

Fallen Hero Profile: Private First Class James H. Vrtatko

Name: James H. Vrtatko
Born: August 1, 1908
Died: January 22, 1945
Hometown: Chicago, Illinois
Entered the Military: March 20, 1942
Branch of Service: U.S. Army
Org Unit: 326th Medical Company, 101st Airborne Division
Rank: Private First Class
Award(s): Purple Heart

Life Before the War

James H. Vrtatko was born in Chicago, Illinois on August 1, 1908. His parents immigrated to the United States in 1904 and owned a home in a predominantly Czechoslovakian immigrant neighborhood known as Little Village.

His mother, Barbara Vrtatko, was widowed sometime before 1930 and had two other children, Olga and Charles. Vrtatko, the oldest child in the family, did not continue his education beyond grammar school, most likely so he could work and support his family. At the age of 21, he worked as a laborer at a soda fountain and by the time he enlisted in the Army in 1942 at age 33, he was working as a stock clerk.

Military Experience

After his enlistment, he was trained as a glider combat medic in the 326th Medical Company of the 101st Airborne Division. He was with the division from their activation in August 1942.

D-Day

Vrtatko was a part of the D-Day invasion and entered Normandy on a glider to support the regiment in their elimination of German beach defenses. They secured beach exits for infantry troops followed by the capture of Carentan. After Normandy, the company moved to Cherbourg to support the operations there. Due to heavy personnel and equipment losses that the division experienced in Normandy, the 326th was shipped back to England in July where they prepared for Operation Market Garden.

Operation Market Garden

Vrtatko entered Holland on September 17, 1944 by glider and supported the 101st Airborne Division's assault on two German Panzer Divisions in Belgium and the liberation of several Dutch towns from German control. The unit dealt with strong German counter attacks and brutal, close-quarter fighting.

The division was relieved and sent back to France on November 28, 1944 for rest. On December 17, the 326th Medical Company moved by motor convoy to Bastogne, Belgium in order to provide medical care to the 101st Airborne Division in their defense of the Ardennes Forest.

Defense of Bastogne

During the early part of the Allied defense of Bastogne, a German force mistakenly attacked the 326th Medical Division Clearing Station for a short period of 15 minutes. Once given the opportunity, the division commander surrendered the facility on December 19, 1944, and Vrtatko was initially classified missing in action until after the war when more detail was uncovered regarding his capture.



Vrtatko was taken prisoner and transferred to Gerolstein Prison Camp where conditions were abhorrent and disease was common. There he contracted bronchial pneumonia and was transferred to Nettersheim, Germany. On January 22, 1945 his heart failed, and he died.

As a medic, Vrtatko had a very unusual war experience that required an incredible amount of courage not only to be a part of major battles in the European Theater but also to face death and human suffering more intimately than many other soldiers. As a medic, rather than soldiering on to advance mission objectives, he was always running to help others who were wounded. When Vrtatko heard the cry of "medic!" he knew he was heading into the depths of human carnage left in the wake of battle.