Memoirs of Major Sgt. Warren Kenneth Coomer

BASIC

I went for my physical on 4 December 1942. Here I am, stark naked, standing in line with about 1000 other men, waiting for some doctor to check to see if I had six toes on one foot and then for another to see if I had six fingers on one hand. There must have been 25 to 50 doctors doing an assembly line check.

After some time, we sat on some bleachers and heard a record playing the "Article of War." Then we all stood and held up our hand and were sworn into the U.S. Army. I didn't realize what had happened until later. More physicals, and when I asked one doctor if he thought I would pass the physical, he said, "You are already in the army, soldier."

I had eight days before reporting for active duty on 12 December 1942. In that time I had to move from Muncie, Indiana, to Petersburg, Indiana, or make arrangements to be moved.

When I reported back to Ft. Harrison, Indianapolis, still in my civilian clothes, I just about froze. Every time we saw someone, they were yelling, "You'll be sorry."

During the early 40s, the Broadway play theme song, "This is the Army, Mr. Jones," became a jukebox hit also. A portion of verse went like this:

> "This is the army, Mr. Jones,
>
> No private rooms or telephones;
>
> You had a housemaid to do your floors,
>
> But you won't have that anymore."

On and on it went.

We shipped out from Ft. Harrison on a train and ended up in the 94th Division at Camp Phillips, Kansas, near Salina. This was my first ride on a train. Getting off the train, we found about four to six inches of snow. This has to be the coldest place in the U.S. when the wind is blowing, and it seldom stops. We spent about three months taking "Basic Training," and didn't leave until June.

Camp Phillips is where I almost got in trouble right from the beginning. The captain said we had to shovel out a drift of snow between the barracks. When we had the drift about half removed, the corporal in charge said, "The captain said this is good enough." I, being a very new recruit, said, "Why doesn't the SOB make up his mind?" I had hardly finished when I got a tap on the shoulder from the captain. He said, "Soldier, come over here." He gave me a good lecture on being more

discreet about what I said. He said it wasn't good for the morale of the other men. I didn't even know what the word morale meant.

My morale must have been good during basic, because I spent a lot of time in the barracks practicing the different marching orders and asking a lot of questions. The First Sgt. told me, "Pvt. Coomer, when are you going to quit asking so many questions? They just get you into trouble." I also learned that you don't volunteer for anything.

It wasn't long until the men were griping about the "slum gullion," beef stew with vegetables in it. I could not understand this; it was good eating to me. My first Christmas, I was on KP. I really fed sumptuously that day. One day we were told to fall out with full field packs and gas masks. We marched to a gas chamber filled with tear gas. One at a time, we entered the chamber and, with tears flowing, put on our masks and walked through to the other side and out.

We were supposed to get just a whiff of each of the gasses to learn the familiar smell. Later, while working in the supply room, I came across sample bottles and decided to get one up on the other fellows by getting an extra whiff. I got too great a smell and almost couldn't get over it. I may well be feeling the effects yet today in the form of asthma.

Wanda and I had a room in Salina, Kansas. We lived in a house on 13th Street with a Mrs. Tosier, her daughter, Frances, and granddaughter, Mary Deann. Frances' husband was in the service. Wanda thought she made passes at me, but I was too ignorant to realize it. I had serveral pictures taken at Camp Kilmer, but the one which I like best was at Mrs. Tosier's house. We became acquainted with a Mr. and Mrs. Norman Hettinger, and corresponded with them, especially with Christmas cards, for a few years.

Wanda had to count her pennies each day to see if she had enough to eat on. A big sergeant was teaching us judo. One day, cocky little Lt. Pine walked up to him and said, "Sergeant, show me how you do that." In about ten seconds the big sergeant was flying over the lieutenant's back and landing on the ground. Of course, I know now that this was a good demonstration of what a small soldier could do.

