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World War II

Three of my brothers served in the infantry during World War II. My parents had four sons and two grandsons in the service all at one time. One of my nephews also was in the infantry, and the other one was in the Navy. I joined first in 1940 before the draft. The others were drafted. But we never saw each other again until the war was over.

My first two years in the Army were spent at Fort Sam Houston in Texas for infantry training with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, a heavy machine gun company. We were on maneuvers in Oklahoma when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Then I spent a year at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin before going to Ireland in 1943. Nine months later, we moved on to England, crossed the English Channel on a Polish coal ship and landed on the Normandy beachhead.

The Normandy landing began around daylight. As we sat there all day, waiting our turn, we used field glasses to watch the other soldiers going in. Of course, one always thinks of the Lord in a situation like that. As I saw so many men dying, I prayed and wondered if I would ever see home again.

Just before dark, my unit was loaded onto a barge and went in as part of the second of the attack's three waves. When the barge's tailgate fell open like a dump truck, we all jumped into the waist-deep water and headed toward the beach. There were so many dead soldiers floating in the water and laying on the beach that we could hardly make our way through them. We also had to worry about the small arms fire from the Germans, though our planes had managed to bomb them enough to push them back somewhat. A young man at the time, I naturally was scared.

As we moved across the beach, I tried to protect myself from gunfire as much as possible and prayed for the Lord's protection. We advanced inland about two miles before stopping to

sleep on our raincoats on the ground with our .30-caliber machine guns by our sides. The gunfire continued all night. When we woke up the next morning, the raincoat another man and I had pulled over us had a hole in it. Digging in the dirt, we found a .50-caliber bullet. It had fallen right between us.

Paratroopers had landed behind the lines before the landing. As we advanced through France, we saw several of them hanging dead in the trees. The Germans had shot them before they could get down. When rescued one who had been hiding out with some Frenchmen, he was really glad to see us.

I was a squad leader over about eight men — a number one gunner and number two gunner along with men who carried our ammunition. Each squad had one water-cooled machinegun. Though some men with the rifle companies engaged in bayonet battles with the Germans, I always used a machinegun. At some hedgerows in France one day, our machine gun was blown all to pieces. A bullet pierced one of our number one gunner's big ears. The Germans were on one side of the small hedgerow, and we were on the other trying to get out. When our company commander crossed to a gate in another hedgerow, I followed him. Just as I passed the gate, a German grabbed my arm. I backhanded him, dove over the hedge and took off running. Maybe he didn't shoot me because he was as excited as I was.

When we reached the next hedgerow, we stopped and set up the machineguns to open fire. Since our water-cooled gun had been blown up, I was issued a different machinegun. Not familiar with it, we burned the new gun up by firing so many shells. Unlike a water-cooled machinegun, there was no jacket around the barrel to keep it cool.

The next day we pushed further inland before having to stop for 10 to 15 days to hold the line and wait for General Patton's tanks. The tank division had landed on Normandy with us. At night, I could hear other soldiers praying in their foxholes. After the tanks arrived, we moved forward close behind as they rolled through France. One day I was right behind a tank that was firing hulls constantly. Suddenly someone yelled at me, "There's a grenade!" Boy, I hit the ground. Though the grenade burst right by me, I wasn't hurt. I had thought it was another hull.

God was with me so many times. As I was leading my squad over a hedgerow once, a mortar shell exploded next to me and knocked me down. A piece of shrapnel hit the ammunition box in my hand, cut my hand and then hit my hip. I thought it had torn my hip off but finally realized there was no blood. After the medic patched up my hand, I led my squad into battle. I was awarded a Bronze Star for that action. I should have received a Purple Heart, but apparently they didn't turn in a report for that. Often when we were pinned down flat on the ground, we would find bullet holes in our backpacks afterward.

By that time, the Germans were running. They no longer had gas for their airplanes, so we didn't have to worry about air attacks. Often we saw their trucks pulling other trucks behind them to save gasoline. We took prisoners when we would catch up with them along the way. After disarming them, we turned them over to soldiers behind us who took care of them elsewhere. Sometimes we had to stop to setup our machine guns and provide cover so the rifle companies could advance.

My outfit took the town of Briest, France, in a battle that lasted about two weeks. Patton's tanks bypassed the town, but we stayed behind. Just before we made it to the center of Briest, I was transferred to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Publicity and Psychological Warfare Division. By then, my company had been in France for about four months and had suffered more than 200% casualties. I no longer knew very many men in my unit. Replacements would arrive every evening, and some of them would be killed that night or the next morning. There was no time to get to know people.

Of course, I lost several good friends whom I had served with over the years. One of my buddies was just walking along when a shell blew his head off. I watched many men die, and it was a terrible ordeal. All I could do was trust the Lord to get me through it, and He did.

Finally, I was sent to Holland and stayed there for a long time. That was good duty. I lived in a hotel and was glad to be out of the infantry. It was the responsibility of the 72<sup>nd</sup> to carry correspondence to the frontline each day. For a while, I served as a supply sergeant. Then I became a motorpool sergeant dispatching jeeps for the men carrying the correspondence. Every morning I dispatched a jeep and a driver to the front lines, and they would return each night. The Germans already had been through Holland, and we were about 20 or 30 miles behind the frontlines. The correspondence came from across Europe and even the States. We also reported news of the war back to those places for the newspapers.

When the war ended, we were in Magnaverde, Germany. By then I had earned enough points to get out of the service, though they had been talking about sending me to Japan since I was single. But I got to come home and was tickled to death. On my way back, I ran into my youngest brother in France. He went with me to the boat, but I had to leave him behind.

We landed at New Jersey, where I stayed for a few days before going on to San Antonio and receiving my discharge papers on September 24, 1945. My folks had left the farm and moved to Houston while I was in the service since no one was left to help them run it. One of my best friends remained with our infantry unit for the rest of the war after I was transferred. A month or so after my discharge, he came to Houston and lived with my parents for about a year. I thought a lot of him. His daddy was an Assembly of God preacher.

I was home only a few weeks when I met the prettiest little Christian girl you ever saw. We married in December and have been happy ever since. She really straightened me out and helped me forget the things I needed to forget. I used to dream about the war and almost hurt my wife in my sleep one night. But I finally got over that. I've never watched war movies. Mostly, I've tried to block those memories out of my mind and don't think about it now. I never attended a reunion or returned to France.