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Never Too Late: Veteran Receives Recognition

A lifetime has passed since **Robert Elsner**'45 left the U.S. Army. So it came as a surprise when he attended a veterans' reunion last year, and a cohort asked about medals he had been awarded for his service in World War II.

"I had received a Purple Heart and several campaign medals," recalls Elsner, who was wounded in action. "But I didn't know about medals that were awarded after the fighting."

Elsner arrived at Beloit College in the fall of 1941, only months before the United States entered World War II. With the advent of war, he enlisted in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). As battles raged overseas, Elsner studied and waited for his call.

"I had two years of German, including one semester of military German," he recalls, noting that Beloit soon felt the effects of war. "By the early spring of 1943, guys were leaving for service almost every week."

The Army discontinued the ASTP in early 1944, so most of the former students who became soldiers were sent to infantry divisions as replacements. Private First Class Elsner was assigned to the 103rd Division, in a regimental intelligence and reconnaissance platoon. After five months of training, he was shipped to southern France in the fall of 1944.

"The 103rd joined the Seventh Army along the southern flank, which was held by allied forces," he recounts. "We entered combat in the Vosges Mountains, with the objective of taking Strasbourg, France, through rough territory."

Photo by Bob Rashid



Robert Elsner '45 is pictured in his Milwaukee home, with some of the medals that he earned for his service in World War II.

Fighting was intense and difficult because of the steep terrain. "We were moving on logging roads," Elsner says, explaining that the roads were easy for Germans to defend. "They would build roadblocks out of trees and dirt, then line them with booby traps or zero in [on allied troops] with snipers and mortar rounds."

On May 3, 1945, on a narrow road in the Innsbruck Valley while probing the German defense of Innsbruck, Elsner and three fellow soldiers were wounded at one such roadblock. When the Americans were captured, Elsner drew on his language training and persuaded the Germans to drop them off at a local hospital.

With bullet wounds in his hip and shoulder from machine gun fire, Elsner was treated in the German hospital for a short time before allied troops captured the city. Five days later, the Continental war ended. The U.S. Army moved him through medical stations in several European cities before he was finally flown to a stateside military hospital.

Upon his discharge, Elsner resumed his education. "I had a wonderful experience at Beloit," he says, but he was saddened by the loss of fraternity brothers to the war and sought a fresh start. After earning a degree in international relations from Brown University, he embarked on a successful business career. He married and raised five children with his wife, Barbara.

More than 50 years later, Elsner learned that—in addition to the Purple Heart, Combat Infantryman Badge, American Campaign Medal, WWII Victory Medal, and other medals he received in 1945—he was awarded a POW Medal and the Bronze Star. Elsner surmises that when the honors were originally bestowed on the soldiers of the 103rd Division, he was convalescing in another city and never received notification of the commendations.

The Army reissued the medals, and on Nov. 8, 2003, Elsner accepted them from Congressman Jerry Kleczka (D-Wis.) in a ceremony attended by Barbara, three of their children, and members of his extended family. He says the medals will be mounted and given to his grandchildren.

Today, Elsner is retired and enjoys volunteer activities, restoring the ecology of land he owns in the Kettle Moraine area of Wisconsin, and lovingly maintaining the family residence, a 1916 vintage Frank Lloyd Wright home.

While he rarely talks about his war experiences, he vividly recalls a defining moment that came as he recuperated from injuries in an American field hospital in France.

Looking out a window that day in 1945, Elsner watched the approach of French citizens who had been forced into slave labor by the Nazis. "When they saw the American flag, they cheered and waved," he says. "And I finally realized why we were there. We freed those people. That is why we fought."

— N. Marie Dries '92

Music and Business: In Perfect Harmony