

Recorded Interview

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I was born here in San Antonio, TX and I have lived here all my life. I went to San Antonio College in San Antonio. It was a small junior college when I attended. After Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt gave a message to the country. My classmates, including many friends, gathered in the auditorium at the college to hear him speak. Afterwards, we talked about how our lives might be impacted by Pearl Harbor. We hoped that the aftermath would end quickly and we would not be involved. In our minds, we felt we would be involved before it was all over.

The following school year I went to St. Mary's University in San Antonio and on December 3, 1942 I enlisted in the Army Enlisted Reserve Corp (ERC). A number of my friends and other classmates enlisted as well. On May 12, 1943, all of the Army Enlisted Reserve Corp was called up from St. Mary's to go into the Army. There were about twenty-five of us from St. Mary's with well established friendships that were called up together. We became even closer living in the same bunk house together. I kept in touch with most of those friends after the war.

I am still in touch with a two or three of them currently. Unfortunately, one of those friends that I knew from St. Mary's, Texas A&I, ASTP, and Camp Maxey passed away last year. We also bowled together. We had been together at St. Mary's University, and Camp Maxey, Texas. We continued our friendship after we married our spouses. About three of my army buddies and I still contact each other.

We went to Camp Maxey in Paris, Texas for basic training. (I got to “Paris” early in the war!) We took basic training in what was called a “Jap Trap.” There was a high barbed wire fence around the enclosure of the camp. It was meant to be a camp for Japanese prisoners of war. Since they did not have many prisoners of war, we took our basic training at that camp with the high barbed wire fence. I have memories of being there and going into Paris at night. Many guys who came back to camp AWOL crawled under that fence.

My dad, who had always been in pretty good physical health, had served in WWI for about six months. He was stationed at Brownwood, Texas. He contracted pneumonia, and received an early discharge. My Uncle Jim went overseas in WWI and was gassed in France by the Germans. His health was not the same after that experience.

I think my parents had mixed feeling about sending me off. They hated to see me go to war. They had two children but I was their only son. At the same time they were pleased that I was going to help defend our country.

I entered the ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program at Texas A&I College -- College of Arts and Industry at Kingsville. Fortunately, I was taking basic engineering because I was not that great in mathematics. They decided to break up the program and put us in the infantry. They gave us credit for the course even though we did not take the exam. I received credit for the chemistry, and mathematics, which were challenging courses for me. (We took hikes out to the King Ranch.)

I joined Co. B, 409th Inf., 103d Div., at Camp Howze, Gainesville, TX, April 1944. In the beginning we were all a group of disillusioned men. We had joined with the expectation of becoming officers and found ourselves buck privates in the rear rank of the

infantry. Some of us thought we should have joined the Navy or the Air Force. Not only were we brought in from ASTP but Air Force guys also joined us at Camp Howze to add to the invasion force. The last I saw my parents before I went overseas was at Camp Howze in Gainesville, Texas. They drove up and it meant a lot to me because it was hard to travel in those days. Gas was rationed and they had to get enough stamps from other people to cover the trip.

We traveled by train to Camp Shanks in New York and boarded our transport, the Monticello, a cruise ship. At one point during our trip we dropped explosive charges off the back of the transport. I am not sure if there had been an enemy threat or they were just practicing. We spent a lot of time on the lower decks of the ship trying to pass the time, coming up on the top deck occasionally. I was very fortunate to be spared seasickness and I also felt the food was pretty good. I enjoyed the trip, talking to my friends, and reading.

We disembarked at Marseilles, hiked up into the hills and set up our tents. We experienced heavy rains that knocked down our tents. While at the port, I was given stevedore detail; we unloaded ships, the Monticello as well as others. We used various conveyances to help us unload. We spent several days in Marseilles and at some point we went into town to see the scenery, sites and to have some wine. We had some interaction with the people in Marseilles and we found them to be friendly.

Our commanding officer of Company B was Captain Walton; Colonel Therrell was our overall Battalion Commander. I was in the weapons platoon in a mortar squad as a mortar gunner. Sgt. Youngblood, from North Carolina, was my platoon leader. We spent about a week at the port.

