

Blessed Quietness Journal

Searching for the Truth in the King James Bible;
Finding it, and passing it on to you.

EDITOR:
Steve Van Nattan

[HOME PAGE](#)

AN XMASS EVE STORY

ed2go Online Courses

ed2go.com

Over 300 Subjects to Choose From - Still
Time to Enroll for December!



It seemed to me that Xmass junkies who visit this Journal should be given their "Christmas Eve Story."

Now, I cannot assure you that this story will tenderly touch your emotions and leave you with the warm fuzzies.

I CAN assure you though that this story will not bore you-- It will make you think and ponder.

THE STORY:

THE WAR DEPARTMENT WORKS IN WONDEROUS WAYS, ITS BLUNDERS TO PERFORM

Dwight D. Eisenhower

On Christmas Eve 1944, the Belgian troopship Leopoldville was transporting 2,235 American soldiers, all from the 262nd and 264th Regiment, 66th Infantry Division across the English Channel as reinforcements to fight in a fierce struggle that would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. The Leopoldville was protected by escort ships, including the British Destroyer Brilliant, but no air cover was made available even though the threat of attack by German submarines was high. Just five and

one half miles from its destination of Cherbourg, France, the vessel was torpedoed by the German submarine U-486. The ship sank 2 1/2 hours later.

According to many survivors, the Belgian crew abandoned the sinking ship and left the American soldiers to fend for themselves. The British Commander in charge of the convoy ordered the Leopoldville's anchor dropped to prevent the troopship from drifting into a minefield outside the harbor. While this solved one problem, it created another. When a tug arrived on the scene, the dropped anchor prevented it from towing the sinking vessel into shore. Murphy's law states that whatever can go wrong will.

On Christmas Eve 1944, Murphy's law was in full effect. Delayed radio transmissions for help, delayed response of rescue craft, heavy seas and freezing temperatures were just a few of the many things that sealed the soldiers fates. And it being Christmas Eve, servicemen at an American base in Cherbourg who could have aided the stricken Leopoldville were taking a night off from

Eve, serviceman at an American base in Cherbourg who could have aided the stricken Leopoldville were taking a night off from the war, either partying or attending church. No one seemed to be around to help.

By the end of that terrible night, 763* American soldiers were dead, many drowning or freezing to death in the icy waters of the English Channel. These soldiers represented youths from 47 of the then 48 United States. New York State alone lost 80 young men, including 39 from New York City. Many of those killed were only 18 to 21 years old and 493 of the bodies were never recovered. Three sets of brothers were killed, including two sets of twins.

Because of wartime censorship and to cover-up the mistakes made by the various governments and officials involved, the disaster was not reported to the news media. Survivors were told by the British and American governments to keep quiet. Amazingly, relatives of the victims received notices that their loved ones were Missing in Action, even though the U.S. War Department knew them all to have perished. Later, the men were declared Killed in Action, but even then no details of their deaths were divulged to their families. After the war, the tragedy was considered an embarrassment to the Allies and all reports were filed away as secret by the American and British governments. Families of victims searched vainly for information about the deaths of their loved ones. Only in 1996--over 50 years later--did the British declassify documents relating to the sinking of the Leopoldville.

The Leopoldville disaster was the worst tragedy to ever befall an American Infantry Division as the result of an enemy submarine attack. Yet, this is more than a story about a terrible wartime tragedy, it is about how governments, in order to hide their own mistakes, can hide the truth from those who need it the most.

*The death toll has often been reported as 802. A review of the official Leopoldville Disaster List from the National Archives totals 763 confirmed dead.

From: gaffergeorge@netscape.net (George Cipolletti)

Date: 97-04-22 22:14:15 EDT Crossed over on USS George Washington 1944 but don't recall crossing date. Crossed with 66th Division, 262 Infantry Regt.

We were in England while Bulge was happening and left for Cherbourg France on Dec 24, 1944 to relieve the 94th Division. I was slated to cross on the 'Cheshire'. The 'Leopoldville' was sunk on Christmas Eve with almost 1,000 men killed or drowned - over 1/3 of the 2,200 men on board. It was a bitter cold night and happened when most of us were asleep. The ones who survived ended up picking bodies out of the water on Christmas Day. It was horrible!

