

Percy J. Smeltzer's Lifelong Traits Reflected in World War II Story

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FRANKFORT - Tomorrow (Thursday) is Veterans Day, a time to honor those who have served our country and it seems that every day, week and year, we find out more about those who fought for our freedom. Delta Airlines pilot Ronald Smeltzer, a 1972 Frankfort High School graduate, like a number of family genealogists, has diligently pursued various avenues to locate first hand stories about his father's World War II military career. His father, Percy Joseph Smeltzer was a well respected Benzie County fruit grower, Blaine Township board commissioner, a board member of the State Savings Bank and for many years, the president of the Frankfort Schools Board of Education. In recent years, Ron Smeltzer, who served in the Navy for 30 years, has pieced together a number of interesting anecdotes about his dad's military experience through his research. He has compiled these in a historical document to better understand his father. Some of the information was found after his father passed away in 2004 when the family needed information from the Department of The Army and the Veteran's Administration for post-death dealings with the Social Security Administration and other government entities. As was the case for many WWII-era GIs and officers, most lost their military records in the fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis in

1973. But researchers are finding alternative sources to piece together a family member's military career. For instance, there are alumni associations available and items like The Morning Reports, daily reports turned in by a company the morning after the day of the report. They are the only records that survive down to the company level. The organizational records, which include The Morning Reports were unscathed by the fire. Many soldiers came back home and hid their war records, photos and memorabilia in trunks and the like and really didn't talk much about the World War II. Such was the case with Percy Smeltzer, who was engaged primarily in his fruit growing business and raising a family. About a year before his death, Percy Smeltzer gave his son Ron some of his papers and gave Ron's older sister Lucille, his first-born child with his first wife, Renee Bittenbender, a truck full of items from his military service. A lot of soldiers kept diaries and these have been valuable sources for family researchers. Percy Smeltzer's trunk included a full collection of all his V-Mails, many detailed, to his wife Renee during his World War II tenure. And then there are the first-hand stories. "My dad first told me stuff about his military times beginning when I was four or five years old. I used to spend entire non-school days riding with him from farm to farm (our farms were spread across Benzie and Manistee counties--from Platte Township. to Onekama, so we spent hours together). We would see something that would remind him of some experience, and he would proceed to tell me about the war," Ron relates. " Or, when I was a bit older, I would hear of something (school, or radio...TV was pretty reception-limited to us then) and I would ask him about something. Or, I would be poking around in the attic of the house on Upper Herring and find something related to the war, and I would ask him about it," he adds. "He was not one to readily volunteer anything about the war--you had to pull it out of him," Ron Smeltzer says. He also remembers going with his dad to a movie matinee in Traverse City of "Saving Private Ryan" on an October day. "We were the only ones in the theatre! The movie rather got to him, and he almost cried watching parts of it. It was very uncharacteristic for him. We talked some on the ride back to Blaine Township, but that sort of put the kibash on detail from him after that. It seemed to touch a spot in his heart," Ron mentions. Born on December 28, 1918 in Joyfield Township, Percy Joseph Smeltzer, whose father Percy R. Smeltzer and his brothers owned and operated a significant fruit-growing and packing business in Benzie County and the Smeltzer Brothers' Dairy in Manistee, was educated in Joyfield Township's one-room schoolhouse, and at Benzonia High School, from which he graduated in 1937. . He then attended Michigan State College, graduating in 1942 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Dairy Science. With America at war, Percy enlisted in the U.S. Army and shortly thereafter, some of the officers under whom he served identified him as a prime candidate to attend Officer Candidate School and become a commissioned officer, which he did serving in the European Theatre during World War II. To say Percy Smeltzer's wartime experience was tough is no exaggeration. He—like thousands of other American fighting men—travelled to Great Britain jammed aboard an ocean liner converted to a troop carrier. The men were cramped and many soldiers suffered from seasickness. After stays in England and Scotland, he arrived in France in December, 1944. By the 16th of the month, the first combat he saw was at the infamous Battle of The Bulge. The U.S. ground forces were woefully ill-equipped for winter warfare. Although native to the cold winters of northern Michigan, Percy Smeltzer would tell his family later that December, 1944 was the coldest he had ever been! The Battle of The Bulge decimated his company—he was one of but three officers in the company to survive it. He was promoted from Second Lieutenant directly to the rank of Captain due to the paucity of officers remaining, and he spent the rest of the war at that rank. Following the Battle of the Bulge, Percy's Eighth Armored Division forged eastward across northern Germany. The fighting was continuous and fierce. Percy was running down a street

