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World War II

Eighteen years old and fresh out of high school, I went into the infantry. After an induction in Dallas, they sent me to Camp Walters in Mineral Wells, Texas. When they asked for volunteer truck drivers at the camp, I wasn't quite that dumb. The guys who did volunteer ended up pushing wheelbarrows loaded with rocks up and down a hill. A few days later, I was sent to Camp Landing in Florida for 17 weeks of basic training.

From Florida, I went to Fort George G. Meade in Maryland — a staging area for a POE (Point of Embarkation) camp in New Jersey. During that time, the powers that be decided too many buck privates were getting killed overseas. So I was sent to Camp Fannin in Tyler for six weeks. Then I joined a division at Camp Claiborne in Louisiana. If I had shipped out earlier, I would have gone as a replacement. That would not have been good. I really didn't want to be stuck in a hole on the frontlines at midnight. God was looking after me pretty well.

I sailed to England with the 84th Infantry Division, the old "Lincoln Rail Splitters." We were supposed to participate in D-Day, but we lost part of our convoy on the way over. A ship had problems and had to turn back. So we spent three weeks restricted to camp in England. When the rest of our outfit arrived, we went to the Cherbourg Peninsula where the landing had occurred on D-Day. There was so much destruction there. It really was a blessing that we had missed it.

Like a million other kids who had been sucked up off the farms and from small towns, I was scared. In Holland, we faced combat for the first time. Then we advanced into Germany. At one point, we were crossing the Ruhr River (the last waterway before reaching the Rhine River). Then they just loaded us up on six-by's and took off. We didn't know where we were going. As we drove through Aachen, Germany, we saw an American MP standing on a corner and started teasing him by saying we were on our way to a 72-hour R&R in Holland. He said, "Shoot, you're going to Belgium."

"Belgium? What's that?"

"Well," he said, "they've had a big breakthrough up there."

Sure enough, they had. We stayed in Belgium about six weeks and cut the gasoline supply lines leading to the coast. That was pretty much the end of things for the Germans in Belgium because they couldn't do anything. Their tanks had run out of fuel. If they had made it to their refineries on the coast, we would have been in a mess.

Next we returned to our spot on the Ruhr River. Having suffered some heavy losses, we stayed there for several days waiting for replacements. We planned to hit the river. Then I committed the unpardonable military sin. I volunteered to work the night before the attack was planned, mainly because I was scared and couldn't sleep. All we did was sandbag the river and line up assault boats. When the time came to hit the river, they suddenly told us, "You people are going to be leading the assault."

Though I hadn't bargained for that, it was a Godsend. As lead people, we were largely across the river before the Germans woke up and said, "This is it." They knew we were coming but didn't know when, so the men behind us caught the most flak. After we made it across wearing 80-pound backpacks and carrying extra ammunition, we spent most of the day clearing out the town. Finally they told us, "You guys who worked all night, find you a safe place and get some sleep." We found a wine cellar and sacked out there. The ceiling had been blown up, and timbers were laying everywhere. I was sound asleep on my back when someone threw a shell through the exposed ceiling and caved the cellar in on us. Luckily, I was able to get free of the debris and remember being led out. I had been trying to help a guy who was screaming that he was pinned down. When I pulled out my flashlight, someone came in and slapped it out of my hand, yelling, "Turn that light off!"

I said, "The light's not working." But it was. I couldn't see a thing because something had hit my eyes. So they led me to a first aid station where they cleaned me up and gave me a pretty good shot of something. Four other guys were being treated there, too. We were loaded on an ambulance and told we were going to a field hospital. Before we got far, artillery disabled the ambulance. So they put us on another ambulance, and that's the last thing I remember. When I work up five days later, I asked, "Where in the heck am I? I'm not where I supposed to be." Some guy said, "You're in the hospital in Liege, Belgium." Three weeks later, they transferred me to the 110th General Hospital in Paris for another three weeks. I couldn't return to my combat outfit when I left the hospital because I couldn't see the end of my rifle. Of course, I didn't miss being called a mudface by the sailors we called mop jockeys.

Except for one guy from Alabama, I don't know what happened to the men who were in that cellar with me. My Alabama friend had talked all night long while we were working, and you couldn't mistake his drawl. While I was in the hospital, I heard him talking one day. We talked, but he didn't know anything about the other guys either.

