

A Chance of a Lifetime

By Retired Master Sgt. Karlen Phillip Morris



INSET LEFT: Retired Brig. Gen. Albin F. Irzyk, left, and Retired Master Sgt. Karlen Phillip Morris pose for a photo in Florida, nine years after meeting to discuss Irzyk's life and career in World War II. (Photo courtesy of the author) • **INSET RIGHT:** A younger Irzyk sat for a photo. (U.S. Army photo) • **BACKGROUND:** Tanks with the 4th Armored Division in the front lines ready for action in Bastogne, Belgium, Jan. 8, 1945. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

As the plane approached the Florida airport, I kept asking myself, "What's he going to be like?" After exchanging letters for the past year and nine months, I was finally about to meet the man. Retired Brig. Gen. Albin F. Irzyk.

Irzyk served in the 3rd Cavalry Regiment in 1941, a horse-mounted unit in an age of mechanized warfare, then as commander, 8th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division, through 1945 as part of Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army. After World War II, he served in the U.S. Constabulary Force in Germany, commanded the 14th Armored Cavalry along the Iron Curtain during the Berlin Crisis in 1961, and was assistant division commander of the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam.

On the plane, I had butterflies in my stomach as I rehearsed what I would say to him. I reassured myself everything would go fine, but I was nervous as I started off the plane.

So I could easily spot him, Irzyk wore a 4th Armored Division hat. When I reached the top of the ramp, I saw him. His hands were behind his back, and he was studying the crowd.

As I approached, he quickly stuck out his hand and welcomed me to West Palm Beach in a booming voice.

Like firing the first rounds on your first engagement as a tank commander, the pressure was off. As we walked through the airport and then drove to his house, we spoke like old college pals reunited after years apart.

Our letters had stuck to military subjects, so we got to know each other better on a personal level. Once we arrived at his home, Irzyk introduced me to Evelyn, his lovely wife of 55 years.

All this began when I bought a book about life as a tankerman during World War II.

4th Armored Division Reads

In *He Rode Up Front for Patton*, Irzyk writes about the famous general, the Third Army, the 4th Armored Division, Combat Command B and all the units attached, the 8th Tank Battalion — and himself (Irzyk, 1996). What separates his work from others on the 4th Armored Division is its coverage of the training that preceded their departure for Europe. Reading it made me want to learn more about this outstanding unit and its leaders.

After finishing it, I found an article by Irzyk about the division in the November 1999 issue of *World War II* magazine (Irzyk, 1999). Both left me with questions. I sent them to the magazine's editor.

I never imagined what would happen next.

At Thanksgiving that same month, my dad, brother, and I discussed traveling to Europe to follow the 4th Armored Division's path. Returning home that weekend, I found a letter from Irzyk in the mail! I was shaking in my boots. Was it a form letter with a stamped name? No, this was a personal correspondence answering all my questions.

I must've read that letter 100 times that night. The last sentence was the highlight: "If you need more information or have other questions, please do not hesitate to write."

Believe me, I had questions. And did I ever write!

The next year, the family Thanksgiving plans came to fruition. My dad, brother, and I spent two weeks traveling across France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany in December. We walked some of the 4th Armored Division's biggest and most controversial battlefields. I purchased maps to locate every town and village along the way. Through Irzyk's letters, I learned details about the places we saw.

Four thousand two hundred kilometers and 14 rolls of film later, we arrived back home. Exhausted.

This was the reason for my eventual meeting with Irzyk: I had a photo album and wanted him to confirm I'd been to the right places. I wanted to hear him tell me how much the area had changed.

Military Family Life

The first thing Irzyk — Al — and Evelyn wanted to know was what interested me in World War II. I explained that

my father served and that U.S. military history fascinated me. They understood. We talked about my dad's military career, the places where we'd lived, his positions, and my time in the service. I told them about my dad going through the Armor Officer Basic Course when Al was assistant commandant at the Armor School. It's a small world!

