



# World War II Veteran Faced a New Enemy

Ben Gehr

It was March 1945 and Allied forces had spent nearly three months in the heavily forested Ardennes battling a massive counter-offensive launched by the Nazis in a final attempt to split and destroy U.S. and British forces in Europe during WWII. The bloody fighting, which would become known as the Battle of the Bulge, left massive casualties on both sides and pushed the tattered German army into retreat.

Ben Gehr was just 18 years old when he and the rest of the Army's 89th Infantry Division marched into Germany from France to reinforce Gen. George Patton's Third Army and spearhead the Allied force's final drive through the Rhineland to take Berlin and end the fighting in Europe.

Trapped by the advancing Russians from the east and Allied forces from the west, the Nazi army was in its final days.

"I was a forward scout," said the 89-year-old Cajon man. "We moved so quickly, I had a hard time knowing exactly where we were from one day to the next."

In its first two weeks of combat, the 89th—known as the Rolling W—cleared critical supply routes, captured thousands of Nazi troops and marched deep within German lines.

Gehr admits it's not always easy remembering the exact details of his time as an Army private first class, but he does recall, however, twice crossing paths with Patton in the spring of 1945.

"I never got a chance to meet Patton," Gehr said. "He wasn't the 'meeting-type.' He was there to fight. He told us not to bother digging foxholes. We'd be moving. And boy, did we move."

As a forward scout in the lightning-quick division, Gehr found himself under fire by German soldiers—snipers and those embedded in machine gun nests—who would rather die than surrender.

In danger more often than he cares to recall, Gehr, wounded twice in combat, said he doesn't remember many of the details of the second time he was shot.

The recipient of two Purple Hearts and two Bronze Stars, Gehr learned of the fall of Berlin and Hitler's death while in a hospital in England. He was discharged in 1946.

Born and raised in Santa Barbara County, Gehr faced another deadly enemy ten years ago when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer during a routine exam. This time, however, it was the cancer that was moving quickly.

"My doctor, Dr. James Halverson, was checking my prostate and said there was a swelling," Gehr said. "He wanted me to see Dr. Marc Beagler right away."



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Gehr had been sent to the Ventura-based urologist who at the time had recently begun using the state-of-the-art da Vinci Robotics device to perform laparoscopic surgeries.

Laparoscopic surgery—commonly referred to as minimally invasive surgery—means a doctor makes a very small incision to insert small, thin surgical tools and a very tiny telescopic video camera, called an endoscope, into the area of the body which requires surgery, typically in the pelvis or stomach.

The da Vinci Robotics device, made by the Northern California-based Intuitive Surgical,

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is a three-armed robot which allows surgeons to perform the surgeries, referred to by doctors as “keyhole surgeries” because the incisions are so small.

With a da Vinci device, the surgeon sits at a console to watch the video taken by the light-afixed endoscope inside of the patient's body to perform the surgery. The surgeon controls the surgical tools using a high-tech console that includes a set of extremely precise controllers the surgeon uses his fingers to manipulate.

Because the surgery, which involves a highly-

trained team of nurses, doesn't include incisions and the movement or removal of organs, patients recover from surgery much faster. What's more, the smaller the incision, the less blood loss.

That's why Beaghler thought Gehr the perfect candidate for such a surgery even though he was 79 at the time.

“Many men his age aren't treated for prostate cancer,” Beaghler said. “Mr. Gehr was so vigorous and active, and I knew his prostate cancer was going to cause him problems soon, problems I knew he didn't want to suffer, so we opted to perform the da Vinci surgery.”

Gehr, who retired as a supervisor for Caltrans, said it was the right choice for him.

“That option sounded real good to me, and they did a great job of explaining everything to me,” Gehr said. “I was home the next day. Went for walks and felt good.”

Gehr said in the decade since the surgery his health has declined due to age—he's 89—but said his decision to have the prostatectomy using the da Vinci Robotics device has given him a good quality of life.

“His overall health has declined, but he's still moving,” said Roberta, Gehr's wife of 64 years. “He's still working out. He has a good attitude—a good outlook on life.”

As a former forward scout in the Army, Gehr knows the importance of looking down the road to know what's coming.

“I asked Dr. Beaghler, ‘How long am I



Dr. Marc Beaghler

expected to live? Because I was getting along, and my life was one of hard work. The doctor said, ‘You could be living until 100,’” Gehr said with a chuckle. “I don't know about that, but I'll give it a try.”