



The SILVER STAR (**POSTHUMOUS**) is awarded to HAROLD BUGNO, O 128 802, Captain, Infantry, Company K, 222<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, for gallantry in action on 24-25 January 1945 near Neubourg, France. Cut off from the Infantry Company on his right, and without communications to the rear, Captain Bugno, under a heavy concentration of enemy artillery and mortar fire, directed his men to a more favorable position from which to fire upon the enemy. Though outnumbered, Captain Bugno continued to maintain pressure upon the enemy for a period of six hours when he became a casualty. As a result of his courageous action, Captain Bugno contained a strong enemy force, limiting its

penetration of friendly lines, and eventually enabling his company to repel the enemy. Name and address of nearest relative: Mrs. Marie H. Bugno, (Wife), 1016 Prospect Avenue, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Entered military service from Scranton, Pennsylvania. [photos provided by the brother of Harold Bugno]



### **The Details Surrounding the Combat Death of Captain Harold Bugno Company K, 222<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division WWII and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 222<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Executive Officer**

Written by Mr. Sam S. Platamone, member K Company, 222<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Rainbow Division August 18, 1992 [photo below]



According to the book, The Combat History of A Rifle Company, written by retired full Colonel Carlyle P. Woelfer, Captain Bugno was listed as killed in action January 25, 1945. Actually, Captain Bugno died in the early morning hours of January 26, 1945, shortly after daybreak. Both of these fine officers were former commanders of Company K, 222<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, the unit I was assigned to during the war.

My involvement with the fatal destiny of Captain Bugno commenced on the evening of January 25, 1945, one day after my nineteenth birthday. Company K was dug in along the south bank of the Moder River near the city of Neubourg in Alsace Lorraine, France. The snow-carpeted Ohlungen Forest stretched out behind our positions, providing an eerie environment for the horrendous fighting that was to ensue within the next few hours.

Our second platoon's assignment was to prevent the Germans from crossing the bridge that spanned the river. We were mandated to "hold at all cost."

Winter nights came early, especially in a heavily-forested area lacking the ubiquitous lights of an urban community. Darkness had already enshrouded us when my squad leader sent word that I report to the platoon command post for a "hot" meal. The command post was several hundred yards to the rear of our hastily dug main line of resistance. The company cooks tried valiantly to serve us warm food whenever possible, having prepared this evening's meal in a small

town close by. Unfortunately, the food was cold by the time it was dispensed due to the frigid weather, and the extreme length of time it took to feed everybody without compromising our effectiveness as a combat unit.

Cold food notwithstanding, my being singled out by the sergeant to take my turn in the "chow line" at that particular moment saved my life. As I approached the kitchen area conveniently set up next to the platoon command post, the Germans launched a vicious attack across the Moder River.

Without going into great detail about the cataclysmic events of the ensuing battle, let it suffice for me to say that only nine men of the second platoon survived. The rest were either killed or captured when the rampaging Germans stormed the bridge in the wake of a tremendous artillery barrage. Approximately one-half of the platoon survivors were men like myself whose turn had come up to be fed.

Dining, of course, was out of the question, and the furthest thing from our minds. As the shells rained down upon us, we sought shelter in the platoon command post, already occupied by one of our platoon's ranking non-commissioned officers. It certainly granted us the asylum we needed in that it consisted of a cave dug into the side of a hill. The walls of this cavern were shored with logs, having been constructed by the farmer on whose land we were deployed. He used it as a storage bin for vegetables.

In the center of this earthy chamber was a table and benches put together with rough-hewn lumber. On the table sat a G.I. helmet with a lit candle affixed to its top, its flickering flame casting ominous shadows throughout the dugout.

Surmising that our forward defenses had been overrun, we young, confused, green, citizen soldiers appealed to our regular Army non-commissioned officer for direction. The momentum of the spearheading Germans was obviously spilling over in our direction. The unique jack-hammer sound of the enemy "burp-guns" was getting louder and louder. If we were to survive, a decision had to be made quickly. Unfortunately, our ranking enlisted man was in no condition to advise us. Without denigrating the man more than I already have, (not all men have the where-with-all to be effective leaders under fire), it was quite manifest that we were going to have to act on our own initiative.

