

**Recorded Interview**

**Walter Modrzejewski, Company F,**

**411<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 103d Division**

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the July 2011 Association Reunion, New Orleans, LA**

I was born in Chicago, Illinois on November 18, 1921. When the war started I was working for the General Electric Company. I was in the mailroom, actually the stationary room because we handled both mail and supplies. I was walking down the street from church when the news erupted on a loud speaker from a radio coming out of a store, they announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I was with my family walking home. I was 19 or 20. (I actually turned 21 in a foxhole at Saint-Lô in France.) I knew this was going to change my life. Some of my friends had already been drafted. They were older than I, so I knew that eventually I would be drafted as well. I tried to enlist in the Air Force but was rejected because of my eyesight. So, I said, "Fine. I will wait until you draft me."

I had to go downtown to an Army Processing Center to be evaluated and given instructions. Then on December 5, I was given ten days and in the 15<sup>th</sup> of December I was put on a train to Camp Grant in Illinois for processing. From there I went to Camp

Claiborne, LA. I was one of the first to arrive at the camp. There was no one in the barracks. Matter of fact, the first night I had to sleep by myself in the barracks.

My parents weren't happy; they didn't want to see me drafted. My dad was in WWI so he knew what the Army was like and he was in the Calvary in France. He knew there were dangers involved with being a part of the Armed Forces. My dad's brother, Henry, was killed in Europe during WWI.

I had four years of ROTC in high school. I knew what basic training would be like: calisthenics, marching, lectures and all that kind of thing. Actually, I was made a Corporal almost immediately because of my ROTC training and one of the courses I lectured on was map reading. I also did the exercises from platform with all the troops down below. I would give the orders for all the exercises we went through.

Our company had the cream of the crop. It was a real grand bunch of young men. Many of them were ASTP. I was not in ASTP. Because of the young men from ASTP, we grouped together, melded together and we traveled in a group when we had our passes. I can remember going into Alexandria with them. We'd stop at the watermelon stand and watermelon would be cut into 4 quarters and we would all devour them. Other times we would go into town to get a steak dinner, so I didn't have any

particular buddy in basic training, but I had a group of buddies that I hung around.

I was the oldest at the time. They were all much younger, college boys. They had no idea they were going to be in the Army that fast. We still stay in touch. They are good people. We share Christmas cards each year. My only regret is that today, my wife and I are the only ones from Company F, 411 Infantry here. No one else is here this time.

At past reunions, Company F, 411 Infantry probably had the greatest number of people who turned out. Our Captain just drew everybody together and we had a ball.

After basic training we had maneuvers, we had war games where we traveled practically all over that part of Louisiana down by Camp Polk. I think we were out there for a month.

Then we went to Camp Howze, Texas. We trained a number of replacements that were sent out. We were there probably for more than a year when our division was alerted to move to France. We took a train to New York to Camp Shanks, which was a port of debarkation. At Camp Shanks, I was afraid to wander away. I did not go sightseeing in New York City. We were put on troop ship that had been an Italian luxury liner called the Aquitania. I was down in "D" or "E" deck, way down. Ironically, I did not get seasick but was given the job of taking care of the fellows that

were. I probably told them to grow up and forget it. On the transport, I don't recall having any lectures or any activity that would keep us busy. I think I was assigned to take a group up on deck to get some fresh air. By then I think I was a sergeant in charge of a squad. Fortunately, or otherwise, the Captain always gave me an assignment to lead, and I benefited as a result. Before the transport, I was what they called a "guidon." I was stationed at the right of the first squad. I guess I did what was necessary and they followed my orders.

I was a very strong Christian and therefore I did not play cards, did not go to movies, we did not dance, we did not play baseball on Sundays. I guess the entertainment I enjoyed the most was with 2 or 3 of the fellows; we would go into town and have dinner. Then we would look around. Sometimes we would go into town, and the people in Alexandria, LA were very sorry; kind of like tired of seeing all the soldiers, the troops. There was time when we would get invited to somebody's home. That happened infrequently, but it did happen. Otherwise, we would just simply go to town and spend the time walking around, stopping at the watermelon stand, going into a restaurant for a steak and then heading back to camp.

At camp we might have gone to a movie contrary to my beliefs. Usually, I would read or do that kind of thing. These type

of activities occurred at Camp Claiborne as well as Camp Howze. At Camp Claiborne we would go to Alexandria, LA and at Camp Howze we would go to Gainesville, TX. It was a warm community. We would be walking down the street and they would say, “Hi soldier.”