We spoke at length about what separates military families from others. I don't think there's a military family that doesn't have a special day when dad (and, in most cases now, mom) and their children bond.

The Irzyks' special day was Sunday morning breakfast: It was dad's treat. Whatever the kids wanted, he cooked. Ours was Saturday morning, dad's treat for breakfast, then off to find parts for the cars he was restoring. (Good quality time and memories that last a lifetime.)

As we got to know each other better, Al asked me questions. *What's the morale like in the Army today? Is your unit combat ready? Is it combat capable? Would it be combat effective? What are the attitudes of today's Soldiers? What would make things better? Where would you stand if called up today?*

These questions left me speechless. Here was a man retired for 30 years, and he was asking me about today's Army. After discussing these points at length, Al offered an explanation.

"The reason I ask is because, like so many times in the past, after every war or conflict, we seem to always downgrade our military," he said. "This usually results in big losses when we do go back into the arena."



A Sherman tank maneuvers in the woods south of Bastogne, Belgium. (U.S. Army photo)

HONORING THE ARMY'S ROLE IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Aaron Troutman)



(Photo by U.S. War Department)



Last year's Army-Navy Game featured subtle nods to the Battle of the Bulge and Bastogne, Belgium. Honoring the 101st Airborne Division's defense of the region 80 years before, the Army's team jersey featured players' names (like "Sofia," at left) in a font recalling the lettering on the Bastogne sign held in a famous photograph taken of Gen. Anthony McAuliffe (standing at center in the black-and-white image), after the Nazi's siege of the area was broken.

The speckled helmets and jerseys evoked the fog and snow encountered in the Ardennes. The stars on the jerseys' fronts and helmets' backs, meanwhile, were surrounded by rings with seven gaps — representing seven roads meeting at Bastogne. Yet another detail: the "Army!" on the jerseys (below) recalls McAuliffe's typed response of "Nuts!" to the Nazi's demand for surrender (essentially telling them they could "Go to hell," as one colonel put it).

A related website highlights the 10th Armored Division's role in the conflict:

"Soldiers of Combat Command B of the Tenth Armored Division were the first American troops to reach the Bastogne. Seeing the need to slow the Nazi advance, Colonel William Roberts, CCB's commander, detached smaller task forces to delay the enemy until the 101st could arrive, then formed a mobile reserve with his surviving tanks to reinforce the 101st's defense."

Find out more at screamingeagles.football.



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Aaron Troutman)

The Battle of the Bulge

After lunch, we talked about the Battle of the Bulge. One of my first questions was about lost artillery recovered on Dec. 20, 1944. Task Force Ezell met Col. William Roberts' 10th Armored Division in Belgium, as directed. Returning from Bastogne, the task force discovered abandoned artillery. They retrieved as much of it as possible — so the enemy wouldn't.

I showed Al letters I received from members of the 9th Armored Division's Team Pyle, which indicated the artillery belonged to the 771st Field Artillery Battalion. I told him about letters from members of the 771st. Since they were wounded at the time, they couldn't confirm or deny the artillery was theirs. It's a project on which I continue to work.

One of the letters was from one of Al's classmates at the National War College. Al was amazed and proud that I contacted veterans of these units rather than relying solely on what I found in print.

That brought us to another discussion: accuracy in military history books. Many were written at the close of World War II, and not all the information is accurate.

When 4th Armored Division's Combat Command B (CCB) drove to Bastogne on Dec. 19 of that year, 33 tanks supposedly broke down. Authors repeat this unverified assertion, but Al pointed out that he wouldn't have had enough tanks to get to Bastogne if he'd lost 33 of them. The fact that the 4th was in a rest period for two weeks before moving north indicates these vehicles were more than ready to go.

A Visit from Gen. George S. Patton

From Dec. 7 to Dec. 18, the 8th Tank Battalion spent its rest and refit in Domnom-les-Dieuze, a French town halfway between Nancy and Singling, just off the D38 road. It trained crew replacements and performed extensive tank maintenance.

