

Subject: A time to reminisce:

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From: "Ernie Crist" <ernie_crist@dnv.org>

To: <fonvca@fonvca.org>

CC: "Mayor and Council - DNV" <Council@dnv.org>, "Senior Management Committee" <managecomm@dnv.org>

A TIME TO REMINISCE: Ernie Crist

Today I should have celebrated. May 3rd 1945 exactly 60 years ago is the day when WW 2 was over for me. Incredible as it seems but after nearly 6 years of mayhem, bloodshed and violence all around me, both from the air and on the ground I had come through alive. I was the only survivor of my whole class to do so. All my classmates were dead - they rest, but not in Flanders Fields where poppies grow, beneath the crosses row on row but in Yugoslavia, in Croatia and in parts of what today is the eastern part of Germany and Western Czechoslovakia.

My fellow class mates were called up in October 44 and sent to what was then the Eastern front. They had hardly any equipment or training. They were under the command of German General Schoerner an uncompromising commander. I too was called up but I was rather small for my age and emaciated from many years of lack of adequate food and harassment by allied bombers. The German officer took one look at me and said, you are too small son - I'll see you in 6 months". In so doing, he saved my life.

In April and May Schoerner's Army was surrounded by the Soviet Army. A call by the Soviet commander to surrender was ignored and they were literally annihilated. After the War I visited their Graves in what was then East Germany. At the entrance of the cemetery there was a sign erected by the East German government. It simply stated " THEY, TOO, WERE VICTIMS OF FASCISM". Most of the dead had been 14, 15 and 16 years old.

On May 3rd, 45, I was in Innsbruck after having returned from Munich where I had been between 1941 and 1944 to study. While in Munich, I had lived close to the Bavarian Motor works, which the American Air force was desperately trying to knock out of action. Today BMW is making cars again and not too shabby ones at that. The Americans never seriously hit the BMW factories but they destroyed everything around it, mostly residential areas. Indeed the American Air Force attacked Munich in July of 44 repeatedly with more than one thousand bombers until the City was destroyed - it burned for 3 weeks. But the Bavarian Motor works kept on producing war material.

The German Air defence had put 48 antiaircraft guns in place and when the American attacked they simply shot up a barrier and most of the times the American pilots turned off and released their bombs before they could hit their intended target. Even today I am reminded of Catch 22 in which a similar scenario is described. It was quite a spectacle. I found out recently that the present Pope was serving in the very anti aircraft units adjacent to the BMW works which produced aircraft and U-Boat engines at the time. I also read he had been induced to do so.

However, while in school in Munich one day, we received a visit from two Luftwaffe officers. They had come in to our classroom asking us boys to join the anti aircraft units protecting the City. To my surprise none of the young students raised his hands to volunteer. Instead one of them started to laugh until every joined in. The officers left in disgust but not before telling us that "you are supposed to be Germany's future and intellectual elite, so shame on you". The laughter from the students grew even louder.


I also read that the present Pope claimed that he had to join the Hitler Youth. While I do not know the specific circumstances, I find this a little difficult to believe. It is true that it was encouraged but at the same time it was still considered to be a privilege to be a member

of the Hitler Youth and was not compulsory albeit those who did not join were looked upon with suspicion.

In May, 45, I was back in Innsbruck, my home town and witnessed the entry of the American troops at approximately 7 o'clock in the evening. That City too was heavily bombed while I was there. A few minutes before the Americans arrived, a unit of German SS troops in VW jeeps passed through the town. There is a bridge across the Inn River which had been occupied by the Austrian resistance. It was manned by two Machine guns.

When the German troops passing through saw the resistance fighters they opened fire on them. I had been an innocent bystander at the northern end of the bridge waiting for the Americans we knew were on the way. The bullets were whizzing by me but miraculously I was not hit. It was uncanny and almost funny, since it would have meant that I would have been killed literally during the last 5 minutes of the war.

As I said, I should celebrate, but I will not, I have seen too much, I remember too much, I know too much and I am too sad to celebrate. There are days when I wonder why in God's name I was not killed as well or what my fate would have been if Germany had won the war which almost happened. These are the thoughts going through my head today on May 3rd as I remember the day 60 years ago when the war ended for me and I was still young. The world has changed a great deal since but the bitch which gave birth to WW 2 is pregnant again.

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