

Recorded Interview

Nashville 2009

Edward R. Condeva, Co. G 411th

I was home in Chicago when Pearl Harbor was bombed. After hearing about Pearl Harbor a good friend of mine and I considered enlisting. My friend, a young fellow about my same age, went to see his doctor first; he had gone through back surgery. As it turned out the Army rejected him. Since he couldn't sign up I waited to be drafted. I turned twenty in April, 1942, signed up for the draft, and in November of the same year I went to camp. I had been working for the Illinois Central Railroad in the supply depot at the main yard, handing out the supplies. They were sad to see me go.

I had basic training at Camp Walters, TX. Basic training was what I expected it would be; maybe a little bit tougher. After basic training I was reassigned to the 10th Army Headquarters in Sherman, TX. I was working in the postal section, but after awhile I signed up for ASTP which put me at Johns Hopkins University. I thought that was above my head, but I was there.

The Army needed more infantry men and they reassigned me to the 103d Division. I ended up at Camp Howze, TX. We embarked for Europe, after taking a train to New York. While we were getting ready to take the train, they needed a detail on the train with mops and brooms. The sergeant turned around and handed me a mop. I refused to take it. I said, "I can't believe I have to do this on a train when I am getting shipped overseas." Of course he got mad at me and said, "You will take the mop. We have a detail on each train section and you're part of the detail." So I did take the mop and did the job. There were several other people that had to do the same. To me that was beneath me because I was being called to go overseas and ended up carrying a mop!

I was on the SS Monticello. That was really a tough experience, because I was on "F"deck, which was the bottom deck where the ship curves. We only got upstairs for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon; we spent 20 hours below deck. Because the ship held 7,000 troops we only ate twice a day and we had to stand up to eat. It was quite a trip and it took exactly 15 days to cross the ocean. They had a Marine guard on each deck and we would pass them going to another deck to eat chow. So somebody asked, "What is this marine standing here for?" He was standing by a big steel door. The Marine said, "Well I don't want to tell

you.” We said, “Tell us.” He said, “This ship has so many compartments, that if we ever got torpedoed on this side of the ship, I am commanded to close this door and seal this side off.” So, to save the ship, you might lose 200 men, but you would save the rest of the ship. We slept in 4 deck bunks. And you were in your bunk with your rifle and your pack as you pillow. I knew Jim Cunnally. I met him at camp and we were on the ship together.

At the time I was 20 years old and the experience didn't seem so bad. Now, as I reflect, I don't know how I did it. Once we landed at Marseilles, they unloaded our duffle bags. We had our packs and our rifles with no ammunition. Our duffle bags were trucked up the hill. We were supposed to assemble at the top of the hill after marching a distance of 14 miles. Jim Cunnally and I were close then. We reached the top of the hill but some men fell out because they couldn't make it. I was only about 135-140 pounds. It probably was harder for some of the bigger guys; maybe they didn't get enough food and were weak; some didn't make that hike.

We got to the top of the hill and started pitching tents. There were two men to a pup tent. Each man would have half the shelter, and a blanket. Some of the GI's started pitching their tents: putting stakes in the ground and making a trough for any water. Cunnally said, “Say Ed, why don't you just put your shelter half down as a blanket and I will put mine over us and we

can go to sleep. These guys are all putting their tents up tonight and going through all that work. Tomorrow morning some sergeant is going to come along and say we have to tear all these down to put them in a line!" So the next morning it happened exactly like he predicted. The sergeant said to take all the tents down. We put our tent up and I bunked with Cunnally.

After Marseilles we were put on "forty and eight" box cars and traveled a few hundred miles. Then trucks took us to the front lines in the Vosges Mountains. I believe that first day of combat was St. Die, France, sometime in early November, 1944. We came in there and took over some foxholes that were already dug. There wasn't any action until the next morning. The platoon officer was Lt. Tainer and the Company Commander was a Captain _____.

After about 6 weeks of combat, we ended up taking part of a town, most of which was controlled by the Germans. My feet were terribly painful so I took my boots and socks off. I noticed that my feet were really swollen and cut. So the next morning, the medic actually carried me piggyback to one of the houses in the town to see a doctor. The doctor said that I had a serious case of trench foot and he hoped that I had not waited too long to get medical attention. He added that some people with trench foot lost toes and feet from gangrene. I was eventually sent to the rear. I was put in an

ambulance with two wounded soldiers and another man with trench foot. The driver sped away down to the next aid station. When I got to the aid station I was put in a cot. It was important to keep my feet uncovered. A doctor examined my feet and said, "If we can't do something with you in a couple of days you will go 'further back' from the front lines." If they could fix a person up, they would return to combat. I ended up in a general hospital. On the way to the hospital the Germans were shelling the area and the debris was hitting the ambulance. The ambulance driver told us to hold on and plowed through as fast as he could drive.

