

An Oral History
with
Robert Leslie, Company G, 409th Infantry, 103d Division

Album of Remembrance Oral History Project, 103d Infantry Division Association

From a two-session interview conducted at July 2010 Association reunion, San Antonio, TX With excerpts from an interview conducted at July 2008 Association reunion, Cincinnati, OH
--

My name is Robert Leslie. I was a member of Company G, 409th Infantry, 103d Division. I graduated from high school in January 1942. I was seventeen years old and had a scholarship to Washington & Jefferson College in Pennsylvania. That summer the eighteen-year-old draft law passed, so I lost the scholarship because I was going to be drafted. When that happened, I tried to join the Navy, but the Navy wouldn't take me because I wore glasses. I then just waited to be drafted and was drafted March 22, 1943.

I first went to the 8th Armored Division, which I was in for eight months, at Camp Polk, Louisiana. When I was drafted, those who scored higher in the AGCT [Army General Classification Test] went to the armored divisions, and the 8th Armored Division happened to be a training division in which they trained cadre and replacements for many other armored divisions. So the Army was looking ahead. The 8th Armored Division's cadre training mission helped form the 11th, 16th, and 20th armored divisions.

I was posted to a medium tank battalion—2d Battalion, 36th Armored Regiment. I became an acting NCO [noncommissioned officer] in reconnaissance of the headquarters of the 2nd Battalion and that's how I got to be in the colonel's tank. It required some intelligence and ability to get information to where it was supposed to be.

Hitting five out of seven targets, I scored highest in the battalion in marksmanship with the 75mm gun of a medium tank and so became a gunner for the colonel. The colonel took a liking to me and wanted me to go to OCS [Officer Candidates School]. I asked him what was open and he said the only things open were the armored force and infantry. I said, "Do you get shot at in both of them?" He said yes, and I said no, I didn't want to go to OCS. He was a little upset at that because he thought every young man aspired to be an officer.

A little later on they put a notice on the bulletin board about the Army Specialized Training Program [ASTP]. Upon entering ASTP, soldiers were frozen at or busted down to private without any chance of promotion. Still, I wanted to go to the ASTP because I thought in

the long run a college education was more important to my life than being an NCO. I figured I could achieve success in either one of them actually, but in the long haul, I would willingly give up my stripes to get a college education.

At that time, the Army decided that all higher-numbered armored divisions would be reorganized with more infantry and less armor. As a result, they said I was going to ASTP and, while awaiting assignment, they sent me to infantry. So I went to Company B, 58th Armored Infantry Battalion and trained with them for a short time.

While on Louisiana maneuvers, all eight of us who had qualified for ASTP were sent to the STAR Unit at Arkansas State College in Jonesboro, Arkansas. A STAR Unit was a holding unit until there were openings at a U.S. Army contract college for engineering training. We all passed some further tests at the STAR Unit. We got fresh milk and fresh eggs, which we hadn't had for a long time.

We all then went on to the University of Oklahoma to study engineering. The 8th Armored Division has quite a number of men in it from Pennsylvania. Four out of the eight of us who went to the ASTP were from Pennsylvania. Of the eight of us who went from the 8th Armored to the ASTP, one who was assigned to Company L, 411th was killed at Sessenheim and five of us were wounded. Only twenty-five percent of us came out unscathed.

Going from Louisiana maneuvers to ASTP, and eating nice warm meals in a mess hall instead of out in the Louisiana woods, I enjoyed the ASTP. The food was good. We were well treated by the civilian population in Norman, Oklahoma. In fact, I had a girlfriend. Her father was a professor at the University of Oklahoma and I corresponded with her while I was in the 103d Division. When the war was almost over, I got a letter from her in which she said her brother was going to be drafted. When the war was over, maybe I could come back and live in his room—well, it sounded like a trap. I continued to correspond with her, but never went back to Oklahoma. She was a nice girl I met at a church group. She was very intelligent and we enjoyed one another's company, but I wasn't ready to settle down yet.

When I first went into the ASTP, I thought it would be longer than it was. I was only in ASTP for between four or five months—one semester. There were a lot who had two or three semesters, but most of those people didn't have the background like I had of eight months in an armored division before I ever went into the ASTP.

When the ASTP was all but eliminated, I was sent to the 103d Infantry Division the first week of March, 1944. When I first went to Company G, 409th Infantry, they saw I had served in an armored infantry battalion and fired expert with the M1—so they put me in a rifle platoon. Because I was a small person, they said you'd make a good scout. I was a scout for a few months.

Adjusting to training in an infantry division wasn't too hard for me. In addition to being an infantryman, I had a lot of skills I had learned in the armored division, where I done basic

training, and later in armored infantry training. In an armored division, I had to learn all the basic infantry weapons in the armored division, plus other weapons like tank guns and antitank guns. I think an armored division took advantage of the fact that you could learn multiple skills, not just one or two. I had to learn the skills of a reconnaissance NCO. I had to learn how to drive a tank, a truck, a half track, a jeep. I also had a driver's license for a Seep, an amphibious jeep which most people never heard of; you didn't see very many of those. The armored divisions had a few of them in their headquarters. I even had to learn how to drive a motorcycle. Every man had to take radio training. So, being in an armored division was an educational process. In my rifle platoon, I think I was chosen to be a scout, which required a little more skill than just an ordinary rifleman, because I had acquired other skills in the armored division.

When we all took our physical examinations to go overseas, two machine gunners in the company didn't pass. They looked at service records of those who had come in and saw another person and I had been expert machine gunners in other units and so they transferred us to the machine gun section of the weapons platoon. In the meantime, both the other fellow and I made PFC, so we felt we were pretty good.

Just an ammunition bearer in the machine gun section, I didn't know if my transfer was a demotion. They wanted everybody in the machine gun section to have fired expert with it and also with a sidearm, a pistol. I had qualified with a pistol in the 8th Armored Division. It wasn't with an automatic pistol like the machine gunners used; it was with a 1917 cavalry Colt revolver and they had been in pretty bad shape. But it was still a .45 caliber sidearm that I had qualified with, and so that was another reason I was transferred to the machine gun section. Training with them, I liked the guys in the machine gun section. All four of us who weren't sergeants had been ASTP students, so we had a lot in common. Instead of shooting dice and playing cards, we would play chess and bridge—just a little bit different than it was in the rifle platoon.

Some of the old-time cadre looked down with a little disdain because we were younger, most of us were not drinkers, and we liked to do things on Saturday night different from what they did. There was a cultural difference, but we got along with them.



When we were transferred from ASTP, some of us welcomed it. Being in the ASTP, some of us felt we weren't regular soldiers yet. I realized that most people don't like to be shot at, but, at the same token, I felt that now I wasn't shirking my duty. When we became integrated into the life of an infantry division, we had proved ourselves. Some were very disappointed. They thought the government had lied to them. I realized what the government was doing. I think they got a better quality infantryman than they had before. I think the quality of an

infantry division improved quite a bit when they had the infusion of ASTP students, aviation cadets, and men out of coastal artillery and anti-aircraft units who had to have more training than they would have as basic infantry.

I proved myself to be a man, and all the others did too. It took us only a short time to assimilate into the infantry division. I remember we had Infantry Day, when I was one of the few chosen to go to the Cotton Bowl to put on an infantry demonstration. I was surprised and am a little proud of the fact that, with the exception of the squad leader and the assistant squad leader, all of us had been ASTP students. We had to very quickly learn what we had to do in this staged program and we did it quite well, and that made us feel good too. We were chosen to be the ones in the infantry squad in the attack. I was the machine gunner, but I was chosen to be one of the infantry squad. So, I changed my weapon from a carbine to an M1 for a couple of days. We bivouacked outside the Cotton Bowl in tents in a grove of trees. We thought this was real nice living, and the people who watched the infantry demonstration thought that was a good thing too.



I hadn't had a furlough for over a year. I went home on furlough at Easter 1944 and then I got a furlough before I went overseas. It took me fifty-four hours—well over two days—on one of my furloughs to go from Gainesville, Texas to New Castle, Pennsylvania on the train. I went through Saint Louis to Chicago, where I had to change trains to go east to Cleveland, and there I had to change trains again to Pennsylvania. Back home, it seemed the civilian population thought the war was going to be over more quickly than it actually was. I wasn't as optimistic as them. I thought it would be a longer haul.

I thought we would be deployed to Europe, where the war there would be over soon. Without suffering a lot of casualties, we would be a well trained and battle hardened outfit ready to be deployed to the Pacific. I remember some guys talking about us going to be MPs in the occupation in Europe. I personally thought that the divisions going over later like we did would be deployed to the Pacific.

