

THE Heroes

Technician Fifth Grade ROBERT D. MAXWELL

COURAGE, like everything else, has its kinds and degrees. No one would detract a hair's weight from the bravery of the firing line, but in battle there is the heartening touch of a comrade's shoulder, the excitement of the charge, and the 50-50 chance of coming out alive. All these aids are lacking in those epic instances where men make death a deliberate choice, well knowing in the split second of decision that they are saying goodbye to life.

Take for example the men who stay at their posts below deck, fighting to keep a blazing ship afloat, electing to die in the flames so that their fellows may escape; or the wounded submarine commander, who knows that his rescue may mean the loss of boat and crew, and gives the order, "Take her down," while he himself stays topside. The records of the armed forces are thick with such cases of devoted sacrifice.

Of the many, however, one that stands out for sheer drama and sustained fortitude is that of Technician Fifth Grade Robert D. Maxwell, who covered a German hand grenade with his body, smothering the explosion that would have killed every member of his group. Three states have a right to claim this heroic youngster, for while born in Boise, Idaho, he made his home with a grandmother near Cottage Grove, Oregon, and at the time of his induction into the Army, was a timber worker in Larimer County, Colorado.

A communications platoon lineman with the 7th Regiment of the Third Infantry Division, 24-year-old Bob Maxwell first showed the stuff of which he was made in the Italian campaign. Once he stayed on a vital job of wire repairing for three hours under heavy shellfire, refusing to quit even when shrapnel tore great gashes in both legs. For this he was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart, the citation praising him for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

What happened in France, therefore, came as no surprise either to his officers or his comrades. The scene was on the outskirts of Besançon, and the time, September, 1944. With the Third Infantry Division advancing on the town, the battalion commander and his staff occupied a suburban villa as an observation post, while young Maxwell and three others had their station in a small front courtyard, watching the wires. Suddenly a German platoon, having managed to infiltrate through the battalion's forward companies, popped up out of a draw some fifteen yards away and let loose with a hail of machine-gun fire.

