

**These stories of remarkable WWII survivors are from *World War II Survivors: Lessons in Resilience*, by Glenn R. Schiraldi, Ph.D., published by Chevron Publishing, Elliott City, MD, 2007 (©2007 Glenn R. Schiraldi. Do not reproduce without written permission).**

## Chapter 15

### Russell Dunham *Medal of Honor*



*Jerseyville, Illinois, is located 40 miles north of St. Louis. Lined by two-storied brick buildings built in the late 1800s, State Street has the solid feel of middle America. The town began as a stagecoach stop. Travel six miles east from Jerseyville on a road through farmland and you come to the forty-acre home of Russell and Wilda Dunham. On the flagpole in front of the home are the American and state flags. Three friendly hunting dogs lie in the warm sun.*

*From the beginning of WWII through 1993, only 839 men have received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor. Most of those men died earning the medal. Russell Dunham earned the Medal of Honor in Europe. He served in eight major campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany. During his 31 months of foreign service, he was credited with 407 days of combat. He was wounded in Italy and France. His brother Ralph, with whom he served, was wounded more than five times. Despite his outer toughness, Russell Dunham is an unusually thoughtful and sensitive man.*

I was born February 23, 1920, in East Carondelet, Illinois, in a converted boxcar on the Mississippi River. Dad worked then for a barge line. I was the sixth of eight children—three girls and five boys. When I was three, we moved because of my mother's health.

We moved quite a bit. Mother was sick with tuberculosis most of my life. She died when I was seven. I don't remember her walking. At one point the family moved to Springfield, in southern Missouri, where my mother had a sister and the weather was warmer. We traveled the distance of 400 miles in a covered wagon.

The whole family had to work real hard, all the time. My dad was a gardener all his life and my first Christmas present was a hoe. As everyone said, my dad was a good boss. Dad rented farms. He moved around when the rent came due. I had an older sister who took pretty good care of us.

After my mother died in 1927, we had a number of housekeepers before Dad remarried. The older children left as soon as they were able. Dad remarried in 1932. My stepmother had three children of her own, and together they had three more.

During the Depression, we oftentimes didn't know where our next meal was coming from. Everybody was expected to do their part from the time they were able to do anything at all. Dad checked on us as we worked. He was busy selling produce, mainly butterbeans, to the produce market in St. Louis. Dad was strict, no doubt about it. Nowadays, welfare probably wouldn't have put up with the way he handled us kids. He was mean to us. My stepmother was worse than he was. I didn't go to high school. He needed us to work at home.

I left home at 16 or 17, when he broke my plate and said get out. It was my stepmother's idea that I leave home. I went to stay with my older brother in St. Louis, peddling hot tamales at night, and brooms and mops by day from carts. I also distributed advertising circulars for stores door to door at thirty-five cents an hour. Overtime was fifty cents an hour.

My dad coaxed me into going into the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1938. I always tried to help him. CCC paid \$30 per month, \$25 of which was to be sent home. He said he would give me back some of the money I sent home, but he never did. I worked on farms, setting out trees, building dams,

placing tiles to drain farm fields, clearing out farm fields. After my six months were up, my buddy and I took a freight train to California to pick cotton. Business wasn't good, so I came back to St. Louis to sell hot tamales, brooms, and mops until spring.

My buddy and I decided to go back to California. We got to Tulsa, Oklahoma, and joined a carnival. I traveled over the country until the fall of 1939. Then it was back to selling tamales, brooms, and mops in St. Louis.

In August of 1940, my brother Ralph, a buddy, and I went to Peoria, Illinois, to look for a job. Finding none, we joined the Army. We knew that eventually war was on the way. I was so dumb I didn't know any better than to join the infantry (*chuckling*).

We went to Fort Ord, California, to the old 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division under General Stillwell.

In March of 1941, they transferred all three-year men to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. I was in "I" Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and stayed with that unit throughout the war.

My brother was with me all the time. When we transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup>, my brother stayed with the 7<sup>th</sup> Division because he was on the boxing team. Meanwhile, we went to Ft. Lewis, Washington, for maneuvers. When the war broke he joined us at Ft. Lewis.

