

Hank Rosenthal WWII “Recollections”

Below are the personal memories of Hank Rosenthal’s war service in Company B of the 318th Regiment of the 80th Division along with sections of his letters home and reconstructions of Hank’s recollections as remembered by his son, Will.

Training for the Service

I enlisted in the Army in September 1943. The war was on and I was in college at Hobart. I was in my sophomore year and was not looking forward to service but there was no choice. So what did I do? I enlisted in Fall of ’43 so I could stay out and finish my second year. So I finished two years of studying and lacrosse. I went home in June 1944, but not for long. Within seven days I received a letter from the War Dept. Report to Fort Deven within one week. This I did and within three days I was in uniform on my way to Alabama – no way out- but with lots of soon-to-be-friends. Amen.

Landing on Omaha Beach, 1944 (Sept. 19th)

During the summer of 1944 I spent walking through the state of Indiana out of Camp Attenburg – walking thru the woods, crossing streams, and hiking up and down the hills, always carrying a pack and a weapon. This was advanced infantry training.

Come the end of August, I was shipped east to a ship in NY harbor. This ship was a huge liner, and the sister ship of the George Washington.

I can’t tell you how many Army men were on the ship – it was packed. Beds were stacked five high all through the cargo area. Meals were served all days. The best thing about the ship was that it was fast, and could out maneuver German submarines. We crisscrossed the entire Atlantic, and no sub could get a bead on us. The ride was smooth, no storms, and we joked and kidded each other for 3,500 miles. We played poker and cribbage all the way.

After eight days at sea we landed in Liverpool, England, on a floating dock. Then we boarded a train for Southampton. The train stopped right at the harbor almost next to a small cargo ship all prepped for our 22-mile trip across the

English Channel. We loaded quickly and within two hours we spotted D-Day's Omaha Beach.

A long dock had been built extending into the ocean, so we didn't have to get wet walking to the beach. From the beach we had to hike up a very steep hill to really get into France. The climb took a huffing-puffing hour.

At the top there had been erected a wooden gate through which we could see a large cemetery. Across the top of the gate in large letters was printed "Through these portals passed the bravest men in the world."

The smiling stopped, the kidding stopped, the joking stopped. We had caught up with the men who landed on D-Day!

<Note: Hank landed on Omaha on September 19th, and joined the 80th Division on October 3rd. He was with another outfit in the interim, serving in Nancy and LeMans, with side trips to Paris and elsewhere. Repple Depple sent him to the 80th where he found he was among the few northerners in his company.>

Getting surrounded in Laudrefang, France on Nov 22, 1944

Hank wrote about how his company had been surrounded one night by the Germans after Captain Sweeny made the mistake of entering the town of Laudrefang on Nov 22, 1944 without orders apparently. In an earlier telling of this episode for the 318th, Ed Bredbenner provided a lot of details about this very scary night. My father was fortunate to not be on the outskirts of the town, but rather in a cellar. Left out of his story below is that a member of the French underground came down the stairs in the middle of the night. They were not sure who he was going to be. Dad wrote this up, along with other stories, when he was in his mid '80s for a memoir group where he lived at the time:

"In November of 1944 I was crossing France from one town to the next. As we were approaching one town that will be nameless (because I can't remember it) at about 3:30 in the afternoon we were stopped by a tank trap.

This trap at the edge of the town was at least 15 feet across, 20 feet deep, and extended left and right as far as we could see. There was one thing that made it

different from other traps we'd seen. Across this trap was a tree which made it possible to cross over.

Our Captain Sweeney told the four platoons of Company B to cross over. We followed orders. One man at a time – all 200 of us. We got into the town without a shot being fired. Then all hell broke loose, and we learned the enemy had led us into a trap. We fired back from one cellar to the next most of the night.

