The combat stories of
Henry B. (Hank) Williams

Dates in Service: January 1943-April 1946
Hometown: Verona, NJ
Branch of Service: Army
Unit: 100th Infantry Division, 399th Anti-Tank Company, Mine Platoon Messenger, Jeep Driver
Battles/Campaigns: Operation Norwind
Location: France, & Germany
Highest Rank: Private First Class

Hank Williams recalls his time in Europe in a Mine Platoon in which he describes probing for and removing mines, and a run-in he had with some Germans blowing up a bridge.

These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.

In August of 1939, I had just turned 15 when I was walking down a street in Brattleboro, Vermont with my parents, and we heard a radio blaring out from a store that Germany had invaded Poland. My dad served in the Army on the Mexican border before being sent overseas with the 27th New York Division and fought in France during World War One. Dad put his arm around my shoulder and said, “You’ll be in this one son.” It seemed really far-fetched at the time.

In 1943, I was drafted right out of high school along with a large percentage of my class. It wasn’t until I arrived on the trolley car to the induction center in Newkirk that I learned how many of my classmates had been drafted. My pal Ray was a gun nut and wanted to get into the Army ordinance. I on the other hand, for some stupid reason, favored fighting and wanted the Marines. During our pre-physical tests, Ray and I got separated. During the end of the procedure when asked which branch of service we wanted to enter, I chose Army because that’s what Ray wanted. As I exited the induction center, there stood Ray waiting for me. As I walked up to him I said, “We’re in the Army now!” Ray replied, “You wanted Marines so that’s what I chose.” It ended with Ray in the Marine Ordinance and me in the Army Infantry. That evening I returned home to wait for further orders, which arrived within two weeks, advising me to report to Fort Dix, New Jersey. A group of us boarded a trolley car, which took us to Penn Station in Newark where we boarded a train for Fort Dix.

Here I was issued my uniforms, given a physical and took more tests, with the remainder of the three weeks on what we called “chicken shit details,” such as picking up butts and KP duty. It was while at Dix that I was under a Sergeant who had been a Major in the Polish Army. One day in his broken English he called us out and said, “Now today you go get test,” and he went on to say he had gotten a 91 on his. No sooner had he said that then someone in the back shouted, “And who helped you?” Other times he would call out five guys and say, “OK half of you follow me.” One day as we stood there he told a guy to jump up and then admonished the poor recruit by saying, “Who told you to come down?”

After three weeks of looking at the bulletin board each morning to learn our next assignment, I was given orders to report to Fort Benning, Georgia where I was placed in the ASTP program and had my basic training in the 3rd Platoon, 14th Company, 4th Battalion, and 4th Training Regiment. By the end of the 13th week I was placed on a troop train for St. Johns University, where I took Basic Engineering. With the university only 17 miles from my home, it made it real nice for me. I arrived at St. Johns in early December and by the middle of March the ASTP program had ended, and I found myself on another troop train heading south for Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

The train pulled through the gates and on into the base to an area where we unloaded. We arrived shortly after the 100th had returned from their Tennessee maneuvers. As I stepped off the train into a group of 50 to 60 guys I heard someone yell out, “Anti-Tank Company has jeeps and

trucks and they don't have to walk." We were taken to a waiting room where we were called in one at a time to be interviewed and assigned by a personnel officer. He started at the beginning of the alphabet by last name and as each guy came out of the office he would say "A Company," then "B Company," and so on until he had gotten to "M Company" and started over again with A. At the time, I had no idea of the makeup of an infantry regiment but with my last name being Williams and putting me at the end of the alphabet, I listened intently and noted that the guys were only assigned to companies from A to M. When my turn finally came, the officer looked at my records and said, "Basic training at Fort Benning, ASTP at St. John's University. Ok, I'm going to assign you to the 399th I Company." At that point I asked him if I could say something and he replied that I could. So I told him that ever since I've been in the Army, I wanted to be in the Anti-Tank Company, (The thought of riding instead of hiking appealed to me). He looked over his recorders and said, "I haven't assigned anybody to the Anti-Tank Company so if that's what you want…" while scratching out the I and replacing it with "anti-Tank". When I emerged from the office and announced, Anti-Tank, the others chorused, "You lucky son of a gun, how did you get that?" I was doubly lucky when I learned that I Company was under the command of Captain Travis Hopkins who walked with a limp. I Company double-timed every place they went and were known as Captain Hoppy's greyhounds.

One thing that surprised me was how well we were received in the company. The “old timers” had been in the 100th for nearly a year and a half already and here are a bunch college kids thrown amongst them. I fully expected to be teased and ostracized and the fact that we were accepted began my lifelong love of the 100th. One day while checking the bulletin board, I noticed my name on it and that I was to be sent someplace for basic training. Seeing it, I went to the Captain and explained to him that I had already had basic training while at Fort Benning. Putting on his hat, he told me to follow him and we crossed the parade ground to regimental headquarters and down to the Major’s office. After knocking on the door, we were told to come in and we sorted the whole issue out. However, although all of our vehicles had drivers, several of us were sent to drivers school to learn how to drive our jeeps and 6x6 trucks that were used to pull our guns.