We ended up being transferred to the St. Nazaire/ Lorient area instead of going into the major battles. The 106th Div - or 94th - not sure -went instead and we sat out most of war in that area containing German forces that were slated to join the German breakthrough.

There is an account of the event sinking in a paper 'The Patriot Ledger' dated Dec. 27, 1994. An accounting also can be found in a book entitled 'A Night Before Christmas' by Joaquin Sanders: 1963.

It was a night to remember! No life jackets were issued and many were left to swim or float in 48 degree water. Most did not survive who went into the water.

The sinking took out the heart of our 'Black Panther' Division, most from the 264 Inf Regt. The accounting lists 802 men lost, but I recall a listing from our division commander listing the lost men as over 980. The ship list was inaccurate. Many of us were on the wrong ship since many of us had been on leave in various parts on England when the order came to ship out. We went onto the ships as we arrived. Many of us were not listed with their correct unit. The shipping out was very hurried and VERY unorganized!

From a Family Biography on the Web:

Clarence the youngest was born July 29, 1918. He died December 24, 1944 while on board the U.S.S. Leopoldville. It went down in the English Channel during WWII.

James writes that Carol Korte Warren, oldest daughter of George Jr. and Dorothy remembers one winter day when Grandma came over to her house and failed to show her the attention she thought a six year old granddaughter deserved. Katherine had just received the telegram confirming Clarence's death. It is the only recollection Carol has of seeing Grandma Cry.

Ernie Pyle Writes about the Crossing:

The Ocean Was Infested with Ships

NORMANDY BEACHHEAD, June 15, 1944--The ship on which I rode to the invasion of the Continent brought certain components of the second wave of assault troops. We arrived in the congested waters of the beachhead shortly after dawn on D-One Day.

We aboard this ship had secretly dreaded the trip, for we had expected attacks from U-boats, E-boats, and at nighttime from aircraft. Yet nothing whatever happened.

We were at sea for a much longer time than it would ordinarily take to make a beeline journey from England to France. The convoy we sailed in was one of several which comprised what is known as a "force."

As we came down, the English Channel was crammed with forces going both ways, and as I write it still is. Minesweepers had swept wide channels for us, all the way from England to France. These were marked with buoys. Each channel was miles wide.

We surely saw there before us more ships than any human had ever seen before at one glance. And going north were other vast convoys, some composed of fast liners speeding back to England for new loads of troops and equipment.

As far as you could see in every direction, the ocean was infested with ships. There must have been every type of oceangoing vessel in the world. I even thought I saw a paddle-wheel steamer in the distance, but that was probably an illusion.

There were battleships and all other kinds of warships clear down to patrol boats. There were great fleets of Liberty ships. There were fleets of luxury liners turned into troop transports, and fleets of big landing craft and tank carriers and tankers. And in and out through it all were nondescript ships--converted yachts, riverboats, tugs, and barges.

The best way I can describe this vast armada and the frantic urgency of the traffic is to suggest that you visualize New York Harbor on its busiest day of the year and then just enlarge that scene until it takes in all the ocean the human eye can reach, clear around the horizon. And over the horizon there are dozens of times that many.

We were not able to go ashore immediately after arriving off the invasion coast amidst the great pool of ships in what was known as the "transport area."

*

Everything is highly organized in an invasion, and every ship, even the tiniest one, is always under exact orders timed to the minute. But at one time our convoy was so pushed along by the wind and the currents that we were five hours ahead of schedule, despite the fact that our engines had been stopped half the time. We lost this by circling.

Although we arrived just on time, they weren't ready for us on the beaches and we spent several hours weaving in and out among the multitude of ships just off the beachhead, and finally just settled down to await our turn.

That was when the most incongruous--to us--part of the invasion came. Here we were in a front-row seat at a great military epic. Shells from battleships were whamming over our heads, and occasionally a dead man floated face downward past us. Hundreds and hundreds of ships laden with death milled around us. We could stand at the rail and see both our shells and German shells exploding on the beaches, where struggling men were leaping ashore, desperately hauling guns and equipment in through the water.

We were in the very vortex of the war--and yet, as we sat there waiting, Lt. Chuck Conick and I played gin rummy in the wardroom and Bing Crosby sang "Sweet Leilani" over the ship's phonograph.

Angry shells hitting near us would make heavy thuds as the concussion carried through the water and struck the hull of our ship. But in our wardroom men in gas-impregnated uniforms and wearing lifebelts sat reading Life and listening to the BBC telling us how the war before our eyes was going.