The train trip to Camp Shanks in New York to deploy overseas was long and rather boring. We would go along, stop at a siding, and get out and do calisthenics, and then get back on the train. I can remember guys saying, "This is my neighborhood," "I went to high school there," or "I trained here in another outfit." By that time, the 103d Division was much more diversified in terms of where men came from than when it was first formed from reserves in the Southwest.

I went into New York City once. I had never been to New York before so I was impressed. We had one bad experience. We had had our neckties and our blouses taken from

us, so we had to go into New York in field jackets and no tie. The military police picked us up and told us, "You're out of uniform. You're going to be thrown in the brig," until they found out we were wearing field jackets and no ties because we were going to be shipped overseas.

As most young men did, we gravitated toward the night clubs and theater shows. Four of us from ASTP went to a nightclub. One young man had just gotten a letter from his girlfriend breaking up. Upset by the letter, he ordered a double scotch, and when the cigarette girl came by, he bought a big plush teddy bear and poured the double scotch over it. We were in the same platoon; he was a machine gunner. When we went overseas, he took the teddy bear with him that he had poured the drink over. Unfortunately, he was wounded rather badly in February. At the end of the war—I was one of the few that was still in the company—we got his duffle bag; he had deployed back to the States for treatment. When I opened it, that teddy bear was still in it and you could still smell the scotch he'd poured on it.

Where I had never traveled on a big ocean liner or ship before, being on the *U.S.S. Monticello* was quite an experience. It was overcrowded. When we hit rough weather, everybody got seasick. I was in the forward compartment on the top bunk and it was right next to the head. All the fumes from the head drifted up to me. The smell got to me and I got seasick. Fortunately, some of my friends brought me apples. I stayed in the bunk; I couldn't go to eat. When we'd go to eat, I'd almost get there and have to run for the GI cans that they had lashed all around. It was a bad experience that way.

When we landed in Marseille, I got on a good detail. The last four men in each rifle company from each compartment had to stay and scrub the inside of the ship before we left. The rest of them all got off and had to make that long hike up to the plateau outside of the city. I didn't have to do that; I got a ride up after scrubbing that ship for two days. One thing about the 103d Division was that it left things clean and shipshape right until we went into combat. That's the way it always was. We had discipline. We were told to clean the ship; so we cleaned it.

Doing that detail, we were stationed up over Marseille. I was a naïve young man who hadn't seen too much of the world. I hadn't seen anything like the outdoor public toilets before. We were up on the back of a truck looking down at an outdoor public toilet when a priest walked in and did his business up against the little wall of the latrine. A young man, walking hand in hand down the street with his girlfriend, saw the priest's head up above the latrine, doing his business, and tipped his hat like it didn't bother anybody. My friends and I were mortified.

Then we got sent down to the docks to help unload the convoy. Again, I had never seen dice games on the docks with different nationalities—the merchant seamen, the sailors, the American soldiers, the French Senegalese, the Moroccans, the French civilians, the French stevedores—everybody in on a dice game. The guys would win and gather up all this paper

money, put it inside their coats, inside their field jackets, without seeming to know what the value of the money was. They knew what the odds were, but didn't seem to know what the money was worth.

The 409th Regiment went north by truck; we didn't go by rail like some of the other ones did. It was cold and wet; they told us it was colder and wetter than usual. That is how our experience was in Europe—everything was worse than it ordinarily was. But we made it all right.

I liked the countryside. If the weather had been a little warmer and we weren't getting wet, cold and shivering, it would have been pleasurable. I can remember everyone's gripe: sunny France? But it was an interesting experience for me. I think the general population of France appreciated the Americans as liberators and it seemed to me they have had enough of this occupation they had been under. People would throw pears and apples to the guys in the trucks, which we appreciated. Little did I know how bad it was going to be a little later on.

We went through Epinal on up further to the front. The 409th relieved the 7th Infantry of the 3d Division. We got off the trucks and we bivouacked the first night. They came to our bivouac area and it took me aback what they did. They said, "Everybody take off your shoes and leggings. Everybody take off your overcoats, take all your blankets and put them in a pile, put all your shelter halves in a pile, all your tent pegs, ropes. Your shoes and your leggings, hang them on the broken branch stubs of the pine trees." They gave us shoepacs and ski socks. We used our field jackets as our outer clothing. The overcoats we never used.

The rifle companies that were going to make the first attack—we were told to turn in our machine guns and we were given new machine guns—the A6 model, which had a shoulder stock and bipods on them. You didn't have to use a tripod. Of course, we were in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains and the A6 would be a better assault weapon than the old A4, which had to have a tripod before you could fire. You could fire an A6 just like a Browning automatic rifle. Hit the ground and open up.

They gave us a sleeping bag, which was woolen on the inside just like a blanket. The outside was water repellent sailcloth. It was very light; it wasn't like the big fluffy sleeping bags like some of the units had gotten before. We used them the whole time in the war. We'd been in Marseille, with two blankets, overcoats over the top of us, and a raincoat over the top of that. A lot of guys suffered sleeping out. And here there was snow on the ground. I was amazed by it.

We left our duffle bags behind and never saw them again until the end of the war—along with any of our personal items in them. It was an unsettling experience when we moved up to relieve the 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3d Division. Along the road on the way up to the col du Haut Jacques, I saw dead GIs for the first time and that shook me to up. Then later on the forward slope we came across German dead that had been killed by artillery, machine gun, or rifle fire from the 3d Division troops. We would see a lot of that later on.

We in Company G were fortunate to be the reserve company for about four days. E and F companies were the line companies. We were on a low mountain or pretty good-size hill near the little hamlet at the col du Haut Jacques. When I went out on patrol searching for German stragglers, I didn't know what to expect; it was a new experience. We went down the hill a short distance, and there were some bodies of dead Germans that hadn't been searched. We searched them. I opened up a wallet of one of the dead Germans. He had a picture of a young German woman, a couple of young daughters. I hadn't thought of soldiers being married and having kids like that. It shook me up. We went a little further down the hill, hit a stream, and followed it back up the hill. We came across a dead American GI. He had been shot right through the head, and that shook us up. On the way up, in this little stream, we found more bodies of dead Germans. We had been drinking some of the water and hadn't thought too much about that. Of course, we used halazone tablets in our water.

We inherited some rations from the 3d Division troops. They had left their rations when they were relieved, including 10-in-1 rations, which, frankly, we in the 103d Division didn't receive very many times. The whole time in combat, we usually had Ks, Cs, and Ds. The 10-in-1 rations we got we usually stole from tankers, tank destroyers, artillery, or somebody like that we happened to be close to. The 10-in-1 rations were the best and provided a meal for 10 men. They contained canned bacon—that was one thing that I thought was truly amazing. The Cs and the Ks you could eat without cooking even though they weren't very palatable. Because the 10-in-1s had to be cooked, you could only use them when you were in reserve or in a position where you could have a fire.

I weighed 130 pounds when I went overseas. When I weighed myself in January, I weighed 98 pounds on a butcher's scale in a butcher shop. I had had enough experience that I could convert from kilograms to pounds and all of us guys were the same way. We'd all lost a considerable amount of weight from November to January. Then from January to the end of the war, we had that one period from roughly Christmas to March where the fighting wasn't so intense and we gained a little bit of weight back. From about the 15th of December, I had GIs and didn't have a solid bowel movement until after the war was over. Whether stress was a factor, I know I had diarrhea from the unsanitary conditions we were living under.

The day after that first patrol the sergeant and I happened to dig in together. He and I got along quite well. He was a little morose—worried about what was going to happen. I told him, "Nothing's going to happen. We're going to make it, no problem." Little did I know that he would be dead within forty-eight hours.

We had been in reserve on the hill. When we made our first attack, we passed through the rifle company that was on line down the hill. There was a pasture field and one house and some drainage ditches across the field. Attacking across the pasture field, we encountered long-

range machine gun fire and some rifle fire—not really heavy rifle or machine gun fire, but just enough so we got pinned down in a little drainage ditch.

Then our rifle platoon got stopped at the river and we couldn't move until they moved and we had no orders what to do with our machine guns. We were lying in this drainage ditch and they started putting mortar fire on us and I knew well enough that if we stayed there we would get hit with mortar fire. I yelled at the sergeant—I called him by his last name—"Dorgan, let's get the hell out of here!" He looked back. A round had hit in front of him and a round hit in the drainage ditch just twenty yards behind our last man. There were five of us laying in the drainage ditch. The man behind me was laying straddle-legged in the ditch when a round came in and hit between his legs. It was a dud; it didn't go off because it was muddy enough to absorb the impact. When that happened, Dorgan said, "Les, move to the house!" which was fifty to seventy-five feet from us. I didn't expect for me to be the lead getting up with that firing, but I got up and into the house.

