

Recorded Interview

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Nicholas J. Melas, I & R Platoon, Hq. Co. 411th

I was born and raised in Chicago and I am still living there. I am commonly known as Nick. I graduated from high school in June of 1941 and entered the University of Chicago in September. By December the quarter was ending and we were getting ready for the quarterly exams. I probably heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor at home over the radio. A couple of days later, along with two of my school friends, I decided to enlist in the U.S. Army. We felt that we had to do something.

At the enlistment office they asked us what we were doing currently. We were told to stay in school and that we would be put in the ERC (Enlisted Reserve Corps). They told us, "When we need you we will call you." So, we signed up in early December and went back to school.

I had gone to the University of Chicago from an inner city high school, and was given a 1/3rd tuition scholarship. I had been on the high school wrestling team and had done pretty well in the Chicago area, so I became a member of the University's wrestling team.

In March of '43, we got notification from the Army that they were giving us a thirty day notice to report for active duty. In the meantime, the other two fellows who had gone down with me originally to enlist, had just

been admitted to medical school after two years of undergraduate work. The Army told my friends to stay in medical school but I had to report in a month. I focused on finishing up the general courses I was taking. I had planned to get a degree in chemistry. I had taken a lot of preliminary chemistry courses in high school.

I was put on a train along with a number of other people. We were sent for basic training to Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois. It appeared that the Chemical Warfare Units of the Army were headquartered at Camp Grant and apparently they had looked at my background and saw that I was studying chemistry. But, that was the last place in the world that I wanted to be. My friends said to take a particular exam and if I did well I could get into the Army Air Corp program. I took the exam, was lucky enough to pass, and they transferred me out of Camp Grant to Jefferson Barracks outside of St. Louis. They outfitted us there and sent me to Northwestern State Teachers College in Alva, Oklahoma for an eight or ten week course load including academics and preliminary training prior to going into Air Training. We were supposed to do twelve hours in a Piper Cub and then they would let us solo. The idea was that when you finished this program they would send you back to another Air Corp Base, check you out, and put you into one of three categories prior to more schooling: bombardier, navigator or pilot. About that same time the military planners at the Pentagon had gotten together and were drawing up the final plans for the invasion of

Europe. They realized, after putting all the numbers together, that the amount of infantrymen needed to replace those who would be lost in the invasion would be greater than estimated. They decided that there were too many “flyboys.” Anybody who had not actually finished this particular course (preflight training) would be terminated from the program; they eliminated thousands of us. I was put on a train with the guys from Alva around November of ‘43 and we ended up in Louisiana at Camp Polk in the 88th Infantry Division. All of us thought the world had ended; we were so disappointed. First I was separated from some good buddies during Basic Training and then after we left Alva we all got split up into different companies. We got off that train two days later at mid-night after thirty-six hours, dirty and disheveled. We were greeted by pouring rain and a Sergeant who raised heck with us because we were wearing officer’s OD. “You get out of those clothes or I will get you tomorrow.” I was having a terrible time and the first thing the next morning, I went to sick call. After about a couple weeks, as we got close to Thanksgiving they decided to give us a two week furlong and I went home to Chicago.

While I was home I did have a chance to meet with my cousin who also went to enlist right after Pearl Harbor. He was a few years younger than I was but was not in college at the time. I don’t know how he did it but he got into the U.S. Marines. He had been wounded at Guadalcanal and was home recuperating. We went out and spent a lot of time together and I realized

that God had not been that bad to me when I saw what Danny had gone through; his name was Dan Pappas. He recuperated and went back and ended up on Iwo Jima as well. He spent quite a bit of time in the Pacific. Being with Danny helped me think things through when I went back to Camp Polk. I realized that these were the cards that I had been dealt, I might as well accept it and make the best of it. I decided I was not going to be a “screw off” any more; I was going to do what I was supposed to do.

