

# Lucky Lindy

U.S. Army Veteran and Roswell Resident Frank "Lindy" Fancher Shares his Memories of World War II

[ WRITTEN BY CARL DANBURY JR. ]



**My** FATHER ENLISTED in the U.S. Army at 17 and lied about his age so that he'd be accepted. Like many sons and daughters of military personnel, I rarely had the opportunity to discuss my father's World War II duties, experiences or exploits with him, and when he passed away in late November 2001, there were many unanswered questions about the wound he suffered to his knee, the photos of concentration camps he tucked away in a shoebox in his closet and the medals he received while serving our country for a brief time in 1944 and 1945.

When the opportunity arose to discuss World War II with 91-year-old Frank "Lindy" Fancher, who now lives in Roswell, I was thrilled. Fancher, who lived for most of his life in Lincoln, Ill., before relocating closer to his son Jim and his family in 2001, ascended from National Guard enlisted man to lieutenant during his five years of service in the U.S. Army. When his wife of 55 years, Vada, passed away in December 2002 after suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Fancher, like many caregivers, tried to fill a restless void. Although he never graduated from high school, Fancher authored "WWII: Through These Eyes," a 288-page book on his military experiences and his life just prior to and after World War II. It was published in 2005, around the time of his 86th birthday.

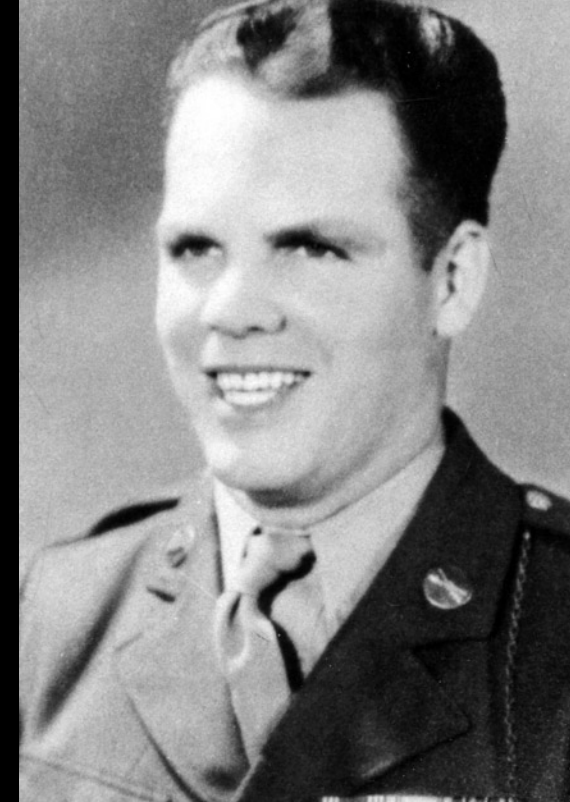
In filling the void for himself, Fancher treats the rest of us to an incredible story that is both personal and historic.

## An Action-Packed Past

As one of the heroes of Le Stromberg Hill in Luxembourg during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944, Fancher is confined to a wheelchair because of two artificial knees, arthritic ankles with no cartilage and an eroded disc separating his neck and spinal cord. Surgery is not an option. While some of us might be prone to self-pity during our later years under similar circumstances, Fancher remains upbeat and a willing participant in all conversation. Jim said his father has always been a "glass half full" kind of guy who relishes every day he is alive.

Although life for Fancher these days might move at a much slower pace, his vivid recollections coupled with the omnipresent memorabilia in his two-room quarters at Merrill Gardens, the assisted living facility where he currently resides, provide a visage of a heroic military career that was action packed.

Fancher enlisted in the 106th cavalry regiment of the Illinois National Guard, a unit that was inducted into Federal Service for one year on Dec. 6, 1940. Basic training was held at Camp Livingston near Alexandria, La., and Fancher learned demolition and bridge



construction among other things. He completed his one year of service the day before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, but rather than being released from duty, he and the 106th were sent to New Orleans to guard bridges, docks and other installations of military importance. Then, his unit was sent to the Panama Canal Zone, "The spy crossroads of the world," Fancher noted.

Among his duties there were to uncover hand-held radio positions of German spies, who relayed ship movements of the Allied Forces in the area, providing security for air bases and orchestrating covert missions in Central and South American countries for the FBI, as there was no CIA at that time.

"They were sinking so many ships in the Gulf of Mexico that it was just prohibitive," Fancher explained. "Colombia and Ecuador were supposed to be neutral, but those countries were letting German spies operate these big radio towers to contact our enemy's subs. Then they would direct supply ships into these various inlets in the Gulf." According to Fancher, the permanent locations were found quickly, but the moving mule packs were a grave challenge for the team.

