

AMERICA IN WWII

COVER STORY

Major Dick Winters: GENUINE LEGEND, GENUINE MAN

What made Major Dick Winters a great commander?
The same thing that made him a great friend: He genuinely cared about people.

by Colonel Cole C. Kingseed

AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH on January 2, 2011, Major Richard “Dick” Winters was probably the most recognized company commander of World War II’s European theater. He was an extraordinary combat officer whose story historian Stephen E. Ambrose chronicled in *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne, from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest*. In the wake of the 2001 Emmy Award-winning HBO miniseries of the same title, Winters published his own memoirs in an effort to set the record straight and to detail the accomplishments of his airborne company in combat in Europe. *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters* (2006) rapidly climbed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction books within two months of publication.

Winters’s path to fame mirrored that of thousands of other young men who joined the US Army in 1941 to escape the draft. By enlisting, Winters could choose his branch of service, rather than being thrown indiscriminately into the pool of draftees from which the services selected their members. Because Winters could not swim, his choice was easy—no navy or marine corps for him. Accustomed to working outdoors and a natural athlete, Winters applied for duty in the infantry. His intent was to serve one year and then to return to civilian life and pursue another career. Pearl Harbor intervened, however, and Winters realized he would remain in the army far beyond his initial enlistment period.

A college graduate, Winters was eligible for Officer Candidate School. He applied, was accepted, and graduated a few months later. Immediately afterward he put in for airborne training, because the paratroopers he met at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he completed OCS, “were hard, lean, bronzed, and tough. And I wanted to be with the best.” Paratroopers also received additional pay, which would be helpful in paying down the Winters family’s mortgage back in Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, no officer slots were available in the airborne at the time Winters graduated, so he returned to Camp Croft, South Carolina, until a second lieutenant assignment opened up in August 1942. Winters joined Company E—“Easy Company”—of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel Robert Sink, a no-nonsense 1927 West Point graduate. Training at Camp Toccoa in northern Georgia proved intensive, but Winters was one of the few who had little problem with the physical aspects. Of the 500 officers who began the rigorous training, only 148 graduated from airborne school.

Easy Company, later assigned with the 506th to the 101st “Screaming Eagles” Airborne Division, was under the command of First Lieutenant Herbert Sobel, whom Ambrose described as a “petty tyrant.” His harsh discipline and policy of instilling fear in his men alienated his junior commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Worse, Sobel frequently proved indecisive during the tactical phases of training. With war on the horizon, the NCOs mutinied rather than risk serving under him in combat. As company executive officer, Winters was caught in the middle. Sink temporarily assigned him to headquarters com-



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Richard “Dick” Winters of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, applied to be an airborne infantry officer because he “wanted to be with the best.” Above: The Screaming Eagle of the 101st Airborne Division. Opposite: Service with Easy Company in the 101st Airborne’s 506th Parachute Infantry took Winters into some of the fiercest fighting in Europe. Here, he stands in the Schoonderlogt estate gateway in Holland in October 1944.



Major Dick Winters: **GENUINE LEGEND, GENUINE MAN** by Colonel Cole C. Kingseed

pany to stabilize the command team there until he could transfer Sobel away and quell the insurrection within Easy Company. After First Lieutenant Thomas Meehan took command, Easy Company welcomed Winters back two months before D-Day.

AS THE INVASION OF NORMANDY approached, Winters tirelessly prepared his platoon for combat. The months of training took a toll on him. Still only 26 years old, Winters felt that the simpler times of his college years, and the days of civilian life when he did as he pleased, were long past. In a letter to a female friend, he noted that he had grown old beyond his years, “not old physically, but hardened to the point where I can make the rest of [my soldiers] look like undeveloped high school boys. Old to the extent where I can keep going after my men fall over and go to sleep from exhaustion, and I can keep going like a mother who works on after her sick and exhausted child has fallen asleep.” Winters went on to say that he hoped all his efforts would mean more of his men would return home to the States than otherwise might have made it back to their families and friends.

On the evening of June 5, 1944, Winters climbed aboard a C-47 Dakota aircraft and departed for Normandy for June 6 D-Day operations. Shortly after midnight, Winters jumped with his stick of paratroopers amid intense anti-aircraft fire, from a plane traveling too fast and too low to the ground. The blast of air from the propeller ripped away the supplies bag strapped to his leg as he descended to earth. When he landed outside Sainte-Mère-Église, the only weapon he still had was a trench knife that he had stuck in his boot. “Alone and defenseless in enemy-occupied France,” he recalled, “I

stuck the knife in the ground before I went to work on my chute. This was a hell of a way to begin a war.”