But it wasn't like that ashore. No, it wasn't like that ashore.

Tale of ship's fate no longer censored

Joseph Cycon was on his way to France aboard the S.S. Leopoldville on Dec. 24, 1944, when the ship was torpedoed by a German submarine and hundreds of his Army buddies were killed. He was unable to talk about the incident because it was coded top secret by the government.

But now the story is out. Allan Andrade, a retired New York City police detective, has written a book about it based on his interviews with survivors of the ship. One of the survivors was Cycon, a Sidney resident who worked at the Bendix plant before and after World War II.

The Charles L. Jacobi Post 183 of the American Legion in Sidney will pay tribute to Cycon, who died in 1990, and his family at the post's annual birthday celebration dinner this Saturday for the founding of the American Legion.

Cycon's wife, Margaret, his two daughters and granddaughter will be there as the post presents a copy of Andrade's book, "The S.S. Leopoldville Disaster," to the Sidney Historical Society.

Margaret Cycon said her husband almost never talked much about the tragic night, but when he did it was only with her and his family.

On the Christmas Eve that Cycon was headed to Cherbourg, France, aboard the Leopoldville, he and the other infantrymen tried to pass the time by singing Christmas carols, his wife said. Her husband played his harmonica for a while, but the combination of the ship's poor quality of food and swaying motion eventually got to him and he headed upward, toward the main deck of the ship, to get some air. His fellow members of the U.S. Army 66th Panther Infantry Division were still below decks.

"He was about halfway up the ladder when the torpedo hit," Margaret said. "His feeling sick probably saved his life."

Cycon attempted to help the other men get to the main deck, but many were killed by the torpedo's explosion and others drowned. The surviving men later jumped to a British ship that responded to the Leopoldville's S.O.S. call.

Margaret and the families of the others who survived, alongside the families of those who were killed, had no idea what happened. The Army decided soon after the sinking of the Leopoldville, that the disaster should be kept under wraps.

But, before the Army censored all the news going back to the States, the European Stars & Stripes newspaper wrote an account of it. Cycon cut out a portion of the article and tucked it into the finger of a pair of blue lace gloves he sent as a gift to his wife.

"It was a long time before I actually tried on the gloves," said Margaret, remembering the urging of a friend who wanted to see her with them on. "When I did try them on, I found the bit of paper tucked near the tip of one of the glove's fingers. ... That's how Joe beat the censors and let me know what happened."

The events would particularly haunt him every Christmas Eve afterward.

Margaret said each Christmas Eve after her husband returned to Sidney, he would become very quiet. Christmas carols would strike memories of when the ship sank. "It was like he could somehow hear all those voices on the ship," Margaret said.

Herbert E. Murray, commander of the Sidney American Legion post, said the trip Cycon and the rest of the 2,600 troops were on was supposed to last nine hours. Murray said the ship was torpedoed about five miles from shore and 825 men lost their lives.

"The Navy and Army tried to hush it up and every survivor was sworn to secrecy," Murray said. "Once we heard about the book, we thought it would be nice to remember Joe by giving a copy of the book to the historical society."

Charles Downin, past commander and current chaplain of the post, said he's happy to see the men who were on the ship are finally getting the recognition they deserve and he's glad the truth about the incident was uncovered by Andrade.

See a photo of Cycon and his widow at: <http://www.thedailystar.com/news/stories/1998/03/27/honor.html>

SURVIVORS FROM THAT XMASS EVE:



Rich Dutka, Company A, 264th Regiment, ended up in the water and swam to a nearby raft. He remembers seeing Coast Guard ship No. 15 moving toward him with its entire prow sheared off due to a collision with the Leopoldville. From his floating position he saw the new prow of the tug with a white china toilet leading the way like a ship's figurehead! This humorous sight has lasted at least fifty years in his memory. The ship had one engine not working that night, but rescued about 30 troops.

"Mac" McFall, Company E, 264th Regiment, was sleeping below when the torpedo hit. Fortunately, he was wearing his life jacket, and awoke floating around in the compartment. "Mac" could not swim, but was floating back and forth as the waves moved the ship around in the high seas. He eventually floated out through the torpedo hole and was spotted by some guys on deck

floats out through the torpedo hole and was spotted by some guys on deck! They threw down a rope and hauled him up on deck.

