***Memorial Day***

By John Clayton, Jr.

For many of us, and I hope most of us, Memorial Day is a very moving time. We remember those who have passed on before us, and especially those who have given their lives, in sacrifice, for going to war to preserve our freedoms. I won’t try to improve on the dozens of sentiments I have read over the years about this (as if I could), but I wanted to observe the day in some way to honor and remember those who have gone into the madness and horror of mortal combat for our benefit. They live and perhaps die in experiences that the rest of us, no matter how well it is explained, can only imagine.

My father, John Clayton, Sr., fought in World War II. He was an infantryman in the 14th Armored Division and fought his way through France and into Germany from late 1944 to the end of the war. He usually carried a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), an automatic weapon, typically carried by one member of a squad of about a dozen men. Along the way, he was in the Battle of the Bulge, and in other large-scale engagements remembered vividly by many, if not by the rest of us, and was in a combat unit until the end of the war. He remained in Europe for a period afterwards, as was the custom. While he is an accomplished writer, holder of a doctorate from Yale, and a former university professor and telecommunications executive, he only recently wrote down many of these memories. I decided to present a small sample in tribute to our troops in service and in combat, now and then.

*I almost never saw the big picture, as during a barrage I was too busy trying to get the rest of me inside my helmet. I do remember being on a ridge and looking out at a tank battle going on. It was pretty hairy—these huge pachyderms ponderously moving back and forth as they fired, their shells skipping across the field as the target had moved or suddenly turning into a ball of fire. Never envied tankers and hated being around them. They drew fire.*

*Of course, that's the way my platoon thought of me. The Jerrys would very rapidly identify my automatic fire, zero in, and respond with mortar fire, which is how I lost several ammo bearers. The mortar rounds had a thirty-yard killing range that was funnel shaped, so if you were flat, your chances were pretty good. I had one hit so close, I could reach out and touch the blackened crater in the snow. May have been the one that hit my first ammo bearer, Warren Valenze from Staten Island, with a small fragment in the head. I've told the story many times--how I took off his helmet and used the bandage from a pouch we all carried to wrap around his head, how we were ordered to pull back to the relative safety of a ditch beside the road, how I squirmed backward in the snow, unable to drag Warren, and finally dropped with my BAR into the ditch with the rest of the platoon, including our seriously-wounded platoon leader, a lieutenant, and our seriously-wounded platoon sergeant, and how one of our sergeants, D'Arilio, said to my squad leader, Sergeant Barnhardt, a cabinet maker, “Barney, you're senior, I guess you're in command,” and how Barney--who like all of our non-coms had been in the National Guard--shook his head, saying, “It's all yours, D.A.,” and how D.A. proved to be a superb combat commander, and how the medic in our ditch tried to reach Warren twice, but each time was driven back by the volume of fire that made the trip suicidal, and how as he sheltered beside me tried to speak, but couldn't, so he took out a small notebook, wrote in it, and showed me what he was unable to say: I tried.*

*I do still dream a fair amount.*