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First Sergeant, U.S. Army
World War II

On November 2, 1939, I was sworn into the U.S. Army in Dallas and caught a train to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio for basic training. I spent the next two years there. Before the war began, we didn't even have enough rifles at Fort Sam Houston to go around. Usually, there was only one rifle for each squad of twelve men. We used that rifle, more or less, for teaching the nomenclature of the weapon — how to tear it down, put it back together and clean it. When World War II broke out, that's where we sat. But there must have been more rifles in storage somewhere because soon everyone had a rifle for which they received rigid training. Everything changed overnight. Though we had lots of free time before, suddenly we were hiking 25 miles every day and eating lunch in the field.

After the war began, the military made instructors out of most of the men already in the service and shipped them to different camps. The first place they sent me was Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. There we formed, and I helped train, the first tank destroyer battalion. That battalion wound up in Germany and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. But I was lucky... I stayed in the States to continue training soldiers.

From Fort Hood, they sent us to Camp Bowie in Brownwood, Texas — the best thing that ever happened to me. I got married while I was there. On December 12, 2003, my wife and I will have been married for 60 years. Three days after our wedding, I was shipped out to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. Then I was sent to Camp Forest in Tennessee, where we formed another tank destroyer battalion. In all, we formed six tank destroyer battalions for combat in Europe. Each of our destroyers weighed 36 tons and had 55-millimeter cannons on the front along with

50-caliber machine guns mounted on each side. I guess participating in the formation of those battalions was one my biggest accomplishments in the service.

Sometimes I worked with a group of 15 to 20 guys, and sometimes I was sent out individually as an instructor on cadres (a key group of officers and enlisted personnel necessary to establish and train a new military unit). After the war, we worked with recruits for 13 weeks of basic training. Starting the men out on close order drills, we then taught them what we could about combat before turning them loose. By then, they were ready to go. A lot of them went overseas for 13 weeks of excellent training.

On night maneuvers once in Tallahoma, Tennessee, I was riding in a destroyer, and our only guide was a little blue light on the back of the vehicle ahead of us. But the driver of our tank failed to follow the blue light. We went off over a mountain and rolled until the tank wound up on some railroad tracks. Luckily, we were belted in and nobody was hurt. Six men were in the tank that night, including gunners, the driver, the assistant driver and a commander. Of course, our driver had a lot of explaining to do. He was relieved from duty as a driver of a destroyer as a result of that incident.

Twice I also went out on maneuvers in the Louisiana swamps. The first time, we were out about six weeks. We slept outside in pup tents (two men to a tent) and bathed in whatever creeks we could find. Most of the time, we didn't have anything to lie on other than blankets. That was quite an experience.

My Army salary was about \$21.00 per month. After paying for my laundry, toilet articles, and other necessities, I wound up with about ten dollars. I had to pay for my own haircuts, too. We had a barber in our company who charged a quarter for a haircut and loaned money to everybody. Standing at the end of the pay line every payday to collect his loans, he didn't miss a thing.

Mostly, I was just bouncing around during the war, though I had different positions or different duties each time. I wound up as a first sergeant. A master sergeant is the highest rank for enlisted personnel. First sergeants then were placed in command of a company, and master sergeants performed administrative duties. In February 1944, I was discharged at Camp Forest.

Though I made many lifelong friends in the service and stayed in touch with three very close friends in San Antonio and Houston throughout the years, most of them are deceased now. My childhood friend Vernon Payne enlisted with me originally. We had graduated from high school together and were inseparable. When we decided there was nothing else to do, we joined the Army but didn't get to stay together. After our arrival in San Antonio, we were assigned to different companies. We still saw each other pretty often; then we pretty well lost contact until after the war. Vernon died about eight years ago.

I have attended a few reunions of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. They get together every two years in different places, including San Antonio, Texas; Branson, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; and Hot Springs, Arkansas. Four years ago, only 40 out of 270 men attended. Not all the ones missing had died. Some were not able to come because of sickness or other plans. I missed the last reunion, but hope to make the next one. I'll find out more when I receive their newsletter. It's called the *Panther Track* after our original logo.

Every young man should have to serve some time in the military when he finishes school. It helps them grow up, more or less, and teaches them responsibility and discipline. At 20, I was one of the youngest instructors in my outfit and was instructing guys 30-35 years old. Though I'm sure they wished they could say what they were thinking, they couldn't. They would just go ahead and do whatever I told them to do.

After I left the service, I took advantage of their “on-the-job training” deal. It was really a help to me because that training eventually helped me form my own vending machine business, which is now a corporation. The Army paid my salary each month in exchange for my training at a company in Longview. By the end of my training period, I had saved enough money to buy a car.

I was married and had a six-month-old son when I came home from the Army. I like to say, “I had a wife, a baby, a bedroom suite and \$13.00 when I got home.” I didn’t have any clothes to wear since I had outgrown everything. All I had was my khaki uniforms. In 1944, they also were still rationing many things like sugar and meat. In order to buy clothes so I could work, I went to see Sam Cohen at Peoples National Bank about a loan. We talked for about 30 minutes before he finally asked, “What can I do for you?”

“Well, Sam, I got a job. But I just got home from the military and need some clothes,” I said.

“Well, how much do you need?” he asked.

“About \$250.00 should do it. I don’t know how soon I can pay you back, but I will pay you.”

He said, “Well, I’m going to let you have the money, and we’ll set it up on a six-month note. If you can’t pay at the end of six months, come in and pay the interest. We’ll renew the loan.”

Of course, money was scarce then. So it was ironic that a man with no money and no credit could get a loan. Just knowing each other made the difference.

I grew up in a Christian home. My mother was an old-fashioned Apostolic — a religion involving shouting, screaming, hollering, rolling in the sawdust. I never took to it much. Actually, I didn’t become a Christian until I got married. Since then I’ve seen God’s providence in my life more than once. After our three children (two boys and a girl) came along, my prayers were that He would let me live and provide for them until they were grown and out of school. Though I’m 80 now and my children are grown, they still are foremost in my prayers. I pray for them every day. My children are Christians, too, and they all live in Tyler. My wife had a stroke about three years ago and is now at an assisted living facility. I go there every day to have breakfast with her and visit.

I think our country is the greatest country in the world. I have my doubts about whether we’re going to continue to enjoy our current life styles, however. This terrorism problem is frightening, and I think we’re going to survive this ordeal only by the grace of God.