

## Recorded Interview

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I originally enlisted in November 1942. I was nineteen years old. At the time the minimum draft age was twenty-one. If I wanted to enlist before that age you had to have a parent's permission. I wanted to be a member of the Air Corps but I could not obtain my mother's permission. I did get permission to enlist in the Army. That is how I ended up in the Infantry. Not the best of outcomes.

I had been studying Chemical Engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I had completed two and one half years toward my degree when I entered the Army in May 1943

At that time the Government had established an ill designed program to help Colleges and Universities weather the financial impact of losing their students to the war effort. The program was given the name Army Specialized Training Program, ASTP. The program has been documented in the book "Scholars in Foxholes: The Story of the Army Specialized Training Program in World War II. I entered the program.

I was given Infantry Basic Training at Camp Fannin, outside Tyler, Texas. A number of my classmates were in the same camp After basic training I was assigned to attend the ASTP program in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Technological College at the fourth degree level. I completed two three month semesters. The Government was having second thoughts about

having able bodied soldiers in the safety of college when many were dying and there was a shortage of replacements. The ASPT program provided a ready source of new bodies. It was disbanded. So, in March 1944 I found myself in the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division at Camp Howze. Along with a large number of others who had also been in the program. Many “ASTPers” did enter various Infantry Divisions. A very few got other assignments but most never had an opportunity to use any special skills they may have had.

From my experience these “Foxhole Scholars” became fine Infantrymen and played a large part in the successes the Division had and also currently in the success of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division WW II Association. There was some resentment among the cadre and other enlisted men of these men from college who obviously had higher intelligence than most of them or the officers. After a month or two it was recognized that we were all in the same boat and the units became a cohesive whole.

Generally I do not speak about my war experiences except with the people I knew during combat and whom I meet at these reunions. I did not learn of the annual reunions until 1991. In all the interim years I never spoke to anyone of my activities. People who did not share the experience would not understand. Everyone had their own experiences. It was only after I started to attend these reunions that I came to enjoy swapping stories with old friends. As one of our wives remarked “The stories get better every year”. I really enjoy attending reunions even though I meet fewer people I know each year. I remember very little of any actual fighting I was engaged in. My memory has blocked out most of what happened or what I did

during the actual fire fights. Talking with my friends who were there also has brought back many memories.

I went overseas with the Division in October 1944 and found myself on the front lines at St Die on November 10<sup>th</sup>. Like the others I was hoping that the following day, November 11<sup>th</sup>, would be another armistice day. Didn't happen, however, as with most of the other good things we wished for in those days.

My Brother, who had gone into Casablanca in November 1942 and whom I had not seen in well over two years, came to visit me on the front lines at the platoon CP a day or two after we got there. He was a member of the Corps of Engineers and had been in North Africa, Sicily, Italy and Southern France. The Division's presence had not gone unknown and when he learned of it he was able to come and visit me. He visited twice more before the end of the war. Once near Schillersdorf and once in Obermodern, in February and March 1945.

The Company went into our first action when the Division attacked St. Die. We had been up all night waiting in the rain as the engineers attempted to erect a foot bridge across the Merth River north of St. Die. In any event we jumped off early in the morning with great apprehension, not knowing what to expect. Things went uneventfully until afternoon when we came under fire from 88's and then experienced our first fire fight.

It was during this action that the squad leader of the second squad of my third platoon, Staff Sergeant Luchasee was killed. At the time he had a two year old daughter who didn't actually know him. Almost fifty years later I met this daughter in St. Die during a Division Tour of the area. I was able to explain to her where we were and what we did on

the day her father died and point out the location where he fell. She said that being there helped to better know her father of whom she had no recollection or remembered ever seeing.

After St Die we continued through the lower Vosges Mountains. There was some German opposition but by the day before Thanksgiving Day that year we were coming down to a small town on the beginning of the Alsace Plain. During our journey through the mountains the local people were very kind to us giving us brown bread and wine when they could. Sometimes, too much wine.

We bedded down in the town and the next day we were given our Thanksgiving Day feast, a turkey and cranberry sauce sandwich on the usual large slices of Army bread. Just as we were given the sandwiches we were told to saddle up and to leave the house. The Germans had erected a roadblock on the road heading out of town and were shelling us. We jumped into the roadside ditch and ate our sandwiches there. Happy Thanksgiving!

A brother of a boyhood friend (whom I still see) was in L Company of the 411<sup>th</sup>. He had joined the Division just before we left the States. He had been in a coastal anti-aircraft unit on the west coast for several years. Unfortunately he was killed November 28<sup>th</sup>. I had the honor of attending a memorial service for him in our home town in the fall of 1945.

After we were on the Alsace Plain we headed for Selestat and assisted in its capture. We were then moved north a short distance, near Phaffenhoffen, then started west again until we hit Wisemburg. This was in mid December. We able to attend Church services in a

fourteenth century cathedral and sing Christmas carols accompanied by a fourteenth century organ.

