

An Oral History
with
Jerry O. Passmore, Company I, 411th Infantry, 103d Division

Album of Remembrance Oral History Project, 103d Infantry Division Association

<p>From an interview conducted at the July 2011 Association reunion, New Orleans, LA</p>

I grew up and went to school in Dallas, Texas. In 1938, I transferred to a military academy in San Marcus, Texas. I started to do photography at San Marcus in the latter part of '38 and early part of '39—the beginning of my lifelong interest in photography. So, I left San Marcus to go back to Dallas to attend Crozier Technical High School, where they taught photography.

In March 1943, I turned eighteen years old. A senior in high school, I hadn't been drafted, but I had a draft registration card. One of my closest friends, Johnny Russell, who was also at Crozier Tech, was in the same predicament as I was. He was a senior. We went down to the enlistment center in April or May. It was in a vacant automobile building. They had tables set up: the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the Army Air Force. We walked in there and they said, "Where do you want to go?" Johnny said, "I think I'll go for the Air Force." I said, "Well, I think I'll just go with the Army. I know a little bit about it, but not much." So, we signed up. I reported for basic training on June 6th. I went to Camp Wolters, an old Army training camp near Mineral Wells, Texas. Of course, I really had no idea of what I was getting into.

When we finished our sixteen-week basic training, we were all divided up and sent to various units. They sent me to the 103d Infantry Division at Camp Howze, near the town of Gainesville, Texas. Camp Howze, when it rained, you had to slosh through the mud because there were no paved streets. The barracks and all the other buildings were temporary framed buildings covered with tarpaper.

I was assigned to a rifle company—Company I, 411th Infantry, one of three regiments in the 103d Division. I was one of the bigger men in the company, so I was assigned to carry a BAR [Browning automatic rifle]. I put in a request for a transfer to Signal Company because they did photography there and that was my interest.

Nothing ever came of that, however. I had a camera, but it got lost in combat. I would have had some good pictures. But it was one of those things. Sometimes things happen so fast—sometimes you're moving so fast and so seriously to just save your own life.

I had been in Camp Howze maybe ten days. We had just come in from the field. It was summertime and we were hot, sweaty. We were pulling off our dirty fatigues and boots to take a shower. I was just pulling off my boots when an orderly came running in. The barracks had a set of bunks along each side, with an aisle down the middle. The orderly said, "I'm looking for Jerry Passmore. Is he in here?" I said I was. He said, "Well, you're wanted at division headquarters."

Some of the men started to tease me—saying "What have you done?"

I said, "I don't know."

They said, "You must have done something to be called up to division." I continued to take my boots off.

The orderly came running back in and said, "Are you still here?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm going to change my clothes."

The orderly said, "No, they want you there now."

I said, "Dirty fatigues?"

He said, "Yes, just as you are. Just put your boots back on and go." So, I put my boots back on and headed out for division headquarters.

A captain met me at the door and said, "Can I help you, soldier?"

I said, "Well, sir, I don't know. I just was told to report to division headquarters."

He said, "Well, did they tell you who to report to?"

I said, "No, sir, they did not. My only orders were to report to division headquarters."

He said, "Well, you wait right here and I'll check around to see who called you up." He started making the rounds. Nobody seemed to have called for me.

General Hafner's office when you walked in the front door was at the other end. His desk was sitting so that he could look right out at the front door and see everybody who walked in there. He had an officer in with him, so the captain passed him right by. He came back and said, "I can't find anybody. Wait a minute and I'm sure General Hafner will know."

The officer in General Hafner's office left and the captain went in and asked him. He was standing right there in the doorway, so I could hear him say, "Sir, did anyone here at division headquarters ask for Jerry Passmore?"

The general stood up and said, "Yes, I called for him." So, the officer motioned for me to go in. He sat down at his desk and I stood there at attention. About that time, the phone rang and he answered it. I heard him say, "I've got someone here I want to talk to. So, I'll get back to you." I was still standing there at attention.

