

Recorded Interview
New Orleans, Louisiana

Thomas Miller, Company F, 409th Infantry, 103d Division

I was born October 31, 1923 in, Belen, Mississippi. I was a sophomore in college at Mississippi State when WWII started. I was sitting on the 4th floor of the main dormitory and listening to the radio when I heard about Pearl Harbor. Looking out the window, one of my roommates said, “Boys, look at those war clouds.” I had three roommates. Things got pretty hectic after Pearl Harbor.

One curious thing happened at college. My roommate and the two students next door decided we would just knock a hole in the wall and make an apartment.

We were already anticipating the war and we knew what we would have to do. When I went in it was several months after Pearl Harbor so there was no question. We heard our ROTC instructor say the army was overflowing with volunteers, especially from schools all over the country, so they actually preferred we wait until they called us. So that’s what I did.

I was drafted when I was a sophomore. I joined up at Camp Shelby, MS in April 21, 1943. I went straight into the service. My parents were supportive and encouraging; they expected me to go. My sister was in the Army Red Cross. She went in about the time I did. I took combat MP basic training at Fort Custer, Michigan. On a break during a 16 mile hike, I looked up and saw the B-26 bombers from Kellogg AFB. I decided right then, “that’s for me” and eventually was transferred to the Army Air Corps as a cadet trainee in December 1943.

There were two guys I became close to in basic training, Jim Lacy and Howard Yeager from Wisconsin. Yeager had a background similar to mine. He had been in some other branch of the service and he volunteered and succeeded getting transferred to the Army Air Corp as a cadet trainee. We were special friends mainly because of that common background. We were sent to Kessler Field, MS and then to Big Springs, Texas Air Corps Bombardier Base to take some subjects that a cadet trainee needed to take. So that is where I was when the *hammer fell*. I never did complete cadet training. I was all set to go to college, along with a 1,000 other guys, to take courses. Then we shipped out to Camp Livingston, LA. During the war, after we were transferred to the 103d, we kind of looked down on the ASTP college boys. That's what the old vets called them, "college boys" and "fly boys". We were proud to be fly boys but I didn't like to say that too loud. After midnight, in the pouring down rain, one of the members of that ASTP group asked the sergeant, "Sarge, where are we?" The Sergeant said, "Where are you? You are in the "***Damn Army***" now; that's where you are!" We all thought we were in the "***Army***" but we were mistaken. That was the end of my flying dreams. We never got to go up in a plane. We were waiting to go to Big Springs, TX before being sent to the 86th infantry at Camp Livingston, Louisiana. During that period they did use us for flying observers. When new pilots would come into the base the experienced pilots would check them out. They put a hood over the new pilots and we sat in the nose of these 17 aircraft.

We thought we were going to college up north for school but instead we found ourselves in Louisiana, training as foot troops. My personal thoughts about training: Everybody has their own little ego and I thought I had leadership qualities. I proved that I could be an effective trainee. I was

proud to go to the “Queen of Battle,” the Infantry. After I was kicked out of the Air Force, I was sent to the 86th Infantry, stayed a month then transferred to the 103d Infantry. The 103d continued our training until we shipped out. I was really proud to be a “dogface” infantry man because in the end the infantry is the Queen of Battle.

We took a train to the camp in New York. We captured a midsize Italian Passenger Ship. Life on the troop ship was bad. We were allowed to be topside for 30 minutes a day. All of us were sick at some point. I didn’t get sick in the first storm but during the milder storm in the Mediterranean I was ill. There were bunk beds on E Deck. I passed the time by shooting the bull with my friends and playing poker. There were three middle size troop ships. The 103d was divided among three troop ships with “six high” bunks. We had two meals a day and were called to eat by a whistle blown over the intercom by the Sergeant. Then we would go up the stairway and file into the mess hall and put food on our tray. We would start to eat the food immediately. By the time you reached the end of the food choices you had eaten most of your food. Then, we would get in line again. We saw the Straits of Gibraltar and the Navy men topside pointed out the North African coast.

