

WWII VET, 100, GETS BRONZE STAR



ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION, CULPEPER STAR-EXPONENT

Richard Brani, 100, of Culpeper, recently shared about getting the Bronze Star for his service at the Battle of Bulge in 1944 in Europe.

Culpeper man served in the Battle of the Bulge

ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION
Culpeper Star-Exponent

INLET—A 100-year-old Culpeper World War II veteran who served meritoriously at the Battle of the Bulge in Europe nearly 80 years ago recently re-

ceived the Bronze Star Medal.

Madison American Legion Post 157 coordinated the formal presentation of the prestigious award to the U.S. Army

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Brani

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veteran, Richard Francis Brani, Nov. 29 at his residence at Our Father's House in Culpeper County.

The centenarian served with the 84th Infantry Division "Railsplitters" as part of a fighting force of more than a million Allied troops defending against the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium, December 1944 to January 1945. It was five months before war's end in Europe.

Conditions were brutal, around 20 degrees, snow-covered fields and forest, bombardments, enemy contact, soldiers freezing to death. The U.S. Army lost approximately 19,000 men in the six-week battle. It was the United States' deadliest single World War II battle, according to Arlington Cemetery.

"Astonishing," said Brani in a Dec. 5 interview with the Star-Exponent, asked how it felt to get the Bronze Star Medal for his service, all these years later.

He shared deeply-stored memories of seeing the war end around Christmas in 1944. He was 21-years-old, a young man from Brooklyn, N.Y.

"The amazing thing about this story is it's very personal, unusual and unfortunately, some of our guys got killed," Brani said. "War is hell. It really is."

"That's just a case of somebody doing what they're supposed to do, that's all."

His division arrived Oct. 1 in England and landed on Omaha Beach Nov. 1-4. Brani's regiment was assigned to the British Second Army to attack the German's Siegfried Line. They entered combat on Nov. 18, 1944, for the next 152 days, according to research on the 84th Infantry Division by Madison American Legion member Gerry Stephenson, a U.S. Army veteran.

After the war, Brani received a Combat Infantry Badge for combat duty at the Bulge, carrying with it an extra \$10 pay/month, according to the research.

He didn't qualify upon discharge for the Bronze Star Medal, the fourth highest ranking award a service member can receive for a



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Madison American Legion Post Commander Mark Farmer (left) with Post member Gerry Stephenson (center) present the Bronze Star Award Nov. 29 to Richard Brani, age 100, (right), next to his daughter, Sharon Brani.

heroic deed performed in an armed conflict. Today's local veterans sought to make that right in coordinating the recent presentation.

It was a team effort, said post commander Mark Farmer, and their privilege.

"The Battle of the Bulge was a critical turning point in the war. It was a time when the resolve of our soldiers was tested, and their bravery shone through," he said in remarks at the medal presentation.

"Our honoree was one of those brave souls who faced the harsh winter and the fierce enemy, demonstrating extraordinary heroism."

Brani, in the interview, remembered getting the order at midnight to defend against a German pincer movement attempting to cut off the Allied troops.

"It's about 400 miles away...were not poised to defend against...we were on a farm, high on a hill, in bed, in our hole. The word comes, get in the truck," Brani said. "Our driver drove and drove until he got close to what was going on and then we piled out of the trucks and went in by foot."

His regiment ran across a hole 10-feet wide from WWI. It was the same area battled over then, too, noted Brani.

"A bomb came in when we were there, we were in the hole, I got my buddies to get out of this hole, nine other guys here, you shouldn't cluster like that, and I got out with my other buddy and a bomb came in and eight or nine other guys were killed instantly, they were all just as close as this," he said.



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Richard Brani, 100, of Culpeper recently received the Bronze Star Medal for his service at the Battle of the Bulge nearly 80 years ago in WWII.

German foot soldiers tried to come through them, but that petered out pretty quickly, Brani said. "I saw a couple of Germans coming my way, I went a different way. They're coming after you, but they didn't go very far," he said.