The original 103d Infantry Division had gone over to England as replacements for the invasion and the military was trying to reconstitute the 103d at Camp Howze. The Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado National Guard were the basis for the 103d. They also had called the 88th Division Headquarters in Denver to transfer three or four hundred men to the 103d. My name was on the list of people to be transferred, so I was sent to Camp Howze, TX.

[Interviewer’s comment: Major **General Charles C. Haffner, Jr.** was from Chicago and was also Commander of the Illinois National Guard in civilian life. He had a lot of political influence. He was a Democrat and Roosevelt knew him because he had delivered votes for Roosevelt in Chicago, Illinois. In December of ’42, after Haffner became the Major General of the 103d, they sent him and the Cadre from the three National Guard Units to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. Then they needed about thirteen thousand fillers and you were one of them from the 88th Division. Beside the 88th

there was a second Infantry Division, which was a regular Army Division. They contributed Cadre as well as the 88th. That constituted the 103d at Camp Claiborne. Haffner took over and he was going to be the guy to head up the Division.]

When they sent me to the 88th they made me a rifleman, (MOS, 745). I was in a platoon in a rifle company for a very short time. They were really swamped trying to process these new guys from pre-flight training, ASTP, and maybe just new draftees. They decided to send a few hundred of us out on furlough. When I got back I was not very popular with the Sergeants. I was dragging my feet so bad, they put my name on the board with a couple hundred guys and I was happy. We were washouts from the Air Corps Preflight Training and now were on our way to Camp Polk Louisiana and the 88th Division. We were pretty upset. When I got back I noticed they had my name on a list of people who were being transferred out of the 88th over to the 103d and I was reassigned to go to Camp Howze. I was initially assigned to 411th Regiment in one of the Rifle Companies but I was only there for a very short time; I do not recall which company it was. They also had me as a member of a mortar squad. I was looking in the manual and it said that the largest guy out of the four would carry the base plate. At 5 ft 2 inches and one hundred and twenty pounds I ended up carrying the base plate! We were out in the field on the first day of training with our Sergeant. I saw a jeep pull up and our Sergeant ran over to see who he wanted. The Sergeant came

over and screamed at us, "Which one of you is Melas?" They always mispronounced my name but I said it was me. The Sergeant said that the Captain wanted to see me. I went over to the jeep and spoke to the man. He explained that he was the Intelligence Officer for the Regiment and he was recomposing the Intelligence and Recognizance Platoon. He told me that he had gone through the jackets of all the new men, pulled out about fifty of them, from which he would select twenty men to compose this reconstituted Intelligence and Recognizance Platoon. I was one of the men he wanted to interview. Right away I had a stroke of good fortune because it turned out we were both from Chicago. In the end, after the interview, I was one of the men he selected.

We ended up at Camp Howze. The I & R Platoon was assigned four jeeps. The first day we were working out they wanted me to get in and drive the car. I said, "Sir, I am sorry but I do not know how to drive an automobile." There I was at 19 or 20 years old and never driven a car in my life. The first lesson I learned in the I & R Platoon was how to drive an automobile. They had a man there who taught me how to drive a jeep. Camp Howze was a very good experience even though we were there in the middle of that Texas heat. It was particularly bad when we had to do those forced marches with full backpack but we survived it.

We always got our pay around the first of the month. I don't remember the sum, maybe eighteen dollars. That first weekend we would generally go

up to Dallas and spend some time seeing the sights and the entertainment places. By the second weekend about half of us had pretty much spent our money so we didn't go to Dallas. But there was a place halfway to Dallas called Denton, home of the Northwestern State Teachers College. It was said that the girls in that school were the most beautiful in the world. We found that to be true and by the fourth weekend, when nearly everybody's money was gone, we all ended up in Denton. Competition got even tougher. It was an interesting pastime.

I will never forget Staff Sergeant Boyd at Camp Howze. He was a Regular Army guy and I will never forget what he put us through. He was really tough but in retrospect I thank God that he was; it made us better soldiers and better men. When the fall came along in late October, we were put on a train and sent to Camp Shanks in New York. It was a much better train ride than the one I had earlier from Alva, Oklahoma to Camp Polk. We were kind of excited that we were going to the European Theater. All the time we were in Howze we didn't know if we were going to end up in the Pacific Theater or the European Theater. It turned out that this outcome was much better for us.

