

WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCES OF EARL PARKER

BILL SONNENBURG:

This is Earl Parker and I'm going to ask him about some of his military experiences. One thing I would like to ask about is would you please explain your military experience from the time you entered military service to the time of your discharge.

EARL PARKER:

I entered military service in January 13th, 1943. I went away to basic training at that time which was sixteen weeks long. Basically it was infantry training. After I was in infantry training about twelve weeks I always wanted to go into the Air Corp so I took the entrance examination, passed the entrance examination and transferred into air cadet training.

After being accepted and passing all my physicals and written examinations we were sent to Sheppard Field, Texas to take another seven weeks of Air Corp basic training. After completing the seven weeks additional of Air Force or Air Corp basis training we were sent to Oklahoma A&M at Stillwater Oklahoma for Air Force cadet training. We stayed there six months and finished all our training. We were ready to go to pre-flight and then an order came out that requested that the Air Corp return all of the transfers that had gone from ground force to air force back to the ground forces because they were running short of personnel for invasion purposes.

So at that time we did not wash out and were ready to go to pre-flight. If we had gone to pre-flight there would have been no return to the infantry. But the cut-off point was leaving the college training detachment. We were still at the college training detachment and were automatically returned to infantry service.

At that time we were shipped back to the 86th division infantry division, Camp Livingston, Louisiana. After about a month there, we were transferred to the 103rd infantry division. Shortly after arriving at the 103rd, we were POE or shipped to the port of embarkation for overseas duty with the 103rd infantry division.

We left Camp Howze, Texas, went to Camp Shanks New York, which is on Stanton Island in New York. After being there just a few days, we were placed on a

troop transport. No one knew where we were going, but we did know that we were going off the East coast instead of the West coast so we all assumed that we were going to the European Theater of Operations.

In loading the transports, it almost takes a whole night to load one regiment and there is no slow down, no stopping. Everything you own is on your back or in your hands including your rifle and all your personal belongings. When you load a troop ship, the bunks are about 8 high and there's about two feet of clearance between the bunks. As you go down the aisle every man takes a bunk and then the next man takes a bunk on top of him until somebody goes all the way up to the top and then they start the next row. There is no slow down, no stopping. You have to lay in the bunk until the ship's loaded. You can't-if you few can wiggle out of your pack you can put your rifle down, but you cannot get back down in the aisle and stop the loading procedure.

After loading all night we shipped out the next day. Just from temperature change we could guess something about where we were heading. We left Camp Shanks New York in winter clothing. About the second day out, we didn't know where we were, but it really got warm to where we had to go to summer clothing. So, we assumed that we'd sailed straight south. We were in a large troop convoy with support vessels. We crossed the Atlantic and went into the Mediterranean through the straits of Gibraltar and up the coast of Italy to the port of Marseilles, France. Marseilles, France had been taken just prior to our arrival. The beach head was made by the Third Infantry Division. You may not recall the third infantry division, but it became famous later after the war was over because it was the outfit that Audie Murphy was in, who was the most decorated soldier in World War II, received a battle field commission.

We relieved the Third Division just north of Marseilles and went on from there straight north through the French Maginot Line. It was a heavily fortified line of resistance built in France. We then went up to the Siegfried Line which was the equivalent of the Maginot Line but was the German main line of defense. The Siegfried Line went into Germany. From there we continued to go north through Heidelberg, Germany. We crossed the Rhine River real close in the vicinity of Mannheim, Germany. Went through Heidelberg, which was located on the Neckar River straight north again up through Germany into Ulm, Germany which was on the Danube River. Then we

turned back south and came through Garmisch Partenkirchen, Germany and down into Innsbruck, Austria.

The war was just about to end when we got down in the vicinity of Innsbruck. We met the 5th Army in Brenner Pass, Northern Italy and that's when the war ended.

