Eyewitness to History

“Well,” John Regnier begins, “at 93 my head works better than my body.”

Indeed, it works pretty darn fine as the long-time Stevens Point resident recalls his Depression era boyhood on a Minnesota farm as one of 10 children. After high school graduation in 1939, he worked as a hotel bellhop and in a grocery store to save enough money to finance a one-year course at a Minneapolis business college. Although he ran out of money three weeks prior to completing the course, he was able to obtain employment at General Mills in Minneapolis, which afforded him the opportunity to finish the course at night.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, when the United States was drawn into World War II, “the potential for future employment required military service and became a reality for me and my age group,” said Regnier. He was inducted into the Army in December 1942, right after his 21st birthday, and was assigned to a newly formed medical regiment that was trained in Mississippi.

During basic training, soldiers were assigned to various unpleasant tasks such as KP and latrine duty. Regnier performed several of these tasks, including garbage truck duty. One day, as his truck stopped at the Regimental Supply Department, the sergeant in charge came out and asked if any of the soldiers could type. Regnier could, so he was given a part-time job with the supply department.

Regnier was ultimately promoted to technical sergeant of the battalion supply department. His battalion joined the war in Europe in August 1944. The first assignment for his headquarters unit was to provide extra help in a M.A.S.H.-type field hospital in the north of France. The painful images of wounded soldiers that Regnier tried to forget were filed far away in his memory for half a century.

After the war, Regnier returned to Minnesota and, thanks to the G.I. Bill, attended the University of St. Thomas and St. Cloud State College before earning his degree at the University of Minnesota in 1949. He married Eva Mae Cann in 1950 and began working for Hardware Mutual Insurance, which later became Sentry Insurance, in Minnesota. Regnier wanted to move into human resources, and the experience he gained in claims, underwriting and sales training provided “an invaluable background.”

In 1963, he accepted a position at their office in Stevens Point and relocated his family. “We left
many friends in Minnesota but the company was growing and hiring many new college graduates," he recalled. "They developed young people to accept responsibility, and I had many promotions even without a grandiose master plan."

John and Eva Mae built their home just a year after arriving in Stevens Point and raised six children, three of whom, Carol (Class of 1985), Steven (Class of 1983) and Greg (Class of 1976), are UW-Stevens Point graduates. Eva Mae taught school and completed her master’s degree at UW-Stevens Point. John retired after 32 years with Sentry. “I just love this community,” he said.

The lead-up to the 50th anniversary of D-Day in 1994 unleashed many of Regnier’s long-repressed memories, and he began to talk publicly about his experience. On April 12 of that year, he took the family dog to the vet. “I told the receptionist I will never forget that date,” he said.

On that day in 1945 his battalion arrived at a crossroad outside the German village of Ohrdruf. Although he did not know it, Regnier had arrived at his personal intersection with history. Regnier's battalion encountered a convoy filled with top brass, including generals George S. Patton, Omar Bradley and Walton Walker--and General Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces. While searching for a Nazi communications position, the advancing troops had instead uncovered a slave labor camp and more than 3,000 starved, decaying corpses left by retreating Nazis.

“Eisenhower wanted witnesses,” said Regnier. "He wanted evidence. I shared a camera with Technical Sergeant Fred Kercheval and we recorded what our minds could not believe.”

The concentration camp at Ohrdruf was not Regnier's only encounter with the incomprehensible. His unit ended its tour of duty in Austria, where he had an opportunity to visit a slave labor camp in the town of Ebensee, which had been liberated in May of 1945.

When Eric Yonke, UW-Stevens Point professor of history and director of international programs, learned of Regnier’s personal wartime experience, he invited the veteran to speak to his history class.

“The students always sat in rapt silence as he spoke,” said Yonke. “For the students and me, listening personally to someone who witnessed the final stages of the Holocaust was stunning. Profound historical events were suddenly embodied in this kind grandfatherly figure standing in front of us.”

This was the beginning of many more opportunities to speak to students, groups and organizations throughout Wisconsin. Thanks to his mother, who kept the photographic “evidence,” Regnier has been able to share images as well as his memories with the news media, educators and students of all ages. He also has spoken at a Holocaust seminar at Viterbo University and on public radio programs.

Regnier has been a steadfast supporter of UW-Stevens Point. He helped develop the Central Wisconsin Math League for high school students in 1970 with Howard Thorye and Charles Johnson of the University's mathematics department. Later, he and his wife started The Regnier
Family Scholarship Fund. The entire family participated in the Host Family Program, welcoming 29 foreign students into their home over several years.

“It was good for all the kids and an opportunity for us to learn about each other,” Regnier said of the hosting experience. “We wanted to make sure these students could join a family.” Mari Yamamoto, from Japan, actually joined the family permanently when she married the couple's son Greg.

In 1990, Regnier was honored with the Academy of Letters and Science Community Award. His wife received the same honor in 2003. Sadly, Regnier lost his beloved life partner in 2012.

True to his belief that “learning is forever,” and at the urging of friend and Holocaust educator Darryle Clott, Regnier began the difficult, but to his mind, necessary task of documenting his story in a book. Denying the Deniers was published in 2014. In it he writes, “After leaving the concentration camp, it was still hard for me to believe what I had seen, and that it occurred such a short time before seeing it. Life was cheap in that hell-hole.”

Sharing his wartime experiences has allowed Regnier to honor those whose lives were dishonored so long ago, so far from home. Doing so is the act of someone who himself is a most honorable man. Regnier’s life of involvement, service and generosity is an inspiration to everyone privileged to know him.