Everything worked out. At first, they were going to send me with some other men to a portable quartermaster bakery. I don't know why since I couldn't boil water. But we couldn't find the bakery because it was following the troops. Meanwhile we were spending our nights at nearby military installations. We stayed with a fighter group on the Luxembourg border for a couple of days. Those guys sure had better living conditions than we had. We went back and forth looking for the bakery until we finally just told them we had run out of money and wanted to be sent back to our replacement depot.

I ended up being assigned to the Military Police with the 290th Division in Rheims, France, where Eisenhower's headquarters were located. Other than getting called in for a few riots, I worked in an office and was not a policeman. During the three months I was there, the war ended. They told us we were going to the Pacific. I thought, *Oh boy. That means another year or*

maybe two.

We left France on a ship and began sailing across the Mediterranean Sea. Half a day out, the captain announced, "This ship, originally scheduled to go to the Philippines, will now land in New York Harbor." We almost turned that ship over.

Since I had not been in the service very long and was single, I didn't have enough points to get a discharge. But I took a 45-day R&R in Houston and San Antonio when I got back to the States. Dang if I didn't get married during that time. I had met the girl two weeks before going on active duty. When my R&R was over, I returned to Fort Sam Houston. They sent me to Camp Claiborne in Louisiana. I had joined the 84th Infantry Division there before I left the States. They asked me, "Is there a camp near your home that you'd like to be assigned to for the rest of your time in the Army? You don't have much time left to serve."

I first told them, "Camp Maxey at Paris, Texas."

They said, "Nope. It's disbanding."

So I suggested, "How about Camp Fannin in Tyler?" They agreed to that, and I worked in the POW camp there. No longer training men, the camp had become a separation center. Mainly I hauled prisoners around for work details until my discharge three months later.

After leaving the service, I was scared to death. I had no skills other than being a good shot, and there wasn't much demand for that. From the time I was six years old, however, I also knew I didn't want to live on a farm all my life. So I decided to go to school with the help of the GI Bill. I earned a business degree. Though I wanted to be a CPA, I couldn't do it because of the injuries to my eyes. Instead, I taught school for three years in Red River County before moving back to Tyler to teach with my wife at Bonner School for the next seven years. Then I taught in Swan, Texas, and at Mattie Jones before returning to Bonner as principal. God recently has seen me through triple-bypass heart surgery and a hip replacement. He's been good to me. I can't complain.

During World War II, I served in Germany, Holland and Belgium. Thank God, I missed D-Day. My division helped break through the lines at Bastogne. It was a joyous reunion when we met up with those GI's who had been surrounded and trapped there. We razzed them good-naturedly about it, but they were glad to see us. They had run out of supplies and were getting pretty hungry.

In spite of the things that happened while I was overseas, I do not feel like a murderer. I did what I had to do. It wasn't fun and it worked on me, but it was a job that had to be done. I don't like to talk about it, and my wife doesn't know about a lot about it. That kind of experience leaves psychological scars that take a while to heal. I didn't see why someone like Hitler had control over my life for two or three years, but he did.

As a Christian, I didn't want to do some things I had to do. But I had no choice. One incident still worries me a little bit. Every division had tanks and artillery. During lulls in battle, a certain young tank man would leave his tank to come talk to us. We became buddies. One night, he told me, "I don't believe in God. If there was a God, He wouldn't let this kind of thing happen." Though intellectually I knew what an atheist was, I didn't know how to talk to him. I never had met one before. Finally I just said, "Well, I don't agree with you there. I'm a Christian and I believe in God and Jesus Christ." I wish I had known how to talk to him in a helpful way.

I know God protected me and got me out of spots I couldn't possibly have escaped under my own power. He also gave me the satisfaction of knowing that I helped to defeat some bad people — Hitler's army. God was always with me.

I came home from the war with a spirit of freedom and faith that America was a great and

moral country. We had destroyed a terrible enemy of democracy. In Europe I lost some of my innocence about people. Kids were fighting other kids, but it took me a while to realize that. By and large, the Germans were just like us. Not many people realize how few Germans actually were Nazis. The problem was that the Nazis controlled them.

There's no comparison between American patriotism during World War II and now. I feel especially sorry for the men who fought in Vietnam with no support from the people or the government. They had to fight with one hand tied behind their back. Though I don't believe we should have been there, I admire those soldiers. America is the best country on earth, but we sure have gotten away from some of our earlier principles. There was a great upsurge of patriotism and Christianity after the events of September 11, 2001, and I hope it continues. My times of contribution are about over, so I hope the younger generation will get their lives in good order and continue with a spirit of strong patriotism and Christianity. Unless they get behind America, we may not always be the best. We always will have to struggle against evil forces and do the best we can.