In December of 1941 we traveled up and down the West coast on guard duty, watching bridges. We had a grand ol' time. Because we'd trained so much, we always said, "Let the Japs come, we're not afraid of them." We also trained in amphibious operations with the Marine Corps. Then we took the train to Camp Pickett, Virginia, a staging area to go overseas. We shipped out to North Africa in October 1942, getting there in November 8, 1942. We saw our first combat there under General Patton. We fought against the French three days before they surrendered. We were shelled when we landed; we scurried. This was the first time we were shot at. After things settled down, Patton paid us a visit. He learned that some of our guys were in the stockade for drinking. He said, "Whoever heard of locking up a GI for drinking? Release them." By 1943 the Germans had given up.

July 10, 1943 was our first fighting in Sicily. We walked across Sicily under Patton for 38 days. We lost a lot of men to the Germans. There were also lots of casualties from malaria and trench foot. Patton was a slave driver. That's where he slapped that boy and was relieved. We used to get mad at the Italians because they wouldn't fight.

We fought up the boot of Italy in General Clark's 5th Army. We were in the bloody battle for the monastery at Cassino. Only a few of us — 32 of the 800 men in the battalion — walked away from Mount Rotundo. Ralph landed in the hospital with trench feet. Anzio was a real blood bath. We went in with 202 men and the next day we were only 22. By mid-March of 1944 the division had lost 6000 men, killed, wounded, or missing. I got hit on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 1944. I was in the hospital for 30 days from shrapnel wounds in the leg, mouth, and chin from white phosphorous. I rejoined the unit and the fighting was still going on hot and heavy.

In June, my company commander assigned me to lead a patrol of six into the town of Labico. We surprised a group of about fifty Germans preparing for a meeting in a building. Just as we'd disarmed them, a German tank approached. Leaving a man to guard the prisoners, the rest of us hid in the shadows of the building. When the tank came, two of my men jumped on the tank and surprised the crew. Now we'd captured a tank. Then an ambulance with a high-ranking German doctor came down the road and we captured that. We were the center of attention when my little patrol returned with a column of sixty Germans, a tank, and an ambulance.

We made the famous breakthrough to Rome. We were there only a few days, when the Normandy invasion took place. When people ask where I was during D-Day, I say we were over there waiting. We had already been there over 1½ years before they came over.

We landed in southern France on August 15, 1944, joining up with the D-Day invaders under Patton, who had been forgiven and now had the Third Army. Thousands of Germans were trapped, along with horses, vehicles, and giant railroad guns, in southern France.

In September we got into the Vosges Mountains, with rain and snow coming in, fighting determined Germans for each position. We finally broke out of there in November and went into Strasbourg.

From there we were attached to the French 1st Army. A key target in the "Colmar Pocket" (a bulge west of the Rhine River) was Kaisersberg. Near there I received the Medal of Honor for action on

January 8, 1945. After a quick prayer (“God, give me this day.”), I led my platoon in the attack on Hill #616. We were pinned down by machine-gun fire in the snow on the hillside. Our own artillery was also landing near us. There were three enemy machine gun nests. I crawled in the snow, about seventy-five yards, toward the first one. I got close enough to heave a hand grenade, which killed two German soldiers. I reached into the nest and yanked the survivor out and threw him down the hill (our mission was to take prisoners for interrogation). As I moved toward the second nest, I felt a stinging sensation across my back as I was hit. I rolled down the hill. When I stopped rolling I went up the hill again toward the second nest. I tossed a grenade and killed the crew. I crawled uphill toward the third gun emplacement and cleared that out with a hand grenade. Back in town, someone asked what all the shooting was about. Someone said, “The Dunham brothers were on the loose again.” Later, as I lay on a bunk at the battalion medics, I realized that my earlier prayer had been answered. *[The citation credits Dunham with killing nine Germans, wounding seven and capturing two. In addition to neutralizing the machine-gun emplacements, he also fired his carbine and a rifle (from a wounded GI) and threw grenades into supporting foxholes, dispatching and dispersing the enemy riflemen. Throughout this attack, Dunham was under intense enemy machine-gun, automatic rifle, and mortar fire. At one point he kicked aside a German egg grenade that landed at his feet. His white camouflage robe, turned red from the blood from a 10-inch gash in his back, made him a conspicuous target against the white background. In the episode Dunham expended 11 grenades and 175 rounds of carbine ammunition.]*

I was captured on January 22, 1945, in the fatal attack on the little town of Holtzwihr.