Our Charge of Quarters, Cpl. Garzenski, forgot to wake up our barracks one morning and this second lieutenant ordered a 5-mile hike with full field pack at night. He was right beside me and I thought, "You rascal, I could suddenly hit you with the butt of my rifle and lay you out for good." I also thought that my dad would have done it, too. He called on the CQ to count cadence but he complained he had a sore throat and couldn't. Once, we stayed one or more nights out in the field in pup tents. Each soldier carried half a tent. Two men buttoned their shelter halves together and they had a complete two-man tent. A Pvt. Locke and I shared a tent. When we got home after this tiring experience of hiking, sleeping on the ground and eating K-rations, we were offered celery soup and hard dry bread for supper. It made me sick in the night and I have never cared for celery since.

I had a ride with a man back and forth to camp, but one morning he forgot to pick me up. I had to rush around and catch a bus to camp. I was late and got caught because we were going out on bivouac for a week and I was the jeep driver for a first lieutenant. I was there just in time to leave. He waited until Friday in the field and said to another officer in my presence, "Coomer thinks he has got away with being late, but we will see tomorrow after payday." The next day was Saturday, and, true to his brag, after we were paid he sent the CQ for me to report to him. He restricted me to camp for all of the next week. The next week we were out on bivouac again. This meant I was restricted for three weeks. Wanda could come out to visit me only at the service club. I still get angry when I recall this incident.

In June, 1943, the first sergeant told me he had a communication about an Army Specialized Training Program and he wanted me to go take the test. His name was Sgt. Walker from Norfolk, Va. I took two days of tests and passed. I told the sergeant I wasn't interested in going any further with it. About five days later he had the results and called me in and I told him the same thing. He said, "Private Coomer, I think you ought to go. There is no chance you will get any further than where you are here. You will be a PFC forever if you remain here. Think about it for two days and let me know."

I knew I didn't want to remain a PFC forever. I would become a private, however, if I went. On the other hand, Sgt. Walker had told me we might come out being officers when we graduated. I went in and told him I had decided to go and he was glad. One more pest he didn't have to put up with! Sounds like Gomer Pyle, doesn't it? The sergeant told me that the choice was made on the original IQ test I had taken at Ft. Harrison. I didn't know that I had taken one or even what an IQ was.

ASTP

Within a few days, I was on my way to the University of Wyoming at Cheyenne, Wyoming. We stayed there overnight and then took a train to the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. We were all enrolled in Trigonometry, Physics, Chemistry, History, Geography, English and Military Science (Physical Ed.). The instructors were attempting to go at about three times the pace of an ordinary course. They hoped they could make 90-day engineers out of us like they make 90-day Second Lts. at O.C.S. I had never looked at a Physics, Chemistry or Trigonometry book before. In fact, in high school I had freshman Algebra, Plane Geometry and Business Math. Needless to say, I was not prepared for this.

I did find it interesting, however, and couldn't keep from trying. I also found out how much I didn't know but wanted to know.

Wanda had a room just off campus and she could eat at the cafeteria.

We marched in formation between classes. One day a group of us got tired of the cadet lieutenant "brown-nosing" the teacher and started ahead to the next class. When we were about 500 yards away, he came out of the building and yelled for us to come back. We responded for him to come down here. He gave us all enough demerits that we couldn't go to town that weekend. For every demerit we had to walk around a rectangular plot for one hour. I didn't have all my hours walked when Saturday night came, but I went off campus just the same to visit my wife. Of course, I got caught. More demerits and more hours of walking.

After this, I never did get through walking. I had become the object of every officer's attention. So I walked and whistled and sang to prove that they couldn't get the best of me. Every Saturday morning I washed my window and made my bed very tight and policed up my area, yet I got demerits; so one Saturday I decided not to wash my window anymore and passed inspection.

One time, I was marching in the middle of a group of soldiers, and a cadet lieutenant came from about 100 yards away, stopped us and said I was out of step. I wasn't, but more demerits!

Soon this came to the attention of the commandant, Col. George Washington Carver Whiting. He called me into his office and asked me the trouble and talked for some time about orders and good discipline. He had guessed what was going on, and I told him he was right. He asked, "If I erase all of these demerits and start you out with a clean slate will you go back to being a good soldier?" I replied, "Yes, Sir." I am sure he passed the word to lay off, because I never got another demerit.

