

"I Thought I Was Dead When I Saw Those Mummies"

Bert Stickler Awarded France's Medal of Valor

by Susan E. Lloyd (1979-2004)

Research by Rudy Valadez (1967-1992)

When he was just 22 years old, retired Special Agent Bert Stickler (1951-1977) had already received three Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars and three Battle Stars from the United States for his bravery in World War II. More recently and nearly seven decades later, on Feb. 21, 2013, he was presented with the French Legion of Honor, Grade of Chevalier Medal — France's most important medal of valor — for his actions in the war.

Bert's story begins in Newark, NJ, where he was born and grew up. Although a city boy, his dream was one day to work in the great outdoors, perhaps as the head of a national park. He was a devoted Eagle Scout and as such, loved outdoor activities, particularly hiking and camping. Bert was also an athlete at Weequahic High School in Newark, where he ran track, threw the javelin and competed in the broad jump.

He enrolled in North Carolina State College because of its proximity to forests and mountains, but dropped out in 1943 to join the Army. After basic training at Fort Dix, NJ, Bert volunteered for the 10th Mountain Division and spent eight months training at Camp Hale in Colorado. Seeking more action, he then entered pilot training at Mississippi State College. After only a few months, however, he learned that the program had been terminated.

Bert then found himself reassigned to the 75th Infantry Division and subsequently deployed by ship from New York to England in November 1944. Within a few weeks, the 75th Infantry moved from England to France and through the Netherlands into Germany. On Dec. 18, 1944, the Division was thrown into the Battle of the Bulge.

Battle of the Bulge

The Battle of the Bulge had begun two days earlier on Dec. 16, 1944, and was the largest and bloodiest battle of World War II, with more than 610,000 American soldiers committed to the fighting. The battle took place over a wide area in Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg and was the last big counteroffensive that was initiated by the Germans, who intended to split and defeat the Allied forces.

During his first few days on the ground, Bert was involved in two separate hand-to-hand skirmishes and was injured in both. Despite his wounds, he kept going. On a frigid day in Germany in late December 1944, Bert was taking his turn as point man for his men, cutting a trail through the 3-foot deep snow. This duty was rotated every 15 to 20 minutes among the men because of the fatigue that ensued from making a path through the heavy snow. Bert recalled his troop was at the edge of an open field in the Ardennes Forest, prepared to cross to a wooded area about 100 yards away. German soldiers suddenly appeared in the distance and almost at the same time, a mortar shell exploded 90 yards to the right of Bert's position, followed quickly by another round. A third mortar shell then detonated approximately nine feet from him. Shrapnel pierced Bert's right hand, right chest and lung, and then exited through his lower back.



Bert Stickler's New Agent photo

"I Thought I Was Dead When I Saw Those Mummies"

Bert instantly lost consciousness and to this day, doesn't know how he survived. However, two days later, he regained consciousness and opened his eyes to what



Bert Stickler and French Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Francis Blandin

Photo courtesy of FBI photographer Dan Parr

looked like an empty Quonset hut. All was quiet and he sensed he was alone, that is, until he turned his head to one side. There he saw a mummy-like figure lying on a cot next to him, wrapped in bandages from head to toe, with two small slits for the eyes. He turned his head to the other side and saw another enwrapped figure similar to the first and recalled: "I thought I was dead when I saw those mummies." He later learned these were soldiers who had survived being burned over their entire bodies when a shelter they were in was hit by a mortar shell, catching fire and trapping them inside.

Unable to move, Bert only realized he was alive when an American nurse came into the hut to check on him. After two more days in recovery, he was strong enough for transport. Before he was moved, though, he experienced another scare when four German soldiers entered the hut and came directly to his bed. Bert feared the worst but was soon relieved to learn that these were German POWs assigned to U.S. hospital duty, tasked to take him to a plane designated to fly wounded soldiers to a hospital in England.

After the war in Europe was over, Bert and thousands of other troops found themselves waiting to be transported back to the United States. During this period, a concern of the U.S. government was finding ways to keep the GIs busy and "out of mischief." One solution was to hold a military version of the Olympics, to be known as the "GI Olympics," in a stadium in Nuremberg, Germany, in August 1945. By then, Bert had sufficiently recovered from his wounds to participate in the broad jump and archery, winning a bronze medal in the latter.

The FBI

After his return to the United States, Bert finished out his college days at Utah State University and went to work in Newark as an inspector in a steel foundry. One day in 1951, he saw an FBI recruiting poster in a post office and submitted his application. He was soon sworn in as a Special Agent and subsequently served for 26 years, with assignments in the Chicago, Newark and Miami Divisions. Bert has the distinction of being the Special Agent who found the 33.1-carat Krupp diamond in a Newark motel room. The diamond had been stolen from socialite Vera Krupp in 1959 in Las Vegas — it had been hidden by the subject in the lining of his jacket and was the same diamond later purchased by Richard Burton as a gift for Elizabeth Taylor.

In 1977, when he reached the age of mandatory retirement (at that time, age 55), Bert reluctantly left the FBI and went to work as director of investigations for Wackenhut Security. He has one daughter, Jodi Sue Glyn, and two grandchildren. He lives in Plantation, FL, and is a member of the Society's Gold Coast Chapter in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

A Postscript

A few days after our last interview, Bert called me to talk about his brother, 2nd Lt. Stanley C. Stickler, who Bert considers to be the true hero of the Stickler family. Stanley was



Bert Stickler and French Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Francis Blandid



Bert's older brother by two years and served as a navigator in the Army Air Force in the Pacific during World War II. According to Bert, Lt. Stickler's wife had given birth to a baby girl in mid-1944 and he was anxious to get home to see his newborn child. Bert recalled that his brother had hoped to move up the date of his leave by volunteering for extra flights. And so, in July 1944, Lt. Stickler offered to take the place of a fellow navigator who was sick. The plane that Bert's brother was in crashed near a Japanese-held island and the entire crew was lost. The airmen were listed as MIA on Aug. 1, 1944, and to date, their remains have not been found.

Thank You for Your Service

On behalf of the Society and its members, we pay tribute to and thank Bert for his many dedicated years of service to our nation and offer our congratulations for his award of the French Legion of Honor, Grade of Chevalier Medal from the French government.

(Gold Coast Chapter President Ben Parkerson and Secretary Jack Williams assisted with this article. FBI historian John Fox provided Stickler's FBI photo.)