We didn’t know the tanks weren’t behind us. They caved in on the bridge behind us. German tanks came in and captured many from our company. I had flown through an open window and hid in a sauerkraut barrel by a barn all night. This was possible because my weight had dropped from the usual 150 to 117 pounds. When I got out and stopped to relieve myself, I was captured. They searched me and took my grenades, but missed my concealed shoulder pistol. They got into a fight over my candy bars and cigarettes. Two guards placed me in the back seat of a jeep headed to Germany. When we stopped, one guard went into a building. I shot the other. I traveled through the woods at night heading toward the sound of our guns. During the three days coming back I almost froze to death. I went back to the hospital. My feet froze up and I had a piece of shrapnel in my foot. It was operated on. I rejoined the company in Germany, but I never did go back to combat again.

After the war, I got out and felt lost. I went from job to job and couldn’t find one I liked. Finally, President Truman said that all Medal of Honor recipients could work for the Veterans Administration. I took him up on his offer and did this from 1946 to 1975. As a VA representative, I advised veterans of their rights and benefits. I mostly lived near St. Louis, where the main office was, and also worked in Vietnam, Germany, and Korea.

I met Wilda in 1955. She was a city clerk in Alton, my home. We moved here to Jerseyville in 1985. We built a house on property we’d owned for several years. Our grandchildren still live in my place in Alton.



## PTSD Symptoms?

In the service, I saw guys foam at the mouth and curl up. One sergeant at Anzio came to me and said he was not going to fight and ran away from the front. My ability to function was never impaired in the military or after. I got credit for 407 days in combat. After the war, I had an anxiety condition off and on, and always tried to hide it and fight it. I’m often anxious and in a hurry. But I find it sometimes relieves me to talk about it. You don’t want to keep it cooped up in you. You have to let it out.

I never did have too many dreams. I have no trouble sleeping. I never shut down from people and wasn’t bothered by memory problems. Watching the movie *Saving Private Ryan* didn’t bother me. Maybe I’m short tempered at times, but I always was. I think I got that from my dad. I still have pain

in the leg. I didn't use drugs. I saw my brother drink himself out. It killed him, so I shut drinking off altogether.

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## What Helped You Cope?

My childhood strengthened me. I always had it rough. The two-mile walks to school and handling the animals and the chores strengthened my body. Many a night we went to sleep without anything to eat. I learned to fend for myself and to defend myself against my older siblings. My sister, bless her heart, even said that it would be best if Ralph and I got killed. We had nothing left to come home to, so we might as well get killed and let some of the other guys live. It makes you stubborn and stronger in some ways. My dad, bless his heart, had four or five women and they all wanted to whip me 'cause I was little and ugly and mean. I didn't have a bath or a change of clothes. Every Thursday night we got a whipping whether we needed it or not. Other families had it as rough. My dad never accepted welfare. That was out. When I graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I had no shoes to wear to the graduation. My stepmother ordered them through welfare. Oh, boy, dad really ranted and raved. In St. Louis, you couldn't get a social security number until you were eighteen, and so it was hard to find jobs. But some people liked me and hired me anyway.

We used to walk night and day hunting. We were strong. If we got tired we just figured we had to put up with it. I knew what it meant to persist. In the Army, I didn't want to get court-martialed for goldbricking. I was downtrodden and had no help from Congressmen or relatives, so I knew I'd better perform. Our company commander said, "I didn't train you guys to get hit." He would court martial you or not promote you if you couldn't prove the wound was legitimate. But he liked me for some reason.

