

Introduction

Jack Port believes that “If every person...served twenty-four hours in combat duty as an infantryman, there would be no more wars.” He arrived at this conclusion based upon his fifteen months in the European Theater during World War II. For almost a year, he fought in France, Belgium, and Germany as a rifleman. Throughout that time, Jack was assigned to the 2nd Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment attached to the 4th Infantry Division. His three major campaigns were among the most brutal in World War II--the Battle for Normandy, the Battle in the Hurtgen Forest, and the Battle of the Bulge. The first one followed what has often been identified as the greatest amphibious landing in military history. It took place June 6, 1944 on the Normandy coast of northern France. On that well-known D-Day, Jack’s combat experience began at Utah Beach. It continued for eleven more intense weeks as Allied forces fought German troops in the Battle for Normandy. While most Americans have heard of the D-Day landings, few are familiar with the names of the French towns Montebourg, Cherbourg, and Mortain. Jack knows them all too well since his unit engaged enemy forces there, with casualties much higher than what his unit suffered at Utah Beach.

The Hurtgen Forest followed a few months after the Normandy Campaign. Jack judges the enemy engagement in this wooded area to have been the worst campaign he fought in, which says quite a bit about the Hurtgen given the fact that he saw combat in both Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. “The horror of the Hurtgen will never be forgotten,” Jack wrote in a three-page memoir for his family. Just ten days after the 12th Infantry Regiment left the forest, the Germans attacked Allied forces in Belgium. The massive counteroffensive became known as the Battle of the Bulge. It is judged to have been the greatest battle ever fought by the United States Army. Jack’s regiment found itself on the southern shoulder of the enemy attack. The 12th Infantry Regiment received the Distinguished Unit Citation for its successful defense of Luxembourg. Jack himself was awarded a Bronze Star for manning a machine gun outside the Belgian town of Consdorf over the course of several days. Soon after all three of his major campaigns--Normandy, the Hurtgen, and the Bulge--Jack acknowledged in a letter to a friend “I can’t believe myself that I have been through all this.”¹ Jack Port’s World War II story, however, is a broader history than the battles he fought in.

While Jack’s time in the military is the focus of his story, a reader will learn about how his personal history factored into that service. When he entered the Army in September 1943, Jack stood apart from the vast majority of inductees. Unlike most recruits, he had graduated high school and had even attended college for a brief time. Perhaps more significantly, Jack set himself apart from his peers because of why and how

he entered the Army. His religious heritage largely explains his enlistment. For the first few years of the war, his hometown's draft board assigned Jack an occupational deferment. (He worked for a San Diego aircraft company.) His resignation from that position, however, opened him up to the draft, which was his plan. When referring to his time in Europe, Jack candidly explains "I didn't want to be there." Yet he felt he had to wear the uniform. Jack wanted to serve for a very personal reason rooted in his Jewish heritage. A stereotype existed about Jewish men in uniform--they were not good soldiers, they were cowardly, sly, and lacked leadership skills. If Jews did enter the Army, the prejudice held that they worked in the Quartermaster Corps that dealt with supplies. Jack heard such talk; it moved him to give up his occupational deferment and "prove" that such anti-Semitism was false.² While technically he was drafted, Jack in essence enlisted when he gave up his job at an aircraft company.

How his religious background influenced his World War II experience is only one part of Jack's personal history. His hometown also enters into an account of his life during the war. Jack was just five years old when the Ports moved to Escondido, California in 1927. He remains a resident to this day. As such, Escondido's civic history is very much intertwined with Jack's personal history. Much has been written about how unified and committed Americans were to the war. Escondido illustrates that generalization with specific examples of its contributions to the national war effort. The town's self-proclaimed "community spirit and patriotism" reached what was probably an all-time high during World War II. "Your home town is with you," proclaimed the chair of Escondido's bond drives in a front page newspaper message directed to local men and women serving in the armed forces.³ During the war years, residents who Jack knew proved how supportive they were of their sons and daughters in uniform. Articles in the city's newspaper, the *Daily Times-Advocate (T-A)*, are used throughout Jack's story to show the support directed to him and all of the others in the military. For example, one day after the Battle of the Bulge began in Belgium, the 6th War Bond drive ended in the United States. Escondido had been given a \$500,000 quota. In the three and a half weeks that the drive had been going on, the community sold almost \$560,000 worth of bonds. Towns were assigned quotas, too, for other Home Front efforts such as scrap drives and blood drives. Escondido always exceeded its quota. It could be that we will never again see in our history the unity and commitment that were so apparent during World War II. Small cities throughout the United States, such as Escondido, reflected those two national characteristics.

Additionally, Jack's hometown gives us examples of the sacrifices Americans endured. When Jack was in the Hurtgen Forest, a November 10, 1944 headline in the *T-A* announced that United States military casualties numbered more than half a million men.

The newspaper published the local ones. Names of those killed in action, wounded, and missing in action appeared prominently on the front pages of the *T-A*. One can imagine how grateful Jack's parents, Charlie and Rena Port, were that their youngest son's name was not among them. By capturing in Jack's story some of the unity, commitment, and sacrifice seen in the history of Escondido during World War II, we preserve examples of what our nation is capable of. Hopefully, other generations can learn from such a history.

