Dad, What Did You Do During the Big War?

On March 30, 1943, I registered for the draft as required by law, even though I was attending Georgia Tech at night and working for Firestone Tire and Rubber Company during the day. The salary was 40 cents per hour. My draft call came, and I reported to Fort McPherson on August 31 with only the clothes I was wearing and a shaving kit. I quickly received the physical exam, was issued a uniform, took a battery of tests, and within a week received orders to report to The Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

At Fort Benning, I was assigned barracks in the Harmony Church area. After many training films, lectures, and orientations, basic training began on September 30. For a person who had been through four years of ROTC in high school, much of the material covered was repetitious; however, things changed after a couple of weeks when I learned how to use a bayonet to kill, a rope to strangle, and hand grenades to take out machine guns. I next learned map reading and how to handle units on day and night maneuvers. After days of rifle instruction, all trainees fired for record; I qualified as expert. Instructions on the use of 60-mm mortar, 30-caliber and 50-caliber machine guns followed. The last items taught were squad and platoon tactics as an end came to 90 days of basic training on December 19.

After Basic, all eyes were on the bulletin board to see who had qualified for college and the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program). I had already taken the AGCT (an Intelligence Test) and scored 136 points; 130 points were required for ASTP (120 points were required for officers' candidate school). Finally my name appeared and my school was Georgia Tech. After a week's leave for Christmas, I reported to Tech, and schooling started immediately. This was to be the last quarter of the ASTP program. All those assigned to schools throughout the country were sent to the Infantry because of the shortage of men overseas.

In April 1944, I was assigned to L Company, 399th Regiment, of the 100th Division, located at Fort Bragg just outside of Fayetteville, North Carolina. Advanced training began early, since this was a combat division. Tactical problems, survival details, forced marches, extended night and day problems, and use of all sort of weapons continued.

In June 1944, 50 men from the Division were selected to go to New York for an extended period to sell War Bonds and raise and lower the flag at Rockefeller Center. We stayed at Camp Shanks just outside of New York and were brought to the city each day for our trips to the Bronx, Brooklyn, or Staten Island. New Yorkers accepted us with open arms and gave us free food and theater tickets.

Returning to Fort Bragg, we continued preparing for combat. In early October we were taken by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where all of our equipment was checked prior to departure on October 6. Our ship, the George Washington, was an ocean liner taken from the Germans after World War I as part of the reparations, and it carried most of the Division. Three other smaller ships carried segments. L Company was fortunate in that we were quartered on the covered, but open, deck. We slept in our blankets on the wood deck. On the sixth day of our 21-day

trip, we were hit by 85-mile-per-hour winds, and the Company had to be moved into the officers' mess area. Some equipment was lost, but fortunately no members of the Company were. After three days the storm subsided, and the sea became normal again. We passed the Rock of Gibraltar, and we saw the lights of the cities of Morocco. We watched with fascination and fear as one of the merchant ships in the convoy was torpedoed. It was said that the George Washington could outrun German submarines, but...

Meals (twice daily) consisted of boiled potatoes, boiled eggs, dill pickles, fresh fruit, and bread. All this ostensibly helped prevent motion sickness. The mess hall standing tables were pivoted at the ends to remain level as the ship rolled. Training, rifle inspection, French and German classes, and boat drills occupied our days. Our band gave a concert every evening before dark. The ship was blacked out every night, and no lights were allowed on deck.

After dropping anchor at Marseille, France, late in the evening on October 20, 1944, we left the ship with full field packs and rifles via cargo nets. These nets were heavy rope affairs with vertical and horizontal lines meeting and tied at one-foot intervals that allowed 25 or 30 soldiers to climb down side by side on rope ladders to waiting LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) boats. Unfortunately, we lost one of our group. He fell off into the darkness and drowned.

We were "welcomed" by a German plane with a recording by Axis Sally (an English woman who turned traitor and broadcast for German radio), saying "We welcome the men of the 100th Division to Germany." After an endless hike with packs, duffle bags, and rifles, we bivouacked in French mud on a large field. In pairs, we pitched our shelter halves and tried to get out of the rain and sleep. It took several days for the Division to get all material unloaded and organized.