That fairly well explains when I entered and where I really finished. But to reiterate a little, we really loved Air Cadet training when we were back in Oklahoma A&M at Stillwater. There were 500 Air Cadet trainees and 500 Army specialized training program people there. It was the best duty and the best food that I had the whole time I was in the service.

It was 15 days from the time we left Stanton Island, Camp Shanks, New York until we arrived in Marseilles harbor. The troop ship that I was on was the General John R. Brooke. It was a U.S. Navy transport. A lot of the British ships only provided two meals a day. The transport that I was on had three full meals a day and all good food. We did have to go in to Marseilles on landing craft because the harbor and all the facilities were blown up in the invasion by the 3rd Division. But there was no combat at the time we arrived in Marseilles. Shortly after we left Marseilles, it was combat the whole route that I described except once for about a month when we were in Corp reserves and pulled back off the line in Heidelberg, Germany. When I went into the 103rd Division, I was assigned as a rifleman in E Company which is a rifle company in the 410th regiment. Shortly after being assigned there, an officer came by and interviewed five of us, myself and four friends, and asked if we would transfer into an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon in the same regiment. Intelligence and reconnaissance platoons pretty much do all the scouting and patrolling for the regiment which involves many times if they're going to move the regiment up and they're going to move them up, they want to know that things are pretty well clear. A lot of times we would run routes on highways and roads to really be sure that it was clear of mines and that the other vehicles moving up behind us would not get into something like a mine explosion or an ambush. We did a lot of patrol work. Most of our patrol work was at night and it was really a sneak and peak operation. It was not a combat patrol. It was intended to find out what you could about the enemy, where their positions were, what kind of armament they had, what our people would run into maybe the next day or the day after when they advanced forward

into the foreign lines or to the German lines. For most of this work we would go through our own outpost and into what you would call no-man's land, between our lines and the German lines. Many times we got close enough to the German lines so that we could see them. You could see their operations. You could see their equipment. The most important thing was to try to not get into a fire fight and not to even let them know you were there. Just bring back the information, furnish it to the regiment.

All five of the boys including myself that were interviewed or requested to transfer into this platoon all transferred into the platoon and all of us came back, nobody wounded, nobody killed out of the five. Many times if replacements were slow in being furnished to other companies they would take this platoon and attach us to a rifle company or heavy weapons company. Most of the time we were attached to a rifle company, until their strength was brought up with replacements. Sometimes when we were attached to other companies, we were involved in taking back positions that we had lost to the Germans. Many times we rode tanks into the area to take back the positions we had lost. Most of our work was on foot but we did have vehicles in our platoon that were used for road reconnaissance. The vehicles we had included five jeeps that were heavily sandbagged in case we hit mines with them and we had two 50 caliber machine guns mounted on two of the jeeps. I was one of the 50 caliber machine gunners and rode on my platoon leader's jeep.

At times they would use our platoon and other attached units as flank protection for the regiment. One day while we were out on flank protection for the regiment two ^ Messerschmitt ME 109s came in and strafed us. The platoon leader said, well, have at them with the 50 caliber machine guns. And we did but we would have been better off if we had just let them go strafe and leave us because then after we started firing on them with a 50 caliber machine guns they turned and came back on us. I don't know what size bombs they dropped but you could almost put a vehicle inside the crater that they made. They dropped a few bombs on us, strafed us again, and about that time two of our fighter aircraft, Thunderbolts, I can't remember the number of them. I think P-47 Thunderbolts, I believe. But at any rate they were Thunderbolt fighters they came in and started to dogfight with the ME 109s. We left one enemy 109 smoking. We don't know who hit him but everybody was firing on them. One of the boys in one of the tank

destroyer outfits attached to us that day was injured. But other than that none of our people suffered any injuries as a result of the strafing and the bombing.

