

Taped Interview

Cincinnati 2008

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Robert D. Quinn, I Co. 410<sup>th</sup>

I am known as Bob Quinn. I live in Westlake Ohio. I was born on October 17, 1924. I am 84 years old. When the war started it was Sunday afternoon and I was at home listening to the radio. When I heard the news that we were at war, I thought that I would eventually be in it. I was in high school and I graduated from high school in June, 1942. I went to college in my hometown of Akron, Ohio. The last day of classes at Akron University was Saturday, June 5, 1943 and I was inducted into the Army two days later on a Monday. I did my infantry training at Camp Walters in Texas. It was near Mineral Wells, Texas. It was a resort town.

There is an animal in Texas called a chigger. A chigger was a little insect that would bore under your skin and cause you irritation you wouldn't believe. To kill the chigger you had to burn them up. I didn't smoke but I would borrow someone's lit cigarette and put it next to my arm so it would kill the animal, preventing further penetration. Then you had to dig it out of your skin which would be in effect a little irritating and painful.

Surprisingly, I found out I could go back to college so I joined the ASTP\*. I was assigned to Oklahoma University in Norman, Oklahoma. At that time it was a very small school with a very small football stadium. There were forty members of ASTP who were housed in a sorority house, Kappa Alpha. We were known as the “Boys of Kappa Alpha.” I was in ASTP the equivalent of two semesters. I was training to be a scientist. I took physics and math etc. All the credits from the University of Oklahoma were accepted by the college I attended after the war. I remember the date was April 1, April Fools Day, and someone posted a notice on the bulletin board that ASTP would be cancelled. Everyone in the ASTP would be sent to the infantry. I thought it was a joke but it wasn't!

I was sent to Camp Howze in Gainesville, Texas on April 5, 1944. I was put in Company I of the 410<sup>th</sup>. We did more training, more twenty-five mile hikes. I was in pretty good shape. However, one time we had an exercise up near the Red River. We had this amphibious training before going into the war. We were doing some basic training with some kind of a boat. Twenty-five people were lifting the boat up and turning it upside down. It was not a big boat. The boat was a flat bottom metal boat. It was the kind of boat that could be hooked together to form a Bailey-pontoon

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\* Army Specialized Training Program

bridge. This was just a flat bottom boat but everybody lifted it. We had just lifted it and someone said “drop it” and my finger was under it and it caught my finger. My finger was misshaped after that. It was my trigger finger so I didn’t have to carry my rifle for about three months. I was slow getting my finger out.

I was assigned to the Second Platoon and the Second Squad. In 1990 (to 1995) I wrote a book about Company I with a lot of people’s help. They sent me their war stories and I published that particular book. The book is called Company I, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. It is a book that I give away if anyone wants one.

We took a train trip from Texas and passed through Cleveland, Ohio where they were playing a night baseball game. We stopped there to put more water in the steam engine. I had an urge to leave the train and walk the forty miles to my home. I didn’t go even though I had not had any furlough for many months. The train was right on the Lake Front. The stadium was right on the lake; it was called Lake Front Stadium. The train came through Northern Ohio, Sandusky area, Cleveland, eventually to New York.

When we got to New York we went to Camp Shanks for five days while they got the ship ready for us to go. They gave us passes to New York

City and I remember going to a Broadway Play. The play was a fantasy that they made into a movie called Brigadoon. It was an Irish story about Irish little people, the leprechauns.

Then we got on board ship. We were on the *General Brooks*, bound for Marseilles. Approaching Gibraltar we were in a severe storm. We were about five hundred miles west of Gibraltar. The front of the boat was going into the water. I don't think the *General Brooks* was the largest ship in the convoy. One time we saw smoke. They said it was a tanker that's burning and going down. A U-boat had sunk it within sight of our ship. Therefore, there were a lot of patrol boats around us protecting the convoy.

The first land we saw was North Africa before we saw Gibraltar. North Africa looks very dry and mountainous. We landed in Marseilles, went over the side, crawled down the netting and got into a boat. Eventually, we walked from the boat on dry land. They walked us out about five miles out of town and sent all of us to a high hill where we put our pup tents up. It was raining.

