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World War II

Raised in Clarksville, Texas in Red River County, I joined the service in November 1943. My mother was a widow with five boys to raise, so we grew up pretty quickly. Her oldest child (a girl) left home soon after our father died. Three of my brothers also served in World War II. One brother received a deferment because his wife was desperately ill.

I went through basic training at Camp Blanding in Jasper, Florida. When I returned to Florida years later and asked about the old camp, they told me it had become a prison camp. I thought that's what it was in 1943. After boot camp, I shipped out to Liverpool, England in 1944 to join Company B of the 22nd Infantry Regiment of the 4th Division.

By June, our division reached France. From a hill outside St. Lo, we could see that the Germans had surrounded the town. On July 25, at least 150 to 200 allied airplanes flew over. I had never seen so many airplanes at one time. Ironically, each group had only one bombsite. Someone would set off a smoke signal on the ground so when the bombardiers saw it, they knew to fly so far and drop their bombs. They had flown in from England, but the wind had changed by the time they arrived at St. Lo. About half their bombs were dropped on our troops. I never heard how many men were killed or wounded. The Army had a strange way of doing things. If someone was injured and taken to a hospital, we never heard what happened to him... even if he was our best friend.

After the Germans left St. Lo, we proceeded toward Paris. As a frontline unit, we fought our way there and ran into a lot of resistance. A French armored unit accompanied us. Every other day, we could ride on their tanks rather than walk. In Paris, American flags were displayed in front of all the houses on the main streets, but we knew there still were a bunch of German flags in their attics. The French were playing it both ways.

Though we only were in Paris about two hours, we saw a lot of American WWI soldiers

there. We never found out whether they had been discharged or possibly were deserters listed as missing in action (MIA). The economy back home was bad, and the military paid a \$10,000 benefit to the family of a soldier reported as killed or missing in action. A person with \$10,000 was rich then, so I suspected that some World War II veterans listed as MIA's actually just decided to stay there. My salary in 1943 was \$21.00 a month. Three years later, I earned \$50.00 a month. Of course, they furnished our clothes, room and board. It wasn't a bad deal, especially considering I had been used to working for 50 to 75 cents a day at home.

From Paris we marched to Germany and were the first troops to hit the Siegfried Line. For six weeks, whenever we stopped at night, we had to dig a foxhole, eat our C-Rations, stand guard two hours and sleep two hours. It was summertime, so there were only four hours of darkness.

Our platoon leader was a Louisiana Cajun named Fontaineaux, and I was his assistant. He spoke fluent French. All the time we were overseas, he never dug a foxhole. At night, no matter what was happening, he would lay down beside a tree or a log to sleep. When we were supposed to stay in a particular spot for three or four days once, he said, "Why don't we make us a nice sled trench?" A foxhole was only large enough for one person to stand in, but a sled trench was long enough to lie down in and was about two feet deep. So we dug a reasonably safe sled trench and covered it with logs and dirt. The next morning, we received orders to move out. The trench had about a two-foot opening at one end, and Fontaineaux was hunkered down in that hole waiting on the signal to move out. Since there wasn't room enough for me, I was laying down. Suddenly a mortar shell landed about six inches from the hole and took his face off. Though I couldn't hear anything for a couple of days, I wasn't hurt. Actually, I never got a scratch throughout the war.

Before crossing the Prum River into Germany, our company spent 31 days in the cold and wet Hurtgen Forest from the middle of November through the middle of December. We had moved back to Luxembourg to get replacements and were on the fringe of the breakthrough into Germany. Normally an infantry company has 180 men. During those 31 days, 800 replacement soldiers were sent in to us. When we finally were relieved, 22 men were left in my company. Only four men had been there from the beginning — the captain (our company commander), the radio operator, a sergeant and me.

By the time the four of us left the Hurtgen Forest, we were pretty close. Captain Tony Bazarro was one of the best company commanders I ever met, though he liked to fight. So I took a job as his runner and sort of bodyguard. About a year younger than I was, the captain came from a wealthy family that owned three steel mills. Not caring whether or not they booted him out of the service, he took no guff off anyone. If no other ranking officer was around, I never saluted him or called him "Captain". He was just "Tony", and he didn't go anywhere without me... except once.