On about the last night prior to the end of the war we were instructed to go into Heidelberg, Germany and try not to fire just go in and see. We knew the war was going to end the next day at noon. There was no question. We went into Heidelberg after dark and saw German soldiers. They didn't fire on us, we didn't fire on them. We came back out of town. We were going to move the outfit up the next day. Between the time we went in and came back out there was some SS resistance the next morning on the unit moving up. The unit suffered pretty serious casualties going in. It was just hours before the war ended. It was really unfortunate and terrible that it had to happen that way; to lose lives and know that you're only six hours away or five hours away from the end of the whole hostilities.

After the war ended, it was decided that they would create a point system and you'd get so many points for so many days overseas and for accomplishments and battles that you were in overseas. The high point men would have all come up through northern Italy and been in a long, long, long time and through a lot of fighting. They decided they would leave them in Germany as the Army of Occupation. They would also take the low point men who hadn't been overseas very long, and had little experience and leave them in the Army of Occupation. But the middle point people who had been there maybe a year or two years and had good experience would be transferred to another outfit, another division with the intent of bringing them through the United States, give them a 30-day furlough, go out to the west coast and join to the Pacific Theater of Operations to end the war with Japan.

While we were in Le Havre, France we were transferred to the middle point division which was the Thunderbird Division, the 45th Infantry Division. We were the ones that were going to come through the states and go out to the Pacific. While we were in Le Havre, France waiting for troop transports to bring us home through the states the war in Japan ended. At that time, we thought maybe we were not going to get home as fast as we thought because all these high point men had been in a lot longer than us and we thought they would go home first. But it didn't happen that way. They shipped us back on a victory transport ship into Boston, Massachusetts. We were

seven days coming home. Whether I mentioned it or not, going over because of zig zagging and the convoy it took us fifteen days to go from New York into Marseilles Harbor but from La Havre to Boston it only took us seven days to come home.

We were transported then and transferred into the 2nd Infantry Division and finally moved to a point where we could be discharged or released from the service. I was discharged with an honorable discharge on January 28th, 1946. While overseas and throughout my military experience, I was awarded some medals. I wrote in for them and was furnished the metals and have them in frames that I'm going to leave with my grandchildren. It included the Bronze Star, Military Service Medal, Expert Rifleman Badge, Infantry Badge, Combat Infantry Badge, American Theater of Operation, European Theater of Operation with two battle stars on it, the Victory Medal in Europe, and the Army of Occupation Medal in Europe.

I did bring home some war trophies most of those I accumulated from prisoners or took them away from prisoners. At times when it was near the end of the war the Germans in the last week or so began surrendering in large, large, large numbers, they knew that it was over, they couldn't win and they had to give it up. In Innsbruck, Austria I saw German pilots bring German prop and jet planes in. They would run the length of the runway and then nose them over to damage them so no one else could use them and then they would surrender.

At times, we would move prisoners from a compound back to the rear. We would handle as many as two or three thousand prisoners with only 25 or 30 men and five jeeps. Get them in a line and keep them walking. You had guns on them, machine guns on them and they knew that it was over if they tried to make a break and they would suffer the consequences. We'd handle large, large, large numbers of prisoners back to prison of war compounds where they'd be for some time before the duration.

BILL SONNENBERG:

Could you explain a little more detail about your experiences in infantry basic training?

EARL PARKER:

Yes, as I told you a little earlier it's either fourteen weeks or sixteen weeks, I can't quite remember. But it was either fourteen or sixteen weeks of real extensive hard training. I took my basic training in Texas. I can't think of the name of the camp right now but it was sandy, hot. The training was really to try to get you water disciplined and conditioned to serve as an infantry soldier. The training would progress. They would try to take what you did in the first week and extend it. You would do more the second week and then try to get you into condition where you could stand up under combat conditions.