While we were waiting for our ship to take us overseas we received one day passes to go into New York City. I got a chance to see the Great White Way and to see a live show with Cab Calloway and his orchestra. We got on a small vessel called the *SS Santa Maria* which, we were told, had been

primarily used to ferry bananas from Costa Rica up to New York prior to the war. In those days the service confiscated every vessel we could get. They lined us all up and we waited until the convoy was assembled. We needed a convoy with some escorts because the German submarine fleet was very active in those days, patrolling and shooting down many of our vessels.

Thank God we made it safely across. The trip over the Atlantic wasn't too bad; some of us got seasick, not everybody, but quite a few. We experienced the worst turbulence when we passed from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean, by Gibraltar; just about everybody threw up. I remember being in the chow line holding my steel tray and like most of the others in line, my stomach was queasy. Somebody up ahead in line got sick and threw up onto his tray and plate, which caused others to do the same. I ran upstairs to find a railing. The one saving grace of that whole incident was that the one guy out of the whole platoon, who was the sickest of all, was Sgt. Boyd. We were all a little bit happy at that.

We ended up in Marseilles which had already been a point of entry by the 3d, 45th, and 36th Divisions. The original invasion was probably in August and we got there in late October or early November. We pitched our pup tents just outside the town and had to wait there until the rest of the Division could be assembled and all the equipment and vehicles could be unloaded from other ships.

We would walk into the little hamlets surrounding the area and go into the French bars, thinking that we might get a bite to eat and something to drink. The bite to eat never came because the French people were really in dire straits. Every once in a while we would bring them the little pieces of cheese we would get in the K ration. They thought it was wonderful that we would share that with them. If we wanted a drink, only Vermouth was available and I was very inexperienced in drinking sweet Vermouth. One night, after plenty of Vermouth, halfway back to our bivouac area, I decided to go to sleep curled up in the middle of the road. I was there with two of my buddies: Ralph Crawford from Yerington, Nevada, his hometown, and Gordon George, a Mormon from Salt Lake City Utah, who became a very close friend of mine. George had never tasted anything even as strong as a Coca Cola before he came into the Army. Ralph Crawford, coming from Nevada, was very much in tune with living life, whether it was women or girls or whatever. Of course he could hold his liquor but George and I could not. We just didn't know what that was. If it had not been for Ralph getting me out of the road, making me get up, and stand I don't know if I would have made it back to the bivouac area. He got both of us back and into our pup tents where we did not move until the next morning.

After awhile we were all assembled and in our vehicles; the rest of the regiment were in the big trucks. We went up the Rhone River Valley to the Vosges Mountains. I think we actually got into position November 10th

because I remember Armistice Day, November 11, was the next morning. Elements of the 3d Division moved into the same area in the middle of the night. When the 3d moved out of their positions the 411th came up and occupied those same positions. [Some years later after the war I was attending a Young Democrats meeting in Springfield, Illinois. I had a chance to meet a young guy who was a State Representative from down state Illinois named Clyde Choate. I found out that he had been a member of that 3d Division and was actually a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. I was so proud to meet a man like that and I told him that I was a member of the 103d Division and we might have crossed paths in the middle of the night back on November 10th of '44. It was an interesting coincidence. Clyde was a great guy and I had the pleasure of meeting him.]

We had a tough time those first days. I believe it was C Company from the 410th that suffered some terrific casualties there that first day. Our officers were not seasoned and had allowed the men to stay pretty much in clusters. The Germans knew more about where we were than we did. The tree bursts were coming in and we had some severe casualties those first few days. We learned quickly and adapted to the situation. We passed through a number of those small towns; we liberated St. Die a few days later and went on from there.