Help was coming – our radio man was told by headquarters we'd be given an artillery barrage at 6:00 A.M for us to exit. Only one error: they misfired and 105 mm shells hit us rather than the Krauts. Most of us still managed to get out of our cellars, and we rushed toward our line. Guess what? The log was still over the tank trap and those of us who could went out over that log. Wow! After I crossed over I was pooped. We got to take the next day off – except for Capt. Sweeney who got called to Regiment, then Division, and then to Army HQ. Gen. Patton told him that Co. B had been the "forward element of the Third Army." He was not needed by Gen. Patton anymore. None of us missed Capt. Sweeney.

<Note: Dad also mentioned he'd jumped into a hole during exit from the town, landing on a German soldier who was fairly happy to surrender quickly.>

Leaving the 80th for the Post office and V-E Day

In 1945, when I got into the hospital in France they didn't want (hooray) to send me back to the front lines. Evidently they decided that the US could win without me. I said 'send me home. ' No, they said your record shows that you have post office experience . Yes, I had worked two weeks in a local post office, helping with heavy Christmas mail.

"Good, we need help in Paris at APO 887. We'll move you there." The Gare Montparnasse (RR Station) had been turned into a post office.



We worked in the lobby and slept on the second floor. There were three eight-hour shifts - a busy place. We did have one thing I ever had in the Army – one day off each week. On that day each week we walked all over Paris – just great!

Then in April the war in Europe ended, and I experienced V-E Day in Paris. It was a great three days – parades, fireworks, parties – everything was free, especially for American G.I.'s.

The G.I.'s felt great but you can imagine how the French people felt after years and years of occupation and fighting. Yes, it was a great three days!

Pictured below, Henry and pals at the Tulleries



(March 20th 1945 -from left to right: Ed Mroz, Dad, Raymond Bonebrake, and Skip Trepanier)



Above is Dad with Joe Blaida who was 6 foot four inches, according to the note on the back. They worked at the Paris Montparnasse post office together. This was likely a picture in the neighborhood. Dated July, 1945.

Hank's memoirs don't mention many of the stories he often told over the years. Here are other anecdotes he would tell us about his time in Patton's 3rd Army. Due to the number of times he told these stories, we are very sure they are accurate.

First Wound

He first saw action in Clemery, where he saw his first KIA on the field, and thought 'I'm glad I'm not one of them.' He got a slight shrapnel wound in his leg which was dressed on the field. A purple heart for this wound was later thrown to him while he sat in a foxhole.

Pooping under Fire

A story he told us when we were young was that they were advancing under fire somewhere in France when he had to move his bowels. So he did just that as quickly as he could. Then they advanced another few yards when they were shelled again. Everyone hit the dirt, but his Sgt. hit what Dad had left. The Sarge was not happy, and angrily yelled 'who shit!?' with a strong emphasis on the second word in his brief question. Dad did not volunteer that he'd been the content provider.

Face First in the Manure

Another advance took place across a farmer's field that was covered with manure as fertilizer. Halfway across, the Germans started shelling, so this time everyone got a face full as they hit the 'dirt.' It was definitely the case that Dad told us the more scatological war stories when we were younger. He knew his audience.

Marlene Hated the Nazis

He enjoyed seeing Marlene Dietrich sing from about only a thousand yards from the front. He said that they had planes flying overhead to protect her. In a letter from December 14th, 1944, he described the event: *"I thought I told you about Miss Dietrich. She simply came and put on a show for an hour-plus (with a small*

group of others) and left very fast- guess it was a little too hot for her where we were. I will hand it to her though, for coming as close to the front as she did. She looked old and tired. I never knew she could play the saw. We saw nary a thing of her legs – tough!”

The Best Jew I Ever Knew

One time, after yet another advance under fire, the unit got to its position. A soldier from Tennessee came up to Hank, poked him firmly in the chest with his index finger, and said “You are the best Jew I ever knew.” Then he walked away. He got a chuckle out of that one for years, but he also never much wanted to dwell on the fact that he had an H, for Hebrew, stamped on his dog tag that the Germans would have seen had he been captured, something that could have easily happened during the Bulge. Was

Foxholes

To paraphrase Hank, he’d say: “Before each night, you had to dig a foxhole, and then find a door in a nearby town to put on top. Then you’d put three feet of dirt on top, thus protecting you from a direct hit.” Seems like a lot of work at the end of a long day.