There was a German captain lying there dying and a German medic treating him. I was surprised; I hadn't expected anybody to be in the house. I didn't shoot either of them; I had my carbine on my shoulders because I was carrying two boxes of machine gun ammunition. By that time, the rest of the squad got into the house. Nobody got wounded.

Our second gunner was upset that our rifle troops were lying there and couldn't get across the creek—the Taintrux River—I called it a creek back home. He yelled at me, "Les, let's go set up the gun." The sergeant didn't tell us not to and the lieutenant wasn't there; so he set the gun up and I acted as loader. He fired across the river at some foxholes we could see and suppressed the German fire somewhat. Our rifle troops started to move. We'd set the gun up in a manure pile and the steam from the manure pile dissipated some of the smoke from our machine gun. The German machine guns were smokeless, but ours weren't and our rifles weren't either—you could see the puffs of smoke when we fired. Probably ten minutes went by when we fired sporadically. We did our job, the guys moved and started to cross the river. The lieutenant came up and chewed us out for firing without orders. We did it on our own. That upset us. It was doing the job; we were there to help these guys.

We got across the river finally. The Taintrux River wasn't a very big river, but our officers had told us, "When crossing the river, don't hit the shallow spots. They're all mined"—and we listened to them. We got up to our waists in water; it was cold because of the snowmelt from the top of the ridges. We started up into the trees and captured a few Germans and our rifle platoons kept moving up. Before we crossed the river, we had three medics with us, and before we got across the river two of the medics got wounded helping the wounded that had been lying in that field. We got about two-thirds of the way up the hill to where there was an open spot and we took a couple of casualties and our third medic went up to help them.

Somebody had bypassed a German, who got up and shot the medic in his arm. So, we lost all three medics the first day of our attack.

We continued the attack. We had started about nine o'clock in the morning and now at about three thirty or four in the afternoon, it was getting dark. In the mountains, you don't have the daylight you do out in the plains. And at this time of year, the days were shorter. When we finally got to the top of the hill, we dispersed and our two machine gun sergeants dug a foxhole together; they found a piece of ground that was soft enough. The rest of us started digging in, but there were too many rocks. You'd dig down two or three inches or a foot and you'd hit solid rock.

About that time, two rounds of smoke came in on the company, one to the left part of the company and one to the right part. That is not a good sign when you get artillery rounds smoking in on you. We didn't know if it was artillery or mortar. We soon found out it was mortar fire because we didn't hear the whine of the artillery shell, just a little bit of a whisper from a mortar shell. We learned very quickly whether it was mortar or artillery. They shelled us pretty much all night. There was a lot of pine trees, a lot of tree bursts, a lot of casualties. We had more casualties that night than we had had during our attack. We had around fifteen killed and twenty some wounded.

The two sergeants got wounded, one mortally and the other wounded so badly that he never came back. We lost one gunner, who was hit in the leg. We stayed up all night with him; we put a tourniquet on and released it every so often. It was cold and I can remember shivering all night trying to keep warm. The medics finally got to the wounded the next morning.

I know of four men who were wounded that first night, but none of us bad enough to be evacuated. So, we don't show up in the morning reports. I got wounded in the hand that night. I thought it was my buddy's foot kicking me in the hand. It hurt. The next morning I looked at it and there were blisters on both sides, so it wasn't my buddy's foot that hit me. The other ammo bearer in our machine gun squad man had a piece of shrapnel in the behind that I pulled out the next morning. One was a headquarters guy.

The next morning we jumped off again and took the next hill. Fortunately, the Germans had retreated. There we found the mortar positions they had been firing on us from. They were for three 120mm mortars, which is a good-sized mortar. They carried their shells in wicker baskets they called *panniers* that they put on the backs of mules. This was a mule-supported 120mm mortar battery with three mortars and they had pulled out right before morning. We didn't catch them; they got back across into Saint-Dié.

A few years ago I read a book by a German author that told about a German officer who received the Iron Cross for getting mortar ammunition to the mortar batteries that were firing on the 103d Infantry Division in Saint-Dié in November 1944. This really boggled my mind,

because if he hadn't found the ammunition and a way to get it to the mortar battery, we wouldn't have gotten shelled that night.

Our company took half the next hill and F Company took the other half of the hill. Saint-Dié was still burning. Our reserve company eventually was one of the companies that took Saint-Dié. We were pulled out of that position and we moved further north to the Meurthe River, where the Taintrux River ran into it. The 3d Division had one of their guys swim across the river and made it. They made a foot bridge and we were able to cross there, because the Germans hadn't defended it. That was nice to go across the river on a foot bridge. Now they were shelling us—long-distance shelling that wasn't too accurate. So, we had hardly any casualties going across there.

We had Black troops with smoke generators over the bridge site, so the Germans couldn't direct accurate fire on the bridge. Because they were working under smoke generators, their skin was turning light grey. So we kidded them as we crossed the bridge. It's funny how we were able to kid with these guys in combat and we had a dead guy laying on the bridge—killed by a mortar or artillery shell—that we had to jump across to get the rest of the way across the bridge. We told these Black guys they were so scared that they were turning white—so we were able to kid back and forth with these guys right in the middle of a battle.

We dug in and the next morning we woke up to find a German radio operator right in our bivouac area giving instructions to an artillery outfit firing on us. That was quite a coincidence. We took Saint-Dié and then we got relieved. We got a couple days' rest and continued the battle across the spine of the Vosges to the Rhine River plain.

In the Vosges, there were a lot of little towns connected by roads. But you had to take the high ground to make sure you could get through and take the villages. If you didn't take the high ground, they would have artillery observation and fire artillery on you. You had to climb the hills and a lot of times nobody would be there, but sometimes there would be. We were tired after a week or so of that. In this kind of fighting, you get really tired physically. You sleep wherever you stop. You go to sleep in the middle of the road or the middle of the woods.

We got orders to take the high ground and we took the high ground. So they wanted a detail to go back down and carry food and ammunition up to the company. Those of us who had carbines or automatic pistols, we'd carried our machine guns and mortars up the hill. The officers said, "You who have light weapons, you go down to get the rations and ammunition." We had carried heavier loads up the hill than the riflemen had. It aggravated me that they didn't catch on. We finally told them we were doing double duty; so let's get some of the other guys to do this detail. Finally they wised up and said, "Okay, so-and-so, give them your rifle and take his pistol and go back down to finish the ration detail or ammunition detail."

We moved on. We had some casualties. We met some roadblocks, and we had to stop and attack them, envelop them, things like that, and that takes time. You don't do something like that in a couple of hours; it might take a day.

We had some FFI [French Forces of the Interior] who helped us considerably during this time going across the mountains. Some of those guys had maybe just a helmet liner, not even a steel helmet, and a pistol and they'd be leading our guys up the goat trails that ran up the mountains. They saved a lot of American lives. People don't know about that. They were brave men. They knew the terrain and they figured what wouldn't be defended. Sometimes we would walk four or five miles extra rather than confront the Germans in a head-on attack. You take one of these mountains and cut off their supply line and they would have to retreat—maybe retreat through us and we'd capture them. We might not advance as quickly, but we did a good job and conserved lives, which I'm very grateful for. The FFI were good men, brave men, and I tip my hat to them. They didn't have to do it; they weren't told by a higher power you have to do this. They just volunteered. They said I'm FFI, I know about this and a lot of times they knew, for example, a better place to ford a river—a place that wasn't defended. If they got captured, it would be death for them. Most people in the United States don't know about that, but those of us who do are very appreciative.

We attacked out of the Vosges onto the Rhine plain near Scherwiller. We made some mistakes. In a railroad yard between Scherwiller and Sélestat, the Germans had a cement flak tower. When an officer radioed back while we were going through the railroad yard, he said, "We're at the flak tower." The Germans heard it, they fired on the flak tower and we lost two or three killed and maybe a half dozen wounded. We were upset about it. This officer wasn't thinking, and we lost men because of that.

When we attacked into Sélestat, G Company was what they'd call a trailing company. E Company and F Company were to attack on the flanks, G Company was supposed to go in the middle and take out all the strong points. E and F companies were to pinpoint the strong points, but not attack them, while G Company was to knock them out. Sometimes that was a good job because you didn't find many strong points. If you find a lot of strong points, the trailing company gets all the dirty work that the other companies bypass.