This was the time the Germans started “the Bulge”. The Division was moved north to relieve the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division which subsequently relieved the 101<sup>st</sup> Division at Bastogne.

In early January we were moved back to Alsace at the time the Germans started their North wind Offensive there. This was a second bulge battle. At this time we were given a new Division Commander. Brigadier General Anthony C. McAuliffe the commanding General of the 101<sup>st</sup> Division at Bastogne. He of the “nuts” reply to the German demand for surrender. McAuliffe was a real leader. When he took command of the Division he visited the front lines. He visited the men in the foxholes and in their billets. Several times subsequently I saw him on the front lines, once directing traffic. Until he took command I had not seen a flag officer, not even our battalion commander, anywhere near where somebody might be shooting. As we were heading south to Innsbruck he and his staff came up to the lead tanks to determine how things were progressing.

We were in defensive positions most of the winter but saw our heaviest fighting in Sessenheim, Schillersdorf and Niefren during this period. Also night patrols were frequent.

.On March 15, 1945 the Seventh Army launched a general offensive designed to push the Germans out of the area. The second day we achieved success and were never halted thereafter. McAuliffe was going to send us across the Rhine in rubber boats but luckily the mayor of the city of Mannheim gave the city up, so there was time to construct a bridge.

There was very little resistance as we were heading south through Bavaria. At one point my squad was cut off for the night but the Germans really didn't want to fight so in the morning they surrendered. At only one point did we have to fight for a town, which according to orders we largely burned down after its' surrender. The German soldiers were unusually arrogant and refused to recognize it was over. As they were lined up to be led off, one decided he was going to stop and relieve himself. When told to keep going he decided to squat down anyway. One shot between his feet brought on immediate constipation. There was no resistance from any of them after that.

We eventually got to Innsbruck and the war was over for us in Europe.

The 103 Infantry Division was in the line for about 140 straight days without relief, which was exceptionally long. I was with the Division the entire time. Never was I given a pass. Our platoon participated in several major battles including Selestat, Sessenhein and Schillersdorf and a combat raid on Niefren, during which we suffered high casualties. Fortunately I was never hurt, except for a few minor scrapes and powder burns. In April we were given several days of rest as occupation troops. In mid-April we were again put on active duty in the vanguard of the Seventh Armies to capture Bavaria.

Generally we did not have much interaction with the civilian populations. During the fighting they generally fled and in Germany we were not supposed to fraternize. This was fine with me since I had no desire to meet them.

We spent about two months in Austria, about half in Innsbruck and half in a small town upriver. This was a great time for us and was a wonderful hiatus after our combat experiences. During this time I skied

on the top of the mountain. I witnessed a beautifully memorable sunrise in the Inn River valley. It was wonderful to see the sun come up over the Alps Mountains. We also participated in a spectacular Division Parade in the Inn Valley. The effect of the band music reverberating of the mountains was unforgettable. A DeKuyper warehouse was discovered in Innsbruck. A substantial quantity of Anisette which was stored there was liberated and most of the men enjoyed the licorice aperitif that evening. We enjoyed many activities during this period.

In July most of the men in the Division who did not have enough service to be eligible for a discharge were transferred either to the Forty-Fifth Infantry Division to be transported to the United States to retrain for the invasion of Japan or to the Ninth Infantry Division for occupation duty.

I went to the Forty-fifth. Since I had not been promoted I lost my status as an Infantry Squad Leader. Many others were in the same boat. As we were moving toward shipment home we learned first of the atom bombing of Japan and then of the Japanese surrender. We were in a camp outside of Rheims at the time. When the news was announced the whole camp erupted with joy. We continued on our journey home so we were fortunate to be in the States when it was time to be discharged.

I was eventually discharged on February 6, 1946 after a forty-five day furlough and a two month stint of guarding German PW's in a small town in Arkansas. The farmers in that area grew rice and cotton and the PW's aided in the harvest. There were only five men to guard about one hundred and fifty PW's both in the fields and in camp, which had been

a CCC facility built in the 1930's. Fortunately the Germans were glad to be where they were at and didn't want to go anyplace. Not even back to Germany. The farmers were very good to us.

After discharge I was able to start the next semester at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute the following week, on February 12<sup>th</sup>. I received my degree in Chemical Engineering in June 1947. Two years late, serving thirty-nine months in the Army in the interim.

Not really liking "engineering" as such I got a job in consumer product manufacturing. First , for the American Chicle Company and then with the Warner Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, when the two companies merged. Thirty-eight years later I retired after an eventful and worldwide career. I now live in Austin Texas.

I never regretted serving in the Army I am sure my life was richer for having the experience and I always felt I was living on borrowed time after escaping serious harm in combat.

Ed Mundhenk