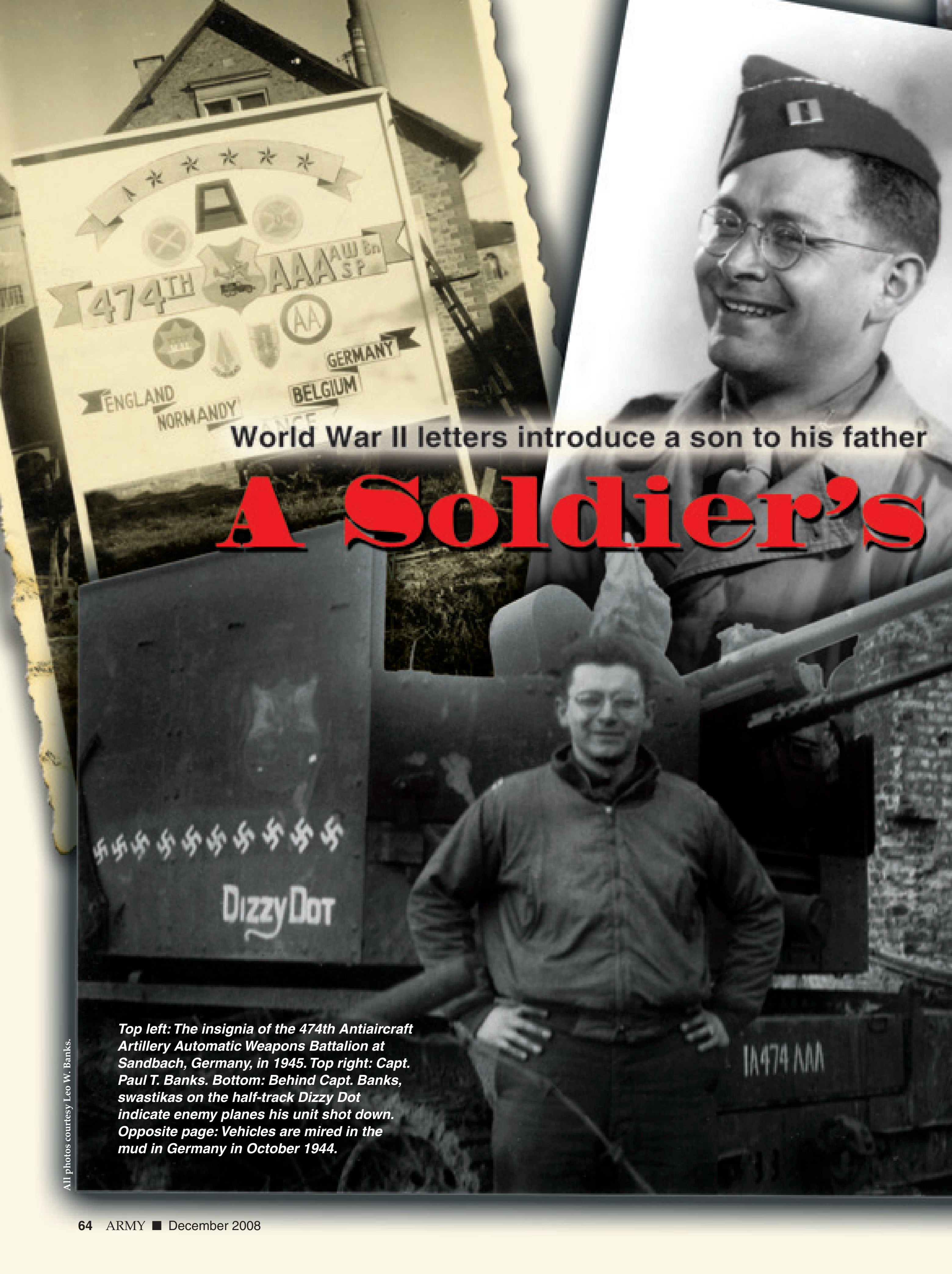

World War II letters introduce a son to his father

A Soldier's

Top left: The insignia of the 474th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion at Sandbach, Germany, in 1945. Top right: Capt. Paul T. Banks. Bottom: Behind Capt. Banks, swastikas on the half-track Dizzy Dot indicate enemy planes his unit shot down. Opposite page: Vehicles are mired in the mud in Germany in October 1944.

All photos courtesy Leo W. Banks.

Belated Gift

By Leo W. Banks

In my last memories of my father, Paul Banks, he was a white-haired retiree puttering around the toolshed of his Massachusetts home and fussing over holes in the Red Sox lineup. Shortly after his death at 87, in 2004, I met him again, this time as a soldier doing his part, as he put it, to "chase Hitler and his tribe off the face of the earth."