In basic training, they impress upon you that you will never encounter a general. The only officers you will have contact with are a first lieutenant or second lieutenant, a captain occasionally, a major maybe. But you'll never have any contact with anyone higher than that. And, of course, in basic training, they always impressed on you how to address any officer. The main thing is you stand at attention until they tell you, "At ease." So, I was standing there and he was going through some papers—I guess he heard my knees knocking and I was getting more nervous by the second.

Finally, he looked up and said, "At ease." He said, "There's no sense in your standing there. In fact, I want to talk with you. There's a chair over there. Pull the chair over here." So, I pulled the chair over close to his desk. Then he started telling me what he had in mind. He wanted to create a booklet about the 103d Infantry Division in its final phase of training at Camp Howze before going overseas—called *Cactus Caravan*.

He said, "I understand that you have done quite a bit of photography."

I said, "Yes, sir, I have."

He said, "Do you have a camera?"

I said, "Yes, sir, I have."

He then asked me a lot of questions—about where I lived, what I had done in school, and so forth. He just chatted on and on. And, of course, the more he talked, the more relaxed I got. He talked to you just like he had known you all your life. That was one man I don't know how anyone could ever dislike. He was the most down-to-earth officer and, yet, he was a three-star general—someone I never expected to meet. He commanded 15,000 men and there I was—a buck private just days out of basic training—talking with him. I'd hardly had time to get acquainted with the services. And the more we talked, the more relaxed I got with him.

He explained what he wanted to do with *Cactus Caravan*. He wanted to get photos of all the activities—from the artillery to the engineers, everything that went on in training the 103d Division at Camp Howze.

I said, "I don't know how I'm going to do it."

He said, "Well, I'm going to put you on detached service. You will report to division headquarters. I'll notify your company commander that you're in my command now. I'll instruct you on what we want you to do from day to day, what we need and so forth."

And that's what he did. General Hafner pretty much managed the whole development of *Cactus Caravan*; he didn't assign some lower officer to handle it. He controlled it. He would tell you exactly what to do. I would report in and General Hafner would say, "We have some engineering projects going on. We want to cover this, this, and this in the engineering projects." So, I would figure out how I could cover

what he wanted to be covered in the engineering project. And that's the way everything went.

We were finally finishing it up just about the time we got orders we were shipping out. He told me, "You have to report back to your company now." One of the last things he told me in the meetings when I went in to sit with him, "When this thing is over"—I don't recall him ever saying "when the war is over"—"I want you to look me up." That was the one thing he told me that I didn't do. And I've often wondered whether that was a smart move or a dumb move.

I have the copy of *Cactus Caravan* he gave me. I'm listed on the credit page in the back. I have nothing but praise for that man, and anybody who has ever had any contact with him would tell you the same thing—that he was very easy to understand; he didn't mince words with you. What he wanted done, he was straightforward about. If you had any questions, that was fine. Like I said, he would sit down and talk with you just like he'd known you all your life. I don't think I ever met a nicer man.

I still wonder, from the thousands of men who came to Camp Howze, how was I picked to do photography for the *Cactus Caravan*? There must have been hundreds of other men with cameras. In all my conversations with General Hafner, I never asked him how he got my name. I'll never know what happened.



We were in New York for about four days before shipping out. With our free time, we did a lot of running around New York. I was eighteen years old and hadn't been around much, so I quickly learned a lot.

Then the orders came we were shipping out. We went down to the dock and boarded the *U.S.S. Monticello*, a converted Italian luxury liner. From Bob Huff, who was in my company and one of the waiters in the ship's officers' mess, I learned that General Hafner was on the same ship. Of course, there was no luxury on it for the enlisted men. They had stripped everything out of it. We were about two weeks going across and were fine until we hit a big storm. It was a real nightmare going through that storm. The ship was up and down and everyone got sick. It was a real pleasure to hit calm water.

We pulled into Marseille in southern France and then went north by train. We went on the line in the Vosges Mountains in northeastern France in November 1944.

My company took heavy casualties during our first attack across the Taintrux Valley and creek to take the high ground above the city of Saint-Dié. The Germans were dug in, waiting for us. The first day—November 16th—we suffered ten killed and twenty-one wounded. The following day we had one killed and seven wounded.