This is where the "field expedience" we had been taught came into play. Perhaps my greater amount of apprehension served as the catalyst. Knowing full well that an advancing German soldier could easily fling a "potato-masher" (German hand grenade) into our shelter, I strongly suggested that we all leave the dugout. As a Private-First-Class, I certainly wasn't accustomed to issuing orders. I do recall however, saying, "I don't know about you guys but I'm

convinced that, if we stay here, we're all going to die. I want to live to fight another day. I'm leaving."

With that admonition, I was the first man through the doorway, grasping my Browning Automatic Rifle which I had positioned against the door frame before entering. At precisely the same moment that my right hand clasped the rifle, a weapon, incidentally, not functional, but which I was keeping until the opportunity presented itself for me to trade it in for one that worked, a parachute flare erupted, silhouetting a German infantryman who had just crested the hill to the left front of our command post. I was profoundly aware of the German pointing his "burp gun" in my direction as I desperately sought cover.

Snow was just starting to fall as the parachute flare floated down, dissipating itself when it hit the ground. I ran like blazes to the rear, jumping over a huge tree lying on the forest floor. Since my helmet was not buckled under my chin, it flew off my head as I hurdled the tree. Surprisingly, the German soldier skipped my head piece over the hill to our rear with a full burst from his weapon, where I joined it immediately afterwards, grateful to be out of his line of fire: how lucky for me, he had started his burst a little on the high side. Automatic weapons have a tendency to rise as they are fired. Consequently, I came through unscathed as did the rest of our group who took advantage of the German's empty weapon to exit the dugout.

Together, and in an orderly manner, we fell back to the third battalion headquarters situated a fair distance behind the main line of resistance. Word had already preceded our arrival. The enemy had pierced our defenses in the area of the bridge. The good news was that the units on both sides of the second platoon had held.

Stringent measures were quickly being taken to assemble a task force whose job it was going to be to plug up the hole in the line. We second platoon survivors knew that our role in this important effort was a given. As chaotic as things appeared to be, the good news was that the newly appointed third battalion executive officer, Captain Harold Bugno, was going to lead the battle group. Yes, we were finally going to have the leadership we so desperately needed.

Captain Bugno commandeered two M-8's (six wheeled armored vehicles), and about 25 men who happened to be in the area. Of course, we K Company men were a part of this combat patrol along with a melding of L and M company guys. In a very efficient, and low-key manner Captain Bugno rallied us, explained our mission, and put us into motion, but not before I traded my non-functioning Browning Automatic Rifle for an M-1 that worked.

Our point of demarcation was a road block that had been hastily set up by Lieutenant Otto Yanke of M Company in a successful effort to stem the German advance, a strategy I might add, that earned Lieutenant Yanke the Distinguished Service Cross. Unfortunately, this gallant officer was killed the next morning, when his jeep rolled over a land mine. "From this point on," Lieutenant Yanke cautioned us, "You're entering no-man's land. Be vigilant!"

With this profound warning imprinted upon our minds, Captain Bugno, standing in the hatch of the second M-8 ordered his hastily recruited task force to move forward. As the two armored vehicles noisily labored up the road that cut a swatch through the heavily wooded valley stretching out in front of us, we collectively stifled our anxieties, and proceeded to do the job that was ours to do – engage and defeat the enemy.

The darkness that completely enveloped us was made even more profound by the heavy snowfall that silently added another layer to the already hip-deep drifts that my friend, Bob Owens and I were forced to struggle through as we tenaciously attempted to maintain our balance on the steep slope constituting the left flank of the patrol. Captain Bugno had designated us as left flank security when he recognized us as two of his former K Company men. The two L Company men comprising the right flank security ere floundering pretty much as we were, extremely aware, as Bob and I were, of the importance of keeping up with the vehicles and the men down on the road.

Wisely, Captain Bugno had deployed his soldiers professionally, with half of his men on one side of the road, and the other half on the opposite side with the proper interval between men. One artillery shell was not going to obliterate his patrol.

We hadn't advanced fifty yards into no-man's land when Private First Class Robert Owens, who was about seven feet to my left front, suddenly stopped much in the manner of a hound dog picking up the spoor. He shouted out, "Halt! Who goes there?" Apparently, he had seen something that was hidden from my view. With the snow melting on my glasses, it was difficult for me to be as alert as Bob. Please keep in mind that it was snowing heavily, and unless a parachute flare went off, it was almost impossible to see anything. Certainly, with the noise emanating from the two armored cars laboring up the road, the enemy had no problems in detecting our positions.