### CALM UNDER PRESSURE

It was just pride that kept me functional. I didn't want anybody thinking that I couldn't do it, just like a pitcher in a ballgame. Then, too, if you have men under you that you are responsible for, if you have something to do for them, it helps. I didn't only have myself to worry about. I was in the same platoon all the way through, from the time I was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. I ran the whole platoon for a long time.

A lot of people think that heroic acts are done in a blind rage, where you forget what you are doing. During the incident on Hill #616, where I earned the Medal of Honor, that wasn't the case. I was very aware and thinking about what I had to do at each point. If you forget what you're doing, you're lost and can get killed in action.

I admired the Germans, really, because of their stamina and fighting ability. I felt no bitterness. The first thing we did was give them a cigarette. Most German front line troops in Africa and Europe treated us pretty well if captured. When I was captured in France, I was treated alright.

### RATIONAL THOUGHT PROCESSES

There were a number of times when I thought I might break. But I summoned my reserve strength and pushed that thought aside, knowing I had to carry on as part of the team. After seeing so many friends wounded and killed, I couldn't dwell too long on this for my own sanity. I'd think of happier times and think that I had to press on for awhile.

When someone made a mistake, I was a good actor. I could make out like I was mad as hell, but at the same time I was laughing way down deep. I never actually got mad at them. I still hear from a couple of the guys who are still alive. I didn't promote one to PFC because of sand in his rifle. He still throws it at me. He says I'm the only sergeant who told him why he didn't get promoted. When you have eleven openings for twelve guys what are you going to do? Of course, a week or so later I promoted him. I bawled out another for dragging his rifle in the dirt. I would correct people but I wasn't mean.

My sister wrote and said I probably give people hell now that I'm a sergeant. I just thought, "You don't know the conditions that we're in here." As a leader, and in my own life, I always felt that no matter how low you go, you can usually come back. I always saw some good in any misfit. That's probably why I could relate to my men, and why later, working in the VA, I could talk to the soldiers.

Sometimes you really felt bad if you messed up, or sent someone in there when you knew you shouldn't have, and someone got wounded or killed. That hurt. In time it wears off, or you find out you were actually right, or that maybe someone else upstairs gave an order that made it bad. Now in this one attack, when Sergeant Palmer with 25 years of service was killed, the Germans had captured a recon car with two .50 caliber machine guns. The company commander wanted us to attack it point blank. I told the captain if he'd let me sneak around, rather than head on, I could take it. I lost 28 men in about 15 minutes. I never did get over that. There was nothing I could have done. The captain would have relieved me if I'd disobeyed. So I didn't feel guilt but sorrow for the guys lost.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT

I never did hear from my dad. My sister wrote letters every two weeks. If I didn't respond, she wrote my company commander and, boy, did I catch it. A girl in California wrote all the time and sent me cookies. After you're on the line, letters became oh, so dear. In the bitter fighting in the mountains of Italy, I read and re-read one letter from home several times.

We really had a lot of good friends in the unit. I'd take guys to the tavern to get to know them. There was constant turnover. Ralph was the only one who went all the way through with me. My brother was braver than I was. I saw him do things I couldn't have done. He had a fist fight with a German in the combat when Sergeant Palmer got killed.

Some guys would die for me. One guy from North Dakota would come to me every time we were in a tight spot. We were together all the time.

Men call me today. It really does you good. It helps your morale a lot when friends say a lot of us wouldn't be alive today if it hadn't been for Dunham.

### COMFORTABLE WITH EMOTIONS

The killing bothered me—especially when people were killed because of leaders' mistakes and when I lost friends. Tears ran down my cheeks when I had to identify the bodies of friends killed on Mount Rotundo and had to carry their bodies down the hillside. I didn't like the hardness that war caused.

I could acknowledge fears. You had to have a certain amount of fear to protect yourself or you wouldn't live to tell about it. As a private, we used to talk about how scared we were. I had some friends I could really open up with. I had one buddy, especially, that used to tell me about eating apple pie in Alabama. We went on a patrol with a lieutenant in Italy, 20 miles behind the German lines. I don't think he was afraid of anything. We sat there in an olive grove and watched him shave and sing and mark targets on his map. My buddy and I were really afraid. We said, "Don't let us get on a patrol again with this stupid dude," because he was too brave. He got killed not too long after that. Another I knew, that didn't seem to be afraid, got killed. Sometimes I wasn't afraid. Sometimes I *was*, but maybe not as much as the next guy. Back at the tavern, we'd talk about it.