Patton visited the troops there, so we made it a stop on my family trip. The view from that town allows travelers to picture the scene: the greatest military mind of the time doing what separated him from others — walking among his troops, inspiring them, talking to

them. Six days later, Patton sent this force north for a counterattack at the underbelly of the German thrust.

That led us to discuss gaps in history books and the preludes of major battles. Al and I talked at length about the lead-up to Singling, France. The Army Historical Division book *Small Unit Actions* covers four such actions, including the 4th Armored Division at Singling (1946). The book describes B Company, 37th Tank Battalion, and B Company, 51st Armored Infantry Battalion, and the amazing battle in Singling. The attack's background doesn't cover what happened with the entire division before Dec. 5 (another project in the works).

Books covering World War II military operations contain such gaps. While many cover Patton during

the Battle of the Bulge, several overlook that on Dec. 12, after visiting his troops, Patton ordered his staff to prepare to counterattack north into the First Army sector.

His intelligence staff gave him an accurate picture of what was happening in front of the First Army sector. His staff produced three separate plans that could be implemented with just one code word from Patton. The actions of Third Army from Dec. 18 to Dec. 22 are rarely discussed or covered in articles and books about Patton and the Battle of the Bulge. This is when his leadership and tactics were at their best.

If you bought every book on Patton and the Battle of the Bulge, you would find gaps in them all.



Domnom-les-Dieuze, France, was the town where the 8th Tank Battalion pulled back to rest and refit after the battle of Singling. Gen. Patton visited the 8th Tank Battalion here on Dec. 12, 1944. (Photo courtesy of the author)

How to Use a Tank

After sitting at the dining room table for nearly two hours, Al and I returned to the softer seats of the family room. In an earlier letter to Al, I questioned the role of Armor during WWII. Now, I prepared to listen and learn, and taped our conversation.

Through the ages, infantry has been the queen of battle. It takes infantry to seize ground, hold it, and win wars. This primacy was the case up until World War II. Then, there was a new kid on the block.

The tank.

Few individuals knew what this new technological advancement could do, and the infantry powers-that-be

did not want it to take them out of the war. Infantry oversaw armor development and limited it to fit their needs. World War II tanks were not designed to fight other tanks based on the infantry.

The object of tanks is not to support infantry. They're meant to break through from the infantry. Their objective is *not* to fight other tanks, primarily, but to envelop the enemy and knock out enemy tanks while doing so.

When I told Al I thought armor's role was to support infantry, he exclaimed, "If your mouth was open, Gen. Patton, Gen. Wood, and I would've been down your throat!"

Armor was tanks leading the way, with armored infantry supporting. Hit the enemy head-on and try to penetrate; if not possible, envelop. Maj. Gen. John S. Wood understood this new force and its capabilities and exploited them on the battlefield.

In 1937, as commanding officer of a field motorized artillery regiment, Wood experimented with the capabilities and limitations of a mobile force. (This was a general way ahead of his time.)

"Of all the leaders that I ever met, he is the greatest," Al said. "He is the greatest not because of one reason or two reasons, but for many reasons. First of all, he loved his troops, and his troops loved him."

Al said Wood was also a fabulous trainer and a superb tactician.

"You can throw [all the books on leadership] away

and study Gen. Wood. He had it! He is the greatest leader I have ever known, and I will say this over and over again until the day I die."

He said there are many generals the public knows about, but relatively no one's heard about Wood. And the greatest irony of all was that he was relieved in combat as a division commander.

Al said he was a general who did everything right, plus Patton and Wood were close friends, Wood and Eisenhower were friends, and to be treated the way he was was astonishing. Patton gave the instructions, he gave impossible orders, and then Wood did the impossible.

Trip to Europe: \$1,200. Fourteen rolls of film developed: \$150. Plane ticket to Florida: \$193. Talking about Maj. Gen. John S. Wood with a member of the 4th Armored Division — priceless!

