Obituary: Richard 'Dick' Winters, courageous WWII officer portrayed in 'Band of Brothers'

By T. Rees Shapiro
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, January 10, 2011; 8:20 PM

Richard "Dick" Winters, 92, a decorated Army officer whose courageous leadership through some of the fiercest combat of World War II was featured in the best-selling book and HBO miniseries "Band of Brothers," died Jan. 2. He had Parkinson's disease.

The Patriot-News in central Pennsylvania reported that Maj. Winters, a longtime Hershey resident, died at an assisted-living facility in nearby Campbellsport.


One of Easy Company's officers was Maj. Winters, a charismatic and compassionate leader who entered Army service as a private and returned home after World War II as a major.

He and his men jumped into combat on June 6, 1944, above Normandy and later fought together through Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands and the Battle of the Bulge.

The unit experienced heavy turnover because of battlefield casualties. One Easy Company soldier later wrote that among his colleagues, the Purple Heart "was not a decoration but a badge of office."

Maj. Winters graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in 1941 before enlisting in the Army. He was selected to attend officer candidates' school, earned a commission in the summer of 1942 and then - drawn by the promise of extra pay for hazardous duty - volunteered to join a newly formed paratrooper unit.

Of about 500 officers who volunteered to join the elite unit, only 148 made the cut.

Maj. Winters excelled as a infantry leader and a paratrooper and became a hallowed figure among his men for his "follow me" attitude.

He received the military's second-highest decoration for valor, the Distinguished Service Cross, for his actions on D-Day.

That morning, after landing and untangling from his parachute, Maj. Winters gathered a small group of men for a raid on German cannon emplacements near Brecourt Manor.

Guarded by a platoon of 50 German sentries, the heavily fortified battery had been firing on Utah Beach, causing significant casualties and slowing the Allied advance.

In their assault of the position, Maj. Winters and his men killed 15 German soldiers and took 12 as prisoners. At one point, Maj. Winters noticed a wounded German soldier crawling toward a machine gun.

"I drilled him clear through the head," Maj. Winters told Ambrose.

Maj. Winters and his men destroyed three German cannons and completed the action with near-textbook efficiency.

Throughout the war, Maj. Winters's leadership skills earned him commendations and promotions. He served as Easy Company's commander and was promoted to lead the 506th Regiment's 2nd Battalion, which included Easy Company.
Maj. Winters and his men eventually saw the end of the European campaign while occupying Adolf Hitler's mountainside retreat, the Eagle's Nest, nestled in the Alps above Berchtesgaden. They celebrated by drinking champagne from the Fuhrer's 10,000-bottle cellar.

Late in the war, one of Maj. Winters's soldiers, Floyd Talbert, wrote him a letter from an Indiana hospital, thanking him for his loyalty and leadership. "You are loved and will never be forgotten by any soldier that ever served under you," Talbert wrote. "I would follow you into hell."

Richard Davis Winters was born Jan. 21, 1918, in Lancaster, Pa. His family's roots in American history reached back to Timothy Winters, a British immigrant who served in the Revolutionary War and saw action in the Battle of Yorktown.

Maj. Winters's own war story went untold for nearly a half-century until the publication of Ambrose's book, which became a national bestseller. In 2001, a television miniseries adapted from Ambrose's work was released on HBO. The series, co-produced by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, won six Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe.

Toward the end of the war, Maj. Winters turned down the opportunity to make the Army a career. He returned to the United States and joined an Army colleague's company, Nixon Nitration Works, in New Jersey. He was recalled to active duty during the Korean War as a training officer.

For the rest of his career, Maj. Winters owned a farm in rural Pennsylvania and sold animal nutrition products to animal-feed companies. He married Ethel Estoppey in 1948 and had two children. He lived the quiet and peaceful life he'd promised to himself after surviving the war.

One of the most harrowing experiences of his military service came in late April 1945. The men of Easy Company discovered a German working camp near Landsberg that was part of the Dachau concentration camp. Maj. Winters found wheels of cheese piled in a nearby cellar and ordered that the nourishment be distributed among the inmates.