It struck me that choosing to take German in high school served me well in the military. We had to take two years of a foreign language in the

Chicago High Schools and since I was interested in science, I chose German. In addition, when I was in the Enlisted Reserve Corp and still going to school at the University of Chicago, I decided to take a course in Military German. Therefore, when I got into Alsace Lorraine I could converse with the local people. As you know, in that area, one year the population may be German and the next French; it went back and forth for years. When I would speak to the local people they would respond, "Du sprichst Berlin Deutsch." ("You speak Berlin German"). I was speaking the kind of German I had learned in school which was the kinder, more polite German, as opposed to what the villagers spoke. At least we could converse even though I was not very fluent.

After a few weeks had passed we got into that severe winter of December and the Battle of the Bulge when the Germans made their last attack to try and stop the invasion of their homeland. General Patton swung the Third Army toward the north to relieve our forces at Bastogne with that amazing march nobody thought was possible. His whole right flank became exposed and the 7th Army, including the 103d Division, had to stretch out and move northward. That effort protected his flank so that the Third Army could not be surrounded. I remember nights when we had guard duty, while most of the fellows were sleeping; two hours on and four hours off. I remember walking outside the house or barn where we were staying and hearing the "crunch, crunch" of footsteps in the frozen snow. I would take one step and hear a "crunch" and I would freeze, thinking, "I am being

surrounded.” It was a very scary time. After the success of the defense of Bastogne, we held our positions. It was pretty much a static situation until the big push east that began on March 15 when the 1st Army crossed the bridge at Remagen. It was this whole movement East at that time.

During that period of “static” there was one incident I still think about all these years later. I remember we had stopped in a grassy area, adjacent to a farmer’s field, because we were suffering enemy incoming mortar shells and machine gun fire. Our Sergeant selected two of us, me and a fellow by the name of Bender, to cross the farmer’s field that evening and determine where the machine gun nests and mortar placements were located. To the east of that field was a wooded area. We crawled up to the edge of our position in the afternoon and some of the landmarks were pointed out to us for our return. That particular evening turned out to be absolutely the darkest night; there were clouds and very little moonlight. We went ahead, crawling on our hands and knees because of the machine guns. We could see the tracer bullets flying through the air ever so often. We got close enough to the wooded area that I could hear conversations and determine that the speakers were Germans. I could not make out exactly what they were saying. Once we had made that determination, Bender and I wanted to go back to our lines. We started looking around for the landmarks so that we would head in the right direction. We could not see them; it was just too dark. Bender got very excited and said, “Let’s go this way!” Then he said, “No! It’s

over that way!" I froze. I realized under the conditions we could not be certain of where we were going. I remembered some wisdom from my teen years in the Boy Scouts: if you are lost at night, stay where you are, and wait until daylight. I finally convinced Bender to wait until daylight. The farmer had already planted furrows and they held a little water that had already frozen. We were experiencing one of the coldest winters in the history of Europe. We had to hold on to each other to keep each other warm so we wouldn't freeze to death while we waited. As soon as the sun started to break through the clouds, we were able to determine that the direction Bender was talking about would have been disastrous. We turned and headed back. When we got close to our positions we had to start yelling out to the guys to make sure no one accidentally pulled a trigger on us. We got back safe and sound and transmitted the information to our superiors; the word got back to our artillery guys and they laid down quite a bit of fire in that particular wooded area. Eventually, we were able to move and made a big push on the 15th of March, keeping the Germans on the move. We outran our supplies and did not get a change of clothing. We did find places to spend the night; maybe a barn with some straw, knowing full well that the night before German soldiers had been sleeping in that same straw.

It was a hectic time; I remember two specific instances. We were given one day of rest in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, famous for the passion play they put on there every year. We moved into an abandoned home for a day and

were pleased to find plenty of champagne. I remember taking the bottles out and putting them around the house like a little fence in the snow so that they would cool.