We were loaded on trucks leaving Marseilles, traveled up through Leon, Dijon and winding up in the Vosges Mountains. We were fired on by the Germans for the first time in the mountains near the town of St. Die. We also came across some dead Germans. That was the first time we fully realized we were in a combat situation and that being killed was a possibility. As a mortar gunner I could not fire mortars because there were too many trees. We needed a field of fire in order to get the shell up to an open area. There were no open areas. The mortar gunners were relegated to riflemen and used their carbines. We were in action in the area of St. Die for about a week, starting around November 23. About a week later we left the mountains, went down into the Rhine River Plain, crossed the Muerthe River and went into the town of Selestat. The Germans knocked the bridge out behind us. Consequently, we were lost and had no communications. I was on the second floor of a house with my “trusty” carbine, when we heard two German tanks rolling up in front of our house. A former ASTP guy, a friend of mine, who I think wanted to be a hero, began firing on the tanks from the attic window. The German tanks began shelling us and the sergeant asked me to go downstairs and get the captain. I was about halfway down the stairway when a shell hit behind me. I landed on my wrist, which is still fractured today. Shells went through the attic; a couple of guys may have been hit. Fortunately, I was not hit. I heard the Germans yell, “Hände hoch!” Komm raus! (“Hands up!” “Come out with your hands up!”). About seventy-nine men of company B filed out of the house and became prisoners of war. That occurred in Selestat, Alsace Lorraine, near the Rhine River and the Rhine Plain. We lost communications with our division because the Germans had knocked out the bridge behind us. I was missing in action for three months. No one knew what had happened to

us; we had just disappeared. In our company's history we are referred to as the "lost company of the 103d Division."

We went down with our hands up and they took us all into tow. I remembered that I had a pocket knife and I did not want them to take it away from me. So, I used the knife to cut a hole in the bottom of my cuff and put my pocket knife in there. The Germans never found it. That knife turned out to be the official bread cutting knife in the prison camp. We were taken back through the lines and our own fighter planes came over and shelled us in a town near there. We were put into an air raid shelter in the town where we were captured. Then they took us to Breisach on the Rhine. They put us in a farmhouse that had housed some horses or cows ahead of us. We stayed there a couple of days and I remember finding an old hunk of rotten stale bread with teeth marks on it. Probably a horse or cow had it before I did. We had not eaten in a couple of days and the bread looked pretty good to me. It tasted pretty good as well.

The Germans forced us to dig machine gun placements along the Rhine, which was against the Geneva Convention. Meanwhile my arm was messed up and I tried to tell them that I could not work because I had a bad wrist. They did not pay any attention to that. We did dig those machine gun placements; I gave the digging half-hearted, one handed treatment.

We stayed there several days before we were loaded on freight cars in Breisach on the Rhine and transported through Stuttgart and Essen. It took us about three days to go 150 miles. Several times the American planes would come over and bomb those cities. Meanwhile, we were sitting in the rail yard bouncing around in our freight cars as the bombing continued while our German guard fled to an air raid shelter. Fortunately, none

of those bombs or shells hit us. We had an unfortunate incident happen to one of our Company B guys, Carlton Neumeister. Our train made one of those jolting stops while Carlton and our guard were in the doorway of our freight car. The sudden movement of the train caused the German guard's burp gun to discharge, inadvertently hitting Carlton in the head. He was a really good friend of mine. We had been together in ASTP and at Texas A&I. It was an accident, but it killed him in that boxcar right in front of us. Carlton spoke German and was our Company B interpreter.

We proceeded up to Limburg in the Frankfurt area, and our first prison camp (camp 12A). I was captured on December 2, 1944 and we stayed in Limburg until right around Christmas. We slept on a hard dirty floor, shared one dirty blanket and turned over only when we all turned together. We were very fortunate that we got out of Limburg when we did, because the day after we left, the Americans bombed the town. We left on or around December 23 and were transported by train to a prison camp at Muhlberg, Germany (camp 4B). It was near Berlin. We stayed in that prison camp about three weeks. The accommodations were not too bad. Next, they loaded us on another train car and took us to Glauchau, another camp, which was near Leipzig and Dresden and the Czech border. I was one of twenty American POWs working at this camp that had a mill. We were building prefabricated houses for the bombed out areas which was pretty good duty overall. It was a small group of American guys. We stayed at a residence and had a German army guard. The boss who ran the factory had been an American prisoner of war in WWI and had been treated pretty well in America. Consequently, he treated us pretty well. One of our men was our allowed to be our cook. Breakfast might include any of the following: a bowl of oatmeal or cereal, hunk of bread.

