



# LIVING LEGACY



THOMAS J.  
VAPNER

Born: December 5, 1918  
World War II  
Army  
Served: 1942-1945



Thomas Joseph Vapner was born in Benwood, WV on December 5, 1918 as the second of four children and as the eldest of two sons to Peter and Madelyn Vapner. He had a younger brother, Albert and two sisters: Barbara and Olga. Tom grew up on Boggs Run and enjoyed summers playing softball with his friends. One of his best friends was Vincent Palossi. Tom and Vince played softball all summer long. Tom earned the nickname “Tister” from playing softball and trying to hit the fast twisting pitch of a friend. Tom was a huge Pittsburgh Pirates fan and remains committed to his team to this very day.

Tom saw many events occur in his Boggs Run-Benwood community. “I witnessed the building of the Bellaire Bridge in 1926. I was also walking with a friend, Ernest Eros, on April 28, 1924, when his brother Lou came to tell us the coal mine of the Wheeling Steel Corporation’s mill located in Benwood had exploded, killing all 119 men who were working in the coal mine at the time. The majority of the miners killed were recent immigrants from all over: Polish, Italian, Greek, Croatian, Serbian, Hungarian, Austrian, Russian, Ukrainian and Lithuanian descent. That disaster shook the entire community because everyone knew one another. Many of those killed were from Boggs Run.”

“In 1930, Mike Perkovich owned a grocery store in Boggs Run that also sold shoes. He had shoes in the

store from the Hamilton-Brown Shoe Company. The shoes made for children by this company were called Twinkies. Mr. Perkovich convinced the Hamilton-Brown Shoe Company to sponsor our Boggs Run softball team. Up until that time, we were a rag-tag outfit and had no uniforms. We were so proud when we received our Twinkie Softball



The 1930 Twinkies • Boggs Run Softball Team

Uniforms – pinstripe shirts and pants with “Twinkie” written across the front of the shirts. They were the nicest uniforms around as most teams didn’t have uniforms at all. We played teams in Wheeling and McMechen. The team from 47th Street in Wheeling was called the Cardinals. Their coach, Mr. Melko, had obtained white shirts for them, but those shirts didn’t compare to our Twinkie uniforms. I remember my friend, Ja-Ja DiCrease playing softball for Benwood. The friends I remember from my Twinkies team were: Emil Narick, Joe Gordon, Walter Schlaka, Paul Mazellum, John Perkovich, Alex Horvath, Eli Kutchva, and Minnie Miller. We had some good times playing softball – with the Twinkies usually winning,” Tom recalls proudly.

He remembers, “I loved horses from an early age. My mother had a picture taken of me on a pony when I was very young. I hung around horses wherever they were hoping someone would let me ride. Mr. Phillip Richter had a produce cart he drove from house to house and his horse’s name was Pet. I hung around Mr. Richter to get to visit with Pet. I remember going to county fairs just to see the horses. I’d walk back and forth looking at the horses again and again. I’d watch the owners ride the horses and wash them.” Tom attended St. Catherine’s Elementary School in Benwood and Union High School in McMechen.

Tom continues, “I remember when there were no street lights in Boggs Run. Only when Benwood took over did we get street lights. Back in those days, older guys would get boozed-up and stand on street corners singing. But no one would call the police because they were causing no harm. That would be different today.”

Tom recalls, “One of my fondest memories as a child was when my mother would give me a dime every Sunday. I was allowed to go to the local grocery store to buy candy with that dime. And back then a dime bought a lot of candy. I looked forward to that special event all week long. Our Christmases were small by today’s standards. We’d get an apple and an orange and mother cooked a delicious dinner – and we were happy and together and thought we had a wonderful Christmas. On the other hand, I remember having a very nasty case of poison ivy when I was a teenager. I’ve always been very sensitive to the stuff.”

“I quit school as soon as I was old enough to get a job in the steel mill. When I had second thoughts and wanted to go back to high school to finish my final year, my father said, ‘you got a job now – stay there and forget about school.’ So I stayed at Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel Mill’s Benwood facility until I was drafted in 1942,” Tom recalls.

