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HEADLINE: How brave GI saved my father

BYLINE: John Pollick

HIGHLIGHT:

When shooting died down, he picked up a burning timber with superhuman strength

BODY:

To commemorate Veterans Day, which is on Tuesday, the Chicago Sun-Times is publishing this story of three soldiers in World War II: Duke, Dutch and Mel.

Duke was a Jewish kid from Detroit. Dutch was a Protestant farm boy from Iowa. Mel was a Catholic boy from Chicago.

Together, they were brothers in arms.

The story was written by John Pollick, a Chicago attorney.

It was the winter of 1945 and bitter cold. In an abandoned French farmhouse near the German border, two GIs stood silently, scouting enemy positions. One was a farm boy from Iowa, strong as an ox and fearless, the other a Jewish kid from Detroit, wiry and street-smart. Riflemen in the 28th Infantry Division, they had seen their share of combat in the past seven months -- St. Lo, Huertgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge and many places in between and after.

The German shelling began in midafternoon. As explosions came closer to the farmhouse, the GIs descended to the basement. Soon there was a deafening blast. Stone, plaster and giant timbers crashed down, much of it in flames. When the debris settled, the Iowan looked up and saw the Detroiter sprawled on the floor, unconscious, pinned beneath a smoldering timber. Rushing over, he placed his arms beneath the burning timber and, in a feat of superhuman strength, lifted the giant weight off the soldier. Later, after the Detroiter regained consciousness, the two GIs, under cover of night, returned to their squad in a nearby town.

The scorched sleeves and arms of the Iowan were obvious to other soldiers in the squad.

When they asked him about it, he told them about the collapsed farmhouse and how he had lifted the smoldering timber. No one doubted him, but they were amazed nonetheless.

When the fighting quieted down, one of the soldiers, a tall, lanky kid from Chicago, asked the Iowan to take him to the farmhouse and show him exactly what he had done. They went back and, among the rubble, the Iowan pointed to the enormous timber he had lifted a few days before.

"Let's see you lift it now," the Chicagoan said.

The Iowan stooped down, put his arms under the timber and gave a mighty heave. The timber didn't budge. It had been the rush of adrenaline, the drive to rescue his friend, that had enabled the Iowan to lift the timber earlier and save the Detroiter's life.

I know this story because I am the son of the Detroiter. His name is Sid Pollick. He was 20 years old at the time, a staff sergeant and squad leader, with combat sense born of city streets and months of front-line fighting. The Iowan was Lester "Dutch" Kleinendorst, 25, one of 13 children raised on a farm near Newton, Iowa. He was a sergeant and assistant squad leader. Back home, he had a wife and a young daughter.

How I came to know this story is a story in itself. Like many combat veterans, my father rarely, if ever, volunteered anything about the war. I discovered early on, though, that if I asked him questions about the war, he would answer them. I have been asking questions ever since. Few soldiers in Western Europe had more front-line combat experience than he did, and as a result, he has stories and battle-hardened perspectives on just about every aspect of combat and Army life.

One of his perspectives is that rifle companies faced the most dangerous and miserable conditions of the war and, therefore, were generally the last place a soldier wanted to be. Another perspective, put simply, is that not everyone in a rifle company was a person you wanted your life to depend on. Two soldiers my father trusted and always spoke highly of were Dutch and the soldier from Chicago, Mel Bacon.

Thirteen years ago, I looked up Mel in a Chicago phone book, found his number and called him. He was overjoyed to hear from me and hear that my father, whom he referred to as "Duke," was still around and doing well. "Your father was just a super guy," he said.

When I asked why he called my father Duke, he said he had called him that during the war.

"I called him that because, when I was in his squad in the winter of 1945, he was at the top of his game, like Duke Ellington or Count Basie," he explained. "He had been through so much -- Huertgen Forest, I don't know how he survived that, the Battle of the Bulge, I don't know how he survived that -- and he always knew what to do and always

did the right thing. I put my life in his hands every day with no doubt at all about the outcome."

My father was barely 20 years old at the time. Mel then proceeded to tell me several stories about my father, most of which I had never heard before. One was the story about the collapsing farmhouse, an incident my father had never mentioned.

Later that day, I called my father and told him I had found Mel and talked to him. He was happy to hear that Mel was doing fine. I also told him the farmhouse story. When I finished it, he was silent.

"That never happened," he finally said.

"How can you say that," I asked, "when Mel's recollection was so vivid? It was 45 years ago. You must have forgotten."

"No," he repeated matter-of-factly, "it never happened."