in a German village one winter's day as a battle raged around him. A German artillery round landed nearby, blowing him off his feet. When he stood up, although uninjured, he found the buttocks of his trousers had been sliced completely away on one side, leaving his backside exposed to the freezing cold. In the late winter of 1945, Captain Smeltzer and a small contingent of enlisted men were assigned the dangerous mission of infiltrating behind the German lines and establishing a communications-relay outpost on a high hillside. For several days, the American band operated clandestinely and successfully—relaying essential information on German forces to elements of the U.S. Third Army. For this action, Percy was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor Device for bravery in the face of extreme danger. The Bronze Star is America's fourth-highest combat award. Percy and the Eighth Armored Division pushed relentlessly eastward throughout the winter and spring of 1945. The war neared culmination in April—that month Percy met what he would later describe as the most ferocious fighting since the Battle of The Bulge. In May came the surrender of the Germans. By this time Percy was in Czechoslovakia. On May 6, 1945, his Eighth Armored Division liberated the town of Pilsen, in western Czechoslovakia. The townspeople of Pilsen celebrate the liberation every five years saluting America's presence. This past year, he received photos from a fellow Delta Air Lines pilot of the 2010 celebration in Pilsen. In June, 1945, as the post-combat chaos that was Central Europe began to become a bit organized, Percy was transferred to the Ninety-Fourth Infantry Division (significant armored infantry not being as necessary in the "nation-building" post-war process). He was made a Company Commander within the 376th Infantry Battalion. About a year before his death in 2004, Percy Smeltzer unveiled to his son papers highlighting an incident with Russian troops later that summer. "These were copies that were held in my dad's personal archives. He kept sort of a "skeleton file" of his military service. These papers have proved to be invaluable to our family as both necessary records to the Government, and--perhaps more importantly--for family "nostalgia". It seems that late in the summer of 1945, the Ninety-Fourth Infantry Division met the Russian Army near the town of Vodnany, in central Czechoslovakia. The Americans held the town, and the Russian line was just to the east of the town. One evening in early September, Percy was in his company's headquarters when an American military policeman (MP) reported that two highly intoxicated Russian officers were in trouble in Vodnany's town square. The Russian officers were being attacked by the Czech townsfolk—the Czechs had an intense national dislike of the Russians, and the two officers, being drunk, were baiting the local Czech citizens. Captain Smeltzer went to the scene and directed that his military police intervene and rescue the Russian officers. Had the American MPs not acted, it seemed likely that the Russian officers would have been badly beaten or even killed by the Czechs. Captain Smeltzer then decided that a contingent of his soldiers, including himself, would escort the Russian officers back to the Russian line. The goodwill gesture of ensuring the Russian's safety would prove to not be reciprocated... Upon reaching the Russian command post, established in a farmhouse near the edge of town, the Russian officers, riding in the back of a one-ton U.S. Army truck, suddenly began shouting to the Russian sentries who guarded the approaches. Smeltzer had with him an American soldier who spoke Russian, and he informed Percy that the Russian officers were calling out that they had been taken prisoner and wanted help from the Russian sentries! The sentries trained several large-caliber weapons on the truck, the U.S. servicemen were pulled from the vehicle, and the Russians demanded that the Americans surrender their weapons. Smeltzer directed that his men resist this, but he and the other Americans were then assaulted and disarmed. The Russians then herded the Americans to the exterior wall of a nearby barn, an equal number of Russian soldiers were assembled in front of the Americans, and the Russian officers put the American men through the manual-of-arms. Just as it seemed that this