The detailing of Escondido's Home Front activities serves another purpose. It illuminates the lives of Charlie and Rena Port while their son fought in Europe. Like Jack's story of service, theirs too must not be lost to history. Yet the story of the parents in World War II is generally missing in accounts of the war years. Unlike their sons and daughters, they rarely wrote memoirs after the war to document their activities. One can certainly imagine, however, their feelings as they sent children off to war. Parents wanted to support their sons and daughters in uniform. They did so by participating in war-related activities on the Home Front. We know from stories in the *T-A* that Charlie joined at its inception the Escondido chapter of the American War Dads. It existed to assist service members in a variety of ways. Articles in the *T-A* identify Charlie as the club's treasurer.

While we cannot document Rena's activities on the Home Front, we do know that she regularly contributed her cinnamon rolls to the Escondido Navy Mother's Hostess House. It offered free room and board to visiting servicemen. Jack's mother probably did more than that to support the war effort, but the details of her life during World War II are generally unknown. Because of an incident she shared with Jack upon his return home, we do know that Rena became deeply depressed in the winter of 1944-1945. Jack had innocently sent home some shoes his parents had mailed him. His mother interpreted the returned package as evidence her son had been killed in action. Since Rena received the parcel as news of the Battle of the Bulge dominated the front page of the *T-A*, her conclusion is understandable.

Unfortunately, the Ports did not save any of the letters Jack sent home. A regular column in the *T-A*, "News of Our Men and Women in Uniform," does allow us to know when his parents received some letters. Snippets from the correspondence appeared in the column as Charlie and Rena shared with the community news about their youngest son. One edition of the paper printed in its entirety a letter Jack wrote. Today, such small-town newspapers, and even ones in metropolitan areas, are disappearing. Escondido's *T-A* shows how important they are in studying the Home Front in World War II. For Jack's story, the publication adds to his personal history in the war years with its articles on his community and its references to his parents.

For those interested in the history of World War II, Jack Port's story offers several lessons on that subject. First, one can learn about three major European battles--Normandy, the Hurtgen Forest, and the Bulge. The focus in all three is on Jack and his regiment. Second, lessons in unity, commitment, and sacrifice can be gleaned from accounts of Escondido's activities on the Home Front. Lastly, Jack's story affords the reader a study in character. We can all learn from Jack's honesty in his recounting of his wartime service. It can be seen in Jack's unvarnished explanation of why he entered the military, namely to prove wrong a stereotype many Americans held about Jews. Did patriotism and the desire to defeat fascism enter into his decision to join the Army? To some degree, probably yes. But Jack honestly explains how anti-Semitism provided his main motivation.

Jack's candor can be seen, too, when he shares a course of action he considered if the war had not ended when it did. The original plan had been to send his regiment to the Pacific Theater to fight the Japanese once the war against the Germans ended in Europe. If that had happened, Jack thought of seeking an exemption as a Conscientious Objector. What Jack experienced in Normandy, the Hurtgen, and the Bulge explains his consideration of such a declaration. To say that he saw heavy casualties in those campaigns would be an understatement. In one postwar study by the U.S. Army, riflemen represented sixty-eight percent of an infantry division's authorized strength, yet they accounted for almost ninety-five percent of its casualties.⁴ Once he left the European Theater, Jack wanted to put his combat experience behind him. He admits, though, that he is not sure if he really would have acted on his inclination to seek a Conscientious Objector classification. Both Jack's openness in sharing that he thought about it, and his admission that he is not really sure he would have done so, speak to his character. Jack Port is a man who found no glory in combat while at the same time he was an infantryman who believed, as he puts it, in "following orders."

Jack's reaction to the combat conditions he witnessed also gives evidence of his truthfulness. His response reflects part of the nature of war that many veterans are too embarrassed to admit. Some glamorize war, yet Jack spent much of his time in combat feeling "miserable"--living in foxholes and dealing with freezing temperatures, rain, and mud. After seven months as a combat infantryman, Jack described in a letter to a friend what he called the "ungodly weather" that characterized the winter of 1944-1945. "Snow, snow, and more snow. It's so cold that if you wet your lips, they just freeze solid."

His reaction to war during his combat service also unmask an experience many combat veterans probably had, but one that they might be embarrassed to admit--he was

scared. Jack identifies that as his feeling immediately after his arrival in Europe when he sat on a train headed south after his troopship docked in Scotland. He had no idea what the immediate future held for him, but he did know that he was “scared.” That same reaction surfaced when Jack received some additional equipment for the D-Day landings, such as impregnated clothing in case of a German gas attack. He characterizes himself as “scared,” too, on his first time in combat when he landed at Utah Beach. Jack was frightened, as well, when he moved around the Hurtgen Forest with TNT strapped to his leg. He was also scared to get out of the safety seemingly afforded by a foxhole. Jack admits that during the campaign in the Hurtgen Forest, he sought help for feelings that were called during World War II “battle fatigue.” Once at the medical station, however, Jack saw the wounded and the dying. He judged them to be more in need of attention than he was, so he quietly left. Even at war’s end, Jack was scared of becoming a casualty for no good reason when his Commanding Officer sent him to capture some enemy soldiers after the Germans had surrendered. As Jack declares, “I was scared all of the time.” No, war was not an adventure for Jack Port, and he is honest enough to admit that.

In the early winter of 1944-1945, he shared his feelings on his wartime service in a letter to a childhood friend. “Well, Joe, after seven months of it [the war], I can say for sure that I have had my fill of it. I get pretty blue and disgusted at times, but keep the old chin up, and keep plugging away...” Perhaps the greatest lesson that can be learned from Jack’s story is the glimpse--just a glimpse--of the true face of war