The mission of the 506th's 2nd Battalion, in which Easy Company served, was to seize one of the four causeways exiting the Normandy landing's Utah Beach. The company had been widely scattered in the dark, chaotic jump. But rallying a couple of troopers, Winters set out for the Norman village of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont behind causeway No. 2. En route he joined another battalion and collected roughly 10 members of Easy Company. Unbeknownst to Winters, Lieutenant Meehan, Easy Company's commanding officer, had been killed together with every member of the company's command team when anti-aircraft fire struck his aircraft.

Reaching his destination shortly after daybreak, Winters reported to battalion headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Strayer, the battalion commander, ordered Winters to take his men and destroy a four-gun German 105mm battery outside Brecourt Manor, a farmhouse that stood a scant half-mile from Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. By this time the American amphibious forces were landing on Utah Beach and the battery was firing on them. Silencing it was imperative if the seaborne assault was to succeed. Winters would have but 12 men for the task.

Conducting a hasty reconnaissance, Winters issued orders for the assault, which would consist of him and another officer leading the main charge while other Easy Company troopers provided supporting fire. In Winters's words, the keys to this “high risk assault” were “initiative, an immediate appraisal of the situation, the use of terrain to get into the connecting trench, and taking one gun at a time.” Less than three hours



Above: Winters wears an M1C paratrooper's helmet and totes an M-1 carbine at Camp Toombs near Toccoa, Georgia, where he received airborne training. Below: Men of the 506th Parachute Infantry head for their transport planes on June 5, 1944, to jump into France in the wee hours of D-Day—the day Winters saw his first action.



after Winters received his initial orders, the battery was silenced, and the 50 enemy artillerymen there were either killed, wounded, or missing. With the loss of 2 men, Winters and his paratroopers had killed 15 Germans, wounded many more, taken 12 prisoners, and knocked out four artillery guns. It was a textbook operation that would still be studied at West Point 50 years later.

Winters always regarded the attack at Brecourt Manor as one of the highlights of his tenure in company command. Correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote that the “first pioneering days of anything are always the best days.” Though Winters would experience many harrowing battles in the future, Brecourt remained special to him because it was his first battle, and he measured up to his personal standard of leadership and to the expectations of his soldiers. The successful assault validated the months of prepa-



Above, left: A D-Day assault on German guns was Winters's first combat, but not his last. Here, Easy Company troopers man a machine gun in October 1944 in the section of Holland called the Island. Winters's unit was there as part of an effort to penetrate Germany via Holland. Above, right: Easy Company loads up for Bastogne, Belgium, in December 1944, to help withstand a German siege during the Battle of the Bulge.

ration and training that Easy Company had gone through.

That night Winters reflected on D-Day and his very small part in its overall success. Before he dozed off, he knelt down on his knees and thanked God for allowing him to survive that horrible day. He resolved to live the war one day at a time. And he promised himself that if he survived, he would find a small farm somewhere in southern Pennsylvania and spend the remainder of his life in quiet and peace.

D-Day may have been Easy Company's big day, but it was just a beginning. The fighting continued in the Norman countryside. On June 12, Winters led his men in the seizure of Carentan, inland from D-Day's Omaha landing beach. The next day, they repelled a determined German counterattack to retake the town, and the regimental commander singled out Winters for extraordinary leadership under fire. Promoted to captain on July 2, Winters led his men

in his second combat jump, on September 17, as part of Operation Market Garden, British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's abortive attempt to bridge the Lower Rhine in the Netherlands and cross into Germany. Over the course of the next week, Winters's unit would incur 22 casualties and take what he termed “a hell of a licking.” But his company never gave an inch, and it liberated Eindhoven, Holland, a city of 100,000 inhabitants.

From Eindhoven, Winters moved Easy Company to an area of Holland known as the Island, a broad stretch of lowlands bordered by the Lower Rhine to the north and the Waal River to the south. “Our strength was low and our front big,” Winters recalled, but the defense of the Island led to the brightest chapter in Winters's service as a company commander. In the early morning hours of October 5, Winters received word that the enemy



had penetrated his forward defenses along a dike that ran parallel to the Lower Rhine. Collecting half his reserve platoon, he attacked and destroyed a German machine-gun nest guarding an important crossroads.

