

FEATURE

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Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.

The European priest recounted to Father Hayes how some American soldiers were in the basement of the rectory when a German tank was spotted coming down the road.

"To a man, everyone got up with no hesitation, got the bazooka, and destroyed (the tank)," Father Hayes said. "The response to the call to duty was almost instinctive."

Still, he grudgingly acknowledged that there were times when he was in danger while attached to the 183rd Field Artillery Group, part of General George Patton's 3rd Army. He served with the unit from shortly after D-Day until the end of the war, by which time he'd risen to the rank of major.

He recalled, for example, Thanksgiving Day in 1944.

Father Hayes was working at a first-aid

station that was the target of German shells.

The station "got hit by a German 88 shell," he said. "Fortunately, it didn't detonate."

He also single-handedly "liberated" a village near the French city of Nantes when out driving one day.

"I didn't realize I was the first American soldier in the village," Father Hayes recalled with a chuckle. "People all came out to cheer the 'liberation.'"

Sometimes even driving around was a danger due to mines on the roads, Father Hayes acknowledged.

Still, he said, most of his duties involved just trying to comfort and assure soldiers — and civilians.

"Once in a while you'd come across people deeply affected by battle fatigue," Father Hayes recalled. "I was able to bring some security to those guys."

Later, because he had learned to speak some German, he served as the

unit's billeting officer, arranging for U.S. troops to stay in German civilians' homes.

"As a priest, I had a rapport with the people, particularly in (heavily Catholic) Bavaria," Father Hayes said. As a result, he could put them at ease about how their homes would be treated, and thus help to smooth things over.

Father Hayes performed an additional duty for which he was honored with a personal commendation by General Patton: The priest wrote a history of the 183rd Field Artillery Group.

"He congratulated me," Father Hayes recalled. The commendation noted that the priest had not only recorded the history, but had been a part of it.

"I got the Bronze Star, but I was more proud of that (commendation)," Father Hayes said.

As for the recent state award, Father Hayes simply commented, "It's kind of nice at my age. I see it as my last hurrah."



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Thoughts to Consider



EDWIN SULEWSKI
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What are some ways to help a child who has lost a parent?

First it is important to make sure the child is honestly included in all the information and planning. This means being honest about the death and answering the child's questions. It also means allowing but not forcing children to go to the funeral or visitation as they wish. Secondly, a child needs love and security. Let a child know they will be cared for, take an interest in schoolwork and include them in play. Some children resent being pressured to accept burdens beyond their reach. "Taking over for Dad or Mom" may be too much responsibility. Naturally, changes will occur but a child needs time and help in adjusting to them.

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