In six months of combat, Company I, 411th Infantry suffered 170 battle-related casualties. This number does not include the non-battle casualties, mostly resulting from exposure to the elements; the winter of 1944-45 was the coldest, wettest period Europe had seen in 30 years. During the Seventh Army's push through the Vosges Mountains, soldiers in combat units suffered high rates of trench foot and frostbite from being continually out in rain, snow, and bitter cold. Among Company I soldiers whose duties were to actively fight the enemy in ground combat, there was more than a hundred percent turnover by the war's end in Europe.

The Germans would fire the dreaded 88s into the forests where we were. The shells would hit the trees and explode, sending shrapnel everywhere. They used them a lot at night. You could hear them screaming through the air. A lot of men got hit by shrapnel from those 88s. Maybe we had dug in for the night. Other times we didn't have protection except for if you were lucky to find a hole or depression to lay in or dig a small place where you could get below the level of the ground—any protection. I know it's hard for anybody to understand who has never been there. Basically, every man had to protect himself. Your buddy can't protect you.

We were treated well by the French. When we would go through a French village, they would really welcome us. If they had anything to eat, drink, wine, they would gladly give you part of what they had—especially if you had some chocolate. The kids loved the chocolate. We used to get these big chocolate bars in our rations. They were good, rich. And the kids loved them. If we had any chocolate, we'd break off some of a chocolate bar and give it to the kids.

It was a wet, cold, snowy winter. Tanks and trucks would get bogged down. Half-tracks would get stuck, and tanks would come along and have to pull them out.

Going through the woods, you've got a couple of hundred men and you're spread out over a wide area. You would never get a bunch of us together—that was strictly a no-no. No bunching up because the Germans with machine guns would wipe out the whole group real quick. So, we were always pretty well separated.

The night of November 20, 1944—I don't know how we got elected, but someone came around at around two o'clock and gathered up a bunch of us and we went over to this old farmhouse where they had set up headquarters. There we were told that we were going on a patrol. At that time, the Germans were retreating very fast. This major said, "Well, we're going up through the forest so far and then there's a valley. I want a patrol to spread out and sweep across there. We want to find out where the Germans are, how far they've pulled back"—because we didn't know at that point.

I remember there was about a foot of snow on the ground. In that snow, we were told we would be getting white coveralls, but we hadn't got them. They said they were shipping them in, but they hadn't caught up with us.

When we pulled out from that point back through the forest, we came to a clearing with a farmhouse. This was still in the wee hours of the morning. A woman was making soup for the day for her family. When she saw us, she came out with a water bucket full of soup. We got our canteens out and she gave us all some hot soup that she was making for her family that day. We were cold and we hadn't had a hot meal in days. Many times the kitchen couldn't keep up with us, so we didn't have hot meals. All we had were C rations and K rations—not very tasteful, but something to eat. I remember that soup she gave us. I had no idea what it was, but it was hot and it was good.

We got up to this clearing. It was beginning to break day. It was a field that was about as flat as a table and hundreds of yards wide, and in back there was a mountain or hill overlooking it. The major said, "Well, we don't have any heavy artillery for support. But we have a .30 caliber heavy machine gun. That's going to be your backup." They had a water jacket on them, so they could send rapid fire. But beyond much more than a hundred yards, they are about as useful as a pea gun.

We spread out and started across the field. I'm sure the Germans could see us spread out across there. They let us get up so far before they opened fire. Our dark uniforms showed up in that snow. There were no trees, no ravines, any cover you could get to. And we were absolutely useless. They kept us pinned down there with machine gun fire all that day until well after dark. All we could do was lay there in that snow and try to see where the fire was coming from and fire in that direction. And even after dark once in a while a machine gun would open up and you didn't know where they were spraying except that you could see the bullets kicking up the snow. While I was lying there, I could see the bullets hitting near me. So, I knew that they knew where I was. We couldn't retreat; we couldn't go forward. You stand up, start to crawl or run, why they could just cut you down in a second.