We lost quite a number of men. We lost three officers in Sélestat. Our company had a high officer turnover. There were six officers in the company, and, by the time the war was over, thirteen officers had passed through the company. Two officers were wounded twice. We had two sergeants who were field commissioned because we lost officers. Captain Craddock, the company commander, never got a scratch; he was off sick for two to three weeks, but never a battle casualty.

So we had, I think, a higher percentage of officer casualties than most companies. The company had more killed in action than any other company in the 103d Division because we

were given more hard details, because the colonel knew our company commander would do the job with the least amount of casualties. And if you get into a company that is known to do the job and do it well, you get too many tough assignments. I respected our company commander. He was a fine man, a good person and he didn't do it recklessly. He thought out everything and did a good job. He didn't get nervous or shook up or anything like that. He assessed the situation, did it and did it well, and we respected him for it.

There's an interesting little sideline on taking Sélestat. The 36th Division was on our right flank and I noticed some of their casualties were lying along a canal down behind the bank covered with blankets. Then the 36th Division relieved us and I didn't think much about it after that. I went to the reserves after the war was over and my company commander in the reserves said that Sélestat was where he was wounded. He was one of the casualties lying under blankets along the canal bank. I told him I had been there. It's a small world when something happens like that.

From the time we left Scherwiller to the time Sélestat was taken—that was November 30th to December 4th. Sélestat was a pretty good-sized town. It was an old city, a walled city, and the Germans had a lot of troops in there, hospitals, ammunition dumps, food dumps and things like that. It was a strong point and they wanted to hold it for a long time. They moved some tank units in there to fight against us and so we had to keep off the streets if at all possible. We found a technique of blowing holes in the walls of the houses, going house to house, because many of the houses were built side by side with common walls. We had the problem, we met it and found a way to beat it. I think we did a good job in Sélestat, considering we hadn't been trained for urban warfare. I think it shows the ability of the American soldier to see the problem and take care of it and we did it.

Having lost three officers in Sélestat, we were fighting under platoon sergeants, which again is an indication—a good company would do that. A lot of companies that lost their officers, nothing would happen—they would stall in a situation like that.

After moving out of Sélestat and resting for a couple of days, we started north up against the Siegfried Line.



Where we attacked the Siegfried Line we called Pill Hill because of the pillboxes on the ridge. The first day we took communication trenches and one pillbox and the Germans surrendered. They had a periscope on another one; so when we occupied the communication trenches, they had accurate artillery fire on us. We couldn't figure it out. Here they had a tree with a periscope inside it and would turn it and direct their artillery fire right on us. One of our platoon sergeants, Sergeant Springborn, happened to see the tree move, then a mirror reflection

of a little bit of light, and shot the periscope off. After that, the Germans couldn't direct accurate artillery fire on us.

My machine squad was supporting Sergeant Springborn's platoon at the time. He had no officer; the lieutenant had been wounded. So he called back and got a TNT satchel charge. He asked me, my machine gun to provide covering fire for him to use the satchel charge against the pillbox. I had been in his squad when he was a squad leader and been a rifleman scout for him, and so we knew each another. He said, "Keep fire on the pillbox until I get up to it." I did and he put the satchel charge in and came back. He said it was a two-minute fuse, but it seemed like an hour. And I was afraid to fire on it because maybe I'd knock the fuse out. We just hoped and hoped and hoped, and it finally went off. It blew the pillbox and we got twelve prisoners out of it. He got a Silver Star for destroying that pillbox.

We had a hard time getting water up on top of the hill. Mules would bring ammunition, water, and food up to us, they would take the empty canteens back down, and the next day they would bring the canteens up filled with water, if there was enough room on the mules. Sometimes you didn't have water for a period of time and the guys who had water would share it with one another. When Springborn blew the pillbox, he came around the corner into the trench and asked, "Who has a drink of water?" I happened to have some water in my canteen and gave it to him. Later at reunions, Springborn always remembered, "You know, Les, after we blew the pillbox, I was really shaky and you gave me a drink of water."

Then we got counterattacked about three days in a row. There was about two days of pretty strong counterattacks and one day of sporadic counterattacks. They had artillery fire and mortar fire. They had attacking rifleman. They had some armor support in the woods but they did not get close enough to us. We were very fortunate that way. They could have rolled up with those tanks and rolled right through us.

One of our mortar sergeants got killed. They had fired all their mortar ammunition and our mortarmen came up to help out the riflemen and machine gunners. He asked, "Where are they?" I said, "They're all over the place. Don't stand up!" The trench was only two or three feet deep. He stood up and said, "They're all over the place!" He fired, maybe two or three rounds, I'm not sure, and got hit in the head and fell over on me. I had blood all over me and my field jacket. It shook me up. If he hadn't run out of ammunition, he wouldn't have come up and maybe wouldn't have been killed. It is just one of those things.

I was right beside my squad leader when he was killed on the 20th of December. He'd asked me to change places with him. After we changed places, a short round of our own artillery came in and hit the communication trench where we were. He got killed, I got wounded in the face, and it killed another guy further down the trench. It also knocked the machine gun out—and we were being counterattacked at the time. I grabbed a rifle, not my sergeant's—his rifle had been damaged by shrapnel from the short artillery round.

We returned the fire and were able to maintain our position. Our men slung a box of hand grenades that slithered across the ground from the trench behind up to one of my ammo bearers and me. There's twenty-five grenades in a box, five by five. This other guy and I down at the bottom of the trench pulled the pins of the hand grenades. We could hear the Germans outside and so we didn't toss them overhand, but sidearm and underhand because they were that close. I thought they would make a final assault on us, but they just never did. I don't know whether they thought there were more men in there than there were because there were never more than eight men in that section from one end of the trench to the other where the trench stopped.

We killed a German captain at one end of the communication trench that we were in. They had got that close to us. We tramped on him for about four days while we were in there. When the 45th Division relieved us, one of their guys pulled the German officer's sleeve back and there was a watch there. It was a gold watch and here we had been tramping on it for four days. We were too busy fighting to be thinking about watches or anything like that.

There were some tough days up to that and some tough days after that, but the days up in the Siegfried Line were my four worst days of the war. No sleep, with constant counterattacks, with explosions, death and not giving proper burial to those who died. The other part of the trench we could get the dead out every night. We put our dead on the mules that brought up water, food, and ammunition to take them out and down the hill—that's a pretty traumatic proposition.

In a trench maybe thirty to forty feet long, we had three dead and we couldn't get our dead out the whole time we were there. In fact, two of the bodies we put up on the forward edge of the trench, because the trench was only about two to two and a half feet deep in that particular area and there was impact of small-arms weaponry hitting these two bodies that we put out there. I would have wanted my body to be used to protect somebody else's life. For a long time, I had qualms about that particular action. But it's resolved now when I realized what we did.

We were fighting without hope of somebody else relieving us and making a stronger attack or something like that. When the 45th Division finally relieved us, they were told to stay in position until we got out and then they pulled back into the Maginot Line. The powers that be had different plans—at the time, we didn't know about the German attack north of us that began the Battle of the Bulge. But at the time, we didn't know this; we wanted to continue the attacking we'd been doing. It's one of those things that the poor fellow that's fighting at the cutting end doesn't know what the big plans are behind you.

When we were up in the trench, we ate things I hadn't eaten before—like horseflesh with rice. In the pillbox that we had blown the embrasure out of were German rations. In black gothic letters on a can that was light in color—a galvanized color—was imprinted *Pferdefleisch*

mit Reis. Most of us were able to figure out some of the German; it was horsemeat with rice and we couldn't heat it; we had no facilities for heating it. We ate it anyhow.

When we went into the attack there, we had a full squad of five men, and when we pulled out, there were three of us—one had been killed, one wounded. I had also been wounded, but I was walking wounded and we didn't consider walking wounded as being wounded badly enough; if you could still navigate, you were expected to navigate. I carried the machine gun part way down the hill. Due to exertion, lack of sleep, lack of food and all that go with that, I passed out and one of the other guys carried the gun the rest of the way down.

When we were finally pulled out, my squad's machine gun was inoperative. I had tried immediate action on it during a counterattack, but I couldn't get the bolt pulled back. I stuck the shoulder stock in the bottom of the trench and jumped on the bolt, but I couldn't move it. We later found a piece of shrapnel wedged between the receiver and the bolt. That's why it couldn't be operated. Our company's armorer repaired the gun before we got to our next position where we had to use it.

