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World War II

I was named for my parents, Luther Cranford and Ursula Joyce Cranford, and was raised in Alba, Wood County, Texas, where my father ran a drugstore for 60 years. My half-brother and I also became pharmacists and have been licensed now for more than 50 years.

On December 7, 1941, I was a pharmacy student at the University of Texas in Austin. Taking a break from my studies, I was sitting in a drugstore drinking a milkshake when an announcement was broadcast on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I went back to my room and was thinking about how that would affect thousands of people. About that time, my roommates came in and we discussed it. Within a month or so, some had joined the service while others were drafted after they got their degree.

I realized I would be called sooner or later but thought I stood a better chance of serving my preferred military branch if I volunteered. At the end of the semester, I went home to Alba and enlisted in January 1942. By February, my first job in the military was to oversee a busload of recruits headed from Quitman to the induction station in Dallas. I was to be sure that no one changed their mind and jumped off the bus.

After processing in Dallas, we were sent to Camp Walters, an infantry-training center at Mineral Wells, Texas. We were marching one day when a drill sergeant issued a command several of us didn't like. I muttered a complaint, and he happened to hear me. Long story short, I thought he was going to ground the entire platoon because of my remark. Though nothing really happened, I could have been in a lot of trouble. But it made me realize, “Uh-oh, I'm in the Army

now!”

My experiences during basic training at Camp Walters were extremely beneficial in the end. I had to get up at five o'clock each morning, do calisthenics for 30 minutes, eat a breakfast big enough for two or three people, and then march about 10 miles before reporting to the hospital for my regular duties. Within three months of my arrival, I had never felt better in my life. I was in such good shape that I felt I could lick the world.

Recognizing my college training, they had assigned me to the pharmacy at the camp hospital. What a break! I stayed there one year, filling prescriptions, and earned a rating as a pharmacy technician and a medical technician. In the pharmacy, we had to prepare huge quantities of medications, like five gallons of cough syrup or 25 pounds of ointment. We bought the ingredients and made everything ourselves. At times, I had to go out into the field to minister to the soldiers at the various clinics in the camp.

I could have received even more training and regret that I did not. They wanted to send me to the Army Pharmacy School, but I didn't think I needed that three-month course since I already had practically three years of college courses in pharmaceuticals. Of course, I was young and thought I knew everything. If I had agreed to go, I would have gained more knowledge and experience and also would have earned an extra stripe.

Then I was transferred to Camp Roberts, California, and was sure I would be going to the Pacific. One of the officers there seemed to like me. He said, “We have two lists here. Some men are being sent to the Eastern Theater of Operations and some to the South Pacific. Which one do you prefer?” I said I wanted to go back to the medics.

A rumor soon started that our group was going to Wake Island in the South Pacific. In our case, however, Wake Island was a way station for Camp Swift in Bastrop, Texas. Soldiers were unloaded there as they arrived at the camp. After we were there a while, the way station became a field hospital unit. So our responsibilities were the same as those in a normal hospital, plus we had to put up ward tents at night with no light. Becoming disenchanted and wanting to do more glamorous work (we were young), three or four of us decided to apply for the Air Corps.

We were accepted and sent to Shepherd Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. Other soldiers from different parts of the country apparently had the same idea. To deal with the huge influx of men trying to transfer there, they reassigned 30,000 men to other branches of the service. I was sent to Camp Barkley, Texas, a replacement center for men who eventually would replace returning, wounded or dead soldiers fighting overseas. While I was stationed there, I married my high school sweetheart, Marja Sadler.

Next I was sent to Camp Reynolds, Pennsylvania, and sailed from New York on June 15, 1944, to England aboard the old USS George Washington. Now the new George Washington is an aircraft carrier, but the old one was a German luxury liner that the Americans had captured during World War I. Many famous people had crossed the Atlantic on that ship, including the king and queen of Belgium, the queen of Romania, the former Prince of Wales, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Wilson had sailed on it when he traveled to Europe to sign the Treaty of Versailles. I doubt that the original George Washington is still commissioned.

We stayed in the central part of England for a while, living at first in tents. Later we moved into the 75-room castle of the Earl of St. Vincent. Lord Jervis, the earl, had played an important part in Lord Nelson's Navy. In early September, we sailed for France and landed at Utah Beach. On the beach, we saw the ruins resulting from D-Day that had occurred three months earlier. I'll never forget the first little town we came to—St. Mary Mere Eglise, France.

The village had figured prominently into the landing on D-Day. We stayed in tents in a pasture a few miles away before being transferred to a village called Ciney in southeastern Belgium.