2nd Lieutenant John Replogle was Executive Officer of Company B, 264th Regiment. He came aboard the Leopoldville with the Company payroll in a pouch around his neck. He jumped into the water at the last minute as the ship was going down. After one and a half hours in the water, he was picked up by a small ship. When he awoke about thirty hours later, his binoculars were at the side of his bed, but the payroll was nowhere to be found! A year later in Vienna, Austria, he had to endure a formal proceeding to prove that he did not swim ashore, stash the payroll, and then swim back in the channel to be rescued.

Frank Sieplinga, Sgt., Company B, 264th Regiment is a big man, but he did not know how to swim. During the time he was in the water, he swallowed quantities of sea water and oil, and developed pneumonia. After a month in the hospital, he felt well enough to eat some Red Cross doughnuts. He got sick again and spent another month in the hospital.

Anthony Pignatone, PFC, Company E, 264th Regiment, was on deck when a Belgium crewman gave him a cage with a parrot in it before the crewman got into a lifeboat. Anthony yelled to the sailor aboard the British destroyer, "Brilliant" and threw the cage down to the deck. At our Division reunion in 1989, Angus Currie from Scotland spoke to our membership. He had been Chief Petty Officer on board the "Brilliant", and had been nearby when the cage landed on the deck. A few minutes later, Anthony jumped safely to the deck, and retrieved the cage. The parrot was alright. He later gave the parrot to a British sailor in the mess hall.

Reverend Doctor Arnold Olson was 264th Regimental Chaplain. During our 1989 "Return to Europe" trip, he told me a story. He does not remember the explosion, his rescue, or anything about it until he arrived in an army hospital in Cherbourg. The first thing he remembers is walking into the survivors ward and hear someone shout, "Hey guys, Reverend Ole is not dead, he's here!" He was not visibly wounded but several hours of his memory are a blank. I have not been able to find any survivor who knows what happened to Reverend Olson during those blank hours.

Don Blake, Sgt., Company F, 262nd Regiment had been constipated for a couple of days before boarding the Leopoldville. During the wavy ride he finally developed the urge, so he went up two decks to the latrine. Just as he pulled his pants down, the torpedo exploded! Most of his buddies below were killed.

Vito Briamonte, Sgt., Company E, 264th Regiment. As the ship started to sink with him on deck, Vito said a prayer to his deceased mother. He went underwater with the ship, but shortly shot up to the surface and swam away. "When I popped to the surface, I just knew that it was my Mom and God that saved me." He was later picked up by a tug. Vito still has the calendar watch he was wearing on that night. It is stopped at 8:26 PM, and the date is stopped at Dec. 24th.



Sid Spiro, PFC, Hq. Co. 3rd Battalion, 262nd Regiment. "I was in the water about 30 minutes when I was picked up by a French tug and two Frenchmen. As I was pulled aboard, I became sick, and vomited on the head of one of my rescuers. I regret that I did not get their names or the name of the tug boat."

Edwin C. Philips, Pvt., Hq. Co. 3rd Battalion, 262nd Regiment had been pulled out of the water and taken to the dock in Cherbourg. He was thrown in a pile of dead bodies on the dock. Later, when a Navy medic was checking the bodies, Ed's eyes moved! The medic immediately wrapped him in blankets and resuscitated him. He survived!

Staff Sergeant Jerry Crean, Company B, 264th Regiment, tells about his buddy, PFC Clifford "Kip" Tranter, whom he helped boost into a rescue tug. "Someone on the rescue tug gave Kip a blanket, and that was the only thing they had for shelter and warmth for the next week. They spent this week in tents at a bombed out airport after they were dropped ashore. Kip kept that blanket until the day he died many years later."

Lt. Colonel Ira Rumberg, Battalion Commander, 264th Regiment was a great hero aboard the Leopoldville, as testified by at least ten troopers that have told about his exploits. A big 28 year old man, 6 ft. 8 in. and 240 pounds, he kept going below into the hold to bring up injured men, *sometimes two at a time*. His tenth trip below occurred just before the Leopoldville took her final plunge into the depths. No one saw him again. At that Survivors 50th Anniversary Reunion in San Antonio in November 1994, Colonel Rumberg's widow called the hotel from her home in San Antonio. She talked with a couple of the survivors from his Regiment, and found out what a great hero he was! Imagine, no one had told her for 50 years!!

