

## Recorded Interview

San Antonio 2010

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### Joel C. Schnitz, Co. C 409th

I was born in Nixon, Texas approximately sixty miles east of San Antonio. I had finished my first year as a Business Major at Corpus Christi Junior College (now Delmar College). I worked for the Collier Times Publishing Co. as a credit manager. My wife, June, and I were on a date downtown in Corpus Christi on a Sunday. As we left a movie theatre, June saw the headlines in a newspaper that said, "United States attacked by Japan." I said, "Look, June, we are in the war already." That gave both of us chills because we planned to be married soon. We chose a closer date and were married on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

My oldest sister, who was a business major at the time and lived in San Antonio, called me and said, "Joel, if you join the service you can finish your second year of college." All I had to do was conform to the agreement between the college and the service. In a few days I went to San Antonio and completed the paperwork. I was sworn in by a Colonel, after agreeing

to serve for ten years in the Enlisted Reserve Corp and that commitment allowed me to continue through my second year of college. I went back to Corpus Christi the same day and continued working half days for the newspaper as well as attending college part-time. I had to conform to the courses/activities that the service had worked out with the college.

My parents lived in the country near Nixon, Texas and my sister lived in San Antonio. My dad had come to the United States from Germany as a seven year old boy; he supported the decision to go to war. I remember hearing him say, "They couldn't find Düsseldorf after they bombed!" He was full-blooded German but he never taught us to speak the language, for which I am sorry. It certainly would have been to my advantage to have had knowledge of the language during my war experience. When I went on my first patrol into combat I heard some Germans speaking but I could not understand them.

Like other German families, my dad's family came to the United States and lived in a German settlement in San Marcos, Texas. My parents met and married. My parents lived down there around the same area so they had family to support them. Our settlement was called New Braunfels

and we live there for a year or so. We eventually moved and started a little farm in Nixon, Texas where I eventually met my wife.

After my two years at college they called me to Fort Sam Houston immediately. My wife had to cross the stage and get my diploma. I talked to a very good friend of mine who just finished his four years but did not score high enough on his final to graduate. He had hoped to start graduate school to get his master's degree. He told me what I knew already, that I would have to push for doing the test in three hours and pass it. I was good in math and that is what pulled me through it. I double checked my answers as I went and then went back over the test again. If we passed the test we would go into ASTP for three months. I scored 117 points, which was 7 points over what they required for acceptance into ASTP, and I agreed to the stipulation that I would stay in the Army for ten years. I lived in an apartment with my wife during ASTP. My wife and I found an apartment and I started the program in August 1943. The program would have continued but in January of 1944 but General \_\_\_\_\_ was pushed back in Europe and they needed one-half million men and ASTP filled that need. They were so wonderful; they gave us every opportunity to take our tests. I took one test and the professor told me if I had taken

biology in high school or college you would be going to medical school.

They screened you on your knowledge up to that point. Some men were able to continue with the courses but in a different state.

I left right away for Camp Maxi in Paris, Texas which is approximately sixty miles north of Dallas. Even though I did not have R.O.T.C. training I was allowed to be the commanding officer for one week with oversight by the Lieutenant. Harry Nixon and I went to Camp Maxi by bus together and later traveled together to Camp Howze before going overseas. Harry and I spoke to each other just last week. My next destination was Texas A&I University (currently named Texas A&M University-Kingsville) and I lived in the barracks. We had a four hour study hall every night of the week. We carried seven subjects even though one was geography. The officers walked around and you were made to study. We had twenty hours of compulsory study hall a week. Eventually we would be screened on our knowledge. Many men chose to go that route. The program would have continued but the general in Europe was pushed back and they needed a million men and they military looked at us and said "here you are." Some men were allowed to stay in the ASTP Program. We were there from August until the rest of the year. January of '44 is when they called us up.

A few men actually were able to continue going to school at another college.

I got a wonderful break when they sent me, Harry Nixon and others to Camp Howze in Gainesville, TX, almost to the Oklahoma border, where we trained for eight months before going overseas. It was a much more challenging than past training. We took a twenty-five mile hike once a week; twelve and one-half miles to the Red River and back. In addition, on Tuesday and Thursday nights we were called out for drill about an hour after our meal for a run/walk. We would run or walk according to the whistle, twelve and one-half miles. All in all that was about seven miles of running? I give the generals credit for that conditioning; they had sent men over before us and knew that we needed that training. They knew that we would have to be able to travel eighteen to twenty miles a day in the Vosges Mountains to keep up with the Germans who were pulling back. It was important not to give the Germans any slack to regroup and come back. We were just about one hundred miles from Selestat; they said we would be there a couple of days.

