

## Taped Interview

Dallas Reunion 2006

---

Joe Kopenhofer, Co. C 411<sup>th</sup>

I was born and raised in a little town in Elroy, Wisconsin. I entered the Army in December '43. I went to Chicago to Navy Pier. After that, I went to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. Navy Pier was a Navy project originating back in WWI. They were using it as a depot. I think the saddest thing in my mind was Christmas Day. They were playing Christmas carols over the church steeples. They were singing White Christmas. That was about the worst homesick I ever got.

I was assigned to Company C 411<sup>th</sup> at Camp Claiborne. I ended up in Company C 411<sup>th</sup>, Infantry, in the Mortar Section, Weapons Platoon. We had sixty mm mortars. D Company had the 81 mm. They were heavy weapons. I was one of the Sergeants for the Mortar Section. There were three of us. I became a Sergeant on maneuvers at Camp Claiborne. I was about 21 when I became Sergeant. We spent a long time in Camp Claiborne and then we went on maneuvers from there. Then we went from there across the Sabine River and ended up at Camp Howze. I stayed at Camp Howze until the last of them went to Camp Shanks on the East Coast.

I remember going down into the ship's hold and seeing the Statue of Liberty. It was the nicest thing to see. When I left Camp Howze I was a mortar Sergeant. We had three ammunition bearers and a gunner or maybe five in all for one mortar. We had three mortar sections. The ammunition bearers carried the ammunition across their back. The rounds were about ten pounds apiece. The 81 mm were the heavy ones. They don't carry those. The jeep follows them all the time. The gunner adjusts and the squad leader sits out in front and tells how many yards the target is. Then he tells the gunner to set his sights and everything for it. Then he tells him to fire or fire for effect or whatever it is. We carried the sights in a little leather square 5x5 box. You took them out and put them on a part of the projection on the mortar. If that squad leader out in front said 1000 yards then the gunner would set the sight for 1000 yards, or the best of his ability. Then he had to traverse and everything on that mortar to make sure it was left and right as well as up and down. I was the squad leader. The squad leader had to tell the gunner what to do. The squad leader had to be far enough in front to see the target. Usually we did not have a problem communicating. Someone would always carry a wire with him. Actually what you are doing is trying to pin the enemy down. You are not going to hit anybody. It would be an accident if you did. I will give you an example:

I was hit on December 14. I was wounded. And before I got wounded, I was crossing a little creek. Half the Weapons Platoon went across this bridge and my squad didn't. We stayed behind. That night we stayed in a house. The next morning we went to a place called Haguenau. Our outfit, C Company, was the first ones there before they drew back. I did not know they drew back until many years later because I spent a year in the hospital. We were pinned down by three German tanks. The German tanks were sitting there shooting machine gun bullets at us all the time. Why they did not use their heavy artillery on those Tiger tanks, I don't know. It was a fantastic place, bunkers and all that (the Maginot Line). We were pinned down; then I got hit. They said it was friendly fire from our 155 Howitzers trying to pin those German Tiger tanks down. We had a tree burst. So I was hit. They carried me out on a litter. I said, "Lord don't let me get hit again."

Let me back up a little bit. When we were going across that bridge there were six little German tanks, the smallest ones I have ever seen. They were coming down the side road. We didn't have anything to shoot with. Half the stuff was on the other side of the river, a little creek. This is what we did. We had the gunner hold the tube between his legs. So I looked out the window from this house and I said "right" or "left" just to shut them down. On the wall was a big German flag. So I got the flag and put it in my

field jacket. So, when I got hit I said, "Lord, don't let me die with this flag in my field jacket." That is the story of the flag. I just now got rid of it. I gave it to my oldest son. He was a Full Colonel. I dedicated it to him.

So I was six months in the hospital at Marseilles and then I came back home and ended up in the hospital here. I got married in '45. That is about it. I had five boys. I lost the oldest one when he was a short shaver. He had a deep seeded vein brain tumor.

I did not use anything to protect my hearing. We didn't have anything on the rifle range. We shot M1s of course and then we tried out for the machine gun and different calibers. We did not have anything in our ears. They did not make anything that I can remember. Some of the guys who knew what they were doing would take the bullets out of the 45 caliber pistol and they would put the bullet in their ears to block the noise.

*Regarding the mortars, was there ever a premature burst when it came out of the tube?* We never had any problem like that. The mortar round has all these increments of powder all the way around the tail end of it. If you were going to set it for 1000 yards, maybe you would use all the increments on that shell. If it was going to be less than that, you would take some of them off. They are attached to the shell itself as powder. They are made out of powder. Dropping it into the tube sets the mechanism that fires

it. It won't fire until it gets out so far or wherever it is suppose to go. A pin comes out and when you drop it down into that tube, it energizes and it takes the pin out. When the shell leaves the tube, the pin falls off somewhere and it is armed. It was a very nice deal. It was almost like a hand grenade. You have to pull the pin to get the hand grenade to shoot.

Two things happened when I was hit. One of them was in the paper a year or two ago. We were sitting by these bunkers pinned down by those German Tiger tanks. Here comes one of our half-tracks with colored anti-tankers. They went up there and they got smattered all to pieces. They got blown up by the tanks. The only thing that saved my life, (I got hit across "here") and it went through my left foot. The left foot stung like a hornet hit it. It still bothers me today, 65 years later. I can't run. The weather was cold and damp. The only thing that kept me alive was the two undershirts, two OD wool shirts, a field jacket and a raincoat that I had on. So when that shrapnel hit that tree it broke stuff off all over me. That clothing saved my life. All that cloth was embedded in the wound. It was a coincidence, but that is what happened. It was still serious. I was in the hospital six months in Marseille and six months in the United States.

I got married right before I got out of the hospital in the States. My wife was a schoolteacher then at Denton, Texas. We got a home and started

different things. I ended up going to school on the GI Bill. That was the big thing! I went to the University of Wisconsin and majored in Dairy Industry and Food Technology. I have been around dairies all my life growing up in a small town. After school, I went to work for Borden's in Milwaukee.

Betty's folks lived in Little Rock, Arkansas. We came down there on a visit. It was not cold down there and I liked it. The guy that had this dairy in town had just built a big laboratory but he had no one to run it. I was looking around to see what I could find. I went to work for him. We moved to Little Rock. I like Little Rock.