

Taped Interview

Cincinnati Reunion 2008

Michael F Toohig, Co. B 411th

I was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts. My parents were immigrants from Ireland, County Cork. I finished high school in June of '42. I finished my freshman year of college in '43. And in the middle of July I was in the Army. I felt that Pearl Harbor was a rather nasty sneak attack. It was a big messy problem and it was very dangerous! As soon as I was eligible, I was drafted. That was when I turned eighteen years old. I was almost seventeen when Pearl Harbor occurred. I took basic training in North Camp Hood, Texas. I was in an ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program-technical officers) basic training unit but I did not want to go to college. I had been impressed by the Finnish Ski Troopers against the Russians. So I wanted to go into the Ski Troops and volunteered for the Ski Troops. All the guys I was with in Basic Training were New Englanders. Several of them had been with me at Boston College. This whole crew went up to Northeastern University in Boston. Another fellow that I was in high school with also wanted to go with me to the Ski Troops and several more friends wanted to

be Air Force Cadets. At the end of the Basic Training they took all of the ASTP fellows and they shipped them up to Northeastern. They put a dozen or so of us in a replacement pool. Several of us were trying to go to the Ski Troops and some of the guys were trying to go into the Air Force to be fighter pilots. One day in late November or so, they called us together and said they would like to tell us that the Ski Troops were closed down, they were full; the Air Force Cadet programs were also closed down. They were full. But they need infantry replacements in Italy. So, everyone is going to Italy except for these people; they then called out me and Joe Regan, my good buddy from Lawrence, Massachusetts, and a few more. We said, "Hey we want to go with these guys!" They said no, you are only eighteen and you cannot go as a combat replacement until you are nineteen. If you are in a unit you can go to combat at eighteen. But if you are a replacement going through the replacement channel as an individual, you have to be nineteen. So they pulled both of us out and said you cannot go as replacements. You are going into regular divisions. He went into the 99th Division and I went into the 103rd the beginning of January of '44. Some of the ones who went as replacements included friends from Boston and we corresponded. They went to Italy. They were some of the first replacements into Anzio. They were creamed! Dead! I lost a good friend, Bob Segal. I got a letter back

after a month that he was KIA. Heavy casualties. They were reporting that guys were being killed right and left there. So I ended up by default in the 103rd Division. An ASTP group showed up in the 103rd Division four or five months later when they closed down ASTP because they needed infantry replacements. Our ASTPers came from the University of Oklahoma.

On October 6, 1944 we left from New York. We were on a three thousand ton x-banana boat, Santa Maria. The George Washington, a former commercial liner, was in front of us and that was about a 25,000 ton ship. It was a much bigger ship. We hit a hurricane on the way over. Our little ship was up and down. The propeller would come out of the water and then go down. To eat we had to go up on deck and sort of swish around and go down where the food was. They had a guy there and they would basically “time” the waves. When it would look right they said, “run”, “run”, because the deck would be washed at times. That was an experience. The holds had five to seven bunks high. I was in a seven hold stack—3rd person up. It was a fairly good spot because the vomit from the top bunkers might not splatter me. Many people were heaving all during the hurricane. The luckiest guy was working on KP and one of the big heavy doors slammed on him and broke his leg. He went to the hospital in Marseilles when we got there. He never showed up again. Marseilles was historically interesting to

me. I had always been a history student. I remembered particularly that I liked bouillabaisse. I remember seeing again and again the cathedral on top of the mountain. That is still the only thing I remember. We were the first ships into Marseilles! The harbor was just open. We were small enough that we went off on a gang plank. Some of the other ships had the men go off over the side in nets. What I remember next and what most of the guys remember was a horrible walk. We had not had any exercise for a month! We were loaded with packs and going up hill. We were walking twelve miles up hill in mild weather and we were short of water. We got up to the top of this plateau. We were the first troops there. It was later that this became a Cigarette Camp. They were digging latrines along the road. They were just open pits. The civilians, including girls, would walk past the latrines and you would be sitting on the latrine. We put up pup tents. Within a day or so it was just pouring rain and the water didn't go anywhere. You were flooded. It was just a mess.

The major ports had camps for embarkation both ways. They were called Cigarette Camps from their names. When the ports opened up that is where they would keep people and then send them to the front. Then when the war ended that is how they sent people out through the Cigarette Camps. Famous Cigarette Camps were in Marseilles and Le Havre. They were

huge tent cities. They named the camps after the cigarettes, Lucky Strike in Janville, France; Camp Phillip Morris in Le Havre, France, etc.

