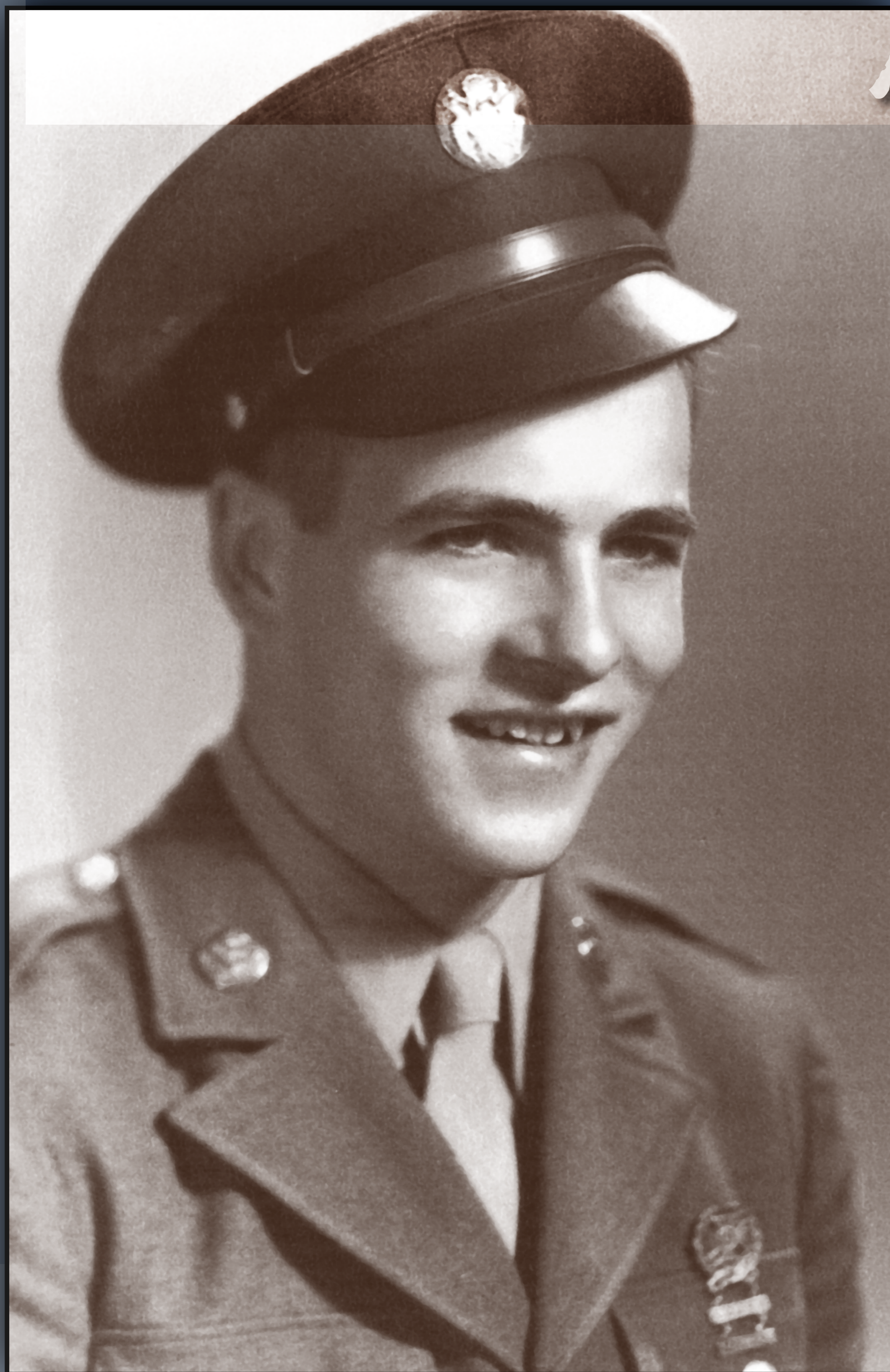


Leo Hymas



Leo, a trained but untried soldier, October 1944.
Collection of Leo Hymas

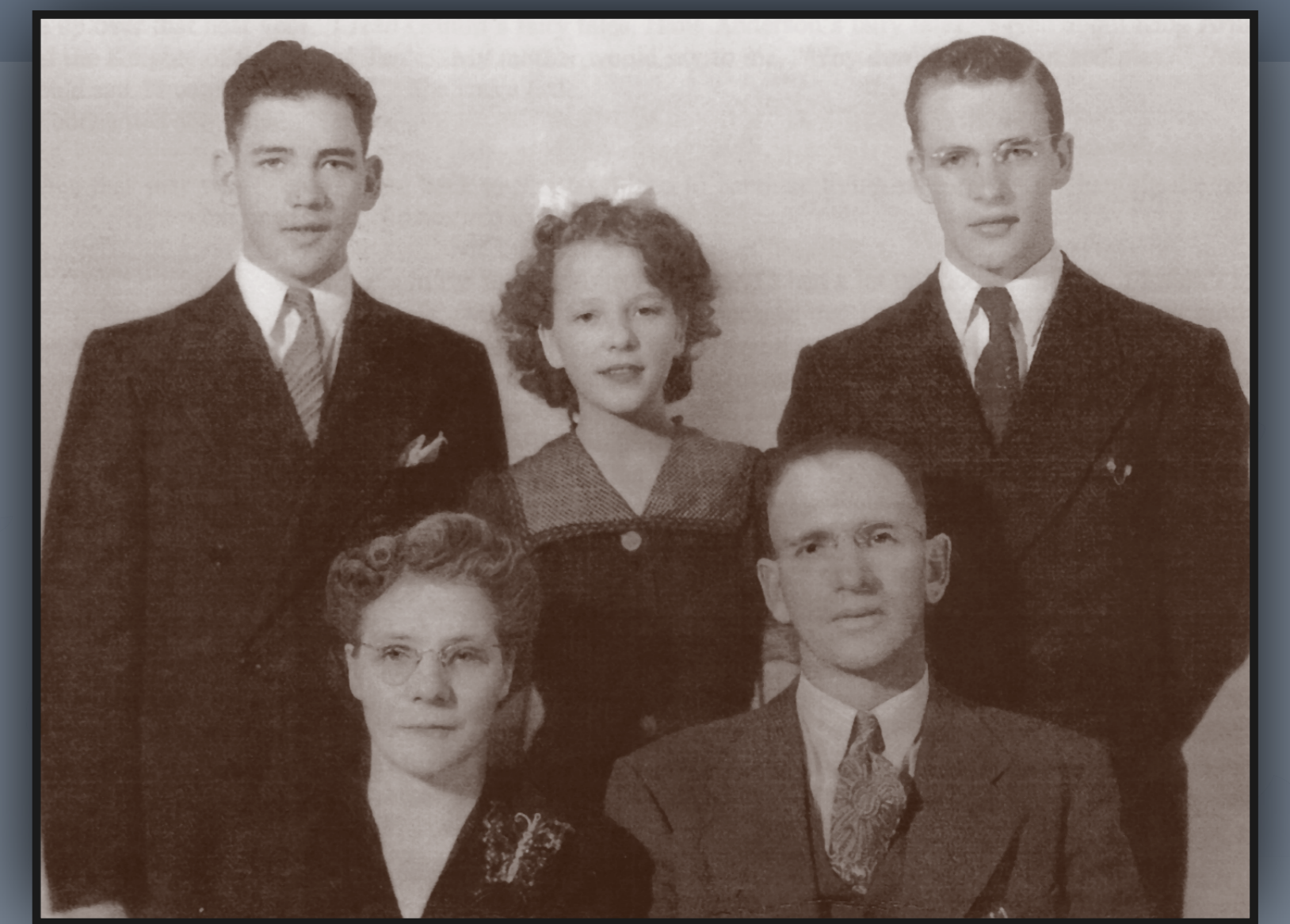
Leo Hymas was a 15-year-old Utah farm boy when Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

After graduating from high school, Leo was drafted into the army. As Leo's convoy sailed across the Atlantic to join Patton's Third Army, he prayed. A devout Mormon, Leo pledged himself first to his Higher Power, the source of his moral resolve, and then to his duty to protect his loved ones and country.

Leo could not have imagined his path would take him to the gates of Buchenwald, where he would witness the horrors of the notorious concentration camp and help liberate its survivors.

