

## The Homily 2010: Proud to have served

**Theodore G. Heck, K/275**

**I**t is a privilege to have the assignment of presenting the homily this morning.

For half a century we have used this occasion to remember those comrades who have left our ranks since last we met. And we go back another two decades to honor all those who came home in flag-draped coffins and those who still sleep in Alsace/Lorraine under white crosses and Stars of David.

To walk among the graves in St. Avold or Epinal or any military cemetery in America is an emotional experience for each of us. How many of us can watch the final scene of "Saving Private Ryan," without a lump in our throat, when an old Matt Damon salutes the grave of his rescuer in the cemetery in Normandy?

Many of us had to read Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in our high school English class. It's the 18th century poem with such memorable phrases as "Far from the madding crowd" and "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Who among us cannot relate to the poet's wondering what snuffed-out life is under each tombstone? Lines such as these:

"Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest? Full many a flower

is born to blush unseen. Here rests a youth to fortune and fame unknown."

If you Google "Gray's Elegy" you may get the same feelings that you experience when you walk among the ten thousand soldiers and airmen buried in St. Avold, more than 120 of them veterans of the 70th Division. And in Epinal twice as many more. Young men whose lives were snuffed out before they could make their mark.

Like the poet Gray we wonder what the fallen heroes might have become . . . the student chemical engineer who never got to join a company, because the phosphorus grenade on his chest blew up . . . the would-be teacher who never met his first class because his helmet could not block the tree burst . . . the would-be doctor who never got to scribble a prescription because, as a medic going to help a wounded buddy, he crawled over a Schü mine hidden in the snow.

Several hundred others were originally in these foreign fields, until their families asked for them to be repatriated to plots at home or to American military cemeteries.

We think of those families who were devastated by telegrams from the Secretary of War. Of children who never met their father. Of love beds never slept in.

The impact of war on those who endured it at home is sometimes overlooked.

But it's easy to feel if you're standing near a Trailblazer memorial in Philippsbourg and a mother and daughter, who are on a trip with you, ask if anybody can show them where their father or grandfather was killed. And you remember how difficult it was to write to the brother of your college classmate who wanted details of his death.

Some folks believe that such sadness is compensated for by a fallen soldier's earlier entrance into an afterlife. But most of us probably are happy for the delay. Satisfied that we had more time to love and be loved and to contribute to the happiness of others.

**O**ur reunion is also a permanent salute to the men who became prisoners of war and suffered the anguish and the bad conditions in those months of captivity. The men who wince at the unreal situations portrayed in the movies or on TV in "Stalag 17" and "Hogan's Heroes" and a host of other films.

This reunion, like all that preceded it and those that will follow under the guidance of associates and later generations, is designed to be more than mournful recollection.

tions.

Homage is part of the program, but so are happy recollections. We congratulate each other on how well we look, which may be a bit of a stretch.

We get together to tell stories and retell stories. We smile if they've changed a bit. Stories, such as the relief we all felt when taken off the line. The joy of sleeping in a bed instead of a snow-rimmed foxhole. The applause we had for the kitchen, when they could get to the front with hot food to replace K and C rations.

Some men were lucky enough to escape the snow for several days to enjoy a pass to Paris and walk down the Champs-Élysées, in some cases armed with cartons of cigarettes the friendly supply sergeant gave them to take the place of cash.

The stories we tell also deal with the Army of Occupation. Our wounded men and prisoners of war, and those with longer service came home early. Others stayed another year or so. Training, of course, while we wondered what the Russians were up to. But also playing softball and baseball and basketball. Going to school. Traveling around Europe and learning about people and cultures that were a far cry from the farm or factory, the college campus or the streets of Saint Louis.

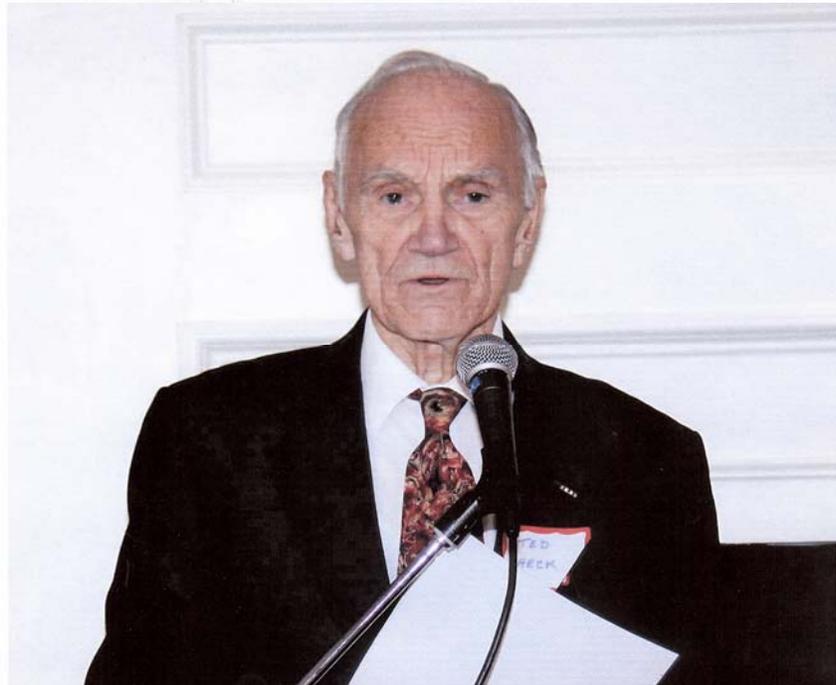
**O**ur reunions have changed dramatically in one aspect. The dissolution of our association may be further away than we used to think. There was a time when we pondered what to do with money left in our treasury, as our ranks approached zero. Build another monument? Endow a chair in military history at an appropriate university?

Fortunately, our associate

members rode in to solve that problem. They rode in, in increasing numbers to assure that the 70th Infantry Division Association will remain alive.

The stories may be second hand ones, told by succeeding generations.

great adventure. We just wanted to do whatever duty we were called upon to do, get the job done and get on with what most of us would call normal living. Therein lies the reason for the heartfelt gratitude our nation owes its veterans and in particular the veterans of World



*Ted Heck addresses the gathering of Trailblazers at the memorial service.*

**L**et me conclude by saying that we old soldiers who attend reunions are willing to remember the past. And to share memories with our band of brothers, we happy few.

We can reflect on the horrible and unfriendly periods, but at the same time, smile about the pleasant ones.

In Ed Lane's homily at the last reunion, he said of our service in the Army that he was sure we did not have feelings of grandeur or

War Two.

I hope you, too, are getting the occasional thanks from strangers who learn of your service. It's a good feeling.

And it fits with the overriding emotion of PRIDE.

None of us would like to do it again, but we can be proud that we were there.

Proud to have served with those who long since have slept elsewhere.