WINTERS HANDLED THE FIGHT at the dike by assessing the situation and then calling up the remainder of his platoon. Rather than sit and wait for the enemy to make the next move, he prepared to assault the German force that he determined lay behind the dike. After a careful reconnaissance, Easy Company laid supporting fire as Winters called for fixed bayonets and led the assault across a 175-meter open field. Springing to the top of the dike, he fired two clips of ammunition into the enemy while waiting for the rest of his company to join him. Just then, a company of enemy reinforcements appeared.



Above: An enduring friendship helped Winters deal with the stress of war. Captain Lewis Nixon (right), an Easy Company and later 2nd Battalion operations officer with a taste for whiskey and a wicked sense of humor, couldn't have been more different than the serious-minded, ever-sober Winters. The two men would witness the war together, and remain lifelong friends. Opposite: Winters as a lieutenant.

Without hesitation, Winters called for fire to stem their attack. One Easy Company paratrooper likened the battle to a “duck shoot” with the retreating Germans running for their lives to the safety of the river.

As at Brecourt Manor, Winters executed an assault with precision against a vastly superior enemy at the Island. He had conducted a reconnaissance under fire, rapidly assessed the enemy's strength and weaknesses, and allocated his resources accordingly. Leading from the front, he kept his adversaries off balance and drove them from the field. He claimed this attack was “the highlight of all E Company actions for the entire war, even better than D-Day, because it demonstrated Easy's overall superiority in every phase of infantry tactics: patrol, defense, attack under a base of fire, withdrawal, and, above all, superior marksmanship with rifle, machinegun, and mortar fire.”

Days later, Sink promoted Winters to executive officer of the 506th's 2nd Battalion. Winters relinquished command of Easy Company and moved to battalion staff. It was bittersweet to leave the paratroopers he had led with such distinction for four months and with whom he had served for two years. By any measure, his

command of Easy Company had been extraordinary. Time and again he had demonstrated his tactical brilliance at the company level. Promotion to battalion level had been warranted. But it was also necessary; Winters's full potential could be realized only with a larger command. October 5, 1944, was the last day Winters fired his weapon in combat.

TWO AND A HALF MONTHS AFTER Winters's climactic battle on the Island, the 2nd Battalion rushed to the defense of Bastogne, Belgium, in the wake of Adolf Hitler's massive counteroffensive in the Ardennes, which began on December 16. Although still assigned as battalion executive officer, Winters served as the de facto commander, because its actual commander, Lieutenant Colonel Strayer, was frequently called to regimental headquarters. Bastogne proved to be Winters's toughest challenge as a combat leader.

Heavily outnumbered and cut off from supplies, the 101st Airborne held Bastogne's perimeter until General George S. Patton, Jr.'s Third Army relieved the beleaguered garrison on December 26. Patton's arrival did not end the fighting, however.

His Secret? He Cared

Wounded in the aftermath of a mortar attack at a crossroads in Carentan, France, on June 11, 1944, Winters was taken to his regiment's aid station. The encounter he had there sheds light on what made Winters an effective and beloved commander.

The injured were taken to the aid station that Lieutenant Jackson Neavles, one of the regimental surgeons, had set up in the first building on the northwest corner of the intersection.

The rain of mortar shells ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Fearing the lull might signal a counterattack, Winters decided to check the company's ammo supply. Walking by the hotel at the intersection, where the dead German machine gun crew lay sprawled, a voice called, "Lieutenant Winters. Is it safe to cross?"

It was Strayer. The battalion commander and his staff, less the wounded Lavenson, were directly across from Winters, crouched by the wall of a building.

"Yes, sir," Winters replied, irked by Strayer's question in light of the fact that his men had just bled to secure the area. To emphasize the point, Winters stepped into the middle of the street. Strayer nodded, then hurried across, his staff trailing behind. Winters smiled and shook his head in disgust. That was typical of Strayer, he thought. Don't lead the way if someone else can do it instead.

Strayer was no sooner out of sight than something slammed into Winters' left shin with the impact of being hit by a baseball bat. He involuntarily gasped in pain and hobbled to the side of the road.

"Goddamit," he said, less from pain than out of anger for knowing he had stupidly exposed himself to show up Strayer. Welsh ran to Winters and helped him into a sitting position on the sidewalk.

"Let's get that boot off," Welsh said. Doing so, he examined the wound. "It's not deep. Maybe I can get it."

He drew out his trench knife and began probing.

"Ouch! Dammit, Harry, you're all thumbs." Winters winced. "Just help me to the aid station."

At the makeshift hospital Doc Neavles hurried over and helped Welsh ease Winters onto a tabletop. "You're not supposed to be here," Neavles joked. "At least, not as a customer."

"Sorry, Doc, I forgot that," Winters replied.

