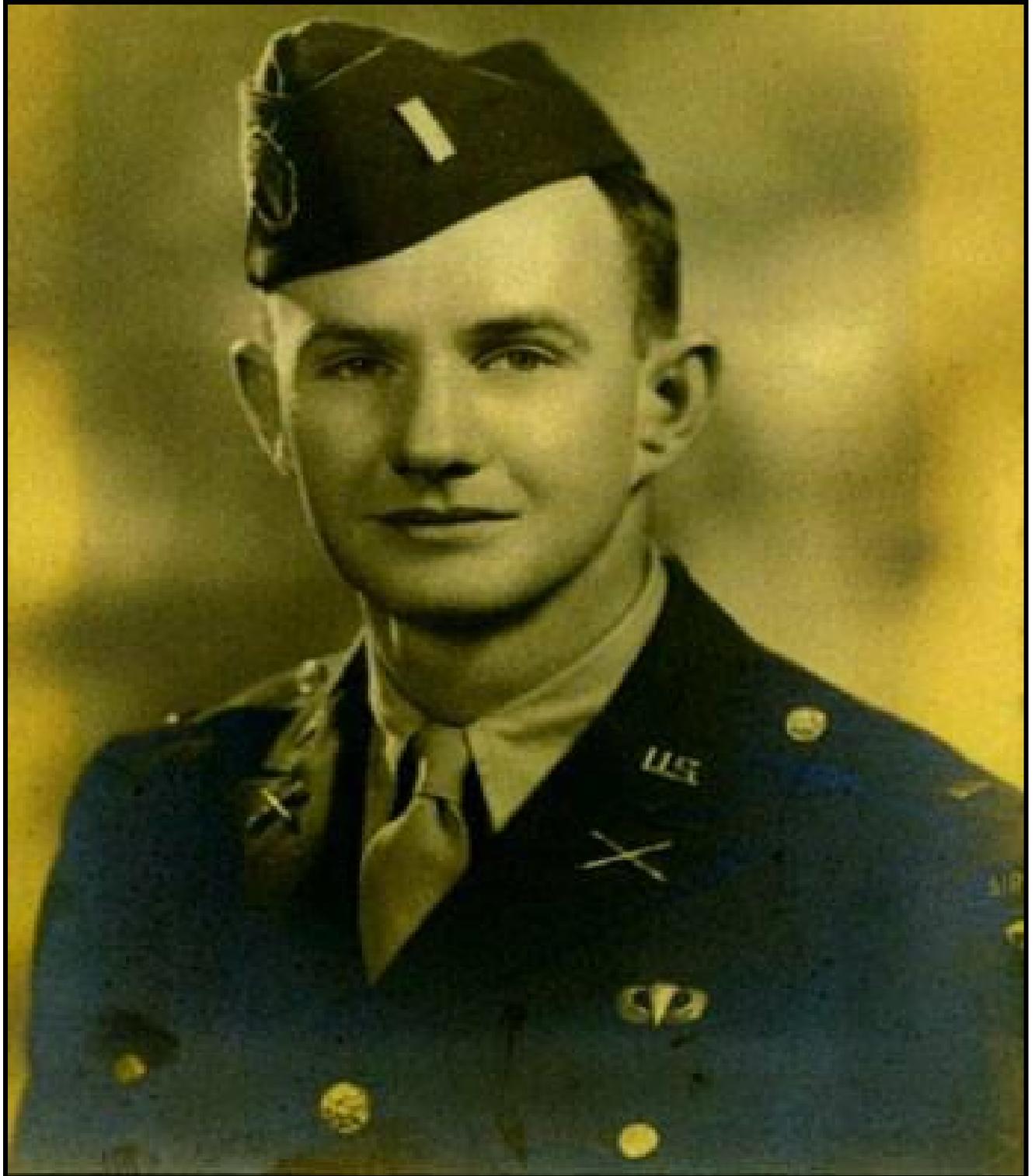


MELVIN MORTON SPRUIELL– 1914-1944

An Extraordinary Life

Rebecca House
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The Price of Freedom: Normandy 1944
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The highest obligation and privilege of citizenship is that of bearing arms for one's country.

GEORGE S. PATTON JR.



