

# Allan P. Atwell

## A Hero For Our Country and Our Community

By Jenna Caputo  
Photos by Angela Mia Photography



JONESVILLE  
FIRE DISTRICT  
STATION 1

Allan P. Atwell grew up in Breesport, NY—a very small town 10 miles from Elmira. The whole town consisted of two stores, two churches, one Chevy dealer, one Masonic lodge, and a small school with two grades in one classroom. It was up to the older kids to help the younger ones while the teacher concentrated on those who were struggling the most. He enjoyed the typical life of a teenager in the late 1930s, but on December 7, 1941, everything changed.

Hearing the news about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor while listening to the radio in the living room, Allan knew that his life had changed at that moment. Two out of the eight boys in his class quit school instantly to join the fight, but Allan was only 16 and had to wait. Despite the change in the country, he went back to school and back to admiring Vera Allen, the girl from Erin that always got off the bus with her friend, Neva Campbell, at the General Store. Finally, he got up the courage to ask her to the school dance. “But she replied, ‘I already have a date. Why don’t you ask Neva?’ How do you not ask when the girl is standing right in front of you?” he says. He asked. She accepted. And they ended up together for 73 years.

The day after his 18th birthday, Allan went to the recruiting offices, trying to enlist, but for some reason, they weren’t taking anyone and suggested he go to the Draft Board to volunteer. That worked, and within a week he received his notice. While stationed in Mississippi, he learned they were being sent as backup to the beaches of Normandy after the first wave had suffered severe casualties. D-Day had begun. On September 1, 1944, they landed on the shores of Normandy. Ordered back to headquarters, he and another soldier hiked behind the lines over open fields when an 88-shell lit across the fields—one in front and one behind them. The two men ran as fast as they could, zigzagging to avoid any other shots and made it!

While stationed in Hurtgen Forest, they experienced the worst cold in decades, and many got severe frostbite—including Allan. “We were told to change our socks daily, but if you only had one pair, that is what you wore. I lost the feeling in both feet. At the aid station, I was sent to a



hospital. There you lay on a cot with your bare feet sticking out. Each morning a doctor walked by. If they turned black, they cut them off. I was ordered to a room one day. I was sure it was a seminar of doctors discussing frost bite. They helped me stand on a table and stuck a needle in my toes to show I had no feeling. 'Ok, Atwell, you are dismissed.' Once your circulatory system is disrupted, there is no cure or treatment. I did not lose any toes but sleep the year around with my feet sticking out from the covers. You don't want anything over them."

After lying in the hospital listening to the Buzz Bombs fly overhead on their way to London, Allan made it to Neufchâteau in December for the Battle of the Bulge, where he became a Military Policeman

and saluted General George S. Patton as he rode by with his ivory pistols.

In celebration of V-E Day, Allan had a leave pass to visit home for three days. He was back in Elmira when V-J Day hit, and celebration took to the streets as everyone cheered the end of the war. Discharged soon after, he married Neva and had five children—Jerrold, now a Flight Safety and Flight Instructor; Alane, working in Compassionate Home Healthcare; Barbara, a Volunteer and Retired Radiographer; Jeffrey, ASCO, resurfacing/powder coating metal structures and items; and Jonathan, Retired UPS and now delivering for Fleurtaicious Designs, a florist based in Latham. After the war, Allan went to work for the NY Telephone Company and was transferred to the



Capital District and never left. Neva passed away in her sleep in 2019.

In addition to his work with the phone company, Allan became a charter member of the Breesport Fire Department, serving as President, Fire Chief, and Building Chairman to build their first firehouse. He was a member there for 25 years and has since been a member of the Jonesville Fire Department for 50 years. This passion ended up in a collection of model fire trucks over the years. "As an instructor in the phone training center, when I introduced myself to the class, I would mention that I was a volunteer fireman. In the early 1970s, a student said he was also and brought in a picture of his truck collection. That struck a nerve and I started collecting. I traded with other collectors from Japan, England, Germany, Ireland, plus a few others. I counted over 2,000 trucks from 24 different countries." The oldest is a set of cast-iron horse-drawn fire carriages from Ontario and the smallest is the size of a jellybean! Allan plans to donate his collection to the future Town of Clifton Park Museum that will be located in a restored grange building.

Allan is also an active volunteer and is the Chairman of Emergency Services





Advisory Board of Clifton Park; VP of Chapter 49 Battle of Bulge; VP of the Jonesville Cemetery Association; Board of Directors for Jonesville Fire Department; Chaplain of Clifton Park/Halfmoon VFW Post 1498; Member of the Clifton Park Elks Club and the American Legion; Member of ON DA WA Lodge #820, Chairman of a veterans' breakfast service every Tuesday; Member of the Shenendehowa Methodist Church; Member of the Northland Toy Club, and Director at Patriot Flight, Inc.

Patriot Flight, Inc. is a non-profit organization that is the official representative of the National Honor Flight Network for the seven-county NY State Capital area. Their mission is to send veterans to Washington, DC at no expense to them to see the various veteran monuments dedicated in their honor. Patriot Flight's staff for each trip also includes medical staff and professional photographers to document the day and post for all to see on the web.

Allan loves to travel. His favorite trip so far was an inland tour of Alaska. But in December of 2020, Allan went back to Luxembourg for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge. Many veterans of the battle were invited to return with their chaperones for a five-day excursion that consisted of multiple ceremonies with high-ranking officials. Allan says it was strange to be back there but fulfilling. "I met the heads of state of France, Belgium, and Luxemburg. One day I left the group and returned to Neufchâteau where I had been stationed in December of 1944. There I was made an Honorary Citizen, and they were having a marathon race in two weeks in my name. I felt very humbled and presented them with a 48-star flag." During this trip, he also met the granddaughter of General Patton and visited the Luxembourg American Cemetery and Memorial in Hamm, where 5,073 Americans are buried on the 50-acre site, including General Patton himself. They also passed by the very spot at the crossroads where Allan had seen Patton pass by all those years ago.