Once you're in the thick of it, you lose all fears. You don't have time to be scared. But it gets you when you are waiting to move out. I didn't like it when we were sitting off the coast of Africa in a ship. Confidence and eagerness to get into battle were mixed with reluctance because of what might happen. Approaching the shore, shells were landing all around and you couldn't do anything about it. As experience and confidence grew, fear tended to subside somewhat. There was still strong fear, but it seemed that the more intense the fight, the more the survival instinct took over and the calmer I became.

When I was a sergeant, I kept fears under my hat because I had to. If the men asked me what I thought I'd say, "We'll be there alright. We'll be drinking wine in Rome in a couple more days." I took pride in not showing fear. They all thought that I was not afraid. When people asked me why I wasn't afraid, I was. I just said, "You gotta do what you gotta do."

I can understand people who need to talk about their fears, and even those who crack under the pressure.

### **SELF-ESTEEM**

I thought I was a good leader most of the time. I was pretty confident because of the other men. They thought I was better than any officer, and they actually helped me believe it. When I asked for volunteers to go on a patrol with me, they'd be willing to go. Other guys had to appoint people.

I knew I was worthwhile. That was acquired. I knew it to be true because everybody depended on me. That makes you feel good. They'd go AWOL from their own outfit and want to be with me under the same circumstances.

### **ACTIVE, ADAPTIVE COPING**

I didn't want to die, and fighting like mad was the only way to keep from dying. You had to go forward, otherwise our own artillery would get you, as we learned in Anzio. In rolling artillery barrages, the first barrage lands in front of you, and the next barrage advances. Then they'd fire behind you to protect you from flank attacks.

I wanted to pull my load. I didn't want to be a burden on someone if I got wounded. I figured, if they get me, let them get me good. There are worse things than dying. In fact, I didn't even want to be in the hospital. I got mad when an officer in the hospital interviewed me to see if I was goldbricking. I told him that I was put in for the Medal of Honor, I was there legitimately, and I didn't want to be there.

Sometimes I thought I wasn't going to get out of this world alive anyway, so take it as it comes, one day at a time. I always had hope it would end. Every time you broke through the lines you thought, "We gotta keep it going." When you had them on the run you had to keep them on the run. Having had so much training in the year before the war is the only thing that saved me.

When captured, I knew I was going to escape. All I was waiting for was the chance to do it. I wasn't going to stay captured. I would have died getting away. It was humiliating to be captured.

Even on the line, we'd talk about creative ways to go AWOL—never to avoid fighting when we were needed, but for brief respites and fun. There were some times between fights when I would drink to try to block out the memories. I found that this didn't really help much because the hangover only added to my other woes that hadn't changed. Now I find when I get anxious, it helps if I find something to do that tires me out in a comfortable way.

### **SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL STRENGTHS**

#### *God*

You always had a prayer on your lips. That was natural. At times I could almost feel God's presence, as if He were sitting beside me. I was a believer in someone greater than us and felt that I knew God in my own way. Even today I believe, although on Anzio I thought that God went on a coffee break. When I was a child, we went to church and Sunday school, but not too much. We said the Lord's prayer every morning before school started. I always believed in God. It gives you comfort. When it's over, you thank God that you made it. The war actually strengthened my belief. I say my prayers still.

#### *Meaning & Purpose*

We knew we had to win. We knew enough about what was going on in Germany. The Jews were dead meat, and we knew that the colored were next. The Germans would then dispose of everybody if they could, even Hitler's own people that he didn't like. I went through some of the prison camps around Munich. You didn't have to be a Jew to be gassed. You saw thousands stacked in the boxcars. Some of them weren't even dead yet.

I wrote my autobiography in hopes that people will consider the mindless and wasteful suffering of war and perhaps eliminate wars in the future. Greatness is achieved over the conference table, not in war. I agree with the saying, "Only God and a GI know the misery of war."

