

Alexander « Pete » Suer (1917-1945), dentist and Second World War hero

by
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Introduction

The United States of America entered the Second World War after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Eventually it had an army of eight million soldiers, who needed many doctors and dentists to support them. In that year 2,000 reserve dentists were summoned to serve in the armed forces (Jeffcott, 1955). By November 1944 the active Dental Corps had a record 15,292 officers (King, 2002).

On 6 June 1944 the Allies landed in Normandy. In order to prepare for the D-Day landings huge amounts of weapons and equipment were transported across the Atlantic from America to Great Britain (Jeffcott, 1955; Ahlfeld, 1951). The Dental Service lost 116 dental officers on all fronts: 20 on the battlefield, 5 from their injuries, 10 in custody and 81 because of diseases or injuries far from the battlefields (King, 2002 & Konieczny, 1992). Alexander Suer was one of them.

Alexander « Pete » Suer (1917-1945)

Monier and De Trez (2005) relate that Alexander Suer was born in Philadelphia in 1917. He went to Overbrook High School and studied dentistry at Temple University where he graduated in 1938. He then opened his dental office on 5739, North Park Avenue in Philadelphia (Monier & De Trez, 2005).

Worried about anti-semitic exactions perpetrated in Europe by the Germans, he enlisted in the reserve army in 1939. On April 1, 1941, he joined the army dental service (Monier & De Trez, 2005).



Captain Alexander « Pete » Suer (1917-1945), dentist in the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) of the 82nd Airborne Division at the first-aid post of “le Manoir des Flories” in Varenguebec (De Trez, 2004, © Michel de Trez).

Military training

He followed a 12-week medical training in the Medical Field Service School of Carlisle in Pennsylvania. *“Alexander “Pete” Suer received physical training similar to that of all the military, and got accustomed to the training system of the military dental profession: within the country hospital, but also as a “Medic” within a first-line fighting unit, a position which consists in practicing all vital emergency care, the gathering of the wounded men and their evacuation outside the war zone”* (Monier & De Trez, 2005).

Pearl Harbour, December 7, 1941

Monier and De Trez (2005) specify that following the Japanese air raid, Suer decided to follow the training of the Parachute School of Fort Benning. He got his certificate and joined the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). According to the two authors, on April 20, 1943, his regiment left Fort Bragg and settled in Camp Edwards in Massachusetts. There, he received an intensive training before his departure for Europe. During a week, the medical staff vaccinated the soldiers, carried out dental examinations and got their kits ready (Monier & De Trez, 2005). On May 10, 1943, the men of the 505th PIR landed in North Africa in Casablanca. On July 9, 1943, they boarded C-47s to Sicily.

In Sicily...

Safely landed, the American dentist bent over backwards to save the wounded. De Trez (2004) recalled that: *«Pete Suer had invented in Sicily an audacious method to save the wounded soldiers who were almost out of reach. Standing upright on the bumper of his jeep, waving a Red-Cross flag, Peter was moving between the lines to gather the wounded soldiers while the two camps carried on shooting at each other.»* (De Trez, 2004) Suer never got injured. He was supposed to remain at the rear first-aid post. On August 20, after the fall of Messina, the 505th PIR was summoned back in Tunisia (De Trez, 2004).

Second parachuting

Monier and De Trez (2005) relate that during the landing on the coasts of Salerno, the regiment parachuted in close to Paestum on September 14, 1943. On October 1, it attacked Naples and on November 18, the 505th PIR went to Ireland where the soldiers spent the end of year celebrations (Monier & De Trez, 2005).

The Normandy landing

De Trez (2004) points out that on February 13, the troops left for Scotland. There, after some rough training, they learnt of their departure on the night of June 5 for France. Their goal was to reach Sainte-Mère-Eglise. Once there, Suer immediately organized a rudimentary hospital with Dr Franco in the village's hospice. There he gave medical care freely to all the wounded men, whatever their nationality (De Trez, 2004).

“The Surgical Technician Raymond Queen remembered that Pete Suer wanted to rescue all the wounded men. We had to calm him down each time. However much we tried to tell him that he would be shot down, he loved braving danger too much. He was brave but also dynamic.” (Monier & De Trez, 2005)

According to Monier and De Trez (2005), *“He was by far the most admired and most decorated medical practitioner of the regiment. Indeed, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal, an American military decoration, for treating his wounded comrades under German fire shortly after the Normandy landing.”* (Monier & De Trez, 2005)

“During the regiment’s stay in Normandy, Pete Suer’s recklessness often gave cold sweats to his colleagues of the medical staff. Doctor Franco recalled: “Pete Suer and I were walking through fields when we caught sight of moving human figures. Pete, who talked German, shouted that they were surrounded by heavily armed Americans. The Germans dropped their weapons and we forced them to lie down. There were fifteen of them and we were only two! I was terrified by the idea that they could catch sight of my Red Cross armband. Fortunately this did not occur.” (De Trez, 2004)

The Operation Market Garden

Monier & De Trez (2005) relate that on September 17, 1944, the regiment parachuted into Holland. The first-aid post was immediately settled in a Girls’ School in Groesbeek. It was soon transferred to Nijmegen because of violent bombings. According to the two authors, Suer distinguished himself by his inexhaustible will and action to gather all the injured despite of the bullets whizzing around him. On November 12, Canadian troops replaced the 505th PIR who was summoned in Suippes, next to Reims (Monier & De Trez, 2005).

Mortar fire...

According to Monier and De Trez (2005), on December 23, 1944, during his fifth military mission in the Ardennes, *““Pete” Suer learnt that two injured soldiers were waiting for emergency medical care next to German lines. Accompanied by three medical orderlies, he went on the spot, and alone, crawled forward without cover towards the soldiers. It is at that moment that mortar fire hit the brave dentist in his legs, crushing his two feet. He then insisted that the two wounded soldiers be evacuated before him. With that done, he was then driven to the first aid post where he was given a plasma transfusion. The seriousness of his wounds was such that Alexander P. Suer was transferred to the Hospital of Liege, then to Paris, and from there, to the great military hospital, Walter Reed, next to Washington D.C.”* (Monier & De Trez, 2005)

Having gangrene, his two legs were amputated. He died of a pulmonary embolism following the operation. He was 28 years old (De Trez, 2004).

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