The problem hiking out of Marseilles was that we had not walked for weeks and now you are loaded with a pack and walking up hill. People were falling out and hitching rides. There were a few jeeps but most of us walked. My weapon was an M-1. You *lived* with the M-1. It weighed eleven pounds and I thought it was a toothpick until one of the kids gave me one a few years ago. And it is a heavy eleven pounds. But at that time it was like a toothpick. During the war we hardly ever knew where we were going except that we were loading up to go to the next position. I recently got the Morning Reports for Co B, 411th because I couldn't figure out where I was much of the time. We knew St. Die; we were going around that, and some of the other towns like Maisongoutte where there was a lot of fighting. When we left the Siegfried to cover Patton in December, I knew it was up around Sarreguemines, somewhere. It was later that I found out what towns we were in. My Company officer was Danny Levinson. He was probably twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He was a New York City Jewish boy. When we were up on the Siegfried in December 1944 he got his shoulder shot off. On the attack on the Siegfried the machine guns were mounted in the pillboxes apertures which means they didn't ride. Normally, when a

machine gun shoots it rides to the right. So when you are looking at a machine gun you run right. In this case it would just hold its stream together so it didn't spread. He took a burst that took the shoulder off.

He came to one of the reunions back in the early 1990's. And I was talking to him at that time. He is probably well into his nineties now and is probably dead by now. Before the age of prosthetics, he had seven operations where they had to go in and take pieces of the bone and build the bone so he would have an arm socket. He became a good golfer which was an interesting thing.

We were now in Alsace. The Maginot Line ran basically from the Rhine over to the Saar. About five to ten miles away was the Siegfried. The Maginot Line was just inside Alsace. The Siegfried was just inside the German area. We started on the west side of the Vosges Mountains. The first fighting that we had was in an area called Taintrux Valley. We took over the German positions there. That is the first fighting. That is where we took our first casualties. They then trucked us down the line further and we went through the German lines, up over the mountains. Then we came down into the Steige Pass. We came in behind the Germans lines. We captured the town of Maisongoutte. It was a crazy area because the Germans were in town and we were in town. It was dark and everybody was mixed up. We

out-posted the town and then we came back into town. We came down the street and a column of Germans came towards us. We went towards them and we both saw each other. We both had our rifles slung. We walked past each other and then both ran! It has happened a few times in battles.

Nobody was about to shoot. Everyone would have been shot if we had. We were only five feet apart.

This was Saturday. Another company went down the pass to Ville. We stayed behind. We were in the town of Maisongoutte for Sunday. There was a Mass in the village Catholic Church. All the villagers came into the church. It was a small town. I had been in the Mass sitting on my helmet along the window. Years later I took my wife in and showed her exactly where I was sitting on my helmet. The next day was Monday. We were going to move out because someone else had gone down the pass and taken Ville. We were to go down past them and go over the mountains again. The officers were getting everyone together on the street. However, the Germans had left a Howitzer behind, up on the hill. So with everybody out now and getting ready to move down the road, we were thinking we were behind the lines. Then Germans began dropping 150 mm Howitzer shells onto the streets. There was chaos. Under the road was a street maintenance area where they put gravel and stuff like that. So a bunch of the guys went in

there to get out of the way of the shells. I was coming down the street and there was a house across the street to the left of the road shelter and I could hear a big shell coming in. There was a door there so I jumped through the door. And I jumped left. There were some guys in there along the wall inside the door. A shell landed on a line between the storage facility and the entrance to this basement. It was chaos. We lost a bunch of guys, killed and wounded in my squad. I had jumped through to the left. There were some guys along the wall and they took the shrapnel. One of the things I always remember was one young guy that had taken the shrapnel in his mid section. He had just been married before he left. I had to take his pants down and assure him everything was alright. I said, "I don't know if you are going to live or not, but you're alright there." He was not part of our Company so I don't know what happened to him. We lost a couple of guys from our Company, they were killed and several were wounded including my squad leader-Gil Kretchmann and my friend Carl Boltz. Bill Gale was killed. We reassembled and went down and exited the Vosges a few days later, going over the Hochwald Pass. We came out at Barr, which is today on the Wine Highway in the Vosges. We were always buddied. And the guy I buddied with got killed there (Joe Hajkowicz of Iron River, MI) and another fellow's buddy got killed. He and I ended up together digging a foxhole so we