Several seconds after Bob's shout of, "Halt!", a guttural rebuttal of, "Kamarad", sounded out. It was apparent to me that Bob had seen a German soldier who was willing to be taken prisoner. At that moment, a parachute flare lit up the surrounding terrain. The events that followed are imprinted in my mind forever,

much in the manner of an action scene in a Rambo movie where frame by frame, in slow motion, Sylvester Stallone decimates an entire opposing force singlehandedly. Would that I could have reacted in the swash-buckling style of Mr. Stallone. This was real life, however, embracing all the weaknesses of human nature.

On a shelf of ground about ten yards to our left front, I finally saw what had polarized Bob's attention. Nine enemy soldiers, dressed in white hoods and parkas, totally blending in with the snow opposed us. They appeared to be confused and disoriented. Rather than being deployed as they should have been – with the proper interval between each man so as not to present themselves as easy targets, they were all bunched together in the manner of a litter of pigs suckling the sow. Obviously, they were just as cold as we were, and I did briefly entertain the thought of an easy surrender on their part. It didn't happen that way, however. With the parachute flare at the top of its arc, we were all visible to one another. The "sow" who turned out to be a German soldier lying in the prone position behind a light machine gun, mounted on a set of bi-pods, squeezed the trigger of his weapon, shattering the interval of stillness that had resulted as our collective forward movement ground to a halt. Three rounds left the muzzle of the machine gun, the second of which was a tracer (a bullet that lights up), its heat almost burning my nose and upper lip. Realizing how close I had come to being killed, I unequivocally froze up. How much better for me had I been a macho soldier in complete control.

Thanks to the coolness and quick reflexes of Bob Owens, my life was spared. Firing from the hip with his M-1 Bob impacted eight rounds into the bunched-up Germans, his first bullet killing the machine gunner who certainly would have blown my head off had he been given the opportunity of traversing his gun. As I stood transfixed, utterly devoid of feeling, I observed Bob fall to one knee, deftly removing a clip of ammunition from his web belt, and smoothly inserting it into his weapon. From the kneeling position, he fired another eight rounds into the Germans, then moved to his right to join the main body of the patrol. It was at this point that I came out of my mesmerized stance, emptying my weapon into the writhing mass of humanity that Bob had already neutralized.

As soon as Bob and I moved down to the road, Captain Bugno ordered the gunners in the armored cars to fire their 37-millimeter cannons in the direction of where the firing had erupted. In the meantime, the parachute flare descended and fizzled out. This confrontation was over in a matter of seconds so were the lives of eight German soldiers. Captain Bugno and Sergeant McGrath trudged up the hill to see what was left. They brought down one wounded German prisoner who was sent to the rear under guard.

As we moved forward again, I positioned myself behind the trailing armored car in an attempt to absorb heat from the vehicles exhaust system into my fingertips. My hands were so numb that I could barely hang on to my weapon.

We hadn't advanced fifty additional yards when another German soldier, perched high on a knoll to our left front, with a perfect field of fire, pummeled both armored cars with a long burst of heavy machine gun fire. The six tires on the left side of both vehicles exploded, rendering the two M-8's immobile. The German, a persistent cuss, continued to pour down a withering deluge of bullets, many of which ricocheted off the vehicles' armored plates, ultimately killing and wounding several members of the patrol. As I crouched behind the rear-section of the number two M-8, I became aware of bullets methodically chipping the ice around my feet. Without further ado, I flung myself into a snow drift on the protective right side of the car.

Clinging to the rear wheel of the M-8 for cover, I couldn't help but admire the tenacity and professionalism of the German machine gunner and his squad as they battered us with bullets, he, all the while, calling us Yankee S.O.B. His command of English was pretty good, and he dared us to get by him. Anytime one of our guys attempted to move, he would fire in the direction of the sound of crunching snow. In spite of the cold, he appeared to be on a "high." Adrenalin does pump through one's body in the heat of battle. In his case, he might have been high on Schnapps. Most of the German prisoners taken that night were found to have Schnapps in their canteens rather than water. At least it didn't freeze as did the water in my canteen.

