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Soldier saved doughboy from peril

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Somewhere in France, a trench turned into a tomb for an American soldier.

An artillery shell caved in the muddy wall, burying the World War I doughboy. Cpl. John "Jack" Blazosky, who was nearby, pulled out his mess kit.

He started digging.

Using the lid, Blazosky freed the man, Jimmy Halderman, who later became a minister. At a reunion long after that fall day in 1918, Halderman vowed to do anything for Blazosky as long as they lived.

So went the story told to Blazosky's son.

John Blazosky, 79, grew up on a Worth Township farm listening to tales from his namesake, who fought with the 314th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division, during the famous Meuse Argonne Offensive.

"We'd be working and he'd tell me something during a rest," Blazosky said.

The boy remembered, but until recently, kept the accounts to himself. Then, his sister's son-in-law, a military commander, was asked to speak at a Memorial Day ceremony at the regimental memorial site at Valley Forge. Blazosky agreed to send details about his father's service.

In his Ferguson Township home, an old, tin mess kit contained medals, a draft card and dog tags. There was also a worn, brown diary carried into battle, its faded entries recalling the stories all over again.

Blazosky is unable to attend the Valley Forge ceremony. But today, he nonetheless will think of the coal miner's son who lived when thousands of others perished.

"It was kill or be killed," Blazosky said.

The American Expeditionary Force's biggest operation, lasting six weeks, Meuse Argonne claimed 26,277 Americans from late September to the war's end on Nov. 11, 1918. No division lost more men than the 79th.

Into the front lines with Company L went Jack Blazosky. Once in the Argonne Forest's blasted fields and trenches, the 30-year-old miner and expert marksman from Philipsburg needed all his skill with a Springfield rifle.

"They'd be fighting, and one time, he remembered, there were five days when they didn't get any food or water. It was too intense, and they couldn't get them up to the lines," his son said.

One time, during a lull in the shelling, he and his squadmates charged over a hill. Their guns became so hot, they couldn't touch the metal parts.

But when a German biplane sprayed his trench with a machine gun, Jack Blazosky held his fire to avoid revealing his position.

He also didn't shoot when he encountered two possible relatives. The enemy soldiers, it turned out, came from where the American's parents had emigrated.

"He heard them talking to each other, and here they were talking in the language that he had in his home," John Blazosky said.

They had been conscripted, they told the doughboy, who let one bring back other Austrians who wanted to surrender. When bunches returned, Jack Blazosky lined up rows, a white flag at each end, and sent one at a time back to headquarters.

A runner brought a note from the captain. How did the corporal take so many prisoners? The reply: It wasn't their war.

And then, on Sept. 30, it wasn't Blazosky's either.

Artillery hit him in the hip. Before he could arrive at one first-aid station, it was bombed. He went to a Vichy hospital by train, survived a bout of diphtheria and came home on a battleship.

Tired and hungry, he arrived in Philipsburg in the middle of the night. His parents and sister, who had received a telegram stating he was missing in action, were overjoyed. His father shook so hard he had to place the oil lamp on the floor. Nobody slept a wink.

Jack Blazosky died in 1964 with shell fragments still inside him. But he didn't carry his memories to the grave, and his son now honors those memories.

The old soldier also had some advice when the Navy drafted his boy in 1944, John Blazosky said.

"My dad always said, 'Don't volunteer for anything. I want you to come back alive.' "

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