

Dear Randy,

You have asked me for my remembrance of WW11. (You will please excuse my English mistakes). I will try to give you what I can. I'm an old man now and memories have faded.

Life before WW11 was much simpler. Life evolved around the family, Dad got up, had his breakfast and went to work – if he was lucky to work. If he was unlucky – he went looking for work. We kids got up, had breakfast and went to school. I was the youngest of five. When we came home from school we gathered about the kitchen. Table and did our homework. My father – if we were lucky – gave us milk and cookies. When we finished our homework, we were allowed out to play until supper time. We all ate together and discussions were sometimes funny – sad – or angry. As I said – life was simpler and families knew each other. When one married, one rented an apartment close by the family.

There was a war going on in Europe beginning in 1939. Life got easier here in the states because we began to make and supply the weapons of war to Europe. The USA began to live the good life. Everyone was working and money was no longer scarce.

December 7, 1941 changed everything! Japan bombed Pearl Harbor! The good times were over. We were at War!!

We, the Byrne family, were all gathered around the radio as was usual – listening to the big bands – or Jack Benny – or whatever – when the program was interrupted telling us of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. People were stunned, horrified, frightened and finally angered.

My brother Tome was taken into the military in first round draft. He went into the Air force and was trained as a flight engineer and turret gunner of a B-24 bomber, 8th Air force, and shipped to England early. My step-brother Harry joined the Navy and served in the South Pacific. My cousin joined the marines and served in the So. Pacific.

My turn came in April, 1943. I was drafted into the Army and sent to Camp Blanding, FL. I joined the newly formed 66th Infantry Division, took my basic training and was sent to radio school to learn Morse code and minor repair of radios, I became [art of the 566th signal Co. – 66th Infantry Division.

I was transferred to the 80th Infantry division in Jan. 1944 and joined HQ Co 905th Field Artillery Battalion as a radio operator. We shipped out to England on the Queen Mary in April '44. We crossed over to France 7 days after 'D' Day.

Our first casualties occurred right after we debarked and were headed inland. Our own Air force attacked our convoy. Only one plane of 3 fired on us – only a short burst – before recognizing us as friendliest. That short bust hit one truck killing 2 men – cut off the legs of another and destroyed the truck and the 105MM Howitzer it was towing.

The 80th Division was attached to General Patton's 3rd Army. It was the only division to serve under his command the entire war in Europe,

The adage “war is 80% boredom and 10% sheer terror” is true! You were either marching, standing around, shivering in a fox hole from the cold, wondering what was going on. Or, you were running acrossed a field, or thru the woods while some damned fool was shooting at you. Or, you were cowering in a fox hole, behind a tree or a wall while artillery shells were bursting all around you.

What possessed a man that he stood up and ran towards those people who were shooting at him- Towards those tanks while those artillery shells were bursting about him – I will never know? Was it courage, rage, stupidity or what? I wonder – if one man had turned and ran away – would the rest of followed??

As a forward observer – myself and an officer worked with infantry and directed artillery fire to disperse enemy troops, knock out tanks, or lay down fire before our troops attacked.

During the Battle of the Bulge – 3rd Army under Patton was attacking down south when we were ordered to break off and head north to relieve the troops surrounded in Bastogne. We did it and it became one of the greatest feats of the war.

Later, the 80th division helped liberate a then little known concentration camp – Buchenwald! Words cannot aptly describe the horror of that camp. The inmates were walking skeletons. Some so thin, they didn’t cast a shadow! So emaciated, they couldn’t stand up and lay there in their own filth. They grabbed our hands to kiss. Some wore no clothing. Others covered their nakedness with one pant leg – or one sleeve: anything that would give them a sense of dignity.

Orders were given not to feed them solid food. Orders came too late for some. We gave them chocolate bars. We were told later that the chocolate doubled some over in pain, killed others. True, or not, I do not know.

People from the surrounding area were made to view this horror. The men got sick, the women fainted. ALL claimed they knew nothing of this camp. You could smell this camp for miles around. The stench of death travels for miles. The inmates said they were marched through the main town to their work places. The towns’ people turned their heads away, laughed at them or threw things at them.

Soldiers – who were so battle hardened to death that they could sit on a dead body to eat, or stack 2 or 3 bodies to use as wind breakers or protection – broke down and cried when they saw this example of man inhumanity to man!

Bulldozers came to camp and carved long deep trenches into which the bodies were bulldozed like so many broken rag dolls and then covered over by another bulldozer shoving dirt into the trench. Thank God when we left!

The 80th division fought many more battles before the war ended. The 80th returned to the USA on the Aircraft carrier Wasp.

I was discharged Feb. 1946