### *Morality*

We always felt sorry for people and didn't kill them needlessly – prisoners and civilians. It was important not to harm them. But, you couldn't even trust some people to take prisoners back. I got on several people for shooting Germans with their hands up. In Africa, I stopped a French guard from beating two Arabs.

As a platoon sergeant, I was always truthful with my men. I never did like a lie and never was much on that. I had to report a soldier next to me for a self-inflicted wound. But I told the company commander that I wouldn't lie by saying that he did it on purpose, because I hadn't seen him do it.

A thief in our company didn't live long if he were caught.

Ralph wasn't getting promoted in the heavy weapons platoon, because his platoon wasn't having the casualties like the other platoons. At Anzio, the company commander asked if I could be impartial if he came into my platoon. I told him that I figured everyone in the outfit was my brother. So I became his boss. When my brother was complaining, I realized that I had been picking on him so as not to appear to be favoring him. I was trying to be fair.

I worry about killing people. You know down deep that mistakes were made. A lieutenant was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He was sending one man at a time into a clearing to make an attack. Three guys got killed before I got to him. I said, "You aren't going to send my men to get killed." I went back and told the company commander and I never did see that lieutenant again. Instead we flanked and attacked all together and lost no more men.

### *Love*

You can't explain the bond that forms between comrades in arms. I had a lot of respect for my men. I cared for my men. As a private, I was inseparable from my friends. Returning to my unit after being wounded was like returning home – the only one I had at the time. I had tears in my eyes when I said goodbye to them at the end of the war. You needed your friends before, during, and after the battle. I'm sure the friends that I made in the hospital helped in my rehabilitation.

### *Optimism*

I was optimistic to a certain extent. There were times I thought that we couldn't go further, but we knew we'd win eventually.

### *Humor*

We had a lot of humor in our outfit. You had to think of something funny to say. We'd laugh at letters we'd get. One guy sent his girlfriend a Purple Heart. She wrote back and told him to get one for her mother. One guy's brother worked in the shipyards. He said he wished the war would last long enough for him to pay for an automobile. We had a Jewish lieutenant in our outfit, a good guy. We'd ask him who held the world speed record – a Jew going through Berlin on a bicycle.

### *Long View of Suffering*

In my early years in the Army, I'd been a screw-up, a yardbird. I didn't want the responsibility of leadership. But in Italy, we had so many casualties that I had to take over. In fact, I was threatened with a court martial for shirking from duty if I didn't. I'm grateful for the opportunity that I had to become a leader. I determined to become a good one and gained an appreciation for good leadership. I knew I was a good soldier, and wanted to be a good man. I came to treasure my stripes and felt that I had earned them.

The fact is that combat helped we with my VA work, to realize what the soldiers were up against. I saw some of my best friends succumb to battle fatigue, and understood that it could happen to anybody. I could tell if a man was a goldbrick or genuinely stressed. I got in trouble for helping them. I don't think a man should stay on the line more than a year.

My Congressional medal also shaped my life. It gave me a sense acceptance and recognition for being the fighting man I had tried to be, and helped me to feel a greater sense of value inwardly.

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## Maintaining Balanced Living

For exercise, I like hunting, fishing, and gardening. On my 40 acres, you name it and I grow it. I walk and mow the lawn. I get seven or eight hours of sleep regularly, from 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. I eat regular meals. I don't believe in junk food. I never smoked. I gave up alcohol years ago.

For recreation, I enjoy lots of cards, parties, hunting in the winter, and fishing in a nearby lake. I lecture at schools. I used to go to Disabled Veterans meetings, but that has tapered off since my wife got sick.

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## Advice to Younger Generations

Take care of your body and lead a good clean life. Stay away from drugs and smoking. Don't overdo anything.

Don't hold yourself above others. Don't think you're better than people who had less opportunity. See yourselves as equals. I saw a number of leaders who didn't understand this, who created resentment.

No matter how low you get, you can usually come out of it.



Russell Dunham, wearing his Medal of Honor,  
at Arlington Cemetery.