On October 28 we boarded 2½-ton trucks for the 420-mile, 3-day trip up the Rhone Valley. We traveled through Avignon, Valence, and Dijon. There were 25 men per truck and only 18 seats, but all our packs and duffle bags were used for seats. The rifles were constantly in the way. Travel was very slow because of poor roads, burned German equipment, dead animals, and traffic. At one time, in an effort to help solve the space problem, some of our group hung their packs on the outside of the horizontal boards that served as seat backs. This presented a problem in the narrow streets, and when we went through the town gate, the packs were cut off as cleanly as if they had been cut with a knife. We ate "K" or "C" rations at lunch and had a meal served each evening when we stopped. When we reached our destination we stopped, dug in, and ate. The next day, November 2, we replaced the 45th Division on the line, Company for Company. The 45th Division soldiers were amused that we carried gas masks, packs, etc.; we saw that they carried only their weapons, a small bag for "stuff," and their raincoat. We immediately copied their lead. On November 4, L Company advanced about 1,000 yards through heavy woods and then over open ground into St. Remy, France.

Enemy mortar and machine gun fire slowed the Company, but we cleared the houses one at a time and set up a "two on, two off guard duty" routine for the night. Each day we were issued a full day's ration (3 K meals), and where possible we received a hot meal once a day. Company cooks prepared the food, placing it in thermal (marmite) 20-gallon cans, loading it in jeep-pulled trailers, and bringing it as close as possible to the Company. Each platoon then went in shifts to the feeding area or sent men to bring the food closer.

After arrival in Europe we received a sleeping bag, consisting of a heavy wool liner with an outer shell of water-resistant cloth. These bags were called "mummy bags" because once you were zipped inside you looked like a mummy. We also received shoe boots called "snow pacs" that were leather boots with rubber covering about four inches of the lower leather. These snow pacs had one felt innersole and an extra. We used one innersole and kept the other one dry. As we received these new items, we were told that we should take only what we needed from our duffle bags because they would be brought to us each evening. I next saw mine one month after the war was over; it contained only my personal property.

After about two days in the snow and rain, our mummy bags were soaking wet, but our Company Quartermaster tried to get them to us as often as possible. Many nights our raincoat and the clothes we had on were our only protection from the subfreezing temperatures. I should explain that each night you "buddied up" with a friend and dug a foxhole, covered it with pine trees that you had cut down, covered it with pine boughs, put pine boughs in the bottom of the hole, and then alternated guard duty, two on, two off. The bottom of the hole was always full of mud or water. If we were lucky, the nights were spent in barns, houses, or other shelters.

After St. Remy we were relieved by the 3rd Division and moved to replace the 45th Division near Paiaille. On November 10, the entire 399th Regiment moved by truck across the Meurthe River through Baccarat. We off-loaded in deep woods, dug in, and waited. Snow came and deadened the already quiet forest. Germany's winter wall had been dug and built by slave labor and was well laced with barbed wire. Our artillery and the heavy weapons company eventually broke through, and with the snow and temperatures near zero life was miserable. George Demopoulis, our aid man, was hit but came back to fight later.

We captured two Germans and advanced, only to run into concentrated fire from 88's as well as short rounds from our own artillery. The Germans advanced, and we had several wounded men, but we held, got more ammunition, and again waited. The Vosges Mountains are so dense that morning comes late and afternoon early, so noon is about the only time of real light. Trees are so close together that getting a field of fire for a machine gun is impossible, and except on roads tanks are useless; in fact, the noise of tanks revealed our position and brought fire. Again, nighttime, foxhole, and log covering.

At times we were in contact with French Moroccan troops (noted for having their wives and girlfriends with them until they went into battle). They were stealthy, like the American Indians, and were used for night patrols. Quite often they would pass through our lines on the way out, and in the blackness they would touch a soldier's steel helmet; if it was smooth, the soldier's throat was cut. American helmets had camouflage nets covering them. German helmets were smooth. Skirmishes continued daily with the Germans.

Our last bath had been in Marseille around October 21. On November 27, we were relieved, and we had a delicious Thanksgiving dinner, although our mess kits filled with rain water before we could eat the meal. We got mail and even some packages from home. We received mail as often as Company mail clerks could get it to us.