They used us to unload ships. We went on the ships. I remember the cartons were of #10 cans of crushed pineapple. You could open a can by hitting it with your bayonet. We all gorged ourselves with fresh pineapple. We would fill the container for liquids in our mess kits with the pineapple.

We would eat it with a spoon. We have an expression in our company now, “don’t eat any crushed pineapple!” We figured we were stealing from our own government if they wanted to prosecute us. I got a pass into Marseilles and being a Catholic I was looking for the churches. There were some large churches in Marseilles and they had English speaking priests who were confessors. Many Catholic soldiers were able to go to confession. And there were many soldiers who were visiting houses of “ill repute.”

There were many Algerians and Moroccans in the town. And later on I met members of the Algerian army who were part of the French Infantry forces. I met Algerian and Moroccan soldiers who were Black. I also met many when I went back in 1990 for the 103d reunion in Phaffenhoeffen. They had a band from the French Army. They were mainly Black African.

I heard comments from members of the 103d Division who were at this reunion that racism was present in 1990. It was almost like hearing the 1960s civil rights movement had never occurred relative to the sentiment among some Americans who were there; they were vocally anti-Black. So prejudice was not erased by a war.

We ended up in Doceilles or in that area. We replaced a company from the Third Division in the middle of the night. I remember walking up and down the mountains. Eventually the 103d had their foxholes on the

north side of the hill. All the French rivers and French cities were to our front. These were all west of St. Die. In the morning after the Third Division had left, we found out they had just survived a very close attack by the Germans. There were a lot of dead Germans in that area. I discovered that American soldiers like watches because a lot of German soldiers' watches were gone.

I was carrying a BAR\* at this time. That was heavier than an M-1. The BAR weighed sixteen or seventeen pounds. I had an assistant and he would carry some of the ammunition. He was my close buddy. This was the Second Platoon of Co. I. My assistant had an M-1 rifle. He had to carry ammo for me and ammo for himself.

Our first taste of war in this area was when we relieved the 3d Division. We had German 88's zeroed in on the Front Lines. The shells would hit the highest trees many of which were 130 feet to 140 feet tall. A lot of shrapnel would be dispersed around. It was the first place one of the soldiers in our company was killed with an airburst of artillery. His name was Richard Lloyd. He may have been one of the first members of the Division to be killed. It happened November 12<sup>th</sup>. We took over on November 11<sup>th</sup>. Armistice Day was a very symbolic date for me. Our

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\* BAR: Browning Automatic Rifle

Battalion was directed on the left front to go across a bridge in a sweeping mission around the town of St. Die. We were under heavy artillery fire on the Muerthe River, four miles north of St. Die. We never went into St. Die but we went into a lot of towns near St. Die. I think that there were four Battalions in the 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry. That was the start of sixty-two days straight of being under artillery fire. German artillery went over before we got there near Selestat. During the sixty-two days the German artillery fire felt like a “swoosh” over our heads. When that happened we said, “That’s another miss.”

The Commander of our Company was Captain Thompson. The First Sergeant basically ran the Company. His name was “Bear” Walters. His first name was Audrey but he went by the title of “Bear.” He was a Texan. Whenever he addressed the Company, he would say you “GD people.” But he wouldn’t say “GD” he would say the actual words. He is still alive and lives in El Paso, Texas. After World War II, he became the number one Sergeant in the European Theatre of Operation. He was in charge of missile defense. But he never was an officer. He retired with forty years of service. He said he still lives in El Paso because, “I can still use the PX at Fort Hood.” At one point he was the highest ranking non-commissioned officer in the European Theatre of Operation. He was at Claiborne. He was regular

army. He entered the army in 1942. At that time he had contempt for everybody and most people returned the favor. I have had many phone conversations with him because of the book I had published. He served in the Army forty years from 1942 to 1982. He has come to some of our conventions especially the one in Dallas, Texas. He hasn't been more recent than that. He has become a beloved figure. He was interested in everybody. He helped commemorate the heroic act of a soldier, Gene Wise, in our company.