Lunch might provide bread or grass soup. The food was better in Glauchau than it was in Limburg. That is where I worked until I was liberated.

There was a farm outside of town that grew the boss's potatoes. The cook needed men to plant potatoes at the farm. Three of us were taken to work at the farm: a city slicker from San Antonio, Texas, a guy from Brooklyn, and a guy from Philadelphia that had never seen a farm. Of the twenty people at the camp at least a dozen had been farmers or had some knowledge of a farm. Unfortunately, right next to the field was a German army barracks. American fighter planes would fly over and strafe the barracks while we were working. When this occurred, the German civilian guard who was with us during the day would move us to the cemetery next to the field. We would take cover among the tombstones to avoid being strafed, with only a few narrow escapes.

It was a pretty good deal to be part of the potato planting detail. When we got our Red Cross boxes one of us would slip the guard an American cigarette on our way out to work. Someone else would slip him one on our way back to the barracks. Sometimes we would come back with fifteen pounds of potatoes under our shirts. We had gained fifteen pounds and he would not see anything because he was so enthralled by our American cigarettes.

We also went to this brick kiln where our boss had apples. We were able to indulge in some and take some back to our men. When we knew we were going to be liberated we cooked the fifty pounds of potatoes still under the floorboards of our barracks and treated our liberators to a potato lunch.

We were encouraged by several things. Every couple of weeks we were able to go out and get a keg of beer. We took our little wagon, went to the brewery in downtown

Glauchau and brought the keg back. The oldest guy in our stalag, a forty-two year old named Rodgers, would say, "This beer does not have any kick at all!" It was apparent to the rest of us that he was affected by the beer. It meant so much to receive Red Cross packages. Also, an old German guard, Max Tippmar, would take our cigarettes and barter them for us through the black market in exchange for bread. He was an old "volkstürmer," but the Germans were in need of soldiers. We remember him to this day as being part of our salvation. The Red Cross boxes and the cigarettes would buy us the bread that helped us survive.

A couple of days before we were liberated we heard that President Roosevelt had died on April 12, 1949. There were twenty of us as well as five Russian and five French prisoners of war in the camp. We associated with them to a degree but it was challenging because of the language barrier. Eventually, we heard the signs of battle moving toward us. We knew from the rumor mill that the Germans were saying the Americans were coming. We heard the gunfire getting closer and closer. We woke up on the morning of the 15th of April, looked across the street from our barracks and saw white towels and white pillow cases on every window in the building across from ours. It was a sign that the German citizens were surrendering. We could hear the sounds of battle moving toward us and heard small arms fire. All of a sudden American troops were coming up our street with guns pulled. We yelled, "Americans in here don't shoot!" The troops were very cautious but they saw we were Americans. We were liberated on the 15th of April 1945. I had only been a prisoner for four and a half months but it was still a good "home appreciation course." Also, our town was not hit during the war. You appreciate the small things in life when you have to do without them. It was Patton's Third Army that

spearheaded right for our town and liberated us. The POWs at Chemnitz, a rather large German town about twenty miles from us, was not liberated for about twenty days by the Russians. The Russians held onto those POWs for awhile. Our town was not hit during the war but a few times the railroad station was hit. We could hear the shelling but we were spared.

On one occasion a man showed up at our POW camp and supposedly was a GI. His name was Otto and we did not trust him from the beginning. Otto only stayed three to four weeks and then disappeared. We felt he was a “plant” by the Germans to get information. A few of our men talked about escaping. I never thought about trying because I did not speak German and we were way behind the German lines. The war was going to end soon any way and I knew I could sweat it out.

My wife and I went back to Germany after the Berlin wall fell. We visited the burial site of my old German boss, Heir Meister, the owner of the factory where I worked as a prisoner. We visited his son and daughter as well. They took us all around the town and we went out to the farm where I had worked. I was impressed by the kind treatment we received knowing that Heir Meister had been a prisoner of war in WWI. I had written to the mayor of the town of Glauchau explaining that I was planning a trip to Europe. I asked if my wife and I could visit my former prison camp. He wrote back and said his assistant would take us to the camp. We were staying in Prague so we took a train to Glauchau about 125 miles away. Heir Meister’s son and daughter took us all around. He was a real character. He smoked cigarettes right and left and drove his BMW a mile a minute around town. He took us out to the farm, and to the old brick kiln where we picked apples. We also met the mayor’s assistant who had responded to my requests and

with whom I still correspond. We had a nice visit and saw all the old sites including the prison camp. Overall, my experience was not so bad. It beats being on the front line in combat. We worked hard and occasionally were hit if the guards wanted us to work harder. One time a guard caught about twenty of us behind a lumber pile. He yelled, "Why aren't you working harder to defend the "Father Land?"