Growing up

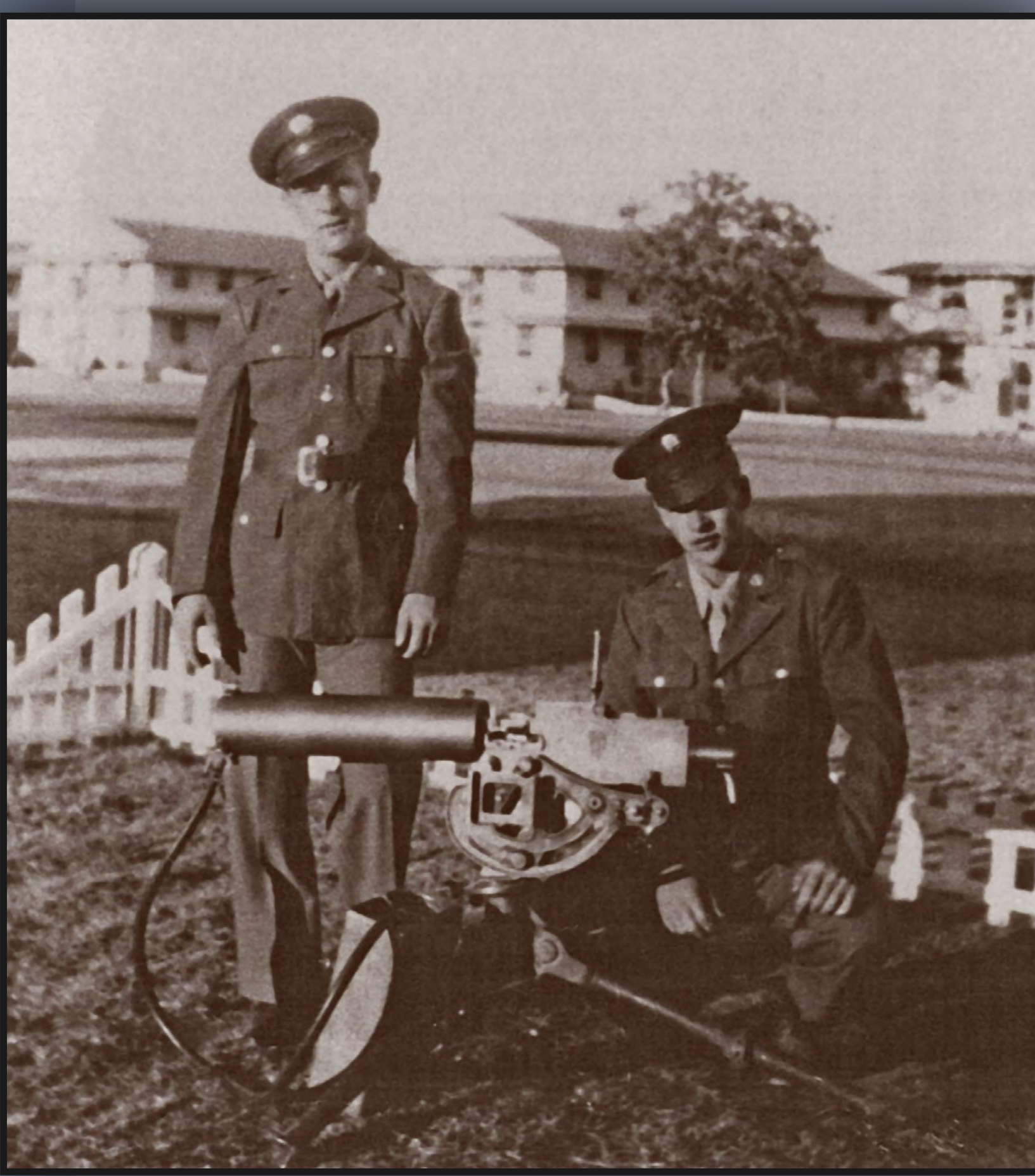
Leo, rear right, and family, 1939.
Collection of Leo Hymas



Leo Hymas was born on February 2, 1926, in Sharon, Idaho. In 1938, when Leo was 12, he and his family moved to Cache Valley, Utah. They ran a 335-acre dairy farm and grew hay, grain, corn, field peas, and sugar beets. Leo and his younger brother and sister worked on the farm year round and milked the cows twice daily.

Soldier

Leo Hymas, right, and best friend Jimmy DeMarco trained and fought with these machine guns, 1945.
Collection of Leo Hymas



Leo was assigned to the 97th Infantry Division as a machine gunner and met Jimmy DeMarco.