Our reunion came when I read the letters he sent home during World War II. For decades, they were stored in a cardboard box in an attic cubbyhole, unread. As a kid, I paid no attention to them, preferring a second box—the one containing his mem-

Capt. Banks, far right, confers with three of his men as the crew observes German soldiers they have trapped in the Harz Mountains of Germany in 1945.

orabilia. He had Nazi helmets, pistols, daggers and other items that gave me hours of fascination.

Now I know I missed the real story. I grew up to become a journalist, of course.

The letters are a remarkable record of one Boston boy's war. From enlistment in 1942, through homeland training, life in preinvasion England and 11 straight months of combat at Normandy, Cherbourg, the Ardennes, central Germany and the Battle of the Bulge, he used every spare moment to write home.

I count 223 letters in all, some running 11 pages. They make the best kind of history—fresh, personal and up close—including one scribbled aboard his LST (landing ship tank) as it churned toward Utah Beach and D-Day.

The next note comes the night of June 6, 1944, and he's blessedly alive, the invasion force having established a beachhead that would eventually spell the Reich's end. In exhilaration, Dad writes: "Although I'm tired and dirty, I never felt better in my life."

I love the immediacy of the emotions he conveys. They put me on the ground with him in a way other histories never could. He knew how to use details, too. He tells of soldiers sipping homemade cider in a French mayor's dining room, then pouring what they didn't swallow into their cigarette lighters to use as lighter fluid.

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Some of the episodes sound like Hollywood. In October 1944, he describes enjoying a cigar and cognac at a Belgian château with a Mr. Von Zuylen, son of a factory owner. The man commented that he'd never seen a plane, either Allied or German, shot from the sky.

"Just about that time," Dad writes, "a Nazi fighter plane approached off in the distance trying to evade the ack-ack from our guns. While we watched, the Jerry began to smoke, then burst into flames and plummeted to the ground before our eyes. Mr. Von Zuylen was delighted and amazed that I was able to satisfy his wish so quickly and dramatically."

He writes extensively of home-front matters, too, commenting on an upcoming Boston College-Holy Cross football game and asking for news about his brothers, John and Bob, then at the Jesuit seminary at Weston, and his sister, Wanda, studying to become a nun in Kentucky. He begs his folks for scuttlebutt about his home in "dear old Southie"—South Boston—and wonders if spring has come to his beloved city, "with flowers blooming and boats beginning to gather in the harbor." In one letter, Dad marvels

Capt. Banks rests against the recon car that returned him from the hospital near Kassel, Germany, to his unit on V-E Day—May 8, 1945.

American graffiti marks a train behind Capt. Banks.

at hearing that James Michael Curley is making another run at mayor, and Dad congratulates his father on getting invited to the installation of his old Southie chum Richard Cushing as Boston's archbishop.

I especially love the letter noting another grand installation—his father getting a set of false teeth. "I am also delighted to hear that you look so handsome in your new molars, Pop," he writes. "That should bring your age down to about 35, shouldn't it?"

That cracked me up because it sounded just like him. Other times I found myself saying, "Is that really Dad?" It's hard to fathom your father as a 26-year-old warrior.

When we were growing up, he was steady as the tides, never a risk-taker. After the war, he went on to a distinguished, 34-year career as a math professor at Boston College. Several times in his letters, however, he speaks of his unit's battles with a boyish bravado.

"Despite the danger and risk involved in visiting France at this particular time," he tells his parents shortly after D-Day, "I wouldn't have missed this show for anything."

The attitude is understandable, I suppose, given the heightened circumstance. But Dad's education played a role, too. He graduated from Boston College in 1939, then got a master's degree in mathematics there. He enlisted in April 1942 because he understood the horrors a victorious Hitler would bring to Western civilization. But I was still surprised by Dad's repeated vow to come home with Hitler's ear.

The boast comes in a running exchange with his grandfather, Tom Kowalik, born in Lwow, Poland, and forced to serve two years in the German army. He hated it and went AWOL, eventually coming to the States. When Dad was preparing to ship out, Kowalik pulled him aside and said, "Bring back Hitler's ear!"

Dad didn't forget that grim request and in his letters repeatedly asks his mom to relay: "To Grandpa, the word of an Army officer that Hitler is on his way out …"

Later, in July 1944, Dad notes that the Russians had retaken Lwow, and even better, he's writing that news on a captured German typewriter. I'm sure old Tom Kowalik took great pleasure at both pieces of information.