The Germans were pulling back so fast that we could hear them on the brick/stone road. My platoon leader, John D. Hagan from Michigan,

said, "Schnitz, drink this, it will warm you up." I did drink it and told him it had warmed me up all the way to the naval. We were making a loud clicking sound through the town also, just like a horse was pulling a wagon the over it.

As we started to march out of that town a high ranking German officer shot our Captain Taylor in the left arm. I found out today after all these years from John Poole that the captain lost that arm. I don't know what rank the German was but someone shot him. I saw his good pistol but we knew we were never to touch anything. The French in that city were very welcoming and we stayed in that city over night in a loft over the cattle area. The heat from the cattle kept us very warm. When you were held up your packages caught up with you. What I received included orange slice cake, cookies of all descriptions, the ten or fifteen pound box. The whole platoon ate well that night. The next morning we proceeded further toward Germany and I happened to be the first man in route march. That was the only time I recall leading the route march in the second platoon. We were still in France and I was a runner from the captain to the platoon; I couldn't carry anything anyway if I had gone down there that night.

They told us if you want a souvenir, it is not wise, but if you do, put a rope around the enemies' leg and move off a distance to check in case the enemy is booby-trapped. They didn't booby-trap as many men as they did in Japan. I did glance when I went that morning; he had a large pistol. I believe without a doubt that he was ready to give up because with us following so close and him being the only one he must have chosen to stay there and be killed. That is the way I looked at it.

I proceeded up the road and in two to three minutes after I left him they started shooting with a fifty caliber machine gun. I immediately dropped into the bar ditch; I am a skinny guy. I looked up above and called back for artillery help. The first one kicked up dust to the left of the machine gun nest but the next one hit dead center, destroying the whole nest. We proceeded up the hill 200 yards or so and they started dropping 60 mm mortar. I went around the backside of a roofless stucco home and stayed there while they dropped a couple more. Finally, the artillery zeroed in on the enemy's location, allowing us to move ahead.

When the Germans were attacking us they might steal a cow, tie it up and pull it behind a wagon of food. But the tide had turned, and in their haste the Germans left a cart with loaves of brown bread, strawberry

preserves, and blocks of butter with no chance of spoiling in the 15-30 degree weather. The bitter cold bothered me more than anything though I became used to it; it became secondary. That ended the skirmishes for that day. The following day that same group of men and I went down in a very low place; it had rained almost every day, which was unusual for that area at that time of the year. Our reconnaissance kept us posted on the location of the enemy. We were observed by the enemy when we were down in a low area below a high ridge held by the enemy. The area made me think of Texas because we have that kind of terrain. They started dropping 60 mm mortar on our location. Although it had rained every day and night, it was muddy but still passable by foot. I experienced my closest call; I had a 60 mm drop twenty-four inches from my right foot, putting mud up in the air fifteen feet. The mud saved all of our lives because shrapnel cannot get momentum in mud like that. It was God's blessing. We were not terrorized by that as much as the large mm gun which could shoot three miles causing it to hit the flint rock over our head, sending it out in all directions.

There were no more skirmishes that day but we found out before we got to Steige. It was the middle of the afternoon and I was very cold, sitting

in the middle of a small fenced field that looked very much like one you would see in Texas. Our K-rations were containers about the size of a Cracker Jack box which included a bar of raisins, and bouillon soup. I used the wax paper from the K-Ration as fuel to heat the soup. Soon after that we got a call that our battalion, eight hundred men plus, would go up that mountain by following the switchback path. We accomplished that about midnight. We had a gentleman who was in C Company who could speak German fluently. Colonel Ferrell of the Battalion asked him to go and tell the Germans that we had hit a barbed wire entanglement so we could not proceed. In addition, he was to tell them we are the retreating column. (Actually, they were the retreating column) They were not buying it. They shot one shot in the air to scare our man who gave them the message. I can still here that shot ring out; it just stays with you. Cornell Therrell said to pass the word back down the line for all four companies to drop back 100 yards and bed down for the night. We had been in combat for two days and this was the first experience my buddy and I had in setting up our shelter. By this time many of us had purged parts of our tenting to make our packs lighter. We were at 8000 feet and it was already sleeting and snowing so my buddy and I put our guns down beside us. I pulled my

shelter “half” out, put it on the ground and we lay down on our backs. My buddy pulled the other half of the tent over us; we could hear the sound of the sleet hitting the tarp. It was about one o’clock and in a few minutes I was warm. After a couple of hours of sleep we had our breakfast and prepared to move out and chase them the next day. A German in a tree with a burp gun firing one thousand rounds a minute shot a medic in the left arm right where the cross was on his armband. They knew they had lost the war, were at the end of the road and started using poor tactics. There was a gentleman who had just come into our company and into our unit who wore thick glasses and the enemy shot him right in the chest. In nothing flat that German was shot right out of the tree.

