

Pluck and penicillin saves WWII soldier

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with the Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

The war ended for Chick Erkoboni in a frozen foxhole near Lemberg, France, 10 miles from the German border, in January, 1945.

After five months of combat with no relief, it was not an enemy bullet that struck him down, but the prolonged exposure to the elements with little or no protection. His frostbitten feet and severe case of trenchfoot were in such bad condition, he spent the next four months in the hospital and came dangerously close to losing them.

Quinto C. Erkoboni was born in the Eldridge Park section of Lawrence on June 6, 1923, and named because he was the fifth child in the family of seven boys and one girl. He attended Eldridge Park School and Trenton junior and senior high schools, and was inducted in to the U.S. Army on April 9, 1943. Originally with the 66th Infantry Division at Camp Robinson, Ark., the Ranger training he received there helped him to survive combat the following year. In July, 1944, he was sent overseas as a replacement and assigned to the 36th "Texas" Infantry Division.

The 36th was known as the "T-Patchers" because of their insignia, an arrowhead with a large T centered on a field of blue. They landed in Algeria in April, 1943, and were held in reserve in the Tunisian Campaign. They were the first American division to land on the European mainland in World War II when they made an amphibious landing at Saler-



Photo by Bill Bretzger

Quinto Erkoboni heads a family that may have the distinction of having the most members in the military from Lawrence.

no, Italy, and spent the next 11 months fighting a bitter campaign north through the Liri Valley, San Pietro, the Rapido River, Cassino, and triumphantly entered Rome in June, 1944. In August they began preparing for a second landing at a destination not yet known.

"After I arrived in Naples," Chick began, "I was sent to Caserta and assigned to Company I, 141st Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division. I was classified as a light truck driver, but did just about everything else the rest of the infantry did. We began training on landing craft and knew that we could be making a landing somewhere soon. On Aug. 13, we boarded ships at Naples and left in a

large convoy to the southern coast of France on the Riviera. The Navy and Air Corps had already bombed and shelled the coast when the first wave went ashore, and our unit was the next as we waded ashore. There was sporadic sniper fire, but otherwise there wasn't much opposition on our beach. As soon as we got organized, we formed a truck convoy and pushed 65 miles in the first few days. Our objective was to cut off the German 19th Army at Montelimar."

The invasion of Southern France was originally to be coordinated with

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Nicholas Loveless

Normandy, but was delayed because the campaign in Italy was behind schedule. The American and Free French Forces moved so fast, that the Germans were caught off balance and the 19th Army quickly collapsed. The 36th reached Grenoble, 200 miles to the north, after only seven days, and by September had reached the Moselle River.

"When we crossed the Moselle," Chick continued, "we were under heavy machine gun fire and lost a lot of men before we made it. After that the word was that we were to take no prisoners, but if we did, we would be responsible for them. I came up on three German soldiers who had taken off their helmets and cartridge belts and threw down their rifles, and yelled 'Kamarad' as they surrendered. If I shot them, to me it would have been cold-blooded murder, so I took them prisoner and marched them to the rear. Our CO chewed me out for bringing them in, and I had to take them further to the rear and in the meantime had to share my rations with them. I made them carry out a wounded GI and told them that if they tried anything they would be shot on the spot, and they understood that perfectly."

"On Oct. 20 we were in the Black

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Quinto C. Erkoboni not only experienced months of constant combat in Europe during World War II, he also faced another potent enemy of the soldier, brutal winter weather. Photo was taken in 1945.

Forest (Vosges) and one of our battalions pushed too far and were surrounded by the Germans for over a week. They were called "The Lost Battalion" and took a beating from the Germans. My battalion was sent in to try to relieve them, and we went in with a full company and only came back with 37 men, the others were killed or taken prisoner. Finally the 442nd Regiment of Japanese-American Nisei were sent in, and they beat the Germans back and saved what was left of the battalion. I fought side-by-side with those men and have a lot of respect for them. They never retreat and use their bayonets in close combat."

Chick's division had been in direct contact with the enemy since the invasion on Aug. 15, and without a break. On Christmas Day they were relieved and authorized to move back from the front lines for a rest, but it didn't last. In conjunction with the Battle of the Bulge, a major German offensive was made at Bitche, France, and the 36th was ordered back into the battle on New Year's Day, 1945.

"We had been living in foxholes in the ice and bitter cold," Chick went on, "when our company was cut off. Our lieutenant told us we might have to surrender and to get rid of any German souvenirs we might be carrying. I had a pistol and a few other things and hid them in some rocks nearby. I kept stumbling and falling and had no feeling in my feet, and when I took my boots off, my feet were all black and blue and the skin was peeling off. They were so swollen I couldn't get the boots back on. My buddy, Herman Zerger, helped get me to the medics, and the CO signed a slip for me to leave with the last jeep that was taking a wounded man to the rear. They treated me at a field hospital and then sent me to the 21st General Hospital in France. The day after I left the line, Zerger and a lot of others were taken prisoner."

"Me feet weren't getting any better

in the hospital and gangrene had set in. One day five officers came in and told me I was going to England to have my feet amputated, but first they wanted to try something new. They had some salve that they had just received, and put some on one of my feet to test it. The next day the foot looked a little better, so they put it on the other foot, and they both started to get better, but it took four months altogether before I was released from the hospital. I was the guinea pig that first used penicillin salve, and thank goodness, it worked."

Chick was reassigned to the Signal Corps to keep him off his feet, and returned to the U.S. for discharge on Jan. 26, 1946. Although he had been hit by shrapnel in one finger earlier in the war, his records were lost, and he never received the Purple Heart. In spite of that, he feels very fortunate to have made it out at all.

He returned to Lawrence and he and his wife, Grace, have lived at 771 Bunker Hill Ave. for the past 35 years. They have two sons, David and Richard and four grandchildren. He and his brother Vito have been proprietors of Cedar Motors in Trenton since 1949, and several years ago turned the business over to two of their sons to operate. He is a long-time member of American Legion Post 414, the 36th Division Associa-

tion and the N.J. Chapter of Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge.

The Erkoboni family may very well have the distinction of having the most family members in the military from Lawrence. Chick, Virino and Vito were in the Army during World War II; Nello, Ralph and Richard were in the Army during the Korean Conflict; Daniel had been inducted and then told he was not needed as the war ended; and David served in the National Guard. Their sister, Ida Kavchak, is the only non-veteran, but has always supported veteran activities.

The Erkobonis have made an outstanding contribution to the Armed Forces and to their community. Chick has problems with his feet at times, but will always be grateful for the miracle of penicillin for saving them when hope was almost given up.

The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Fami-

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photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All materials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.