Liberation of Nancy and Metz

Dad took part in both of these actions just prior to joining the 80th as a mortar man. He commented often that the pre-attack artillery barrages were the loudest things you’d ever hear. He made it back to a town near Nancy in 1996. He spoke to a Frenchman who had lived through the liberation of the town. A friend of mine’s father, appropriately named Metz, was in a US artillery unit at Metz. I’ve always blamed his noisy father for my father’s hearing loss.

Tossing Two 45s

Crossing the Moselle river, he was struggling with the weight he was lugging around, so he threw one .45 pistol over the left side of the bridge, and another over the right side. This incident seemed to appeal to him in his memory, and he would often re-live the moment, perhaps because he enjoyed the symmetry.

Frank the Machine Gunner

Henry had trained as a mortar man, but when he first joined the 80th Division he was given the job of working a machine gun with a G.I. named Frank. Dad would feed the gun, while Frank fired. He said that Frank never spoke much at all, but they did the job well together. The day after Hank was put back on the mortar squad Frank was killed by a shell that landed right between the tri-pod. Dad said that was an 'interesting' day, as in extremely sobering. He would get a little pale when recollecting that one. Looking at the casualty report from November '44, his gun partner was likely Frank Cerney, the only Frank on the KIA list for the month from Company B.

Reconnoitering in the Night

Lt. Penny told Dad that he had been volunteered to reconnoiter enemy positions during the night, but that he would therefore not have to take part in the general attack during the following day. He and a small team of two or three other G.I.s from the company took a flashlight and a blanket, and crawled around until they could spot an enemy position. Then they got under the blanket with the flashlight to make notations on a map. He was pretty scared. Henry said he had no sense of direction and stuck close to his fellows. His only remark beyond describing the above was "Lt. Penny lied! I still had to take part in the general attack the next day!" But he always remained a fan of Lt. Penny nonetheless.

Taking Prisoners

A couple of G.I.s once took a prisoner over the hill and then there was gunfire. They came back, saying that the prisoner or 'son of a bitch' had tried to escape so they had to shoot him. He noted that 'we were mad' at the Germans.

In the Barn Door

Lt. Penny gave Hank some coordinates as they were engaging with some German infantry. Dad saw the Germans running for a barn. After he fired the mortar, he asked Penny where the shell had landed. Penny said "right in the barn door."



Here's a pic of Lt Penny in 1949 at Pittsburg State.

Battle of Ettelbruck – December 22, 1944

Henry was part of Patton's famous pivot to the north during the start of the Battle of the Bulge, when they were sent to relieve the encircled Bastogne. They were on the truck for many hours, perhaps a full day or more, when they got off and started through the woods. Henry asked Lt. Penny "Where are the enemy?" to which Penny replied "We are just going to keep walking in this direction."

A few minutes later, they were approaching the town of Ettelbruck in Luxembourg from the south. Henry went a little ahead of the squad to look down on the side of the town from the crest of a hill. He immediately saw a large German tank or motorized artillery, about a quarter mile away. It quickly turned its turret right at him – he was very likely the only target on the ridge – and he tried to take cover behind a tree that was only a couple inches thick. We always kidded him about why he didn't hide behind a thicker tree. He felt the displacement of the air as the shell went by his head. The explosion ripped his raincoat off, and gave him a messy shrapnel wound in his chest. The blast just about blew off the leg off of a friend, but that was salvaged apparently.