After that situation was over we proceeded to go to Steigie. We were on that mountain all day into the afternoon during which time I was thinking to myself how tired I was and how nice it would be to have a good night’s sleep. Unfortunately, we were up all night again. We got down to the town and Captain Taylor and I took a French home. If people know or think their town is going to be involved in a battle they leave their town. They outsmarted us in that respect. It had been a clear day but for some reason reconnaissance did not pick up the 320 Germans who came under

cover of darkness and knocked our men of the fourth platoon out who were in the church steeple. Our men in the steeple had the heavy weapons because that was the best vantage point for us. The enemy began shooting our own weapons at us until midnight. I really don't know what happened from midnight on except we eventually got control of the situation. We found out the next day that there were 320 Germans when we loaded them on the truck. I told Captain Taylor that they were using everything against us including grenades, flame throwers and hand-to-hand fighting.

On January 1, 1945 I met up with a young man near the English Channel at the 224th General Hospital in Paris, who was just out of surgery. I had come back from the city of Dambach at the front. He came back from the operating room screaming and reaching for his leg that had been amputated. He was shot in November 1944 and January 15, they amputated. From midnight on I guess we were laying low.

The next day Colonel Therrell had all the captains send their men to the end of the city of Dambach and once they were all there each man was to shoot one or two rounds into the air. The enemy gave up! I found it interesting that the men ranged in age from sixteen to forty years old. We had several buses to take them back to safety and they eventually could

have gone to the United States; we had Germans working some of our farms in the United States.

I would occasionally ask, "How long are we going to stay here?" They would say that we were going to have fried chicken and we did! We stayed there one day and the next day we moved out. From there we headed up to Dambach I thought it was larger than most small cities that we had gone through but later on I found out that it is quite a large city. One of the men at this reunion told me that they still have a wall all around that city.

I remember before we shipped out we had 25 mile hikes once a week and 7 mile hikes Tuesdays and Thursdays to condition us for "drawing back". I don't believe the academies trained that hard. They had to earmark us for that because they knew what we needed to do to keep up with a fast moving enemy. It was difficult and they did not want any slacking. We also prepared by going on the Red River and used targets for practice. They did not want the enemy to re-fortify, and come back.

They said we would be at Dambach, about 100 miles from Selestat, Germany, in a couple of days but things were happening so fast, we moved out the next day. I had been keeping my Halazone tablets in my pocket for

a time. The water truck had not come to our area that day. So, just before we got into Dambach, I filled my canteen up in the river and put two Halazone Tablets, instead of one in my bottle to be safe. Even though I waited an hour instead of forty-five minutes to purify it, I picked up a stomach virus. I would tell my younger brother that on the twenty-fifth of November on his birthday I got food items from my wife and had a big feast to celebrate his birthday.

I knew I had to go to the infirmary because of my virus and that is where the field hospital sent me. While I was there I saw the troops heading out. I asked someone to let my unit know that I am going back to the field hospital but they failed to do it. After the war was over one of the sergeants sent me a note asking me if I knew I had been listed as Missing in Action. While I was in the infirmary I used the phone to try to connect with my brother who was in the area (the one who had written me when I got to Marseilles). My brother, Beasley, who was in the Signal Corp, had been fighting in Africa in '43 against Rommel.

He was able to meet up with me when I was in Marseilles because in the Signal Corp they have a line through the combat zone and they knew

the location of every company. He drove into the area on the 12<sup>th</sup>. We trucked up there from Marseilles and it was snowing. He trucked up there the next morning. He asked the captain if I could go back to his unit. The Captain said sure but I had to come back in the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> since we were jumping off that day. My brother gave me a few pointers when I told him that I did not like the sound of the artillery. He said not to worry about that artillery; it is yours, wait until the German artillery returns fire. He came back the morning I left on the 21/2 ton truck; my shoulder had an inch of snow on it by the time he left.

