



CLOSE TO HOME

A WORLD WAR II SOLDIER REMEMBERS HIS TIME BEHIND ENEMY LINES

By DAVID CAMPICHE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

In the volatile winds of 2017, the physical and emotional climate seems tempestuous: two 500-year storms in 10 days, the shooting in Las Vegas and — one pleads to the storm gods, “Please, no more” — renegade fires sweeping through Northern California and up our beloved Columbia Gorge. Much of the country seems in major depression over the 2016 election, and even Stephen Colbert can’t keep up with the barrage of unsettling tweets spewing forth from President Trump. Have times ever appeared so threatening to Americans?

Imagine for a minute that the Japanese have seemingly conquered the Pacific. The attack on Pearl Harbor has left the U.S. Navy in shambles. Hitler is sweeping across Europe, and America is regretting its former isolation. War news is all bad news. The world is burning, and no one has yet heard of climate change.

The war in Europe

In northern Belgium, three young soldiers are sneaking behind enemy lines in a reconnaissance assignment for Gen. George Patton and the Third Army. Blaine Anderson talks of this today with a sense of humor — though his heart must have been thundering in 1944.

Ninety-six years old today, he is struggling with memories, but not this one.

“When we got back to our position,” he said, “there



LAURIE ANDERSON PHOTO

At 96, Blaine Anderson leads a quiet life. Once an avid gardener and Model A enthusiast and collector, he enjoys visits from family and friends.

was no Third Army. There wasn’t even a camp circle. The whole kit and caboodle had moved out, and we were deep in German territory without one small bit of protection. Well, we had stealth.”

Yes, and they had luck on their side. A family of Belgians (the family name has been forgotten) agreed to hide the infantrymen in their vegetable cellar. Needless to say, if the Germans got wind of this deception (their definition), each member, including children, would be shot. That threat hung over those soldiers day and night, and the nights were interminably long.

A month later, Patton was back, and the three soldiers were temporarily liberated — liberated to go back to the fighting and the constant risk of death on the battlefield, or, in this case, behind enemy lines.

Fighting back bouts of memory loss, Anderson talked about the relationship with that Belgian family. Food wasn’t plentiful, but what little the farm and village produced was shared freely with the Americans. Anderson can no longer answer all the questions I ask. We imagine the three soldiers huddled in the small cellar, perhaps playing cards, and day after day, making small talk to cover up their fears. They probably smoked. Most Americans did. Did they talk about girls? Of course! And Thanksgiving dinners? Naturally. And baseball? Who

Continued on Page 16