Directory assistance in Newton, Iowa, had a listing for a Lester Kleinendorst. I called the number the next day. A man answered, and I asked if he was Lester Kleinendorst. He said he was. I asked if he had been in the 28th Division during World War II, and he said, yes, he had been. I then identified myself as the son of Sid Pollick. "I remember Sid very well," Dutch said. "He was a great guy, believe me."

As we talked, it became apparent that, unlike Mel, Dutch would not be volunteering stories about my father. "You come home and want to forget about that stuff," he said.

I told him that I had recently spoken with Mel, and Mel had told me some stories about him and my father. One of the stories, I said, was about a farmhouse that collapsed and how he had lifted a smoldering timber off of my father. Do you remember that, I asked.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "And I remember returning with Mel some time later and not being able to move it."

I told him my father said it never happened.

"Your father," Dutch said, "was unconscious. I would be surprised if he remembered much about that at all."

I paused and, holding back a swell of emotion, thanked Dutch for saving my father's life.

"We looked out for each other," Dutch said. "He would have done the same for me."

I live in the Chicago area and over the years have stayed in touch with Mel. In the spring of 2000, I videotaped him talking about the war -- his early days in another squad, the famous August 1944 parade of the 28th Division down the Champs Elysees, his severe

wounding the following month, his time in my father's squad. When the tape was done, I told him I was going to call Dutch and try to arrange to videotape him, too. It was worth a drive to Newton, Iowa, I said. Mel agreed. "If you go," he insisted, "I'm going with you."

I had not talked to Dutch since our conversation 10 years earlier. As before, I called directory assistance for his number. I gave the operator his name and city and, somewhat nervously, waited for a response. There is no such listing, she said. My heart sank. Were there other Kleinendorsts in Newton, I asked. Yes, there were, she said. I wrote down the numbers and called the first one. A man with an elderly voice answered. I am looking for a Lester Kleinendorst, I said. There was a short pause. "Les is no longer with us," he responded. "He passed away two years ago."

The man was Dutch's brother. I told him that my father was in the war with Dutch and thought very highly of him. "Les was a very good man," he said, "but he didn't talk much about the war."

Not long after my conversation with Dutch's brother, I obtained a copy of Dutch's obituary from the Newton Library. It said he had worked at the post office and as a carpenter and had built many homes in Newton. The only reference to the war was a brief mention that he was "a United States Army veteran." There was nothing about the 28th Division, Huertgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge or how, in a heroic way, he had saved my father's life.

I recently read that World War II veterans are dying at a rate of 1,500 a day. With them, every day, die thousands, if not millions, of untold stories of life and death, sacrifice and duty and their own roles in the greatest, most important and most terrible war in the history of mankind. We understand and respect the reluctance of many of them to talk about the war, but it is our loss and often theirs that so many stories go untold.

The hundreds of conversations that I have had with my father about the war have unquestionably deepened my respect for and understanding of him. At the same time, they have been invaluable lessons for me about history and human behavior. Our conversations also led me to Mel, a wonderful man I now consider an uncle. I am certain that my attention and admiration have meant a lot to them, too. Not everyone, perhaps, will have experiences like these in talking to veterans, but many will, and they are deeply moving. A great number of their stories, however, will be told only in response to questions we ask them, questions that, in most cases, must come from the right person at the right time and in the right way. It is a matter of judgment. We should use that judgment and not assume that all veterans are unwilling or unable to talk about their experiences.

My father is still around. After the war, he went to college and law school on the GI Bill and, for 45 years, was a trial lawyer in Detroit. He retired at 70 when he was no longer able to hear in the courtroom. The explosions and blasts of the war had, over the years, made him almost completely deaf. I call him regularly, shouting into the phone, and see

him and my mother several times a year. From time to time, he talks to Mel. In their last conversation, they talked about getting digital hearing aids at the VA. World War II veterans with Purple Hearts, which they both have, get priority.

Every Veterans Day for the past 25 years, I have called my father and thanked him for "making the world safe for democracy." This Veterans Day, I will call and thank him again. I will think of Mel and maybe give him a call and think of Dutch, too. I regret, and always will, that I never had the chance to shake Dutch's hand, look him in the eye and thank him personally for saving my father's life so long ago. I am grateful, though, for the one time I did thank him. I think Dutch knew the thanks came from the bottom of my heart, and I think he appreciated it, too.

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GRAPHIC: Scott Stewart, Lester "Dutch" Kleinendorst (left) and Sid "Duke" Pollick pose for a snapshot during WWII. Dutch saved Duke's life in a French farmhouse during WWII.; Sid Pollick (right) doesn't remember Lester Kleinendorst's (above) heroic feat that saved his life in France in 1945.; WWII veteran Mel Bacon, 78, holds a photo of himself and his friend, Sid "Duke" Pollick (right), taken in 1945 in Germany.

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