We came down the hill to a small unpaved road that ran parallel to the Siegfried Line, with little cutoffs where you could go up a little higher. This hill was maybe 300 feet higher than the valley that we went back down into. Here was a jeep and a trailer; the trailer was open, full of fresh army bread—unsliced, of course, just loaves of bread. We hadn't had bread or a hot meal or anything like that and, as we walked past, the chaplain and his assistant would take a loaf of bread out of the trailer and break it into either halves or thirds and give each man a piece of it. The chaplain was crying. I guess we weren't very presentable. I had a bandage on my face and blood on my field jacket from one man who had been killed next to me. We looked bad to the chaplain and he was crying. We just felt so relieved we were kind of in ecstasy with just getting a loaf of white bread and we're alive.

Then they fed us a hot meal of mashed potatoes and gravy, big meatballs and green beans, a piece of bread. We had to get on trucks and move out, so we didn't even have time to eat it out of our mess kits. So each man went through the chow line and the cooks made a great big sandwich with all the things we were going to eat, gave it to you, and you climbed on the truck.

The food was heavenly after four or five days of tough combat with no warm food. It came back to haunt us, however. A rich meal like that caused some diarrhea and the trip took a long time and the trucks didn't stop. Whenever nature called, over the tail gate the men would do what nature called them to do and we were running blackout and I guess a lot of it splattered on the windshields of the vehicle behind you.

In open trucks, it was a long cold journey. We drove eighty to a hundred miles north from the Siegfried Line in Germany, near Rechtenbach to a place in Lorraine behind the front lines. Fortunately, we didn't have to fight when we got off the trucks. We were the last part of

the division to move north. We were the last ones fighting when they pulled us out, so we were put in reserve.

We relieved the 6th Armored Division. But, before we relieved them, we all got the first hot shower since we had left the ship. The last shower that I had before this one was on board ship and it with salt water, and that doesn't clean you; you only have a scummy feeling from that. Our clothes were in pretty bad shape. We got new underwear, socks, ODs [Olive Drabs, army fatigues], and we left the old clothing there. This shower was in a big coal mine; they had hot showers for the coal miners after they got off their shift. Oh, that felt wonderful. It took that scum off of me—the salt water and all the dirt we'd accumulated from somewhere in the middle of October until December 22d, I think. Never again would I go that long without a shower. We tried to soak as long as possible under the showers—it felt so good. All of us looked emaciated; I was surprised everyone looked skinny. Our flesh was white, no suntan left from summertime in Texas.

Then we acted like combat engineers going to work. Every day we dug foxholes and then ran communication trenches from foxhole to foxhole and laid barbed wire in front of them. We prepared defensive positions until about January 20th. Then we moved back to Alsace-Lorraine, where we relieved the 70th Division. They had been brought over without their artillery and then committed to combat, which is not a good thing.

I had no platoon leader. We had a platoon sergeant, a section sergeant, but no squad sergeants. So we were moved into positions as acting noncommissioned officers and the company commander came down and said to the platoon sergeant and me—I was standing with him—to find out where the machine guns were of the outfit we were relieving. They were in a very small village surrounded by pretty dense woods and the fields of fire from any place in this village into the woods were very short and not to our liking. I finally found the lieutenant from the weapons platoon of the company we were relieving and asked him where his machine guns were. I wanted to see if they were good positions so we might use the same positions. He said one is in a house up the street and the other one is in the garage there. In both places, the machine guns were just lying up against the wall, not even set up. They were new to combat and hadn't been trained too well, it seemed. We never fought that way. We put our guns in position as soon as we got some place.

We communicated with our company commander and he said, "Well, never mind. We're getting out of here." He called back to our higher headquarters and told them what the situation was—that the field of fire was very poor. We moved back out of this village at the edge of the forest into the Maginot Line, which had excellent fields of fire, long fields and barbed wire and so we set up there. It was fortunate we did, because that night that little village where we had been was attacked by the Germans and they just shelled the daylights out of it before they attacked. We weren't there. We were back in the Maginot Line in foxholes and

communication trenches behind barbed wire. By the time that they wasted all their energy attacking that little village and then finding out nobody was there, and sending patrols out and coming up into the Maginot Line, they were tired. We called artillery fire, and with little or no small-arms fire, they were pinned down by our artillery and pulled back. So, our company commander made a wise decision in communicating with higher headquarters. We stayed there until the pullback to the Moder River.

The Seventh Army and higher commands wanted to draw troops back into better defensive positions. We pulled back the night of the 20th of January till the morning of the 21st. Each battalion had a company that was going to pull out last, and G Company got chosen for that. Engineers attached to us blew every culvert and small bridge as we pulled out. There was a terrific snowstorm, which was ideal as far as we were concerned. It was hard walking, but the Germans figured no one would pull out under conditions like that. It was about twenty kilometers and that was a long walk in a snowstorm. It took us from dark until the next morning. It was daylight and even though the snow had abated somewhat, it was still difficult to see. We breathed a sigh of relief after we got across the Moder River and blew those bridges, because even though it was a small river, it would be enough to stop a tank attack. If there were any fords, they were well covered by minefields and antitank guns.

We pulled across the Moder River and started digging in. There were some houses there where our company headquarters and some of our platoon headquarters had shelter, but the rest of us were out in the cold. It was difficult digging because the ground was frozen. There were tricks we could use—take our rifle and fire eight rounds in maybe an eight- to ten-inch circle and it would break up the frozen ground, so that you could get a start digging in. But we didn't because we didn't know where the Germans were in relation to us. I found out later that they hadn't even realized we had pulled back. We didn't know that, so we used precautions and did it by hand, which was difficult.

A friend of mine rejoined the company. He was a machine gunner and had been wounded in Sélestat and this was the 20th of January—seven weeks later and his wound wasn't completely healed. Because of the Battle of the Bulge, they were taking guys from the hospital and sending them back as replacements—not back to their original units. But the guys all wanted to go back to their original units; they didn't want to go back as a replacement to some other unit. So he went AWOL from the hospital and found his way back—hitchhiked back up and joined us just before the march back. On the march back, he passed out, his wound reopened, and he lost a considerable amount of blood. So we carried him back, put his arms around our shoulders—and we were tired too, because a twenty-kilometer march is no picnic. We put him in the company headquarters building, where it was warm and he got some stuff to eat. The medics took care of his wound again and he regained enough mobility to stay with us. But I give him a lot of credit.

He and I were good friends for a long time. When my children were not much more than babies, I bought a new station wagon, my wife and I took a week and we drove down to Arkansas to visit him and a couple of other buddies who were in the same platoon—and all those Arkansas buddies are dead now.

Bill Gibbs was also wounded in Sélestat. A concussion destroyed his hearing and he did the same thing—he came back to my squad and I found out he couldn't hear. If you can't hear and you're on the front lines, this is not good for anybody concerned. You could be killed or wounded because of your impairment or you could cause your buddy to be killed or wounded. So, I went to the company commander and told him that he was going to get himself killed or wounded or one of his buddies in the machine gun squad. He put him in the kitchen and he was permanent KP from there to the end of war and he still couldn't hear so well. He went to the 45th Division to come back to the States. When they found out about his hearing impairment, he ended up in a veterans hospital in a town about twenty miles from where I live. While he was getting treatment there, he would come and visit my mother and father, sleep in my bed, and date some of the girls that I knew in town. He would write me letters—the war's over, but I'm still over in Europe—saying that he dated so-and-so Saturday night and my mother cooked a nice roast beef dinner. So we went back and forth like that for quite some time. We had good times together at reunions. He passed on too, but those are things that you'll remember the rest of your life.



Kindwiller was a night of pure terror. On the 7th of February, we were in reserve and the company commander called a formation, put us all in a schoolroom, and told us we were going to make a night raid. The purpose of the night raid was to get prisoners and there would be three platoons in the attack and one platoon in reserve. I figured the weapons platoon would be the reserve platoon because we probably wouldn't carry our heavy weapons up there. He said, "We're not taking our mortars or our machine guns. However, because the Fourth Platoon has a greater number of old men in it . . ."—now when he said "old men"—I was twenty years old—he meant men that had trained together in the States that are still around and because the mortar men didn't have the casualty rates of the machine gunners. He said the Fourth Platoon would be an assault platoon—I wasn't paying much attention until he said that.

Captain Craddock was a good company commander and did an excellent job in preparation. He went up in an airplane and did an aerial observation of it. Two other companies had tried to get into Kindwiller and they were stopped outside and got no prisoners. And the regimental commander was a little bit upset because he didn't have any

prisoners and the division had told him to get prisoners out of there. So he gave our company commander that job.