They sent me back to Besançon which is halfway between Marseilles and Paris. Over ten days they gave me very large sulfa pills; twelve pills four times a day. I had to go to the lab two times a day. They treated me aggressively and when they felt that I was cured they put me on a train back to Paris. About the time people were going to sleep the nurse said everyone has to take a sleeping pill. I told her that I had never taking one but I took it. When I awoke I was in Paris and they put me in an ambulance. It was around December 1, and I was taken to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Hospital near the English Channel. On our way there I saw the Eifel Tower from the ambulance. Unfortunately, I never asked for a pass to see the city. The

doctors treated my back the best they could. L4 and L5 had slipped forward on the sacrum although when I joined the Enlisted Reserve Corp I passed the examination. The physician told me that if they had x-rayed your back in New York you would not have passed the physical for advance training at Camp Howze, Texas. He was referring to dressing up with full pack and all your equipment to run combat simulations. For example, in one drill we were separated into two lines facing each other. When the signal was given we would run at our partner in the opposing line and try to knock him down. I remember going to the infirmary because my back was so painful after that drill. They gave me an APC pill (a medication containing aspirin, phenacetin, and caffeine) and sent me back to my squad.

I stayed at a field hospital near the English Channel and continued to rehabilitate until just before Christmas. I didn't know at that time why we were being delayed, but later found out that the C-47s could not take off because the runway was too muddy. By January 1, '45 we were able to take off in a prop plane and fly across the English Channel. They never warned us about air currents and how the airplane might randomly drop. We were standing up, holding onto a belt when the plane would drop 100

feet and it scared the daylights out of all of us. While we stayed on the French side the nurses would make us hot chocolate at night and played music trying to create a homey atmosphere. We felt that the nurses were angels. After I crossed the English Channel, I stayed in a little town whose name I cannot recall from January 1, 1945 until I was sent to Glasgow, Scotland on February 15, 1945 to get on the ship to come home through the English Channel. That was a sight unto itself; a huge ship like that. Most of us went over on "E" Deck. We had to climb a very long ladder to get onto the "Ile de France" which was the largest in the world at this time. On June 22, 1927 the Ile de France sailed from Le Havre for her maiden voyage to New York. The acclaim she received in Europe was echoed by the citizens of America. Her popularity was such that by 1935, the ship had carried more First-Class passengers than any other transatlantic liner.

When eventuality of war in Europe became fact, the Ile de France was laid up in September of 1939 at Pier 88 in New York, just opposite the Normandy. The ship would undergo conversion to troopship in 1941, after making several supply runs for the British Admiralty. The Ile would serve the British and American interests until September 1945, when she was decommissioned by the British

The ship had to zigzag every seven minutes to avoid the U-boats that were still out. We docked in New York on the twenty-fourth after seven days at sea. I was on B deck coming home and another gentleman and I watched the ship. It was interesting; we would walk all the way around the ship when the weather was good and there were Catholic priests who were coming from Ireland. They wanted to know what it was like in Corpus Christi; coincidentally, they were going to my hometown!

After we docked in New York they allowed us a twenty-five dollar telephone call to our home. I missed my wife the first time I called but she called back. She cried the rest of the twenty-five dollars; she was so happy. The gentleman who I came over with on the ship asked me to go home with him to his brother's home. I stayed with him until I was shipped out. I was able to call my wife again from that home and my wife was still crying.

I left New York heading to El Paso, Texas by train. The physicians at William Beaumont General Hospital offered to take bone from my shin and connect the vertebrae in my back. I had heard that it is better to be cautious in choosing back surgery so I declined the surgery. My wife brought our first son and came to stay with me in El Paso. My son was a

year old when I left to go overseas and I was back in five months so I did not miss as much time with him compared to others in the military. Those five months seems much longer. I was medically discharged from the hospital and returned to Corpus Christi with my wife and son by train.

I went to work with Southern Alkali. When I was hired they put me in the research depart. The company would go out by boat and dredge the bay then take pictures to determine the amount of shell that is still left in the bay. What was dredged was part of what made caustic sodas. I checked the test tubes to see if the salinity was correct. It was a wonderful job but when they went to shift work I went back to the newspaper. I was tired of being away from home at night and I did not want that anymore.

I am happy to say I have ten grandchildren.

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My wife contracted Parkinson's disease in 1982; she remained at home for five years. Sadly, I lost her December 12, 2001.

