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Polio: Death of a Disease

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Arnold Snyder: He came home from the war to the fight of his life

By Huntly Collins
Inquirer Staff Writer
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He landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. For his courage under fire, he was decorated with five Purple Hearts, three Silver Stars, and two Bronze Stars.

But when Army infantryman Arnold Snyder came home to Philadelphia from World War II, he met an enemy more daunting than the Nazis - bulbar polio, the most severe form of poliomyelitis.

Arnold, then 24, had enrolled at Temple University's pharmacy school on the GI Bill. He wanted to find a wife and take over his father's business, Stenton Pharmacy in East Mount Airy.

But one July afternoon in 1948, he went swimming at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel pool in Atlantic City. He woke up the next day paralyzed from the neck down. Gasping for air as polio virus attacked the nerves that controlled his diaphragm, he was rushed to the Naval Hospital in South Philadelphia.

The hospital had only three iron lungs. He got the last one.

Invented in the 1930s, the iron lung was the precursor of the modern respirator. It was a huge steel tank with windows and hatches on the side.

A polio patient was put on a bed that slid into the tank. Only his head remained outside. The tank was sealed with a large rubber collar around the patient's neck.

The huge machine worked by alternating pressure on the patient's chest, forcing air in and out of the lungs. The idea was to keep the patient alive long enough for new nerve cells to take over the work of those destroyed by polio.

Arnold could not move his arms or legs, had trouble swallowing, and talked with great difficulty.

At first, he tried holding a pencil in his mouth and writing on a tablet in front of him. But that proved too difficult. With his thoughts trapped inside him, he waited patiently for the male orderlies to wipe his face with cold compresses and listened to the ever-present *swish*,



Arnold Snyder, 74, motors through in Curtis Park near his home in Wyncote. (Peter Tobia/Inquirer)

bang, swish, bang of the great machine that held his body.

The orderlies repositioned him several times a day to avoid bedsores. At first, a catheter carried away his urine. Then he used a bedpan, which the orderlies changed by reaching in through the hatches on the tank.

On Friday nights, Arnold was visited by a pretty 17-year-old named Suzanne Udell from Olney High School who volunteered at the hospital, cheering up the wounded vets who filled most of the wards.

When she came to Arnold, she spent more time than usual, joking and talking to him. Five years later, they married.

Arnold spent six months in the iron lung and then was sent to Warm Springs, Ga., where Franklin D. Roosevelt had established a polio rehabilitation center.

The physical therapy in 80-degree spring water worked wonders. And Arnold's spirits soared when he and two teenage boys were invited to roll their wheelchairs into the VIP dining room to have lunch with Eleanor Roosevelt.

Over fried chicken, mashed potatoes and peas, the former first lady talked with them about the ravages of the disease and the importance of finding a vaccine to prevent it.

"She was so nice. She was interested in everything we had to say."

More tales from the polio years

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