The company commander did the preparation and told us what we were going to do and every man that carried a pistol in the weapons platoon would also get a grease gun. The grease guns were submachine guns that looked like a grease gun; you can put down a lot of automatic weapons fire quickly with them. He gave us the order of battle—First Platoon would be on the right, Third Platoon would be in the middle, and Fourth Platoon would be to the left at a little bit of an angle. We would start out after midnight. He drew a little sketch of the vineyards, apple orchards, the roads that went into the village. He told the platoon sergeants what they were going to do and what the noncoms were going to do.

I had a wool knit cap on—we didn't wear our helmets that night. We didn't wear rifle belts or pistol belts. We had first aid pocket packs and grenades in our pockets. We set out, but it took longer than we thought to get to our objective, because it was so muddy and we couldn't walk very fast in the mud. We went down the road a very short distance and across the Moder River. We went left, which would be north, and followed a road and then slowly rising ground up to the little village of Kindwiller.

They told the other machine gun sergeant and me we were going to split the platoon and he would get half and I'd get half. The mortar men would just go along and act as riflemen. Gerald Wilks, the other squad leader, still had a nickel he brought from the States. We tossed and he won and chose the left side of the platoon, which I would have chosen had I won. According to the map and the aerial photographs and all that, that would be the least defended. And then the right side of the platoon tied in with the Third Platoon, which was to take the greatest brunt of the attack. The platoon sergeant for the Third Platoon and I were pretty good friends because I'd been a scout for him in the States before I had become a machine gunner. He told me it's going to be a tough one, but we'll do it. Springborn was a real soldier.

Less than fifty yards from the town, a German yelled HALT! Nobody said a word; we kept on moving in toward the town. He yelled HALT! again. We kept moving and nothing happened. The third time he yells HALT!, he starts to fire and about that time I counted about six machine guns across the company front firing on us—that wasn't good. The Fourth Platoon had gone through some vineyards and were into the apple orchard. When we hit the dirt, you could see some of the apple trees just being sliced off by the German machine gun fire. It's not a real comforting proposition—you look up and you see these German red tracers passing over you.

I kept crawling toward the town, trying to keep contact with my half of the platoon. Low and behold, I look around and I'm the only one there and I don't know where the rest of them are. I'm close enough to the building that a German opened a window next to a big barn door. You could get just enough light so you could see from the tracers, and we had used the artificial

moonlight as soon as we got fired on to hit the clouds and bounce down into our objective. Here comes a machine gun shooting at all the guys with another machine gun closer—so close I could reach up and touch the barrel with my hand. I was scared, I tell you.

I thought, well, I'm up here and he would fire and I would fire at him and I fired about a bandolier of ammunition—armor-piercing ammunition—into the window and knocked a lot of the bricks off the window lintel. There were light-colored marks where the bricks had split and gone into the building. I tossed a concussion grenade—not the pineapple, because we were to get prisoners, we weren't to kill them—but they had chicken wire over the window with a space maybe four inches around for the barrel of the machine gun. The grenade hit the chicken wire and bounced about ten feet from me, and I threw myself as far away from the grenade as possible. Fortunately, no shrapnel—just the concussion, but it really stunned me for a minute. So, I got up again and fired some more at it. The barn door had a big heavy lock on it. By this time, Lieutenant Henneke, the platoon leader for Second Platoon, the support platoon, came up to help.

We had a platoon leader that night that had just come back from the hospital and he got wounded again. So, we were without a platoon leader and we had an extra numerary officer along with us that night who had been assigned to the company who didn't have a particular platoon, but he came with the Fourth Platoon because he wanted to find out how to maneuver a weapons platoon with a rifle platoon so he was on-the-job training and he got wounded. So we have no platoon leaders. My platoon sergeant was trying to calm down the mortar section; they were pretty confused. The other machine gun sergeant, Gerald Wilks, was wounded.

So it left me and the balance of the machine gunners to try to get in through there with Lieutenant Henneke. Henneke is carrying a carbine and it doesn't have enough impact to knock a heavy lock off; so I shot the lock off. Henneke is a real tall guy and I'm a short guy; so I got down low and he got up high and we hit the barn door and shoved it to the side. As soon as we got it open, we both dove in and hit the barn floor. Nothing—nothing happened. Oh, I was thankful—I had been waiting for somebody with a burp gun to fire, but nobody was there. So we stand up and I'm closer to the left mow of the barn and he's closer to the right mow.

When I stood up, I touched a wire and it's German communication wire. I could tell by the feel of it; theirs was made out of plastic—different from our rubber communications wire. So I pulled it, and when I pulled it, the plastic phone came out of the mow, hit the floor, and startled us. The small-arms fire had died down considerably. We heard somebody running in the mow; they went through the mow door into the house. We couldn't see them; it was dark inside there even though we had artificial moonlight. We got into the house and cleared the house except the cellar. Lieutenant Henneke, the mortar sergeant, and I were there. One or two guys were guarding our backs while we were working on the door.

We heard somebody run down the cellar steps. The mortar sergeant kicked the door open—he was a great big guy, heavy so he had a little more impact than Henneke or I would have. Henneke called for a grenade, but nobody had a grenade. Finally, somebody found one and gave Henneke the grenade and he threw it down the cellar. Big explosion! A big fire started in the cellar. Evidently, they had a kerosene lantern down there. Then we hear a guy yelling, "*Nicht schiessen, nicht schiessen!*" So, a lot of them came up the stairs, and each guy was assigned to one prisoner and I got a prisoner who had this flammable liquid on his pants that was burning. A little bit of a sadist at the time, I think, I wouldn't let him put the fire out. Finally, I motioned to him to put the fire out that was about the only light we had had in the room.

We got them out of the room to a collecting point outside the little village and started back. I got the carbine and Tommy gun that Lieutenant Hall had and the carbine that Lieutenant Ebel had. The medics got up there and got them. Wilks, the other machine gun sergeant—I couldn't find him and the medics came back and wanted to know where he was. I said, "You better go back up there and find him." By this time, the adrenaline was slowing, I got a little uptight, and I wanted him to be found and brought back. One man was killed that we knew of because we carried his body back and we had six missing. I think seventeen wounded in six minutes. We got them back behind our lines. The group taking prisoners back had the medics with them and the prisoners apparently started acting up. The medics had no weapons—and I don't know for sure, I wasn't there—but they said they drowned a couple of them so finally the Germans settled down. The guys didn't shoot; we didn't hear any small-arms fire or anything like that.

The artillery provided a screen around us as we pulled back to our own lines. They fired on both sides of us and they fired to our rear as we were walking back to our lines. But, at the same time, the company commander asked about half dozen at least to provide the covering fire and he chose me. I'm carrying a carbine, a Tommy gun, and my own rifle, as we went back. Almost all of us were buck sergeants—the reason being he didn't want to lose his platoon sergeants. And the buck sergeants—almost all of us had been wounded or decorated before and had proved themselves to be pretty good guys in combat.

We got back across the Moder River and the tension was over. I had diarrhea bad before that. All during the firefight, it didn't bother me the least bit. When we got back across the river, I had to go something awful. There was a building there and I went around to the back side of the building so I wouldn't be on the German side of the building to relieve myself. I came back out and the trucks that had been back in there were all gone. Fortunately, a jeep came along and I got a ride back to the next town back that was over the ridge line.

The next morning we were wakened early. We thought we would be allowed to sleep in. General McAuliffe [commanding the 103d Division] came down to present Bronze Stars to the company commander, Lieutenant Henneke, the mortar sergeant, and Private Earl Spague. The

company commander told me after, "You already have one." We listened to McAuliffe for a little bit. But they let us go back to bed and we didn't even wash off the black stuff on us. That afternoon we cleaned up a bit.

About fifty years later, I was over in the Butler area of Pennsylvania—where my daughter lives—and picked up a bargain bulletin or other little newspaper that had little excerpts of local news and brought it home with me. I was reading it and it says something about a man; I looked at the name, but it can't be the guy who was wounded that night. I went to the state police and I said, "Could you give me this guy's name, address, and telephone number?" "Oh, yeah, I know him," said one of the officers to the other. "He's in the VFW." So they gave me his contact information and I called him on the telephone and he said, "Yes, I am." I didn't get to talk to him, but he made arrangements to talk to me. He was going to come to my hometown, which is about twenty miles. He said, "I'll see you at a certain restaurant at a certain time." I was just getting ready to go out the door and the telephone rang. I picked up the telephone: "Are you Robert Leslie?" It was a women's voice. I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I'm the widow of Charles Ferrere. He was working on his car last night and had it up on jacks and it fell off and crushed him to death." It really shook me up! I hadn't seen the guy for fifty years or so. You wonder about certain things that happened to you in life and that was one of them. He never came to an army reunion or anything like that. He didn't know about the association. I had information about where to send the dues and so on. I felt bad about it.