We stayed there until well after dark and then angled back to the closest woods where we could get some cover. Two of us had been wounded—one boy had been hit in the arm and I got hit in the ankle. The boy who was hit in the arm was able to walk. Two other men acted as a crutch for me. They dropped me off at an old farmhouse we ran across that was occupied. One of the boys gave me a shot of morphine from his first aid kit. I don't know how many beds they had in the house, but the French family gave me one of them. The other men went on back and I lay there until they got in there with a jeep and took me back to a deserted building where there were several other wounded men. There must have been eight or nine of us.

They finally got a couple of ambulances in there that carried us all back to a field hospital that was nothing more than a tent set up where they did some emergency surgery. They took all of us—whatever our wounds were—and the doctors dressed them and gave us shots. They finally loaded us up and took us to the 36th General Hospital, where we got our surgeries. They did a lot of things for us there. If you couldn't walk, they gave us crutches so that we could get around. There we got a hot meal, which was more than we had had.



Our regimental commander, Colonel Yeuell, was an old Army man who went by the book. When we were in training, everybody talked about Colonel Yeuell because he was so strict. We'd be out in the field, hot and tired, and see him riding by in his jeep. Of course, everybody envied him.

When old Colonel Yeuell came by the 36th General Hospital, I thought about those times I had seen him driving by in his jeep looking everybody over and how we envied him. But I know that day that I saw him at the hospital, he sure looked good. He presented me with a Purple Heart, which was real thoughtful. That was one day I was really thankful to see that man. Of course, it was a man I had already seen, photographed when we were in training. I had taken his picture back at Camp Howze that I still have a copy of. I'd only talked to him a few times, but he was a good man, a real Army man.

From the 36th General Hospital, they loaded us on a train to Aix, France. That was near the coast [about nineteen miles north of Marseille]. You either got what they called a *ZI*—that was *Zone of Interior*—or they sent you back for a replacement. And, of course, everybody kept thinking every day whether—the doctors would come through—you didn't know what they were going to do.

Then they sent us on a train up to a hospital in Paris. We stayed there until early March. One of the nurses said to me, "Well, looks like your [active-duty] days are over." There were several of us and someone came by later that day and said, "Well, are you ready to go home?"

I said, "Yup."

He said, "Get your things together. You're going to be one of the lucky ones." He said, "Well, they got a hospital ship loading that's going to be leaving on a certain day. The rest of you, we're going to take you all out to the airport. You're going to get to fly home." They took us down by ambulance to the airport and loaded a whole bunch of us on stretchers to carry down to the airplane. They had built bunks in there where they hung the stretchers.

We stopped in the Azores to refuel. A medic came on the plane and asked us if we wanted something to drink. We said, "What do you have?" He said, "Well, we can give you some milk, tea, or hot chocolate." One of the men said, "You got anything stronger than that?" He said, "No, that's the best we can do now." Most of us just took milk. We hadn't had any milk in months. When we got into New York, it was morning.



Shortly after we got into New York and were assigned a bed, some people from the Red Cross came through and wanted to know if anybody would like to go to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. I said, "I'd like to go, but I don't have anything to wear."

One said, "Well, you got a bathrobe?"

I said, "Yeah, a bathrobe and crutches."

He said, "That's all you need." So, there were about twelve to fourteen of us who went in our pajamas and bathrobes, canes or crutches, whatever you had. There was one boy who was carried in in a wheelchair. They handed us a menu, which I still have a copy of. The waiter came around and asked you what you wanted. I remember saying, "Well, I see what I would like to have, but money's kind of short."

He said, "Don't worry about a thing." Well, it happened to be the 13th of March, which was my birthday. Guy Lombardo was playing there at the Waldorf and heard that it was my birthday. He came to our table and welcomed all of us home. He asked me, "I got word that it's your birthday."

I said, "Yes, sir, it is."

He said, "Fine." He gave me an autographed picture of himself and the band, which I still have. When he went back to the orchestra, they played "Happy Birthday" for me.

That was our greeting home. That was it, because they flew us from there to Santa Barbara, California. They said they were going to stop over in Dallas. I asked one of the attendants on the plane if it was true—that we were going to stop in Dallas. He said, yes.

I said, "Well, do you know where we're going to be?"