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¹ Photographs Courtesy of Leeds Historical Society and the Spruiell family

I. PREFACE

There are thousands of American soldiers buried at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer. Thousands who gave their lives on and off the beaches during the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Without these brave men, the War in Europe could not have been won. The role these men played in shaping the course of history is incalculable: what the world would look like without their courageous sacrifice will never be known. Tragically, of the thousands buried in Normandy, the stories have been written for only a small fraction. The courage and selfless sacrifice of these men will benefit generations of Americans still to come. To tell their stories, it seems, is the least that can be done.

This paper attempts to capture the story of one extraordinary man who gave his life in the service of his country during the Allied Invasion of Normandy. A man with extraordinary talent, capable of extraordinary things, had his life cut short in order to preserve the freedoms of countless others. It has been a privilege to tell his story and to get to know his family in the process.

II. EARLY LIFE

Melvin Morton Spruiell was born to John Melvin Spruiell and Bessie May Morton Spruiell on 14 November, 1914. He grew up in a close-knit family in Leeds, AL, about 20 minutes east of Birmingham. He was the eldest of three brothers; Robert E. Spruiell the middle brother and Stanley Glenn Spruiell the youngest. All three served in different branches of the Armed Forces during World War II. Melvin's father, John Melvin, was drafted and served in the army during World War I. Melvin came from a family of pharmacists, who ran the local drug

store in Leeds. He grew up surrounded by close family and friends and cherished his home town and early life. He was an exceptional child, both very intelligent and remarkably athletic.

Melvin's family was well known in the Leeds community and some of his family still live there today. He and his family were active members of the Leeds Presbyterian Church.

III. EDUCATION

During his high school years, Melvin was very fond of his science classes, especially Chemistry. He graduated from Leeds High School with high honors in 1930 and enrolled in the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University) to further his education. He graduated from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (API) in 1934 with a Bachelors of Science in Chemical Engineering. After graduating from API, he received a fellowship to pursue a Master's degree at the University of Tennessee, where he held the position of graduate assistant until graduating in 1936. He then received a second fellowship to Ohio State University to pursue a Doctorate degree. At Ohio State, he held the position of graduate assistant in physiological chemistry until he published his dissertation, titled "The Oxidation of Amino Acids with Bromine Water," and graduated with his P.h.D in 1939. Throughout his time at Ohio State, Melvin's professors regarded him as an "unusually bright young chemist" who thrived in the laboratory.² While at Ohio State, Melvin joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps and was elected to the Sigma Xi pharmacy fraternity, as he hoped to continue his family's tradition of pharmaceutical work. Upon graduation, he was appointed as an analyst at the U.S. Pure Food and Drug Administration in

² Ohio State University Newspaper

Cincinnati, Ohio . He worked there from July of 1939 to January of 1942, when, being a reserve officer, he was called into active service.

IV. CAREER

While serving in the Food and Drug Administration his unusual talent as a chemist became apparent. In addition to analyzing a wide variety of food, drug, and cosmetic products, he conducted a number of original investigations. Especially noteworthy was his work on cerium and methods for the determination of urea in complex mixtures. He continuously evidenced an insatiable curiosity regarding the different avenues of approach to his laboratory problems and was satisfied with nothing less than absolutely accuracy and completeness. His work definitely marked him as a man destined for rapid and far-reaching advancement in the food and drug field.

V. MILITARY SERVICE

He entered the U.S. Army with the rank of First Lieutenant in 1942. When the army called for volunteers for paratroop service, Melvin was among the first to apply. He was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division and was sent overseas, where his unit received nine months of special training in preparation for the invasion of France. He was later assigned to the 377th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division where he served as one of several Artillery Forward Observers, an incredibly dangerous assignment. An Artillery Forward Observer was responsible for directing artillery and mortar fire onto a target by radioing the location of enemy artillery to their own artillery and mortar units. They often accompanied an infantry unit and traveled ahead of the bulk of the troops, which usually exposed them to heavy

