

Letter may unite vet, WWII rescuer

By ANN MARIE CARDAROPOLI

AGAWAW — It was 1944 in Belgium and an American soldier lay wounded in his Army halftrack underneath the bodies of dead comrades as the Battle of the Bulge raged around him.

The soldier, Anthony Calvanese, survived the ordeal through his own courageous efforts and those of four Belgian townspeople.

Forty-three years later, Calvanese recently received a letter from the man most responsible for saving his life, Marcel Ozer of Stavelot, Belgium.

"I never realized I would hear from him again. Now, I would either like to go to Belgium to see him and his family, or have them come here," Calvanese said in an interview at his 17 Cooper St. home.

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"It's really an emotional thing," the World War II veteran said as tears filled his eyes and memories that were buried in his mind for years were awakened.

On Dec. 18, 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, Calvanese's unit, the 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion, was ordered to the front lines to stop the advance of the Germans in Belgium. Field Marshall Karl von Rundstedt's troops were trying to split the Allied troops in Belgium and France.

The Army vehicle on which Calvanese was a machine gunner was hit by a German mortar shell and he was thrown to the floor, shell fragments lodged in his thigh.

Calvanese was the only survivor. The bodies of fellow soldiers — his friends — had fallen on top of him as he lay wounded on the

floor. When he awoke, Calvanese said he felt warm blood trickling down his leg. He wondered if he would survive.

Despite the injuries, Calvanese managed to get out of the half-track and crawl to a house, where he remembers breaking a window to enter. Once inside, he treated his wounds as best he could.

While waiting for the ammunition in the half-track to explode, Calvanese said he planned his escape as he watched the streets become crowded with German soldiers.

When exiting the back door of the house, the half-track exploded, setting fire to the building. As he fled through the back yard, Calvanese ran into a group of civilians, one of whom was Ozer.

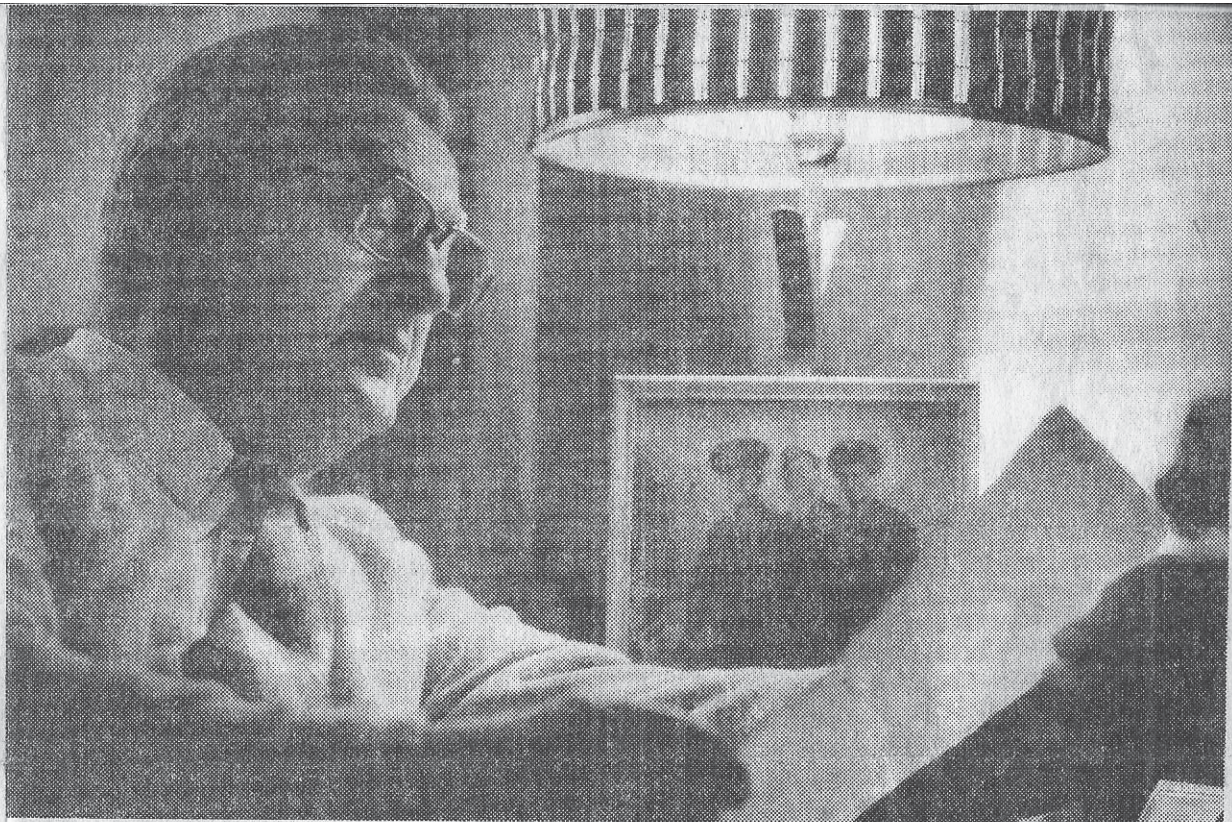
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After making Ozer understand that he was wounded, which was a difficult feat because Ozer didn't speak English, Calvanese was brought to a battle shelter.

Calvanese said Ozer was shot in the shoulder while searching for a doctor to care for his wounds. Ignoring his own wound, the Belgian didn't stop until he found a nurse and stretcher.

After Calvanese's wounds were cleaned and dressed, he was placed in a stretcher for the most terrifying battle he had ever faced, getting through a barricade of German soldiers to a Catholic hospital.

The group passed through the streets, which were occupied by the Germans, without challenge. Calvanese said he remembers approaching a bridge over a small river on the other side of which was the hospital.



Staff photo by John Suchocki

LETTER FROM OVERSEAS — Anthony Calvanese of 17 Cooper St., Agawam, reads a letter written to him by a Belgian who saved his life in World War II. Photo in background shows Calvanese with his brothers Frank and Joseph before they were shipped out.

On the bridge were two German tiger tanks and about a hundred soldiers. Calvanese said the men laid the stretcher on the ground as the nurse placed her fingers to his lips, indicating that he be silent, as she pulled a blanket over his face. Despite their fears, the group was able to proceed across the bridge without incident.

"If they (Germans) pulled the blanket back, we would have been killed," recalled Calvanese.

Upon arrival at the hospital, Calvanese said he was taken to the basement, where he was greeted by terror-stricken men, women and children, who believed he was a German soldier because his uniform was still covered by

the blanket.

The doctor removed the bullet from his thigh and dressed a wound in his foot. After spending a sleepless night, Calvanese said American troops recaptured the town the next morning.

Calvanese, who received a Purple Heart for his service, was taken to an emergency hospital at the rear of the lines, never to see the man who saved his life.

He said Ozer found out about him from a Belgium resident, Rene Rousseau, who is writing a book on the Battle of the Bulge. The widow of the battalion's commander recently met with Rousseau while vacationing in Europe,

and the connection between Ozer and Calvanese was made.

In his letter to Calvanese, Ozer asked if he was the man whose life he saved so many years before.

"Everything came back to me when I read his letter. I'm so happy. It's a miracle. Now that we've found each other, I have to see him," Calvanese said.

He said he has written a five-page letter to Ozer, hoping that the two men can reunite with each other and their families.

"We'll work something out between us. He wrote so little, yet he said so much," said Calvanese.