

# Tribute to My Favorite World War II Veteran

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**By Lenny Cacchio**

LEE'S SUMMIT, Mo.—Sixty-seven years ago in France the shape of the post World War II map hung in the balance. In a last, desperate attempt to break the back of the Allied advance, Adolf Hitler scraped up the last of his reserves and threw everything he had at his enemy's lines. The battle became known as the Battle of the Bulge. Had Hitler succeeded, the map of Europe today would be the worse for it.

At the 50-year commemoration of that event, I remembered something my father had said several times when I was small but had never registered on my young mind. He had mentioned that he was in France and Belgium during World War II. I decided to call and ask him some questions.

Nick Cacchio is of the generation that suffered the double whammy of a devastating Depression and the most colossal war in history. This is the generation that saved the world for freedom, built the strongest economy in history, spread American culture around the world and hung steadfast as the world watched the collapse of communism.

Every president from Dwight Eisenhower to George H.W. Bush was a veteran of World War II. Lyndon Johnson, who was a congressman during that war, answered the call and ended up with a unit in the Far East. Only a direct order from Franklin Roosevelt persuaded him to go back to Washington. John Kennedy's valor with his famous *PT 109* is almost legendary, as are the elder George Bush's brushes with death as a fighter pilot.

But there is a funny thing about that generation—the almost unanimous refusal to take any credit. One of my uncles, an older brother of my father, served as a military policeman in the U.S. Army. He did his job, survived the war, came home and lived quietly in a Pennsylvania village. When he died, the family was sorting through his things and they were shocked at the medals and decorations he had earned but had never talked about. Said one of his sisters, "He felt that everybody had a job to do and that he was just doing his part."

So I called Dad and I asked him if he was there at the Battle of the Bulge.

"Yep," he said. "I was there."

What was it like? What happened?

He laughed his throaty little laugh and said: "Well, we were waiting around for something to happen, and something happened. I remember all the planes flying overhead and all the troops coming in. It was cold out, but we were young and we could handle it."

We could handle it. Typical generational understatement. Just doing what had to be done for home, country and the girl next door.

Tom Brokaw calls the GI Generation the greatest generation, and the man has a point. I could segue now into trite Bible quotations about no greater love than to lay down one's life and so forth, but instead I am rather sad. Comparing my generation with theirs leaves me empty. How can one compare my generation's "accomplishments" with those of the GI Generation?

When I called my father in December of 1994 to talk about the events of 50 years earlier, I kidded him about being alive for one third of our history as a nation. Perhaps he had never thought of it that way before. Little did I know that within just a few years' time our lives would be thrown into a tizzy by some brash folks flying hijacked airplanes, and within just a few years after that our economic viability as a nation would be challenged.

It is during such days that we can be served well by those who walked before us and the sense of history they imparted. Hopefully, my generation also will be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to preserve our freedom for the sake of our posterity.

It is a shame to put the greatest generation out to pasture. They have so much to teach those to whom the torch now passes.