The Story of Jack Randles: As Interviewed by [The History Channel](#)

Jack Randles, 262nd Regiment, 66th Infantry Division was aboard the troopship Leopoldville when it was sunk by a German submarine on December 24, 1944.

THE HISTORY CHANNEL: Please describe for us what happened, from your point of view, the night the Leopoldville sank.

JACK RANDLES: We had just finished a meal in my compartment. My compartment was just above the water line. I was under this table and I was on the floor asleep. I had my hand on my helmet when this tremendous explosion occurred at six in the evening. My compartment stayed pretty calm. We moved up on deck, not realizing what it was. We thought that maybe we hit a mine. It wasn't long until we began to realize this was a pretty big thing. So then we went up to our rally point up on deck where we had our emergency area. It was very cold up there, very windy. Basically we stood around for a couple of hours. We put out

a lifeboat, five or six of us from our unit, but none of us got in it. Time went along and we were limited. You just knew what was going on in your little area. A lot [that] I know about it I read and [got from talking] to other people that were on different parts of the ship. The main thing is, you wondered what is this and what is going on, what is the outcome of it?

As time went on, we knew [we were going down] as the ship began to lift and there was another explosion, probably when it hit the engine room. Even a novice could see [that] this is going to be it. So we went around, [and] we began to cut all the rafts and things that were tied down so that if the ship went down, all the stuff would come up. That was good and that was bad. It was bad in the sense that when the ship lifted, real lurch-like, toward the end, at the last moment, a lot of that stuff moved and I was told that some people were crushed by it. But when the ship went down, that stuff did come up and that was very fortuitous for me, as it developed. When the ship began to really lift, I never heard an order to abandon ship and that had been drilled, that you don't do anything until the captain of the ship or some authority tells you to. Well, obviously that wasn't going to happen. So, we just walked down and jumped into the water.

I couldn't swim, but my life jacket was good and it worked. I remember going down and I thought I'd never come back up. Finally I did pop up and I never thought about suction, all that came to me as I talked to people later. But, apparently, the waves knocked me away from the ship and knocked me in the right direction, so when the ship did go down, I didn't feel the suction[from the ship going down]. But I looked back and I could see the thing sticking up in the air, one end of it, still covered with soldiers. And she slipped right under the water, and that was it.

Strangely enough, I was never afraid, I don't remember having any fear or being afraid of dying or anything like that. That was all blocked from my mind. I just measured on, "how do you get out of this?" A little piece of wood floated by and I grabbed hold of that, [it was] maybe five, six feet long. I took that and pulled myself up. Then, a little while later, these doughnuts floated by and I used that. And then it wasn't long until one of these little rafts floated by, and I got up on that. I pulled by body up halfway, the upper part of my torso, on that. There was one other guy on that thing, and he and I never said a word to each other. I can't imagine doing that, but we were so busy saying, 'hey we're over here!' and you could see the little boats, the ships floating around, and we were trying to get somebody's attention. Eventually, someone came and picked us up.

I think it was a Coast Guard ship we got on, because it was a pretty big ship. This man took me downstairs to his bunk and helped me get out of my wet clothes and gave me a warm blanket. Then he went back to get someone else. He came back with a man and I told him that I would take care of him, and that he should go up and get somebody else. I began to take the clothing off this young man and I recognized the man, it was Captain John Lansicle, who was commander of K Company 262. I began to get the clothing off of him, he was in a semi-conscious state. He kept saying something. I was listening intently, he was saying "God, make me a man." Over and over. I knew exactly what that man was thinking, because I had thought that prayer and prayed it myself.

Later I had an opportunity to tell him that story. Forty years later he had no cognizance of what went on at all. He told his wife a Portuguese fishing boat had picked him up. They didn't even have any of those around because they didn't know where those mines were, but he didn't know that. That was my significant experience in the thing. I am religious and was religious even at that time, as a nineteen-year-old boy would be. It was real significant to me to hear that. I've written a little article on it. I prayed the prayer many times in my own times of testing and temptation. God, make me a man. Because what the Captain was saying is, I want to do right, I want to be what is expected of me, by myself, and what others expect of me. I want that more than living. That's where he was, that's where he was.

