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I've lived around Tyler, Texas, all my life. When I was drafted into the service, I was married and had an 18-month-old son. I went through basic training at Fort Hood in Texas before being shipped overseas from Fort George E. Meade in Maryland in December 1944. We never did get the turkey dinner they kept promising us.

We waited in England for a few days before we found transportation to the frontlines. Riding in hay-filled boxcars that held 40 men or eight horses, we arrived a couple of days before Christmas, just in time to participate in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. Still no turkey. From then on, there was continuous fighting. I was assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Army, 393<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, 99<sup>th</sup> Division. Whenever a gap appeared in the frontlines, it was our division's job to plug it up. If a division was in danger of being overrun, we went to their aid. They called us the Checkerboard Division. So we never knew exactly what we would be getting into.

When we first arrived on the frontlines in Belgium, our soldiers were firing at a little town just above the line. The whole town was on fire. That first night, we were issued old rifles that were in terrible shape. There was no way we could fire them. I guess we could have beaten someone to death if we had been able to catch him. Then we were assigned to different squads. The next day as we were fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, I took an M1 rifle off a GI who had been killed in that field. I kept that gun for the rest of my time in Europe and never was issued another one.

Our foxholes were very confining. But I had to wait until sunrise before it would be safe enough to peek out again and stand up. Of course, we were well aware of everything surrounding us. One time I noticed a bush about three feet from my foxhole and stayed very still so I could watch some little birds pecking around on the snow-covered branches looking for something to eat. I thought, *My gosh, they're not afraid of nothing and not bothering anybody. How precious they are.* One of the men in the demolition squad I had been assigned to had been there too long. When he came out of his foxhole and saw those birds, he blasted them and yelled for them to get out of there. I said, "Boy, what's wrong with you? You better find a medic and get him to do something for you."

He said, "Ain't nothing wrong with me other than this Army don't know what it's doing!"

I told him, "Well, it looks like to me that they're doing the best they can. They're moving forward." After I left that area, I was determined I wasn't going to spend another night around him. I told the sergeant, "Get me hooked up with somebody else. That guy's going crazy, and I don't want to be around when he finishes it up." Luckily, I didn't have to be around him again.

I got a little bit closer to the Lord while I was overseas. Whenever I knew we would be going into battle the next day, I promised Him a lot of things. Mostly, I kept those promises. But as time went along, I slacked off again. That experience though made me a stronger person.

The day we marched into Remagan, we faced a terrible battle. Men were lying dead or wounded in the streets of the small town. Some were waiting to go over the bridgehead. Scared, I wanted to get it over with. When the time came, we made a run for it. The bridge had been bombed and was in bad shape. In an attempt to repair it, four-by-four steel plates had been dropped over the holes. We had to run across those loose steel plates and stay on them. Once we crossed the bridge, we ran into a big cliff and had to turn right or left. We turned right and ran beside the river until we could move away from it. About 149 men, including my outfit, made it across the bridge that day. Then we had to crawl through ruts in an open field to safety. I made my rut deeper as I crawled 300 yards through that field to a clump of trees and a house that had been hit. Though I thought I probably would die, I never gave up.

A group of GI's were there waiting. Two or three hours later, we found more GI's in the basement of the house. A bombshell had penetrated the house through the roof, kitchen and hall, ending up in the cellar without exploding. After the GI's in the cellar realized what it was, they scattered out of there quickly. They sealed the building until the experts could deactivate the bomb. Then we hid out in the house until dawn, when we left for our next mission.

One boy in my outfit was always watching us. When he saw us cringe or fall down as we heard shells coming in, he would say, "What are you scared for? Your time to go ain't gonna come 'til it's your time. Don't be afraid of them." The morning we left that house, we were standing behind a log barn when a scrawny little rooster came out. Most of his feathers were gone. Trying to crow, he made an awful racket that sounded just like a screeching shell about to land. Blam! Down on the ground our friend went. We laughed and told him, "Get up! You're not gonna die 'til your time comes!" After that, he never said another word about dying to us.

My outfit sat at the Siegfried Line in Elsenborne, Belgium, for a month waiting for enough men and equipment to come along and break through the line. Everything was covered in snow. If we saw a hump on the ground and bumped it with our foot, there usually was either a dead German soldier or American GI under it. In the forest we went through just before reaching the Siegfried Line, trees had been chopped down by artillery. Before that, the Germans had hidden in the thick woods there.

My squad went out on patrol one night. As we were coming back, I stepped over a snow-covered log and slid. Falling down, I found myself straddling a dead body. Of course, I stood up real quick and moved on. After we made it back to camp, we found out that our mess sergeants had prepared hot food (pancakes) for the first time in a very long time. I got my pancakes and coffee and started looking for something to sit down behind. For obvious reasons, we never sat out in the open. Spotting what looked like a pile of cordwood, I squatted down beside it. Something kept punching me in the back. I turned around to look and realized the pile of cordwood was actually a stack of dead GI's that rose above my head.