While at the University of North Dakota, I acquired the nickname of "Stan." When I asked why they had decided to call me this, they said it was because I looked so much like Stan Laurel of "Laurel and Hardy."

We slept in bunk beds. The guy below me was Ed DaPrato, an Italian. The two across the aisle were Ed Flaherty, an Irishman, and another Ed who was Jewish. For some time after lights were out, the three Ed's would carry on a "Good night, Ed" chorus and after about four rounds, I would chime in and say "Good night, Ed" and a chorus of "Good night, Stan" would come through.

We had an older man for English. He knew we weren't interested in studies, so he spent three months talking about his trips around the world and about Betty Grable and Hedy Lamar. The next term, we had a young lady who was quite a hard teacher, so we all signed a petition asking for our old teacher back. Petitions generally were a "no-no" in the Army, but this one worked. We got the old man back and had another three months of world trips, Betty Grable and Hedde Lamar. We liked it then, but it has been hard on my English ever since.

Everyone knew that I was a non-drinker and gave me the business and told me I ought to try it sometime. One night I went to town and entered a tavern and sat down at a bar and stayed long enough to be seen by several of them. About 11:30, when everyone was in bed, I got up and sat on my feet in bed and crowed like a rooster for ten minutes and put on a silly show. After that, no one insisted I drink. I never had a drop, but they would not be convinced of it.

One night, one of the guys in a nearby barracks hadn't arrived for bed check. It had been raining, and a St. Bernard dog was hanging around. They put the dog up on the second bunk and covered him up. He just lay there and went to sleep. When the guy arrived you never heard such a fuss. His bed smelled so bad he couldn't sleep in it.

While in the ASTP, there was a young man, just out of high school, by the name of Smith, who was very smart and helped me a lot. One day we were taking a physics test and he knew I was not up to passing it. Everyone was separated about 6 feet apart and the teacher knew we couldn't copy. Well, Smitty finished his paper quickly and turned it in. Coming back down the aisle, he grabbed my paper as quick as a wink and went back to his seat and finished it correctly. When several others went up to turn their papers in, Smitty went up with them and turned mine in also. I got and A on that test and didn't deserve it. I didn't tell the teacher, though. Smitty also taught me how to tell time by the Big Dipper at night by comparing its position to the North Star.

Sometimes, instead of P.E. or military calisthenics, we were sent by bus into Grand Forks to the public swimming pool. On one of these occasions, one of our group drowned. Some of the soldiers closest to me knew I didn't swim well, and thought for sure it was me. That night just before lights out, we were all called out and had a short memorial service for him.

The Army finally realized the futility of the ASTP project and redistributed thousands of soldiers back into the regular ranks. I had a great fear of becoming an infantryman, so it was a great disappointment to me when I was reassigned to the 76th Infantry Division at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. I was supposed to go back to the Field Artillery but that didn't happen.

CAMP MCCOY, FORT DIX

AND CAMP KILMER

The only thing of significance that happened to me at Camp McCoy was missing out on winter maneuvers in northern Michigan. I was all packed with winter gear, snow shoes and all. I had a headache, however, and asked the first seargeant if I could go down to the dispensary and get some aspirin. "OK," he said, "But be sure you get back in a hurry because we may leave any minute." At the dispensary, it was discovered that I was running a high temperature and they sent me to the hospital. After about a week in the hospital they discovered a smallpox vaccination had erupted on my shoulder. By the time my temperature was down, it was too late for me to be in the winter maneuvers, so I stayed around the barracks until they returned. While I was in the hospital, I first heard the song "Mare Si Dotes" by Frank Sinatra.

I would go into Sparta, Wisconsin in my spare time. At the USO Club, I would sit down at an old player piano and pump away to make it play. It didn't make any difference what was on it, I would just play. After sitting around and talking to whoever was at hand, I would go back to camp. The wilder guys went into La Crosse.

There was a man in the 76th named Roger Hunt who had a lot of music in him. He could take almost any child's instrument and in a short time make fair music with it.