So, after a while, we were picked up and then we went to the hospital. Then, of course, you began to look for your buddies, as you began to think about it. We lost seventy-two out of my company, which was Company I, 262nd. I guess the saddest part after that was going to the first mail call. Of course, everybody handled that in their own way. They would call these men out and somebody would say 'Dead!' [and they'd call] another name, [and someone would say] 'Dead!' Finally someone said, 'Shut up!' You just couldn't stand that any longer. I remember that so vividly.

That is basically my story. As I look back at it, I really didn't have anything to do with getting out of that water at all. I didn't know how to swim and the waves were high. Fortunately I was knocked in the right direction. The necessary things floated by and kept me going. I did have one experience. Suddenly, I was conscious that cold water was thrown on my face. Now I am out there with waves going on me and everything else, but I remember it was like somebody put their hand in cold water and flipped it in my face. I realize that I was on the verge of going to sleep. And my mind finally said, 'you can't do that,' and that was that hand. Being religious, I feel that was God. Taking care of me, waking me up at the right time and making me aware of that and putting that thought in mind, that you've got to stay awake here or you'll freeze to death out here if you don't.

THC: How cold was the water?

JR: I've heard 49 degrees.

THC: How long were you out there?

JR: I am not sure. I had a waterproof watch and that stopped at 8:45 p.m. I don't know, I would say I must have been there forty-five minutes or longer before we were picked up. And we had been told nobody could survive ten minutes out there, or fifteen minutes.

THC: So you came very close to going under?

JR: Yes.

THC: Getting back to being on the boat, I understand that the Belgians abandoned ship. How do you feel about that?

JR: I heard about that later. These poor guys didn't know anything of what to do. They couldn't tell us how to put this boat down or anything else. We just did it ourselves. They couldn't do it themselves. I've often wondered how many of those were lost in it. I have heard that a lot of the ships officers did get in a lifeboat and even made GI's get out of it. And others got in it. I heard at the hospital they were the first people brought in. Now, we even had the story that the captain was among that [group], but that was not true. Captain went down with that ship and made no attempt to get off it. It certainly had to be mishandled. We had two and a half hours, and that ship was towable, but finally we had to make the decision to drop the anchor because that would keep us floating out of the area and keep us away from the mine field. So, that anchor had to be dropped. I have heard we could have been towed if the anchor had not been dropped but if the anchor hadn't been dropped we would have been out in the minefield. I don't know about that. From my viewpoint, in retrospect, of course I don't know what was going on at that time, all I know is no one gave an order to abandon that ship, at least that I heard, and the people with me never heard one.

THC: What about the destroyer, Brilliant?

JR: I remember that ship pulling up there and I remember us banging against it. No one from my deck was in a position to jump. That was happening on an entirely different part of the ship. I knew the ship pulled up next to us, and I could hear us hit it, and I heard it pull away. But I did not see anybody jumping. I didn't have an opportunity to jump. And I didn't see anybody jumping. But they tell me that ship took on about five hundred people.

THC: How did you feel when you saw the Brilliant pull away?

JR: As I said, I didn't see that as a means as a way of getting off of that ship, because I didn't see that happening. I didn't have any feeling about it. I knew it would have to pull off because they couldn't keep banging against each other without breaking the hull in some way or another. So, I had no emotions about that when the ship pulled away.

THC: You were talking about when you were in the water, that you felt that God played a part in saving you...

JR: But I don't remember doing it that night. That's the strangest thing. It is only in retrospect that I remember that water in my face. There was water everywhere, splashing on me all the time. But that was just waking me up, my dull mind. My mind was getting dull from the cold and I was on the verge of going to sleep. I have no explanation but that God put that water in my face and made me conscious of it and brought me to awareness.

THC: I spoke to Larry Bond, the producer of the film, and I believe he spoke to you. Did you become a chaplain because of this? Or was it one of your reasons?

JR: No, not because of that. I knew I was going to be a minister some time after the war. That was already in my mind. It was in college that I decided my calling was to the chaplaincy. Now, I'm sure everything fits in and everything contributes, there's no decisive factor other than what I call an "inner call." I'm sure those circumstances influenced my decision to re-enter the army and to make it a career. This wasn't a determinative factor, just one of the provisions along the way, I guess we'd have to say.

THC: After you were brought back on land, what did the Army tell you about keeping quiet?