Neavles grabbed a few instruments and effortlessly dug out a piece of a bullet. The broken slug was bent and misshapen.

"You're lucky, Lieutenant," Neavles said. "It was a ricochet. It'll hurt like hell and get stiff on you, but you'll live. Any chance you can keep off of it for a while?"

"I doubt it," Winters replied.

Neavles shrugged as he applied sulfa powder and wrapped the wound with a bandage. Winters put his boot back on, noting a small hole in the tongue. He did not lace the boot to the top.

Easy had suffered ten casualties in the attack on Carentan, most of them wounded and now in the aid station. Neavles, along with company medics Eugene G. Roe, Ralph F. Spina and John R. Holland, moved among the men, tending their needs and addressing their injuries. Winters got off the table and limped around the room, speaking briefly to Lipton and other wounded men. Then he saw Private Albert Blithe sitting with his back against a wall, seemingly unharmed.

"He said he can't see," Neavles said, noting Winters' questioning gaze. "I believe him. It's called hysterical blindness. I've heard of it, but I've never seen it 'til now." Winters knelt in front of the young man.

"Blithe," he said. "It's Lieutenant Winters. Can you tell me what's the matter?"

"Everything just went black, sir. I can't see a thing. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry."

Winters patted the distressed young man's shoulder. "Don't you worry about a thing, son," he said. "We'll get you out of here and back to England. You just hang tough." He rose and limped away. He'd barely taken five steps when Blithe called to him.

"Lieutenant Winters," Blithe said, slowly rising to his feet, swiping the back of his sleeve across his eyes. "I can see. It's okay. I can see. I think I'll be all right."

Winters walked back to him. Blithe looked into Winters' eyes, and the lieutenant said gently, "That's good, Blithe. But why don't we send you back with the rest and get you checked out properly to make sure you're okay."

"No, sir," he replied. "I'd like to stay here with the fellows, if that's okay."

Winters would have preferred to send him back, but relented. "All right. Rest here a bit first, just to make sure you're fit. Then report back to your platoon."

Blithe nodded. As Winters walked away he felt enormous pride in Blithe. The young man was so terrified he literally lost his eyesight. Yet, once given a few reassuring words, he had snapped out of it and was ready to return to duty. Winters appreciated that Blithe could've taken the easy way out, but chose to stick with his friends.



From Biggest Brother: The Life of Major Dick Winters, the Man Who Led the Band of Brothers, by Larry Alexander, published by NAL Caliber. © Larry Alexander, 2005.

For the next three weeks, Winters's battalion maintained a steady defense north of Bastogne and then conducted a series of limited attacks to seize Foy, Noville, and Rachamps.

The 506th Parachute Infantry was finally relieved from the front line in mid-January 1945. The combat surrounding Bastogne became the most brilliant chapter in the Screaming Eagles' history. Though the 2nd Battalion routinely conducted combat patrols to reestablish contact with the enemy, never again would it conduct large-scale assaults.

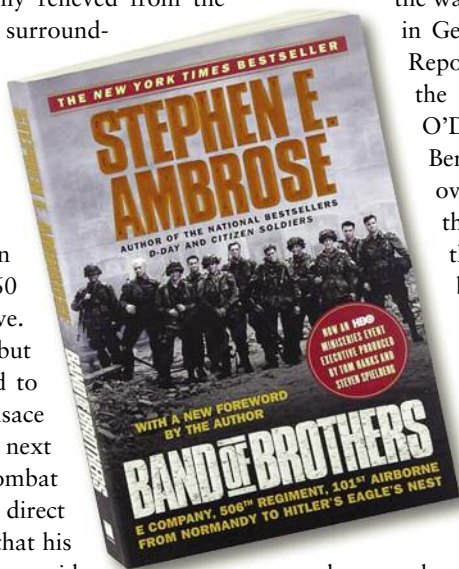
No sooner had the 506th Regiment been pulled from the line than it was directed 160 miles south to halt another enemy offensive. Winters's battalion was initially in reserve, but on February 5, 1945, he moved it forward to defend the town of Hagenau, in France's Alsace region. There the battalion remained for the next month, conducting reconnaissance and combat patrols. At one point, Winters disobeyed direct orders and submitted a false report stating that his command had conducted a nighttime raid—a raid that never happened. He reasoned that the orders to launch the raid had been unlawful because the commanding officer had been under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, the attack, over snow-covered ground, was unnecessary and would have resulted in needless casualties. When addressing the cadets at West Point in 1998, Winters reflected on his actions, stating that the orders created "an ethical dilemma in his mind," but if he had to do it over, he would disobey again.