We moved into Landsberg, the town made famous by Hitler's imprisonment, years earlier, during which time he wrote Mein Kampf. Our mission was to protect the bridge over a river that went through that town. Electricity was being generated from a small hydroelectric plant where they had a dam and adjacent to that was the bridge that crossed the river. Our mission was to make sure none of the retreating Germans would slip back, place some mines, and blow up the bridge. Some of us were inside a flimsy wooden structure which held the machinery for the hydroelectric plant. While we were sitting there a stray bullet went through one of the doors and hit Eddie Katz in the forehead, directly under the helmet. Eddie, unfortunately, was in the wrong place at the wrong time; I remember that event as one of horror. Bob Huesman was adjacent to me when it happened; we were screaming for one of our medics that we had named "Pills". He came up and did what he could for the guy, but he could not do much. I still exchange Christmas cards with "Pills" once a year.

We left that area, moving forward and I recall on May 4th we approached Innsbruck, Austria four days before V-E Day which was on May 8th. The 411th and the other regiments had taken over the town of Innsbruck. Our platoon was told to go past Innsbruck and into Brenner Pass,

not through it. Off to the right were a little valley and a road leading up through that valley to Fulpmes, a little village with twenty or thirty houses in it. We took over two houses with eight men staying in one house and eight men in another. We had not changed clothes in weeks. We spent the first night there and then we received an order from our Company Headquarters that Colonel Donovan P. Yeuell needed an escort the next morning May 5th. He needed to go through the Brenner Pass down into Italy with the expectation of meeting the advance elements of the 5th Army that were coming up through Italy. The next morning the Colonel showed up in his Mercedes Benz Sedan that we had appropriated a few months earlier; he had it painted with the Army OD color and had our Regimental insignia on each door. The Colonel rode with his driver and one other man. Lt. Bailey was in a jeep with the driver, another soldier and me; I don't recall the other soldier's name. We were in the back with our .50 cal. machine gun. We were told to go through the Brenner Pass until we connected with the 5th Army. As we were going through Brenner Pass we could hear and see German soldiers coming down to the road out of the hills with their arms up in surrender. They had thrown away their weapons; the fight was completely out of them. If there had been any fight left in them they could have overwhelmed us; there were hundreds of them. All we did was point them toward Innsbruck and we continued onto Brennero, Italy. The first town of any size was Bolzano, about 30 Kilometers. When we got into the town we

were impressed by the dead silence. It was a very eerie feeling especially since there was not a soul or cat or dog out on the streets. We knew that there had to be people there but they were all in their homes. We were approaching an intersection and we heard a clank, clank noise coming toward us; it was obviously a tank. When we turned the corner and saw a Sherman tank, we knew it was ours. We started waving frantically at them to make sure they realized who we were. We did not want to get blown away by one of those cannons on that Sherman tank. As soon as they recognized who we were they jumped out and came running to us. We jumped out of the jeep and put our arms around each other. It was such a thrilling experience to see our guys coming up from their hard fought route up Italy. The Colonel was directed to the building housing the other Division's Command Post and there he made the formal connection with the Commander of that particular Unit. That was really the first meeting of the 7th Army and the 5th Army and we were there!

Then we turned around and came back to Fulpmes. We were told that we were going to stay in that location indefinitely. The day after that our supply trucks caught up with us and we were all given complete new uniforms-two sets! So we immediately took off all our clothing, including underwear, put them in a big bonfire and burned them all up, lice and all. We were in an area that had not really been touched by the war; they had plenty of supplies. We went into this Gästehaus (Guesthouse) to take

showers. We washed ourselves thoroughly, even our hair, with that GI soap similar to Fels Naptha. We even shampooed with that to get those lice out. In addition, we poured cans of DDT on our hair and under our armpits to make sure we had killed those lice. Twenty years later we were told that DDT was terrible stuff! None of us knew it at the time; we just wanted to get rid of the darn itch. We stayed in Fulpmes for the next several months and it was actually wonderful to spend the spring and summer in the Austrian Alps. You couldn't find a better place. We settled into our houses and ever so often we could get an R & R pass to go into Innsbruck to go skiing at the resort called Mount Hungerberg. We had plenty of champagne, which helped, and we went down the mountain, head over heels in some cases. It was the first time I had ever seen a ski but God protects fools and drunks. It was a wonderful experience. There was a company that set up a mess hall near by and we would go there for breakfast and lunch. Afterward we would drill and have our training. Bob Green, a fellow in our platoon, originally from Virginia, told us he had located a camp where they were gathering up "displaced persons." These were people who had been commandeered by the Nazis to work in their factories and had been kept in prisoner camps. They included many races; Russian, Polish, and Italian. We had put them under our U.S. military government and were trying to ascertain where these people were eventually going to go. The bulk of them had one thing in mind, "How can I get to the United States?" Through the "Displaced Person Law"

