

WORLD WAR II *Remembered* LEADERS, BATTLES & HEROES



World War II Participants and Contemporaries

Stanley T. "Stan" Bahner
Topeka, Kansas
U.S. Army, Mediterranean Theater

World War II Remembered is a multi-year exhibition currently on display at the Eisenhower Presidential Museum. The article that follows is a special feature of this exhibition, the third in a series created to honor and educate about the generation that won World War II. Featured are the stories of real people from the "World War II Participants and Contemporaries" collection, held and preserved in the archives of the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

February 18, 1944—"My God, what a day. Today was the day we have all been waiting for (or I should say expecting.) Jerry [German forces] tossed all hell at us. We had tanks firing point blank at us. I have seen men pray before, but nothing like we are doing today. I have a headache from bombs landing so close. All of us have aged a lot. I watched one of the officers trying to read a funny paper and his hands were shaking like leaves. . . . I have had shells fall closer, but never have I felt so useless. Our infantry took an awful beating. Some got caught between German infantry and German tanks. Some crawled out under our artillery barrage. All day our infantry was carrying back wounded. Two companies were captured. The Germans have massed infantry. They seem to be giving their all. I must admit it's a hell of a lot. The strain on a man's mind is terrific and sleep is a thing of the past. Lt. Conely and Sgt. Ayers got killed at Observation Post 4. Ayers was the only guy left that was inducted with me."

—Stan's diary
Battle for Anzio

It was sunrise, July 10, 1943. The stormy surf was a challenge as 23-year-old Pvt. Stan Bahner scrambled over the side of the U.S.S. *Frederick Funston* into a landing craft destined for the southern coast of Sicily. This, the first day of Operation HUSKY, was the largest

first-day amphibious landing attempted by the Allies in World War II. By the time the war was over, "Staff Sergeant" Stanley Bahner would live through an astonishing 222 combat days as a signalman and forward observer for the 171st Field Artillery, 45th Division, U.S. Army. Incalculable were the moments when he was absolutely certain that he would be one more wartime casualty.

Born in Sedalia, Missouri, on January 23, 1920, to Arthur and Agnes Bahner, Stan was an only child. He grew up in the family home at 805 Jewell, in Topeka, Kansas. His father, "Art," was a plumber, and it was only natural that Stan would learn the trade from him. Photographs from the early 1940s reveal a handsome young man with lively blue eyes and a wide, engaging smile that many must have found irresistible. A compact 5'7" and 150 lbs., Stan was a gifted athlete and star quarterback at Topeka Catholic High School. As he graduated from high school in the spring of 1939, the world was already teetering on the brink of war. Four years later, Stan was fighting on the frontlines in Sicily, an eyewitness to the indiscriminant destruction and cruel indifference of warfare.

Stan enlisted in the U.S. Army on October 20, 1941, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He trained at quite a number of army posts around the country until June 1943, when his unit sailed from Newport News, Virginia, destined for the port of Oran, Algeria. The Allied invasion of Sicily was imminent. Trained as a signalman, Stan's

primary mission was to lay and maintain communication lines between army units in the field. Frequently, he also served as a forward observer, directing artillery fire and spotting enemy targets. When needed, he fought side by side with the infantry. The result was that Stan was almost constantly in the line of fire. On February 21, 1944, Stan's unit was pinned down under a punishing artillery attack near Anzio, Italy. Later that day, Stan recorded, "I prayed to God to pull me through—I made many promises to be a better man. We all had the shakes when it was over. I don't know when I enjoyed darkness so much." During the Battle for Anzio alone, Stan survived 69 grueling days of combat.

Stan began his wartime diary on June 4, 1943; his final entry was April 13, 1944. It is a historical treasure, capturing the deepest thoughts and feelings—and indelible experiences—of a young American soldier 70 years ago. Stan experienced his first combat on July 10, 1943, in southern Sicily. "I was nearly nipped by a sniper. Three shots from his machine rifle kicked up dust at my feet—lost my pen, nearly my heart." Stalwart in courage and raw determination, Stan would earn a commendation "for excellent performance of duty in action." By the time the war in Europe ended, he had been awarded a Bronze Star Medal, a Bronze Service Arrowhead, and seven battle stars.

Especially poignant are Stan's entries, which chronicle the wounding and deaths of his fellow soldiers. "Ayers was a swell fellow . . . just a big red headed Irishman from Kansas. . . I hope he's in a soldier's heaven." In

March 19, 1944 (Anzio)

"I have seen boys with their legs and arms blown off—some just full of shrapnel—Some their face or head half torn away—some with their guts completely out of their stomachs—"

another entry, he writes simply, "Ted died today." Stan and his fellow soldiers barely have time to register their grief before they must refocus on the battle before them. He describes the nearly unbearable hardships in the field. Picking his way through a foreign landscape littered with booby-traps and landmines, Stan lugged heavy communications equipment over miles of unforgiving mountain terrain. He struggled to survive out in the open— exhausted and exposed to cold rain or snow, all the while fighting off determined fleas and hungry rats. How Stan longed for a few precious hours of sleep before the next onslaught!

After more than five grueling months on the frontlines, and living under debilitating conditions, Stan frets that he is close to the end of his rope. "I can't take much more . . ." On December 23, 1943, he writes, "I'm just about done under. Sorta wish I'd catch a slug or get sick so I could go to [the] hospital and rest." He writes that the "best Christmas gift" ever was to be called "off the hill" for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1943. On January 17, 1944, Stan observes, "Been getting sick a lot lately." A medic dispensed a few pills, but Stan had no choice but to carry on. (Unbelievably, an already-spent Stan will not arrive at the ill-fated Anzio beachhead until January 30.) On the rare occasion he could indulge in a "helmet bath" and savor a warm meal, he marveled at the luxury of it. Now and then, Stan allowed his thoughts to turn to home and distant memories of his blessed ordinary life *before* the War.

On April 13, 1944, Stan dared to admit, "I can hardly wait to get back home – there were so many times I doubted my coming back." With an overwhelming sense of relief—coupled with the miracle of surviving 222 days of combat—Stan was finally on his way home to Topeka, where he recuperated from May 20 to June 13, 1944. During this interlude, Rome was finally liberated, and the D-Day operation had succeeded. Time after time, there had been rumors that Stan could expect to be sent to the South Pacific next. Instead, his orders took him to several U.S. Army bases before sending him to France on March 18, 1945. In September, he departed Germany for home. A few weeks later, on October 8, Stan was honorably discharged and headed home, grateful and eager to pick up the threads of his life.

Stan married Dorothy "Dot" Eakes seven months later, on May 6, 1946. The couple would go on to have three children: Pam, Colleen, and Kevin. Like his father before him, Stan made his living as a plumber in Topeka, and, from all accounts, was recognized as a great family man. One lingering legacy of Stan's traumatic war years was his lifelong aversion to loud noises, and, according to his wife, he suffered recurring nightmares from wartime trauma. About 40 years after the end of World War II, Stan began to attend reunions for the 45th Division, something he continued for the rest of his life. Being in the company of those who had a shared experience must have been a great comfort in his later years. Stan began to talk to his family about the war only after being diagnosed with cancer in his final years. In 1994, Stan Bahner, a World War II veteran who proudly flew the American flag every day, died at the age of 74.