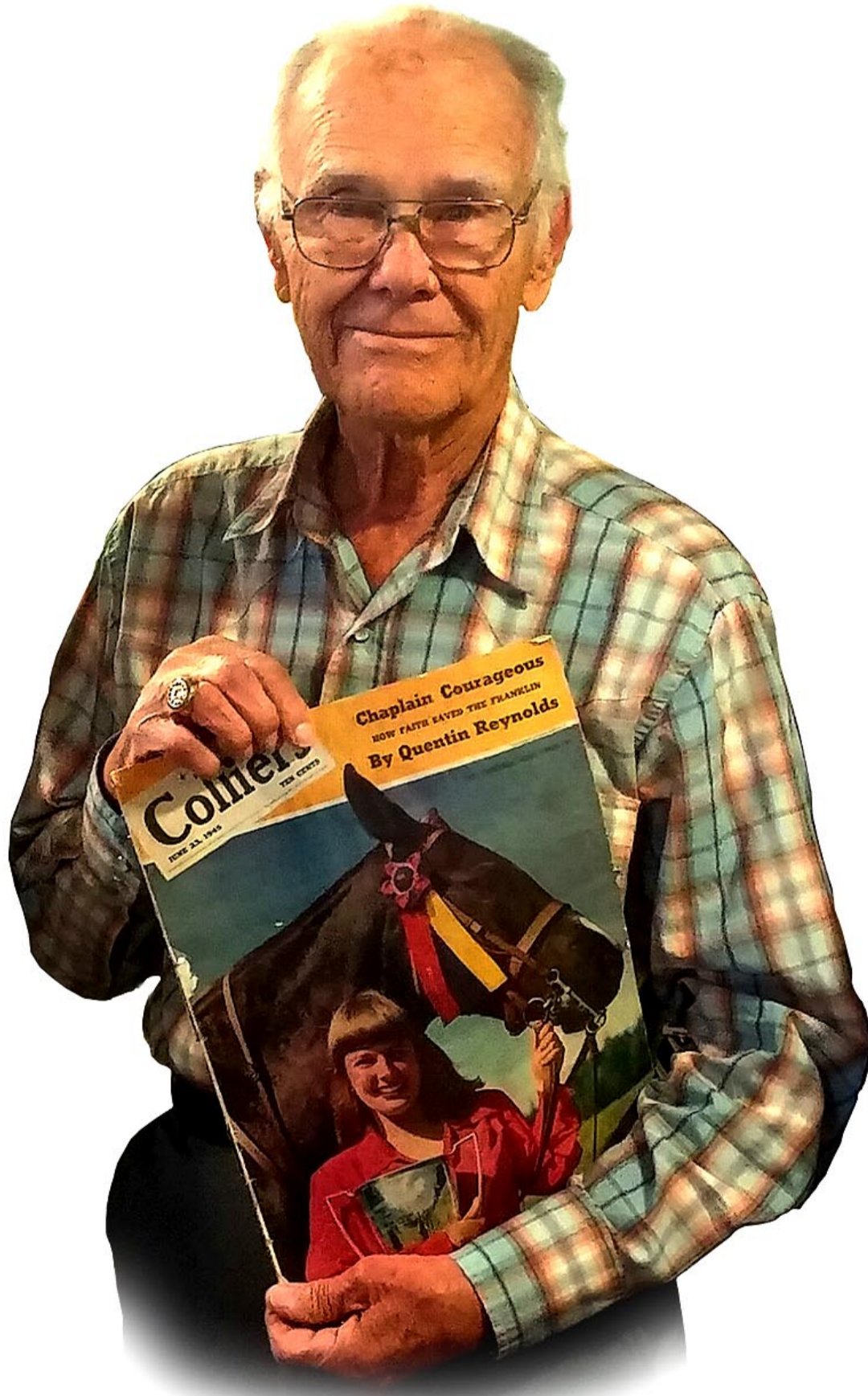
Bob Maxwell and his three buddies were armed only with .45-caliber automatic pistols, but all agreed that the thing to do was to stand off the Germans until the observation post could be evacuated. A low wall, topped with chicken wire, afforded a measure of protection, and from behind this barricade the quartet started to fight a delaying action. At that, every shot meant that a head had to be raised up above the shelter of the wall, a

target for the Germans. By some miracle, however, the four went unwounded, and their unerring marksmanship picked off the enemy in such numbers that they did not dare risk a charge. Greatest luck of all, the blessed chicken wire caught the rain of hand grenades and bounced them back.

"Maxwell's courage was what held us together," reports Technician Fourth Grade Cyril F. McColl of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "The machine-gun fire was just clearing his head, but he sat there taking pot shots at everything that moved. Our wall was beginning to crumble, and I was thinking how nice it would be to get out of there, when a grenade came over the chicken wire, and hit the cement floor right at our feet.

"We were all jammed together in a bunch, and it sure looked as though our numbers were up. And then Maxwell, quick as lightning, made a lunge, throwing himself right on top of the grenade. A second later came the explosion, but Bob's body smothered it, and while the rest of us were blown off our feet, we got up without a scratch. We started to pick him up and beat it, but he made us leave him and keep on fighting. Only when the battalion commander and his staff had moved out of the house would he let us hustle him back to an aid station."

The surgeons saved his life, although still wondering how they did it, and at this writing Technician Fifth Grade Robert D. Maxwell is back in the United States, undergoing treatment that may save him from being permanently maimed. And when his tortured body mends sufficiently, representatives of the War Department will present him with the Medal of Honor to place beside his Silver Star and Purple Heart. There was no waiting, however, on the part of the Third Infantry Division for, as it swept on across France into Germany, each successive victory was dedicated to Bob Maxwell. . . . GEORGE CREEL



During the Winter of 2014, surrounded by the admiring veterans of Bend, Oregon, former Tech-Corporal 5th Grade Robert Maxwell was reunited with the 1945 issue of Collier's in which this article first appeared.

OldMagazineArticles.com was very grateful to have played a small part in the honoring of this unique American.