"Jimmy was from Boston and I didn't like him—I thought he was putting on airs. But I learned a very important lesson: first impressions are not always correct. Jimmy was a good young man, a Catholic, an Italian, a city kid with dark, flashing eyes. I was a blond Mormon farmboy, and we made an interesting pair. We decided that we'd be the best machine gun operators in that battalion. We really worked at it. We came to love each other. He was my dearest friend."

After landing at Le Havre, France, Leo's unit joined General George S. Patton's Third Army and journeyed to the Rhine. The soldiers crossed the river and went into Cologne. Leo and Jimmy faced combat for the first time. While moving their machine gun into position, Jimmy was killed.

"I was so angry, so frightened, and very sorrowful. All of those emotions pushed together. I could hear the shells exploding and the screams of the wounded all around. I could hear them cry out. I've never been so afraid in all of my life!"



Leo earned numerous service medals. He is most proud of these two, the Army Good Conduct Medal and the WWII Victory Medal.
Collection of Leo Hymas

"I remember once attacking a munitions plant in Dusseldorf. We captured two prisoners. One was younger than I and he was crying. Suddenly there was a counterattack and we were surrounded. My lieutenant came in and commanded, 'Shoot those two! I need you out here to defend our position.'

"I said, 'Sir, they've surrendered.' He responded, 'I don't care. Shoot them. That's an order!'

"To disobey an order in wartime is to be subject to court martial. The penalty can be death. I knew that. But I thought to myself that there is a Higher Authority. I said, 'Sir, I will not.' He grabbed my rifle and shot those two right then and there.

"Come with me!' he snapped. 'I'll court martial you for disobeying.' He did not live to file that report."

Liberator

Leo and squad members from the liberation of Buchenwald. Photo taken November 22, 1945.

Left to right rear: Joseph Iovine (not present at liberation), John J. Ennis, and Leo Hymas.
Left to right kneeling: Joe L. Wilson, John E. Burton.
Collection of Leo Hymas



In April of 1945, Leo remembers, "We were ordered to investigate what might be a POW camp surrounded by a 12-foot-high fence of electrified barbed wire. We used explosives to break into the camp. There was a firefight with guards, and one of my friends was wounded." Then Leo and his squad entered Buchenwald.

"I was not prepared for what we found in the barracks—human beings that were mere skeletons. The smell was horrible. As I walked among the racks in the crowded barracks, two little arms came out from the lowest rack and wrapped themselves around my feet. I looked down at another starving face. A soft little voice said, 'Americaines?' 'Yes! Yes!' I said. 'You're free!'"

Buchenwald Survivors at Liberation, April 16, 1945. Author Elie Wiesel, far right, middle row.
Courtesy U.S. National Archives



At liberation, Buchenwald's inmates included 350 children. Many survivors—emaciated, weak, and frail—were too ill to live long after liberation, and others died because they could not tolerate normal food. Recovery for all was difficult and long.

The American public saw horrifying and graphic pictures of Buchenwald for the first time in the May 7, 1945, issue of *Life* magazine. The death toll at Buchenwald was at least 56,000 people between 1937 and 1945. When Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, visited a sub-camp of Buchenwald, he ordered the military and civilian news media to record evidence of the atrocities right away. Eisenhower knew most people would not be able to make any sense of the atrocities that were, in his words, "beyond the American mind to comprehend."

After the War

Leo in Japan, 1945.
Collection of Leo Hymas

Before the war in Europe ended, Leo and his division fought to take Prague and Pilsen in Czechoslovakia. Leo enjoyed a brief leave with his family in the U.S. He was sent to Japan as the U.S. prepared to invade. While the soldiers were on the way, "We heard on the radio that we had bombed Hiroshima, and then the war was over."

Leo served in Japan under Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who oversaw economic recovery programs, the demilitarization of Japan, the reorganization of the government, and war crimes investigations.



Leo in a classroom, 2008.
Hobocast Center Collection

Leo was honorably discharged May 12, 1946. He returned to Utah and married Amy, his high school sweetheart. They raised four children. Leo received a degree in Business Administration and worked for the Boeing Company. In 1998, Leo and Amy moved to Langley, WA.

Since 1997, Leo has told his story to thousands of students and communities as a member of the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center's Speakers Bureau.

"I ask young people today to be good warriors—and to fight for what is right."



"I understood that the most vulnerable, the most innocent, pay the highest price in wartime."

LIBERATOR

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