We visited Buchenwald, the old concentration camp, in Gotha. The conditions there were horrible. We saw some of the Jewish people who had been there for years. They showed us an enclosure where the wife of the commandant, Elsa Cook, was held. She had been accused of making lampshades out of tattoos from the Jewish prisoners. Her husband was also incarcerated as well as German guards.

When we were liberated we went to the town of Gotha and flew out of Gotha Airport to Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre, France. While at the camp we were able to go to Paris on leave a few times. Eventually, we were loaded on a Liberty Ship and sailed to Boston Harbor. I took a train from Boston to San Antonio and my old surroundings. Since I was missing in action for three months they actually thought I was dead. If I had known that I would have been deeply concerned. We were given six Red Cross postcards by the Germans to send home. I told my parents I was in a prison camp and that I was fine. My parents notified the War Department that I was not Missing In Action; instead I was a POW. My parents had feared the worst. Thankfully, it all worked out well. I was liberated on April 15 and given a sixty day furlough. I think my will to survive, my belief that there were better days ahead, and my faith that the good Lord would see me through all contributed to my survival.

I reported to duty at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. I told the doctor that I thought I had a broken arm. I told him how I had fallen down a flight of stairs because of a German tank shell. He confirmed that my arm was broken. They sent me up to Camp Swift Regional Hospital in Texas at the end of my sixty day furlough. I spent several months there with my arm in a cast. The doctors offered to operate to set the little bones in my wrist or to discharge me. I had worked preparing prefabricated houses, and dug replacements for the Germans along the Rhine River; I felt I would surely get by in my civilian career. To this day, I still have my fracture.

I had pretty good duty up there. I learned to play golf with one hand. I still play better with one hand than two hands. In 1945 I was discharged from the army after about two and a half years of active Army duty. I came back to San Antonio Texas and have been here ever since. I enjoy getting together with the veterans at the reunions. Many of these guys were among those capture with me that night.

When I was captured the Germans took my American uniform away from me and offered me a French Army cap and jacket. I wore them all through my incarceration. The jacket had a big red diamond on the front and on the back, which indicated that I was a POW. It also had a big KG on the front. I grew a mustache when I was captured and didn't shave it off until I was liberated and had my sixty day furlough at home. When someone at Glauchau saw me in the French cap and French jacket they would say, "Franzose oder Amerikaner?" ("Is he a Frenchman or an American?") The Germans used American uniforms in the Battle of the Bulge. I could picture a German wearing my jacket in the Battle of the Bulge and identifying himself as an American. (The Germans did not take jackets away from every soldier they captured.) I offered the French Army

jacket and cap to the WWII Museum in San Antonio. Currently, the items have been moved to the WWII Museum in New Orleans, along with some pictures and letters that I wrote home.

After we were liberated we were standing in a field near the airport and a soldier who had helped liberate us asked if he could take a few pictures. He took a “roll” of pictures and he sent me the negatives. It was very kind of him to do that.

I was home when I learned that we dropped the Atomic Bomb. I thought it would be very difficult invading the homeland of Japan; the war had gone on too long already. I was pleased with the decision.

Sergeant Schreckengost called in the ‘70s with a list of people who were going to meet in Hot Springs, Arkansas. I found out that there had been a 103rd Infantry Division reunion actually in San Antonio earlier that I did not know about.

I met my wife, Estelle, in 1954 when I joined a “youth” league and we began bowling together. One night she got her finger caught between two bowling balls. Being a kind and chivalrous lad, I volunteered to take her over to the hospital. The attendants took care of her finger. An old Spanish proverb implies that if you help someone, then you are responsible for them for the rest of your life. We have been living that proverb for almost fifty-five years. We have four sons and four grandchildren.

I worked my way through college as a radio announcer. My profession was journalism. I became a newspaperman and I worked for the *Express News and Light* here in San Antonio. Later, I moved into Public Relations at Saint Mary’s University and received my Masters’ Degree. I went into Public Affairs with the Federal Government

and worked for the U.S. Air Force civilian service at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio for thirty years. I retired as a public affairs officer in 1982.