

The Battles of Gordon Foster's Life

by NEAL JARNAGIN



Sitting across the table, I am immediately reminded of why World War II veterans are considered part of America's greatest generation. The humble yet surprisingly forthcoming man that sits before me exudes the very definitions of honor, courage and commitment as he begins to honor us with his stories. All conversations stop and he commands the room with both wisdom and wit.

Gordon Foster came into this world on Nov. 23, 1920 at a small farm house northeast of Waverly. As was common at the time, Gordon's family was large and poor. As soon as he could walk, he was put to work on his parents' small farm which was managed, almost entirely, to feed the family. The hard work and mischievous nature that he'd learn would, unbeknownst to him at the time, serve him well when his country would call on him to defend its borders and his American way of life.

Gordon was inducted into the United States Army on July 3, 1942 at the age of 21. Within two weeks, he travelled via train to Jefferson Barracks, Mo., for a brief military indoctrination and then to Fort Eustis, Va., where he received the bulk of his basic military training. Generally speaking, training was easy for Gordon since he'd been exposed to the grueling farming practices of the early 20th century and learned how to take orders well.

After his initial training, Gordon spent the next two months hopping around the northeastern United States until reaching New York City, his embarkation point of departure. On Sept. 27, 1942, he stepped aboard the Queen Mary and was thrust into war, passenger ship or not. Three days after leaving New York, the Queen Mary dodged its first torpedo on a journey that would last until Oct. 4. It was also during this voyage that Gordon experienced his first military encounter with death. A day out from Londonderry, Ireland, a British destroyer arrived to escort the Queen Mary to her destination. The destroyer circled the Queen Mary to ensure she was free of German U-boats. However, the destroyer's captain misjudged the speed of the Queen Mary and cut in front of her path. The Queen Mary, unable to reduce her speed, cut through the destroyer like it wasn't even there. Gordon was on deck at the time and had the unfortunate opportunity of witnessing the events as they unfolded. "One half of the destroyer went on one side and the other half went on the other side," he recalled. "I happened to be standing by the railing and saw the one half go by my side. No one on the destroyer survived. There was so much turbulence behind the Queen Mary that it sucked both halves of the destroyer into the ocean before anyone could come out and rescue them." Ninety three days in the service and Gordy realized he was at war.

In Ireland, Gordy was stationed with the 209th Anti-Aircraft Battalion under General Clark to protect our allies, the Irish, from German bombing raids. It wasn't long however, until his unit joined a naval convoy headed toward Oran, Africa. Upon arrival, Gordon's unit immediately engaged the French army until, after approximately three

days, the French joined the allies. Once the fighting ceased, he was sent to Casablanca and pulled guard duty for The Casablanca Conference that took place from Jan. 14-24. He was lucky to have briefly seen the three dignitaries of the conference, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin.

Gordy's unit was ordered to the famed Kasserine Pass to lie in wait for Gen. Rommel. He states, "After Rommel was turned back, we went through Constantine, Algeria as far as Berzerka, then back and guarded the port of Algiers." It was also in Algiers where Gordy would take his only R&R for the entirety of the war; a two-hour swim in the Mediterranean Sea.

Four months would go by before the 209th would jump back on ship and head toward Salerno, Italy and Naples but were stopped by German forces on the outskirts of Naples. Mind you, Gordon experienced heavy combat throughout Italy, but he would soon have some of the most brutal fighting left at the Anzio Beachhead. The Battle of Anzio, Jan. 22 - June 5, 1944 should have been a quick victory for the allies but Maj. Gen. Lucas decided to wait for reinforcements rather than monopolize on the element of surprise that American forces already had. Instead, the battle went on for months with much of the fighting occurring directly on the beach, leaving our troops severely exposed. Gordon's luck would only partially hold out though, and when a German artillery shell hit a nearby ammo dump, the resulting flames and explosions would reach Gordon's fox hole, leaving him badly burned. After finally breaking through the German defenses, the Allies quickly made their way to Rome. Final tallies for the Battle of Anzio would include 7,000 killed in action and another 36,000 wounded, Gordon being but one.

After Rome and Civitavecchia, the 209th headed for Toulon, France. By August of '44, however, most of the German Air Force had been decimated and Gordy's unit was disbanded. He was quickly picked up by the infantry but just as quickly transferred again to the 12th Armored Division, a tank division, and Gordy would be the newest tank gunman in Company B. On his first combat mission, the

Division lost 110 allied tanks in less than two hours. Gordy's new unit, green to combat, quickly learned that training in the United States was drastically different than combat on the front lines.

Gordon was now 60 miles west of the Rhine River in route to Strasbourg. The 12th Armored Division moved quickly through the French countryside but was stopped in one of the small towns that littered the map. The Germans had built a makeshift roadblock that a tank would not be able to disrupt. While waiting for an alternative route, a German soldier fired his bazooka at Gordon's tank. It hit the turret and instantly killed Gordon's ammunition man. Gordon suffered shrapnel injuries to his head, however, they did not appear to be life threatening. Gordon and his remaining men jumped out of the tank and hid into a haymow. Until the following day, Gordon and his tank crew would be on their own and have to make their way back to friendly lines.

While the war was winding down, Gordon's unit still had plenty of fighting to do. The Battle of the Bulge was just beginning and Gordy's tank had quite a few near misses. His unit was now attached to Gen. Patton's command and, regardless of the bad press Patton had received, Gordon considers him an effective leader that saved countless lives under his command. Gordon states that he even had the opportunity to shake Patton's hand, to which he readily accepted. Toward the end of the war, the German army surrendered in droves. Pushing forward however, the U.S. Army just directed the prisoners down the road to their headquarters. They wanted to be the first to the Danube and didn't have time to deal with unarmed, surrendering troops.

Two days later, the war was over.

Not long after Germany's surrender, Gordy finally had an opportunity to go home. He was quickly shuffled to Marseille, France to wait for a ship back to the states. Two weeks would go by and Gordy would finally be heading home. On June 8, 1945, Gordy was honorably discharged from the United States Army.

Gordy, like most combat veterans, is cautious when discussing his combat experiences but, thanks to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, has opened up about his military experiences. In 2006, he wrote a small memoir for his family that describes his life and military experiences. These memories are golden since they've allowed Gordon to reflect on his life. As significant though, Gordon had the opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. on the Sullivan-Hartogh-Davis Honor Flight Network. After he got out of the service, there was no fanfare or parades and the Honor Flight, or more specifically, the fanfare he received when he returned, have made a lasting impression on Gordon. Even now, he gets a little choked up when he thinks about it. His parting thoughts? "Forget the past, don't worry about the future; enjoy the present."

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- GORDON FOSTER, WORLD WAR II VETERAN



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