He said, "Yes, at the hospital out at Love Field."

I said, "How long are we going to be there?"

He said, "I think the plans are you'll just be there overnight."

I asked him if they would call my sister, who lived in Dallas at that time. And I asked him to tell her I was going to be there in the hospital and maybe she could come out and they'd let her in. So, he called her and, sure enough, they made arrangements for her to come in.

I'd picked up a few things along the way when we were in Paris. One was this big bottle of Chanel No. 5—a perfume I knew she liked. She loved perfume. I brought that back to her. She and my other sister shared it. It was a big bottle. I guess they used that perfume for years.

Then I went on to Santa Barbara. And there they started giving us therapy to help us with our injuries. In June, they took us from there to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, where we were discharged from.

There's been this one thing that has bothered me over the years—why I didn't go ahead and look up General Hafner. He had been sent back early because of his health. I often thought about how to look him up. He had an office in Chicago and some way or another I got an office phone number. I carried that around for the longest time. Should I try to get hold of him or not?



After I was discharged, I tried to find a job. There weren't any jobs. It was rough after the war—all the men coming back and everybody having one thing in mind: a job. Everybody was looking for a job.

My brother-in-law got me a job in California—at the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base [now Travis Air Force Base] near Fairfield, California. That was my first real job; it paid me \$47.50 a week. A veteran who had been wounded, I qualified for a ten-point preference. I served out there for six to eight months as a *materiel inspector*, they called me, for surplus Air Force materials until they had a reduction in workforce. I went around looking for jobs out there. But I had only one possibility of a job out there and it didn't really interest me much.

So, I headed back to Texas. When I couldn't find a job, I got a loan, bought a little gasoline-powered lawnmower, and started cutting grass. I would hobble through the lawns. I couldn't get a job, so I made my own. That's the way I made a living. Well, I didn't make a living—just enough to barely exist on.

I tried to get into the postal service—put in an application with the post office. There were too many ahead of me, even with a ten-point preference. Didn't have quite enough. In '47 or '48, an uncle in Houston got me a job as a projectionist in a theatre. I made about \$50 a week, which was pretty good money back then.



After the war, we would visit with a good friend who I had spent a lot of time with in training. He lived in Detroit. He came down and visited with us. He told me

about the 103d reunions. They are a chance to get back to see some of the men, though all the men I was really familiar with have passed on.

Then Harold Branton called me one day and wanted to know if I would be interested in doing some photography for the 103d association. I had done similar things to what he had in mind for the aircraft company I had worked for—for the Christmas dinner and other big parties for the executives and supervisors. The company would rent an amusement park for a one-day celebration for the supervisors and managers and their families.

I had been hired by the aircraft company to do photography. I had first gone to the aircraft company to see if I could get into inspection like I had done for civil service out in California. There weren't any openings in inspection, however. I hadn't even got home when they phoned to say they wanted me to come back out there. I had put on my application "photography," and they wanted a photographer. So, I went back out there and they hired me that day. That's when I got started with the aircraft company.



My wound continued to bother me after the war and probably always will. After all these years, I don't see any reason for it not to give me trouble now. I've gotten along pretty well, however. I've been up Signal Mountain and up in the Smokies to the highest point—Clingmans Dome—a couple of times. That's a long walk up there. The Park Service was real thoughtful to put benches along the way; I'd go so far and sit down. I don't think I will ever be back there.



I thought about giving the kids a lot of the old stuff I still have stored in our basement. I made memorial flag display cases for Bernice's father and grandfather. I made one for myself, with a space in it for the flag, when the time comes. I have to get together my ribbons and medals. I put in for those, but I still haven't gotten them. They said they're on order; it's been a couple of years now. Probably after I'm gone, they'll come in.

I hope that the 103d association continues on. I don't know how much longer I will be able to carry on. I'm not quite ready to say this will be my last reunion. As long as these two legs will carry me, I'm still looking forward to next year. But I know the day is coming when I'm gonna have to say, well, that's it. We're getting older; all these old parts are wearing out. They quit making them. It's like going down to the store looking for a headlight for a Model T—they're just nonexistent.