JR: We were just told not to write about it. Our letters were censored.... I just never stopped to try to figure all those things out along the way. I thought of it much later, as I began to read about it. I've talked to a lot of people that were involved in it. You pick up stuff. Those were not my thoughts at that particular time, I was naive enough to think, well, if the military says this is to be kept quiet, we will try to keep it quiet. This was all under the cloak of secrecy, not to aid the enemy in his purpose. National security. As I look back now, there had to be some cover-ups and I am sure that I would blame the United States, England, Belgium, and France for that. I also know about what goes on Christmas Eve in almost any army place there is too. I think that would explain how long it took for the boats to get to us too. They probably couldn't find a crew that could function.

THC: From what I've heard, most of the men were either partying, or in church.

JR: Probably, yeah. That is what I would envision it to be. And I think, too, we have to bear in mind the coalition we had was very important, keeping England and France and Belgium and the United States together. Unity was important at that time. I don't think it was so important that they couldn't have spoken about it much sooner than they did. There was a cover-up from that standpoint. It might have sounded reasonable at that point in time, but it sounds pretty ludicrous now.

THC: The families were given MIA notices instead of "Killed In Action" and weren't given any details...

JR: I have talked to some of those people and they were told almost nothing. Almost nothing. There was a man on this ship that was from my hometown, which was Rogersville, Tennessee. My wife and I were engaged at the time. She worked for Western Union and delivered telegrams, and delivered the message. She got two for this guy, one that he was missing and one that he was killed in action. They got almost no information beyond that. They didn't know anything about a ship or anything else. My wife saw a little thing in the Knoxville, Tennessee paper announcing that the Germans had released something that they had found, some equipment from the 262nd infantry. Of course, she knew that was my regiment so that caused her to wonder. She knew something [happened], she didn't know exactly what. Of course, later, we did communicate it to her.

THC: It might be understandable during the war how the secret was kept or how people didn't talk about it, but after the war, how was the secret kept, especially when the relatives and families of servicemen who died were looking for information? Have you gotten any letters? How did you respond?

JR: They just went without information. That's my experience. The ones I've talked to in recent years, they just went without information. I talked to a lady once when my company had a reunion up in Wheeling, West Virginia. We got an article put in

information. I talked to a lady [once when my company] had a reunion up in Wheeling, West Virginia. We got an article put in the paper that we were having a reunion up there. My company commander was from Wheeling, and in deference to him, we started meeting there and now even after he died we still meet there some. And there was an article in the paper about it. Just when I was ready to check out [of my hotel] on Saturday morning, I got a phone call from a Catholic sister calling to say she read about [the reunion] in the paper and then she had called someone who had told her to call me. And she said 'I lost a brother in that ship. And we didn't know anything about it until this began to come out.' They didn't know anything about him, they just knew that he died in action, that's all they knew. And his three sisters, we were able to talk to and to tell them. I knew he was in F Company, and F Company was right where the torpedo hit. Every man in F Company that was in that compartment was lost. There were twelve survivors out of the F Company and I could tell them, 'Your brother died immediately, there's no question about that. He never knew what hit him, he suffered no pain, that was it.' You know, you're here one second and the next second you're not. And I don't know if that brings some consolation to them or not, but fifty-some years they've gone without that, you see.

THC: That is unbelievable.

JR: Unbelievable is right. Yes. And when we met down in Fort Benning to dedicate the monument down there, we had people come with pictures and articles in their hand, hoping to find someone that knew their loved one. And, oddly enough, lots of them found them. They really did.

THC: That's great.

JR: Yes. And one guy, his brother was from F Company, the 62nd. Someone brought him to me and I said, 'You know, there's a guy here from F Company,' and I put him in touch with that man and the two of them talked...The man didn't know his brother, but he was in the same company his brother was in and he could tell him essentially what I would tell him, that, in all probability, he was killed instantly. But he lived all these years not knowing.

THC: Well after not knowing, I think knowing might be comforting to the families.

JR: There's no closure, there's no way to close this, you see. I told the people down there, I said, 'When you go down to that monument this morning, you just go try to find your loved one's name and rub your hand right on that name and just say it's all right, I know his name's there and he's been honored and he's not forgotten.' Other people care too you know. Touching moment. I appreciate that you're going to run the program, I really do, I think that's fantastic.

THC: How did you feel about the way the various governments handled this? It brought so much pain to the families, not knowing about their sons and husbands.