He went down into the town in order to get away from the line of fire. It was around this part of the day when he resolved that he would never swear again if he survived. (He pretty much kept that promise his entire life. Anytime he did curse it was always remarked upon, like snow in July.) In the town, he tended to a wounded G.I. who said he'd seen Germans coming by. Hank found a house,

went into the basement, and fell asleep in a coal bin. When he woke up it was fortunately a US Army company's headquarters. He told the officers there that he'd been hit. They sent him back at night in an ambulance. He reported that the ambulance was strafed. Getting to the aid station in the morning, he was on a cot when he saw a plane full of G.I.s land at an adjacent field. They were running by him when one stopped to ask "Which way is London?" Hank said 'front line – a couple miles that way!' The soldier was shocked. Apparently they'd been told they were flying from Iceland to England, but went on ahead to the mainland. Dad got to the hospital and wrote a letter to say that he had not looked forward to spending the holidays in a foxhole, and he now wasn't going to have to. In the letter, he claims that he was wounded by artillery while walking through an orchard, making it sound much less dramatic and worrisome of course. He didn't tell the truth about the tank taking a shot at him until he got home I suppose. There was speculation at home that his wound was also worse than he described. They weren't correct on that point, but he was in the hospital for a few weeks, so who knows? The other family lore is that his mother Janet woke up in the middle of the night on December 22nd and said 'Gerson, Henry's been shot.' After-action reports for the company indicate that Dad was probably among the first G.I.'s into Ettelbruck that day as after-action reports stated that American forces only occupied four houses on that side of town at the end of the day. The next morning, the company left the town, allowing our artillery to fire on it. Reading the after-action report to him 60-some years after the battle really amazed him, giving him the larger context of the fight after all that time.

At the Hospital

The hospital staff would come in every morning to ask if anyone had any 'trials, troubles or tribulations.' A fellow next to him was filled with dozens of bits of shrapnel, and a few were picked out each day. One soldier was pretending to be kooky, but he had seen action in Africa, Italy and France, so he figured he was done. Another one of the wounded was from Dad's hometown of Pittsfield, but they hadn't known each other. After some period of time, a doctor came up to Dad and said, 'are you ready to go back to duty?' Hank said, 'Sure, when are you going to sew me up?' So they sewed him up.

He got a letter from Lt. Penny at the hospital. He'd been wounded himself. Penny ended up a professor/department chairman at Pittsburg State University. He died in 1995 at the age of 76. Hank often talked of Penny, always calling him by his full name, with rank: Lt. Forest L. Penny.

Often the joker, when they handed him a rifle upon his release from the hospital, he handed it back, asking 'what else do ya got?' He was surprised when the response was, 'let's see what we can do.' They looked at his records and found that he'd worked the post office in Pittsfield for a couple of weeks, so he qualified to be sent to Paris to do postal work there. His letter home spoke to his happiness at being able to hand in his carbine.

At the Post Office

He worked with a manager named Susan, with whom he spoke only in French, and she spoke to him only in English, so both could improve on each other's language. Henry was always proud that he had started to think in French. "Woke up one day, thinking in French." One other incident he mentioned was when he was working his 'tail off' but the German prisoners had nothing to do. So, he gave a couple of them big bags of mail and made them carry them around to no purpose. Hank was told by an officer that he could not do that.

Remarks from his letters in '45 about the 80th

While he was working at the Paris B.P.O, he sometimes made comments in his letters home about his time on the line with the 80th:

From a letter dated April 30, 1945

I've been spending quite a lot of time amusing myself with the provided entertainment and sights. It's quite a change for me not only living in a city, but also not to hear constant combat talk. In the hospital and at the 14th B.P.O. there were many combat boys. All day and all night we talked fight. This is the first place I've been that combat is secondary or lower than that. It is apparent to me now that all this rehabilitation talk is not the bunk. It takes quite a while for

readjustment.

I'll tell you more about it sometime.

