

Prologue: The Belgian Corporal

In the summer of 1955, I was a young Texas National Guard sergeant on active duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

A corporal in my squad was a Belgian-American named Charles DeNaer. An old man as far as most of us were concerned, being well over thirty, Charley commanded a certain amount of our respect, for not only was he older than the rest of us, he had lived in Belgium when the Germans rolled across the low countries by-passing the Maginot Line on their way into France. He had seen war. One soft Oklahoma afternoon, sitting on a bunk in the half-light of an old wooden barracks, he told me his story.

In Charley's little town in Belgium, there lived an old man, a gunsmith. The old man was friendly with the kids and welcomed them to his shop. He had once been an armorer to the king of Belgium, according to Charley. He told us of the wonderful guns the old man had crafted, using only hand tools. There were double shotguns and fine rifles with beautiful hardwood stocks and gorgeous engraving and inlay work. Charley liked the old man and enjoyed looking at the guns. He often did chores around the shop.

One day the gunsmith sent for Charley. Arriving at the shop, Charley found the old man carefully oiling and wrapping guns in oilcloth and paper. Charley asked what he was doing. The old smith gestured to a piece of paper on the workbench and said that an order had come to him to register all of his guns. He was to list every gun with a description on a piece of paper and then to send the paper to the government.

The old man had no intention of complying with the registration law and had summoned Charley to help him bury the guns at a railroad crossing. Charley asked why he didn't simply comply with the order and keep the guns. The old man, with tears in his eyes, replied to the

boy, “If I register them, they will be taken away.”

A year or two later, the *blitzkrieg* rolled across the Low Countries. One day not long after, the war arrived in Charley’s town. A squad of German SS troops banged on the door of a house that Charley knew well. The family had twin sons about Charley’s age. The twins were his best friends. The officer displayed a paper describing a Luger pistol, a relic of the Great War, and ordered the father to produce it. That old gun had been lost, stolen, or misplaced sometime after it had been registered, the father explained. He did not know where it was.

The officer told the father that he had exactly fifteen minutes to produce the weapon. The family turned their home upside down. No pistol.

They returned to the SS officer empty-handed.

The officer gave an order and soldiers herded the family outside while other troops called the entire town out into the square. There on the town square the SS machine-gunned the entire family—father, mother, Charley’s two friends, their older brother and a baby sister.

I will never forget the moment. We were sitting on the bunk on a Saturday afternoon and Charley was crying, huge tears rolling down his cheeks, making silver dollar size splotches on the dusty barracks floor.

That was my conversion from a casual gun owner to one who was determined to prevent such a thing from ever happening in America.

Later that summer, when I had returned home I went to the president of the West Texas Sportsman’s Club in Abilene and told him I wanted to be on the legislative committee. He replied that we didn’t have a legislative committee, but that I was now the chairman.

I, who had never given a thought to gun laws, have been eyeball deep in the “gun control” fight ever since.

As the newly-minted Legislative Committee Chairman of the West Texas Sportsman’s club, I set myself to some research. I had never before read the Second Amendment, but now noticed that *The American Rifleman* published it in its masthead. I was delighted to learn that the Constitution prohibited laws like Belgium’s. There was no battle to fight, I thought. We were covered. I have since learned that the words about a militia and the right of the people to keep and bear, while important, mean as much to a determined enemy as the Maginot line did to Hitler.

Rather than depend on the Second Amendment to protect our gun rights, I’ve learned that we must protect the Second Amendment and the precious rights it recognizes.

Editor's Note

Neal Knox published this story a couple of times, once in a letter to supporters and as part of a speech to a rally against the Clinton "assault weapons" ban. I knew it almost by heart as a frequent after-dinner story in answer to questions of how he got into the gun issue. I remember asking him why he didn't beat the drum on this story. Since it was so moving to me, I thought it would impress others. He replied that many returning World War II G.I.'s told variations of the same story and that it was a standard argument against gun laws. And like so many standard arguments, it seems to weaken with repetition. He felt the story was too important to allow it to become trite.

The naïve and all-too-common response to this and similar histories is to say, "That can't happen in America." But if that were so, then it couldn't happen in a place like Belgium, either – a storybook land known for windmills, canals and chocolate. But it did happen there.

And it has happened in America.

The difference between the Nazi atrocities and those in America is only a matter of scale and frequency.

The 1993 Waco debacle proceeded from a suspicion that the "compound" *might* contain a trigger mechanism that required a \$200 tax stamp. Randy Weaver's home and family were shot up because Weaver failed to appear after selling a crudely hacksawed shotgun barrel that might have been an inch under an arbitrary limit, and so also required a tax stamp. Kenyon Ballew had a dummy hand grenade that required no permit. Federal agents dressed in jeans and t-shirts kicked in his door and shot him as he tried to defend himself with an antique pistol.

Waco, Ruby Ridge, the Ballew incident and dozens of other, less publicized, but no less real horrors have proven that such things indeed can happen in America. Neal Knox's life's work was to make sure such incidents remain rare.