

Pete Eckstein



This is the eleventh in a series of articles that we hope to publish for years to come. With this series we want to honor Service Members that served our great Nation. As I mentioned in the last article we need your help to honor these fine Americans. If you have someone you would like us to include, please help us research and develop articles. Our email address is mhamlegionpost113@gmail.com

Pete Eckstein was born 19 January 1924. His parents, George and Annie Eckstein, lived in Mineral Point, and he was raised in this small community.

During Pete's senior year in high school he was drafted into the United States Army. Pete was the first from Mineral Point to be drafted for service in WWII. Life at home would have to be put on hold until his return from the war.

Pete entered the Army and went to Fort Knox for tank school. When he completed his training at Fort Knox the Army sent him to another 10 weeks of training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky to be a tank mechanic.

After training Pete joined the US Army's 4th Armored Division, which was just forming. After completion of training in the United States, the 4th Armored Division trained in England for the landing at Normandy. The 4th Armored Division became known as Patton's Division because they were the lead Division in Patton's Third Army. The 4th Armored Division was tasked with making a large hole in the enemy defenses beyond the beaches at Normandy. As the fight for Europe continued the 4th Armored Division continued to play a key role, as a matter of fact Pete's company was the first in their Division to cross into Germany in a hard-fought battle as the Germans put up heavy resistance.

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In Belgium the 4th Armored Division broke the siege at Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge. Pete talked about just how cold that winter was and how he learned to burrow into the snow at night to make a warm bed. If you have ever seen the documentary about the Battle of the Bulge you saw the airdrops sent to resupply the soldiers. Pete was there in the fields surrounding Bastogne and actually brought one of those parachutes home with him after the war. During one battle, one of the US tanks had been disabled and the Germans were using it against the Americans. When no one else would, Pete volunteered to get the tank and get it back under our control so that the Germans could not use it against us. The first thing he had to do was crawl into the drivers compartment and pull the dead German Lieutenant out. Pete saw the worst of humanity during WWII as the 4th Armored Division freed prisoners from camps in Germany and Czechoslovakia.

As the days and weeks of fighting across France wore on it became difficult to supply the units with everything they needed so they made sure they didn't waste anything. Their food often consisted of C-rations, including some containers that had bacon that the troops would save. In France there were potato fields that the farmers were growing as crops. As the tank units advanced through the fields it was easy enough for the tanks to pivot and dig up some of the potatoes. The men would then cut the potatoes down and cook them like French fries in the grease they had saved from the bacon in their rations. Pete had eaten his share by the time the war was over, so he never ate French fries the rest of his life. He had also had his share of wine. Many of the cellars in France had wine stored in them, and one in particular had plenty of wine to celebrate the Americans defeating the Germans. The French shared their wine and by the time Pete came back after the war he didn't need or want any more wine.

Pete had several awards and received the Purple Heart, the Good Conduct Medal, the Victory Medal, the American Theater Ribbon, European African Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with 4 bronze battle stars, 3 Overseas Service Bars. Pete rose to the rank of Tech Sergeant. He could still wear his Ike Jacket to the end, you may have seen Pete on Veterans Day or Memorial Day in his WWII uniform jacket.

After the war Pete came back to Mineral Point, and in 1948 he married the love of his life, June. June and Pete had five children, later 8 grandchildren, and 9 great grandchildren. Pete loved to spend time with family especially at Fish Lake and Lake Joy. Pete had seen a lot of horrible things in war but he never let that effect his personality, he always looked for the best in things, and he was always quick with a joke.

Pete was very active in the American Legion while the family lived in Mineral Point. He was a member of the Honor Guard and their traveling drill team, as such he took part in the 4th of July Parades, Memorial Day and Veterans Day Ceremonies, as well as, firing rifle volleys for funerals. In the 1970s Pete took a job with Klusendorfs and the family moved to Mount Horeb where they lived until he died September 16th, 2017. He belonged to the Mount Horeb American Legion and the VFW Post 9511.

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In 2011 Pete was honored to go out to Washington DC to see the World War II Memorial as a part of the Badger Honor Flight. He talked about what an incredible experience it was and then to come back to huge crowds with family and friends cheering them on.

Thanks to the amazing people at Raven Software and Sledgehammer Games for immortalizing Pete on his tank in the Call of Duty-WWII Game. Pete's name and tank appear in the game, so he will live on not only in the memory of friends and family but in the game as well.

Let us Never Forget that Freedom is NOT Free

Compiled by Jerry Hook