After Hagenau, Sink promoted Winters to major and gave him official command of the 2d Battalion. After resting and refitting his paratroopers, Winters received orders for his final mission of the war: Capture Berchtesgaden, Hitler's Alpine retreat in Germany's Bavarian Alps, near Salzburg, Austria. Reports conflict over whether Winters's battalion or the 7th Infantry Regiment of Major General John O'Daniel's 3rd Infantry Division was first to enter Berchtesgaden. Winters dismissed the controversy over the competing claims, stating that the men of the 2nd Battalion had no doubt they were first on the scene and that his paratroopers did not do badly in "getting our share of the loot during the final days of the European war."

It was at Berchtesgaden on May 7, 1945, that Winters received word that Germany had surrendered unconditionally. The war was over even though Winters and his men remained in Austria until late summer on occupation duty.

Winters initially flirted with volunteering for postwar service in the Pacific and remaining in the army, but occupation duty and the lack of discipline among occupation troops held no charm for him. He decided to leave military service as soon as possible. He returned to the States in November and was mustered out of the army the following January.

Winters took advantage of the GI Bill's funding for college and graduated from Rutgers with a degree in business. He later married and raised a family. Called back into service for the Korean War, Winters chose not to go to Korea. He had seen enough of war. In 1951 he found that quiet farm in southern Pennsylvania



Above: In 1945, Winters wears the decorations that tell his war story. Top: Stephen Ambrose made that story famous in 1992.

West Point taught the mission to cadets for decades to come.

Winters received the Distinguished Service Cross for his lead role in taking out those guns against great odds and at great risk. Dating back to World War I,

the Distinguished Service Cross is given to soldiers who risk their lives while fighting with extraordinary heroism. It's no slouch of an award, but it is second best. The top decoration in the United States is the Medal of Honor, awarded for "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life beyond the call of duty while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force...." Many supporters of Winters believe his actions met the higher criteria and want Congress to correct the oversight.

Like many of the military heroes on whom the Medal of Honor is bestowed, Winters, who died on January 2 this year, would have to receive the decoration posthumously. But his supporters are keeping alive the effort to make that happen. Find out more, including how you can help, on the Major Dick Winters website, majordickwinters.com

The Right Medal

A German four-gun battery near France's Normandy coast was firing hefty 150mm shells at the US amphibious forces landing on Utah Beach early in the morning of D-Day. Major Dick Winters had parachuted in overnight and managed to gather together members of his Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry, in the chaos. He reached his planned destination just after sunrise and received orders to take out the artillery pieces.

With only 12 men, Winters charged the enemy position at Brecourt Manor and knocked out the guns one by one. Fifty of the enemy were killed, wounded, or missing, and the guns no longer endangered the beach. Professors at



At Adolf Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden, Germany, Winters (far left) and officers of his 2nd Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry enjoy libations from the *führer's* own cabinets. Capturing the Nazi leader's luxurious mountain home was a welcome reward for Winters's men.

that he had promised himself if he survived World War II. A highly successful businessman who marketed a line of nutritional products for animals, Winters eventually retired near Hershey, Pennsylvania. He spent the remainder of his life championing charitable causes and promoting educational reform.

FIFTY YEARS AFTER EASY COMPANY WAS FORMED in 1942, historian Stephen Ambrose chronicled the unit's story in his book *Band of Brothers*. What strikes the reader is the uncommon affection and respect the paratroopers had for their former commander. To a man, the veterans said Winters was the bravest, most courageous leader they had ever known. "You were my ideal and my motor in combat...." said former First Sergeant Floyd Talbert. "I would follow you into hell. When I was with you, I knew everything was absolutely under control."

On May 4, 2001, 10 years after *Band of Brothers* made Winters a national celebrity, the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute presented its prestigious annual Freedom from Fear Award to all of America's WWII veterans. Winters was chosen to represent all the men and women who served in the US Army during the war. He accepted the award from NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw on

behalf of the men he always considered the true heroes of the war: those who lie under white markers in the States and abroad.

That same year, Home Box Office released its miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Once again thrust into the national spotlight, Winters remained as humble and self-effacing as he had been as a wartime commander. "A military organization is a family," he recalled. "Hardship and death bring a family together. Easy Company was such a family. The company belonged to the noncommissioned officers and to the men. Officers aren't family. The officers were merely the caretakers."

I once asked Winters a question that I often posed to veterans of World War II: In a life marked by success in both war and peace, how would you like to be remembered? Winters responded immediately, "As company commander of Easy Company." It seems a fitting epitaph. ★

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