In Marseilles we pulled up close to the dock. It was secure. The 45th and the 3d had invaded in August before we landed in October. They had the balloons up for the Nazi bombers. My platoon was chosen to unload the ships. For whatever reason we went down the rope ladder from some “kitchen” on F deck and dropped into a LCI that was made at a plant we are going to see. We had been selected to unload the ship yet they had us drop into a LCI and towed us to shore. I never understood. But we didn’t have to unload as planned. We got a truck ride up the hill to our bivouac area.

Sergeant Galvin was the platoon sergeant. Lieutenant Westerveld was the commanding officer for the full platoon. Capt. White was the company commander. St. Die was the objective for the division and the company. My company never got to St. Die. I learned that information from reading history books after the war.

My feelings right before and during combat:

A few days before actual combat, Nov 11, we were bivouacked in a wooded area and it was raining. We had experienced some bad circumstances. I passed by the 3d platoon and several members of this platoon had a leader who was more or less a religious type guy. The men had asked him to kneel with them at the base of a tree. I walked by on my way to the slit trench latrine and was moved to say my own prayer right then. We went east to the Vosges Mountains; our mission was a miniature Blitzkrieg. With a column of 8 or 10 six by six trucks and a few tanks we went on attack heading to Selestat, our main objective. Sometimes we walked and other times we rode in the trucks. They would truck us up to the next small town, close to the next objective. We would disengage and take up positions and attack in company or battalion formation, depending on the objective.

The first attack we spent about five days in a “hold” period where the 3d Division had vacated. I took time to write home. The night before we attacked, my “hole mate” and I lit a little stub of a candle and prayed. After Selestat we got a little break, and were in reserve; we pulled back and followed a route due north. We moved into the border between Germany and Alsace-Lorraine.

When on reserve we moved north toward the Siegfried line. They pulled us off the mountain which was a break for us. We were happy to go anywhere. We did not know we were going to be another line of defense at

Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge. As it turned out it was a break for us because we moved some ninety miles from the north. We took up a defensive position that never materialized. The Germans never got to us. We spent Christmas of '44 there. After Christmas they moved us back 70 to 90 miles to the south back to Siegfried Line and we took up where we left off just prior to Christmas when they moved us north. In two or three weeks we met the enemy again when we reopened the attack on the Siegfried Line. Our division was spearheading the attack which was successful. German forces in that area capitulated and it was sort of a breeze compared to some other sections. We went on an extended break for several weeks. They moved us north into Germany across the Rhine River. We were in reserve at some location for two to three weeks. We spent that time doing dry runs everyday. Our platoon was practicing with 30 mm mortars and light machine guns. During this time President Roosevelt died.

I carried a M2 submachine gun; those were the weapons issued to me as the runner for the full platoon. You're in a platoon under the direct command of the platoon sergeant, if you had one at the time. The platoon sergeant was sent to Headquarters for any advice that was needed. If I saw the enemy on my route it was from a distance. Luckily, I did not have any hand to hand combat. Generally, we engaged in fire fights from a distance of one hundred yards or so.

After the extended lay off in the north of Germany we were put back on attack with some other units. We moved directly south into Austria and eventually capture the town of Innsbruck. In April of '45, after Innsbruck was secured and shortly before the war was over, the 103d would camp or be put in mothballs in various towns. My battalion went into Wattans, Austria

and stayed for seven months. We had daily training, dry runs, calisthenics, and KP detail.

The war was over May 7th, Armistice Day. The prisoners were put in POW camps. Eventually, the prisoners were sent back to camps where their units were. I don't know any details; the only German prisoners I saw were in Wattans where POW's going from one camp to another were held. We liberated one concentration camp on our way to Austria, captured all the guards and liberated the prisoners. The prisoners were in their stripped garb that the Germans had given them. At that camp we saw a rope that the German's had laid across the road where they thought the Americans would drive the 6x6 trucks. Sadly, a lieutenant was helping another guy move a rock in that area and a mine went off. It blew the Lt.'s arm off. Sadly, one of the Jewish men took the Lt.'s arm and started to run off with it. One of the GIs told him to stop but he didn't. A Lieutenant, who was nearby, pulled his 45 automatic. He pointed it at the Jewish refugee, who dropped the piece of flesh and ran off into the woods.