Tom was drafted on April 5, 1942 and went to Clarksburg, WV. He had to travel to Fort Hayes near Columbus, OH to receive his indoctrination. He then went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri which was in the Missouri Ozarks to get his basic training that lasted three months. Since he was assigned to the 816th Engineer Aviation Battalion in the Heavy Equipment Section, he got additional training in building and repairing air fields. The 816th Engineer Aviation Battalion originated at Langley Field, VA in 1942. Tom went to Langley Field before arriving at Fort Dix, NJ for two weeks. Tom explains, “We crossed the Atlantic on the West Point liner going from New York City on August 6, 1942 and arriving at Liverpool, England on August 18, 1942. I was told to keep something on my stomach all the time so that I wouldn’t get seasick. I did and the advice worked



Thomas Vapner as a young boy  
1924





Basic Training 1942  
Camp Leonard Wood, Missouri

– I never suffered like most others did.”

Tom continues, “We had our first experience with the blackout as we disembarked our ship in total darkness. We would soon become very familiar with the blackouts as England was being bombed by the Nazis almost every day during the ‘blitz.’ We were transported by rail to Gosfield, Essex. Our job was to build an airfield from scratch. We’d be working on the new airfield and the Germans would bomb us to try to keep us from getting the airfield built. I operated a D-7 caterpillar tractor and got pretty good at it. I learned by trial and error. It was so cold and rainy at times, with mud everywhere, and many days we had to sleep in a ditch near the airfield. When we got to sleep in a barracks, at the first sound of an exploding shell, we dove under anything close for protection. I was scared every day that I was there. I

thought that I was going to be killed. I remember one day the bombing was so bad, I laid in the ditch and started crying because I thought my death was going to occur at any minute. Going day by day with those thoughts in your head does something to you. I just wanted to go home as soon as possible, but unfortunately that didn’t happen for three and a half long years.”

During Tom’s first year and a half in Europe, he wrote a letter each week to his parents. “I also wrote faithfully to my then girlfriend, Helen. She wrote back each week and I really looked forward to getting her letters. All except the last one, that is. That was when she wrote and told me she was seeing another fellow and we were through. I was quite mad as I’d been sending her money routinely. I guess I was better off without her, but it really upset me at the time. Ironically, when I returned from the war, Helen wanted to get back with me. But I told her ‘those days are gone!’ I also remember reading several newspapers published from Boggs Run and Benwood for us boys in the service. Unfortunately, only a few editions

of the 1569 Mailbag caught up to me at the various airfields across war-torn Europe. But I enjoyed reading the ones that did arrive very much.”

Tom recalls having to water-proof his D-7 tractor and the other pieces of heavy equipment. “We used a special chemical to spray onto the moving parts to keep them from rusting due to the heavy rains and constant mud and to get them ready for the invasion. We didn’t know where or when, but we knew we were going to invade from England to stop the Germans at some point.”

Remembering times in England when the bombs weren’t dropping took on a lighter note for Tom, “We’d hop the supply trucks in England that were carrying groceries and throw off entire boxes of food. The truck drivers saw us do it, but they didn’t care as food was plentiful. We especially kept a lookout for the boxes of Hershey bars as they were our favorite. We got together to play games of softball to pass our off duty hours and played cards. And of course, we drank beer. The specified times for drinking beer were established so that all could participate. One group went from 10:00 am until 12 noon, and then the second group would take over from 2:00 pm through 4:00 pm. The last group could drink from 7:00 pm until 9:00 pm. Many times I heard the barkeep call out, “Time, gentlemen, time!” meaning it was time for us to leave so they could prepare for the next group of soldiers.”

Tom spent his first Christmas overseas in Gosfield, England. The men were given a huge turkey dinner and a special church service was provided. “We had church services provided for us every Sunday and if possible, I attended them religiously. Sometimes the priest would come to the camp to serve the mass. I prayed for my family and for my safe return home – as soon as possible – every chance I got,” Tom remembers. “Our daily routine was to work on building the airfield, wash our muddy clothes, and



Christmas 1942

hide from the falling bombs. My best friend overseas was John Genovi from Rochester, PA. We palled around all through the war.”

From Gosfield, the 816th Engineer Aviation Battalion moved to Stanstead where in addition to building an airfield, the Battalion built its own quarters – pre-fabricated wooden barracks that provided excellent comfort during the cold winter months of 1943. At Boreman, Essex, the 816th worked on building another concrete bomber base throughout 1943. Nearby, was Great Barrington, Gloschester. Great Barrington served as the Aviation Engineer training grounds for the upcoming invasion. Every truck and every piece of heavy equipment was overhauled until it was in the best condition possible. Every available spare part across England and Wales was procured to assure the Battalion would not be caught short when it landed on the beaches of Normandy.