buddied after that. His wife and daughter are here, the Messe's. His name was Bud Messe from Rochester, NY. The daughter asked how I met her father and I was telling her stories. We ended up in Ebersheim while the 409th turned right and went to Selestat. From Ebersheim we then went north on December 9, 1944 (my 20th birthday). We started the attacks that went to the Maginot and to the Siegfried from the Griesbach area. We got out of the Vosges and out onto the Alsace Plain. Then we went North and attacked the Siegfried; through the Maginot Line to the Siegfried. We were up on the Siegfried three or four days, three days probably with terrible fighting; we took a lot of casualties. That is where I mentioned the kid from Boston, Tony Vaccaro-Alston, MA, who was the first scout. I was the bazooka man. The theory was we would see the pillbox aperture, he would see it, spot it and I would shoot it with the Bazooka. The Germans shot him and killed him. I signed his death certificate. Later, the German Red Cross reported that he had died in a prisoner of war camp in February 1945. That caused all sorts of problems. His brother who was in the Navy and his father came to Lawrence to see my family in June 1945. My mother contacted me with the story. I knew he was killed—shot between the eyes. I got an action map from my First Sergeant and wrote the Graves Registration. I told them the circumstances and said that he would be buried in a trench where he died or

in the Reisdorf church graveyard. They wrote me later and said they found his body in the Reisdorf church yard. Today, Tony is buried at St. Avold Cemetery in Lorraine, France. With the Battle of the Bulge we pulled back from the Siegfried and went north about a hundred miles to the Sarreguemines area.

We stayed there a couple of weeks over Christmas in '44. We were mostly patrolling. It was miserable weather. We had a very extensive line because when the 3rd Army pulled out we had to cover their front with the one division. Then the Germans attacked on January, 1945 with Northwind along the 7th army front and came across the Rhine north of Strassburg. They wiped out an American tank Battalion. They penetrated out of the Siegfried area and came down in Alsace. We were loaded on trucks on a miserable day in mid-January, and we were driven a hundred miles east. They unloaded us at the Haguenau Forest. That was the 18th of January 1945. The morning of the 19th we basically went to attack Sessenheim. That was a famous mess. The 3rd Battalion was to go through our 1st Battalion and was to take Sessenheim. We were then to pass through. We were at the edge of the woods when they went across the plain. During the night the Germans had moved in a number of Panzer units into Sessenheim. The Americans, our 3rd Battalion, had summoned tanks to support them. These tankers were

new to combat and they made a BIG mistake. It was early in the morning and it was dark. They made the mistake as they got close to town of gunning their engines. When they gunned the engines, the Germans came pouring out of the buildings. They had a number of Panzer tanks there. They knocked out the seven tanks in five minutes. They caught a lot of I and L Company in the open. Part of L Company had already penetrated the town. The Germans trapped them and captured them. A whole bunch of L Company guys were captured. A bunch were wounded. The Lieutenant in charge was wounded thirteen times that day. His name was Bill Sprosser. I have known him since then. Then Company I got all shot up. Company B was still in the woods and the ground was frozen. It had been wet and froze. The problem they had with the earth being frozen was the shrapnel was going flat since the shells did not penetrate before exploding. So you would try to find any declination to get below ground level. People were getting hit from this shrapnel skimming the ground. We basically were held in the woods. The attack was broken and a bunch of wounded guys from I and L Companies got into a house in the middle of the battlefield. That night one of the Company L guys by the name Jack Scannell came back to get some help to bring the wounded out of the cellar of the house before the German patrol captured them. His Battalion Commander would not give him any

help; the Commander said, "Let them surrender." Scannell said no and that he was going back out there to be with them. Someone said, "Go see Major Crouch." Major Crouch had our 1st Battalion. He told him, "We'll go get them." The 3rd Battalion Commander was giving them up. They needed some volunteers! Several of my squad were sitting in a hole next to some tanks. He came over and said you guys just volunteered to go out. There probably were six to eight wounded there. There were a lot of stretcher bearers with stretchers. The Germans had patrols out so we went down in the basement and got the wounded all out. I managed to confiscate a bottle of wine. When we got ready to leave the house two of us were sent behind to keep the German patrols from shooting the stretcher bearers. I found out later that when they went further down the Germans started shelling. One of the shells hit Bill Sprosser of Company L who had already been hit twelve times, making this the thirteenth. We were walking behind to keep the patrols off. When we were walking down the road I hear someone saying "help, help". So, I stopped and went over in the field where there was a "slit trench" in the field. And there was a guy down in there. So I talked to him. I said, "Can you get up and we'll get you back?" He said he couldn't walk. There are only two of us. We can't handle you. I am going to have to get a stretcher and come back. So we went back. Crouch and the medical supplies