extemporaneous firing squad was about to execute the Americans, another Russian soldier excitedly ran to the scene and proclaimed “The General is coming!” A big Russian-flagged car arrived, and a stern-looking Russian general stepped out. Captain Smeltzer commanded his interpreter to “Start talking and don’t stop until you have told all that has happened here!” When this was done, the general asked his men if what the American said was indeed so. The Russians said it was, but that it was all just a big joke. Strangely, for a “joke”, Smeltzer and some of his men were bloodied from the disarmament struggle. Percy Smeltzer carried a scar on the back of one hand for the rest of his life from raising it to protect himself as the Russians were clubbing him with their weapons. The Russian general insisted that everyone go back to the center of the town and have a drink to make up for the incident. Ironically, that was exactly where the intoxicated Russian officers had been found by the American MPs! Percy Smeltzer would forevermore muse about what might have happened had the Russian general not show up. By late 1945 the U.S. presence in Central Europe was in full-fledged drawdown. Smeltzer thus returned to the States, and took employment with a large dairy near Louisville, Kentucky and he, his wife Renee and daughter Lucille lived in the area before returning to Benzie County. County. By then, his father and uncles had sold their dairy in Manistee and were focusing on the fruit production and packing/processing business. So, that line of work became Percy’s life until his death. Percy’s wife, Renee, developed uterine cancer after the family’s move to Michigan. By then a second daughter, Mary Pat, had been born. Renee died while both girls were quite young. Percy eventually met and married Helen Littell, a young woman from Washington, DC whose husband, Captain Charles Littell, had died fighting in the war. Percy adopted Helen’s daughter, Mary, and the couple went on to have four more children between them, Ann, Ron, Sue and Don. Percy Smeltzer likely had many “formative events” during his life. Ron Smeltzer, his son, believes significant defining occurrences for him likely were the death of his mother when he was a little boy; his adolescence experiences during the Great Depression, his military service during World War II, and the death of his first wife, following the war. “These events steered him to become the fine man he was—devoted to his second wife and family, a good businessman, a good citizen. He was forced by the circumstance of his mother’s death to assist in raising his younger brother and sisters. He was forced by the circumstance of The Great Depression to work hard and help scratch out a living for his father’s family in a time of financial distress in America. He was forced by the circumstance of war to heroically lead others in combat. And, he was forced by the circumstance of his wife’s death to rebuild his life and make secure his family. The life of Percy Smeltzer was a life of responsibilities met,” says Ron Smeltzer. Two days after the incident with the Russians in September, 1945, Percy Smeltzer received a commendation from Major General A.J. Barnett stating “the sound judgment, common sense, coolness, patience and tact displayed by you (upon the above occasion) led to the peaceful solution of an extremely critical situation.” Through almost forgotten military records, one realizes the traits that characterized Percy J. Smeltzer’s life before, during and after World War II: those written by a Major General some 65 years ago: sound judgment, common sense, coolness, patience and tact.

<https://www.recordpatriot.com/local-news/article/Percy-J-Smeltzer-s-lifelong-traits-reflected-14307194.php>

Percy J. Smeltzer

Birth 28 Dec 1918
Benzie County, Michigan, USA

Death 28 May 2004 (aged 85)
Frankfort, Benzie County, Michigan, USA

Burial [Blaine Township Cemetery](#)
Benzie County, Michigan, USA

Memorial ID 32664505 · [View Source](#)





<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/32664505/percy-j.-smeltzer>

General Orders Number 46 - 54

Unit	Rank	Last Name	First Name	ASN	Br	Award	GO #	Period	Co	Fr
7-Hq	Capt	Smeltzer	Percy J.	O1016875		Inf	bs	53	20-21 Apr 45	
	Ger	MI								

<http://www.8th-armored.org/rosters/8awards5.htm>

7th Armored Infantry Bn. - Battalion Hq. Roster

Unit	Rank	Last Name	First Name	CIB	CMB	PH	BS	SS	AM	SM
	BC	POW	KIA	DoD						
7-Hq	Capt	Smeltzer	Percy J.	45			53			
			28 May 04							

CIB	Combat Infantry Badge Award
CMB	Combat Medical Badge Award
PH	Purple Heart Medal
BS	Bronze Star Medal
SS	Silver Star Medal
DSC	Distinguished Service Cross
AM	Air Medal
SM	Soldiers Medal

<http://www.8th-armored.org/rosters/7hq-rsta.htm>



Capt. Percy J. Smeltzer - 7th AIB, HQ

http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/7th/7hq_p31.htm



**Capt. Percy J. Smeltzer - 7th AIB, HQ
- receiving the bronze star**

http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/7th/7hq_p32.htm



**Capt. Percy J. Smeltzer - 7th AIB, HQ
- talking to a child (1945)**

http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/7th/7hq_p33.htm



Herzberg Germany shortly after V-E Day.
(Center) Capt. Percy J. Smeltzer
(Left?) Major Harry Craddock
(Right person unknown)
7th AIB, HQ - 8th AD

http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/7th/7hq_p34.htm