

Russian soldiers hated the Latvians in World War II

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

I have few regrets in life, but one regret is that I did not serve in the military.

I graduated from high school in 1973, at a time when the Vietnam War was beginning to wind down and for those my age it was the last year before the lottery was discontinued. My number was in the high 200s, so I was never called for the draft, and even if they had called me, because I suffered from asthma at that time, it is not likely that they would have taken me.

Still, I would have gladly gone if I had been called. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I supported the Vietnam War because I believed that it was important to stop the spread of communism.

I recall a high school classmate, who was one year older than I, who had been drafted and sent into ground combat in Vietnam. I learned from him how terrible war can be when I received a letter from him - the only one I received - telling me how difficult it was to kill children. The Viet Cong would strap bombs on small children and tell them to go ask the "Joes" for chocolate. Our soldiers did their best to keep them away, but often they were forced to shoot.

When I began my studies at The University of Illinois, I got a job doing drafting at the university's Digital Computer Lab. It was there that I met Stan, who enlightened me even more about World War II than I had learned in my high school history classes.

Stan, whose real name was Stanislaus (I may be misspelling his name), was from Latvia.

Trained as a surveyor and speaking six languages fluently, Stan was one of the most intelligent and interesting people I had ever met.

Being from Latvia, Stan spoke with a thick Baltic accent. I was from southern Illinois, so I spoke with an accent more like someone from Kentucky. One day when I arrived at work, Stan said with his thick accent, "Randy, I hope you don't mind, but I think you speak with an accent."

What Stan would think of my Oklahoma drawl now. I thought his comment to be quite funny, and despite our thirty-plus year age difference, we were great friends.

Stan's life during the war was so compelling that I urged him to write a book about it, but I don't think ever did. He told me one story that sounded like it came straight from the movies, but it was a true story.

When the Second World War broke out in Europe, Stan was drafted into the Latvian army. Then the entire Latvian army was drafted by the Russians to serve alongside their army.

According to Stan, the Russians hated the Latvians, and treated them terribly. After serving about six months with the Russians, one of the Russian commanders became enraged at one of the Latvian soldiers over something that was a misunderstanding, not anything the soldier had

done wrong, and Stan feared that the commander was about to kill him. Because one of the languages Stan spoke fluently was Russian, he was able to step forward and calm things down, saving the soldier's life.

But after the incident, Stan and his fellow soldiers realized that the Russians, thinking that the Latvians could not understand them, had said many things in front of the Latvians that the Latvians were not supposed to hear. Suddenly, they knew that all of their lives were in danger.

Getting up very early the next morning, the Latvian soldiers removed the distributor caps from all of the trucks except their own, and drove away in their own trucks as quickly and quietly as they could. Driving as far as their fuel would take them, they eventually abandoned their trucks and fled into hiding in the thick forest.

Stan said that he laid on his stomach motionless for about seven days, and that the Russians nearly stepped on him in their search for him and the other Latvians.

After the Russians abandoned their search, he found a bicycle and escaped into Berlin, Germany, where he lived in hiding until he could make a second escape on a bicycle into France. After the war, he traveled to Canada, then to Chicago, and finally to Danville, Illinois, where he lived until he passed away. Because Stan was technically a deserter, he was never able to return to Latvia to see his parents again.

He met his wife in Chicago. She had lived through the daily bombings of Berlin during the war.

For most of us who did not serve, we owe a debt of gratitude to those in the military who have served to protect our freedoms. And for most of we Americans who have never lived through a war on our own soil, we need to imagine what it must be like to struggle for freedom. I, for one, was a better citizen for knowing him.



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