Gene Wise fell on a grenade in a closed building and saved “forty” lives. The medal he got for it was delivered to his next of kin in St. Joseph, Missouri where he was from. It took until 1999, fifty-five years after the incident, for the Army, through the help of some Congressmen, to give him the Soldier’s Medal. (In 2003, a Medal of Honor was given to a soldier in Iraq, for the same thing Gene did, for saving *three* of his buddies.) Gene Wise had saved *forty* people and was not so honored. Captain Thompson had too many SIWs in our company and each was sent back to a hospital. Therefore, guess what happened on the Battalion level? Too many SIWs. Often he was reminded by 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Walters that Gene Wise deserves a medal for what he did. Capt. Thompson never put PFC Gene Wise up for that even at the end of the war. That is how life is. Some people.... because

they were stubborn or there was pressure from up above, DO NOTHING!

Gene gave the ultimate sacrifice. So, with the testimony from about seven or eight men who were there at the time (one person was wounded slightly and six other people were saved from being wounded) they wrote letters to Secretary Togo West, Jr. who was the Secretary of the Army in 1999. Secretary Togo West, Congressman Pat Danner from Missouri and Jim Leach from Iowa were able to get a SOLDIERS MEDAL for Gene Wise. The medal was presented, by a full Army colonel from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to Gene Wise's next-of-kin at a ceremony we had in St. Joseph, Missouri. (St. Joseph, Missouri is known for the start of the Pony Express. It started there, crossed the Missouri River and headed west.)

In my book we added the testimony written in January, 1945 from a Co. I Lieutenant while he was in the hospital recovering from trench foot. This Lieutenant, Lt. Neely from our company, wrote his testimony out of the first month of the war very close after the event happened. He covers all of the Third Battalion 410<sup>th</sup> including Company I. He includes names of the officers who led. He writes, "We were looking for a particular city. It was the wrong city." They didn't even know the city they were in. It was the worst snafu. There were a lot of snafus like that in the war. Lieutenant Neely wrote a story called "Combat."

After the war and after the Vietnam Memorial became very popular in the '90s, I said we ought to put our stories all down on paper because many people did not talk about WWII. Just write it down so that people in the future can read it. So we put together this book.

Many said we ought to put together some memorials in France. So we put memorials in France for two different battles where five out of the twelve members of our company were killed. One of them was in the town of Uhrwiller where two of our members died. One of them was in the town of Hohwarth in the Vosges where three were killed.

We got together and asked how much money would we need for two plaques in two churches in France? They said a couple hundred dollars. I collected over two thousand dollars and went to a monument factory in Akron, Ohio where I grew up. I said I want to make a plaque. The man asked, "How big do you want it to be?" I gave him an estimate with my hands. He said, "Why don't we make it seventeen inches by twenty-two inches?" I said, "How did you figure that?" He said, "Well, it is four sheets of paper each 8 ½ x 11 doubled. If you double 8 ½ you get 17 and if you double 11 you get 22. We could cut some marble." I asked him how he would make a plaque. He said he would use the computer. He cut all the letters using a computer generated cutter. I said, "We want a French flag, an

American flag, a cross and a Star of David.” He said he could do that easy. I told him we would like to have it in French. So, I had to go to a French teacher to translate “In Memory the Liberation of Uhrwiller, 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1945 Company I, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Division One Hundred Three” as the French would write it. It is written for a French speaking person reading it. I told him the purpose was to convey that these Americans helped to liberate their country.

One plaque is in the St. Gilles Church at Hohwarth. It is a large pilgrimage church. They have special ceremonies and light shows. In the book, **Company I, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regt., 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division**, there is a picture of the Pastor\* of St. Gilles, admiring the plaque; people all over the area come to that church. We have a picture of two members of our company who were there at the dedication of the plaque\*. (We also have French friends, the Kern family, that we met and I stayed at their home in Uhrwiller, in 1990. I didn't put together staying at their home and the events at Uhrwiller until later. I remember the town of Nieffern (2 km from Uhrwiller) because I had been in a battle there during a raid.)