The landing at Marseilles, France was interesting. We could not come into port, so the ship anchored out in, what I would call the bay. We came in on landing craft. It was frightening experience because they had balloons in the air to divert enemy aircraft and when we saw that it kind of put the fear of God in us. The balloons prevented enemy aircraft from diving in because they would get caught in the guide wires.

When we assembled on land with all of our equipment in the pouring rain, we marched to our staging area. (They said it isn't very far to the staging area). I don't know how many miles we marched, but it was a long, long trek down the road to where we raised our pup tents. It was raining and the place was muddy. It wasn't very comfortable. We set up our pup tents, put our canvas on the ground, and put our sleeping bag on that. I was second in command of the platoon because of the position I had as a guidon. I carried the platoon flag. The squad leaders were helping their squads get set up.

Sgt. Snyder and I were bunked together. That night Sergeant had a nightmare and he stood up in the tent and everything went up. I actually didn't like him. He was an old Army Sergeant, rough around the edges. He scared everybody. Thankfully, we did not have to serve with him much after the staging area at St Lo.

Our Company crossed the Meurthe River and somehow got behind enemy lines so we had to be very quiet. Again "he" had shot his rifle off and we don't know what happened to him after that. I know he was probably placed under arrest. He was a very mean person.

Captain Barrios was over us but we did not see him. We were in reserve at that point; we had not been committed. E Company was already in contact with the Germans. The frightening thing at that point was seeing the casualties coming back.

Our first Sergeant's job was purely administrative. I do not know the circumstances of his death but it was frightening to us. We were on reserve when he died. We relieved another unit and I moved up into an area on the edge of a cemetery. We were not supposed to be in a cemetery but we found a foxhole indicating that we were not the first soldiers. We were not sure whether we were "on the perimeter" or just "outside the perimeter". The

Captain said it was a great location for observation. I told him I did not think so because the enemy also knew it was there.

We did find another location and found out that the “first great location” suffered a direct hit. Still in moving toward St. Die combat was frightening, having to think on our feet as we moved forward. When we were in contact with the enemy we would crawl through the furrows the farmers had made in the ground and the bullets would go over us.

Shortly after St. Die we went through the Vosges Mountains. I think I heard recently that the snowfall was the heaviest they had ever experienced. We did not want to be observed so we had to move avoiding paths and roads. We would seek the route most unlikely to be observed. I can remember digging slit trenches which were just wide enough to crawl into and just deep enough to protect us from a sniper’s bullet. But, they were not always wide enough. I can remember getting into my sleeping bag and sleeping next to my slit trench which was not suitable. I would wake up, nearly frozen. If you could get up you would hear a lot of ice cracking. The slit trench became the object of jokes among us.

To stand up in your foxhole you would have to make it “Fox Hole Deep.” A foxhole might accommodate one or two people. A foxhole would be found in an open field. If you were facing the enemy, a tank might be able to get close enough to go over your

foxhole. The treads would miss the foxhole and would not affect you. A slit trench would not be that protected.

We changed directions, to adapt to the conditions that may have existed at that time. When we got to Saarbrucken I got sick with Yellow Jaundice and Hepatitis. The Captain picked me up, put me in a jeep and took me to an aid station. During that time the very hottest campaigns were being fought. I was sent to Paris and then on to Wales, England where I stayed for 2-3 months. During that time, I missed some very dangerous times and while in Wales they wanted to send me back to the States. I told them I wanted to go back. So, reluctantly, the doctor's sent me back to my own Company. When I joined them we were in Austria and in a city below Innsbruck.

I had fatigues, OTs, original issue of shoes that pull over my shoes. Everyone was saluting me because they thought I was a general. It ended up that the military governor of that village "took care of excise needs of the men because the war had come to a virtual end." Even though the war essentially was coming to an end, the outpost where the Germans were was close. We didn't get any backlash from them.

