

1945 October 15-21

Silver Star Sacrifice

Proksch Gets Army Honors

WITH THE FIFTH ARMY.
Italy —(Special)— S. Sgt. Ervin
W. Proksch of La Crosse, Wis.,
has been awarded the silver star
medal posthumously for gallantry
in action in Italy.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 September 4, page 2)

Berg Given Silver Star Posthumously

HOLMEN, Wis. — (Special) —
From the adjutant general's office
in Washington Mrs. John Berg re-
ceived word that her husband,
Lieut. John L. Berg, has been
awarded the silver star posthum-
ously. He lost his life in action in
Germany early this year.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 October 17, page 7)

Besides being from La Crosse County, Ervin Proksch and John Berg had several other things in common.

- They both served in the United States Army during World War II.
- They both led men in combat.
- They both earned this nation's third-highest combat decoration--the Silver Star.¹
- They both died before receiving this honor for their heroism.

This week seventy-five years ago, their widows were presented with this esteemed symbol of bravery in combat.

Ervin Walter Proksch was born on July 6, 1917, in La Crosse County.² His parents were Walter W. and Mary M. Proksch. Ervin and his two sisters grew up on a farm in the town of Greenfield in La Crosse County at the intersection of County Trunk Highway M and State Highway 14.³

Ervin, or "Puddy" as he was called then, graduated from La Crosse Central High School in 1936. His secret ambition was to be a radio announcer.⁴



Ervin W. Proksch in 1936

(*Booster*, La Crosse Central High School yearbook, 1936, page 44)

But Proksch followed a different career path. He graduated from the [Wisconsin Business University](#) in La Crosse.⁵ In October 1940, he was working for Standard Oil at 20 Copeland Avenue in La Crosse.⁶ He later became the manager of a General Mills Farm Service store.⁷

Ervin Proksch entered the U.S. Army on August 6, 1943. He trained at [Camp Grant, Illinois](#); [Fort Riley, Kansas](#); and [Fort George G. Meade, Maryland](#). Proksch was shipped to North Africa in March 1944. Then he went into combat in Italy.⁸

Proksch served in the [135th Infantry Regiment](#) of the [34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division](#).⁹ The 34th Infantry Division had a period of rest and rehabilitation after being pulled off the front line in Italy in the middle of February 1944. Proksch probably joined his regiment during this time, and the 34th Infantry Division landed at Anzio, Italy, on March 25, 1944. The landing at [Anzio](#), on the west coast of Italy, was an attempt to outflank the strong German defensive line anchored on [Monte Cassino](#). American and British troops were hemmed in on the beachhead for weeks of bloody fighting until they were able to break out in late May and join Allied forces advancing from the south. The Allies marched into Rome in early June 1944. The 34th then continued northwest along the western coast of Italy to liberate the port city of [Livorno](#).¹⁰

It was at Livorno that S. Sgt. Ervin Proksch met his fate on September 22, 1944.¹¹ Proksch led a squad of eight men to the top of a hill while under fire. The citation for his Silver Star tells the rest.

Immediately eight enemy troops attacked the position firing [machine pistols](#) and rifles. Realizing his position was untenable because of the open nature of the terrain, Sgt. Proksch ordered his men to withdraw and remained behind to cover their movement. Armed with a rifle he engaged the enemy force, killed two and wounded two. While fighting off the remaining four, Sgt. Proksch was killed but the diversion he had created enabled his squad to gain safety.¹²

He had been in combat for just over six months. Proksch was 27 years old when he was killed in action. His wife, Mildred (Roesler) Proksch, was notified on October 9. There was a memorial service at St. Joseph's Cathedral on Sunday morning, October 14, 1944. Besides his wife, Ervin Proksch was survived by a son, David Proksch, his parents, and two sisters. All of them lived in La Crosse.¹³

Four years after the war ended, it appears that his remains were disinterred from an American military cemetery and brought back to the United States. Funeral services were held at the Hellwig-Morris Funeral Chapel on Saturday afternoon, March 5, 1949. Burial was at the Reformed Church Cemetery in Mormon Coulee.¹⁴ This cemetery in the town of Shelby, La Crosse County, is now called the Trinity United Church of Christ Cemetery.¹⁵

Proksch's widow, Mildred, later married Glen Boullion. Together they owned the Green Lantern Café in Galesville for 20 years. Then she worked for JC Penney in Winona, Minnesota. The company transferred her to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she continued to work until retiring in 1982. She returned to La Crosse after retiring. She outlived her second husband and her son, David, dying at the age of 93 on March 26, 2012, in La Crosse. She is buried in the [Gate of Heaven Cemetery](#).¹⁶