I wanted to get these plaques to France. Both locations were close to Strasbourg. I thought how do you get a plaque safely to France? I called all

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\* Pastor: Rev. Paul Dietrich

\* Mr. Carroll Cook and Mr. Arnie Marzullo

the airlines; Air France said they only fly to Paris. I called American, United, Delta, but no luck. The guy who packed it in a wood crate said he had a friend that might help us. He called me the next day and said we have a transport to Strasbourg for free. The only cost was about one hundred dollars. I asked him what airline is going to fly it. He said that I would be surprised. We are going to have this flown by Lufthansa Airline as a gesture honoring Americans and Frenchmen. They delivered it free to Frankfurt, then to Strasbourg. Then in small trucks it was delivered to the sites. I said that is irony to get something we wanted to do safely. Before that I had called the French Embassy in Washington. They said the General has to take care of that; it has to be Government to Government. I said no! I wasn't going to go that route. I know what to avoid. The irony was our plaque was delivered to France by the German National Airlines. They thought it would be a good symbol of reunification and would be helpful to Americans and of course helpful to the French. We knew a Kern family in Uhrviller and I had stayed in their house. They helped their pastor get it all arranged. I found a steel worker in Illinois, who had retired in the 1930s to his hometown in France which happened to be Hohwarth in the Vosges Mountains. I had his phone number. I called him about Hohwarth, the plaques and the church. He said the Pastor is very happy you would place

the plaque in his church named St. Gilles. St. Gilles Church was a hilltop church. Company I was there when the Germans attacked us. Fortunately, nobody in our Company around the church was killed. It was the next morning when they left Hohwarth to go toward Selestat. That is when we lost three members on November 28<sup>th</sup>. They were killed by tank fire.

In Europe there was Germany and France. Remember Hitler reunited Alsace and Lorraine into Germany after the battle of 1940. So from 1940 to 1945 it was part of Germany and many soldiers in Alsace were drafted into the German Army and fought in Russia. When I went back to Nieffern in 1990 a man walked up to me, his head appeared crushed in. I asked him about his head. He said, "Ruski." He had been an Alsatian citizen inducted in the German Army and fought in Russia and was injured in the head. He was the same age I was, in his 70s. We had pictures from **Company I, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regt., 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division** published in Innsbruck and it had a picture of a building in Nieffern that had been destroyed. I saw the reconstruction of the building which was better than it had been originally. Then my wife and I went into a bar in Nieffern. We couldn't speak much French but we could speak a little German. We said, 'soldaten.' Over to the side in the corner we saw four men drinking wine. They looked over toward us and thought we were former German soldiers. When I saw their

expression I said we were Amerikansi. The mood changed. They saw that we were Americans coming back and we had been in the battle at Nieffern. They were living in Nieffern. We went over and shook hands. People can hear a language and misconstrue it. We lost three members on November 28<sup>th</sup>. There were many others killed in L Company by tank fire.

Then when the Germans attacked in the Nordwind Operation we moved 30 or 40 miles south of the German border back toward the Moder River. We were in the town of Obermoden. March 15<sup>th</sup> was another jump off and surprisingly at that time we lost two men recapturing the town of Uhrviller. One of our plaques is there. This plaque is in the wall of the Lutheran Church. Later, we broke through the German Lines and we went up to the West Bank of the Rhine. We were within 20 feet of the Rhine behind a dike and the Germans were on the other side. Somebody else went across in boats at night to see if there were any Germans over there. (K Company, 409<sup>th</sup>) This was near the city of Alltrip on the West Bank. We were in occupation on the west of the Rhine down near the German Border. Later on we were on occupation duty around the Heidelberg University area. There we had the most unusual order: NO ONE is to come through the Registrar's Office door of the University unless they had a letter signed by Eisenhower! As a PFC I took great pleasure in turning away colonels who

had no letter. I had to point a gun at them. The Registrar's Office of the University of Heidelberg started in the year 1300. So it had records from 1300.

Book by Robert Quinn

**Company I, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regt., 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division**

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