Again, we slept in tents. The Belgians couldn't get over how quickly we medics poured the concrete foundations for our tents. For our hospital, we planned to use a beautiful, four-story building with tiled floors and gold-plated faucets. It originally was a school for friars, but the Germans had converted it to a hospital. Since the nurses' quarters were in the hospital, our men had to keep sleeping in tents. We specialized in treating soldiers there who were suffering from combat fatigue (known as shell shock during World War I). Our job was to determine the severity of the problems and decide whether they could return to the front lines or should be sent home and dismissed.

Some of our patients had faced horrible situations in battle, and their nerves were shot. The first thing the hospital staff did when those boys arrived was to put them under insulin shock and administer a truth serum in an effort to identify their basic fears. Then through counseling and some medication, they were able to return about half those boys to duty. Of course, insulin shock was a little rough. It depleted body sugar. As soon as a man had finished that treatment, he would be handed a bowl of oatmeal laced with lots of sugar.

When the war in Europe ended in 1945, we were returning to the States when the war with Japan ended. We were scheduled to go on to the South Pacific after a little R&R back home. Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, word reached us that Japan had surrendered. That ship exploded with cheers.

After I arrived in the States, I was dismissed at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio and made a beeline for Houston. My wife was living with her relatives in Galena Park, a Houston suburb. Then we moved back to Alba, where our parents were. I finally went back to school and earned my degree.

I wouldn't take anything for my experiences during the war, but I wouldn't want to go through them again. Though an enlightening time, it certainly made me grow up in a hurry. My father was fairly successful, and I had been pampered more or less. My half-brother and half-sister were older. Their mother had died when they were very young, and my father remarried. I needed to grow up because things had always been too easy for me.

Actually, I had a relatively easy time in the Army, though there were two or three anxious moments. Once I was standing outside my tent in England and saw a plane that I thought was ours. By the time the plane got to our camp, it started diving for us. I thought that was it and expected him to start strafing the camp. But he turned around, gained altitude and flew off. That was the end of that.

One night in Ciney, I was in charge of a group of men who were working in the hospital wards to give the nurses a break. As I walked into a ward, I saw a soldier sitting on the edge of his bed and leaning against the windowsill as he looked out the window. I said, "Hey, fella, it's a little late. Don't you want to go to bed and get some rest?"

When he turned toward me, I saw that he had a butcher knife in his hand. Of course, I wasn't about to tackle him. So I walked down the hall and told a sentry about the situation. Another sentry joined us, and we returned to the ward. We managed to calm him down and talk him into giving us the knife.

My third anxious moment came during the Battle of the Bulge, though I really wasn't particularly scared at any time because I knew the Lord always was with me. The Germans had advanced to Ciney, and orders came down around midnight on December 23, 1944, to evacuate all personnel and patients who were able to travel, leaving only a skeleton crew to care for the

ones remaining behind. One officer was so frightened that we had to pick him up and put him in the truck. We pulled back from Ciney and moved to a schoolhouse in Charleroi. I'll never forget being there on Christmas Day. By December 26th, the weather cleared and our troops started moving in. I never in my life had seen so many planes as tanks at one time.

I was fortunate to have come from a good Christian family, so faith has always been a big part of my life. My father was a deacon in the church and taught the men's Sunday school class for about 40 years; and my mother was active in WMU. That was a big influence on me, though I strayed some even after I was converted at age 12. But I never consciously did anything to embarrass my parents.

Never an excessive worrier, I wasn't afraid of losing my life during the war because I knew I'd have a better life waiting for me. I had been saved. So many of the boys overseas were used to gambling, drinking and other things. As we sailed to England, I remember standing on deck trying to see something while a bunch of guys were shooting craps and uttering oaths with every other word. I knew that wasn't for me, so I never fell into that trap and do things I shouldn't do. I smoked some but never drank.

One of the toughest boys I ever had to deal with was a first sergeant for one of the companies. He liked me, and I liked him. I think he recognized that I was different, and he respected me. When I was in charge of our quarters one weekend, the sergeant had gone to town and apparently had too much to drink. He came back and rammed his fist through the sheetrock wall. That was a dilemma. I wanted his friendship, yet I knew I would lose my stripes if I didn't report the incident. I prayed about it and tried to do the right thing for him and for the service. Finally, I decided I had to report it. He was a first sergeant one day and a buck private the next. But everything worked out all right in the end, and we remained friends. He earned his stripes back later, and I didn't lose mine.

Patriotism is a wonderful feeling that is hard to describe. I get a lump in my throat every time I see the American flag and think of all the blessings we have and what our country stands for. Of course, our flag is just a symbol, but boy what a symbol it is. Today, patriotism still plays an important part in my life. I get so aggravated about the current movement to change the pledge of allegiance and leave God out of it. I believe in God and His works, and I believe in America. I believe we have the best country in the world. Though we have problems, they'll be solved with God's help.