

Memories of Fighting Days in France & Germany

by Earl Preston Hale
TSG Earl Hale
Company G
411th Infantry Regiment
103d Infantry Division

I will go back a little farther to my days prior to going to Europe.

In December of 1942 I went to San Antonio from Kerrville, TX, where I had been since high school days in Markham. I wanted to join the Marines, but they wouldn't take married men at the time. I wasn't married yet, but intended to be married at Christmas time. I didn't want the Navy because I wasn't interested in trying to swim the Pacific Ocean to get home, so I went to the Army and enlisted. They told me about the unit they were developing – the ASTP– *Army Specialized Training Program*. This would give me some additional education and Jean (my bride to be) and I could go through Christmas and be married in Markham at my home.

The ASTP wasn't fully developed until around the middle of May so I finished the school year at Kerrville and was called to active duty in late May of 1943. I spent most of my time in Paris, TX until I was assigned to a group going to Kingsville at the University of Texas A & I. I was there until about the middle of May 1944, when I was sent to Camp Howze, Gainesville, TX, for additional training before going to Europe. I spent the rest of the summer at Camp Howze.

In early September we were told to prepare to go to Europe. We went by train to New York City, and were trucked to Camp Shanks. We were given a little time off during the day, so I contacted my older brother, who lived in the Northern part of New York City and was an FBI agent. He took me to the FBI training facilities with him. I really enjoyed the small break from the Army.

After a day or so, we were trucked to New York Harbor and boarded our ships. I was very fortunate to be assigned to the "Monticello" Ship – being the largest ship of the group. It was a converted Italian cruise ship, and considerably larger than the newer – but smaller troop ships.

After getting under way in the Atlantic Ocean for a day or so, we were hit by a really bad storm which blew us off-course and off-schedule about 4 or 5 days. During this storm period, the deck of the ship was washed with sea water with every big wave, with the ship pitching up and down. It was nearly impossible to move around below deck. I was assigned to the deck above the motors, and the additional heat made life extremely uncomfortable.

To make life even more miserable, the canvas bunks – 4 or 5 high – were about the size of the surface of a cot. I was unfortunate to be assigned to a "top" bunk, with a glass protection covering the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. To turn over, the glass protection would singe my skin lightly. This condition – along with the fact all of my equipment, everything I had, was also in this canvas bunk with me.

During the storm period, we were not allowed to be on deck more than a few minutes at a time – by rotation. Cooking was impossible, but we had cold-cuts if you were brave enough to make the trip up to the mess hall area. I was lucky enough to survive that part, but having to "walk through the results" of others who were sick wasn't enjoyable, to say the least.

After about fourteen days at sea, we arrived in the Harbor of Marseilles, France at just after sundown. Needless to say, the darkness made things worse as we didn't know which direction was North, South, East or West.

A scout type plane flew over about midnight and "Berlin Sally" verbally greeted the 103rd to Europe with a loudspeaker. That didn't make things much better, but it certainly was better than bombs and artillery. We walked that night, with all our gear, for about 16 or 17 miles to a bivouac area. Not very many made it to the proper area for a day or so, but we finally all assembled at the proper area.

For the next several days, we helped assemble jeeps, trucks, and other vehicles. We then boarded a French train of "40 & 8 boxcars" (that's 40 men or 8 mules) and traveled northerly into the Vosges Mountains area.

On November 16, 1944 we entered the combat zone easterly of St. Die, France. We came out of the Vosges slopes into a rather broad flattish valley with a small stream. After a few hundred yards of cleared terrain, and approaching the small creek, the Germans opened up with most everything they had. I don't remember for sure, but I don't think aircraft with bombs were involved. They were able to use dense wooded cover for protection, and the mountain slopes to their back gave them visibility and protection.

Our people were being picked off one by one like "ducks on a pond." After about an hour, Capt. Cowley ordered a retreat back into the slopes of the Vosges. We lost 69 or 70 members of the Company, either dead or wounded. Our platoon leader, Lt. Wolf, was killed, our platoon Sgt. was wounded, our BAR ammo carrier was wounded in my squad. All three squad leaders in our platoon were wounded or dead, and two assistant squad leaders were dead or wounded. That left the 2nd platoon with platoon guide, and 1 assistant squad leader remaining with a handful of PFC's and Privates.

I was asked to take over a squad, but I felt I didn't have the experience to lead a squad but I accepted an assistant squad leader position. After all we didn't have much more than one normal squad left in the platoon, plus the platoon guide.

As time went on, more casualties occurred and within a week or less, I was acting Platoon Sgt. and remained such until about mid-December when I was officially made the Platoon Sgt. with the stripes to go with the occasion. Of course I never wore the stripes until after the end of fighting.

From the first day of combat when we lost Lt. Wolf, our platoon never had an assigned officer until Lt. Charles Clark arrived. Every few days, or sometimes weeks, another officer would check to see if things were going okay and if we needed anything, but never went into action with us. Of course, our number of bodies was hardly ever more than a normal squad in number. At times we would be as low as eight or nine bodies. I often carried two or three BAR's along with my rifle - better to have them present than have the man, with no BAR. I generally carried a BAR when on night patrol or scouting.

