

A TRUE STORY OF OVERCOMING
SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE ODDS

**THE
BRAVEST GUY**

H A R R Y E . W E D E W E R

The Bravest Guy

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First Print Edition: September 2016

ISBN-13: 978-1539098874

ISBN-10: 1539098877

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016916142

CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, North Charleston, SC

For more about this work visit www.bravestguy.com

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Cover and Formatting: Streetlight Graphics

To my mother and father.

To the love of my life, Robin, and my son, Ben, and to my sister, and all of my brothers and their families.

And to those who have served, and who continue to serve in the defense of this great nation.

The United States of America, and to their families.

I am merely a scribe who has told another's story.

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens;
but often we look so long at the closed door that we do
not see the one which has been opened for us.*

– Helen Keller – We Bereaved, 1929

PROLOGUE

MORE THAN 70 YEARS HAVE passed since a day that was, and remains for me, unimaginable. My father, Don Wedewer, was nearly dead. In fact, he should have been dead.

Then a 19-year-old Army infantry private, he lay badly wounded in slushy snow, fading in and out of consciousness, his face bleeding from the blast that moments before had shattered the hospital in Liège, Belgium, where he was a patient. It was November 24, 1944, the day after Thanksgiving, and almost three years since the United States had entered World War II. The hospital had been shredded by a German V-1 “Buzz Bomb.” The Vergeltungswaffe 1—Revenge Weapon No. 1, as it was called by the Germans—was an indiscriminate terror weapon, a long-range flying bomb loaded with almost 2,000 pounds of high explosives. It was a cross between a SCUD missile of First Gulf War infamy and a flying improvised explosive device (IED) of more recent notoriety in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Like later weapons, the V-1 was crude but gruesomely effective, exacting revenge by indiscriminately destroying and killing everything and everyone in its path.

Two days earlier in Liège, in a particularly horrific bombing, a careening V-1 had ricocheted off the top of a street trolley and crashing into the second floor of a girls’ school before exploding, killing dozens and injuring many more. One historian described the V-1 as the World War II equivalent of the cinematic *Terminator*: “It can’t be reasoned with; it doesn’t feel pity or remorse or fear. It absolutely will not stop.”¹ In short, nothing was sacred or

secure from the V-1. And in Liège, there was virtually no defense against it.

Sometimes you had warning it was coming. On the horizon, the V-1 first appeared as a speck. As it drew closer it looked like a black cross² streaking across the sky while emitting a guttural roar. It was an unnerving sound, similar to that made by a pack of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. The roar abruptly stopped with a distinctive “*click*” as the V-1’s motor cut off. Then followed 14 seconds of terrifying silence as it plunged to earth to annihilate whatever lay in its path. In describing the psychological effect of the terror bombing of Liège by the V-1s, one soldier wrote: “Mere words are highly inadequate to portray the terror and noise and death which all occur at the height of battle or bombing.”³

It was shortly after nine o’clock in the morning.⁴ The ground around the two-story brick buildings of the hospital was wet with slushy snow. Dad had just been moved to a recovery room after being x-rayed. His body – or what was left of it – was in a full body cast. His tissue was perforated by shrapnel, one eye was gone, his teeth were blown in, and one finger had the knuckle blown off. Worst of all, both legs were severed, one above the knee, the other below the knee. Four days before, while in combat in Germany, Private First Class Wedewer had stepped on a land mine.

Dad had heard plenty of V-1s while in the combat zone. That morning, though, he didn’t hear it coming. No sirens, no calls to take cover. No warning at all. One moment he was lying immobilized in the serenity of the recovery room; the next, the blast from the bomb’s impact catapulted him into the air and then slammed him back onto the bed. The ceiling collapsed on top of him. A rafter came crashing down and landed across his chest, pinning him to the bed. Pieces of the ceiling, now a barrage of razor-like projectiles, slashed his face.