enemy fire. Melvin's unit dropped into France at H-hour the night of 5 June 1944 near the city of Carentan. He was one of the first artillerymen to jump into Normandy with the 101st. His unit, along with several others, were responsible for securing the town of Carentan. Five days after dropping into France, using one U.S. 105mm Howitzer brought in by air, another borne by sea plus two Russian 7.62mm guns captured from the Germans, the 377th supported the attack on Carentan. Due to flooding by the Germans in the drop zone, many of the artillery pieces and radios were lost in the water. Because of this loss of equipment, there was no position for all the 377th observers. Melvin was ordered to give up his position with the 377th and serve as a member of the 502nd Parachute Infantry –a position strange to his training temperament, but nevertheless, an assignment to which he dedicated himself. The mission of the 502nd was to locate and destroy positions of machine guns on the Causeway to Carentan. It was here that Melvin became a candidate for the Distinguished Service Cross. His heroic actions are recalled by Capt. Rosemond of 377th: "Having no communications with his firing batteries, 1st Lt. Melvin Spruiell, forward observer of the 377th PFA Bn., had participated in Cole's Charge, and then acted as an infantry troop leader. Leading some parachute infantry troopers, who were personally unknown to him, Lieutenant Spruiell and his group destroyed several fortified German machine gun dugouts before Spruiell was killed in action." His official citation for the Distinguished Service Cross is given below.

Citation for Distinguished Service Cross: "The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pride in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross (Posthumously) to First Lieutenant (Field Artillery) Melvin M. Spruiell (ASN: 0-338619), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism from 10 to 11 June 1944, during an attack against

an enemy position in the vicinity of Carentan, France. As a Forward Artillery Observer with the 377th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, First Lieutenant Spruiell was at bridge number four with the lead platoon of Company G, 3d Battalion, 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, to relay fire ranging to his artillery battalion by means of radio. The company was attempting to cross the causeway over the Douve River, bypass Carentan and seize Hill 30 along the railway west of the city. However, the bridge was blocked causing the platoon to maneuver single-file around the obstructions. The enemy opened fire from a nearby farmhouse and hedgerow stopping the platoon's movement altogether. When his radio became inoperable, First Lieutenant Spruiell exposed himself to the withering enemy fire in order to locate an operable radio on the bridge. Once locating an operable radio within Company G, he resumed calling out accurate fire in order to suppress and dislodge the enemy from their embedded defensive positions. Without this crucial fire support, Company G would not have lasted until the cover of darkness when they were able to advance around the bridge obstruction. On 11 June, First Lieutenant Spruiell, unable to contact his battalion and recognizing he could no longer serve effectively as a Forward Artillery Observer, volunteered to act instead as an infantryman. While leading a charge across an open field towards the farmhouse and hedgerow where the enemy had repositioned its machine gun nests to escape the artillery fire from the previous day, First Lieutenant Spruiell was killed. His actions are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the 101st Airborne Division and the Army of the United States.”

The Inguf farm house mentioned in the citation was being used by the Germans as a command post and was inflicting heavy losses on troops of the 502nd. The officer leading these

men, Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Cole, decided to lead a bayonet charge across an open in an attempt to take the farmhouse. This maneuver, known as Cole's Charge, earned Cole the Medal of Honor and Melvin his distinguished service cross. While the citation states that Melvin died during Cole's Charge, it is actually believed that he survived that attack and died later that day while attempting to take out enemy positions behind the farmhouse. Melvin died at 29 years old on 11 June 1944, when he was struck in the head by the bullet of a German sniper positioned near the farmhouse. He was initially buried in the temporary American cemetery St. Mere Eglise No. 1 in Plot D, Row 1, Grave 1. He now rests eternally in the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, Plot E, Row 22, Grave 38.



The site of Cole's Charge as it is seen today. The open field is on the right side of the road and the farmhouse is the farthest building on the left side of the road. The bridge is behind the camera.

A local newspaper article written at the time of Melvin's death reads as follows: "On July 6, Mr and Mrs J. M. Spruiell received that saddest of all messages from the War Department—"The Secretary of War desires me to express his deepest regrets that your son, First Lieutenant Melvin M. Spruiell, was killed in action on 11 June in France." In another article in the newspaper of Leeds, AL, the following paragraph appeared: "Melvin Morton Spruiell gave his life for his country in the Invasion of France, June 11. It was a high price to pay, for his was an outstanding life, one of high morals, clean thoughts, character, unusual intelligence, a keen sense of humor, appreciation of fine arts, and deep religious convictions." Melvin's family was presented a certificate from Ohio State University recognizing his bravery. The certificate reads: "The Ohio State University expresses to you its pride in the valiant service to his country of Melvin Morton Spruiell. He was prepared to advance its welfare in peace. He was ready to defend its heritage in war. The sacrifice he has made in the cause of freedom becomes a part of the tradition which has inspired American citizens and kept our country free. The University extends its deepest sympathy as it enshrines his name on its highest roll of honor."