I finally did spend the night in the woods with about six inches of snow on the ground. I almost froze but learned a little about surviving.

Soon, orders came in to send all men except the Cadre (those necessary to train more soldiers) out as replacements for the other divisions going overseas. Cyzinski, Sissel, myself and probably more ended up in the 80th Division, in Ft. Dix, New Jersey.

I was assigned to Co. G, 2nd Battalion, 319th Regiment of the 80th Infantry Division. I was here about six to eight weeks and got to see bayonet practice one time. This was my only infantry training.

The Battalion Commander decided to have an endurance test, a five mile cross-country race. There was perhaps one hundred or more of about five thousand which ran. Well, Douglas Thornberry and I decided we had to try, so we signed up. I don't remember how many finished, but we did and I think we came out about fourth or fifth, with Thornberry being ahead. Sure wish I could do that now! This would have been in May or June of 1944.

When we were told we were definitely going overseas, they started giving some of us three-day passes with the understanding that if someone didn't return on time there would be no more passes until they got back. We would all be restricted to the post. Well, you can guess that someone didn't return on time. Wanda lived a short distance off post, so I forged a pass and went anyhow. Again, I was using more courage than good sense. One of the officers, Lt. Foley, saw me but didn't stop me. Just as I stepped inside the mess hall the next morning, he called me over and asked me if I didn't go into town the night before. I lied out of it, but I didn't fool him at all.

Later on, when I was "Charge of Quarters" during the day, he came in and saw a pad of blank passes laying on the first seargeant's desk. He began "chewing out" the first seargeant for leaving them out. He told him that anybody could get in there and forge a pass, and then he said, "Couldn't they, Pvt. Coomer?" I answered, "Yes, Sir, they probably could if they were brave enough."

We were on the firing range in the 94th, the 76th and the 80th Divisions. I made the grades of marksman, expert and sharpshooter, but not necessarily in that order. We also crawled through an infiltration course at all three places; barbed wire, over holes and around rocks with machine guns firing supposedly eighteen inches above the ground and small explosions going off here and there. In all three places, they told us that just yesterday someone got scared and jumped up and they mowed him down. It made a good teaching tool but, of course, it didn't happen.

After about six weeks or so at Ft. Dix, we were all called together and told to pack up everything; we were shipping out to Camp Kilmer, a short distance away. Camp Kilmer was the P.O.E. (port of embarkation) and we were told we would be shipped overseas from there.

I had one pass to go into New York City and got back on time. I wandered around Times Square for awhile but that is about all I remember. The next time I went to New York City, I walked through a hole in the fence, strolled past the M.P. gate, and caught a bus without a pass. I almost missed the last bus back but got back on time. I was exercising more courage that good sense again.

OVERSEAS

We expected to leave each day. My birthday rolled around and I wrote my name on the wall and "Happy Birthday, we are leaving today." But we didn't. We did, however, leave July 1, 1944. Late that afternoon, we were loaded in trucks with our gear and taken to the dock. As we walked up the gangplank, an officer would call our last name and we would reply with our first. A short time later, the Statue of Liberty disappeared in the distance. We were on our way, aboard the Queen Mary, to Glasgow, Scotland. It would be about six days before we were back on good old terra firma again.

The Queen Mary, the next-to-the-largest ship in the world, as well as the fastest, went unescorted all the way. The great ship took evasive action all the way from New York to Glasgow to avoid German submarines. The ship would change directions before a German submarine could aim its torpedo. Then, before the enemy could get our direction again, we were out of range and going back in another direction. On the nice days, we could look back in the wake and see several zig-zags in it.

Every day but one was a good day. We ran into a big storm about the third or fourth day out. The ship was big, but it seemed it had almost met its match that day. The waves would roll the ship so badly that, when standing on deck, we could almost dip our hands in the water; and just moments later we would be fifty feet above the water. On one of those good days, when the ocean looked as smooth as glass and the air was balmy and the sun shining without a cloud in the sky, they started playing music over the loud speakers. One of the songs was "When I Grow Too Old to Dream." It was one of Wanda's favorite songs. I suppose it made everyone a little homesick. I know it did me.

