

An association of members of his WWII division has helped a Minnesotan overcome the shame of surrendering in the Battle of the Bulge.

Ex-POW lifts shame of surrender

By Chuck Haga
Staff Writer

The letter came three weeks ago from a man in Oregon, a veteran of the greatest land battle fought by U.S. troops in World War II, and John Kline recognized his old self in the man's shame.

The letter came to Kline, of Apple Valley, because he edits a magazine for an association of veterans who served with the 106th Infantry Division. The man apologized for waiting so long to join.

"I guess you could say I have a problem," he wrote. "When I left Stalag 9B, civilians drew back from me as though I was something repulsive and unclean. This went on in the States until I learned to hide the fact that I was an ex-prisoner of war.

"To now, I find it hard to admit I was a prisoner. . . . I am still proud of our 106th Division. I think we were a good division. But hardly a day goes by that I do not wonder why it had to happen to us."

For more than 40 years, Kline wondered, too, and felt a similar shame.

He was a sergeant in mid-December 1944, a machine-gun squad leader on a hill in the rugged Ardennes forest of Belgium. He was 19, fresh to the line. And like 600,000 other U.S. troops stretched along the Ardennes he was



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Gen. George Patton's army relieved the Belgian city of Bastogne from the pressure of German attack in 1945.

caught by surprise when three German armies launched the Battle of the Bulge on Dec. 16, 1944.

His unit surrendered three days later. Kline spent six months as a POW.

"We received some very bad press after the war," he said. "The British writers were probably the cruelest . . . made us out to be cowards. A lot of people were stuck with that image. I've talked to guys who said they would walk into a Legion club to

have a drink, and somebody would say, 'Oh, you were with the 106th? You were one of those guys who let the Germans through the Bulge.'

"I didn't talk a lot about it. If somebody asked about the war, I didn't



Staff Photo by David Brewster

John Kline, of Apple Valley, edits a magazine for veterans.

hide where I had been. But I didn't go out and talk about my part."

Then in 1987 Kline read a new history of the battle, "A Time for Trumpets." Author Charles MacDonald, who was there as a company com-

mander, showed that the breakthrough was due to its own daring and to Allied intelligence failures. The individual soldier deserved no blame. "Surprised, stunned . . . he

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