After a day's rest and late at night, we boarded blackout trucks and traveled through Raon L'Etrope to a French village where we were assigned houses that the owners had left when war came to their town. Most of these houses had a barn that was literally part of the house. We had a wonderful shower, and from a pile of assorted clothes we each tried to select clean clothing that fit. We were in "glorious" reserve--with hot meals, daily mail call, and even a Coke at one time.

I have mentioned both the K and the C rations. The K ration was a box about the size of a Cracker Jack package. It contained a shallow tin can (about the size of a salmon can) with cheese or meat in it, three hard crackers, three cigarettes, one hard chocolate bar, a small packet of toilet paper, and a disposable can opener. The C ration consisted of two cans that together were as high as a soup can. One can contained meat and vegetable stew, eggs and bacon, or cheese. The other one contained crackers, toilet paper, candy, and cigarettes. There is nothing more unappetizing than to open a can of cold meat and vegetable hash and find a half inch of grease on top.

On December 2, we moved out for a three-day hike in the direction of Lemberg toward the Maginot and Seigfried line. Walking on both sides of the road wi 10-yard intervals between men, we continued. We dug in and stayed in Alsati houses each evening. At the assembly area we set up perimeter defense and again dug in. At dawn we moved through Wingen and a dense forest to a fruit orchard. Avoiding this open ground, we advanced through somewhat open woods We knew that the Germans had been observing, because in the afternoon their 88's started hitting us, and then we could hear rifle and machine gunfire ahead of us. Three men from our Company were killed by enemy artillery. Snow fell during the afternoon, and soon the ground was covered. We dug in best we could under rifle fire. After dark we improved our foxholes.

Breakfast was a K ration, and water was from a nearby stream and from the snow. We went through Sarreinsberg and Gaetzenbruck without losses and then moved again toward Lemberg. A German concentration slowed us as we attempte to enter the city. The whole Battalion was involved, and the Commanding Officer decided to try a pincer move on the city. Our Company was to attack from right center. We dug in again at dusk without having made much progress

On December 8, we continued our forward movement. Our AT (anti-tank) guns were brought forward in an effort to eliminate the 20-mm German guns that were causing many casualties. When our guns won that decision, 88's were directed to our position. Rather than stay and suffer more hits, we moved forward on an open hillside. A high railroad embankment overlooking the open area gave the Germans a distinct advantage, but L Company finally was able to advance through an underpass in the embankment. Casualties were heavy, and litter bearers could not keep up.

We experienced the screaming meemies (they made a horrible sound as they came down) for the first time. Our 60-mm mortar squad, assisted by a rifleman who had reached the top of the embankment, finally silenced the machine gunfire that had pinned us down. The 20-mm guns were another matter, and we timed our runs through the underpass as the Germans fired and reloaded. Several houses eventually were cleared beyond the embankment by the use of grenades. French civilians hiding in the basement of houses were interrogated and told to seek shelter out of the battle area. German soldiers who had survived in the houses were taken prisoner. A main street with houses on both sides ran at a right angle to the railroad and to the underpass. Having had no food all day, we took time before dark to hunt for canned items that we dared try. At dark, guards were posted at front and rear doors of all buildings held.

After dark, a 20-mm German gun shot down the length of the street to discourage any further advance. Well after dark we heard a clatter on the cobblestone street, and all our guards opened up, only to discover at dawn that two German horses had gotten loose and no 20-mm gun was being pulled. During the next day we heard that some rations were available across an open field, but out of range of the 20-mm guns. Two of us volunteered to try a run to get them. We tore curtains off the windows in the house that we were in to use for carrying the rations. We set out and had no trouble on the way over, but on the way back the Germans used 88's to shoot at both of us. Whatever rations we didn't get on that first trip were left. The rations consisted of pork chops and pineapple fritters--the best I've ever eaten! We finally secured all of Lember

Since I had been with the lead platoon, I was asked on December 11 to direct the burial detail to the bodies of our men now covered with a foot of snow. We found all five men lost from our area, and as we returned to the Company area, the jeep towing the trailer hit a mine. This was either a glass mine that detectors could not record or a mine set to explode after a given number of vehicles had crossed it. The three other men in the jeep were killed; I was blown about 50 feet and sustained shrapnel injuries and a broken foot. I distinctly remember the used battery plates of the jeep coming down like so many playing cards thrown into the air.