were in one of the Maginot pillboxes. So I said we need to get another stretcher out. Six guys went back with me to pick him up. It was light enough that I knew where he was. We picked him up and got him out of the hole. He had a flashlight and he gave it to me as a gift. We got him loaded up. He said he was a Sergeant from L Co. So we brought him back and he went to the hospital. We went back to where we were at the tanks. The next night we had a fifteen mile retreat. It had been snowing during the day so it was a good thing we got the wounded out. That night we had this twelve or fifteen mile retreat. Our Company had left our 6 man squad to cover the retreat as rear guard. They were supposed to tell us when to move. We had waited and waited. We could hear German tanks on the sides. I said, "We are moving." We took off down the road. We finally caught up with the columns. They had forgotten to tell us to move out. After retreating about 15 miles we were put in a field. We just basically went in and lay down on the ground. They had given us just a blanket bag. We went to sleep. When we woke up in the morning, everything was covered with about 3 inches of snow. We were just a bunch of lumps in a field! Sometime early in the morning the Red Cross came with coffee and donuts. It was marvelous! That is how we ended up that mess.

We went into occupation in Bouxwiller. Our squad was billeted in a “bar” in a house. It was just like a neighborhood bar. Not like an American bar. We were there sleeping on the floor. First Battalion was assigned to raid the town of Rothback. We would be the raiding party. We had to take over the town. We had a guy from Time Magazine with us. When he took a look at what was going to happen he decided not to go with us. Our B Company had to come up through an ice field to get into the town. We were noisily crunching the ice. The Germans started to shell and we had to duck down into the water. They were little drainage ditches. C Company went in through the cemetery and the Germans were dropping phosphorous shells into the cemetery. So some of the soldiers would fall into the holes, get wet and be covered with phosphorous. There was a story in the “Stars and Stripes” that talked about these “glowing guys” jumping out of foxholes.

A few years ago my youngest sister, who is a nun, and two other nuns were in Europe. They had studied in Europe and were traveling around Europe. I set them up to visit Sessenheim and Rothback. They went to the house where all the wounded were in Sessenheim. They could talk to the people. These were of course the children or grandchildren. They got the whole story there too. In Rothback they visited the cemetery. When we came back from the Rothback raid to Bouxwiller they put us into the lines at

Rothback. We were there for a week or ten days. It was just miserable weather! Myself and another guy were at an out post. When we went to take it over there was nobody to relieve. It turns out we had the 6th SS below us. They had come up and captured the guys the night we were moving in. So we were in that hole and you couldn't get out in daylight because the Germans could see you. The hole was a bad hole. It was an exposed hole and it was not dug deep. We were laying there in the rain and it was miserable. When we moved we had to turn together. The guy I was with was one of my best friends. When we got through with that experience we didn't talk to each other for a while. It was terrible! They pulled our platoon back except for us. They couldn't get us, but they got us out later. We stayed in a cave higher up with the next platoon in the area. The next platoon put us down the hill in a hole below the cave, just above the SS buildings. There were three of us in the hole. I went to sleep. I said I would take the middle shift. So you have two awake and one down. While I was sleeping one of the SS came up and got on the roof. They knew he was around so one of the guys (I never knew who these guys were because they stuck me with them) got out to throw a flare grenade down. The SS man stabbed him and he yelled. The guy in the hole with me started shooting through the roof. I came out of dead sleep with a rifle going off in my face

and I couldn't find my rifle. As it turns out I was sleeping on it. It was terrible. We survived that night. The guy got knifed and killed. We came back up the hill to the cave. We stayed there a couple of days. I knew I had a problem. As it turns out I had yellow jaundice, which is Hepatitis. When we came back I said I must go see a medic. People were always trying to get off the line. They don't let you off so easily. The medic said alright, let me see your urine. They won't let you do your urine specimen somewhere else. They make you do it right there so they know it is your urine. He saw black urine and said, "Alright, you are going back." So I went back to Sarreguemines and it was Yellow Jaundice. I was up on top floor of a school building which was the hospital. And that was the time they had Alsace Alice. Alsace Alice was the railroad cannon. It was shelling the area. The shells were like a freight train coming in. There was an article recently in one of the Washington papers by the nurses telling that every time they heard Alsace Alice the casualties started pouring in. They wanted to get everyone down in the basement. I said I was too sick. I said that shell is too heavy; it will go through the top floor. So I just stayed there and slept through the whole thing. When I came back the outfit had just started the March attack. They kept me just behind them. As soon as they got through the Siegfried this time, I rejoined them. Then we went across the Rhine and