Allan is enjoying his volunteer work and is passionate about spreading the good deeds of his various organizations like the Elks and Patriot Flight. He can often be found out and about in the community still being the hero that he is!

*For more information about Patriot Flight, visit [Patriotflight.org](http://Patriotflight.org).*



# War Memories, As Told By Allan P. Atwell

When my folks left me at the train station, it was the only time I ever saw my dad cry. I reported first to Camp Upton on Long Island and then to Camp Croft, SC for my Basic Training. In talking with fellows since who live nearby, the area has been turned into a housing development. At that time, I weighed only 155 lbs. During hand-to-hand combat training, I was paired with a 200 lb. opponent. In practicing hip throws, you would stiffen your body when stretched over your opponent's hip. He did not throw me, but I felt something pop in my lower stomach. I suffered an inguinal hernia on the left side. This happened mid-way during the 17-week training and was quite difficult at times—especially during the 25-mile hike with full gear. They operated in the base hospital with no ill effects since.

From there I reported to Camp Van Dom, MS for further training. I remember being on the rifle range when word spread that troops had stormed the beaches of France, June 6<sup>th</sup>. When word was received that we were on our way, our 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. knew he was going to be seasick. They carried him aboard, he never left his bunk, and was carried ashore. I was lucky to be assigned to the French Liner, Mauritania. It was next to the Queen Mary, both in size and speed. Upon climbing aboard, I wondered why 55-gallon barrels were located at all the stairways. After only a short time at sea, the barrels became very handy for those with seasickness. Having taken several cruises and looking back now, I was fortunate to have been assigned to what must have been the bar lounge on the top deck. I have never forgotten those poor souls assigned to decks below the water line. Being so fast, we sailed alone instead of in a convoy. One dark night, we heard this announcement: "This is the Captain speaking. We have made contact with several submarines and are taking evasive action." Following that, you could feel the ship going one direction and then another. Some of the boys got their beads out and started mumbling while the rest of us started praying. Thank God none found us because it would have been a long walk home.

We landed on the west coast of England at night in a rainstorm. Boarded a train and crossed the country, arriving on the east coast by morning. Went aboard a ship that took us near the coast of France. We climbed down landing nets, jumping into LCI's when the waves raised them up the highest. I walked ashore on Omaha Beach on Labor Day. There was still a lot of damaged equipment everywhere. As a replacement, I worked my way through many depots towards the front. I noticed elements of the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne as we moved forward. Riding in the back of a 2 1/2, I hollered, "Hi, Bob." Back came the reply, "Hi Al." Robert Campbell, he was to become my future brother-in-law but neither of us knew it at the time. I tried to get permission to go back and see him, but it wasn't granted.

Nearing the front, I was assigned to a rifle company of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division. It had been a National Guard Division from PA before being federalized. Thank God the sector was quiet, but looking out over no man's land at night gave your imagination a lot to work with. One day, another fellow and I were ordered to report back to Battalion Headquarters. It was a hot, sunny day with us walking across this large open field when an 88mm artillery shell burst some distance ahead of us. It had missed us, and we thought nothing more until another shell burst behind us. If you have ever seen cartoon characters with little legs running that was somewhat how we may have looked. First this way and then that. Whatever, that third round never came obviously because you're reading this.

At this point, I was assigned to help guard the Division Finance Office. Sitting around a German bunker one dark night, the fellows were telling where they were from. Come my turn, I said, "New York." Someone asked, "What borough?" I replied, "Not the city but upstate." The questioner from the darkness, "Where?" I replied, "Elmira." The questioner was persistent, "Where?" "Well, not really Elmira," I replied, "but a little spot called Breesport." "Well, where in Breesport?" He turned out to be Fred Allen—Vera Allen's brother, the girl who had introduced me to

my wife. Thousands of miles from home—when you run across someone who lives four miles from you—strange.

In November, winter settled in with lots of snow, mud, and freezing temperatures. During the battle of the Hurtgen Forrest, I lived outside in whatever shelter we could make. Days on end, my feet were wet with freezing temperatures at night. I came down with Frost Bite or Trench Foot. My feet were numb with no feeling in them. The sector was quiet, so I reported to an Aid station. I was taken to a field hospital where I laid on a cot with my feet sticking out from under a blanket. If they turned black, they were amputated. There was no treatment to be had. One day, I was ordered to this room filled with many people. I was helped to stand on a table where a doctor took a sharp needle and stuck it into my toes to show I had lost the feeling in them. Looking back now, I wonder if that may have been a seminar of doctors looking into this problem. During this period, the Germans were sending Buzz Bombs towards England. There was little control except they were headed west. They would sputter, leaving a long trail of sparks. We were just interested that they kept going.

Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>—Battle of the Bulge. The hospital was emptied of all who could walk. I was headed towards Bastogne as a rifleman replacement when asked if I would be interested in becoming a Military Policeman. I made a quick decision and became one on the spot. Saluted General Patton one day as he rode by in his sheepskin jacket and ivory pistols. V-E Day came along shortly afterwards with a welcome trip home. I happened to be on leave when V-J Day was announced. What a wild town Elmira was that night. Thank God! I have read since that our division would have been in the third wave assaulting the shores of Japan. They were well fortified and would have fought to the last person.

The war was over, and we were mustered out in short order. I had been in the States just about one year total and overseas one year.

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