“We crossed into Normandy on Omaha Beach from Southhampton three days after D-Day – June 9, 1944. We’d water-proofed our equipment for the crossing. Our experience gained in England helped immensely as our job was to repair the bombed airfields at Cardonville, Deux Jumeaux, and Colleville – all in France. We successfully repaired them in record time so that the Allied pilots could begin landing their aircraft, refueling and taking off to bomb the Germans,” Tom states proudly. “We worked hard that summer and fall repairing


previously bombed airfields so that the Allied planes could use them and advance into territory held by the Germans. We finally liberated Paris in September, 1944. I remember the entire 816th Battalion entering Paris. I was riding in the back of one of our heavy equipment trucks with some of my buddies through the streets of Paris. The French citizens waved flags and cheered for us and called us heroes. It was quite a day and one I remember very well.”



D-7 Tractor pulls a wrecked plane off of the runway  
St. Trond, Belgium • December 25, 1944







Tom recalls the day when victory over Germany was declared, “We went crazy! We hollered and jumped up and down. Some of the guys went to town to get drunk. The rest of us stayed at our camp and got boozed up to celebrate. We were finally going home! It was one of the happiest days in my life!”

After the Allied victory over Germany, the 816th was located in Schleissan, near Munich, Germany, for three months. The medals, awards and citations were nice but they were for others to look at. The men in the 816th had the satisfaction that comes with the inner knowledge that they had individually contributed. They were the keystones to victory. Victory – air power – airfields – the Battalion – this Company – this section – this man!

Tom had served in five major battles in the European Theater from 1942 – 1945. He was subsequently awarded an astounding five battle stars for his exceptional service and valor in battles at: Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, and Central Europe. In addition, he was awarded the European African Middle Eastern Service Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. He had gone forty long months during the war without a furlough!



***“We went crazy! We hollered and jumped up and down. Some of the guys went to town to get drunk. The rest of us stayed at our camp and got boozed up to celebrate. We were finally going home! It was one of the happiest days in my life!”***



“Because I had played so many pranks on my buddies during the three and a half years overseas, and gotten into trouble on several occasions, the officers read my name out last for receiving the Good Conduct Medal. They wanted to keep me guessing if I was going to get it or not,” says Tom laughing.

The Embassy of France provided a ‘Thank-You-America Certificate’ that said, “For the certificate to recognize the Allied soldiers who took part to the Normandy Landing and contributed to the Liberation of France 1944-1945.” Over 80% of the men in the 816th had incurred significant action in battle and time served overseas that they easily had the 85 points to be given an immediate discharge to return home in the fall of 1945. Tom was one of these men. He was asked to reenlist, but he’d prayed so hard for the day to get home that he declined every offer of reenlistment. He left England on September 18, 1945 on the SS





Liberty and arrived in New York on September 25, 1945. He was honorably discharged on October 1, 1945 at the separation center at Fort George G. Meade, MD.

“When I got home from the war, I opened my suitcase and took out a fifth of whiskey and gave it to my dad. I took off my uniform and put on civilian clothes and went out to join my friends in a celebration. It was a very good day,” Tom recalls.

Tom returned to his beloved family and his job at Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel in Benwood. Tom recalls, “If I had reenlisted, I would have had a much better insurance plan than I currently have. But that was the trade-off for electing to come home as soon as I could. I returned to the steel mill and two weeks later they went on an extended strike. I’d been better off to have taken the 52/\$20 unemployment offered to G.I.s instead of returning directly to work. But I didn’t know that at the time. So when the mill went on strike, I was out of a paycheck and I couldn’t collect any unemployment either,” Tom explains.

Tom was a steel worker for a total of forty-six years retiring in 1981. “I worked mostly shiftwork and had several jobs over the years. I served as a hook-up man to lift the pipes to be taken to the next step. For a while, I was the clerk with four men in my gang to get orders ready for the various customers. My final job at the mill was feeding the coils into the furnace. We’d take ribbons of steel that were ½ inch in width and ‘melt’ them into four inch ribbons of steel. We cut the pipes of steel into 21 foot sections.”

Tom recalls his many friends while working at the mill and the times they would congregate at Kramer’s Nut House – later Undo’s – in Benwood to play cards and socialize. “There were so many of us working at the mill. Each shift change would see a crowd of steel workers drinking a few beers together and blowing off some steam. Those were some good times.”

Betty Vargo, from Blaine, OH, was a registered nurse at Wheeling Hospital. A close friend of Tom’s



Tom with Mr. Ritchie and his horse drawing the produce cart, in 1929.



Tom and Betty  
On their Wedding Day in 1951

introduced the two. Tom remembers their first date, “We went to the show at the Capital Theater on Main Street in Wheeling. We hit it off pretty good and kept on dating. I was a very lucky man when I asked Betty to marry me and she said, ‘yes.’ We got married in 1951.”