were in occupation for a week or so in Beerfelden. The French were in trouble down in the Black Forest and the Germans were going to retreat into the Alps. So they put us back in the line. Our job was to go down on the East side of the Black Forest from ULM on the Danube. Then they put us on tanks to go and block the Alpine passes.

After the war I used to work in Germany. I had a good friend who happened to be one of the German soldiers in the Black Forest retreating. I asked him why he hadn't stopped. I told him that I had so many blisters on my feet trying to catch up with you that it wasn't funny. Then they put us on tanks and we went down into the Alps. We ended up down in the Brenner Pass in Italy. That is where I was when the war ended.

Then we were slated for Japan as infantry. I had to get my physical. That is where I met this Irish guy from Company D who told me about Ireland being available on leave from London. I was supposed to have been on combat leave in April but I was out in tanks away from any supply line so I essentially lost the leave. But after the war was over they said I had the leave. I had a delayed leave to London coming. I had this leave extended and I went to Ireland and met my Mother's father and my Father's mother. I had about two weeks there. I had to have civilian clothes. I had to go to the British Red Cross to get clothes. A week or so after I left, they sent another

group from the same company on leave to London. So when I came back to London I came walking into the club and the whole next crew on leave was in there. And I walk in wearing civilian clothes! It was a riot. They had to go back to the Company. They were traveling with orders as a group. I was on Independent Orders so I decided to go back by way of Paris. I spent a few days in Paris where I eventually ran out of rations and money. I went back and rejoined the Company.

I had to get a physical to go to Japan. You had to have a certain amount of points and I think I had 44 and you needed 50 to go back to the States. The problem I had was that some of the guys had received Purple Hearts and that was five extra points. I had gotten one wound on my finger and took care of it myself; it was trivial. I didn't know then that the wound was worth five points. When I found out at the end of the war I went to get my Purple Heart; they said they had no records of this. This was after I had been in Ireland so they were not too sympathetic. So I did not get my five points. I was in line to go as experienced infantry to Japan. I was in Germany when I heard about Japan and the bomb. Then the war ended and they hit me with Occupation.

I was in Ingolstadt up on the Danube. They were looking for people to go to Holland for grave registration. They had a problem. They had the

bomber run from England to the German Industrial Ruhr. A lot of planes were shot down there at the Dutch border. They had a big anti-aircraft complex. When they shot them down they would bury the crew next to the plane. After the war they had to dig up the crews and bring them to a cemetery. At this time my battalion was plagued with unhappy troops. The staff had a lot of interviews regarding why people were unhappy. I explained that I had left college and I wanted to go back to college. The war was over, I did not want to be part of the Occupation and I wanted to go home. They decided I was not a happy trooper. They were looking for volunteers to help the grave diggers. They volunteered me to go to Holland with the Grave Digger establishment! It turned out to be a great experience. I spent three months in Holland attached to the Canadian Army. We hired local people to dig up the bodies. The first ones I saw were moldy and that was enough for me. I ended up in Holland and then I went back to the States in late February, 1946 out of Antwerp.

After the war, I went back to school and was a physicist. I got my Master's Degree and worked for Firestone Tire and Rubber Company for a few years designing the 106mm Recoilless Rifle System. In 1953 I went to Fort Wayne to work with Philo Farnsworth, who invented TV, and ITT Laboratories in electro-optics. I ran the Electro Optic Laboratories and

Division for a number of years in Fort Wayne and Roanoke, VA. My Director of Research at Roanoke was Dr. Charles Kao- inventor of Fiber Optics for telecommunications which are the heart of worldwide communications today. Other products were display tubes, star trackers for satellites, and night vision goggles. Over 1 million of the helmet design with night vision goggles for the infantry have been sold.

In Fort Wayne in 1953, I joined a group called the Catholic Young Adults. I was chairman of the social committee and I met my wife during an event. I have five children and eleven grandchildren. I started coming to reunions in 1980. I have attended about two out of three reunions. Since I retired in 2002 I have regularly attended. I am presently the 411th representative with the 103rd Division of WWII Association.