We had some rough times during the remainder of November - fighting through the Vosges and crossed into Germany, and on to the Siegfried emplacements where we stalled and had to retreat back into France when the "Battle of the Bulge" almost trapped us. While bucking the Siegfried emplacements our Company crossed through about 100ft or so where the Germans had cut down all the trees from one valley, up and across the crest of an elongated mountain, down to the valley on the other side. The logs were placed across the crest, making a very tough situation. We were allowed to move into and partially across this situation, and then came under heavy artillery, aircraft fire, machine gun, and rifle fire. We stalled and were being picked off one by one. I approached Capt. Cowley and requested to let us retreat. He was laying partially protected by a shallow depression made by an artillery shell. My head was no more than two feet from his head, when a shell hit between our heads and half buried in the dirt. We both thought our "end of life" had arrived. Both of us lay waiting for the explosion but it turned out to be a dud. The Capt. suddenly jumped up and said, "Let's get back across that opening." I waited until the last of the living soldiers got through the logs to safety. Then I crossed by jumping from log to log to safety on the other side. I have often wondered if some of those left behind may have been alive but *unable to move*. This thought has burdened me even to this day. We received word to withdraw back into France where we remained during "The Bulge" with little battle activity for a while.

On one occasion back in November or early December, we replaced the 45th Division in a hilly area where the Germans had a series of trenches. We entered some of the trenches for the night - not knowing that the Germans had moved back to some of the positions. We were bombarded by rifle-launched and hand-thrown grenades for most of the night. I received a flesh wound on the back of my neck from a grenade fragment. My life was probably saved by several layers of a scarf I had cut from my Army blanket. By the time the piece of grenade went through the five or six layers of blanket material, its velocity had slowed down so that it penetrated with hardly any blood. The 4th platoon

soldier standing shoulder-to-shoulder with me was not so lucky. A piece went through his helmet and into his brain. Needless to say, he never took another breath and dropped to the ground, dead.

The next morning the Company Commander had placed most of the remaining soldiers in a trench leading up to the central area of German soldiers. At the break-of-day, I was #21 from the front. As the day passed numerous soldiers either stumbled by me or were carried back – all with head or neck wounds. By mid-afternoon I was #3 from the front; when we received word that the Germans had pulled out and retreated, ending our terrible situation.

On January 10, 1945 our company was given an assignment to extend our front as far as we could. As we approached what appeared to be a farming area with a few scattered barns and houses. The ground was snow covered, with 6-12 inches of snow, a small creek ran through the field about 150 to 200 yards to our right. A barbed wire entanglement existed from near the creek, up the low slope and on beyond a trail type road – for wagons and farm equipment. After some of our unit crossed over the barbed wire and proceeded toward the scattered buildings, the Germans opened up with machine guns, rifles, and some light artillery or mortar fire. My platoon occupied this area from the wagon trail type road, down to the creek. Sgt. Bond and I were across the barbed wire about 100 yards from the creek. We came under fire from a machine gun position down by the creek. This position was unnoticeable until the gun and the two soldiers were moved to firing position. The machine gun was keeping the rest of the Company from advancing on the target area. We had Pvt. Englehart with a BAR in a foxhole near Sgt. Bond. I thought that between the two of them, they could keep the Germans' guns from firing with accuracy while I crawled through the snow-covered slope up to the wagon trail road. Once the barbed wire was cut the flattened road bed would protect our troops, allowing them to get through by crawling. I proceeded up the slight sloping hillside to the road bed, but had no way of cutting the wire entanglement. One of my platoon members happened to have a pair of wire cutters on his belt, but his mental ability to take action with machine gun bullets zinging off the wire entanglement (actually parting the wire occasionally) was such that I had to reach through the wire and jerk the cutters from his belt. After cutting a gap in the wire entanglement, I discovered that Englehart had been killed and Sgt. Bond was wounded in the foot and ankle by the machine gun.

Darkness was approaching rapidly as the other members of the Company began retreating. Several members were captured, including one of my platoon members, who was acting as a lead scout. Needless to say, the mission failed, but we lost only three people.

The first night Lt. Charles Clark was with our platoon, we had an opportunity to go to a movie in the village that we were in. Sgt. Parslow, Pfc. Tuttle (our BAR rifleman), Pfc. McFarland (my platoon runner), me, and the 12 or 13 year old daughter of the owners of the house we were staying in at the time, all walked over to the theater. That was the one and only movie we attended while in Europe. Pfc. Tuttle was from South Carolina and his livelihood before the Army was with his brother. They hand chopped railroad cross ties with an ax, he was undoubtedly the best soldier in our Company.