The last day aboard ship, I got interested in a blackjack game: much too interested to hear an announcement on the loudspeaker about a planned target practice. I was involved in, and winning, a game I regarded as sinful, when all the big guns on the ship opened up. I was really scared, because I thought we had been attacked and I was liable to die.

About 4:00 P.M. on July 7 we disembarked at Glasgow and were given the traditional coffee and donuts by the Red Cross or the Salvation Army. We got on a train at Glasgow and traveled cross-country to the small village of Wilmslow, a few miles outside of Manchester. While on the train, we seemed practically in the land of the midnight sun because the men were still playing cards at midnight with no

light. After deboarding, we went about a mile or so to our temporary base camp. We remained here, living in tents which held eight men. The latrines were also temporary, with buckets under them, which the Englishmen picked up each day and used as fertilizer. One day we were to watch a demonstration of an attacking German platoon. We fell out with full field packs. The "Germans" approached firing blamks and fake grenades as we sat on a grassy bank. Suddenly tear gas grenades began exploding in our midst. Nobody yelled "GAS!" but everyone had their masks on in a hurry.

One evening we had potatoes boiled with the skins on. I got sick that night, and have never since eaten another potato skin.

After about a week, I got a 24-hour pass into Manchester, England. I took a pass and found a bed at the Red Cross Club and stayed overnight. I asked a Red Cross attendant if she could get me a bracelet for my wife, made out of some older silver sixpence, and she said she would. I gave her some money and she told me that, of course, it is illegal to deface His Majesty's coins, but everybody does it. After about two-and-a-half weeks, we were moved out again and I never expected to see the bracelet, but it caught up with me in a foxhole in France.

When we moved out, we were sent to someplace in southern England that was just a wooded area. We stayed here about a week. An American of Greek descent, John Mercurio, told the officers, with much profanity, that he was not going to fight for America and was going back to Greece. He was restricted to the area and I never knew the outcome, but I don't remember ever seeing him again. I suppose he spent some time in a stockade somewhere.

We left here and went to Southampton, boarded an LST (landing ship tank), and crossed the English Channel, landing, I was told, on Omaha beach. This was 6 August 1944, just two months after D-Day. This was shortly before the breakthrough out of the Normandy peninsula by the Allied troops. We were now in the Third Army.

FRANCE

When we landed, the end of the LST was let down into the water and we all waded ashore. There were many ships in the harbor which had been sunk and still had the barrage balloons attached. Barrage balloons were above the ships to keep enemy airplanes away.

We were in trucks for the next day or so, moving on toward the front which almost disappeared for a while. I remember going through the towns of Caen, Carenton, Avaranches, and St. Lo in the Normandy peninsula.

Going through one of these towns (I think this town was Avaranches), the streets were full of Frenchmen cheering us on. We stopped temporarily and a pretty French girl handed me a packet of cards which had pictures of places in France on them. I still have them.

One other little incident occured while we were in Normandy. On the first day, our colonel told us a stray bullet from an airplane had creased his helmet. I never did believe his story.

I remember one big tech sergeant saying he hoped the war wasn't ended before he got to shoot at least one of the enemy. I asked why and he said he just wanted to see one of them jump. A short time later, he led a patrol across a small river at night, telling his troops that if they ran into the enemy, it was every man for himself. Well, the Germans opened fire, and the big sergeant was the first one back across the river. His name was Sgt. James Dees.

Now we were somewhere west of Paris. Our squad of twelve or more men was sent out to guard an anti-tank gun along a road. This was a very pleasant, warm afternoon, doing nothing until, just about an hour or so before dark, someone spotted some Germans about an eighth of a mile away, across a wide open field, down next to a wooded area. Being new and inexperienced, our whole squad took off across the field after them. The Germans disappeared into the woods.