JR: Well, I think...I don't feel good about it, to tell you the truth. I think the people should have been told, but we lost so many in that war, who takes on this task of informing them? It's just, I think sometimes we just say, that's the way war is. Those things just happen in war, people get killed by friendly fire, people get killed by mistakes, people get murdered. Those things just happen. War is a demoralizing thing, so you know, you can lose perspective because it's so degrading to humanity. And so, when it's over, most people just say I'm through with it and I don't want to worry about it anymore. You get with your life and go on. The families have to do that too. You carry the question mark, but you've got to go from day to day also and that's what most of them have done. There is a question mark, how much emotional impact that's had on them we don't really know. I know it's been encouraging to them when they find out that somebody cares or somebody knew or somebody is trying to do something that will bring honor to them. Just like this show you're going to run, that's going to help a lot of people.

THC: Do you feel this experience changed you at all?

JR: Yes, yes. The captain's prayer is my prayer too. God, make me a man. All that that involves. Living up to the expectations that you have for yourself, and not being afraid of the expectations that others put on you in certain circumstances. This man, his wife said that the only thing he ever told her [was that] he was picked up by a Portuguese fishing boat. He said, 'I realized I was in the water, I was very cold, I was very tired, and the ship pulled up alongside and I was supposed to climb this rope ladder to get up. And I didn't have the strength to do it. And I became aware that I was in the way of other people doing it, getting to the ladder, and I pushed away.' He pushed away to die. But he didn't, somebody grabbed him. But that was his thought. That's what he was talking about, 'God make me a man.' The Lord heard his prayer before he even prayed it, because that's a manly act.

THC: So he thought he was going to die?

JR: Of course. I'm sure when he pushed himself away and opened up that ladder for other people to climb up on, he never thought he'd get back to it. But somebody saw him and grabbed him.

THC: A selfless act.

JR: Yes.

TRIBUTE:

Real men all!

As we enter another war, a war where men are asked to take very few risks, and a war that is not even necessary, let us remember these men who took the final risk in order to stop a genuine and world consuming monster. *Balaam's Ass Speaks* Journal wants to give tribute to these men. We also want to share in the grief which must be present every Christmas Eve as the survivors of those soldiers still deal with their grief. Let us also pointedly recall that these men did NOT run to Oxford or Russia to dodge the draft-- They served, and that nobly.

God and the soldier,
All men adore;
In time of war,
And not before.

But, when war is over,
And all things righted.
God is forgotten,
and the old soldier slighted.

Let us not forget the crew of the Leopoldville which was Belgian.

These men seem to have been forgotten. I could find nothing on them except that they abandoned ship. Somewhere in Belgium, this Christmas Eve, there is a man who wonders what happened to his grandfather. Did he really abandon those US soldiers in their hour of terror? A son, now perhaps 55 years old, wonders how it feels to drown. Somewhere in Brussels sits a widow, aging slowly, waiting for her journey into eternity, and she has never heard what happened to her beloved husband.

SHAME:

We cannot leave this story without mentioning those few relatives of the German U-Boat 486 crew who killed those men that Christmas Eve. They cannot possibly pass another Christmas Eve without remembering the hundreds of families which cannot enjoy Christmas Eve because of the memories of death. It is a dreadful responsibility that men take on themselves when they kill on command. We recall the hippie question of the 60s-- "What if they called a war and no one came?"

As the world heads for the Middle East to kill and destroy the people of Baghdad in the name of some obscure objective based on pure speculation, may we suggest that all soldiers consider the option of NOT killing? If you are not being attacked, nor is your family or homeland, why are you off to kill other people's children?

Are you happy to take the order to kill from a scurvy weasely wimp who dodged the draft, uses cigars sexually on young ladies, lies openly, and then calls on YOU to distract his adversaries by shooting Iraqis?

For the record, U-486 was sunk 12 April, 1945 in the North Sea northwest of Bergen, Norway, in position 60.44N, 04.39E by torpedoes from the British submarine HMS Tapir. 48 dead (all crew lost). So, while there was some sort of justice in this, we see that war simply makes for misery all the way around. But do men ever lose their lust for war? How sad.

VIDEO ON THE LEOPOLDVILLE STORY:

[BACK TO CHRISTMAS MENU PAGE](#)

[BACK TO THE TITLE PAGE](#)