



Photos Courtesy of Steven Schwartz

Virgil Bixler of Decatur saw Battle of the Bulge, Normandy

Virgil Bixler of Decatur wears his World War II uniform and holds a German rifle that he brought home.



By Kayleen Reusser, for The News-Sentinel
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In December 1944 the Allies encountered a major ambush in the mountains of the city of Kaiserslautern in southwest Germany.

Needing assistance, they radioed England to request the Army Air Corps bomb the head of their convoy. "Once they did that, we used bulldozers to clear the road as we went through," said Virgil Bixler of Decatur.

The soldiers were fighting in the month-long Battle of Bastogne, as part of one of World War II's worst conflicts, the Battle of the Bulge.

During their advancement through Belgium, France and Germany, soldiers who were members of the 80th Infantry Division, 905th Field Artillery, endured two months of record cold temperatures. "I saw many soldiers freeze to death," Bixler said. "We slept in foxholes and used leaves for mattresses. One soldier didn't like his foxhole and crawled out to dig another. Right afterward, it was demolished by a shell." Bixler, lying nearby in his own shelter, and the soldier were uninjured.

The days were spent in constant vigilance. "We scattered around to shoot so the Germans would think we had a bigger force," said Bixler. One night the Allies thought they were the only ones in the area. Suddenly, German planes filled the air, firing 450-caliber machine guns at troops on the ground. "The sky was lit up with Kaiser bullets," he said. "We always had protection from our fighter planes, the P-47s and P-51s."

It was a lot of serious fighting for Bixler, who had led a quiet life in the small town of Geneva. Born in 1920, he attended school until the eighth grade when he quit to work on the family farm. By the time he was drafted in February 1942, Bixler was married and working at Central Soya in Decatur. "I was part of the first group of soldiers to leave Decatur for the war," he said.

After passing his physical exam at Camp Perry in Ohio, Bixler participated in basic training at Camp Forrest in Tenn. "We crawled under barbed wire and away from a 30-cal machine gun firing live ammunition," he said.

When Bixler was transferred to Camp Phillips, Kan., for prairie maneuvers, he was designated No. 1 man in the 905th field artillery. "I was the fastest soldier at firing," he said. "They used me to zero in on targets."

In Arizona, Bixler participated in desert training in hot sandstorms. Garnett Bixler followed her husband as he was transferred around the country. "I was released from duties each night so we could stay together," Virgil said.

In Phoenix the closest accommodations Garnett could find was an apartment two hours away. "I hitchhiked home each weekend to be with her," he said.

In spring 1944 family time ended when Bixler and 3,500 other troops boarded the Queen Mary, a converted troop ship, at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. Garnett returned to their home in Indiana, expecting the couple's first child. It was a challenge to leave his pregnant wife, but Bixler was resolved. "I had trained and was ready to go," he said.

For eight days many of the troops suffered from seasickness. Bixler was not one of them. His solution? "I ate olives," he said.

The ship landed in Glasgow, Scotland. After restocking supplies, it crossed the English Channel one night in mid-June to land near a beach at Normandy. Other troops had already landed, but fighting continued.

Bixler advanced into the fighting, firing a 30-caliber carbine gun. "It was very loud with all of the shooting," he said. "I came close to being injured, but we didn't lose anyone."

Throughout the summer, the Army continued to advance. Bixler found out weeks later via a letter from home that his son, Roger, had been born in July 1944.

In fall 1944 Bixler was transferred to the 105th field artillery, due to his ability to shoot. "I could set my sights quickly," he said.

The Battle of the Bulge ended in February 1945, but the Allies achieved another significant defeat of the

Germans in spring 1945 with the capture of a weapon nicknamed "Big Bertha."
"This was a huge gun that required two railroad cars for transport," Bixler said. "The Germans fired it at night from 75 miles away. It lit the sky."

Though the gun was kept hidden in a mountain under armed guard until needed, Allied forces found and seized it.

Another time Bixler's group of Allies captured as many as 5,000 German soldiers, including several top-ranking officials. "They were part of the SS troops," said Bixler.

With extra mouths to feed, Bixler's captain ordered him to go with a few of the captured Germans behind Germany's front lines to gather potatoes from a storage area. "My father was from Germany so I could speak to the prisoners," he said.

Armed with his gun, Bixler followed the POWs to a barn where they found potatoes covered with straw. They filled a truck and delivered the spuds to the Allies. Bixler was not worried about being overtaken by the POWs. "They were tired of fighting and didn't try to escape," he said. "Some German POWs worked at Central Soya in Decatur until the war ended."

Still the Germans prevailed. At the Rhine River the Allies used strategy to outsmart them. "We believed the Germans would think we would cross the river at its narrowest spot," said Bixler. Instead, the Americans crossed the Wurm River at night. "Our engineers made pontoons for the trucks to drive across," he said. "It was cold, but no Germans were there."

Bixler trekked with the rest of the Allies through France and Belgium where they scored another momentous seizure -- 29 train cars of Benzene, otherwise known as mustard gas.

"We knew the Germans would try to re-capture it so we moved out quickly," he said. "We took down the track behind us, using a buzz saw to cut the railroad ties.

In late 1945 Bixler and other Allies helped liberate German death camps. "Dead bodies lay frozen and piled up," he said.

In May 1945 Bixler was in Munich, Germany, when he heard the war had ended. He didn't get excited because he had no idea when he would receive orders to return to the States. He kept a photo of Baby Roger and hoped his son was enjoying the big teddy bear Virgil had mailed to him as a gift.

When Cpl. Bixler was discharged in October 1945, one souvenir he claimed was a German rifle from the Battle of the Bulge. Upon being reunited with his family, he had one culinary request. "I never want to eat Spam again!" he said.

Bixler returned to his former job at Central Soya, retiring in 1982. He and Garnett became parents to two additional children. Garnett died in 1987. Bixler never returned to Europe.

Having entered the Army with a Christian faith, Bixler admitted he felt scared many times as a soldier. "But I always believed I would return home," he said. "I saw many soldiers who didn't make it, but I always felt God would protect me."