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King High Remembers

The Story of James Dudek

“My whole world changed, I didn't know what i was going to do.” James Dudek served his country for three years in World War II. Dudek has experienced things that many wouldn't dream of, but being a part of a tragic war didn't seem to affect him in any way. Although he was going through a tough time, he still managed to keep his head held high and never gave up hope. Being the strong man he is, he managed to live through this experience shaping the sweet kind person he is today. On the contrary, born in April 6, 1924; little did he know that by the age of 19 his world would be changed forever.

James (Jim) Dudek was born to Netti and Edward Dudek, in Wausau, Wisconsin. His family consisted of an older and younger brother, making him the second son, and three sisters. After two years living in Wausau, Wisconsin the Dudek family decided to move to Racine, Wisconsin due to the fact that it was his mother's hometown. Edward Dudek was employed by the J.I case company as a production worker where he operated, and produced parts used in the assembly of farm equipment.

Getting ready to graduate from his senior year at William Horlick High School in Racine Wisconsin, news of the Pearl Harbor spread. His parents had accepted the idea of war but were very concerned about their three sons being drafted into the service. By the time that Dudek had graduated from his senior year in January 1942, he went to

work after his 18th birthday. Working with his father with the same company making artillery guns wasn't enough for him. His older brother and a friend decided to join the Navy as Navy pilots. As plans failed, they had no other choice but to join the Army Air Corps. By the time that they arrived the Army Air Corps recruiting office had closed enlistment. Nothing seemed to go as planned, so it was decided that Dudek would wait until drafted which happened in April of 1943.

Taken into the Army in April, 1943 at the Fort Sheridan, Illinois induction center; they were all put in trains to end up in Riverside, California to a basic training center at Camp Hahn right outside the city. Having 12 weeks of basic training, 6 more weeks were added at Fort Erwin out on the Mojave Desert for training. All the training done in the desert was his worst experience there. The heat was horrible and they were required to go out on maneuvers everyday with their full packs and limited water supply during artillery exercises. About the time that those 6 weeks of training were over, around September, 1943 his unit returned to Camp Hahn for rest and relaxation. He received a furlough in October that same year to return to Wisconsin which was enjoying a beautiful Indian summer; also a huge relief from the 100 degree + heat.

During this artillery training at camp the he met a young lady by the name of Rachel on December 20th. The two met while he was was on leave and attending a gathering at the First Baptist Church of Riverside that she helped host. Gradually, after leaving camp Hahn Dudek began receiving letters from Rachel that were more like books than letters. The two became instant correspondents, but Dudek always feared that because he was going to be so far from Riverside, she will forget all about him.

Prior to departing from Riverside, Dudek was transferred to the Army Air Corps and stationed at Ontario Air Force base (now Ontario Airport) in California only to receive a notice after a month of waiting for pre-pilot training that there were too many pilots and navigators and the Army needed infantrymen.

Dudek was then transferred into the infantry located at the Presidio at Monterey, California where they formed a new infantry- training unit. After the regiment was complete to go to Medford, Oregon, they were all put on a train for Camp Phillips, Kansas where he received a crash course in infantry training during the spring of 1944. Upon completion of training, Dudek was assigned to an infantry replacement regiment at fort DIX, N.J. The unit boarded a “luxury” ocean Liner and landed in Scotland which would then later be moving to Southern England by train.

Upon arriving at the replacement depot, he voluntarily joined the 101st ARB Div. Dudek was assigned to an 81 mm mortar platoon, 2nd Battalion, in the 501 PIR (Parachute Infantry Regiment). He had three practice jumps before a call came to jump into Holland on September 17, 1944. 501 PIR landed 35 miles beyond the line where the enemy was not in sight. The Dutch people were so happy that freedom had arrived, they welcomed paratroopers with open arms and provided them with Milk and fruits from their orchards. As happy as they were they even set up a parade for them. As they walked to the center of the town of Vechel, Holland the people would be cheering them on as they set up for the infantry platoons on the outskirts of the city.

Two days later when everything seemed calm, the Germans had regrouped and they started throwing shells into the city. Immediately they were told to dig foxholes and

be ready to move out. They were then moved out to a perimeter around the city to repel the Germans as they came toward our positions. They were waiting for ground forces from Eindhoven that were breaking through and following the road "The Highway Hell." After four to five days the U.S. tanks had reached his unit; it was a relief for them. They started heading off to the Rhine River. Their goal was to capture the bridges along and across the river. It was an extremely big operation for them. Most of the British paratroopers who had landed on the German side of the Rhine River had become prisoners of war because the U.S. ground forces did not arrive at the appointed time.

After three months being at war with Germany, Dudek's division were told that they were all in need of a break from fighting. In December 1944, they were sent to Camp Mourmelon, 20 miles south of Rheims, France for a one month rest. Dudek got a pass to go to Paris for a leave of three days. He concentrated on sightseeing due to the fact that he is a dedicated Christian and wanted to stay clean for Rachel because he knew he wanted to marry her once he came home. To make his dream come true he proposed to her in one of the letters, which she said yes. Three weeks earlier than expected, they were called back into action because the Germans had broken in the Ardennes Mountains. All the men were then put in trucks and sent to Bastogne.

Always being afraid that one of the enemy machine gunners were going to hit him and take him out, once back in the battle field. Once news reached that the Germans had surrendered and war was over, Dudek was released to go back home. During his war experience, he witnessed his initial death of a buddy that he can never forget. He was walking along the road, when he passed the radio operator in a kneeling

position, he noticed that there was a hole in his head from a direct hit by a German gun. He refers this incident as his "Baptism of Fire."

After being relieved from action his unit was sent to France to wait for deporting to the states. during this time he was attending a university established in France for all the soldiers who wished to increase their education. He was able to finish three college courses at Biarritz Army University in Biarritz, France. January, 1946 was time to go home, His ride over the stormy North Atlantic Ocean took him 14 days. Dude was discharged from the army January 31, 1946 at Fort Sheridan, IL. James and Rachel were then married on March 12, 1946. Dudek attended Westmont College in Santa Barbara one year, then transferred to UC Berkeley graduating in September 1950. They had three children, two sons and one daughter. His son Dennis, who only got 22 precious months in 1948; second son Jed, who was born November 28, 1950; and his daughter Joan, who was born June 16, 1954. Dudek is now happy and healthy as can be.

Many people can't say that they have experienced what James Dudek had to go through at such a young age. His overall experience from his time in the military was that he had to do what had to be done. He sure is one strong man that many people appreciate. Although he thinks otherwise, He is a hero to not only America but also to his family. His story will never be forgotten and he will always be honored.