German Panthers and Tigers

The next morning, we cleared off the dining room table and got to the trip's main purpose: looking through the photo album. We wanted to cover several places, so we started early each day and drove hard. We spoke about the area from Bayon, France, and the Moselle River to Fulda.

CCB fought across the Moselle, around the south of Nancy, and across Lorraine. One of the most significant battles it had was at Fresnes-en-Saulnois. In a close-range battle, the 8th Tank Battalion came up against the



From left to right: Unknown major general, Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, Maj. Gen. John S. Wood, Lt. Gen. George Patton, and Maj. Gen. Manton Eddy inspect a map from one of Patton's Armored Battalion commanders during a tour near Metz, France. (U.S. Army photo)



Battle of the Bulge combat left a German Panther burned out. (U.S. Army Photo, from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA))

German Panther and Tiger tanks. It defended a ridgeline just west of town on a foggy, rainy, nasty day, when out of the woods to the northeast advanced tanks and infantry.

“That was the first time that Tigers were as close and as evident and as dangerous. I’d seen Tigers occasionally, but this time it was a mortal battle. And this was the time where I fully, fully appreciated the German 88,” Al said.

When training on tank tactics, tankers learn about turret and hull defilade. On the ridge that day, tanks had to come up until their guns were clear of the ridge, fire a couple of rounds, then back down below the ridge and move. Then they would move back up to the ridge, fire, and move again. German Tiger tanks would fire at tanks that were there moments before, but by then, they were already gone. The unit didn’t lose any tanks to the Tigers because every time they fired, they moved. According to Al, fire and movement were perfectly executed that day.

When a Tiger fired its 88 at the top of the ridge where the U.S. tank had been, Al said, the round would ricochet. “That is the most horrendous sound you have ever heard,” he said.

I asked if it was the 88’s muzzle velocity that made it scream like that.

“When it was coming, it was not terrifying. It was just another round,” he said. But when it hit the ridge and ricocheted, it “screamed to high heaven.”

“It was a whistling, screaming, terrible, terrible sound,” he said. “Boy, that 88 was something.”

After an 88 round hit and ricocheted, it took “a hell of a lot of guts” for tankers to move over and go back up when they knew that Tiger was out there.

Al mentioned in his book that one of the greatest allies they had that day was the Air Force. He elaborated on the encounters, noting there were days when they

thought aircraft couldn’t provide air support. Then, suddenly, there was a hole in the ceiling and pilots zoomed down and oriented themselves to see who was friend and who was foe.

“I don’t know how they did it,” Al said, “but they did.”

He said they didn’t have forward air controllers (FACs) all the time, but they had them at the time. Technology wasn’t what it is today, so they sometimes had to go back to combat command to communicate with the pilots. It wasn’t always immediate.

Much of the time, Al said, they had a pilot who was a FAC. They would make room in the tank — sometimes bouncing out the bow gunner — and the pilot would go forward with them.

With their radios, FACs could talk directly with the planes, so they were rather responsive. They would be with the tanks for two or three weeks, but never more than four. They came and left as fast as they could.

Al and I had many great conversations like these, and they went on for hours. The World War II discussions were terrific, but Al also had stories about the Armor branch after the war.

CheckPoint Alpha

When Al saw the pictures from the museum at CheckPoint Alpha just outside of Rasdorf, Germany, he had great memories from serving there.

The feelings I had when I went there were indescribable. Those of us born in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s know what it’s like to live under the threat of nuclear war. We grew up knowing the only thing separating us from the Russians was a wall between East and West Germany.

On that beautiful, sunny day, I stood on that wall, looking across the Fulda Gap. There were no tanks in the motor pool, armed guards, or security checkpoints to go



The author's father captured this image of the old wooden tower at Check Point Alpha in 1978. (Photo courtesy of the author)

through. The tower across the fence was empty. I looked into what had been one of the most feared areas in the world, and there was no threat.

