Guest Column

Chester County’s Band of Brothers

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GUEST COLUMN

Many are familiar with the 10-hour HBO-produced series “Band of Brothers,” currently being rebroadcast on the History Channel. The series is based on the book by the late eminent historian, Stephen Ambrose, and was produced by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg. (The duo may produce a second band of brothers for the Pacific Theater.)

“Band of Brothers” is a true account of Easy Company, 506th PIR (Parachute Infantry Regiment), 101st Airborne Division that parachuted into Normandy for D-Day and fought to the end of the war.

The story is an accurate portrayal of Easy Company and of the bond that formed. These were men from all walks of life and different geographical areas, who first met while in training. They soon learned that whatever one thinks of the person next to him, one depends on him for his life. One consequently will protect this person’s life as if it were his own — a Band of Brothers.

There was a Chester County “Band of Brothers”: Harry Lacky, Herbert Hagamon, Vernon Rubicam, John Grycky, and Jim Latta — all graduates of the Class of 1936 at Coatesville’s high school. Unlike the bands of brothers in the HBO series, these teens knew each other before they went off to war. They were close friends who went out together and helped each other with school, personal problems, etc. They met to play touch football nearly every Sunday afternoon at the Latta farm, which was located on Parkesburg at the intersection of routes 10 and 30, now home to a Wal-Mart.

After graduation, they remained close friends. Lacky worked at Lukens Steel. Hagamon became a pilot (he took Lacky for his first airplane ride) and also worked at Lukens. Rubicam also became a pilot at Coatesville airport and went on to Drexel University. Grycky went to West Chester State Teachers College to pursue his making music talent. Latta attended the University of Pennsylvania.

When the war broke out, the five friends named themselves the “Knights of the Square Table.” They thought of themselves as knights coming to the rescue of their country, and planned to “square things up” with those who attacked us. Lacky because of his poor eyesight was rejected from the armed forces, but he later became involved manufacturing critical components for the Manhattan Project at Lukens Steel.

Hagamon enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a pilot, and rose to the rank of captain. He was lost while ferried an A-20 light bomber from France to England in a heavy fog on June 10, 1945. Rubicam was commissioned as a Marine Corps pilot, flew dive bombers with the first group of pilots from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, taking off and landing often when the airfield was under enemy fire. He flew 69 missions, and while returning on a transport from Australia, his plane went down.

Grycky was on the USS Juneau when it was sunk during the naval battle of Guadalcanal, the ship on which the five Sullivans died. He survived the sinking, aided several crewmembers, and encouraged them to never give up. As he swam to a nearby raft, a shark attacked him. Latta enlisted in the Army and served in the China-Burma-India Theater. The Coatesville Class of 1936 memorialized the four graduates who gave their lives during the war: three of the “Knights” and Harry Benard. The Class of 1936 Scholarship is given to a senior for good citizenship.

Some say that the Knights made a pact — that whoever survived would take care of the families of those who didn’t. Latta, before his recent death, said he did not remember a specific pact. But he nevertheless took care of the families of Rubicam, Hagamon, and Grycky. He visited their mothers bringing flowers each holiday until they passed away. He was one of a band of brothers, a “Knight of the Square Table.”

These knights fought not in suits of armor, but in armored ships, and armored aircraft. They came to the rescue of our country and did square things up with our enemies.

The writer lives in West Chester.