



J. P. “Jack” Pinkerton
U.S. Army
World War II

I was inducted into the U.S. Army in Little Rock, Arkansas, on February 9, 1943. Remaining in my home state, I went to basic training at Camp Robertson, Arkansas. Then I was transferred to Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas, to help open it.

The Camp Fannin barracks were empty when I arrived, and the camp wasn't quite finished. We had to set up all the bunks for the trainees coming in. Six months later, you would not have recognized the place. Shrubs, grass and flowers had been planted, so the grounds were beautiful. There were as many soldiers in the camp as there were people living in Tyler. It became like another town. I was in charge of the supplies for one of the ten large mess halls that each fed 2,500 men three meals a day. When a soldier left Camp Fannin, he could go to any branch of the service. A replacement training center, the camp offered classes in artillery, tanks, infantry, antiaircraft, etc.

When World War II was at its worst and we lost so many men, I was shipped overseas as a replacement in 1944. If there's ever another war like that one, I hope no one has to go as a replacement. You don't belong to anyone and are treated like an orphan until you reach your outfit. On the way to the front, we rode in boxcars for two days and two nights. There were so many soldiers in those boxcars that we had to sleep head-to-toe every night. We stopped a lot so we could leave the train to eat our meals. The cold weather caused most everybody to get sick. When we finally reached our destination, I had a very high fever and thought I would die. We were told to report to the Orderly Room at two o'clock the next morning if we wanted to be on sick call. When I went there, they transported me to a hospital where I remained for four or five weeks and almost died from pneumonia.

After I left the hospital, we were staying in tents in a big warehouse. On Christmas Day of 1944, we ate Christmas dinner at midnight and then were loaded onto trucks to join General Patton's 3rd Army on the frontlines. I joined my division a day later. My truck was full of replacement soldiers along with a second lieutenant who had served with an antiaircraft division previously. When I arrived at my platoon, I found that he had been assigned as our platoon leader.

The allied planes in England had been fogged in for several days. But on Christmas Day

the sun came out, and they were able to fly over in one wave after the other. As we made our way to the front, some of those planes were flying back with holes in their wings. Many of the fighter planes and bombers had been shot down. That aerial attack was a big turning point in the war. If they had not been able to fly, the Germans probably would have broken through the lines.

The Battle of the Bulge had begun on December 16, 1944. I joined my division during the heat of that battle. We were fighting the 11th Panzer Division — one of the crack German divisions, and I was a rifleman. At night, the skies were lit up by what looked like 4th of July fireworks as a result of the barrage of mortar shells, flasher bullets, machinegun fire, bazookas and every other available weapon. The first time I came under fire, my first thought was to wonder what my mother would think. I just knew I was going to be killed.

Everyone took part in the fighting at some point. In addition to the perils of battle, we lost many soldiers due to the weather conditions. It was a horrible winter with temperatures well below zero, and lots of men suffered with frostbite. While I was in the hospital, I had seen men whose feet were swollen to twice their normal size and as black as soot.

I have a picture at home that shows the men left in my divisions following 120 days of battle. Very few of the original members of the division had survived. We had pushed the enemy back to the Rhine River and wind up in Cologne, Germany. We took so many German soldiers as prisoners that we began just disarming them and sending them back from the frontlines alone. It wasn't possible to take care of all of them. I think they were glad not to fight any more. Sometimes we could see the Germans, but sometimes they were hiding in houses in the fields and villages. Then we had to go in after them.

God's hand was upon me all the time, or I would not have made it. He helped me recover from pneumonia, though that illness may actually have saved my life. If I had gone to the frontlines earlier, I might not have lived through it. I had become a Christian while I was in the service back in the States.

I always looked forward to was mail call and a chance to bathe. Showers were rigged up inside two big trucks that moved around the area, so we could enjoy a hot shower once in a while. The water was heated in big tanks. The rest of the time, we washed up with water in our helmets.

Of course, I spent a lot of sleepless nights while overseas. As we were going through a little town once, things had slacked off a bit. I found a building and thought I could get a good night's sleep there. No sooner had I crawled into my sleeping bag than enemy artillery started raining shells on the roof.

Later, we occupied Dusseldorf in Germany. Our platoon guarded the Ernie Pyle Bridge, a pontoon bridge that served as a main supply line for the troops. Whenever we saw German civilians, they seemed to be glad we were there and treated us with respect. When some fellow soldiers returned to Germany years later, the Germans rolled out the red carpet for them. I've never had the opportunity to return, though I would like to.

After the war ended, I remained in Czechoslovakia as part of the Occupation Forces. I don't recall experiencing any resistance then. I couldn't go home with my division because I didn't have enough points. Several months later, I was discharged in Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, on March 26, 1946.

Back home, it was amazing to see all the new things being developed. Industry boomed and many people left the farming life behind. When I came home, I spent a couple of weeks with my folks in Arkansas and then joined my fiancé in Tyler. I had met her on a blind date while I was based at Camp Fannin. I've been living in Tyler ever since.

I joined the reserves for three years after coming home and then reenlisted for another three years. One day I came home for lunch and found a bus ticket to Killeen in my mailbox. I called the Army Reserve officer in Houston to tell him I had received the ticket but no orders. He said I should have received them two weeks earlier. I said, "Well, I didn't, and I can't be down there tomorrow morning." He asked how much time I needed, and I told him at least two weeks. He agreed to give me one week only. A week later, I was in Killeen preparing to go to Korea. Luckily, due to an earlier back injury, I didn't have to go and received a discharge from the reserves instead.

I never gave a thought to not serving my country during World War II. Regardless of the danger, I knew I had a job to do. In battle, soldiers become like a close knit family. We always looked out for each other. Our sense of duty was instilled in us by the circumstances and by the patriotism back home. I'm glad I played a part in the Battle of the Bulge, but it is so sad that so many men didn't get to come home and realize the victory we had achieved. There are thousands of white crosses still there.

One of the main things young people can do to help their country today is to become involved in their government. They should vote and not be taken in by people who might try to destroy America. I fear that future generations won't enjoy the freedom we have if young people today don't get involved.