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Somerset County Native Earns Bronze Star for Battle of the Bulge Service

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Photo, on left is John Krotkosky.

Private First Class John “Yunko” Krotkosky (b. 1913 – d. 1981) of Hooversville, Somerset County was working in the coal mines of Carpenter’s Park and Tire Hill with his father and brothers when he was drafted into the Army in 1943. He completed training at Fort Lewis, Washington as a pioneer (a soldier trained to complete engineering and construction tasks) and wireman. He was assigned to Headquarters Company, Second Battalion, 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Division. The Division arrived in France on September 14, 1944 where they trained for a month before entering combat. Beginning in October, the division participated in the Rhineland campaign to drive Germany back across the Rhine River and force their defeat. On November 24, 1944 John received shrapnel wounds to his face from German artillery fire. He was awarded the Purple Heart.

During the Battle of the Bulge (12/16/1944 – 1/25/1945), John volunteered to use his skills as a coal miner to blast holes in the frozen ground for gun emplacements and foxholes. He recalled that winter as the coldest, snowiest in his memory. To keep warm, he placed newspapers under his clothes and in his shoes for extra insulation. Late one night, John received word that an American unit has just moved into a wooded area nearby and needed his explosives expertise to help the unit “dig in”. John arrived in the dark, on a dirt road, and was told the unit was on top of a hill. He began to climb the hill, and halfway up stopped to rest against a large tree.

John was about to resume his climb when he noticed several men dressed in white moving along the hillside. He realized the men were German soldiers searching for the American unit on the hilltop. At one point, a young German soldier passed within several yards of John’s position. John remembers the soldier dragging his rifle in the snow, a look of utter exhaustion on his face. John remained motionless against the tree until the Germans passed. Cold, and very shaken, he eventually arrived at the American unit and reported what he saw.



Photo of Bronze Star, awarded to J. Krotkosky

John returned to the U.S. on July 20, 1945. He told his family the encounter on the snowy hillside haunted him the rest of his life. He never understood why he was not killed that night. For his service during that winter establishing wire communications, mine fields, and barbed wire installations under enemy fire, John was awarded the Bronze Star. John's experiences during the war left him a changed man. His sister recalled that "one Yunko left and another

came back". He continued to work as a miner and died of silicosis in 1981. He is buried in Soldiers' Circle, Richland Cemetery, Johnstown.