From a letter dated June 3, 1945:

This evening I rode out to Orly Field to pick up a A.G.D. Colonel. This was all most inspiring!!! Officers don't impress me a great deal. Our C.O. who is a major is a fine example. Two years ago, he was a T/4 and you'd think he'd have the enlisted men's point of view, but he doesn't. Well, the Infantry has good men anyhow. You don't run into men like Lt. Penny or Lt. Starr every day. I've written you before about Penny - he was my platoon leader up front. As far as I know he's still going. Lt. Starr - Jewish by the way - was killed back in November. He walked point blank, firing like mad, into German machine gun fire. He was right at the head of his platoon where he should be too. He got hit but kept on going till they finally got him for good. Rear echelon officers should take a fling at combat - they'd take a different slant on things then.

I don't know why the dissertation on leadership, but who knows why we do anything?

< Bertram S.Starr –

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56375712/bertram-s-starr> >

From June 30, 1945 letter

Yesterday I received a letter from Penny, 1st Lt Penny to you. He is in the States - California. He wrote that he was hit just eight days after I left the line. Unfortunately he got it even worse than I did. He stated that he had a fractured skull and his shoulder banged up a bit. There are eleven pieces of steel in him. I think he was just about the best soldier I've ever met. The Army thought he was pretty good too because they gave him the Silver Star. He was a Tech Sergeant when I joined the outfit. We had some swell guys in that platoon in the 318th. One thing, however, I did not agree with was that they would never call a replacement "one of the old men." This distinction belonged to the original men of the 80th. But really I was older in combat than some of them. My stay on line was a bit longer than the average member of a rifle company -- if the company is in the thick of it.

There were times when men would come and go so fast that I didn't even know the men in my squad to say nothing about my platoon.

From a letter dated Oct 11, 1945:

A buck sergeant from the 80th came in yesterday to work at the P.O. He was from the 317th. When I told him I was in the 318th for three months, he said "With the 318th that's an awfully long time." So you can see what another 80th man thought of my regiment. If there was a tough assignment, you know who got it. That sounds like bragging - well it is.

From a letter dated November 13, 1945

I know that the States won't be the same as when I left, but what's the story? We get the news they want us to hear plus pictures of pin-ups in Palm Springs. Your news is probably doctored concerning our action. I remember a clipping you sent me on how the 80th Division, through an amazing bit of strategy, took the Delme Ridge. I'll tell you how we took it. We walked straight up and over the hill like little tin soldiers. The Germans didn't even defend it. Just before we arrived some Heine Division HQ men were marched 15 miles to defend the slope. They waited to be captured. Some were prisoners during the last war. See what I mean - what is anyone to believe? Who says what we shall and shall not know? Who's running the States and from what company does he or they buy the wool he so abundantly places over our eyes?

Return to the USA on the Liberty ship, The Thomas Hyde (Hank's memoir)

It was December of 1945 and I was in a military encampment in France. I was delighted to be there because only those with enough points to go home were there – Hooray!

A couple days before departure they sent us to the port of Le Havre on France's western coast. On Dec. 1 we set sail on a Liberty ship named the Thomas Hyde. Liberty ships were used for all kinds of transport during WWII. They carried men and/or equipment. They were not large ships, but this one was large enough to

carry 400 G.I.'s. The one problem Liberty ships had was that they tended to break in half. Didn't give it a thought. We were going home.

Three days out in the Atlantic we ran into a storm.... not the usual storm – a hurricane!

For 13 days no one was allowed on deck – who wanted to be? Ropes closed all doors to the decks- the winds were furious but they were out done by the ocean waves. The boat would nose down into these huge waves and the rear end (stern) of the ship would come out of the water and the ship's propeller would come up and whirl around. Then we would rock from side to side, almost tipping over but not quite. This went on for 13 days. One day we went backward.

To keep us busy the captain of the ship ordered movies to run for 24 hours and the kitchen to be open as well. Who was hungry? When I left Le Havre I said to myself I wouldn't get sick on the trip. I was true to myself. I did not get sick. Some of the men literally turned green with sea sickness. After 13 days in this scary bedlam we got through the storm and three later, guess what? We spotted the Statue of Liberty. There were cheers and tears. Then off to Ft. Dix in New Jersey. What did I do there? The first thing, I went to the PX and gulped down two great hot dogs.