Later, we were approaching the Siegfried line for the second time. Parslow, our medic and I were going up a steep slope heading for the crest of the hill to try to see what the Germans had waiting for us. As we approached the break-over from steepness to near flat, we came under fire from most everything the Germans had. Three of us hit the ground, with Parslow lying just a few feet on the flattened surface, with the medic lying partly on the slope and with his body perpendicular to Parslow's. A bullet from a rifle or machine gun entered Parslow's body about midway and lodged near his spine. Our medic was looking over Parslow's back toward the German front. I feel certain the German was using the "red cross" on the medics helmet as a target, but aimed a little low. The steepness of the slope down to the valley below made moving him very difficult. Medical aid was available once they reached the flattened area, but was unsuccessful in saving his life.

When the Germans surrendered, we went on north to the English harbor and waited until our turn came to load on ships for New York harbor.

We arrived in New York and loaded on trains for the Southwest. I arrived in San Antonio at about midnight. Through some error, we left San Antonio and went all the way to El Paso. This delayed my getting home for several days. Once back to San Antonio my duffle bag (full of clothing and other junk) and I made our way to a highway that headed toward home and began my "hitch-hiking" at about 12:00 a.m. When I was in El Campo, a farmer from Danavang picked me up and dropped me off at Clemville (about five miles from my home in Markham). As I was walking the last stretch toward home, about three or four miles left, a car came by headed for their home in Clemville. It was two guys and their wives who were on their way home from a dance and recognized me. They slammed on the brakes, backed up, loaded me and my bag in their car and took me the rest of the way to my house in Markham. (Those guys and girls were about five years older than me but they knew who I was). Neither of the guys had been in the service – I never asked why, because they both seemed healthy.

As I approached the porch of my house and went to the window where Mom and Dad always slept. I called, "Mama, Mama," and heard a sudden burst of noise and feet hitting the floor and Mama screamed, "It's my boy, it's my boy!" This was at about 1:00 a.m.

When I began inquiring about the "whereabouts" of my wife, Jean, we called my sister Lucille, who was working as a telephone operator in Markham. She then called Kerrville, where Jean and her parents were, and they made their way to Markham by daylight. Jean remained in Markham with me.

Sometime within the next few days, she and I went to Houston to my sister and husband's house. We later caught a bus and went "car" hunting. We ended up, I think, in the southwest part of town where lots of used cars were and bought a Chevrolet –about four years old, but ran pretty good. The car was okay, but had to put some used tires on it since the others were pretty thin. We really thought I would be shipping out to the Pacific soon and might not make it home again. Too many bullets had my name on them and missed me.

I was not released from the Army yet and had to return to some "Camp" in Illinois or somewhere up in that part of the states. When I was finally released from the Army (didn't have to go to the Pacific after all), we finally settled down in Bay City, TX.

First I worked for awhile with my brother on a rice watering job. Then I was hired and worked as a roughneck for a couple of drilling wells.

About May 20th, or so, I received a telephone call from a couple of friends from Schriener insisting I come to OU and tryout for football under "Big Jim" Tatum. Talk was "he was taking on most anybody that could walk". I hitch hiked (and walked) to Norman and later that morning I went to the O.U. Football Office and asked to see Mr. Tatum. I was shown the door to go through and Tatum and Bud Wilkerson were both there. They asked me a few questions about my football and other athletic experiences. (Before my football years at Schriener, my only experience was with 6-man football – which neither of them had ever heard of.) I was told to show up on the practice field and to check out a uniform for a tryout. All went well and I was then told to report that afternoon for practice in full uniform.

After the first day of practice, I was working behind Homer Paine at left tackle. I never started a game at OU, but played at least 45% –50% of the time in most all the games for the two seasons I played. I worked for and received a BS in Geology from Oklahoma University.

After graduation I signed on with Gulf Oil Corp. where I worked as a geologist for 34 years. those years took me from Houston, Texas, to New Orleans, Lake Charles, and Morgan City, Louisiana, Luanda, Angola, Portuguese West Africa and finally Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Earl P. Hale was married to Jean Whittington Hale, Dec. 30, 1942 and had one daughter, Mary Lee, in 1946. They lived most of his retirement years in Oklahoma City. In April of 2011 his wife of 68 years died and he lived with his daughter and her husband on ten acres just north of Ada, Oklahoma. He too passed from this life, September 30, 2011 just 5 -1/2 months later. He did not talk much about his time in WWII until he started attending the 103rd Conventions. He attended the dedication of the Monument to the 103rd in Gainseville, Texas in 2006.

The story I submit to you here was written by my father, I have compiled two letters he wrote about his experiences. One was to Lt. Charles Clark, Brunswick, Maine when he was in his last years of life and asked Earl if he would share some of his experiences in war after he (Charles) was wounded and sent stateside. The other letter (a journal really) was his effort to remember good times in his life after My mother died in April, 2011. He really missed her and to help him make it through the days I suggested he write down the good memories he had with her. He started writing and kept on till he had handwritten 21 pages in the journal. This story was from those pages.

I fully intended to have them typed and to the history of the 103rd in 2012, but I fell and broke my leg, and was down with surgery and blood clots and recovery took a while. I have finally got it done. It will be his epitaph to leave for his two granddaughters and three great-granddaughters.

Thank you sincerely,

*Mary Lee Hale Looper
6111 County Rd 3605
Ada, Oklahoma 74820
405-816-6104
claylady@sbcglobal.net*