

398th Medics Have Impact During and After Army

by Rufus Dalton, 398-E

The Story of the Century is a great book documenting the activities of the 100th Infantry Division during WWII and I feel it does a very professional job in recording the movement of the Division's units as they fought the Germans from the Vosges through Heilbronn and on to Ulm, Germany. Because of its scope, however, *The Story of the Century* does not record the names and actions of individual soldiers except on a limited basis. Sergeant Charles Carey, posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, was one of these. Among the few others, two caught my interest because I was personally acquainted with their area of recorded activity during the battle for Rimling in Alsace.

These men were 1st Lieutenant Dwight L. Burton, 398th Provisional Battalion, and Pfc. Marco Zagha, 398th Medical Detachment. Their names appear on page 120 of *The Story of the Century*.

I felt it would be of interest to find out what happened to them after the war. As you know, WWII was a "citizen's" war when most of us left our jobs or schools to join the crusade to defeat Hitler and his allies. Almost as important as winning the war, however, was the need for the "citizen" army to return home and help build good communities that would be the basis for a strong nation. I was pleased to find that both of these men did just that. Here are their stories.

Marco Zagha was born in Damascus, Syria, and came to the United States with his family as immigrants. He was the oldest of eight sons, five of whom served during the war. His son, Ron, said, "Prior to the war, Dad was in the Army. He was from a large, poor family and a tough kid from the mean streets of New York. At about age 20, someone took an interest in developing those skills into a boxing career. He was encouraged to join the Army and subsequently became a Golden Gloves champion. I wear a medal he gave me around my neck with 21st Division Champion, 1931, which took place in Hawaii. He re-enlisted at the age of 35 when the war broke out, as did five of his brothers."

Sy Zagha, Marco's brother, spoke to me about the eight brothers. Sy was too young for the service, Charley was turned down because of bad eyesight, and Jack was interned in China from 1940 until the war's end. Ralph, Marco, and Eli served in the Army; Sam in the Navy; and Alex in the Merchant Marines.

Marco Zagha received the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroic action during the battle at Rimling. These were the circumstances: On 8 January 1945 in an early morning, massive attack, the Germans had overrun Company E's positions on Hill 375 and had also taken Hill 370, close to Guising. A collection point for the wounded under 1st Lieutenant Dwight L. Burton, had been set up in a concrete pillbox along the road north of Guising about halfway to Hill 370. *The Story of the Century* reports, "In early afternoon, a runner from the collecting point brought news to the aid station in Guising that there were ten seriously wounded men in the pillbox who needed to be moved to the rear for more complete medical attention. The road between the collecting point and the aid station was under enemy fire because tanks and tank destroyers had been moving about in the area. (Also) since a round of 88mm fire landed on the road about every 45 seconds, no men were being ordered to go forward to evacuate the wounded. Pfc. Marco Zagha, a litter bearer and not a driver, offered to take a medical jeep and bring back the wounded men. In spite of the Red Cross markings on the jeep, which must have been clear to the enemy forward observers who could see the whole stretch of road, the firing did not slacken. Pfc. Zagha, who would take no one with him because of the danger, however, made four trips to bring the wounded back to the aid station."

Marco had demonstrated his courage under fire earlier. Richard Babbitt, who was a medic with 1st Bn, 398th Inf. Reg., has told me of this incident that occurred in the Vosges Mountains fighting: "There was an injured soldier in a front-line foxhole. I went back to the battalion aid station for supplies and said he should be evacuated. Zagha said, 'Let's go get him', and jumped into a jeep (with Red Cross markings). I got in and told him where to go. We pulled up next to the foxhole and proceeded to drag the soldier out and onto a litter. While we were doing this, I could see German soldiers watching us from the bushes 40-50 feet away."

His son, Ron, said, "All brothers survived, and after the war he [Marco] moved back to New York. [Our] family moved to Atlanta to seek better opportunities. That was 1952 and we lived there for ten years before moving to Los Angeles. Life got better for the family in Los Angeles where Dad opened a small electronics business in Long Beach. He developed a passion for golf and tried to play almost every other day. Another passion was the horses, but he did restrain himself in this area. He was a strong and comfortable man that everyone loved to be around. He was robust and had a zest for life that was infectious. You were automatically made part of his world and his fun from the minute you met him. He was cared deeply for his rather large extended family. I personally needed no other role model in my life to learn how to become a good man, and to this day, I attribute any strengths inside me to this person.

"He had the usual health issues later in life (prostate, and so on) and developed Alzheimer's at the age of 80. It was not the way for a great man like this to go, but such is life. He struggled with this for six long years before passing in 1995."

First Lieutenant Dwight L. Burton graduated from the Univ. of Minnesota, went to Officers Candidate School at Fort Benning and came overseas with the 100th Division. He was in charge of the collection point for wounded, as detailed in the Zaghera story, under hazardous conditions.

He later received a Bronze Star for his courageous action at Odheim, Germany. His citation reads that on April 19, he went to the aid of a man seriously wounded some distance in front of the Company's position. Learning that several aid men had been fired upon in this area and noting the intensity of the enemy fire, Lt. Burton went forward alone to where the man lay. Finding him dead, he returned to the Company positions still under severe artillery fire.

Burton closed his career in the service with the rank of captain and returned to civilian life. He began teaching high school in Superior, Wisconsin, while working on his doctorate at the University of Minnesota, and was successful in receiving a doctorate in 1951. His degree was in English and English education. He joined the faculty of Florida State University in 1952 and had a distinguished record there of 38 years.

He had two daughters by an earlier marriage, but spent his last 26 years married to Claudia Croy Burton, an educator herself, who was very much involved in his career at FSU. He died at the age of 73. At his death, he was Assistant Dean and former faculty member of the College of Education and chair of the English Department in the College of Arts and Sciences.

"I never saw him swagger," said John Simmons, professor and coordinator of English education at FSU. "I learned more from him than I've learned from anybody in my life."

Pamela Carroll, distinguished teaching professor at FSU, said, "Dr. Burton was one of the real initiators of English education as a field of study, apart from English. . . . He was able to add a focus on English pedagogy that had not been considered prior to his arrival at FSU in the 1950s. . . . He was an editor of the largest journal for teachers of English and English education professors, *English Journal*. . . . He is internationally known for his work on English curricula."

In 1970, the Modern Language Association (USA) identified the doctoral program he directed, with those at New York and Stanford Universities, as the best English education nationwide. No fewer than four of his graduate students were elected president of the National Council of Teachers of English.

So ends the story of two good men who served their country at a time of war and returned home to pick up their lives and be a part of securing the peace. They have gone on now like so many others of our numbers, but I am glad to have had the opportunity to witness their lives and hold them up to stir our memories.

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