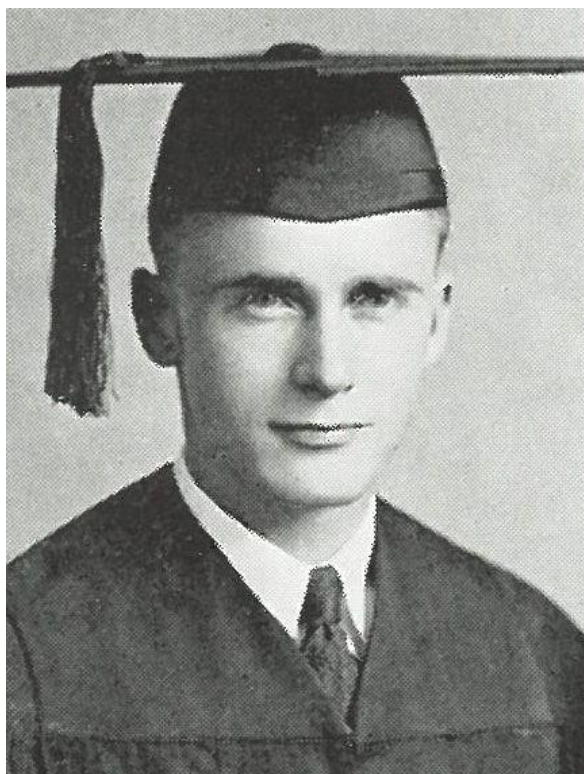


Trinity United Church of Christ Cemetery, La Crosse County

[\(Find a Grave\)](#)

John Linne Berg was born on September 10, 1919, at Holmen, Wisconsin.¹⁷

He graduated from Holmen High School in 1937. Then he earned a degree at La Crosse State Teachers College in 1941.¹⁸ His Bachelor of Science degree was in Secondary Education. While in college, he was a member of the Kappa Delta Pi fraternity, the Science Club, and the Secondary Education Club.¹⁹



John L. Berg in 1941

(*La Crosse*, La Crosse State Teachers College, 1941, page 31)

He started his teaching career in science and mathematics in high schools at [Butternut, Wisconsin](#), and then [What Cheer, Iowa](#).²⁰

World War II intervened, and Berg joined the United States Army in 1942. Following training at [Camp Callen, California](#), he went to [Camp Davis, North Carolina](#), for officer candidate school. He did so well in OCS that he stayed on at Camp Davis after graduating from the course to become an instructor.²¹ Camp Davis was a training school for anti-aircraft artillery officers. Berg remained there for over a year as a searchlight instructor.²² For his next assignment, Berg was reassigned to the infantry. This meant a transfer to [Fort Benning, Georgia](#), and then to [Camp Gruber, Oklahoma](#).²³

John Berg married Alberta Bautch of Independence on December 8, 1943.²⁴ After her husband was shipped overseas, she lived with her parents in Independence.²⁵

Berg was part of the 222nd Infantry Regiment of the [42nd "Rainbow" Infantry Division](#). This unit landed in France in December 1944. He had only been in combat less than two months before he was reported missing in action in France as of January 25, 1945.²⁶



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11, page 12)

It was early March when Albert (Bautch) Berg received the news that she dreaded. The War Department confirmed that Lt. John Berg had been killed in action in France on January 26, 1945. He was 25 years old. Besides his wife, he was also survived by a brother, C. E. Berg, of Holmen, and two sisters, Ragna of Holmen, and Borghild of Melvindale, Michigan.²⁷

A memorial service for Lt. Berg was held on Friday, March 16, 1945, at the Holmen Lutheran Church. Captain Harold K. Hilner, post chaplain at Camp McCoy, conducted the service with assistance from La Crosse American Legion commander Leonard Weisensel. S. Sgt. Harold Nelson and Pfc. Clayton Holder were the color-bearers. A serviceman from Camp McCoy played "Taps," and singers were Constance Wall, Helen Larson, Claudia Nelson, Margie Stark, Joyce Johnson, Evelyn Skogen, Dorothy Olson, Marion Haug, and Joanne Haug. Members of the Morris Snuggerud Post of the Holmen American Legion attended as a group.²⁸

