



PFC DONALD NEAL HELSEL

April 23, 1925 – Chicago Heights, Illinois

Company C, 67th Armored Infantry Battalion · 13th Armored Division
United States Army · 1943 – 1946



CHICAGO HEIGHTS

Donald Neal Helsel was born on April 23, 1925, and grew up at 1611 Chicago Road in Chicago Heights, Illinois — the house whose two-car garage would one day hold the beginnings of the family business. He went to Bloom Township High School, where the yearbooks of 1941, 1942, and 1943 carry his name, and where he studied the technical course: metal shop, mechanical drawing, shop science, aviation mathematics. Five days after his eighteenth birthday he registered for the draft, still a student. He never got a senior year. On July 19, 1943, three months out of the eleventh grade, the Army called him to Camp Grant, and he answered.

WATCHING THE SKIES

The Army first made him an Intelligence Observer in an antiaircraft artillery battalion — the man in the headquarters section who watched the sky, told friendly aircraft from enemy by silhouette and sound, and decided whether the guns should fire. He drafted map grids and laid contour lines. But by 1944 the Luftwaffe was broken, and America needed riflemen more than it needed watchers of empty skies. The Army retrained him as a light machine gunner and sent him to Camp Bowie, Texas, where he joined Company C of the 67th Armored Infantry Battalion, 13th Armored Division — the Black Cats. He would fight the war from a half-track, behind a .30-caliber Browning.

OVER THERE

On the night of January 17, 1945, the battalion left Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and boarded the SS Marine Dragon. Eleven days across the winter Atlantic, and on January 29 — four days after the Battle of the Bulge ended — Donald stepped ashore at Le Havre, France. He was nineteen. That spring, in the last great reorganization before battle, his company was attached to the 46th Tank Battalion as the infantry of Task Force Delnore, Combat Command A. Roughly two hundred and thirty men, riding with the tanks.

THE RUHR

On April 10, 1945, at dawn and without artillery preparation, Task Force Delnore crossed the Sieg River at Hennef into the Ruhr Pocket, where more than three hundred thousand German soldiers stood encircled. German 88s destroyed the two lead tanks in the first hours; his company's Lieutenant Bukowski fell wounded that first day. Two days later the task force overran an Allied prisoner-of-war camp and set free some 1,400 men — about two hundred of them Americans. On April 17 his own company, moving as Task Force Fifield under the battalion's reconnaissance screen, captured a German corps headquarters at Mudlinghoven: two major generals, their staffs, six hundred prisoners. In eight days of fighting the pocket collapsed, and Donald's company counted its prisoners by the hundred.

THE DANUBE, THE INN, AND HITLER'S BIRTHPLACE

The division then marched three hundred miles south to Bavaria — Donald turned twenty in a bivouac near Nuremberg on April 23 — and was thrown across the Danube under General Patton's Third Army. The Isar, then a sixty-five-mile dash to the Inn River, every bridge blown. On May 2, 1945, across the water from his company's positions, the town of Braunau am Inn — the birthplace of Adolf Hitler — surrendered. That night, Company C of the 67th Armored Infantry Battalion was sent across into Braunau to hold the bridgehead. Five days later the war in Europe was over. In the fields southwest of that town, fifteen thousand liberated Allied prisoners waited for the food and medicine his division brought them.

HOME

He sailed home in July 1945 and trained at Camp Cooke, California, for the invasion of Japan — an invasion that, mercifully, never came. Discharged at Camp Grant on February 13, 1946, he carried the European–African–Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with two battle stars, the American Campaign Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, and the World War II Victory Medal. Under “wounds received in action,” his discharge reads: None. Through the Sieg, the Ruhr, the Danube, and the Inn, he came through untouched.

Four months later, in the garage behind the house on Chicago Road, Donald Helsel, Richard Helsel, and Clarence “Jep” Jepperson — three veterans home from the war — founded Helsel-Jepperson Electrical. The family always said Papa Don served with an elite unit. The records say this: his two-hundred-man company crossed a river under fire, freed fourteen hundred Allied prisoners, captured two German generals, and walked into Hitler's birthplace the night it fell — then came home and built something that lasted even longer.