I hobbled back to the Company, and a medic sent me to the rear. From the aid station, I was sent to an evacuation hospital where I was bandaged and put in a cast up to my knee. Since I could not immediately return to combat, I was sent from that hospital to a tent hospital at the edge of an airfield for evacuation to England. While I was in the hospital, we learned that Germans dressed as allied soldiers were being parachuted into our area for sabotage.

As a volunteer, I was given an M-1 rifle and driven by ambulance to a pre-dug foxhole. There, wearing hospital clothes, a GI overcoat, and of course the leg cast, I guarded the air strip. During this period the Battle of the Bulge required all transport aircraft, so I was sent to a hospital at Dijon, France, where I remained until I returned to duty through a replacement depot.

When I returned to the Company in late March of 1945, we were in Mosback, Germany, guarding VI Company Headquarters. Since I was well rested and spoke a little German, I was asked to go with an Intelligence Officer and a jeep driver to see if certain factories could be used to manufacture war goods for the allies. The Intelligence Officer would read corps battle plans, and if a town was supposed to be taken by 9 A.M. he tried to arrive by 10 A.M. to prevent industrial sabotage. Often the three of us actually moved into a town before it was taken. On two separate occasions and after the vehicle had been hit by rifle fire, the jeep driver opted for disciplinary action rather than go out with us again. This went on for some days as we inspected factories.

On April 17, we moved to an assembly area. I was Company radio man assigned to carry the Company radio (SCR 300). This allowed me to be with the lead platoon on every attack. On that date, in the Battle of Five Fingers, we moved down steep vineyards of Steinberg into Kablesteige. At Berlstein we were caught in a ravine by perfectly zeroed-in 88's and took many losses. We sustained the attack, however, and the 3rd Battalion won its first unit citation for this action. My second purple heart was earned that day as a result of wounds in the face just below the eyes. The piece of shrapnel was only slightly larger than the cluster on the purple heart, but overnight the whole side of my face became badly swollen. I was ordered back to the aid station, where the shrapnel was surgically removed. No one wanted to leave the Company, because there were so few of us left that we felt obliged to stay on line if at all possible.

On April 20, our Company took Gras Bottwar and then Rommelhausen. Waldenbrough and Winder, then Stattenfell, were taken. On the 25th, we were in Stuttgart. Still later we took Ohmden. May 2-6 we were in Kircheim, and the thing that I remember most was seeing the lights in the city after months of seeing only nighttime darkness. We did have a VE Day parade on May 6, 1945, and then we were off to German barracks at Alterslager for a week. We were billeted in Nueffen from May 11 to June 8, in Alterslager from June 8 to June 11, and then in Muchlacker from July 8 until I was assigned to the General's staff in Stuttgart.

In the fall of 1945, I was ordered to report to Battalion Headquarters in full dress uniform. It seemed that my AGCT score was 136, making me eligible for a slot at West Point if subsequent interviews went well. I later was assigned a driver and jeep, and I had interviews at Regiment, Division, Corps, and Army Headquarters. Apparently all went well, because I was told that I was the first alternate for the European Theater of Operations. I was told to go to my Company and be ready for a 24-hour transfer to the States and West Point. No details, no leave, just wait. After about a month I was told that the European quota was filled. I called to congratulate the first choice and found that he had received the same letter, so we assumed that no one went.

The next day I was summoned to General Tychsen's office and, after an interview, was selected to be his aide-de-camp with the promise of a battlefield commission. This assignment began in September 1945.

Although the war was over before the actual date that I was to report, all battlefield commissionings were stopped--so I had the job but no rank. I worked with General Tychsen in Stuttgart. When the Division was sent home, men with 156 points were eligible to accompany the Division (soldiers receive two points for each month overseas, one point for each month statewide, etc.) As Division Commanding Officer, General Tychsen had used a van as his headquarters and office. This van had an office-bedroom installed on a 2½-ton truck body, and it was our transport for the trip to Marseille on the way home. I accompanied the van to Marseille. There, after a long wait of 10 days, we left Marseille on the Woodridge Victory, a Victory ship, and arrived in Hampton, Virginia, in early January 1946. I was discharged on January 15, 1946.

As a footnote: General Tychsen asked me to accompany him to China in June of 1946, with the rank of captain. I declined his invitation.

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219 Company strength

400 Men in Company throughout overseas service

101 Men wounded (5 twice)

33 Men killed