



Life of a Black Devil (A BOOK by ME)

A Book by Me, Halie Parkinson

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Casimere "Casey" Celske" was born on March 4, 1921 in Conrath, Wisconsin. He remembers his Catholic mother working in a big family garden to keep food on the table for their large family. He was the oldest in the family of fourteen children and he can't remember a time when his mother wasn't pregnant. Casey was drafted into the Army in December of 1942. After basic training, he was in San Antonio, Texas ready to ship out. He was given the title of mechanic and was assigned to the infantry. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship, dodging Nazi submarines before landing in North Africa. "It was a terrible trip because everybody was heaving," said 93-year-old Casey. "I got out of the ship's hold and slept up on the deck." His unit then shipped to Naples, Italy where the Americans set up their camp at a horse racetrack. While spending time in Rome, he walked to the Vatican to see Pope Pius XII as often as he could. The Pope would pray and give a blessing at his window every morning. He bought rosary beads and felt more at peace and blessed to be at the center of the Catholic Church during wartime. After a bombing of a monastery, the American forces had many casualties. They lost 1,330 of the 1,800 men. It was then Casey answered a call for replacement troops for a specialized unit nicknamed the Black Devils. They were named by the Nazi soldiers because of the black shoe polish they smeared on their faces during night missions. This was an elite American-Canadian commando unit who fought in the Aleutian Islands, Italy and southern France before being disbanded in December of 1944. Casey went from being an auto mechanic to a machine-gunner. His monthly pay went from \$21 to \$32 per month. Maj. Gen. Robert T. Frederick was the creator and commander of the 1st Special Service Force, one of the most feared—and most fearless—fighting units ever assembled. Frederick was called into General Eisenhower's office and given this assignment which was originally called "Project Plough." It was during an attack at Anzio, Italy that the brigade got their nickname. The diary of a dead Nazi soldier was found saying "The black devils are all around us every time we come into the line. We never hear them coming." Another German prisoner stated "They are treacherous, unmerciful and clever. You cannot afford to relax." The Black Devils were immortalized years later in Hollywood in a 1968 movie titled "The Devil's Brigade" starring William Holden. The film portrays the first mission of the Italian campaign, the seemingly impossible task of capturing an impregnable Nazi mountain stronghold called Monte La Difensa. Casey knew how to handle mules from life on the farm. He volunteered to bring a pack of four with supplies up the mountain in Italy. The plan was to lead one and have the other three follow. It didn't work all the time because mules can be stubborn. It was an extremely cold and tedious journey up the mountain. A great victory was won when Monte la Difensa was in Allied hands and eventually the Allies took the other mountain peaks nearby. Casey's unit was near the Czech border in the spring of 1945 when the news came that the Allies had won the war in the European theater. Casey came home on a victory ship in October of 1945. It was foggy when he came into the harbor in New York City but he could see the arm of Lady Liberty as they arrived. Like thousands of American soldiers, he kissed the ground when he stepped foot on American soil. Casey is a decorated war veteran with a bronze star and two purple hearts. In 2013, the United States Congress passed a bill to award the First Special Service Force members the highly prestigious Congressional Gold Medal. Casey hopes to attend the award ceremony in 2015. Casey Celske was proud on February 3, 2015 when he went to Washington DC to participate in the First Special Service Force (FSSF) receiving the highest civilian honor: the Congressional Gold Medal.

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