many of them were able to come into the States. Green said that the Captain who was in command from the military government was from his hometown in Virginia and was a local political leader, a judge or justice of the peace. He told Green that we were free to offer some employment to these people and that the people would be happy to work for Americans. We drove into the camp a day or so later and I was with Green and the group. As soon as those former prisoners saw an American jeep driving in they all came running to us, excitedly. I stood up and said in my best German, “?Wer wollen, zu kommen und arbeiten für amerikanische Soldaten?” (Who wants to come and work for American soldiers?). Green and Crawford, both very handsome guys, very tall (6 ft. or so) they went out into the crowd and selected two young women to come and work with us. We brought them back to Fulpmes and one was in one home and one was in another home. We would get up in the morning, go to the mess hall, and get what they were serving; many times it was creamed chipped beef on toast, which was horrible. We would tell the cook to give us some extra food because we have some “dogs” to feed back at the house. He knew what we were doing but would pack it up and when our people saw the food they would exclaim “Weiss Brot,” “White Bread!” To them it was beyond their wildest dreams. We would then go to our workout areas where we were doing our drilling, leaving our clothes out that we had worn the day before. We would come back at about 4 o’clock. And sure enough, on our bed we had freshly pressed underwear, trousers and

uniforms; all washed and ironed every single day. In the evening, we decided to manage our own meals since we were really on our own. We had one other fellow in our platoon who spoke fluent German; he was from Minneapolis. His name was Galkey. He and I had the assignment to go into the town and negotiate with the local butchers for cuts of meat. Even though the war had gone on it did not touch Austria very much, particularly in the rural areas. They had plenty of food and we had plenty of German marks to “deal” with them. We would buy whatever we needed to buy. Also, in our houses they had stored plenty of potatoes. We would cook the steaks and use butter to cook the French fries; oil was not available. We located a cave outside of the town where wonderful Italian wine had been stored. The Nazis were great plunderers and took what they could as they retreated. They had hundreds of cases of these various wines and in their haste they had put them in this cave. One officer had been assigned to safeguard this place; it was now American property. We made a point to invite this particular Lieutenant to come and have dinner with us most evenings. We would offer him a steak dinner and he would bring a couple of cases of wine with him. We ate outside under the trees and had wine with our steak. To top it all off a couple of the men, who used to lay our telephone lines, had wired up loud speakers in the trees and connected them to the Armed Service Radio. We would sit and listen to Glen Miller and others. We really had it made though it came to an end pretty quickly when the Division was decommissioned in July.

I was sent to the 45th Division which was encamped outside of Munich near Dachau. I was sent to that camp for a very short time, although I had to change my patch from the Cactus to the 45th Division Eagle. In July I did get a chance to see the camp at Dachau. By the time I got there, our military government had done an amazing job of cleaning it up. The emaciated people were gone but you could still see the ovens. Knowing what had gone on there was very disturbing. We weren't there very long because the orders came to move the Division to France to a temporary tent city outside of Reims. The various locations in that tent city were named after cigarettes: Camp Lucky Strike, Camp Chesterfield, and so on.