I thought back to 1989, before I had signed up. Getting up for work, my dad sat downstairs, watching the morning news. He had returned from Germany three weeks before, and now he watched the Wall come down. During his entire military career — as a tank commander, company commander, battalion commander, and brigade commander — he'd prepared his soldiers to defend this ground against the Soviet Union. On that morning, the danger faded. It was unforgettable.

I thought about 1961 and the Berlin Crisis, the only time we faced the Russians tank to tank. As during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two superpowers stood nose to nose, ready to fight. Al commanded the 14th Armored Cavalry and was about to go to war with the Russians. It was then that my dad's tank battalion was activated and sent to Fort Stewart, Georgia, for nearly a year of active duty, preparing to go to Germany.

Battling to Bastogne

The last pages of the photo album and our trip covered CCB's drive to Bastogne, starting at Beheme, Belgium. As Al looked at the photos, he noticed

something: "There are more trees cut down than there were in '44."

As we drove along the road north, we passed through the Forêt d'Anlier, a thick forest. After about two and a half miles, the terrain opened a bit.

Al had his original map from the time. Comparing it with a contemporary one revealed few differences — new roads and fewer forested areas.

CCB secured the town of Burnon on the night of Dec. 22. After driving 161 miles on Dec. 19 and stopping at Nives, it sent a task force into Bastogne and fell back to Leglise on Dec. 20. It moved to its initial point (IP) on Dec. 21. Now, after attacking all day, it was to "move all night." On Dec. 23, a vicious counterattack at Chaumont stopped CCB in its tracks. The losses were heavy for both the tanks and armored infantry.

Patton pushed Third Army into Bastogne. In his book *War As I Knew It*, he wrote:

"The day of the 24th was rather discouraging. All along the front we received violent counterattacks, one of which forced CCB of the 4th Armored Division back several miles, with the loss of a number of tanks. This is probably my fault, because I had insisted on a day and night attack. Such an attack is all right for the first night of battle and possibly on the second, but after that the men become tired. Furthermore, unless you have very bright moonlight and clear going, armored battle at night is of dubious value. I remember being surprised at the time at how long it took me to learn war. I should have known this before."

(Patton, 1947)

Al looked at the pictures of Chaumont.

"With all this greenery, it looks 180 degrees different than it did then. When it was cold, bitter, snow, the gray fog — and here you can see for miles and miles — but then our visibility was restricted," he said.

They could make out the town, but beyond that, they couldn't see a thing. It was dark, heavy, oppressive, and a thick haze hung over the area. It looks different today.

"When the attack came, I never saw the tanks. I just saw the flashes," Al continued. "I was down in the town, and off about one to three o'clock is where the fire came from. I was in the center of town, and elements of B Co had advanced to the outskirts of town."

On Dec. 23, the 26th Volks Grenadier Division was headquartered at Hompre, about two miles from Chaumont. The 11th Sturmgeschütz Battalion was sent to stop the Third Army's southern advance at Chaumont. In Al's book, he noted it was an element of the Führer Grenadier Brigade. Other books say it was the 653 Heavy Panzerjäger Battalion.

"All I know is I had direct fire weapons shooting," Al said, "and I don't know if they were Mark IV tanks or

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM WORLD WAR II



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— Gen. George S. Patton, writing about pushing Third Army into Bastogne in *War As I Knew It* (1947)

(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Panther tanks or if it was towed anti-tank guns. All I know is it was direct fire weapons, and they really powdered us.”

According to his estimate from muzzle flashes, it was 23 to 25 guns. They got out as soon as they could. The enemy was mobile — they moved in, struck, and then were gone.

On Dec. 24, the CCB was given 2nd Battalion, 318th Infantry Regiment, 80th Infantry Division, to assist in the drive to Bastogne. They fought alongside them the rest of the way to Bastogne and were the extra force needed to turn the tide of the battle.

The Armor Force Today

The morning before I left, as we were eating breakfast, we talked about the Armor force today. I told Al about the M1A1 and some of its features. What most amazed him was our 120 mm main gun.