We stayed in Obersoultzbach [a commune in the Bas-Rhin department in Alsace] until we jumped off again March 15th for the final assault on Germany. Just before the final assault, the company commander gave me a three-day pass to a rest camp in Nancy, France. I was the only one left that was still with them from the beginning and my platoon sergeant was the only other one out of the Fourth Platoon. He went to Brussels and I went to the Nancy rest camp. I came back up to the front after the jump-off. It was the 18th of March when I rejoined the company—I remember the date because it was my brother's birthday.

The company hadn't been committed until I joined them and then they were committed. So I didn't miss one attack the company was in. It was a situation that I thought maybe I missed some of the big push, but I didn't miss out on any of it. When I came back, the company had had a lot of yellow jaundice and three or four guys out of my squad got yellow jaundice and were sent back to the hospital.

When I joined the company, I went to find out where the Fourth Platoon was and Bill Gibbs, who had the hearing impairment, was back in the kitchen. I had been eating K-rations coming back up on the truck for a whole day—maybe three K-rations. It was after dark and

they had fed the company. I said to Bill Gibbs—I'm in the kitchen with him—"Did you eat?" He said, "Everything's put away." The mess sergeant came up and wanted the cooks. He said to me, "I'm sorry. Everything's cleaned up and put away. Eat your K-rations"—and I was a little upset at that. The cooks went away, but the mess sergeant was still there. Bill Gibbs and I started a little conversation; we could hear some small-arms fire up in the front some place. I said, "Oh, sounds like something's going on up there." He said, "Yeah, even I can hear it." So the mess sergeant was listening to us, and Bill Gibbs said to me, "You know one of those stray rounds might come through the kitchen and somebody might get hurt." He was carrying a carbine and I was carrying a rifle. I hadn't even drawn any ammunition from the supply truck. But I unslung my rifle and said, "That just might happen." The mess sergeant got a little nervous and said, "Well, maybe I'll have one of the cooks cook you something." He called one of the cooks, he came, started up the stove again, and fried me some pork chops and potatoes and gave me some pineapple.

The mess sergeant and I used to antagonize one another. He was an old regular army guy from Pennsylvania. He told me when I was a private I would never have any special privileges just because I was from Pennsylvania and he was from Pennsylvania. So, every time I would go on KP, I would have to clean the grease traps. This was back in Texas and the guys always wondered why, and he said, "Well, I'm not going to show any special favoritism." So he was acting tough all the time.

When I became section sergeant, we were drawing a liquor ration; all noncoms were drawing liquor rations even though it was illegal. I didn't drink; so I had a window sill in the room I was in with these little bottles. So when they said send some guys from my machine gun section for KP, I would ask who wanted to go on KP and pick up a bottle. I would give them the bottle, they'd start drinking and go on KP and give the mess sergeant a hard time.



We jumped off and fought our way from the Moder River to the Siegfried Line. They put us in a task force [called Task Force Rhine] and G Company got the honor of liberating a little town with the help of the 761st Tank Battalion. The Black tankers were good. I knew they were good because I had been well trained in my eight months in an armored division. These Black tankers knew what to do and they saved a lot of our lives. They used searching fire. They would fire at anything that fired at them. We would also fire with rifles and BARs.

That was a real trying time because most of the infantrymen didn't know anything about tanks and tankers or how to utilize them. I tried to direct the guys to keep the German infantry that had *Panzerfausts* [an antitank weapon operated by a single soldier] from getting in close. I rode point with a jeep for awhile being a machine gunner. It is pretty nerve-racking

riding up a dark road with a tank maybe a hundred to two hundred feet behind you. You're firing at anyone that fires at you.

We fought a day and a night and a day to get to our objective. My idea of hell would be the night that we fought all kinds of enemy fire, while dealing with burning buildings. We broke through the Siegfried Line and we ran over a German supply column trying to pull out before the Americans got there and we shot up the horses, the caissons, the trucks, all the vehicles.

It was a tough action and we did a good job. The Black tank unit later got a unit citation for that particular action. Some of our guys were a little bitter about it when they found out about it at reunions—"We didn't get anything and we had more casualties in our company than they did in their battalion." It was just one of those things, but I always tried to stick up for the 761st Tank Battalion.

Some of the tankers from the 761st Tank Battalion came to one of our reunions. One of the guys who came had been a truck driver. If you were a trucker who belonged to a tank battalion, your job was to get ammunition and gasoline to the tanks. On this particular action, we had at least three trucks that carried nothing but gasoline—five-gallon cans of gasoline on the back of them and that's a very flammable proposition if you get hit with tracers or artillery or anything like that.

When they relieved the jeep driver and the machine gunners who were on the jeep, we went back and rode the gasoline trucks. We were stopped because of a burning ammunition dump. Some of the German infantry could get back close to the road without our infantry being able to see them because it was night. I am off the truck. One German soldier came out of a cut in the road and he had a Panzerfaust. He wasn't twenty-five feet from one truck that had gasoline on it. At that particular time, my job was to get prisoners from the infantry and tankers who were collecting them. There was no other place to put them than on the gasoline and ammunition trucks. There were about a dozen prisoners up on the gasoline truck and they saw the guy. Even though it was dark, the flames were flickering enough so you could see him. He's there with a Panzerfaust aimed at the truck, and I'm there with my M1 aimed at him. I had the drop on him, but if I fired, he would fire the Panzerfaust. We looked at one another. It was probably no more than ten or fifteen seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime and I'm sure he was going to shoot. And all those German prisoners up on the truck were yelling at him, "*Nicht schiessen, nicht schiessen!*" They didn't want to get blown up. I was motioning to him to throw the Panzerfaust away. Finally, he stuck the safety pin back into the Panzerfaust, threw it over his head, put his hands on his head, and climbed up on the truck.

At the reunion, I said to the truck driver I was talking to, "Maybe you don't know this, but I'll tell you a story." He said, "I don't know if I was driving that truck or not." I said, "I remember that some sayings painted on the front of the truck. You guys in the 761st Tank

Battalion, you painted some crazy names on the sides of your tanks and the fronts of your trucks." I continued, "This one said 'Dear God, how long?'" He said, "That was my truck!"

The German soldier saved his life. I was there, I was just a part of it. If the German soldier had made the decision to blow up the truck, it would have blown him up too. I think that had something to do with it too. It wasn't all me.



After that action, we were stopped in the little town called Klingenmünster, where we waited for the balance of the infantry and the armored force to catch up with us. There was supposed to be a task force from the 14th Armored that was supposed to check in with the 761st Tank Battalion and that would close a circle around so many thousands of Germans. We were waiting there at a little road intersection right outside of town—a half a squad of riflemen, one light machine gun with my squad, and one American Sherman tank, which would be five tankers. We were there almost a whole day without much to do.

There was a little house close by. I went in the house, checked it out, and found a crock of eggs. They put their eggs in water glass and crocks to preserve them, and I found a ham up in the chimney. We started a fire in the stove and fried eggs and ham. I can remember I ate thirteen fried eggs and it made me sick—no bread with it, just the ham and the eggs. We had been eating K-rations again for some time and my stomach couldn't take all that protein at one time without anything to go with it. The guys were socializing with one another—the Black tankers, the riflemen, and the machine gun squad. All I had to do was stick close to the machine gun and the two guys that were on it all the time. At that time, we were full strength—we had five guys.

After the war was over, I went to the 9th Division, along with one of the young machine gunners from my squad. We were in the same platoon, same letter company, only a different regiment. Just before he shipped out, he said to me, "I want to tell you something." I asked, "What's that, Roy?" He told me, "Well, we went back into the town when we didn't have anything to do and I was with one of the tankers. The tanker and I raped a German girl." I hadn't known anything about it. He was shipping out the next day to another outfit. I didn't know what to do. It wasn't the company he fought with, so no officers would know anything about what was going on and until my dying day I don't know whether I did the right thing. I just reported it. What could they do? This was back months before, and our paths never crossed again with the 761st Tank Battalion.

My company commander had gone to the 45th and was home in the United States. We're still over there and this young machine gunner is shipping out to another outfit. I feel

guilty sometimes about that particular incident, because perhaps it was my fault that I didn't keep close enough tabs on my guys and they did something wrong.