We liberated Mittenwald but I don't know how those German prisoners of war were handled; we moved on to the south toward Austria after we capture all the German guards and liberated the prisoners.

I did not have enough points to come home. You needed around 53 points to go home. The majority of my platoon and many other members of the 103d were shipped out to join the 45th Division in Munich. We thought that was a great deal because the 45th was slotted to return according to the rumor mill. We found out later that they were slotted to return but just to take amphibious training in preparation to being shipped to the Pacific to invade Japan. Of course in the meantime the war was over. I joined the 45th

in Munich. When the war was over it changed everything. I went to a mass GI Camp near Paris. Some of us got passes and went into Paris.

We also went to Amsterdam, then on to London, England, to board a large transport back to NY. While I was in England I got to go to Amsterdam for 2 or three days. It was a lucky break to go into London and look up one of my buddies from my home town. Our parents would let the other family know where their son was and pass along news. His duty was with the Quarter Master; he took a lot of ribbing about that. That same guy came with me to one of these reunions and someone asked him, "What unit were you in?" Another person would ask him, "Were you in the 103d?" He did not want to answer because he had been on the staff of the Quarter Master. He married a girl from England and she was sitting with him at the reunion. She spoke up and said, "He was with the Quarter Master in London." My friend just cringed. He was talking to F Troop combat unit and she was telling the whole room he was with the Quarter Master in London. Nobody heard really. It was not too big a deal.

We landed in New York and "millions of guys" were shipped back to their last camp in the States. I headed with other soldiers to Camp Shelby in Mississippi by troop train, possibly to catch our breath. Then they gave us a thirty day pass. I think the Army needed to catch its breath with all these men returning. They still were not ready to take these guys. I went back to Shelby and got another thirty day pass. After approximately sixty days of passes, they sent me back to Camp Bowie, Texas, just to be discharged out of the army and sent back to Belen, MS. Seeing my parents for the first time after leaving the army was a very moving experience. I was on a 30 day furlough the first time I saw them. I boarded a bus and went to Clarksdale, MS, called my parents and my Dad and Stepmother picked me up.

I wrote some letters home but not very often. I have a little book with pictures that were taken during the war by guys that were “camera bugs.” That is what I call them, right loosely.

If we captured a little village my platoon would billet there for a few days after the action was over. We’d set up guard, then the men would pillage a little bit and find cameras and film. As a rule, one particular guy, who was a camera nut in my platoon, would keep these cameras and that film. (There were a couple of “camera nuts.”) They would roll up the film, which kept indefinitely, and stored it. I collected most of my pictures from those guys. Way after the war my friends would go through those pictures and say, “Here’s old Tom Miller. Let’s send him this one.” That is how I got most of them.

During the war the thing I missed most about home was friends, going to school, folks at home and food stuff (meals).

I had a slight wound on my finger on my right hand. It wasn’t bad enough to even report it. I did not know it at the time but a piece of shrapnel from a shell, or mortar or artillery, (I never knew which one.) lodged in my helmet. It didn’t penetrate the hair but it went through my helmet liner. At the same time a small piece hit my right thumb. It bled a little bit, but it wasn’t even enough to ask the medics to treat it. A buddy of mine nonchalantly said, “Miller, do you want me to pull that piece of steel out of the side of your helmet?” *That* was what got my attention. I was walking around the platoon with this piece of steel stuck in the right side of my helmet. I didn’t keep the piece of steel, but I kept my helmet. I’ve been told at one of these reunions that the helmet might be worth \$500. I was very fortunate. Not too long after that happened my name came up to go to Nancee, France to a rest camp for three days. When you went to the rest camp they gave you all new

clothes. My buddy had already pulled that chunk of metal out of the side of my helmet. The medic said, "Man, you've got a hole in your helmet!" They scrapped that one and gave me a new helmet. Obviously, I didn't get to collect the \$500.