I had only been there a couple of days when someone came through the tent looking for me. Our Sergeant was walking up and down saying, "Melas, Melas, where are you? You have a visitor." Nick Manos, serving in another unit, had looked me up and had come to see me. We had grown up together back in Chicago and had been corresponding during the war. He knew that I had been in the 103d Division. He was in one of the adjacent camps and he came over to look for me. We exchanged thoughts back and forth. Back home, we were members of the same Parish and in a club together called, The Sons of Pericles. It was like a social organization and athletic group. He asked me if I had been to Paris and I told him that I was waiting for a pass. Nick thought that we were going to be in camp for awhile because they had to find a ship to get us over to LeHarve. Then he said, "You

have to go to Paris and when you get there you have to look up Johnny Anton. I was surprised to know that John Anton was in the service; he was another guy in the Sons of Pericles. He was a little bit older than us. Nick told me how to contact John and said that John would show me the “time of my life!” In a few days after my visit with Nick I got my pass. I got to Paris in the morning and looked up Anton, who was staying at a very nice hotel in Paris. He was a Sergeant in charge of a special Unit of twelve men who ran the Teletype Service for General Eisenhower. They were the ones who received coded messages from the States and then deciphered them for the General. Those men were always at Eisenhower’s Headquarters; traveling with him from England to Versailles. Anton was living it up in Paris. He said, “Have you had breakfast yet? You have got to come down to the dining room.” It was the first time I had sat down to eat a meal out of “real” china. I had china and silverware and a nice meal. Of course the French citizens did not have a lot of food but we had everything we wanted. John said we had to find a room for me with a real bed and sheets and then we would go out that night. He said that he had real respect for the guys in the infantry. This guy had been a wheeler and dealer back home and he took me into a bar in an area of Paris where the American tourist never got to go. It was down in the real underbelly of Paris and the girls sitting around the bar gave him a very enthusiastic reception. He had made himself a tidy little business selling cigarettes and nylons, which were worth their weight in gold. It was well

worth the trip; I got to see Paris in a way that most people do not see it. I went back to the camp having seen two guys I never expected to see in France.

The second event that really stands out monumentally happened on August 6, in France, when *The Stars and Stripes* was delivered with a screaming headline, “United States Drops the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima.” I read that the first atomic pile developed by Enrico Fermi originated under the West Stands of Stag Field at my college. When I was on the wrestling team at the University of Chicago we practiced in Bartlett Gymnasium, the largest gym on campus. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, the University of Chicago signed a contract with the Army to train meteorologists for the Air Corps. They were taking groups of nine hundred men in periods of 8 or 10 weeks; I forget exactly. They needed someplace to house them, so they took over our entire gymnasium. They put triple-decker bunks on the basketball court. Of course there was a swimming pool and locker room facilities which made it perfect for them. We were evicted from our wrestling room so they temporarily put us underneath the West Stands of Stag Field in what used to be an old squash court. Immediately adjacent to us, separated by an 8 inch thick cement block wall, was another area that the University was using. They had a little sign on the outside of the door off the street, a little innocuous sign, which said: **Institute for the Study of Metals**. We didn’t know anything at the time. I was at the University until 1943 when I was called for

active duty. We never knew what was going on there because the security around that area was so strong concerning what was called The Manhattan Project. We were right there within eight inches of the place, on the other side of the wall where Enrico Fermi and his colleagues were ushering in the Atomic Age.

Around 2003 or 2004 or so, I get a phone call from a former member of our University of Chicago wrestling team by the name of George Culp who was living in Massachusetts. I had not talked to him since school ended. He asked me how I was doing and if I was physically all right. I said I was fine. George wanted me to know that he had contracted lymphoma, had beaten it, but two of his three daughters had lymphoma. He was wondering about the time we spent in the room next to where Fermi was doing all those experiments. George was trying to contact all the rest of the team members to see if they had any health problems. I told him that I was fine. He was pretty upset at the time because he had tried contacting the University to get names, addresses, and phone numbers of other members of the team, but had found the school uncooperative. He was trying to contact the members on his own to see if there was any connection between the experiments and illness later in life. I don't think he ever got anywhere with that. We do know that Fermi himself and many of the guys working with him on the original project did die of radiation sickness.