Two days at Dix and we were sent to Ft Devens in Ayers (MA) right outside of Boston. Christmas was two days away. They – unlike the usual Army – hurried procedures to get us home for the holiday. I arrived in Pittsfield at 4:00 p.m. on December 24th.

Lessons learned – beware of Mother Nature and never get near the Atlantic Ocean.

Return to Pittsfield.

Since one of his letters had remarked that they were moving across France so fast that he didn't have time to change his underwear for six weeks, he was often greeted with "welcome back Hank – have you changed your underwear?" When his brother Lt. Gus Rosenthal returned, they met at the train station with their

parents, Janet and Gerson. Hank saluted his brother the officer, but Gus didn't want to return the salute. Hank wouldn't stop saluting, so Gus finally just said 'ok, carry my bags you son of a bitch.' Mother Janet was not happy about this kind of language from her boys. Both the veterans were roundly scolded.

Subsequently, Hank got his degree from Hobart College where he played a lot of lacrosse as well. His next stop was the University of Chicago where he got an MBA, all thanks to the G.I. Bill. He spent many years as an executive sales manager at various large companies such as Colgate, Clairol and GAF. He never watched a war movie. He did attend parades on Memorial Day and Veterans Day, but never marched. Although an attentive father, he never took us camping. He'd had enough of sleeping in the elements. He also didn't evince any symptoms of post-traumatic stress that we were aware of, not that we knew of such a thing at the time. He golfed. He had one drink a night before dinner, and that was it. He kept his war correspondence and other service related items in a box in the attic. Once grandchildren arrived, they would eventually ask to see his uniform in the attic. "Where is the bullet hole?" asked Max.

Right after Dad turned 90, we had the occasion to meet a second cousin from Pittsfield, who is ten years younger than he. They hadn't seen each other for at least 50 years. He told Hank that, as a 10-year-old, he remembered seeing Cousin Hank upon his return from the war, "I remember exactly how you looked – the uniform – your posture – how you parted your hair, everything."

Another Pittsfield veteran by the name of Otis Pease who had been a childhood playmate of Hank's, wrote a memoir about his wartime experiences called "Blueberry Pie: The Meaning of World War II for the Americans Who Fought In It". I surprised Dad with it one Christmas in the last couple years of his life. He enjoyed the book of course, but remarked after reading it, 'Otis was only on the line for ten days before he got hit. I was there three months!' I suggested that ten days in battle in the Hurtgen forest was no picnic, but he remained competitive with his old friend. (He was competitive, even in the aging process. He's the only 90 year old I've ever heard say in front of other elderly people: "why do all these old people need canes and walkers? I don't need any of that!") Otis

and he had exchanged holiday cards for more than 50 years. Otis was a longtime professor of history at the University of Washington.

I found the 80th Division website during Dad's last years as well. He was absolutely stunned at the level of detail that filled in the facts around his participation in some actions, especially at Ettelbruck. Finding his name on a list of casualties gave him pause, until he recognized the name of another soldier on the list of wounded for December 1944. He exclaimed "Hey, that guy was a labor agitator from Toledo!"

One last item: One of Hank's dorm mates at Hobart College before the war was a fellow named Ed Crone. Crone became the basis for the character Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's book, *Slaughterhouse Five*. Apparently, Crone was a bit of a loner, and didn't have much to do with the others, so they gave him a wide berth. Upon Crone's capture, he had been put in the same work camp as Vonnegut where he refused food, giving it others instead, and therefore did not survive.

Dad didn't start to wear his bronze star bar until late in life, and only started to tell more stories about his experiences when he realized that people were really interested. After telling his tales, he'd often end the session with the comment, "The guys who really got the job done didn't come back."