When we reached the woods, everyone started firing their M-1 rifles. I could see no one and I asked our squad leader, "Sgt. Spain, what are they firing at?" and he said, "Just fire to keep them down." So I started firing at nothing. Down through the woods we moved, and, turning to the left, headed back toward the road. An American paratrooper on guard somewhere up there was allegedly drunk and started firing at us with a submachine gun. I crawled up to a tree which was only big enough to cover half of me, though it looked like a haven of rest. Before it was over, one guy got shot through the foot or ankle. His name was Russell Rhodes and we called him "Dusty." We became the heroes of the whole regiment, because we had been under fire. It's a wonder we didn't all get killed. This was sometime during the night of 12 August. I remember the date because on 13 August I wrote to my brother, Luther, in North Africa, and told him that we had been under fire the night before. But the dated card was returned to me - Luther was headed for home.

When it was all over, we returned to the anti-tank gun and resumed guard without ever seeing those Germans again that evening. I was on guard with Thornberry. I heard some people in hobnailed shoes coming down the asphalt road, clippety-clop, clippety-clop.

I hollered just a little above a whisper, "Halt." Nothing happened. "Thornberry, what do I do?" "Say 'halt' again."

This time I was a little louder - "Halt." Nothing happened except more clippety-clop. "Thornberry, they didn't stop."

"Aw, it is probably some Frenchmen going home. Let them go." Boy, was I scared. By this time they were in front of the anti-tank gun and one of the men on guard yelled "HALT" and opened up with a machine gun. There was nothing timid about this guy. The three Germans jumped in the ditch across the road and escaped. I think our whole squad learned a lot from this experience.

The next morning, about 9:00 A.M., one lone German came up the road with a white flag. The man on the anti-tank gun followed him up the road with the sight of the big gun on him. About fifteen rifles and a machine gun were also following him. The German said there were three of them the day before, and they had been looking for some way to surrender. I don't know what happened to the other two.

The next place that we stopped was LeMans. After a couple of days we moved on to Angers, on the Loire River. We seemed to be dug in on the campus of a college, but I heard years later that it was a monastery. The Germans were on the other bank. Nothing happened except some artillery fire back and forth across the river.

The Germans were on the run, and we couldn't catch them as we turned east here. The southern part of France was occupied by some Germans, but not to any great extent, so the Allies left a few troops; but mostly we moved east. The first day we rode in trucks all day and the next day we walked all day. At the end of the first day, we stopped in Orleans. In the middle of the town, Frenchmen were all around us. Several of them were saying "Ghon de Arc" and pointing at a statue of a lady on a horse. I admit that there were parts of my education that were very limited. About all that I knew of Joan of Arc was the trade-mark label I had seen on a can of pork and beans. It would have meant so much more to me if I had known

about her. Someone thought they saw a sniper in a window and we were given the order to scatter.

On our way to the Mosselle, we passed very close to Bar le Duc which I think was General Pershing's headquarters during the First World War. I remember passing through Tours before we got to Orleans and Troyes after we left. We passed through Chalons, Rheims and St. Mihiel; I cannot remember well what happened during this time.

MOSELLE RIVER

We passed through Commercy and finally caught up to the Germans on the Moselle River, at a small town named Toul. Just outside the town, our artillery was pointed at a church belfry before we went in. Church steeples and belfrys were good for observation points. Just as soon as we moved into the town, the German artillery started pounding away at it. When I last saw the church, only one corner was holding the belfry up. Trying to put this down just as it happened is difficult, if not impossible, after forty-five years.

One time in France, we were on the edge of a field just outside a small town that had no Germans in it. Everyone in our company was drinking but myself and Sgt. Heydinger.

I told the sergeant, "Heydinger, if we get ordered to attack tonight, I am not going." He remarked, "I don't blame you and I don't think I will, either." Sure enough, during the night some Americans began firing at each other from opposite sides of the field.

Some time later, I saw Sgt. Heydinger coming back from the front of our column with one side of his face and mouth all drawn up. He had had a stroke while leading the front of the column. I never saw him again.