“That’s a real cannon there,” he said.

He couldn’t believe it when I told him the tank weighed 70 tons.

“That is too heavy!”

He told me about a mind-numbingly complicated briefing he had at Fort Knox, Kentucky, some years ago.

“A long time ago, we had what we called ‘simplification’ when we were training,” he said.

Plans and operations had to be simple enough for inexperienced leaders to succeed. If leadership got lost in battle, those below could still carry out the mission.

Al asked if the tank had an auto-loader and how many crew members it took.

We had no auto-loader, I replied, and only four men in the crew.

That led us to talk about machines replacing humans.

“You know, you can program a computer or a machine to do a lot of things, but there is one thing that you can’t program into it,” Al said. “That is ‘spirit.’ Spirit and feelings are what separate machines from humans in combat.”

Men win Medals of Honor, not machines. Internal instincts make a man go above and beyond the call of duty

to save his friends and do the unimaginable.

Al and I could have talked for days and days, but I had to leave.

Growing up, I never thought I’d be at a table with a man who had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, and countless other medals during service for this nation in World War II and beyond. I have learned more about armor from him, through our countless letters and conversations, than I have from all the books I could buy.

Men like Al were there for the birth of armor and helped to develop the branch into what it is today. It has its share of silent heroes. Al is just one of many.

Epilogue

I wrote this article as a young, newly promoted staff sergeant — who had just visited an idol.

Among many things Irzyk taught me was how to write better. I don’t know if he knew the value of the letters we exchanged. Now, I have a collection of documented conversations with him.

When we started, I wasn’t much of a writer, but I quickly adapted to his style: how he laid out his page, broke up conversations, or shifted from point to point.

Irzyk forced me to put my thoughts on paper. How do I ask this question? What am I asking? I look back on my first letters and laugh at how dumb they sound. I’m sure Irzyk could see my growth. He fostered my desire to learn and invest in research.

He always said if I found anything that contradicted or supported one of his statements, I should share it. He wanted to see the evidence himself. On my first visit to the Armor School Library, I found such an item, made a copy, and shared it. He was pleased to see things like that.

When he invited me for a visit, I knew I wanted to capture the experience. So, I bought a tape recorder, the best I could afford. I didn’t want to spend my entire visit writing things down.

This recorder had a voice activator. I could set it on the table, and we could talk. This setup paid huge dividends when it came to writing this story. I listened to the recording to make sure I got quotes word perfect.

I wrote the paper as I went along; I didn't take anything down while I was there. In my head, though, I composed it, and I used it to build the framework of this story.

Irzyk and his wife, Evelyn, were amazing people. Together, they were a power couple. She turned out to be as valuable a mentor as he. After I got off the plane and sat in their living room, he was in his chair on my right, and she was on the couch beside me to my left. I think she asked more questions than Al did.

One conversation I didn't record was their "getting to know me." The Irzyks learned who I was and asked why I was interested in their story. This moment is when they "adopted" me. (Evelyn later called me their "adopted son from Kentucky.")

Later, I learned this is how they familiarized themselves with everyone invited into their home. Others with whom I spoke talked about the green couch and the deep questions they asked. It was how they got to know new arrivals and became invested in who they were and what made them tick. It's something I try to do when I meet people.

When I returned home, I immediately put pen to paper. I took my time and then sent what I wrote to Irzyk for review. I was planning on submitting it to *Armor* magazine.

Boy, did Irzyk red-pen my paper. Thinking back, I wonder if Evelyn — a former teacher — made the edits. Either way, I made the corrections and sent the article back for approval. Somewhere in my basement, I have all those papers. But this is the final product.

I felt confident the piece would make it into the magazine and sent it in. The staff approved it, but it would have to wait to get published.

Well, 9/11 happened, and many things changed. It kept getting pushed back, and then it was never brought up again.

I deployed several times and continued to put the article out there, always receiving the same response: "It's too personal." Well, that was the point. Meeting a veteran with significant military service *is* personal. It's life-changing.

