

The Bonsai Named Curly

By Paul Koenning

Similar to many bonsai enthusiasts when they first feel the bite of bonsai addiction, I placed anything with green in a pot in hopes of it becoming a fine piece of art in the coming years. Most of those little cuttings and recently sprouted seeds have slowly ended up in the compost heap as they failed to live through my ability to care for them, or simply were never going to amount to much. However, one of those green little cuttings did survive the crucible of my care and has even become a “remarkable” little bonsai.



That one cutting become bonsai was my first attempt at creating a root over rock composition, but that is not what makes the tree so special to me. I have been caring for this bonsai for 14 years now and that is special, but not why this bonsai holds a special place in my heart. Curly the bonsai is a dwarf schefflera, which is a difficult species to encourage to branch, but it is not pruning mastery of the species that keeps me holding on to this precious bonsai. The most outstanding attribute of Curly for me, is the fact that the original dwarf schefflera unrooted cutting came from a floral arrangement at my Grandpa Leonard Koenning's funeral.



The family history tied to this schefflera makes this tree priceless to me, and I hope to persuade you into agreeing with me. What I had heard growing up is that grandpa is a war hero who fought in the second world war. As time has passed it is difficult to remember all of the conversation associated with my grandpa, but Leonard never acted like a famous war hero in my mind. He was just my funny and loving grandpa, that liked to joke with everyone given the chance. I will forever remember letting him know that I am doing pretty good, only to have him reply that it does not cost any more to be remarkable! While he may not have fallen into how a younger me thought a war hero should act, I am now confident that it was his experience in the war that caused him to see every new day as a remarkable one.



705 Tank Destroyer Battalion
April 1st 1944
Fort Lewis Wash

Leonard Koenning's military service in the Army began in 1942 and he was attached to the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, which had been activated for less than a year. The tank destroyer battalions used the M-18 Hellcat which looks awfully similar to a tank. The difference is that the Hellcat was not weighed down by armor, so it was the fastest vehicle in the ground in the war. Of course, the lack of armor left the men very vulnerable to enemy fire. Grandpa Koenning was one of the gun crewmen responsible for manning and operating the 76-millimeter gun used on the M-18 Hellcat, which is the same sized gun used on the larger Sherman tanks. Having served his country and the world during the second world war is enough on its own to deserve hero status, but the operation the 705th became involved in became one of the "most outstanding military feats of all time," according to former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Late in the war the Nazis had advanced and were attempting to split the allied forces and cut off their resupply routes. This resulted in a bulge in the German forces extending towards the coast of Belgium near Antwerp. The 101st airborne unit found themselves in Bastogne with the orders to hold the city and stop the Germans advance. Commanders put out a call for reinforcements to help fill the gaps, and the 705th battalion was on their way within an hour. The high speed of their M-18 Hellcats allowed them to reach the 101st before being completely surrounded at Bastogne. The single division of the 101st combined with the one battalion of 705th tank destroyers, were severely out numbers by "the full weight of 10 divisions of the world's best troops".



This battle became known as the battle of the bulge, and the 101st paratroopers and 705th tank destroyers became known as the “Battered Bastards of Bastogne.” Incredibly the 705th was able to “destroy 39 German tanks, 3 half-tracks, 3 trucks, an armored car, 3 anti-tank guns and 4 other vehicles. They also accounted for an untold number of enemy casualties”. This battle happened over Christmas 1944 through New Years of 1945 and is credited for completely halting the Nazi advance.

Corporal Koenning, was awarded a purple heart, 4 bronze stars, and several other prestigious medals. His unit the 705th, in addition, was awarded the distinguished unit award, which is the highest award a unit can receive. All of these accolades that were well deserved, and the only words I can remember him telling me about his service were the nick name he received while in the service.

Curly! I always figured grandpa was just joking around with me, as he was bald and didn't have hair. How could he have been given the nick name of Curly? I will probably never have the answer to that question, but I sure am glad that little schefflera cutting was as tough a fighter as Curly or I may never have taken the time to truly research the magnitude of hero my grandpa is to me and America.



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