I don't know just where it was, but we were sort of mopping up after a town had been taken. Thornberry and I were going down one side of a street looking for stray Germans, knocking the boards off of windows and doors. We knocked a window cover open and jammed our bayonetted rifles through a window just as an old man and woman entered from another room. This poor, poor old lady let out the most pathetic scream that I ever heard. She was really scared. We went on down the street but her scream stayed with me. This may have been in the little town on the Moselle River.

The place we were to be for a couple of days was on a very high hill overlooking the Moselle River. The hill rose seventy-five feet or more and went almost straight down to the river. This is where I saw my first American killed. There was just a slight rise on top of this hill, and Sgt. Bissonet lay down and, taking a pair of field glasses, looked across the river. A German spotted him and I heard the bullet hit him in the forehead. He didn't even groan. This was not our first casualty but it was a very unusual one, the first death I witnessed, I believe. I was behind a small bush trying to dig in through almost solid rock. I figured I would be next so I got out of there in a hurry.

The next morning, we were overlooking the Moselle and spotted a German soldier. We had mortars below the skyline. Someone knew how to direct mortar fire and radioed the person firing the mortar. The first shell missed the German by about twenty feet. He began to run in a zig-zag pattern, with the mortar explosions following him. After several rounds, he ducked under a bush. The next shell landed in the bush.

We exchanged a lot of fire across the river that day.

After three or four days, we moved out at night and crossed the Moselle on a pontoon boat. The engineers had stretched a rope across and we pulled ourselves to the other shore in bright full moonlight. Boy, was I scared. I didn't even know how to swim.

PONT-A-MOUSSON

After the crossing, we climbed a very long hill to replace some other GI's. We took a break. It was drizzling cold rain and I remember wondering if it was possible for me to be any more miserable than I was.

Must be Mousson Hill ?

Wonder what date this was?

By the time we got up to the top, it was almost dark. The place had been a small castle with a concrete wall around it. The building was ruined and the walls had holes in it big enough for a tank to go through. Some of us in our squad were trying to make ourselves comfortable in a shell crater, when we heard Sgt. Baird talking about ten feet away. We asked him what he was doing. He said he was trying to tell us the password for the night, but he was at the wrong crater. There were some dead Germans in that one. We gave him the business about giving the password and countersign to the enemy. This hill was just outside a town named Pont-a-Mousson. We were told that the Germans had been attacking this hill every morning, coming up through the fog. The next morning there was no attack, but we saw what they meant about the fog because we were above it.

The next day the Frenchmen were coming up and the captain hired them to bury the dead Germans. I didn't see this, but some of the guys said they stripped the clothes from the bodies before putting them in the shallow graves.

We stayed here about a week but saw no fighting. I carved Wanda's name and mine on the butt of my rifle. There were several chickens about, but we were not allowed to eat any. We were able to go down to Pont-a-Mousson and get some marmalade and big long loaves of french bread. This was somewhat of a treat. The bread would keep for a long period of time without getting stale. We were moved back to the front, but then, after awhile, were moved back to the same location again. Somehow, the chickens had disappeared.

One time we were told we had to move out and it was so foggy we could hardly see. We hadn't gone very far when the artillery shells started coming in. Some of it was going over our heads. We had become somewhat accustomed to this. It was getting closer. One of the shells hit close to us, not more that fifteen feet away, and everyone hit the ground but me. It seemed to spin me around, and by this time everyone else was up and we kept moving on. It was foggy and evidently our platoon leader was just a little lost; we were heading right into a road corner that the Germans had zeroed in on. Boy, did they throw a lot of artillery in there! We were given the order to withdraw one hundred yards or so and dig in. When I reached for my entrenching tool, a small spade with a hinge in it, I discovered that the shell which had spun me around had cut the handle out of my entrenching tool and made a hole in my canteen cover. The Good Lord must have been with me then.

A fellow named Foster Watts and I found a large shell crater and jumped in. I started praying and said, "Foster, you had better start praying, too." He told me later that he was so scared all he could think about was digging and he hadn't even thought to pray until I told him to.