"The memory of starved, dazed men who dropped their eyes and heads when we looked at them through the chain-link fence, in the same manner that a beaten, mistreated dog would cringe, leaves feelings that cannot be described and will not be forgotten," Maj. Winters wrote of the experience. "The impact of seeing those people behind that fence left me saying, only to myself, 'Now I know why I am here.'"
Dick Winters, of 'Band of Brothers' fame, dies

Published: Sunday, January 09, 2011, 6:25 PM      Updated: Monday, January 10, 2011, 8:34 PM

By MONICA VON DOBENECK, The Patriot-News

The Patriot-News, 2004

Dick Winters introduced President George W. Bush to a crowd of about 20,000 during a rally in 2004 at Hersheypark Stadium in Derry Township.

Dick Winters, the former World War II commander whose war story was told in the book and miniseries “Band of Brothers,” has died.

Dick Winters led a quiet life on his Fredericksburg farm and in his Hershey home until the book and miniseries “Band of Brothers” threw him into the international spotlight.

Since then, the former World War II commander of Easy Company had received hundreds of requests for interviews and appearances all over the world.

He stood at the podium with President George W. Bush in Hershey during the presidential campaign in 2004. He accepted the “Four Freedoms” award from Tom Brokaw on behalf of the Army. He was on familiar terms with Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, producers of the HBO mini-series, the most expensive television series ever produced.

Winters was always gracious about his new-found celebrity, but never really comfortable with it.
He never claimed to be a hero and said that he had nothing to do with the national effort to get him the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military honor.

When people asked him if he was a hero, he liked to answer the way his World War II buddy, Mike Ranney, did.

“No,” Ranney said. “But I served in a company of heroes.” That became the tag line for the miniseries.

- RELATED STORY: Winters, a private man, remembered as an American hero.

In an interview shortly before the miniseries debuted, Winters said the war wasn’t about individual heroics. The men were able to do what they did because they became closer than brothers when faced with overwhelming hardships.

They weren’t out to save the world. They hated the blood, carnage, exhaustion and filth of war. But they were horrified at the thought of letting down their buddies.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, Winters and his troops from Easy Company, 506th regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, parachuted behind enemy lines to take on a German artillery nest on Utah Beach. Winters made himself a promise then that if he lived through the war, all he wanted was peace and quiet.

His company fought through the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of a death camp at Dachau and to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest at Berchtesgaden.

The war described in “Band of Brothers” is ugly, but the young men developed character under fire, Winters said. He was glad the miniseries showed war realistically, not either glorified or demonized as in so many movies.

He wanted people to understand that success in war depends not on heroics but on bonding, character, getting the job done and “hanging tough,” his lifelong motto. In combat, he wrote 50 years after the war, “your reward for a good job done is that you get the next tough mission.”

When the war ended, Winters kept his promise to himself. He married Ethel, bought a bucolic farm in Fredericksburg, raised two children and worked in the agricultural feed business. He didn’t talk about the war until the late historian Stephen Ambrose wanted to put Easy Company’s exploits on paper.

Following the miniseries, Winters turned down most requests for interviews because he said he didn’t want to appear like he was bragging.

But he did feel the story of Easy Company was an important one, especially for young people. He was more likely to accept invitations by local school groups and spent time with students at Cedar Crest High School, among others. A talk he gave at Palmyra Middle School drew hundreds of spectators.

People who knew Winters during and after the war said he is exactly what he appears to be. He could lead without ever raising his voice or swearing. His friend Bob Hoffman, a Lebanon
architect, said Winters’ eyes could “burn a hole right through you.”
The men who served under him and people who only met him later in life call him a hero, no matter what he says.
According to the book, one wounded member of Easy Company wrote Winters from a hospital bed in 1945, “I would follow you into hell.”
He received a standing ovation from 500 veterans when he spoke at the dedication of the Army’s Military History Institute in Middlesex Township in September.

When President Bush was in Hershey in April, he called Winters “a fine example ... for those brave souls who now wear our nation’s uniform.”
Ambrose, the author of “Band of Brothers,” said in a 2001 BBC interview that he hopes young people say. “I want to be like Dick Winters.”
“Not necessarily as soldiers, but as that kind of leader, that kind of man, with basic honesty and virtue and an understanding of the difference between right and wrong,” Ambrose said.

Enlarge DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News The Hershey-Derry Township Historical Society exhibit re-creates the den in Dick Winters’ Derry Twp. home, with most of the furniture and memorabilia donated by Winters. The desk, nameplate and books are originals and appear just as they did at his home. This photo, from a historical society brochure, show Winters in his home den in 2008. 01/10/2011 DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News Dick Winters Remembered as an American Hero gallery (19 photos)
© 2011 PennLive.com. All rights reserved.