

Harold R. Knudtson

This is the twenty fifth 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

Harold Knudtson died in 2006 so the majority of this article is based on an interviews Paula Fredrickson conducted back in 1995. Paula wrote an excellent article on Harold that was published in the Blade Atlas August 31st, 1995. I'm going to try my best to give you this story without simply retelling Paula's story. This will be a little different than other stories I've told. Harold will be honored at the Mount Horeb Veterans Memorial with a Paver that reads:

CPL HAROLD R KNUDTSON
US ARMY 1942- 45
ARMY INFANTRY WWII
POW GERMANY
BRONZE STAR MEDAL

Ken Stamm asked me to write this story about his friend Harold Knudtson. Harold told Ken some of his experiences while they were working on the farm. The stories about our local Service Members are so important. Most individuals that come back from war live with the things that they've seen and experienced without telling others around them. When I read about Harold I was reminded of how traumatic war is. Harold saw and experienced so much during World War II. When Paula conducted the interview with Harold he told her that for over fifty years he woke up every morning as a Prisoner of War and then when his feet hit the floor he knew where he was and he was fine. Thank you Ken for asking me tell Harold's story and thank you Paula for making sure Harold's story was not lost forever.

Harold was born December 12th, 1921 on a farm in Perry Township. His parents Albert and Mabel (Rundhaug) Knudtson raised Harold and his brothers Everret, Wallace, and Albert Jr., and three sisters Irene, Dorothy, and Beatrice on the farm in Kittleson Valley. Harold and his siblings attended Forward School which was a country school on Highway A in the township of Perry. They lost their mother, Mabel, when Harold was only 11 years old. After Harold finished school he worked on farms until August 1942, when he was enlisted in the Army.

Harold went to Basic Training and then to Anti Aircraft Machinery Training. After training he was assigned to Kilo Company, 137th Infantry Regiment of the 35th Infantry Division as a part of Patton's Third Army.

Harold had never left Kittleson Valley before he went off to war. His introduction to war didn't take long, his very first day in battle was brutal. Harold and three others were riding on a tank as they went through a small French village when they were attacked,

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the other men that were riding with Harold were killed in the attack, Harold found cover. A second round grazed Harold's leg but since he could still continue on he never reported it. An artillery round finally took out the sniper that had been holed up in a church steeple. Harold told Paula that he learned a lot that first day of battle but he also told her that there was so much more to learn and that it seemed like the war would never end. There was always another village to attack and seize from the enemy's control.

Harold's unit was always in the middle of the fighting. He mentioned that during one particularly heavy period of fighting their Division received 2,200 replacements in a four day period. A Division more than likely only had a total of 10,000 people which means that almost one quarter of the entire Division had been injured or killed in battle. At one point, Harold and the men in his unit captured German machine gunners who had been killing US Soldiers. They continued their attack and twice the Americans were surrounded by German forces but they continued to fight on even as the Germans started the house that the Americans were in on fire. As the house began to collapse Harold and the others ran out into the open just before the house came crashing down exposing themselves to German machinegun fire. The Soldiers in the 137th didn't even have time to mourn the loss of all their friends and fellow soldiers.

The 137th fought for days and months on end. Just as the 137th was taken off the line to get some much needed rest they were called back into action in the coldest weather during the Battle of the Bulge. Harold's unit got cut off from the rest of the American forces by Hitler's Division, the 1st Panzer Division. The Lieutenant told the men that they could run or they could surrender. The men that tried to run were immediately gunned down. Harold along with 25 others in his organization were taken prisoner by the German forces. In dead of winter in the freezing cold the Germans took their boots and marched them off to a prisoner of war camp where they were put to work. The Germans did not feed them very well.

Conditions at the Labor Camp were so harsh. The prisoners and the guards had to stay inside during the day due to Allied bombings. At night the prisoners were forced to work digging trenches, repairing the bombed out railroad tracks. The guards were cruel, the food was little more than water and bread that was made from sand. The living conditions were awful, and they only got worse as the Germans had to move the prisoners to other camps because the allies were closing in on them. The Germans moved prisoners several times. The sick and emaciated prisoners on railcars so full that they couldn't sit down or move, when they began pushing and shoving the guards started opening fire killing several prisoners. By this time the prisoners were so sick from the terrible conditions and lack of food that they could not work, they were living in lice infested buildings and at night they could hear other prisoners crying out, yelling and screaming. Death was spreading through the camp and many prisoners did not know how they could survive much longer.

Freedom Arrives

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At this point Harold weighed about 90 pounds. The prisoners heard gunfire and knew that the German guards left in the middle of the night. They woke up on the morning of April 29th. 1945 British troops arrived and liberated the camp.

Harold believed that his upbringing on the farm and his faith helped carry him through the war. Having the strength and will to carry on helped him through some very rough times in battle as well as carrying him through his very difficult time as a Prisoner of War. He was extremely happy that the Germans never took his pocket bible, he talked about how the bible gave him strength to carry on.

Harold didn't talk to many people about his experiences for years and years. He came back settled on the farm, married Gladys Rostad and they raised three sons, Curtis, Raymond, and Wayne and one daughter, Elaine on the farm in Kittleson Valley south of Mount Horeb.

Harold belonged to several Veterans organizations including the VFW and the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Prisoners of War, Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, and the 35th Infantry Division Association. Many of his friends in these organizations urged him to make sure he received the awards and recognition he deserved. They also urged him to talk about his experiences. Without these fellow Veterans, Paula Fredrickson interviewing Harold and Ken Stamm bringing me the story we may never have known the rest of the story as Paul Harvey used to say.

Please continue to help us keep these Veterans stories alive. This community has such a rich history of service and sacrifice. It is truly amazing to think that we had men and women serving in all the places we read about in the history books, the Battle of the Bulge, D-Day at Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima, the USS Indianapolis, on board a ship watching the Japanese surrender, the Ardennes during WWI, throughout Vietnam, and Korea, Kabul Afghanistan, Bagdad, Iraq, etc...