Irzyk encouraged me to keep sending it in. He

couldn't believe it was getting rejected either.

We continued exchanging letters until the time came when he could no longer do so. Because of his mentorship, I began to write better NCO Evaluation Reports (NCOERs) and initial and developmental counseling statements. My commander later said they were the best he'd ever read and recommended I write a book about it. It was a thought. The Army eventually rewrote the counseling manual.

The tape recorder helped me truly remember sitting with Irzyk. I wasn't distracted writing something down, taking the focus from being present.

I used this technique whenever I conducted an operations order (OPORD) brief. Everyone got out their map, and I read the OPORD before anyone tried to write anything down.

To get everyone to grasp the order, they first needed to understand it, then go back and focus on each separate part.

This approach gave everyone a better understanding of the plan. They listened to the order and didn't focus on trying to write everything down. That approach paid off many times over.

Two moments I didn't capture on tape in my talk with the Irzyks stand out. The first: Evelyn told me she could drive an Army Jeep, which made me chuckle.

"Our first car was a jeep that Al bought for \$25, when we were living in post-war Germany," she said sternly. "There were no cars. So, I had to learn how to drive it."

Many of the bridges were being rebuilt at that time. So if she went anywhere, she had

to drive through the river to get around the bridgework.

Later, a guy who restored military vehicles in Irzyk's honor had Evelyn drive a jeep for him.

The other moment was Irzyk's story of how he almost lost his life as a referee at a high school football game. While serving at Fort Knox, he volunteered as a football referee. At a match in Glasgow, Kentucky, a star on the team was playing dirty. So, Irzyk kept penalizing the team for his performance. Eventually, he ejected the player. The hometown crowd was not pleased.

"When the game was over, I made sure I was close to the exit, so I could get to my car," Irzyk said. "When it was over, I hightailed it out of there!"

"Imagine surviving WWII and then getting killed at a high school football game in Kentucky," Evelyn said in the car.



Evelyn Irzyk sits at ease behind the wheel of a World War II jeep. (Photo used with permission of Ivan Steenliste)

The Irzyks' House

The den was a small room off the dining room, with wood paneling and several chairs. Military art and items from the couple's journeys adorned the walls. Their trademark green couch sat against the wall with two floral high-back chairs flanking it.

Irzyk had sat in the chair to my right, I sat on the right end of the couch, and Evelyn sat on my left. This space is where we got to know each other. Behind me and hanging above the couch was a portrait of Irzyk and two crossed sabers. It was intimidating. That portrait has since been donated to the Fort Devens Museum in Devens, Massachusetts.

The dining room was a long, large, formal room surrounded by windows. There were many cabinets and buffets with silver and china. The table had 10 chairs and a huge chandelier above. It was the perfect place to spread out maps, books, and the photo album as we discussed my European trip.

Many a map was thrown on that table, and Irzyk revisited many of his battles there. It was there he recalled the battle for Chaumont to me. There were other battles as well.

Irzyk was a friend, a mentor, and an Army legend. I learned so many things from him in our nearly 20 years of friendship. I was a better leader, NCO, and American from the experience. I cherish the moments I had with him and Evelyn. He made me a better writer, historian, and researcher. He always challenged people to do their research. Dig until you find the answers and can verify them with evidence. I am forever grateful to him. ■



A portrait of Albin Irzyk hung over the green couch in the den of his and Evelyn's home. (Photo courtesy of author)

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Retired Master Sgt. Karlen P. Morris is a body shop manager. He served with Alpha Company, Bravo Company, and Delta Company, 2nd Battalion 123rd Armor Regiment, where he held all positions up to platoon sergeant. He served three years as Intelligence NCO with the 206th Engineer Battalion and retired as first sergeant of the 130th Engineer Support Company. He is a Gray Area Retiree with 22 years as an M-Day Guardsman in the Kentucky National Guard. He holds an associate degree in general studies from Colorado Technical University.

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