While I was in the hospital, my left foot got a great big sore. They gave me some antibiotics and continued to treat my feet. One of the nurses came by and asked if I wanted a backrub. I told her I had just come off the battlefield and was not cleaned up. That didn't make any difference to her. She said, "Do you want one or don't you?" You could not imagine how wonderful that backrub felt. She went right down the line of men giving all a backrub. After I was there for a week or two, a team of doctors came around. Their job was to determine if they could treat the problem adequately within a month or two. If they could not they would then ship the patient to England or the United States. The most severe, like people without limbs, went to the United States. They sent me to England for

rehabilitation. I went on a Red Cross train and German POWS loaded me.

When I got to the port of Cherbourg to cross the English Channel by hospital ship, German POWS unloaded me from the train and put me on the ship.

They were controlled by a German sergeant who was real strict. They did all the lifting.

So I got to England and they reassigned me to a hospital there and I stayed for 2-3 months. Then from the main hospital, after I started to walk and put boots on, they put me in a tent with other less serious cases. Then I started to rehabilitate; to learn to walk and march. My feet were continuously examined. Finally, after a few more months a doctor said, "Well, you're not fit for combat duty, but you can be reassigned to some organization. So we're going to send you back to France." (My feet never were completely healed.)

I went into London and while I was there two V-2 bombs came over. They were rocket bombs the Germans were sending to London. They were huge and devastating. But it did not happen where I was stationed. I was reassigned to some camp near the coast and they put me on a C47 with several other guys and we crossed the English Channel. The plane was 200 feet off the water and one of the GIs said, "How come we don't have parachutes?" The pilot says, "We don't use parachutes because we are so

low they wouldn't do any good." That plane took me into Chateau (Dunne) France. I was reassigned to a troop carrier outfit. They had C-47's and C-46 planes that flew near the combat areas with supplies. I had nothing to do with the planes. I did odd jobs there because I was an ex-infantryman. They put me in a tent along an unused runway with some other guys who were airplane mechanics. I was there many months. Then the war ends and they sent me to Marseilles to go home. I ended up as a Corporal. I came through Marseilles and went home through Marseilles. The troop ship going home was a lot different because it was smaller and you could walk all over the place, get up on the deck and everywhere else.

I really traveled. I started in Chicago went to Texas, and then to Camp Shanks in New York. That is where a young lady took a picture of Cunnally and me in a little tavern in September of '44. I sent the picture home to my parents. My girlfriend, who became my wife, kept that picture. When I got home, I had a one month leave. My wife and I got engaged before I went overseas because I didn't want to get married in case something should happen to me. So, I corresponded with her all that time. Within two weeks of me getting back, she had the church all ready and we got married, September of 1945. I was married for 59½ years. I went with her when I was 19 and she was 16 or 17. When we got married I was 23 and

she was 20. I have 4 sons, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild, Mia, a sweet girl.

I never went back to Europe. After the war I joined a Veterans of Foreign Wars Post. I was a member for ten years. After the war I made contact with Jimmy (Cunnally), but not often. I also contacted Sgt. Morgan, a sergeant in my outfit who lived in Wisconsin. We got together quite a bit.

I saw in the *Cactus Patch* and there were two young ladies who were looking for anyone who knew Jim Cunnally. They were Jim's daughter and step-daughter. I had the picture of Jimmy and I, plus I had something that looked like a telegram (called an email) dated December 9, 1944 that I had sent to my girlfriend. Jimmy drew a GI on it, a really good drawing, and signed his name. He drew that in a tent, or a foxhole. That got all the way home and I had a copy of it. I gave them a copy of that too. Luckily, he signed it.

After we got married my wife went back to work and I went to Camp Grant, Illinois. While I was there they were discharging people based on points. They assigned me to Camp Atterberry in Indiana because I only had 50 points and they were discharging people with 55 and above. This was a pretty big camp and they were processing GIs like crazy; they ran out of GIs to process. The Commander decided that because they had so many people

without anything to do, he would drop the points needed from 55 to 50. Just like that, I was sent home. I took a train home and went to my wife's office, surprised her and we celebrated.

My parents had two blue stars in the window. I had a brother who was in the Air Corp stationed in England. While I was overseas with the troop carrier outfit, I used a pass to meet my brother in Paris. Everyone was talking about my brother coming to see me. They treated him like royalty and arranged the tent so he could stay with me on a cot. He stayed a couple of days. It was unbelievable experience to see your own brother who was overseas as well.

I did get a souvenir from Barr, France sixty-five years ago. It is a pocket knife that has Barr, France engraved in French, on it. I do still carry it.

I landed in Newport, News when I came back from overseas; there was a big crowd cheering for us. My son served one year in Vietnam; he came home to Great Lakes, Alaska. I met him in Illinois; it was only the two of us. That was the only greeting he got. He is a retired policeman now and will be fifty-nine this year. He is a Purple Heart Vietnam Veteran and was with the US Marines in Vietnam. He came with me this year to the reunion.