Uncle Charlie's War

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He was on a two day pass to Paris, fresh from a night's sleep in a hotel, and hoping to get tickets to Glenn Miller's Christmas concert. It was December, 1944. Without warning, trucks arrived to pick up the American soldiers. Told only that they were going to the front, that the rest of their battalion was already there, the troops were still wearing their dress clothes when they were whisked away.

Uncle Charlie recalls little of the 220 mile journey to Belgium, except that it was long and slow – the trucks bumping along at about 20 miles an hour, without headlights in the dark. But he remembers vividly the heart-stopping sight of the massive German Tiger Tank, flanked by two smaller tanks for protection, maybe fifty feet away – seen from the back of the truck after the driver made a quick U-Turn. By crazy luck, the Germans, who were having breakfast outside, apparently mistook them for captured trucks. The Americans made it to headquarters, a few miles away.

The largest – and for the Americans, bloodiest – land battle of the war, later known as The Battle of the Bulge, was on.

Glenn Miller's plane never reached Paris. It famously disappeared in a fog after taking off in England, killing the great band leader, pilot and other passenger.

Charles Audet – my husband's uncle – is 96 now. A short, soft-spoken man with a ready smile and a sweet, open face that is still recognizable from the old photographs in his living room, where his Purple Heart and Bronze Star are also on display, he lives alone in the modest sea green ranch house in Framingham, Massachusetts, which he and his late wife, Eleanore, bought in 1957. I used to walk by it on my way home from high school when I'd missed the bus, long before I knew the Audets or their nephew, Chuck Yanikoski, whom I married in 1981.

Uncle Charlie is among a handful of surviving original members of the elite 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, which was virtually extinguished at The Battle of the Bulge: information about original troops is scarce. The 509th was the first parachute unit to ship to England, early in 1942, where they trained with the British 1st Airborne Division, and the first to make combat drops during the invasion of North Africa. (Charlie was in four invasions – three airborne and one amphibious). They fought in Italy and France. After the Bulge, they were awarded their second Presidential Unit Citation.

The 70th anniversary of The Battle of the Bulge passed quietly this year. Here Hitler had launched his last major offensive, ending less than six weeks later in a Pyrrhic victory for the Allies (the Americans alone suffered over 75,000 casualties). As the anniversary ended, in January of 2015, American veterans were dying at a rate of about 550

each day. The living, a few of whom were interviewed, still mentioned the cold: Temperatures plunged to ten, even twenty below zero. The Americans arrived in the Ardennes forest underdressed, undersupplied and outgunned. Charlie remembered getting special gloves, and warnings about frostbite: a perhaps apocryphal tale involved a soldier touching a tank with a bare hand, which had to be amputated on the spot. Charlie saw the bodies of the 84 American POWs left in the snow after the Nazis' infamous Massacre of Malmedy, later prosecuted as a war crime.

Charlie arrived at The Bulge a seasoned soldier. For him, Anzio, Italy, had been worse. After nearly drowning during the 509th's amphibious training exercise in January, 1944, he was entrenched for three months under relentless German fire. The big guns went off about every fifteen minutes, challenging the sanity of the healthiest mind. Troops moved only at night; they cat-napped during the day. Unable to bathe or change clothes but always mindful of gangrene, Charlie took care of his feet by drying one pair of socks under his arm pits, then switching socks.

He considers himself lucky. He was born into a big, loving French Canadian family of ten children who lived in a four room rental house in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. They slept three to four kids in a pull-out bed. His parents were "the greatest love story I ever saw." His father was a barber who worked six days a week on commission, but insisted on relieving his wife of dinner duties on Sundays. Charlie's mother took

in ironing and made all her family's clothes. "We were poor, but we didn't notice because everyone was poor," says Charlie.

A 23-year-old bell hop when he was drafted in 1941, Charlie had a high school diploma, but had always felt limited for jobs by his height. At 5'2", 123 lbs when he entered the Army, only blankets and neckties fit him. All his Army clothes had to be custom-made. But he got through jump school and entered the newly formed 509th, which was attached to a general. When they arrived in England, Charlie was assigned to be a runner/rifleman.

Everything was an extra effort. "A man six foot tall had ten inches of step beyond me," Charlie said. He even parachuted at a different speed – falling about three to four seconds after the others. Determined not to be a slacker, he never dropped out of a hike, even at thirty miles. "As long as little Charlie could make it, I thought I could too," said his buddies.