They'd start out with maybe a hike of a mile or two and a light pack and a rifle. That would finally be extended to where toward the end of your training you would be expected to be able to do a 25 mile hike in full field pack (that's everything you own in your pack) with your rifle. You would hike for an hour, have a ten minute break; go for another hour, and take a ten minute break in each hour of your hiking. They tried to do it in day light but the sun was so hot that people were just passing out from heat exhaustion. They'd have to run the ambulances along side to take them back when they'd become dehydrated. Finally toward the end, with us, they started doing the 25 mile hikes after dark or after sun down in the evening. Most of the time we would leave about sun down and maybe about sun up we would be coming back in. I have a humorous story about the training involving a friend of mine who is still a good friend and lives in New Orleans. We were doing the 25 mile hike one night and he decided he was going to try to get out of doing the 25 miler. So he said, I know what I'll do I'll either pry the heel off my shoe with my bayonet or kick it off, I'm not going to make this hike. So he did. He got the heel off his shoe and we might have been out three or five or eight miles maybe more and one officer saw him, nails were sticking him in his foot. The heel had come off and the boot nails were sticking him in his heel. So he said, okay. We'll just drive you back to the barracks. So he laughed and laughed and he thought he'd made it. Well, the next Saturday when it was time to get a pass to go to town he went in to get his pass and they said, nope, today's the makeup day for the 25 mile hike, you don't get any pass. You're going to have to do your 25 miles. You can't have a weekend pass you're doing your 25 mile hike tonight. So he really didn't get out

of it, there was no getting out of it. It was just that you had to do it and there was no goofing off.

We had training in water discipline where they give you very, very little or no water to try to get you used to being able to survive with very little water. Most of our time overseas we had K rations and C rations. There were very little hot meals cooked over there. Most of your food was in cans or boxes and that's what they were trying to train us for and also trying to increase our ability to withstand longer hikes and faster hikes. Many times we would do forced marches about three miles almost in a trot. We used to do three miles, if I remember right, in about 30 minutes and that's with your rifle and your pack. It is almost jogging to do that.

In addition to the hiking and the physical requirements in basic training, we did a lot of firing on the range with rifles and carbines at 100 yards, 200 yards, 500 yards. Some of the troops would go down in the pits and at what they called pull targets. The targets were about six feet square and they were on pulleys and rollers where you could pull the target down and change it or look at the score on the target then raise it. The bull's eye was about the size of a man's head, say seven or eight inches in diameter.

To get the sharp shooter medal you had to be capable of keeping most of your rounds inside the black bull's eye and all of your rounds on the target. If you missed the target completely you were completely out for qualifying for sharp shooter. I can not recall exactly how many rounds we fired at one time. The way I remember it to qualify for sharp shooter you had to put five of your rounds in the black bull's eye at 500 yards which is pretty fair shooting. And we did that with Garand M1 rifles.

As I stated earlier, I transferred to the Air Cadets somewhere close to end of my infantry basic training. But prior to going into the Air Cadets another requirement in the infantry basic was the machine gun course and we did this a few times. They would have machine guns set up, 30 caliber machine guns, locked in place so that they couldn't lower them and get into you, and a barbed wire laced slop and mud hole. The barbed wire would be just so that you'd have to crawl on your either on your stomach or on your back to get through it. And they told you don't stand up because if you do you're going to get hit with 30 caliber fire going across the top. That was your way of training and knowing that you can crawl under fire, you can move under fire and you

can stay down low enough that it's very likely that you're not going to be hit by the cross fire of the machine guns. This to get you oriented to what is going to happen later on where mortar fire may be coming in or artillery fire may be coming in, and machine gun fire is all around you. They get you to where you can stay down and not get excited and pop up at the wrong time and maybe get yourself seriously injured or killed.