He remembered, "They wanted to get rid of those communications and since I had the fire and demolition team, we went in and blew up these towers." As a result, sinking of Allied ships decreased by 50 to 60 percent, according to Fancher.



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Fancher receives his Battlefield Commission for his heroic actions at Le Stromberg Hill.

Those assignments ended in Nov. 1943, and Fancher's unit was sent to Camp Maxey near Paris, Texas. After a few months of training and re-training, staff sergeant Fancher's 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was deployed to New York, on to Glasgow, Scotland via the Queen Mary, and then to Bournemouth in southern England for a few weeks before being shipped to Omaha Beach in Normandy in June 1944.

By the time Fancher hit Omaha Beach, the first wave of the Allied Normandy invasion had already secured it. After a few weeks of wrestling with the muddy terrain, Fancher's squadron was sent to Burmerange in southern Luxembourg, close to the border of both France and Germany. The Moselle River divides France from Germany and Luxembourg from Germany. Gen. Patton's 3rd Army was attempting to cross the river downstream from Le Stromberg Hill, which was heavily fortified and held by the Germans. In order to provide Patton a clear path to cross the river into Germany, Fancher's squadron was among the units assigned to take the hill.

After a daring dash in which Fancher took out

several machine gun emplacements and mortar batteries, the squadron reached the top of the hill and held it for four days and three nights under constant enemy and friendly artillery and machine gun fire. None of his unit were wounded or killed and Fancher received a battlefield commission for his actions. With Patton safely across the river, Fancher's unit was relieved and sent to Clervaux, about 100 kilometers north of Burmerange, spending Thanksgiving Day 1944 at President Roosevelt's mother Sara's ancestral castle.

Once rested, Fancher's squadron, now based in the hamlet Heinerscheid, was charged with setting up a 7-mile counter reconnaissance screen along the Our River and Skyline Drive. From there, they were sent to St. Vith in Belgium in early December 1944, just in time to catch the brunt of the First S.S. Panzer Division of the Sixth German Army led by Joachim Peiper. Assigned by Hitler to lead the armored offensive, Peiper's duty was to break through the U.S. lines along an assigned itinerary and to take bridges on the Meuse River between Liège and Huy.

The infamous Battle of the Bulge was 40 days of hell. Not only was it cold with snow up to the waist, soldiers on the ground had little ammunition, no food, no warm clothing, gas for vehicles was scarce and they rarely received air or artillery support in that densely forested area of Belgium. They faced a German opponent that was making a last-ditch effort to thwart a burgeoning Allied sweep across France and Belgium, and into Germany. Fancher was one of 87,000 Americans committed to the Ardennes-Alsace campaign and one of approximately 67,000 that survived.

"The Germans had pulled all of their best troops and leaders from other fronts, but the weather was the worst enemy you had," Fancher said. "There was snow up to our [waist] the whole time and there were no flights because of the weather and they rationed artillery support. I've never seen a combination of cold, snow and fog like that. Sometimes the fog was so thick that you couldn't see who the person was next to you."

Fancher and his unit were cut off from their own lines for nearly three weeks. Without food, they ate tree roots but only after they warmed them inside the waistline of their pants. He and others in his unit lost 50 pounds during that time.

"It was just one thing after another. We just did the

best we could. Ammunition was the thing. If we could have had enough ammunition, the Germans could have never gotten the Bulge going. We were cut off and couldn't get any. The 106th division moved in on our flank and they had 28 rounds of ammunition per individual weapon. That's just one clip and you're out. They had 250-round belts for a machine gun and they shoot 450 rounds per minute, so they didn't have much of a chance," Fancher said.

"I went through 1,500 rounds in my first day. You didn't have to aim because we were outnumbered so badly that you were bound to hit somebody. We stopped them sometimes for a few hours but we did a lot of running."

Fancher and his unit managed to escape capture, but many assigned to the 106th didn't and wound up in Stalag 13D in Nuremberg, Germany and later in Stalag 7A in Moosburg until liberated by Patton's 14th Armored Division, April 29, 1945.

Once the Bulge was over, Fancher's platoon was sent to Bergstein, Germany, about 35 kilometers from the Belgian border. The mission was to keep the Germans from blowing up a nearby dam, which would have flooded the Roer Valley. The enemy was in secure positions high atop the Roer River.

To get in their own secure bunkers near the river, Fancher and his men had to be guided in the dark through a minefield into the woods. Once they were two-thirds of the way across the field, one of his men sneezed and alerted the Germans who sent up flares and began shooting. A platoon sergeant was killed and four were wounded. Fancher was able to lead the rest of the men out of the minefield and safely into the bunkers.