The 103d liberated a Jewish prisoner of war camp. It was a hard sight to see. I did not have that particular experience but I was on a 6X6 truck going toward Austria and encountered mines that were placed under the road anticipating our arrival. The Americans would build a bridge across a creek to get the 6x6 transport across. There was a Company Commander that I respected in Company G. His name was Captain Craddick and he was my idea of the kind of a man an officer should be. He used to come to the reunions. When we had to pass in review in training, Company G would be on my left. Capt. Craddick was the picture of what I thought a soldier, or commanding officer of a rifle company should look like. I think a lot of others in that company secretly shared that view too. He was with us from when I first joined the 103d and throughout combat.

I dug slit trenches more than foxholes. When I first went into combat, we were leading the 3rd Division and I shared a foxhole that a guy from the 3d had dug with reinforced logs across the top. I never really had to start from scratch to prepare a foxhole. I stayed in a few. I inherited them.

On VE Day (Victory in Europe Day), 1945 I was in Austria.

I did see two or three Russian soldiers that had been liberated from the Germans. I saw the invasion of Japan as "another step in the war." I viewed the dropping of the Atomic Bomb as an artillery barrage; another piece of artillery. I was outside Paris when I heard that news.

With 55 points you could be put in the upper echelon to come home. Below 55 points you were one of the "boys." I was transported home on a

luxury liner. In Europe I was bothered by itching and the medics said it was scabies brought on by the lack adequate bathing. I was sick and itching on the transport, although improving. The upper deck was the hospital deck where I could get relief by taking “warm baths” that helped to cure my itch. I had a great time all in all! My scabies were just about well and I wasn’t itching as bad when we arrived in the States.

We arrived in New York in September of 1945. I took a train home and for a long time did not connect with my buddies. One day, about five or six years after the war, I got a call from a gentleman. The conversation went as follows: “Is your name Tom Miller?” “Yep.” “Were you in the war in France?” “Yep.” “Do you remember a guy pulling a piece of shrapnel out of the side your head?” I knew right away it was Bill Tollison. As it turned out he lived in a neighboring state! I had a certain kind of service letter that I would dictate and send out to different companies. This man came into our company and I did not recognize him; it had been several years. He said, “The only reason I am over here is that you have a new manager in this office. My dad is an international dealer and we thought if we did not start coming to meetings you might cancel our contract. And I got to come see you!” Bill’s father was a dealer for one of the companies that I worked for and had seen my name on the letterhead.

I started coming to reunions in 1991. One day a co-worker asked me, “Tom, weren’t you in the 103d?” I said I had been. He told me that our company was getting ready for a reunion in Dallas, Texas. I told him, “It can’t be, they are all dead and gone except for me.” He had seen the article about the reunion in the *American Legion Magazine*. He called me again after he reread the article and that is how I started to come to the reunions. Of course, even before that, I thought about the men I knew, but it was not

the custom of the times to reunite. I came to Dallas in '91. I wondered about some of my buddies. I had the feeling that I had blood brothers but felt I should just put it behind me.

After the war I helped on my father's farm for three or four years. He came in the house one day and told me about a company in Memphis building a factory for new farm equipment. You are a farmer, brought up on the farm. You know equipment. Why don't you go and find out about the company? I took his advice and eventually went to work for International Harvester and worked for them for thirty-six years as Regional Service Supervisor.

I did what I was supposed to do in the service. That is what kept me going. I was proud that I was selected for cadet pilot training. I did feel like I proved my leadership capabilities. I felt pretty good about my service even though I came out a Private 1st Class.

My first wife had children by a previous marriage. She died. I married again. My current wife's first husband was a good friend of mine. He died. It was a good deal for me; I don't know about him.

Mrs. Miller, Tom's wife, added, "One of the most important things Tom ever told me was that he was converted just before one of the battles."