My job was to make sure we had food. We stormed the cellars in the town trying to get all the potatoes. While the people did not appreciate our efforts, we felt entitled to take whatever we

could get. The Parish priest was adamant in confronting me about his concerns. We had to have an area for our troops to play baseball so we took over a field on a farm, leveled it and made it into a ball field. The name of this particular town was very long and started with a “Z”. From that time until I left there was a lot of activity. We were driven across much of France toward the Battle of the Bulge. We were in reserve. It was sad because we had accomplished a lot, took lots of ground – but then had to retreat heading toward the Buldge, giving the ground back to the Germans. We moved across the battle zone quite a bit as a reserve company. For instance, we spent Christmas in Strasberg and had a hot meal: turkey with trimmings, similar to a meal our family at home would enjoy. The war sort of stopped. We were in foxholes and the Germans were in foxholes. It was a relief time. Unfortunately, many of us became sick after eating the rich food verses the K-rations. Our kitchen almost always came up with hot food for us before the end of the day. We seldom missed a hot meal. They served D-Rations to us. I can’t recall more than 2 or 3 occasions where we missed a hot meal. It was nice to know the kitchen staff was there and following us.

From there the war had ended. The Germans had capitulated. I was up for a battlefield commission. The War Department cancelled all of those nominations. We were told we were going to

LaHarve, France. We were put on a troop ship and were told we were heading for Japan.

While we were getting ready to ship out, word came that the Japanese had surrendered. So instead of heading to Japan, we headed to New York. When we got to the U.S. we saw the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. We saw how an airplane had run into the Empire State Building about half way up. A tarp had been placed over the crash area.

From there we went to Camp Shanks. We were processed for discharge and given our “Ruptured decree,” that little emblem that we had to put on our uniform. There I was given some money and took a train back to Chicago. The war was over for me.

My parents did not know I was coming home. I was able to get home without telling anyone I was coming home. The only one who sensed I was coming home was my dog. He recognized my footsteps coming through the area way. He began to howl and cry. That alerted my parents as to what was happening. It was very exciting. My Mom, Dad, sister and brother were all there.

When I had arrived here (New Orleans) I had no idea about all the resources. I started to look through one of the books on the first day. It had information about our regiment, battalion, and company. I was going through the list of names and could not find my name. Then I was asked if I had been interviewed. When I

said I had not been interviewed, I was directed to you and here I am.

It is hard to say what the emotional feelings were when under fire; but I can remember our 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. was given a battlefield commission and he and I moved along pretty much together. I was the weapons platoon leader and he being the officer. I can remember on one occasion we were crawling through mud towards an objective and a mortar shell landed pretty close by. I got splashed all over and I “went like so.” I said, “Audrey, I’m bleeding.” He looked at me and said, “No you’re not. It’s mud.” It is very frightening to face the unknown because we didn’t know where the snipers were. They were the people that we would be most concerned about. We did not like their artillery. They had a shell called the “88”. It was a very successful weapon. We never knew when one of those shells would come in. One would land as close as that table.

In one case it tore a fellow’s ear off and the shock of that was very frightening. You all lying there or sitting there near a tree and this shell came in, it was a tree burst. The impact of the shell tore his ear off. A tree burst is a shell that explodes when it hits the tree tops instead of when it hits the ground. When we looked at that fellow bleeding, we asked ourselves, “How did that miss me? What if it had been me there instead of him?” It’s scary.

We went to Dachau (a concentration camp). I remember going in and seeing all their bodies, actually skeletons. The mayor, or someone who appeared to be big in the community, began to order the Germans to get rid of the bodies. But our captain told him, “No you don’t tell these people what to do, you get in there and go to work.” We monitored some of that activity. That was frightening to see. When people say that there was no holocaust, they don’t know what they are talking about.

On V.E. Day, I was in Austria. On V.J. Day I was on a troop ship headed for Japan; I was elated. We didn’t know what the future was going to hold. Some of us stayed in Germany and were assigned various duties as occupation forces. Some were promoted, others given very responsible positions to tie loose ends together and to start the recovery of Europe. I wanted to go back home. I enjoyed the Army; I enjoyed the ROTC training, all its phases. I enjoyed the 25 mile marches. The sad part was that I was at the back end and when they moved at a fast pace, I had to run to keep up. I would be picking up the guys that couldn’t make it and sometimes I would carry more than my own equipment to help out a buddy. We were always trying to accomplish something more. Because we were doing so well, we had the opportunity to go up in a glider. That was very interesting. The plane would start down the runway and then the glider would start to rise

immediately. The plane would be lower than the glider during take-off. The pilots would get a little anxious. Col. Ewell, our Regimental Commander, contacted the pilot and said, "Cut out the nonsense. I don't want these guys killed in a practice exercise. I'd rather see them lost in France." That comment didn't go over very well with us. He made his point because after that we didn't make any more loops.

