they had absolutely nothing; they were nobody. Probably 90, 95 percent of them have risen up to become professional people and part of our culture and our society. It's rewarding to me to see that happen."

En route to take the central German city of Magdeburg on the Elbe River, Towers' 30th Division goes through the small town of Farsleben unopposed. On the other side of town, on April 13, 1945, they spot a train with maybe 40 cattle cars sitting idle. The Nazi train crew has not remained to confront the Americans.

One group of prisoners, somehow outside the train, approaches the Yanks, cautiously. Some know broken English, and they're able to relay the situation. All 40-some cattle cars, it turns out, are hauling prisoners, 2,500 of them, and most of the cars are securely locked. The prisoners are jammed in like sardines, no exaggeration, because sitting or laying isn't physically possible.

The GIs work to free the prisoners, some of whom are, miraculously, in good shape. But many others, hardly able to talk or move, collapse out of the cars as zombies in a near-death state. "They were next to skeletons," Towers recalls, "and they just fell out the doors."

They were starved by the German guards, who offered a cup of soup once a day made of water and, if they were lucky, one or two peelings from a potato, turnip or sugar beet.

The car openings are accompanied by a putrid smack equivalent to leaking sewer and strewn trash in an unkempt morgue. The prisoners have been riding inside for six days, with only one bucket per car for a bathroom. The bucket fills quickly, and those on the opposite side can't maneuver the bodies to reach it. So waste falls in stance.

"If you could imagine days of that — the stench that came out of those cars ..." About 20 dead bodies split among the cars don't help, either. GIs whip around and release their stomachs.

Separated by language, nationality and often faith, the emerging survivors want to show their appreciation by embracing their liberators, but the soldiers resist. There's no way of knowing what diseases they might have — indeed, typhoid and typhus — and lice and fleas are crawling on their clothes and hair.

For Towers and the other men of the 30th, this isn't something for which they are ready. Killing, certainly, and their respective jobs. But being the first contact in the transition to a free world from slave labor, starvation, abuse and mass executions?

"Back in the States, we never heard the word 'concentration camp'; we never heard the word 'Holocaust.' We heard a little bit of rumblings that the Jews were being mistreated in Germany. There were just little small articles in the newspaper about the Jews being not tortured but mistreated."

The Americans' only prior experience with Jewish people in concentration camps was Buchenwald 90 miles southward, liberated on April 11, only two days prior to the train. This gave little time for word to spread among American forces or for the full extent of the Holocaust to be known.

The decision is made to shuttle the prisoners to the U.S.-controlled city of Harsleben, where they can clean up, receive medical attention and stay in the hospital, barracks or houses. Towers is part of the convoy of maybe 50 vehicles making two or three trips to transport all 2,500.

The Red Cross is waiting with clothes collected from the town, to replace the prisoners' covered in insects, urine and feces. Showers are of course needed, too. But there's nervous hesitation from the prisoners, aware by now that showers had become their faith's worst enemy, spitting not water but the poison Zyklon B.

Servicemen strip down to their underwear and let the water run over themselves, showing the afraid they aren't being murdered. The freed prisoners have their filthy rags burned, and for the lice and fleas, they're dusted with DDT, its adverse health effects not yet known.

And so begins their road to healing, physical in the short term and mentally for life, these Jewish prisoners who were being transported to Teriesenstat concentration camp from Bergen-Belsen ahead of the advancing Allies.

Growing to be scientists, doctors, lawyers and engineers, the 275 survivors Towers has made contact with from the train's original 2,500 tell him one motto kept them empowered through it all: "Tomorrow is going to be better. Tomorrow is going to be better."

Christmas Day 2014. For Gasche, a retired history teacher living in Gainesville, it means traveling to his daughter's in Ocoee to exchange gifts with a dozen or so family members. His wife, Carol, has prepared ostrich-sized eggshells to give as gifts to each child there. Last night, Christmas Eve, the couple attended a candle-lit ceremony of Silent Night, Holy Night at Gainesville's Faith Presbyterian Church, where Gasche, active in church most of his life, is the last attending founding member from 30-some years ago. A week before, Dec. 17, Gasche celebrated his 90th birthday.

