

# Norm Neitzke 'Takes Five'

## World War II veteran revisits stories told in 'Band of Brothers'

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Norm Neitzke is a brother in a celebrated band of brothers. A member of Easy Company in the Army's 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne, Neitzke's unit was featured in the Stephen Ambrose bestseller "Band of Brothers," which was turned into a popular HBO series. Neitzke, 80, was a replacement sent to fill out the unit, which suffered losses in the D-Day invasion and Battle of the Bulge, joining the company in February 1945. He's mentioned on Page 261 of the book in a passage where he and other soldiers decide to take a German ambulance, and he appears twice in the HBO series. After returning home from the war, he became a father of three, a grandfather of nine and an insurance salesman. He still sells insurance part time. The Menomonee Falls man will appear at North Shore Bank's new branch in Sussex from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday to talk about his World War II experiences. Neitzke talked to Journal Sentinel reporter Meg Jones a few days before Veterans Day.

### Q. What did you think of the book and series "Band of Brothers"?

A. I thought it was very realistic. There were a few exaggerations, but I think it was a true documentary and Stephen Ambrose did a really good job. There were a couple things, like when the Germans were surrendering in the movie. Actually, the Germans were going from east to west to get away from the Russians, and we were going west to east. The Germans were on the other side of the boulevard, and we were on one side, but in the movie, they showed them going down the middle of the boulevard. It didn't happen that way.

### Q. One of the more poignant scenes in the book and series is when your unit enters a German concentration camp. What are your memories of the camp?

A. One of the duties was to pick up food for the concentration camp victims. We found out later we were doing the wrong thing because they would eat themselves to death. We had these big wheels of cheese almost as big as a tire. So we had to take it away right after giving it to them. It kind of made you think why I went to fight. We said, "Now we know," after seeing the concentration camp victims. It was something we did not like to see. We got stories from the free French people and the Dutch people. It was sure a terrible thing the Germans were doing. It's kind of ironic, because my background is German. My grandparents came over from Germany.

### Q. Did you have any idea when you were going through the war that one day your unit would become famous?

A. No, we didn't. We always felt there were a lot of other good units we met up with. There are about 100 infantry companies, and all of them were very good. It just so happened we were one of the units that Stephen Ambrose wrote about.

### Q. Did you talk much about your experiences after the war, or did it take awhile for you to open up about what you did and saw?

A. I didn't really talk much about it. Everyone wanted to know where I was. Now we get together once a year and talk amongst ourselves, and with the "Band of Brothers" on TV, there's a lot of talk about it. I want to tell my story now to kids.

### Q. Were you scared when you joined Easy Company, not knowing what battle would be like?

A. The first couple of days, not knowing what to expect, we took a long train ride from Le Havre (in Normandy.) We got about 4 miles from the fighting, and then we had to sleep over in a schoolhouse. We couldn't bring the trucks up, because the Germans had really big guns and they would hear the trucks and fire at us. We marched up to the front line, and, of course, as replacements, we wanted to know what to expect. The Germans fired rounds over your head. It made you awfully scared. One night, I was on guard duty in a house, I heard rainwater on the roof, and then I heard some other noises. I gave the password that was supposed to come back to me, and it didn't come back to me. I thought, "Oh, no. Do I shoot these guys?" Fortunately, one of the guys fell into a hole and he came out cussing in English, so it was a pretty good indication of who I was facing.

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