



signature joining hundreds of others in either a joyful holiday greeting card, or an enduring epitaph of loss.

He still remembers the night sky, lit “like the Fourth of July” by machinegun tracers and flashes of cannon fire. Some Christmas, he thought, just as enemy artillery rounds pounded his unit’s position.

“I could hear the choo-choo-choo (of falling shells), and something hits me in the side here,” Cesear said as he traced a hand along his abdomen and leg. “I thought, ‘What the heck?’ I was afraid to look.”

Fortunately Cesear had been bruised, not bloodied, by chunks of earth blown by the blast of an exploding shell. Black-and-blue, he traveled with his battalion to a position where they could use their **90mm guns** on an approaching enemy column.

“Blew the tracks off the lead tank and the rear tank,” then called for the heavy guns to obliterate the middle of the column, as he recalled.

The battle was probably everything and more he’d hoped for when the Cleveland youth enlisted in 1943, fueled by the stories his father, an Army veteran, told about combat during World War I.

“It was a big adventure because I heard the stories about my dad, and I says, ‘I’m going to be in it,’” Cesear recalled. “When you’re that young, you’re immortal. You don’t think you can get hit.”

Cesear said he wound up in an antiaircraft battalion, equipped with rifled guns that

could fire 21 high-velocity rounds per minute, sending shells into targets at 3,000 feet per second.

Initially those targets were German “**buzz bombs**” (missiles) falling across England. “When we engaged them, we got almost 80 percent of the bombs,” he recalled. “And for years after the war, if I’d run into a British war bride, I got a big hug and a kiss.”

The unit’s guns were later used to punch holes in German bunkers and tanks.

During the waning months of the war, Cesear’s unit guarded mines holding art treasure the Nazis had looted during their occupation of Europe, and liberated slave labor and concentration camps. He’ll show anybody and everybody an envelope of small photos of the skeletal victims of those camps, explaining, “I’m on a mission. It just angers me when I hear people say the Holocaust didn’t happen.”

After the war, Cesear worked in Cleveland as a tool and die maker. He and his wife Shirley (who died this year), raised a daughter.

Looking back on his service, Cesear said he’ll always remember **that Christmas Eve Mass**.

Others do, too.

As Cesear related, “We later found out that every Christmas Eve the children in that area come in with candles, and they’ll pick a name on the wall and say a prayer for that person.”

Jim Martin's Battle of the Bulge flights part of his 44 missions

Jim Martin was a B-17 bomber pilot who flew several missions, including a Christmas Eve flight, trying to stem the tide of reinforcements to the German offensive during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II.

Somewhere in the murk shrouding that Christmas Eve battlefield in 1944, Jim Martin and his B-17 loaded with 500-pound bombs, searched for a target -- a bridge, a train, a convoy of enemy tanks and trucks. Anything to help the embattled GIs who hung on, miles below.

"They were sending us out in god-awful weather. We flew eight missions in 10 days," Martin recalled. "We would be flying close formation in the clouds, just able to see the wing-tip light (of other planes), and you would get vertigo, thinking you were in a dive when actually flying straight and level"

"We bombed by radar, and you can imagine how accurate that was, but it tore up something."

They weren't the hardest or the scariest of the 44 missions he flew during the war.

Berlin was the toughest because it was the most heavily defended, he said.

Martin also remembered an attack on the Lutzkendorf oil refinery which was guarded by 400 antiaircraft guns. The sky was black with flak bursts and Martin's plane was punched with more than 100 shrapnel holes.

One of those blasts took out the bomber's hydraulic system, which Martin said he didn't discover until he tried to land, hit the brakes and nothing happened. The plane roared off the end of the runway at 70 mph and plowed through a pasture before stopping.

On another mission their squadron leader took a direct hit. "He was just a white poof and he was gone," Martin said, as his hands traced an invisible ball of vaporized bomber in the air. "The whole plane exploded. They must've hit the gas tank."

You learned to live with the losses, according to Martin, "because you know it's happening on almost every mission."

Besides, "when you're a lot younger, it doesn't bother you nearly as much," he added. "You had to be lucky, that's all."

And luck could sometimes show up in the strangest ways. Martin recalled one mission when a 1,000-pound bomb got hung-up in the bomb bay and wouldn't drop. The bombardier had to go into the bay and work it free. By sheer chance, the falling bomb took out a bridge below. "Talk about 'precision bombing'," Martin quipped.

After the war Martin got a degree in mechanical engineering, then went to work as a sales rep for a machinery equipment firm in Hagerstown, Md, where he'd grown up. He moved to Cleveland after being assigned to sales territory in Ohio. He and his wife Marilyn (who died 11 years ago) raised four children.

And Christmas Eve came to mean something vastly different from piloting a flying fortress through the fog, looking for someone to drop a few 500-pound bombs on.