

# My War Years

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## First Cruise

### December 1944

I was drafted into the army and sworn into the military at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma in May, 1944. We received physicals, our first shots, were issued dog tags, and a set of clothes. In a couple of days we boarded on buses headed out to who knew where. At least half of us thought for sure that we were going to aviation mechanic ground school somewhere because of some connection with airplanes. Late in the day our buses pulled up at Camp Walters, Texas where we did 13 weeks of Infantry basic training.

During that time we marched, drilled, fired and qualified with M-1 rifles, carbines, and 22 caliber rifles. We dug lots of foxholes and filled them up again. One night on a bivouac several of us sneaked off and brought back watermelons from a farmer's field. We also did a couple of 20 mile forced marches with full field packs as part of our training. We had 10 minutes every hour to drink some water from our canteens and rest, and then we were off again.

The first two weeks of basic training we were not allowed to leave the base, so I attended the Chapel. Afterward, I sometimes hitched rides home especially to spend some time with my girl friend Lorene Parks to whom I became engaged before finishing basic training, and to attend my home church at Faxon, Oklahoma. When I did not go home, I would often attend a church in Mineral Wells, Texas, near Camp, with another of the men in my outfit. People were exceptionally nice to the servicemen.

While in basic training a pitch was made for those desiring the exciting life of a paratrooper. We were also promised a wrist watch which was a very attractive offer. Well, why not? When basic was finished some of us went to Ft. Benning, Georgia. While at Benning, three of us pulled guard duty on a Saturday night off someplace on the river bank. We discovered some ammunition in a 30 caliber machine gun belt that had been tossed in the river. Well, curiosity got the better of us and we pulled it out and tried it. Sure enough, it fired. Well, I would hate to have been in the shoes of whoever held that rifle next time an inspection came. During the night we tuned the radio, which had been left at our guard house, to WSM (call letters related to an insurance company slogan 'We Serve Millions'), Nashville, Tennessee, and listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*. I never had that kind of guard duty before or after.

It only took a couple weeks for me to wash out of paratrooper school, and was given leave to visit home before going overseas. During this time my folks moved to a new home they had purchased at Cache. Returning from leave, I reported to Ft. George G. Mead in Maryland near Washington. For a few days there, I was clerk for the company because I had taken typing in

high school. Several of us were fortunate enough to find a taxi driver who gave us a for-hire tour of Washington. About two weeks later it was off to Camp Miles Standish in Maine where we boarded the former luxury liner USS Washington along with about 5,000 other replacements for the European Theater of Operations. The ship had been torpedoed three times. All the wood paneling had burned out and been replaced with armor plated steel, making it top heavy. In addition only three of its five gyros were operative. We were crammed in everywhere, sleeping on the decks and anywhere we could lay out a sleeping bag. One night during a storm the ship listed 45 degrees, just shy of going over. You can imagine that almost everyone was sea sick. If you weren't, you became that way from everyone else's sickness.

We docked at Liverpool, England, loaded on a train (my first time) for London and on to Southampton, only to board another troopship. After a couple days we crossed the English Channel for the coast of France. Off the transport onto landing craft and to the beaches at Le Havre which now had been cleared and was not being defended by the Germans. We loaded on 40 & 8s (railroad box cars into which 40 men or 8 horses could be transported) to cross France on Christmas day 1944. At the replacement depot, we had a late Christmas dinner of turkey and dressing. After a night of somewhat comfortable rest, some of us moved for Luxembourg. My first night there was spent in a castle. As I looked out the window in the morning, I saw a Model A Ford on the grounds. What a surprise, my first time out of the U.S., and here was a feel of home.

I was assigned to Company K, 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Third Army, General George G. Patton, Commander. The 80<sup>th</sup> had been decimated in the Battle of the Bulge.

## 80<sup>th</sup>

A few days after joining Company K, we were deployed to a defensive position near some forest. The whole company was scattered in semi-circular position on top of a hill not far from a forested area. Everyone dug foxholes and prepared for a long stay. There was snow on the ground and during our 11 day stay, it snowed and wind blew several times. One of the men was positioned to the extreme right, several hundred yards from the next man. During our first night he disappeared. From that time on there were always two men in that foxhole. (The next time that man was heard from was after the war was over and we were on our way back to the States. He had been captured by the Germans and held prisoner.)