Lt. Melvin Morton Spruiell was decorated with the following medals posthumously for extraordinary heroism in the Allied invasion of Normandy: the American Campaign Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Arrowhead Device, one Bronze Service Star, the World War II Victory Medal, the Purple Heart, and the Distinguished Service Cross. The paperwork for the Distinguished Service Cross, however, was misplaced. Not until the early 1990s did the paperwork surface, when Mark Bando, a noted authority of the 101st Airborne Division, found the original recommendation and sent it to the Spruiell family. The document resurfaced when the estate of an Army colonel was sold. The colonel, Henry J. F.

Miller, had been demoted and sent home by General Eisenhower in July 1944 after making public statements regarding the official date of the Normandy Invasion. He never acted on the recommendation. Once the Spruiell family received the citation, they began working with Alabama Representative Spencer Bachus and the House Armed Services Committee. The work of Representative Bachus and the committee finally culminated in a ceremony performed in February 2017 where Melvin's surviving family was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross.



Photograph of Melvin's Service Medals³

³ Courtesy of the Spruiell family and the Leeds Historical Society



*And they who for their country die shall fill an honored grave, for glory lights the
soldier's tomb, and beauty weeps the brave.*

JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE

Returning

Sons loyally went to the country's call
Knowing, of course, that some would fall.
Fighting for freedom on foreign shores
To keep the battle from homeland doors.
Many fell in the world turmoil
And were laid to rest in foreign soil.

But after the war and a measure of peace

When the smoke had cleared and guns had ceased;
Thousands asked that dear ones be
In American soil, gracious and free;
And in gratitude the nation said,
She could do no less for our valiant dead.

And under the flag that was their pride,
The flag for which they fought and died;
In quiet peace loved sons
Slowly came to their loves;
'Twas not the return for which we'd pray
But the Father willed it be this way.

Throughout our land in places of rest
We interred these once strongest best;
While the nation grieves that we had to give,
Our youthful sons, just ready to live.

From "Ramblings in Rhyme" by Mercolle DeShazo Whorton

VI. POSTHUMOUS EVENTS

David Spruiell, nephew of Melvin, found 90 letters that Melvin wrote to his parents between 1936 and 1944 in one of his family's old houses in Leeds, AL. The earliest letter was

written in 1936, while Melvin was studying chemical engineering at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. The final letter was written on June 3, 1944—three days before the Normandy invasion. One letter described a situation in which Melvin talked a fellow soldier out of going AWOL. Other letters told of a trip to New York City in 1942 during basic training, and trips to London in 1943 and 1944 while stationed in England. Melvin wrote that he went to the top of the Empire State Building in New York City, and while in London, he bought Wedgwood porcelain and had it shipped to his parents. Melvin wrote that he met the king and queen of England while he was in London and that “King George is the ugliest man I’ve ever seen in my life.”

In an utterly astounding story, Melvin’s helmet, worn when he was shot in the head by a German sniper positioned near the Inguf farmhouse, was found 62 years after his death in a flea market in France by an American collector. Bud Parker, a collector of World War II antiques, bought Morton’s helmet in 2006 at a flea market north of Carentan, France. Bud said that when he bought the helmet with the bullet hole in it, he had no idea where it came from. “It was the bullet hole that got to me,” Bud said, “I wanted to preserve it.” Bud brought the helmet back to his home in Atlanta, GA and gathered a group of historians that examined the markings and engraving on the helmet. The group identified Melvin as the owner. In December of 2006, Bud presented the helmet to Glenn Spruiell, Melvin’s younger brother, who loaned it to the Leeds Historical Society to be displayed in the Bass House, where it can be seen today.



Melvin's helmet with bullet hole, Currently on display at the Bass House, Leeds Historical Society

⁴ Courtesy of Leeds Historical Society

SOURCES AND CONTRIBUTORS

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