While we were camped in that area, I dug a small hole in my bunker to use as a shelf for my stuff — shaving gear, cigarettes, etc. They gave us cigarettes, and I was stockpiling them.

Later I sold them in Paris for a good price and quit smoking. We finally shoved off to break through the Siegfried Line early one morning.

At the end of the war, we stopped on a hillside overlooking a river one day. That night, tracer bullets flew all night between a pocket of Germans on the opposite side of the river and us. Finally things grew quieter, and we were ordered to move down. Some of the Germans had managed to cross the river to our side on a makeshift railroad bridge. After hearing the war was over, they had fallen asleep in their jeeps and trucks there next to the river. They were exhausted. I met a German captain who just handed me his new P38 pistol. My son has that gun now. Some of the Germans threw their weapons in the river, but others handed them to us.

The Germans seemed humble now that the fighting was over. Of course, many of them were almost starving. One man we captured told me, "I have something I want to give you for your wife. When I get to wherever they send me, they'll take everything anyway. I would rather you had it." It was a nice camera and tripod. A sergeant, another guy and I had been sick the night before, and our outfit had left without us that morning. We got lost trying to catch up with them and circled a hillside. That was when I saw four German soldiers in white uniforms. After they saw us watching them, they surrendered to us thinking there would be more Americans coming up behind us.

Those four Germans had been guarding a hospital that held 99 German civilians and soldiers. Still separated from our outfit, we stood guard for a while outside the hospital. The head doctor walked out and said, "Have you heard that your president is dead?" I had not. He said, "Roosevelt is dead. He died last night." So much was happening at that time. Of course, that was sad news. Later I stopped an American colonel who was passing by the hospital and told him he shouldn't be going in the direction he was going. He asked why not, and I said, "Every time somebody goes that way, they get into a firefight." He said, "Well, I don't want to go that way then." When I explained how I happened to be there and asked what he thought I should do, he said, "Stay right here until somebody comes to relieve you. Y'all have a good catch right here." So I did, and we really didn't have any trouble out of the Germans who were there. A few hours later, some American soldiers showed up to relieve us. Eventually, the three of us caught up with our outfit.

During the latter part of World War II, our division was transferred to Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. From then on, we flew from one hot spot to another. When the war ended in Europe, many soldiers were expecting to be shipped to Japan for the big push there. One day a sergeant told me, "Burkett, you ought to get one of these trucks and carry it to Paris. That's where they're pooling them." So I drove a truck to Paris. While I was gone, my name was called. When they couldn't find me, they sent a single boy to Japan in my place. That sergeant had helped me avoid that. We had been together almost every day, and he was a good friend.

Finally I made it onto an aircraft carrier headed back to the States. It had been converted into a troop ship. The second floor had been stripped down to accommodate bunks stacked six high with very little clearance between them. Everything went fine until we ran into a storm one night. There was a lot of praying going on that night, including mine. The ship was making some awful sounds, and I thought it was coming apart until a sailor told me that was routine.

I did finally make it home, however, and I sure was glad to see East Texas again. It was great to be there, but it was kind of scary, too. I didn't have a job and didn't know what I was going to do. I just knew I was going to have to start over one day at a time. My wife and friends helped me a lot, but I'll always think the Lord helped get me through it safe and sound.

Leaving my family behind had been rough. My son really only knew me from pictures my

wife had shown him. The night I came home, he was fooling around on the piano and I said, "Marshall, quit. Quit doing that." He whirled around and said, "I don't have to mind you! I just have to mind Mama." When I reached over and got a handful of him, my wife said, "Now Marshall, don't whip him. He just doesn't really know." From that time on, I got back into the gear of everyday living. My military experience and faith had made me a better man. I became more tolerant about things that I had flown to pieces about before.

Later we had a daughter but lost her in 1977. She was a Christian girl and worked at Green Acres Baptist Church. My son is a church deacon at another church. I've helped out as an usher at Green Acres Baptist Church for about 12 years now and try to help in other ways, too. I enjoy working with the church and would miss it if I didn't do it. I have a Christian family and believe the Lord has blessed me for it.

Though I participated in three major battles — the Battle of the Bulge, the Rhur Pocket and Rumachen Bridgehead, I only was wounded once when light shrapnel hit me. But it wasn't serious, thank God. They sent a Purple Heart medal to me at home after the war. So I've always felt like the Lord was with me all the way.

America and its flag still mean a lot to me. The flag always flew at my school when I was a boy. Every Monday morning, we went to chapel and sang patriotic and Christian songs. Those were good days. I wish the schools all did that now, so that experience could dwell in the hearts of today's children. When I hear the Star Spangled Banner or witness a patriotic celebration, I'm uplifted and am so grateful that we still have a free country. Everyone should have that in his or her heart.