While in infantry basic training, some of us were selected for sniper training school. How the selection was made I don't know, but I was chosen and some of my friends were also chosen to go to sniper training school. Sniper training school involved many hours of class work. It was about a week or two of continuous training. Instead of using the M1 Garand rifle, they furnished us with the bolt action Enfield and Springfield rifles which were equipped with telescopic sights. We were taught all kinds of camouflage to be able to disguise ourselves. We were taught ways to more accurately fire the weapon as well as ways to blend in with the surrounding areas so that we were not observed, picked up too easily or seen too easily. We did very extensive compass training while in sniper school. They would take us out at night to an area that we weren't familiar with and they would give us a list of directions or headings. Everything had to be done in black out conditions (without light). If you were going to try read your compass you had to get down on the ground with your flashlight, cover yourself with your rain coat to read your compass azimuth so that you would not be detected. This was the procedure whether you were in a combat area or in training with the instructors. They would start you out at a numbered stake driven in the ground at an established position. You would start from one position and could run maybe 20 different azimuth courses. You would take a reading off your compass and then compare it with your azimuth, for instance the first azimuth might be to go 25 degrees for a thousand yards. You would take that azimuth reading and stay on line, measuring off a thousand yards. When you got to that location there would be another piece of paper that would tell you to take a different azimuth for another six or eight or a thousand yards. You would be going out into complete darkness, concealing yourself in complete darkness and if you completed the course you would not come back to the same station you left, but a different station. The instructors knew if you did the course right and came back where you were supposed to finish. There was no saying, well, I know if I get back there and I

go to station ten I'm going to be okay. If station ten is the station you left, it's probably not the one you're going to come back to. You had to run the complete course to finish it satisfactorily.

Many of our sniper school classes had instructors that would instruct us for maybe one or two or three hours. It would be sitting on a bench listening to the instructor talk to us and teaching us what we needed to do. Occasionally, in the hot sun everybody would get a little bit sleepy. At times you'd wear the helmet liner which wasn't a steel helmet, and if you'd go to sleep the instructor would take a long stick and tap on your helmet. It would sound like a bell going off and wake you up. At times they had a large hole dug in the ground, we were sitting on benches with the instructor in front of us. He would whisper, I think it's time to take a break. Everybody who was awake would take off running because they knew what was going to happen. A guy that was sitting on the bench snoozing or sleeping would not hear the whisper. The instructor would take a quarter pound block of TNT and throw it down in the hole and it would go off like a cannon. The guy wouldn't be sleeping the next time. He'd be looking for a way to keep himself awake. That was some of the ways that they keep you awake, kept you surprised and kept your attention all throughout the instructions.

BILL SONNENBURG:

Would you explain a little bit about your Air Cadet training?

EARL PARKER:

The Air Cadet training involved classroom learning with math, English, history, and navigation. The rest of it was drilling and training and a lot of object lessons. As an example, whenever you hung your clothes, everything had to be spotless. White glove inspections occurred almost every day. When you hung your clothes you had to button every button. There wasn't a button left unbuttoned. When you took your shoes off, they had to be shined, laced up and tied. The object was if you forget to button a button on your clothes you're going to forget a button later on the instrument panel that's going to cause you to crash an airplane or destroy an airplane or destroy yourself. We did ten hours of dual control flying on Piper Cubs, but we never soloed. Piper Cubs were two seat, dual control airplanes with the instructor in one seat so that he could take over

control from you at any time. While we didn't solo, we did ten hours flying dual. We did many maneuvers, did take offs and landings. We all loved flying. We'd get up early in the mornings to see if the weather was going to be good enough for us to fly because that's the thing we really all loved to do. We'd do touch down, take off landings with the Piper Cub airplane. It took a long time to make your climb in a Piper Cub and it had a maximum altitude of 12 to 15 thousand feet. We'd climb them up and as part of the training you'd stall them out, then pull them out of the stall. Other parts of the training would be to spin them, pull them up into a stall, kick them off into a spin and do about three spins coming down, straight down and then stop the rotation and pull them out. It was done as a constant reminder to look up, look down, look back, look all around you to be sure your safe and you're not pulling out in front of someone or if someone's closely approaching you that you can get out of their way. It's part of the training that later on goes with combat flying.