Tom and Betty bought their current home on Highland Heights in Mt. Olivet near Wheeling, WV in 1955. Tom enjoyed having his own home. Since mowing grass was a favorite pastime for Tom, he not only mowed his own yard that had a very steep back section, but mowed the grass of his two neighbors, as well. “I liked to keep busy and enjoyed mowing the grass,” he explained. When asked at what age he ceased mowing the grass, he laughs and says, “I mowed it up into my eighties. I also chopped wood and only quit doing that about ten years ago.”

Tom and Betty enjoyed their home, going to the show, and eating out at Figaretti’s Restaurant. After a few years, they had two sons: Thomas and Michael. “We enjoyed raising our sons. Our home was a nice place to raise a family. I enjoyed decorating the house for Christmas. We’d always skip a mortgage payment around Christmas to make sure we had enough money to have a good Christmas for our sons.”

Tom played softball with friends throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s. “I played for the Boggs Run Dragons at first base or left field. I was a pretty good hitter and enjoyed playing the game. We won several Wheeling City championships over the years. Betty and her mother would bring my sons to the games so it was a family event. We played several teams from Wheeling and teams from Lansing, Dillonvale, and Moundsville. We were pretty good and won most of the time. My son, Tom, has a picture of me and the Dragon’s team hanging in his bar on Wheeling Island,” Tom says proudly.

Tom lovingly remembers, “I was very fortunate having Betty for my wife. Betty was a special person with a smile for everybody. She loved people and everyone loved her. She was a nurse at Wheeling Hospital for over thirty years. I loved her tomato soup and her beef barley soup. She always made me her special soups. She died in 2005 and I still miss her very much. We were married for over fifty years. We had a small celebration to honor our fiftieth wedding anniversary. I quit having a Christmas tree once Betty died. It just wasn’t the same with her gone.”

Tom was a member of Our Lady of Peace Church in Mt. Olivet for many years and now belongs to St. Vincent de Paul’s Catholic Church. “I prayed all the time when I was in Europe that God would keep me alive to return home. He did his job and I’ve tried to live a good life in return.”

Tom is very proud of his two sons. Thomas Joseph Vapner, Jr. learned to be a meat cutter while attending high school. Tom explains, “He worked for Kroger for a short time and then for the A&P Store in Martins Ferry as a meat-cutter. Eventually, Tom had his own construction company, Tom Vapner Roofing, and owns his own tavern, Three-Alarms, on Wheeling Island. Tom and his family live in Woodruff Estates near Elm Grove. My son, Michael Alan, was a policeman for the city of Wheeling for thirty-one years. Now he is an investigator for the WV Horseracing Association. Mike and his family live nearby in Mozart Meadows. I loved to play softball with my sons when they were growing up. There

Tom with  
his two  
sons:  
Thomas Jr.  
and  
Michael





stars

were much nicer fields to play on for them and my grandchildren than when I was growing up in Boggs Run. Both my sons and their families support me and help care for me. And for that, I am very grateful.”

Tom’s family has grown over the years. He has two sons, five grandchildren and two great grandchildren with a third great grandchild on the way. Tom, Jr. is married to Lana and has three children: Michelle (Wheeling), Nathan (Wheeling), and Jessie (Elm Grove). Granddaughter Michelle has two children: Curtis and Meishal. Son Michael is married to Cheryl and they have two daughters: Mika (Morgantown) and Valerie (Chattanooga, TN). Granddaughter Mika is expecting her first child this winter – near Valentine’s Day.

When asked about his greatest joy in life, Tom readily states, “Watching my grandchildren grow up and be happy.” He says he enjoyed having time in retirement to watch his grandchildren play ball; he wasn’t able to attend many of his children’s games due to shift work. He laughingly adds that he soon realized they needed other career paths to make a living.

At age 94, Tom still enjoys watching the Pirates, Steelers, WVU and smoking a good cigar. “I smoke 2-3 cigars a day. My sons take me to a store in Wheeling on 41st Street to buy them. I enjoy sitting on my back porch while smoking my cigar and looking down into my yard. I’m a little hard of hearing from working around the noisy machinery at the mill for forty-six years and my legs don’t want to move very good these days. But other than that, I can’t complain. When asked what he’d like to tell his family about living a good, long life, he smiles and says, “Be honest, be happy, and keep close to God. It’s worked for me.”

(written August, 2013)



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Thomas Vapner • Age 94

stars