Around sundown one day, we crossed the Siegfried Line and spotted a big German bunker that was a trash heap. Tony said, "Texas, go in there and clean that mess up a little bit so we can stay there. I'm going to go check the troops." Thirty minutes later, he came back and hollered for me. A shell had exploded and torn up his left arm. Later he told me, "Tex, the reason I wouldn't let you go with me was that I knew something was going to happen. That shell exploded exactly where you would have been standing."

Ernie Pyle, the famous reporter, once took a picture of the captain, our jeep driver and me. Highly regarded by the troops, Ernie was reporting from the frontlines but was killed later somewhere in the Pacific.

I made it as far as the second little German town before my leg began to swell, and I

couldn't walk any further. So they evacuated me to a hospital in England. By the time I left the hospital, Germany had surrendered. I was in transit to rejoin my company when I heard the news. The Panzer Division was the only German unit that had not surrendered, but they were worse than the American paratroopers. Eleanor Roosevelt once said our paratroopers would have to be sent to school when they came home to get them out of the habit of killing people. Captured German soldiers told us, "Well, we're through. We've lost the war. But you need to go into Russia now and take them. You're going to have to fight them at some time or other."

Chosen as the first division to leave Germany, the 4th Infantry Division was supposed to go through six weeks of jungle training after a 30-day furlough at home. Then we would hit Japan. The Japanese surrendered while we were on furlough in the States. When I heard about America dropping the atomic bomb in Japan, I was just thankful. They were the enemy, and the bomb basically brought the war to an end. At that point, all I was thinking was how glad I was not to be going to Japan.

After my furlough, I was stationed at Camp Butler in North Carolina, about halfway between Raleigh and Durham. The Army had a point system. Once a soldier earned a certain number of points, he could be discharged automatically. But I didn't have enough points to get a discharge, and I hated that base. I thought, *Well, I could reenlist for a year and get a different post.* I didn't think they would send me overseas again if I only had one year to serve. How wrong I was.

I wound up in Pusan in Occupied Korea. The Korean Conflict had not begun. After two weeks with an Infantry Division there, I was transferred to the MP Division. For the rest of the time, I served as a warden of the stockade. The prisoners didn't give us much trouble. Some of them actually were framed and shouldn't have been there. One Filipino soldier had been assigned to CID as a cook at the officers' mess hall and hated officers. During a Christmas party, they took up a collection to buy drinks. Since he was related to half the people in Korea and could speak Korean, he was sent to town to buy the drinks. After his relatives gave him the drinks and refused to accept his money, he was tried for accepting gifts from the Koreans. (The Korean people were off limits to us.) Basically, he just slept there because he still worked in the mess hall each day. But he was still there when I left.

Two other prisoners had been sentenced to 20 years at Leavenworth for selling drugs and were awaiting an appeal. Back in the States, they both had worked for a railroad company. One was an engineer, and the other was a fireman. Neither one was worried about their situation. The railroad system would stand behind them back home, so they didn't think they ever would serve a day in Leavenworth.

I never heard from Captain Bazarro after the war. Of course, we couldn't keep names and addresses with us on the frontlines, or anything else that could be traced by the enemy. My unit never held a reunion. Over the years, I have stayed in touch with a friend in Illinois who went through basic training with me. As a civilian, I was too busy trying to make a living to try to contact anyone. When I was discharged, I didn't want anything to do with anything that had a military insignia on it. I just wanted to go home.

Back in Clarksville, the GI Bill paid for my on-the-job training as a motion picture machine operator. I also studied photography for four months and loved it. Then I finished my education at a business college. For years, I worked at theaters. In Breckenridge, Texas, I worked for Sears until they closed the store. After that, I worked at the theater at night and helped a friend with electrical work during the day. Next I worked for a lumberyard for six years and a mobile home factory for four years. In 1972, my wife and I moved to Tyler. I spent the next 20

years working for the State of Texas investigating consumer complaints and inspecting mobile homes and mobile home manufacturers. Now I have retired but still do contract work for a Florida company. My wife and I joined Green Acres Baptist Church in about 1974.

I was a Christian when I went into the service, but most of the soldiers in my company were Yankees and Catholic. Over the years, I've tried to forget most of the things I saw during World War II. One of my best friends, a fellow named Caldwell, had his leg blown off and died. We were always in line together. Looking back, I wouldn't take a million dollars for my military experience. But I wouldn't go through it again for a hundred million dollars.