The blast concussed my father, causing the retina in his one good eye to detach, leaving him nearly blind. Almost everyone in the nearby x-ray room, from where he’d just been moved, was dead. By one account, the blast was so powerful that bodies were tossed up to 75 feet and were left hanging over the ceiling rafters,

where some died before they could be rescued.⁵ A courageous nurse, seeing my father's helplessness, fetched help to get him out and laid him in the wet snow outside. Around him were wreckage, fire, and many dead, both civilians and soldiers. Sightless and fading in and out of consciousness, my father heard a Catholic priest giving him the Catholic sacrament of Last Rights in French. In the Catholic faith, this is a final blessing given to someone expected to die: *"Par cette onction sainte, que le Seigneur, en sa grande bonté, vous reconforte par la grâce de l'Esprit Saint ... (Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit) ... Ainsi, vous ayant libéré de tous péchés, qu'il vous sauve et vous relève ... (May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up ...)."*

Having grown up in a small town in Iowa, my father didn't know any French. However, even in his semi-conscious state, he knew what was going on: he was being given-up for dead. Again.

This was the *second* time my father had received Last Rights in less than a week. Four days earlier, advancing on an enemy fortification in the Hürtgen Forest on the western edge of Germany, he'd been given up for dead when his legs were blown off after stepping on a mine. On that occasion too, a priest had stood over him and uttered the same blessing. Subsequently, Dad had been moved to the hospital in Liège, a "safe" area miles from the fighting where wounded soldiers could be further stabilized. Now, in this supposedly safe area, Dad sustained injuries which were as bad, or perhaps worse, than those he had suffered in combat days earlier.

Thousands of miles away, in the small town of Dyersville in the Midwestern cornfields of Iowa, the Reverend John B. Herbers, an ordinarily stern, bespectacled parish priest at St. Francis Xavier Church, broke down in tears as he told his congregation that Private First Class Don Wedewer was wounded. Don Wedewer, the gangly, boyish-looking hometown kid; the altar boy, baseball player, student at St. Francis Xavier School next door, and someone who Reverend Herbers wanted to be a priest, instead went off to war. Now, he would never be the same.

At about the same time, a local newspaper reported: “*Dyersville Infantryman Is Wounded on German Front*”⁶ and published a photo of my father in uniform, looking every bit as young as his 19 years. The newspaper article did not disclose the nature of my father’s wounds, but noted that a nurse wrote the letter home informing his family that he was wounded. This was not a good sign.

These scenes could have played out many times in a war that killed more than 405,000⁷ Americans and wounded more than 670,000⁸ others. Among those were eight from Dyersville who did not make it back from the war: Staff Sergeant Clarence Ries, killed in action; Private First Class John Rahe, killed in action; Technical Sergeant, Cyril Christoph, killed in action;⁹ and there were others.¹⁰ What Reverend Herbers and the newspaper probably didn’t know, though, was how close to death PFC Wedewer came. By a razor-thin margin, he was among those who would make it home.

My father’s wounds, however, would not be the hardest thing to deal with on his journey back.



Decades later, as I read about maimed young veterans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, I think of my father and his long path to recovery. At the same time, I realize that his story is not about one war and its aftermath. Rather, his is a story that transcends all wars.

One haunting image strikes me in particular. An Army Private First Class shot in the stomach in Afghanistan clutches a rosary as he is medically evacuated. Different war, different context, and decades later. Yet, in that image and others like it, I see my father.

After researching my father’s story, I can only begin to comprehend the challenges faced by veterans wounded in recent wars. What I do know, though, if my father’s experience is any guide, is that the challenges are daunting. There will be doubt. There will be setbacks. And there may be resentment as to “Why me?” My father faced these challenges on a journey that led to his becoming the director of a state agency in Florida, a presidential appointee, and a member of the Blind Hall of Fame; a journey

that led to recognition from four U.S. presidents—all while my mother, Marabeth, raised my three brothers, my sister, and me.

Like many of the World War II generation, my father rarely talked about the war. Even now, he instinctively resists doing so out of concern that he would sound as if he were grandstanding. My father hates that.

He is not someone I have known well. But in retracing his steps through the suffering of terrible wounds and recovery, I came to know him—and myself—better. Why sons seek to know their fathers better is something I cannot explain. It is something I simply felt compelled to do.

This book, though, is not about me. It is about my father. Retracing his unlikely steps around the country and overseas was a more protracted process than I anticipated.

In over a decade, drawing inspiration from, among others, the great contemporary historians David McCullough, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Douglas Brinkley, I had to touch and feel history where it happened. My travels and perspective on the following pages are significant only to the extent that they somehow illuminate my father's past.

Ultimately, I hope a brief telling of his story will help others. I know it has been an inspiration to me.