Fresh clean socks were furnished us every two or three days and we were invited to Company headquarters to wash our feet in a solution to fight off athlete's foot fungus. A warm foot bath was wonderful. We often were alerted by German artillery 88 mm rounds fired at us and ever so often (German = nebelwerfer) screaming meemies (high explosive rockets loaded with phosphorus). They could be heard from launch to explosion. That was time to dig the foxhole deeper. It had been cloudy, with both rain or snow and fog for many days. But on February 2, 1945 the weather cleared and wave after wave of bombers flew over heading inland into Germany on their bombing runs. We later would observe the destruction, especially in Nürnberg. This was the turning point of the war.

After those 11 days, we were replaced by another company and moved into quarters where we could get hot baths. After a few days of rest we began our march and/or truck rides closer to the fighting.

## **Moving On**

After a few days rest we moved out. I am glad someone knew where we were and where we were going, for I did not. As we were ready to go into our first real fighting the squad leader (sergeant), who had been in one battle, asked, "I wonder how much it would hurt to smash your foot with a gun butt." He was so frightened, having been in one battle, that he would do himself physical harm to keep from going into another battle. Before the end of the day, he had managed to catch his finger somehow in the "mess" trailer and broke his finger. Consequently he was sent back to the hospital to have his finger set. He didn't have to go into battle the next day. That is how I became leader of third squad, third platoon of Company K. On January 1, 1945 I was a buck private and by February 3 had been upgraded to Sergeant. That's how fast field promotions came about.

The first battle I remember, the men of Co. K were spread out about 15 feet apart across an incline leading up to a small town. There were several inches of snow on the ground and we were proceeding uphill toward the small town on top of the hill. Bullets left streaks in the snow all around us. But since it was dry fresh snow, there was no sound. Men were dropping like flies on every side. German artillery and rockets were coming in from beyond the town. Our artillery was hitting town from behind us. Included in the men shot was our Platoon Lieutenant. By the time we had entered and secured the town, it was night. Third squad found a barn and prepared for the night with only three (Mario Polvere from Brooklyn, William Harris from Pennsylvania, and myself) of our original 10 men left. Losses were quite heavy. By this time the Germans were shelling the town itself.

Another time later on as we were entering a town marching along the road, it was discovered that a Mark IV tank was located at the town limits with its 88 mm gun pointing up the road in the direction from which we were approaching. We stopped, dug our foxholes, and set up watch. Within sight of us, on a hilltop was the German artillery lookout post. During our watch one night, my BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man, Bruce Bray from Kansas who shared the fox hole with me, was lookout and spotted something the size and shape of a helmet on the horizon. He woke me to look. I cautioned him not to shoot until it was very close, because when he shot, all "hell would break loose." No problem, within a couple of minutes a big old jack rabbit got up and hopped off across the landscape. Within a couple of days our artillery had knocked out the tank and we proceeded to enter the village.

Sometime later, in the spring, we were approaching a village that lay in a valley between two low hills, both timbered. We used the same approach that had worked in the snow, spread out across the hill entering the town. The German troops were in the woods on the other side of town and fired their 50 caliber machine guns at us. You could not see the bullet streaks but you could sure hear the ricochets. We took whatever cover we could find. There wasn't much. A few shallow ditches or dug holes. Doyle Chambers of Lynchburg, VA, a rifleman in our squad was on his belly behind a 6 inch apple tree trunk. The enemy fire almost cut the tree off about 6

inches above his head. We yelled to get his attention and brought him back to our shallow foxhole. Even on a forward facing slope on a sunny spring afternoon, our losses were not so great as before. With the assistance of our artillery we entered and searched the village taking a few prisoners and finding some wine cellars, from which some of the men confiscated the contents. Pappy Strole, a 45 year old Virginian with one daughter and Klemenski, a Polish boy from New York were also in the squad.

## **Acceleration**

Things began to accelerate in the action across Germany. General Patton had us on our way to Berlin. We often observed dog fights between P-47s or P-38s and the Luftwaft. Sometimes we heard their jet planes which sounded almost like the screaming meemie rockets. We always ducked for cover. As we moved across, I remember coming to Kassel. Things were rather quiet in that the town had been shelled with artillery and bombed by planes. We proceeded on through the town and then were turned South (as a result of Montgomery's desire to capture Berlin, Eisenhower acceded) to Goetha and Erfurt. Somewhere in this area 3<sup>rd</sup> squad went on patrol to learn of the Nazi position and discovered that they were paralleling us on another road. From here we traveled, mostly by truck on April 22, 1945, to Nürnberg (one of Hitler's main headquarters areas) where we found the city terribly torn up from bombing and shelling. We spent several days there exploring many of the underground tunnels and housing areas away from the destruction of war, before moving on toward Munich and Austria on April 29. When the war ended (German High Command surrendered at 1:41 May 7, 1945 and all active operations were to cease at 1 minute past midnight May 9) Co. K was near Linz, Austria, where we received surrendering troops. They brought in horses, mules, wagons, artillery, large weapons, motor cycles, tanks, small arms, etc. Our job was to disarm and put them on 40 & 8s for transport to discharge centers. It was here that I picked up my souvenir P38 pistol (which I still have and understand that it is worth more than \$500). I have not fired it since bringing it into the U. S.