We all know the stereotype of World War II soldiers doing their duty, coming home and keeping quiet about what they did.

Dad was like that. Sure, he talked about the war some, but rarely in detail. He was wounded when the jeep in which he was riding plunged into a creek at the bottom of a 25-foot ravine where a bridge should have been. The Germans had blown up the bridge, but at night, traveling 50 mph, Dad's driver drove blindly into the divide. The version he told us as kids had more humor than danger, and he treated it similarly in his letters. But he suffered a broken tailbone and some broken ribs, and spent almost three weeks in a French hospital.

In mid-January 1945, Capt. Banks pauses by a shell-battered church in Bihain, Belgium, during the fight to drive the Germans from the Ardennes gap.

In other letters, he describes closer calls he never talked about. On June 25, 1944, he tells of walking to a hilltop with his colonel to site gun positions around a city they were trying to capture.

"We … were watching some street fighting going on, when suddenly the Boche started shelling us, from about 100 yards away. He must have seen us walking up the hill because for the next half-hour we were pinned down on the small hill. If it wasn't for an abandoned German pillbox nearby, we would have been sunk. After lobbing about 30 shells over, Jerry quit and we made our way back."

At the battle of Cherbourg in June 1944, he came under artillery bombardment and again cheated death. "It was direct fire at the killing range of two dozen yards," he writes. "A handy German dugout was the only thing that kept me from being punctured like a sieve."

A month after D-Day, Dad writes to his Jesuit brother Bob: "Sometimes you have absolutely nothing to do, other times you wonder why you're still alive."

If I were to ask him today, I don't think Dad would credit a dugout for his survival. He'd cite prayers from his folks, from all the Jesuits at Weston and the nuns in Kentucky. I'd always known him as a religious man, a regular at Sunday Mass, but I never understood the depth of his devotion, or just how much it sustained him in those dark hours.

Lt. Bob Horton, facing camera, and Capt. Banks question two German soldiers in civilian dress near the Harz Mountains in 1945.

In September 1944, he describes attending Mass inside a German pillbox. "It was again quite a ceremony," he writes, "the only illumination being from the flickering candles, the only noise being the mumbling of the priest and an occasional *bong*—that's the way artillery sounds inside a pillbox, like someone smacking a huge skillet with a spoon. ... Christ was there in spite of the fact that the Nazis never intended that particular fort for anything but death and destruction."

Dad's final crucible came in the bitter mid-December days of 1944, when the Germans launched their counterattack.

"We called it the bulge," he writes, "and it was one of the toughest campaigns we've yet encountered. Old Jerry used his best there—S.S. and panzers—and they showed no mercy. Neither did we, for that matter."

Among the souvenirs Dad sent home was a Nazi belt buckle. On New Year's Eve 1944, he writes that he found it inside a "locker once used by a trainee in an S.S. shock-trooper school, which taught young fanatic Germans all the nasty tricks of their filthy trade."

I keep that buckle on my bureau, a reminder of the part he played, with many others, in putting those brutes out of business. I make no claim to originality in saying this because it's been said many times before, but it can't be said enough: They did a great thing and need to be remembered.

So do those at home who kept our soldiers going with their letters. Dad's mom, Wanda Banks, wrote almost every day and enlisted other relatives and friends to write as well. They were his lifeline.

"All your letters are just perfect, Mother," he writes after counterattacking Nazis pushed his unit out of Germany and back to Belgium. "Every time I get one my morale goes sky-high. You'd never imagine how much a few lines mean to me, Mom."

Every time one of Dad's letters landed in Southie, Wanda put it aside. I'm sure she was guided by her heart, not history. But she did a service to the latter in saving them, and a service to us, his four kids and his wife, Betty, in letting us meet him as a young man and see the same things he saw.

On November 9, 1944, he writes of watching a British Spitfire get shot down by an enemy plane: "I thought sure the pilot was a goner because the plane was heading in a straight line for terra firma, and no pilot had appeared, even though the plane was only about 500 feet off the ground.

The hands of a German casualty jut from the snow about 50 yards from battalion headquarters at Bihain, Belgium, during the Battle of the Ardennes.

"At this very strategic point, however, a parachute suddenly blossomed into life, and a very lucky RAF pilot floated gently into the mud flats halfway between the water and the dry beach. His plane hit and exploded into the most beautiful mushroom of smoke and flame that I have ever seen."

Every time I read such passages, I get the answer to a question I've long asked. I've made my living as a writer for 30 years and often wonder where my talent came from. Now I know. The old man sure could write. I'll add that to the long list of things he gave me. ★