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## World War II in Memory

*James H. Madison\**

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In this issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History*, Bernard L. Rice joins a long line of World War II-generation Americans who have recorded their experiences. Such reminiscences have increased in number in recent years, doubtless sparked by the fiftieth anniversary commemorations in the early 1990s and by that generation's aging. As the young men and women of the 1940s reach the status of senior citizens many have become more thoughtful about their personal histories and about their connection to larger histories. One result is a written effort to sort it all out for themselves and to leave a record for generations to come.

Rice's record presents some themes that are near universal in World War II memoirs. His war experiences show the large place of chance, of serendipity, and of the unpredictability of one's next year, even one's next hour, of life. Rice's memory displays also the close personal affection for his "buddies"—one of the best of World War II words, one loaded with meaning. More than fifty years later Rice remembers sharply many buddies who died and many others who survived. And there is the geography of buddies, the tendency of veterans to attach hometowns to their names. Some are fellow Hoosiers, people Rice knew before and after the war, but most are from places all over the country. Like hundreds of thousands of World War II men and women, Rice met Americans of all kinds and people from other parts of the world. Thus, this graduate of Mishawaka High School, class of 1940, came at a young age to know something of the diversity of this country and of the global society that so shapes us today.

Unlike most of the World War II generation, Rice experienced military combat. Moving across France and into Germany in 1944–1945, he came to know the fear caused by the sound of a German eighty-eight millimeter gun or the engine roar of a Tiger tank. His account of the Herrlisheim battle shows the confusion of large and small events, the "fog" of combat. And Rice was one of many Hoosiers who saw first hand the evil of the Nazi Holocaust. The testimony of

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\*James H. Madison is professor of history, Indiana University, Bloomington.

such ordinary Americans will always be protection against those who would deny the atrocities of Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup>

A special feature of Rice's war experience comes from his assigned duty. Wanting to be a pilot, and after actually acquiring flying experience, he ended up as close to the ground as one could get, a medical aidman. In France and Germany he heard the cry of "medic" uttered in pain and panic, a cry that brought him on the run, often in the open, with bandages, scissors, plasma, and morphine. He knew the terror of hauling wounded men through enemy fire. Even though the German enemy (unlike the Japanese) often respected the red cross of medics, jeep ambulances, and hospitals, aidmen like Rice suffered heavy casualties.<sup>2</sup> It is no wonder that, as Stephen E. Ambrose has written, "The medics were the most popular, respected, and appreciated men in the company."<sup>3</sup>

Rice was at one end of the long chain of evacuation of casualties. The aidman made the first hasty diagnosis and treatment. He stopped the blood, administered sulfa powder or perhaps plasma, relieved the pain, and then got the wounded man to an aid station—all this while close enough to the enemy to be wounded himself. From there the chain of evacuation stretched away from the front to collecting stations and field hospitals where doctors and surgeons provided more extensive treatment and then farther back to evacuation hospitals and eventually to a convalescent hospital. It was an elaborate, sophisticated system, with skilled medical men and women and extensive supplies, including the wonder drug penicillin, large amounts of blood, and x-ray machines. The result was a hospital life rate for wounded Americans of 97 percent, a result one authority labels "the key achievement of American military medicine in World War II."<sup>4</sup>

Rice was at the most dangerous end of this chain of evacuation. He tells his story in a low-key, unheroic style. It is the style of the generation that fought World War II. In many such wartime accounts there are doubtless things forgotten or unmentioned, events too horrible to retell. And as in all history there are different memories of the same events, as there are certainly different perspectives on the many events that make up World War II. The stories of ordinary Americans from places like Mishawaka may be incomplete, but they make clear that people like Bernard Rice set out to do a job, to defeat an enemy that was evil. Few of them thought it was a good war. But it was a

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<sup>1</sup> For another Hoosier's more detailed account, see J. Ray Clark, *Journey to Hell: The Fiery Furnaces of Buchenwald* (Raleigh, N.C., 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Albert E. Cowdrey, *Fighting for Life: American Military Medicine in World War II* (New York, 1994), 251-52, 260, 264. German SS units were more likely to fire at ambulances.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York, 1992), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Cowdrey, *Fighting for Life*, 154-55, 160-61, quotation 175.

necessary war, and a war the good guys won. The generations that came after World War II are forever in their debt for that victory and now for setting down in print some of their stories for us to read and ponder.