We were waiting quite awhile to leave the camp because there was a shortage of ships. Then the Japanese surrendered. When we eventually got into LeHarve, it was well into the fall, late September. From LeHarve we caught a boat over to Southampton and eventually left for home on the ship, Aquitania. It had been a cruise ship before the war and then became a troop carrier. We had landed in Marseilles November 10, and it was the 8th or 9th of November, roughly a year later that we arrived back to Camp Shanks. We were put on a train and those of us from the Mid-West were all going to be sent to Camp Grant, where my Army career began! I had my basic training at Camp Grant and that is where I was going to be discharged. We traveled all night long and in the morning we pulled into the Illinois Central Station in Chicago on 12th Street station, just outside the downtown area. We went out on a side track and were just sitting there. The trains were waiting and when a conductor came through I asked him how long we were going to be there because we were anxious to go. He said that we had to wait our turn because there was a lot of freight going through the station and we might be waiting a couple hours. Then I did something out of character. I decided to go see my mom and dad. The restaurant that my dad owned was not very far from the station. So, still in uniform, I got out of the train in this big railroad station, found a cab driver who treated me with such respect and hospitality. Things were so different then. If you walked into a little diner in your uniform nine times out of ten someone would pick up your check. I told

the cab driver to drop everything and take me to 47th and Kimark. I told him he had to go from 12th street to 47th street and then go a couple of blocks over. He noticed my uniform, heard my request and said, "Yes, Sir!" I walked into the restaurant, my mother was standing behind the counter and my father was back in the kitchen. It was hard to find help so my mom was working. When I walked in she screamed. I ran up to her and hugged and kissed her. She excitedly said, "You're home, You're home. You're here to stay?" I told her I could only stay five minutes because I had to get back to the train. My father came out and it was just incredible. I told them I would be home in a few days. Of possibly ten different railroad stations in Chicago, it was amazing that our train stopped close to where I could see my parents. The cab driver had agreed to wait for me and took me back to the train which took off an hour or so later. We went to Camp Grant, were processed, and discharged around November 11, 1945.

Shortly after we were discharged around '48, '49 or '50 we tried to get a reunion of my platoon together in the central U.S. We found a few guys in Illinois, Texas, Kentucky, and Minnesota; we arranged to meet in St. Louis and we had about ten of us show up but we never kept it up after that. So I was really happy when we got this 103d Division Reunion organized.

It was interesting remembering as far back as Camp Howze. Eddie Katz, who was killed in Landsberg, was so intent on going back to Europe and getting even with the Nazis. We had one other fellow in our platoon

called Marcus Hanson who was an Army brat, whose father was a career soldier. Marcus originally was from California and his father had been captured by the Japanese on Bataan and Marcus was dying to go to the Pacific. He never got his wish but Katz got his, tragically. I kept in touch with Marcus who stayed in the service, making a fulltime career out of it. He became an officer and did get over to the Pacific long after the war was over.

POSTSCRIPT

As for me, I returned back to school at the University of Chicago. I got my degree in Chemistry and then also an MBA from the School of Business. After working for the University for 5 years I then began a career in public service. Fast forward now some 35 years. I married my wife, the former Irene Prasopoulos, and we had two daughters, Christina and Elizabeth. We had just moved into a condo in a new high rise apartment building on North Astor Street in the Lincoln Park area of Chicago. I soon discovered that there was a neighbor in a townhouse across the street named Charles Haffner. I had previously noticed him walking along with a handsome dog toward our nearby park.

A few days later I was out with our dog and we ran into each other and I struck up a conversation. I told him that I had been in the 103d Division at Camp Howze in Texas commanded by a General Charles C. Haffner, Jr. He then told me that General Haffner was his father and that he, as a teenager,

had lived for a time in Gainesville, Texas where his dad maintained a home for the family while the Division was in training.

We have had many pleasant conversations for some time since we have a common interest. Mr. Haffner is very much interested in environmental matters and, well known in the field. In my case, I have spent most of my working life in the environmental field. I was President of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, having been elected a Commissioner of the District for 5 consecutive terms (30 years), and then served 10 years as a member of the Illinois Pollution Control Board.

Only in America!