The next day, friendly artillery fire began to rain down on his position and the phone lines to headquarters had been

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“Well, I’ll tell you I don’t think you’ll find many atheists in a fox hole. They might not be very outgoing about it, but somebody looks out for you.”

cut. Fancher left the bunker, ran through the minefield back to the edge of Bergstein, repaired the phone line and then tried to get back to his platoon. Standing next to a brick wall, Fancher heard an awful sound, a screaming meanie rocket that exploded near him. He couldn’t hear for a short time and his weapon was nowhere to be found. A German advanced toward him and pulled out a pistol as Fancher leapt toward the adversary with a razor-sharp bayonet. Fancher was hit by two slugs in his left arm but managed a coordinated move and cut the German’s throat. The slugs had shattered the bone just above Fancher’s left hand. He was evacuated to Paris and then to England to recover.

For his actions in Bergstein, he was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry.

After a few months, Fancher was sent back to Paris and served on a Court Martial Board. In his book, he shares many colorful tales of the people he met during the last six months of his service and his duties as finance officer of the Thomas H. Barry, the ship which sailed him back to the U.S. in early October.

#### Surviving the Aftermath of War

Many servicemen suffered upon their return home, and it was no different for Fancher, who like my father and others that helped preserve the freedoms we have today, was reluctant to talk about his experiences.

“When I first came home, I didn’t want to talk about it or hear about it, all I wanted to do was to forget about it,” he said.

“There were guys that were devastated by the war that never got over it. Shooting at a building that’s 300 yards away with the enemy in it never bothered me, but when you cut a guy’s throat and get his blood all over you ...” Fancher said his voice trailing off. “I told Jim that the reason I think my neck is bothering me so much is that maybe this is my punishment for all of the necks I broke in World War II. That was the quiet, clean way. When you’re behind enemy lines you can’t fire your gun.”

I asked Fancher to consider why he thought he wasn’t one of the nearly 300,000 U.S. servicemen killed in WWII.

“If a guy could last a couple weeks in combat, usually he had a pretty good chance of staying alive. Of course, the law of averages eventually gets to you but the fresh recruits that came over, most of them got killed before they even got their feet wet,” Fancher said.

“Somebody was looking out for me. I laid and cleared mine fields. I disarmed mines. I still have my fingers even though they don’t work too well all of the time. You develop an extra sense, and it’s hard to make somebody believe this, but I stopped a sixteenth of an inch away from tripping off a damned mine. What made me stop, I don’t know?”

“I volunteered to go retrieve dead bodies on a hill in Luxembourg. We had to take a different route back than the way we went up and I’m walking and in a middle of a step I stopped. I don’t know what made me stop. My pants leg was sitting on a trip wire for a mine that would have wiped out the whole group. What makes you do that?” Fancher asked rhetorically.

After all the carnage and death he had witnessed, I asked Fancher if it was easier or harder to believe in God.

“Well, I’ll tell you I don’t think you’ll find many atheists in a fox hole. They might not be very outgoing about it, but somebody looks out for you. The way we were so outnumbered in the Bulge, there was no way we should have made it out of there. I don’t know why but we did. It’s not difficult to believe at all for me. When I ran up the side of that hill with that old 30-caliber machine gun, I should have been dead before I got half way to the base of the hill. If they had kept using the mortars that they were using before, they’d have had me for sure.”

#### Being More than a Soldier

Fancher and his first wife divorced in February 1949. Their two daughters, Linda, born before he enlisted, and

Marianne, born nine months after Fancher returned home, lived with their mother but Fancher’s relationship with his daughters remains strong.

Fancher remarried later in 1949 to Vada Compton, a college student from Norfolk, Neb. Their first child, Melinda Sue, died a short time after her birth in 1958, but 15 years later Jim was born.

Before Vada passed away in 2002, Fancher looked after her 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“It’s so sad, we did have a good life, but it was all gone, she didn’t know me the last six or eight months at all. She knew I was somebody close, but she didn’t know I was her husband,” he related.

“I wasn’t sleeping too well [after her death] and decided to write this book. If it hadn’t been for the fact that we had these meetings once per month [at the American Legion in Roswell], I would have never been able to write it. There were only three guys that were in the European theater, all the rest of them were in the Pacific theater, so I got a good whiff of what it was like over there too,” Fancher said.

“There was just so much stuff that you can’t remember all of it,” he said.

For some of us, even the faintest of recollections help us put those sacrifices in the proper perspective. Thank you Dad, thank you Parpie, thank you Kyle and thank all of you who have served both at home and afar with your faithful service to our country.

And to Mr. Frank “Lindy” Fancher, thank you for sharing your memories with all of us, and Happy Father’s Day! **PN**

Frank Fancher’s book “WWII: Through These Eyes” is available on demand at Barnes & Noble and other booksellers as well as online at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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