We were on a troop ship in the port at LaHarve when we head about V-J Day. Before the announcement, we were not happy and were frightened about going to fight the Japanese. The Japanese were good fighters. It was a different kind of war there. We fought civilized, human people. One opinion then was that the Japanese were fanatical and you didn't know what to expect from them.

V-J Day was announced and we just assumed that we weren't going to have to go. Soon they told us we were going to go back. We felt the ship turn around.

I got married in my 40's. I've been married for 42 years. My wife is 65 years old. When I came back from the service, I went back to General Electric. They were supposed to hold my position. They didn't. They assigned me to a better position. I didn't know why. My office was on the warehouse floor. My job was to trade fractional horse power motors for replacements with

customers. I decided that I didn't like this, especially considering that every time they opened the big warehouse doors I would get a strong breeze. So, about that time I had a good friend whom I grew up with and who also served in Europe in the Air Force. We tried to get together over there but never did. He worked for a bank on the Gold Coast in Chicago. He came to me and said, "Hey, Walt would you like to come to work for a bank?" I said, "Yes, I'm tired of working on this cold warehouse floor." I went for an interview and went to work on the spot. I moved up through the ranks and ended up at another bank and became Vice President in charge of mortgage lending. I retired from 1<sup>st</sup> Bank of Oak Park as a V.P. at the age of 65. They had a policy that you had to retire at 65. I belonged to a consortium of banks at the time. They heard I was retiring. They invited me to come to work with them. I said, "No. I'm going fishing." They prevailed anyway. I said I would work only for six months. I spent another fifteen years there. We went from 1<sup>st</sup> Bank of Oak Park to Oak Park Trust to MD Bank to Bank One to Chase. I retired from Chase about three years ago. I spent over 55 years in banking. I worked every position in banking, from the mail clerk to the Vice President.

I am as bored as anyone can be who has retired. My wife still works. She is a Vice President of another bank. We met at the bank on the Gold Coast. When she was hired, I was on a

month vacation. She would ask, “Who sits there? Who is this guy?” She noticed my name plate sitting on my desk. She knew how to pronounce my name because she was also Polish. So when I came back we got acquainted. She and another girl were attending banking school. One day I said to them, “If you graduate and pass this course with a high grade, I’ll take you both to dinner.” They passed, but the other girl didn’t want to go to dinner, so Pat and I went. That was our 1<sup>st</sup> acquaintance. I would sit at my desk and shoot rubber bands at her. Then we had the big snow storm in Chicago in the 60’s, so I said to her that I would drive her home. We started out in my Mustang. It wasn’t very good for deep snow. When we got to her house she said, “Don’t drive onto my street; stay on the main street because it is plowed.” I said, “Oh no, we’ll get there.” I got in there. Her home was the 1<sup>st</sup> home after the businesses. She went on in. I drove down to the corner and I got stuck and couldn’t get out.

I went back and asked her father to come out and help me. He wouldn’t do it. So they asked me to spend the night there, which I did. The next morning I walked to my home. My mother had passed away, so my dad was alone at the house. I did get a lift from somebody for a few blocks. When I found out everything at home was fine, I walked back to her house. By that time they had my car out of the snow drift and I was able to go home.

One thing led to another. We have been married for 42 years. We have two children. My daughter is the youngest and she is a school teacher. My son was an aircraft engineer. He could never find a job in that industry due to layoffs. So he went into regular manufacturing and lost his job 18 months ago. He has three boys and a daughter. My daughter has two boys. I am proud of my grandchildren. Her eleven year old is interested in the 103d. He wants to know everything about it. He even did a school project about D-Day. I make a point not to miss the things my grandchildren do.

I do not talk about my military service. If I am asked a question, I will answer. I have my hat and my Eisenhower jacket, plus a book on our regiment and one on the earliest essays on our division.

I listen to the men here. I sat next to a gentleman yesterday at dinner. All through dinner he bent my ear with all these experiences. I was sorry I sat there, but glad I did. He reminded me of many things I had forgotten. It is amazing how some people can recall dates or events as if they happened yesterday. I can't do that. What I plan to do when I get home is to get into the Division History and read it from cover to cover again to refresh my memory. There are stories that you don't really want to talk about; the hard things can be very vivid in your mind. That gentleman

had all this information stored in his head and he had to get it out.

There is a lot I don't remember.

Currently, I am the Chaplain of the Division.