At that time, Berg's company commander (Company K, 222nd Infantry Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division, 7th Army) wrote a letter to Berg's wife stating that Lt. Berg was commanding a rifle platoon when he was killed in the Alsace region of France. The Germans had launched an offensive called "Operation Nordwind" in early January that caused many American casualties.²⁹

It was months before the family found out more details about the last day of John Berg's life, and the reason he was awarded a Silver Star. On January 26, 1945, Lt. Berg had volunteered to lead a rescue party to retrieve a wounded American soldier who was lying between the American and German positions. They had to cover 200 yards of open snow-covered ground under heavy enemy fire to get to the wounded man. After placing the wounded soldier on a litter, they had to get back to American lines while under continual fire. They saved the wounded man from almost certain death or capture. Later that same day, Lt. Berg was killed while leading the defense of his platoon's position against a German attack.³⁰

Three years after World War II ended, Alberta Berg remarried. On May 24, 1948, she married James Zecherle, a native of Bloomer, Wisconsin, who owned a bakery in Independence.³¹ They eventually separated or divorced because James was living in Eau Claire and Alberta was living in Independence in 1970 when their daughter, Patricia, became engaged.³²

Lt. John L. Berg lies in rest at Plot A, Row 31, Grave 22, of the [Epinal American Cemetery](#) at Dinoze, France.³³



The Silver Star
([Medals of America](#))

Besides the Silver Star, there is another thing that Ervin Proksch and John Berg had in common. They both died to protect the men under their command. No medal is sufficient to recognize the kind of sacrifice that made them heroes in every sense of the word.

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Sources & Notes:

- ¹ "Description of Medals," *U.S. Department of Defense*, accessed 2020 October 25, <https://valor.defense.gov/Description-of-Awards/#:~:text=The%20Silver%20Star%20is%20the,the%20United%20States%20Armed%20Forces>. The second-highest award is the Distinguished Service Cross and the highest is the Congressional Medal of Honor.
- ² The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 576; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2020 October 25).
- ³ 1940 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse, p. 5B, dwelling 80, Walter W. and Mary M. Proksch; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 October 25); citing NARA microfilm publication T627, roll 4490.
- ⁴ *Booster* [La Crosse Central High School yearbook] (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Central High School, 1936), 44.
- ⁵ "Sgt. Proksch Dies in Action," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 October 9, page 1.
- ⁶ *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*, Box 576.
- ⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 October 9.
- ⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 October 9.
- ⁹ "Proksch Gets Army Honors," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 4, page 2.
- ¹⁰ "34th Infantry Division," *United States Army, Center for Military History*, 2019 December 12, <https://history.army.mil/html/forcestruc/cbtchron/cc/034id.htm>.
- ¹¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 October 9.
- ¹² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 4.
- ¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 October 9.
- ¹⁴ "Hold Proksch Rites Saturday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1949 March 2, page 1.
- ¹⁵ "Ervin W. Proksch," *FindaGrave.com*, accessed 2020 October 25, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24852833/ervin-w-proksch>.
- ¹⁶ "Mildred J. Roesler Boullion," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2012 March 28, page B-3.
- ¹⁷ The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 47; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2020 October 25).
- ¹⁸ "Report Holmen Officer Missing," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 11, page 12.
- ¹⁹ *La Crosse*, [La Crosse State Teachers College yearbook] (La Crosse, Wisconsin: La Crosse State University, 1941) 31.
- ²⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11.
- ²¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11.
- ²² "Three Men in Area Missing," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 13, page 9.
- ²³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11.
- ²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11. This article misspells her last name as "Bautsch."
- ²⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 13.
- ²⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 11.
- ²⁷ "Four Casualties Are Reported," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 8, page 4.
- ²⁸ "Memorial Service For Lt. John Berg," *La Crosse County Record*, Onalaska, Wisconsin, 1945 March 22, page 1.
- ²⁹ *La Crosse County Record*, 1945 March 22.
- ³⁰ "Berg Given Silver Star Posthumously," *La Crosse County Record*, Onalaska, Wisconsin, page 7. It takes at least two men to carry a litter or stretcher; four are even better, so the rescue party would have consisted of at least one other man, and possibly three more, besides Lt. Berg. There may have also been additional men to provide cover fire for the men carrying the stretcher.
- ³¹ "Announce Marriage of James Zecherle," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1948 July 13, page 5.
- ³² "Zecherle," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1970 October 12, page 19.
- ³³ "John L. Berg," *American Battlefield Monuments Commission*, accessed 2020 October 26, <https://www.abmc.gov/decident-search/berg%3Djohn>.