

# Memories of World War II remain vivid 40 years later

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by Steve Fairchild

**Mt. Vernon** - News of the Allied invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europe" during World War II worried area residents, recalls one local veteran who himself later became a casualty in the war against Nazi Germany.

Verner Nelson, who was still a farm boy living near Freistatt when the Allies landed on the Normandy beaches 40 years ago Wednesday, said civilians were well aware of the dangers involved in the invasion.

"People were pretty worried about it because they knew we were going to have a lot of casualties," Nelson said during an interview last week.

Less than two months after the invasion, Nelson, now a foreman at the Southwest Research Center near here, was called to active duty in the U.S. Army.

He and nine other Freistatt area young men - inducted at the same time - took 17 weeks of basic training at

Fort Hood, Tex., then Nelson was shipped to the E.T.O. (European Theatre of Operation) while eight of the other nine from Freistatt were sent to Asia.

"I left for overseas the first day of January '45," recalls Nelson. "We went over in a

French boat that was taken over by the British. We had over 12,000 troops on it."

In addition to the soldiers, there were 2,000 airmen and some 500 nurses on board the ship, which landed in Glasgow, Scotland on Jan. 13, 1945. (Continued to page 10)



**Verner Nelson**

...in 1944 ...in 1984



# ✓ WWII memories

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A train took the troops to South Hampton, England from where they caught troop transport ships across the English Channel to the Normandy beaches.

So, by the middle of January 1945, Nelson — a member of the 669th Infantry Division of the U.S. 1st Army — had joined the fighting in eastern France near the Belgium border.

"We were pushing the Germans back at a pretty good clip," Nelson said, recalling that many German soldiers were surrendering.

However, many other Germans continued to fight.

Nelson became a war casualty — and came within inches of losing his life — on April 12, 1945, less than one month before V-E Day.

Nelson's unit was involved in fighting in a small German town about 75 miles from Berlin.

"It was really house-to-house combat," Nelson said. "When I got hit, of course I fell. I was conscious the whole time. The medics couldn't get to me because of the battle and my captain turned around and yelled at me. He wanted me to try to crawl back to the corner where the medics were."

Nelson, despite having taken a slug from a German rifle through the face, managed to crawl back to the medics.

His face was badly damaged by the gunshot wound. His upper jaw was shattered and his nose was mangled. He lost sight in his right eye.

However, Nelson said he was lucky because the bullet missed his brain.

"I was told by a doctor that another half an inch back and I'd have been pushing up roses," he said.

As it was, Nelson would spend the next year and a half in various hospitals — including more than a year in O'Reilly Hospital for veterans in Springfield.

A bone graph from his hip was used to rebuild his nose. He never regained the use of his right eye, and to this day, Nelson said he must avoid dust, which he said bothers his sinuses.

Nelson said that because of the nature of his injury, he became the subject of a U.S. Navy photographer, who recorded his wound and the treatments on film for use in training doctors on the treatments of similar wounds.

Nelson, whose older brother Frank served in the Asian Theatre of the war, learned after he had been wounded that the other Freistatt native who had been sent to Europe with him, Hubert Kleiboecker, had been killed in action about the same time that Nelson was wounded.

Nelson returned home to his father's (the C.T. Nelson) farm after his discharge from the army in December, 1946. Today, he and his wife, Ruth reside there with one of their sons, John. They have two other sons, Clarence of Pierce City and Richard of Dallas, Tex., and two daughters, Cheryl Stotts of Monett and Sandra Nelson of St. Louis, and two granddaughters.

Looking back on the 40th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, Nelson says that time hasn't pushed the event back in his memory.

"It doesn't seem that it was that long ago."