

Not in search of glory

Humble WWII vet finally gets his medals

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Staff Writer

CITRUS SPRINGS — For more than 60 years, Ernest Scango wanted nothing to remind him of his World War II Army service.

A paratrooper and survivor of the horrific Battle of the Bulge, once he returned from Europe he "drew a curtain" and shut off his memories. He didn't join any veterans organizations, didn't visit any of the memorials, didn't talk about his experiences, didn't save any mementos other than his discharge papers and a book that contains journal entries from one of his commanding officers.

Last year a neighbor started talking to him about getting his medals.

"You deserve them," the neighbor said.

"But what that does, it brings up memories and I have sleepless nights," Scango explained.

In May, Scango, now 89, went to see the county's veterans service officer and filled out the paperwork for his medals. Last week he received them, and along with them came sleepless nights, as he had feared.

In 1943, Scango worked in a Pennsylvania steel mill. He was 20 years old and some of his buddies were talking about joining the Navy. Scango didn't like that idea and took his chances with the draft. His letter came in March.

While training, he saw a sign encouraging paratrooper recruits.

"It sounded interesting," he said. "Plus, it was \$50 more a month."

After jump school at Fort Benning, Ga., he went to Africa and then Italy for more training. In Rome they had their uniforms spray-painted camouflage.

"They put a bag on our head and sprayed us brown and gray," he said. "Then we made a combat jump in Southern France. I remember they were playing Glenn Miller's 'String of Pearls' and I'm hooked up and ready to jump out of a plane. Some of us made it and some of us didn't."

That's about all Scango will talk about. After the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes mountain region of Belgium in the days surrounding Christmas 1944, out of about 600 men in his unit, only 97 men were left. He and the others were sent to the 82nd Airborne division.



After more than 60 years, World War II veteran Ernest Scango decided it was time to send for the medals he deserved for his combat service. Until now, he didn't want anything reminding him of the horrors of war.

NANCY KENNEDY/Chronicle

ALL HONORS DUE

Veterans interested in receiving or replacing earned military medals, awards and decorations should contact the National Archives at www.archives.gov or write to the National Personnel Records Center, 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, MO 63138.

"We went as far as the Elbe River and had to push back because we went too far," he said. "After that we were sent to occupy Berlin — the war was over."

He was discharged Nov. 25, 1945 and returned to the states on a victory ship.

"Everyone who returned, the Army gave them a steak," he said. That's where Scango's memories stopped — until now.

Last week, as he opened the package that came in the mail, his memories returned.

Of his commendations, Scango received a Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with one silver service star, World War II Victory Medal, Combat Infantry Badge 1st Award, Honorable Service Lapel Button WWII, Marksman Badge with Rifle Bar, Parachutist Medal — and a Bronze Star Medal, which at first he feared

came by accident.

After all, a Bronze Star is for "heroic or meritorious achievement or service," and Scango wasn't sure if he deserved it. Accompanying his medals was a letter warning those who would falsify their medals that doing so could land them in jail.

"We did a lot of heroic things, but that was as a company, unless they include that," he said.

However, it was the very service he has tried to forget that earned him the prestigious Bronze Star medal.

According to Ret. Col. Curt Ebitz, a Bronze Star for heroism has a "V" device for valor on the ribbon portion of the medal and is accompanied by orders detailing the heroic action.

"A Bronze Star awarded for meritorious service...recognizes faithful service during one's time in a combat theater of operation," Ebitz said. "The recognition of

faithful service and the inherent risks of that service is normally accomplished with the awarding of the Bronze Star for meritorious service. Given that he was a paratrooper and a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, he would be a prime candidate for the meritorious service award."

After several emails to and from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo., on Monday Scango learned that the medals are all his and that he deserved each one, and probably more.

"I'm shocked," he said upon hearing the news that the Bronze Star is, indeed, his to keep.

Although the medals reopened memories that caused a few sleepless nights, Scango said he believes now that he deserves them. He has a grandson who asks him questions about his wartime service. Now he has something to show him.

"Now that I know they're mine, I can go out and get myself a frame and put them in it," he said.

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