I remember when we landed at Marseilles, France and were moving up through the front lines we were to relieve the 3rd Division. One thing I didn't mention that was fortunate for us was they left both divisions on the line for about a week, the 3rd Division and our division. I think that was great because it gives a young inexperienced infantry soldier a chance to be with an older experienced infantry soldier that knows what it's all about.

I know when we were moving up past some of our own artillery, they were firing outgoing rounds. At the same time there were also rounds coming in, but I didn't know what was going out and what was coming in until I was there for a day or two and finally found out or knew exactly what was going on. It's not hard to tell the rounds going out; all you hear is a bang and they're gone, but with the ones coming in you hear a whistle and then they're there and explode.

BILL SONNENBURG:

Tell me a little bit about some of the reconnaissance patrols you went on.

EARL PARKER:

As I stated earlier, some of it was over roads and highways but for a lot of it we had to go through our outpost at night, out into enemy territory. First we would go into

no-man's land and then into enemy territory. They'd always be a password. One of the most important things you'd have to remember was the password because if you were challenged and didn't know the password somebody's going to take a shot at you. It got to a point where some of our outposts wouldn't even let us get close enough to ask the password or tell us the password. So we started running a field telephone out maybe a hundred or two hundred yards from the outpost. When we got back we'd call them on the telephone and tell them the password so they would know who we were. We would identify ourselves to try to get back in without our own people laying friendly fire on us.

I can remember on one occasion during a snowy night when it was fairly light we were on about a 15-man patrol from my outfit. The rule was always don't fire unless you're fired on. Observe everything that you can. Get all the information, bring it back, and don't give away your position by firing or getting in a fire fight. A lot of times when you're out there they'd fire flares up in the air that would come down on a parachute and you'd have to just freeze. If you freeze and you don't have any movement there's not much chance of somebody picking you up. But if you're moving it's real easy for the enemy to pick you up and see you out there and fire on you.

One night while we were out, we came within 50 yards of a German patrol of about similar size. They didn't fire on us, we didn't fire on them, they turned and went one way, and we turned and went the other way. Freak things like that can happen and do happen. It follows through with what you're taught all along that it's a reconnaissance sneak and peak patrol, not a combat patrol. There were combat patrols and at times some of us were assigned to combat patrols. Some even served as observers to a rifle company on combat patrols.

As I stated much earlier, five of us were asked to volunteer and transfer from a rifle company, E Company, to I&R platoon. Of the five that transferred, we all came home in good shape, nobody wounded, nobody injured. Three of us have kept in touch through the years. One is in New Orleans and one is out in the Denver - Greeley, Colorado area. When we were returned home, the friend of mine in New Orleans and I were both living in New Orleans. That was before I moved away from New Orleans with my job on the railroad.

The friend in New Orleans, asked me if I would like to join the reserves with him. The reserve training area was near him, but we lived on completely different ends of town. The reserve training area was right in his vicinity of town. I didn't care about joining the reserves to start with, but I told him, no, that I didn't care about joining and I didn't want to drive across town that long distance to go to training sessions. So he joined the reserves and as a result his unit was sent to Korea. He went through the entire Korean War without a scratch, without being wounded and came home back to New Orleans. We still keep in touch with each other. Occasional letters and always a Christmas card with a note written on it.

To this day I'm real happy that I served my country honorably. I wouldn't take anything for the experience of my military service. But wars are a terrible thing. And I sure wouldn't want to do it again. I would rather go back than to have any of my family or relations or grandchildren have to go through a war. War is a terrible thing that takes a lot of unnecessary lives. It seems like it goes on and on. In any war you can go back through and count the number of men some of the divisions lost. I don't know how many times my division turned over but I know some of the old divisions like the 36th, the 45th, and the 3rd Division, the one Audie Murphy was in, turned over as many as four to five times. And that's not all dead but it's a lot of people injured, crippled or had their lives ruined or were killed for no reason whatsoever. It's just a terrible thing to have to fight a war. There ought to be some way to settle differences without doing it that way.