During World War II Charles Audet made three combat jumps, in North Africa, Italy and Southern France – always in the dark – without injury. He squashed his fear. Any display of fear could get you thrown out. He learned to trust his buddies and follow orders: while training with the British at Woolfacomb, England, Charlie once served as a "stepper": two soldiers lifted him onto a huge coil of barbed wire, a copy of a malicious German obstacle, and told him to lie flat. Then troops jumped on his back to scale it, somehow without injuring him. The last two over lifted him off.

Charlie was wounded at The Bulge during the second phase of the battle, in January, when the 509th helped capture and hold critical high ground for the 7th Armored Division. And again he was lucky: German

shrapnel bounced off a tree and got embedded in Charlie's three layers of clothing, entering "flat," which spared his left arm from certain amputation.

Charlie Audet, back row, far right, with other members of the Headquarters Company of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, at Boufarik, Algeria

Of the 750 soldiers from the 509th who fought at The Bulge, only 48, along with seven officers, emerged from the battle on January 25th. Everyone else was either hospitalized or dead. The 509th was deactivated, its soldiers reassigned to other divisions. After some rehabilitation, Charlie was sent to the 82nd Airborne, where, as a replacement, he was no one to anyone. He was "devastated."

Then came an unexpected gift. Charlie's younger brother Donald was a private with the combat engineers in the 101st Airborne Division. Charlie learned that they were only about ten miles away, and he

began making contact with Donald. Finally, some 3½ years after they had last seen each other, Charlie was given a pass to meet Donald at Mourmelon-le-Petit – a precious time of comfort after losing his 509th family.

Donald and Charlie

Next was the surrender of the German 21st Army in the Black Forest on May 2, 1945. Charlie was on guard duty for a few days. He recalls the awe-inspiring hours-long procession of tanks and trucks – the Americans on one side, directing the German tanks and trucks into a tight circle. The Germans were disarmed, only the officers being allowed to keep their pistols. The Americans fed everyone. Charlie's lingering impression is of the orderliness and civility of the proceeding. The German soldiers, who "were very beat down," waved to each other as the American MPs directed traffic. There was this sense that "it's over: it was like pulling down a big curtain," said Charlie. Days later, he was on his way home.

On the ship back, The Sea Porpoise, Charlie was reunited with some of his 509th buddies, some of whom were injured. There was some talk about what had happened to whom, who they were not seeing on the ship. Charlie would run into more of his lost buddies at Ft. Dix before he finally went home and began his "tough adjustment" to civilian life.

"I'm going to get two bottles of whiskey and get drunk every day," Charlie told his mother when he got home in June of 1945. She indulged him briefly. He had been "punished" and ordered around for so long that he went through a period of being "negative." If he saw a Keep Off the Grass sign, he walked on the grass. This lasted about a year. Overcoming the fear he'd had to suppress for four years took longer. In 1957, after a gang of kids turned up at his house late one night to rob him, he finally gave in to Ellie and began locking the doors.

The war has never left him. You don't forget burying a buddy, his head half blown off, or the aunt who never recovered from the death of her son, killed at Anzio. You don't forget the middle of the night jumps, when the air was heavier and you never knew where you'd land. "We all figured we were going to get killed," says Charlie.

Yet he doesn't regret "one day." The war forced him to grow up, showed him unsuspected strengths, and gave him a sense of direction. After graduating from Boston University in three years on the GI Bill – enhanced by the $3,000 in allotment money he sent his mother, who had never spent it but saved it for him, he became an accountant, but the soldier continued to march alongside him.

"I am not I," begins a poem by Juan Ramón Jiménez. "I am this one, walking beside me whom I do not see…"

I see Uncle Charlie gliding across the floor with Auntie Ellie to Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" at my wedding; as half of a childless couple caring tenderly for my two young children, Allie and Randy.

Summer brings sacks full of vegetables from Charlie's garden. I observe his last twenty years of devotion to Ellie, now deceased; he kept his promise not to put her in a nursing home.

Seventy years after the war, Charlie looks embarrassed while recounting how he fell asleep while standing under a plane on guard duty in North Africa – you couldn't move or light a cigarette – and was threatened with court martial. And I see, borrowing from Jiménez, that when this gentle man dies, the soldier will remain standing.

About the Author

Linda H. Davis is the author of three biographies, including *Charles Addams: A Cartoonist's Life*, and *Badge of Courage: The Life of Stephen Crane*. Her essays and columns have been published in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New Yorker, Ozy, Granta* and other publications. A soldier's daughter (her late father fought in the Korean War), she has been married to Charles Audet's nephew, Chuck Yanikoski, for 34 years. They live in Massachusetts with their son, Randy.