One day I had the detail of clipping the grass around company headquarters. When three or four newer arrivals approached me, asking what kind of company it was, I told them that it was a terrific company but I didn’t think much of the company commander. The next day the First Sergeant approached me saying, “Williams, you’re stupid.” When I asked why, he explained that he heard me downgrading the Captain to the new arrivals. I asked if the Captain heard me and he told me that my voice came through the Captain’s window before it reached him. The company commander never said anything but he never seemed to care for me after that.

I made the trip overseas on the McAndrews, which was one of the smaller ships in the convoy and at one point during a storm, we came within five degrees of capsizing, and during a hurricane we nearly collided with the George Washington. The McAndrews was what we always called a banana boat and not built for crossing the Atlantic. As for my duty onboard the McAndrews, there were three of us who were picked to work in the pantry of the officer's mess. Working there was pretty good duty because we ate the same as the officers which was better than the other guys on board. Another plus was that when not working, I had a convenient porthole to look out of. After arriving in Marseille, we were the last ones to leave the ship and as we left, the officers mess cook presented the three of us with a large bag containing fruit and a whole roasted chicken.

It was nearly dark by the time we had gotten ashore and made the 14 mile hike up, carrying all of our worldly possessions, plus the large bag of food the cook had given us. It began raining and by the time we reached our bivouac area, we pitched our tents in the dark in a field of mud. For the following two weeks, we lived in our tents in this muddy field while they unloaded and delivered our equipment, guns and vehicles, which we had to clean off before heading out.

The mine platoon had a number of duties while on the front lines, such as moving mines from roads and removing booby-traps from buildings that would be occupied. At the time we were right alongside rifle companies, removing mines from the road so that jeeps could bring up food, supplies and ammo. It was during our first week in combat

that we were called to the front lines to move some mines on a dirt road. Using a mine sweeper, we found nine large anti-tank mines, and ramp mines. As we found them, we placed them in a pile to the side of the road. Now talk about sweating; you step slowly forward swinging the mine detector just inches above the ground back and forth in front of you with each step. Then there is the removal of the mines. You had to get down on your knees, probing the ground around it and very carefully digging it out.

When we had a pile of about ten mines, I was sent back to get some TNT and fuses out of the back of our truck that was parked in the small town behind us. As I made my way back and came to a wooden bridge, there were some Germans trying to blow up the bridge with their mortars. I came under mortar fire from them and I fell to the ground, but with shells hitting all around me, I decided there wasn't the place to be, so I got up and ran towards town. Being a farming community, all the houses in the village had barns attached and the usual pile of manure by the front door. As I passed by this barn with its doors open, I saw this ox chained to the floor. There beside the ox stood two farmers, one of which had a large knife he was using to cut the throat of the ox. Blood from that ox was everywhere. I filled my pockets with TNT and fuses and as I headed back to the front lines, I noticed that the farmers had the ox on its knees and were hitting it on the head with a sledge hammer. What a sickening sight.

By the time I returned to the wooden bridge area the Germans had finished shelling and the bridge had been hit. The ground had a number of holes in it where the shells had

hit, one of which was where I had been laying. Getting back to the platoon I walked up to the sergeant, handing him my watch saying, “If you want my watch that bad here it is and don’t send me back for TNT again.”

It was late by the time we started back and found ourselves lost in no mans land and before we knew it, we were catching it from the Germans. As I lay there, I thought to myself that I had no plan on spending the night out here. Not knowing the password for that day, I decided I would cuss as loud as I could as I made my way back towards our lines, with the others following, hoping that our guys would realize that no Germans would have a vocabulary like that. It worked! It was dark by the time we made it back to the church we were staying in, so I asked the guys to go out and find us something to eat. It wasn’t long before they came back with potatoes, cabbage and such, but one guy return carrying this piece of fresh meat! We cooked it in a frying pan on the top of a pot-bellied stove. The meat was like shoe leather, but it was meat. As we were chomping away, I asked where he had gotten it from and soon realized that it was that ox I saw being murdered.

Our Platoon Sergeant was Gurdon (Mac) MacNevin, who was old enough to be my father and who taught the Division mine school. We felt perfectly safe under his wing. But while searching a house suspected of being booby-trapped, one of the guys rushed in saying that Mac had been hit and we never saw him again. Several years after the war, I attended a convention in Boston and Sergeant Mac showed up. It seems that outside of the house where we were working, a soldier stepped on a schu-mine.

Sergeant Mac was there and with his bayonet, probed a path so the medics could pick up the wounded soldier. As they were carrying him out on a litter, the rifleman's helmet fell off and Mac stepped out of the path he had cleared to retrieve the helmet and stepped on a schu-mine himself, blowing off his lower leg and unnerving the rest of us to continue without our expert leader. As Mac said, it was a stupid move because that rifleman didn't need his helmet anymore.