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Famous Fighter Comes Home

Col. Cohen Gave Nazis Unwanted Lessons

By Blanche Gibbs

There's a doughboy-commanding officer from Spartanburg who came home from the wars with a story that couldn't be told – even by two generals and a star war correspondent.

He's 29-years-old Lt. Col. Harold Cohen, famed as half of the Cohen-Abrams spearheading team that put fear into the Germans when General George Patton's 4th Armored Division made its historic 58-hour 65-miles dash across the Rhine.

The young commander of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion was here with his mother, Mrs. Max Cohen at their home on Twin Drive this week. He was enroute from Newport News, Va. to Camp Gordon, Ga., where he hopes to discard the silver leaf he earned in his 3½ years of Army climbing from private to colonel.

Young Cohen and his friend, Col. Creighton W. Abrams of West Newton, Mass., slashed through the Nazi ranks with such force on their plunge to the Rhine that when the Nazis captured the Spartan they actually grinned with glee, saying "We're glad to have you"

The tactics of this partnership – a Massachusetts Irish lad of the regular Army and a curly haired South Carolina Jewish youth who was drafted – were the mavel of war correspondents ever seeking to describe the team, and the envy of the military authorities, who sought to chronicle the team's story for the benefit of future Army men.

"I know I'm not going to make sense," Col. Cohen explained when a Herald-Journal reporter interviewed him at his home. "I shouldn't be telling a story. It's not my story. It's those boys who had to fight with us.

"Our partnership was sorta like marriage. You know what I mean. Two people meet each other, think alike, want the same thing. They click. They get married because they can make a go of it together. The colonel and I had something mutual in the war that made us a team, a partnership."

You ask me to tell you of how we worked together? Of how we planned? Of why we chose one method or another?" Col. Cohen explained the reporter.

Well, I'm going to tell you it can't be done. The real story has yet to be told of that war. The correspondents did a wonderful job of sending you folks stories. But even they, as close as the were, didn't know what went through the minds of the American boys. These boys were the ones who deserve the credit. And, only they know the emotions they had – Love, hate, sorrow, misery, all momentarily.

"As for the colonel and me, we had two generals to come visit us once. They wanted to write a field manual on tactics. Yes, a field manual for prosterity. We spent, several hours talking with them," Col. Cohen said.

“When we got through, they said they couldn’t write that. And they didn’t.”

The Spartan youth who rose from private to colonel in 3½ years continued by telling of a visit from Ed Ball of the Associated Press War staff.

“We spent several hours talking with him too. He was another that said that he couldn’t give the people that stuff. ‘Give me something the public can take, is what he told us to do.’”

Col. Cohen, whose forte until he was drafted was assisting his brother, Jack Cohen, operate the Dixie Shirt Co., won’t admit it, but he’s an American soldier whose capture by the Germans led to the downfall of the Nazi’s 6th SS Mountain Division.

He had been in a field hospital or it probably never would have happened. He was unarmed and moving toward his outfit to resume his command.

“We were moving through a wooded area, a major of the doctor’s staff and I, when we saw the Germans. At first we didn’t notice them because their clothes blended with the terrain and the vegetation. Then when we saw them we thought they were prisoners themselves.

“Well, I noticed that they had their caps on – something captured Germans don’t do is wear their caps or helmets.”

The Spartan said he looked at the major and said. “In case you don’t know it, we’re in one hell of a fix.” He explained that they naturally had no arms or ammunition and the Germans were shooting even killing some of the outfit.

“We were taken in when one pointed a Panzerfaust, the equivalent of an American bazooka, at our little peep (jeep). After they shook me down for concealed weapons, I was sent to Division

headquarters. There, an officer, a graduate of UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) interrogated me.”

It was during this capture that the general told him that he was glad to have him and asked how his friend, Col. Creighton W. Abrams was.

Col. Cohen laughed when he related how he told the general that the shoe should really be on the other foot, and that the Nazi should be his (Cohen’s) prisoner.

This Nazi general said that he and his entire division would rather die than have that happen. He was killed the next day by American artillery fire. “This general was a soldier, every inch a soldier.” Col. Cohen declared.

Col. Cohen wanted to walk in the German convoy but had to ride a bus. He had thought he would be able to stage an escape walking easier than on the bus.

Before the Nazis reached their destination, the convoy met heavy American artillery fire. “You remember this was at a time when the fighting was very fluid and the Germans were trying to bypass both the 3rd and the 7th American Armies,” the colonel explained.

“This was when I really suffered. I knew I was going to die, but I was scared it wouldn’t be by the Germans. I didn’t want to be killed by the Americans. My shot had to come from the Germans.”

The colonel found friends among the Germans, even amidst the heavy fire, by administering first aid to one which had been wounded from shrapnel caused by American Artillery. And this eventually led to his rescue.

As one German became injured, the spunky Spartan assisted him to safety in a wooded area, gave him first aid treatment, and rushed back for another Nazi.

“Each time I managed to get the next one further into woods until I had about 18 in a farm house some distance from the Germans.” He was at this farm house when he spotted American doughboys whom he led through the German division.

“These Germans were fighters. They gave me a liberal education while I was with them that night,” he declared seriously.

When asked if his capture was the experience that caused him the most fear, the colonel replied emphatically. “No. Strange as it may seem no.

“What makes you afraid is when you’re in a tight spot involving lots of men and equipment. That’s what the Army cares about. They can’t afford to lose men and they can’t afford to lose equipment. And if you think you are about to do this, you get scared, scared green.

“You see, when I was captured, I was just one man. The Army doesn’t give a damn about one man like me. It has to keep its forces together to fight, but they didn’t miss one man.”

The Spartan hopes to be home for good next week back in his shirt factory. He came home with the Silver and Bronze Stars, with Oak Leaf Clusters to both, and the purple Heart for 3 wounds, none very serious.

Col. Abrams, his buddy, said that he “is the best infantry commander in the Army. And he’s a shirt manufacturer who not long ago didn’t know as much about the Army as my 4-year-old.”

The feeling seems to be mutual because Col. Cohen said that a better soldier couldn’t be found than Col. Abrams.