Following the mop-up duties, 317<sup>th</sup> moved to Fussen, Germany. Company K was housed at Bad Kohlgrub a town near Oberammergau in a kurhouse (hospital resort & healing center). (During a visit with our son, John, in 1986 we toured Oberammergau. John & I drove over to Bad Kohlgrub and located the kurhouse.) It was wonderful housing for our Company. During the summer in the area we swam in local ponds, formed a squad to participate in inter-battalion race. K Company squad won a trip to Paris and Brussels. About this time I developed a boil on my thumb joint and went around with fingers in my shirt, in a Napoleon stance, to hold my hand up because to the pain experienced when it was at my side. In Paris I learned to interpret and ride the underground trams. After a wonderful summer of occupation, the 80<sup>th</sup> was ready to return to the States.

## **A Funny Thing Happened (Fall of '45)**

During the summer of 1945, the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was rotated back to the States. They had helped defeat the Nazi's in WW II. Having served just over a year in the service, I did not have enough points to return to the States with Company K, 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and was transferred to an Antiaircraft unit in Marionbad, Czechoslovakia. We would parade in front of the Russian barracks one day and they would parade in front of ours the next. During the time in Czechoslovakia, Chaplain Prince, a Southern Baptist, would drive over from Pilzen on Wednesday evening to conduct a service. He called it his midweek prayer service.

When it came time for the antiaircraft unit to rotate stateside, we moved everything to Nürnberg. Half tracks moving down the autobahn would often throw a track, so the driver would put the vehicle in front wheel drive and continue traveling on the bogies.

I had somehow learned to drive a 2 ½ ton truck and received an Army driving permit. We began the process of turning in all equipment to its proper place (probably Ansbach). At the equipment depot, a German driver stuck a Jeep in the mud and could not drive it out. One of our American hotshot drivers was anxious to show off his skills and mounted the driver's seat and started to maneuver back and forth. This delighted the Germans and they began to lay bets that the American could not drive the jeep out of the running board deep mud. In about 10 minutes or so though, he made it out to delight of the cheering crowd.

Also interesting was that one morning a 2 ½ ton truck and a trailer were loaded with the left over ammunition. I had been granted a drivers license by then. I started the truck and proceeded out of the parking lot to find it had no brakes. I carefully drove it to the Company Headquarters. And post haste informed the mechanic that the truck was his at that point. When the truck was repaired we proceeded to the depot, leaving the ammo and trailer. On the return a bolt was lost from the clutch linkage and gears had to be shifted by equalizing the motor and transmission speeds. Upon entering town we were behind a street car that was discharging passengers. Without the ability to shift gears, I almost ran over a little old lady, made a quick turn to a side street and on to the motor pool.

During the rest of our time in Nürnberg, we explored the town. One of the interesting times was a day in court at the trial of War Criminals. We observed from an upper chamber or balcony overlooking the courtroom floor being able to see the seating arrangement of the Justices and prisoners. (Following retirement, as I served as interim pastor for the Nürnberg Baptist Church, Ron Fuller from San Pablo, California, an evangelist there for a meeting along with Deane found the old Court building. Upon inquiry located the courtroom. The balcony had been closed in and the room was still used for trials. An employee found a notebook with pictures from the trials.)

From Nürnberg, we were taken by train to Bremerhaven to the port of debarkation. While here worship services were conducted daily by the chaplain. In one of the services the Methodist Chaplain challenged us to become all that God wanted of us and share our witness when we returned to the States. This was my first feeling of a call to preach or pastor a church.

After processing at Bremerhaven, troops boarded a Liberty or Victory ship for the cruise to Ft. Dix, New Jersey. One man on board was sea sick every minute of the way across. It was a beautiful sight as we sailed by the Statue of Liberty entering New York harbor. Boats of all sizes and shapes greeted the returning ship with great enthusiasm. In only a few days a number of us had processed through and were put on a passenger train headed to Camp Chaffey, Arkansas (near Ft. Smith) for discharge. I signed to continue in the reserves. Perhaps a mistake, but was upgraded to Tech Sergeant. As soon as processing was finished, I boarded a bus for Oklahoma arriving in Lawton.