By that time, we were back at full strength and the war wasn't too bad from that time on. We had a little army of occupation duty along the Rhine River—Ludwigshafen, in that area—until we went down into southern Germany, where we were committed again to go to Austria. Some things happened to us, but nothing like it was back in France and the first part of Germany.

We were all mounted on tanks and trucks and jeeps. On various convoys, we would be on different types of vehicles. One time G Company was on DUKWs [a six-wheel-drive amphibious truck]. They were nice riding—one of the best things I ever rode on.

Another time we were reserves riding on the backs of artillery trucks trailing their guns. They were part of our 382d Field Artillery Battalion. I'm a little guy and the back of the artillery truck was just so crowded I got out of the truck and went back on the trail of the artillery piece and it had a piece of canvas around its trail. It was like a little hammock and I put my pack straps through the grommets. While I was lying there sleeping, a German plane strafed us and the noise woke me up. The German plane made one pass, missed the whole convoy and that was it. It was quite a scare and I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

We were in Innsbruck when they told us the Germans were trying to surrender everything. One German army surrendered to the 103d Division in Innsbruck, but the whole war wasn't over yet. As soon as we got into Innsbruck, G Company was assigned to Aldrans, a little mountain village up above Innsbruck where a radio transmission tower was. You could look down in the valley—beautiful scene. Now this little village was a ski resort—two ski lodges and a smattering of houses and a church—and we had wonderful duty there. We liberated a warehouse full of Nazi propaganda material and ordnance, including a lot of brand new Beretta .32 caliber semi-automatic pistols—made quite well. All of us got two, three, four, five or as many as we could carry plus three-by-five foot Nazi flags. I still have one of the flags with the names of my machine gun section on it

While we were in Innsbruck, we wanted to go swimming in a little mountain lake there. So we made bathing suits out of the Nazi flags so that the swastika was on our behinds. The Austrians thought that was hilarious.

One of the ski lodges resorts had a great big patio, nice tables, and shade trees around. Putting our kitchen in the kitchen of the ski lodge, we felt like we were living big-time. We had some displaced KPs that came with our kitchen. They got something to eat so they stayed with

us until we moved back into Germany and they went back to the German areas they came from. That was easy living.

Though the war was over, we ran jeep patrols in the upper mountain meadows where there would be a building where people who took their sheep flocks to the upper meadows would stay in. It was rumored that diehard SS [an elite Nazi military unit] wouldn't surrender and used the buildings as hideouts. A couple of our patrols were said to have been fired on.

One day I was up there with a jeep driver and one other guy. I looked with some field glasses up to one of the alpine meadows and it looks like machine guns right out in the middle of it. It spooked me because I didn't know what's going on. So I told the jeep driver to stop and I took a look at them. There was a German machine gun, a Czech machine gun and a British Sten gun, just out in the middle of this green field, no ammunition near them or anything like that. To play it safe, I took the cable on the jeep and hooked it on the machine guns and backed off the jeep maybe fifty to seventy-five feet and pulled them—nothing happened. I put them on the jeep and turned them in back at headquarters. Somebody from intelligence came up to talk to me, talk to the jeep driver, talk to people who lived on that road and nobody knew anything about it. Nobody ever did find out who put them out there—most probably to get rid of them.

We had good duty when we were in Austria and then the French came and took over. Pulling back to Schwabhausen and then Landsberg in Bavaria in Germany, we had guys being transferred to the 1st, 5th, 9th, 42d, and 45th divisions. The 103d Division went home with the high-pointers. On July 27, 1945, I was assigned to the 9th Division and trained with them at a German fighter strip near Munich. They evidently treated their fighter pilots well; they had apartment complexes, so another guy and I—he was a corporal and I was a buck sergeant—had a two-bedroom apartment. We had a kitchen, bath, living room—this was pretty nice living.

I stayed with them until November—just about Thanksgiving—and then was transferred to the 94th Division, same letter rifle company, but a different regiment—the 376th Infantry. I came home with the 94th Division. When I was discharged from the 94th Division, I signed up in the Army Reserve. A lot of people said, “Oh, you're crazy.” I thought, well, I had learned something and I thought I was a pretty good teacher. In fact, with the 9th Division, I was on task duty and got to teach engineering drawing because it was on my service record that I had taken engineering drawing from Carnegie Tech after I got out of high school and hadn't started college yet. I thought I could teach people and I stayed in the Reserve for nine years, then married, and the family was coming along and I was a weapons platoon sergeant, which wasn't a good job for a married man with kids. So when my term of enlistment was up, I got out.

When I got out of the service, they asked me if my discharge was alright and I told them I'd been wounded twice—both times not bad enough to even go to the aid station. The officer said, “That's not on your service record.” I said, “The medic dressed me and I had shrapnel cut

out of me two times after and I don't have a Purple Heart. We didn't go through the aid station." In July of 1947, I finally got a Purple Heart through the mail.



My service career made me a better man. I can put things in perspective. Before that, I was opinionated—maybe because of the way I was raised, the town I was raised in, my peers. I became more tolerant with other people, I know I have faults and I would overlook their faults and it made me very appreciative of the life that I had. I was living and the company I was in had more killed than any other company in the 103d Division.

We had forty-two killed and one medic who was attached to the company. He was actually in the medical attachment for the regiment, but he was killed back on assignment with us at Kindwiller. In fact, he was one of the three medics who were wounded while attached to our company on the first attack.

The war made me more self-secure: I'm just as good as you are. I had gone through combat. I had made it!

One night I was on an outpost. I don't think I was even a sergeant at that time; I was acting squad leader. We were under strength and I had this sound-powered telephone on the outpost. Somebody whistled into it. That's how we communicated and I picked it up. It was Captain Craddock, the company commander. We had been operating for quite some time without an officer. He said, "Les, I have another officer for you. Please take care of him." I took that as a compliment, actually. I think we had good rapport.

After the war was over, I had a lot of dirt embedded in my face from shell fragments, so it was painful to shave. We had inspection one Saturday and I'm a sergeant. I didn't shave because it hurt that day. Captain Craddock inspected us, then he came back to me and said, "Next week, stand a little closer to the razor." He didn't chew me out; he just said that and I understood I was to be an example to the guys even though my face hurt. I used to kid him about that at reunions.

He went to the army reunions quite consistently until he died. Somebody would ask him a question and he said, "I can't remember that. You go over and ask Les."



Sergeant Springborn and I went back a long way too. He won two Silver Stars. When I first knew him, he was just a buck sergeant and he was my squad leader. When I joined G Company, his wife had just had their first baby and he was home on furlough. He didn't know I was even in the squad until he came back from furlough.

In the States one time, he and I got into it a little bit. He was my squad leader and we were in Texas out in the heat. It was hot and he said something that us new ASTP guys couldn't take it like the real guys could. I said, "Springborn, I'll walk you into the ground" —not the right thing to say. He put me out on flank security where you had to be out off the road where it was harder walking. I never fell. He had to stop and from then on he and I got along real good. I proved to him that I could do it. I fired expert with the rifle and he liked us guys to be expert riflemen.

He went from squad leader to platoon guide to platoon sergeant. When the platoon sergeant got hit, the guy who was platoon guide refused the job. He said, "Give it to Springborn. He'll be a better platoon sergeant than I would be."

So, whenever we got into position, he and I tried to work together and I tried to get my machine gun squad assigned to his platoon, or he would ask for my machine gun squad to go with him whenever they gave him a particular job. He was a guy who liked to drink and I wasn't a drinker; yet, we respected one another. He had a platoon guide—the same kind of guy I was—he wasn't a drinker either. We used to say that we try to keep you on the straight and narrow—and, yet, we got along together, A number one.



At reunions, I don't think we try to impress one another with what we did. You're with your peers who did a certain thing at a certain time—at the time maybe we hated it and we wouldn't do it again. But we are proud of the fact that we did do it and went through it. But we're all equal, no matter what your intellectual or social level was, whatever your level of monetary achievement—that doesn't mean anything. We're all people. And it may be more to what man should be, everybody respecting one another and doing anything for one another that you know in your heart is right and no pretensions that these things don't mean much—the ability of man to get along with man.

You have a brotherhood or bond that nobody can take away from you—even though Chan Rogers and I are the only ones left from the company I was in. At one time, we had twelve to fifteen that came every year and we respected one another, we admired one another and we liked to think of the funny things that happened to one another. You're back into a period of your life when you're going through an extremely traumatic experience and you survived and proved to one another what you actually were as a man. I might not like the fact that you smoke cigars or your language isn't the best in the world. That's why I like to go to the army reunion every year.

Good experience! Wonderful life.