Gasche joins the many veterans — of Iwo and the Bulge and other World War II battlefields around the world — who have already rolled into their 90s, the final stages of their lives. Today, roughly a million GIs, mostly teenagers and 20-somethings then, remain from the original 16 million participants, more than 400,000 of whom never made it home.

There is only a small handful of WWII veterans groups left in Alachua County. The biggest, the D-Day veterans who meet at Conestoga's Restaurant in the city of Alachua once a month for lunch and chatter, has fewer than 20 members, down from its peak of 63 in 1997.

"Today, it's an expanded membership of World War II vets (instead of just those in D-Day) because they're all passing away so fast," explains the group's organizer, Bryan Walker, 54, who isn't a veteran himself but helped found the group because it was just "something I wanted to do."

Gasche and Towers, both members, were in attendance for the November lunch, which brought the surprise of being free, thanks to Conestoga's owner.

For Gasche — a leader of one of the other local WWII groups, the Iwo Trio — age and retirement certainly haven't succeeded in bringing him to a halt. A bulging bag of American flags, noticeably used, sits on a bench on his front porch, part of a program that collects such flags for proper disposal. There's also the Marine-led Toys for Tots program at Christmas. Though not currently active in the program, Gasche once helped local Marines in collecting new toys for needy children, assembling them at a warehouse, dividing them by appropriate gender and age, and giving a bag full each to several hundred Alachua County children.

"It is very heartwarming to see the looks in their eyes, and sometimes tears, when they get that bag of toys," he says. "It's something I feel we have the right to be very proud of: to help needy children in this manner and make their Christmas really a Christmas."

Perhaps most importantly, at least from a historical perspective, Gasche still tours the country, telling his story to schools, reporters and other groups. He spent a year in Korea, too, but that was just cold, nothing compared to his two weeks on Iwo.

He's had the opportunity to return to the island, all expenses paid. But to him, seeing the positions of 1945's foxholes and machine-gun nests, it would only be reliving combat, death. No catharsis. No enjoyment.

"I realized, no, I cannot. I lost too many buddies in that battle. It could not occur for me to undergo the trauma of returning to that island where I had been so close to death."

Others have gone back, even stood on Mount Suribachi and shook hands with descendants of Japanese soldiers who looked down their sights and pulled the trigger.

"I would be hesitant; many are not," Gasche says. "It changed so much. It's a different world. But the memories do linger."

Lingering too are fragments from the Japanese mortar that got him the "Critical" pass off Iwo, once even triggering an airport metal detector in Atlanta.

Living through the bloodiest battle in Marine history, he considers a survivable blow to the stomach lucky, as lucky as such can be. A hanging flag on the front of his house, military and American stickers across the back of his truck, a "Proud to be an American" sweatshirt shielding his arching upper body, his patriotism is unrelenting now, as it was in 1945 even after he was hit.

"Here are young men facing fire that dealt death," Gasche explains, "and yet when the word came out, 'OK, move out,' they moved out and into that fire where there's a Nambu machine gun and an Arisaka rifle — whatever it was, they did what had to be done."

Christmas or not. But today, these last veterans of World War II can have a hot meal to remember because of the family and peace around them, not the troubles that once roped the harmonious occasion of Christmas into a fury of prolonged battle and blood, 70 years ago.

How we got the story

Much of the historical information about Malmedy, Belgium, came from the city's website, written in English. Specifics from the Malmedy bombing not provided by Towers were found in Associated Press and Chicago Tribune archives. The letter to Earl Bohrer's mother is posted to a website commemorating the National Guard's 30th Infantry Division, OldHickory30th.com. Many of the specifics of wartime Christmas came from the Library of Congress book "I'll Be Home for Christmas," including the description of the snow, fields and mountains from a U.S. soldier. Some specifics about the Battle of Iwo Jima came from the Army's website. Surviving veteran totals are from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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