Brani mentioned those who have passed on when speaking about getting the Bronze Star Medal.

"Most of the guys like me are gone...they put an application in for me, because I'm still here, and it got approved."

Farmer, a U.S. Air Force veteran who flew missions around the world during his 24 years in service, said it was an awesome opportunity to honor such a deserving WWII veteran. They presented their research to the Army on Brani's service and got it approved, an estimated six-month-long process.

"The fact he was still alive at 100-years-old, it was just an honor be able to give a



FAMILY PHOTO

WWII veteran Richard Brani grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y.

WWII veteran a medal," said Farmer, among the first and last of service members in Desert Storm. "The miracle of being able to do that—he deserved it and never got it—that's like one of those God things."

Many died and were wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, including 100,000 Germans. The Americans in addition to dead had some 75,000 total casualties as the Germans finally retreated.

"The dawn comes Christmas day and the American planes, the bombers, became to come...my little unit was on the porch. We watched all day. Every five minutes, an American plane would come by—boom, boom, boom. There was nothing left of that tank column after a while," Brani said.

"We sat on that porch and watched that German unit get smashed. They had no gasoline to get back home," the veteran said.

"The war was over at that point because they had to pull back without gas to do it. Even we dumb soldiers could see that one," he said.

Born in May 1923, Brani grew up in Brooklyn and entered the U.S. Army in early 1943, assigned to the division whose shoulder sleeve insignia was a white ax splitting a white rail. The symbol recalls President Abraham Lincoln's youthful use of the

ax, according to the American Legion research.

During WWI, the 84th called itself the Lincoln division since most of its soldiers were National Guardsmen from the area of the 16th U.S. President—Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana. In WWII, the Railsplitters came from all over the U.S.

The Germans had other names for the division, including Hatchet Men and Terror Division, for the way they hacked through the German Siegfried Line in those final months of combat, according to the research by Stephenson. The Railsplitters were rushed to help make a stand against the Germans do-or-die counteroffensive on the north side of the bulge.

Brani was among them. His name appears on the roster of the Anti-Tank Company, 333 Infantry Regiment. Brani served in all three campaigns in the European Theater—to the very end.

"When dawn came, it was over—like you were in a movie show, just like a movie show, the enemy was defeated," Brani said. "Six days later I got a letter from the Army: you are being promoted from a private first class, two grades up, staff sergeant...I never saw a German I didn't like later!"

The veteran said he's read

some books about the Bulge, but he didn't think they did a good job of explaining it.

"You do what you're told in the Army," Brani said.

After the war, he married his sweetheart, Elizabeth Miller, a nurse he met while in a hospital in Pennsylvania, after passing out in formation during training, he recalled. He recovered and they had four dates prior to him being sent to war.

She promptly informed him that her church did not go to the movies when he asked her to one and he didn't go either for a couple of years, Brani said.

"The dates all wound up on park benches, in the daylight, everything was very nice and we went on together for a long time," Brani said, noting she regularly wrote him letters while at war.

The couple had four children in post-war America and were married more than 50 years before her death in 2009: "I'm sorry my wife didn't get to see this. She was part of this, too in a way," Brani said of his WWII service.

He remembered in awe sailing home to his betrothed coming upon the shipwreck site of the Titanic in the North Atlantic.

"We passed right by it. That's historic," Brani said.

Our Father's House in a social media post said it was a privilege for them to witness a momentous occasion in the life of one of their elders.

"Thank you Mr. Brani for your service. We are honored to have you among us."

Madison American Legion expressed its thanks at the ceremony.

"To our honoree, on behalf of a grateful nation, we say thank you. Thank you for your service. Thank you for your sacrifice. And thank you for your bravery. You stood tall in the face of adversity, and for that, you are true hero," Farmer said in his remarks.

"As we conclude, let us remember that the freedoms we enjoy today are built on the sacrifices of brave men and women like our honoree. Let us never forget their service and continue to honor their sacrifices by striving for peace and prosperity," Farmer said.

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