If Captain Bugno and his crew members had attempted to crawl out of their armored cars, they would have been killed. Lucky for us all the opposing force lacked a Panzerfaust (German anti-tank weapon). Needless to say, we were bogged down for the rest of the early morning hours, during which time some of the men wounded in the initial onslaught, bled and froze to death. This young man was learning all about "war being Hell," and I was also becoming cognizant of how much punishment the human body can endure under adverse conditions. It was so painfully frigid.

As dawn broke, it was obvious that the Germans had expended all of their ammunition, and pulled back to a secondary position. In previous engagements, we had observed that advancing German units left caches of ammunition every so many yards in the event that a strategic withdrawal was ordered. The guys we were up against were real professionals, and they weren't about to hand back any real estate they didn't have to.

Captain Bugno rounded up the few of us who were still functional and moved us out. None of us were in the best of shape. The trauma associated with a

horrible night, the frigid weather, lack of sleep, no food, snow for water – all of these negatives eroded our effectiveness as an efficient combat unit. For two days prior to this engagement, I had been rendered almost helpless with a high fever that resulted from drinking contaminated water. I was too proud to go on “sick call.” It was obvious to me that every man in the company was needed, and I toughed it out as only a young, strong body can do.

I moved out to the right front of Captain Bugno, my rifle cradled in my arms. My fingers were so frozen that I simply couldn’t grasp the weapon in my hands, let alone fire it. Reacting as an automaton, rather than an alert, aggressive infantryman, I was stunned when Captain Bugno leaped directly behind me, thrusting me face down into the snow with all the strength he could muster. As I peripherally looked up from my prone position, spitting snow out of my mouth, I observed Captain Bugno standing over my prostrate body, whipping his carbine to his right shoulder, firing it three times. Hearing three “thugs”, I looked forward. Three German soldiers lay dead in front of me. In the dense woods, we had blindly walked into each other.

Without uttering a word, Captain Bugno reached down, helped me to my feet, and put me into motion again. Daylight was upon us. No more snow falling, and the visibility was good. We had advanced perhaps, another one hundred yards into an open piece of terrain when, suddenly, we were inundated with mortar fire. Shell after shell fell into our midst killing and wounding a few more good men. I ran to the base of a huge pine tree embracing it with the little strength I had left. The virgin white ground around us soon became a grotesque abstract portrait of ragged furrows and red splashes. When the barrage subsided, Captain Bugno lay dead just a few feet from me, a victim of a mortar shell that had singled him out.

Almost on cue, Lieutenant Woelfer appeared with a small support group to take over the disorganized remnants of what had been Captain Bugno’s patrol, pulling us back to Lieutenant Yanke’s road block.

A unit from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, three days removed from the bloody Bastogne battle, formed a skirmish line after detrucking, attacking in the direction of the German breakthrough. In a matter of several minutes, a fire fight erupted as the two opposing forces clashed in the thick woods. In no time at all the walking wounded commenced filing to the rear. Aside from Lieutenant Woelfer’s overseeing the disposition of our dead and wounded that’s the last scene I carried away with me that morning.

Although we hadn’t pushed the Germans back, at least their forward momentum had been stopped. Just as our Rainbow doughboys had thwarted the last German drive in WWI at the Battle of Champagne, so had we WWII soldiers held

the line in Alsace Lorraine. It certainly hadn't been easy. After 35 consecutive days of exposure to a frigid, unrelenting winter, and a tough enemy, we were finally pulled off the line for rest and reorganization. The Third Reich's offensive capabilities had been shut down. The end was near.

Divine intervention in the persons of Captain Harold Bugno, and Private First Class Robert Owens allowed me to survive the Battle of the Ohlungen Forest, not my prowess as a young infantryman. In subsequent battles, I had additional help in the form of quickly gained maturity, knowledge that I had gleaned from previous engagements, and tremendous role models to emulate. I will always bear the guilt of surviving the horrors of war when so many better men than myself did not. Bob Owens was killed April 18, 1945 during the Battle for Furth. Why he, Captain Bugno, and so many more of my friends died while I survived is not mine to contemplate. I simply can't handle the rationale governing such selections. I leave it to God Almighty. The only course of action that I've been able to pursue is to endeavor to live my life in a manner pleasing to God. It's my way of expressing appreciation for an *extended* gift of life.