One time, when we were supposed to move out, our assistant squadleader, Sgt. Baird supposedly froze in his trench and couldn't get out because of fear. The squad leader was punching at him with his bayonet and saying, "I am really going to stab you." I never really believed either one. I don't know how it ended, but I just went on, sure that no one could be any more afraid than me. I knew Sgt. Spain would never have really "stabbed" him. At one time, one of the soldiers, PFC

Joseph L. Moyher, kept getting out of his foxhole in sight of the Germans. Our platoon leader, Lt. Newing, yelled at him to stay down. He replied, "What do you care, it's my ass that will get shot." Lt. Newing replied, "You crawl out one more time and I will shoot it off." Needless to say, he stayed down. By the way, I believe Lt. Newing would have done what he said because he was a tremendous leader. Later that day, Lt. Col. Douglas, our battalion commander, was killed by enemy fire.

We moved into a little town and the Germans were shelling part of it. We stopped and were sitting down against a board fence. I don't know what happened, but the next thing I knew I was on the second floor of a building and there were doctors up front examining some guys. I think I was examined a little later. How I got there or how much time had elapsed I do not know. I think it was just across the street from where we had been, though. Another time we were on top of a big hill and Thornberry and I were sharing a foxhole that someone before us had dug. On the side opposite from the Germans was a hole down in the side that a German 88mm shell had made without exploding. I believe this was the time that I received the little song pamphlet that the Army put out. This time, it was entitled "Hymns from Home." When it came to our squad, someone said to "give that to Coomer." The song on the front was "God Will Take Care of You." This since has become one of my favorite songs. I still have the pamphlet. I sincerely believe He did take care of me. This was on a Saturday, I believe, and I know we were attacking the Germans on a Sunday morning.

We lost several, including our platoon leader, Lt. Newing. There must have been twenty to thirty tanks on our left moving around the hill with infantry in among them. When they got to a line near to our line we crawled out and went forward also. This was a very unusual event: in front of the tanks, a lone American soldier with a white flag called out to the Germans to come in and surrender. Some would come, and when they quit coming in, he would put the white flag down and command the troops and tanks to fire. We moved on for awhile, and he repeated the process.

This is the only time that I thought that I may have definitely killed a young German. I spotted a machine gun nest and, putting a rifle grenade on my rifle, fired at it. The machine gun stopped and when I got up to the spot, there was an enemy soldier not yet dead, but with a big hole in his abdomen. I have always hoped that it wasn't me. When you are moving forward there are usually a lot of troops with you, so you are never sure that you did it. You could hardly spend three months on the front and not kill a few. Another time, Thornberry and I had put our bed in a drive-through of a barn and thought we really had a good spot. This was one of about three times we were going to have a hot meal. When we came back, shells had hit the top of the barn and our blanket was covered with pieces of slate roof. Somehow, the enemy could always find a kitchen and bombard away.

One other time, very early in our part of the war, the cooks had tried to serve a hot meal. I wasn't around, or it might have been the next platoon. Anyhow, they had sent a few rounds of artillery in but hadn't done too much damage and then they let up for a few minutes. One of the guys, Pvt. Chalmer H. Rohr, decided he could make a run and grab a pork chop. He did, but before he got back to his hole, another round came in and got him. Rohr was not our first casualty, but I think he was the first one killed in our company.

The next morning after the barn incident, Thornberry and I got out early thinking we might find some eggs, because there were chickens around. I had about three eggs in my hands when we turned a corner of the barn and ran face to face into three Germans. I dropped my eggs trying to get my gun off my shoulder and pointed in the right direction, but they were looking for a way to give up. They were unarmed and started yelling, "Comrade, Comrade," the universal sign that soldiers

used when they wanted to become a prisoner. Of course, there was also the white flag.

We were taking one town, but had not yet entered. Prisoners were coming out of three or four underground bunkers. I had thrown hand grenades in one that I assumed was empty. I yelled, and just before I was ready to lob a grenade in another bunker, a white flag appeared. Two or three of the enemy came out and I asked if there were any more. When they indicated "No," I pitched in a couple of grenades and we went on.

PLATOON RUNNER

One day the platoon runner (message carrier), Pvt. Marvin Anderson, got lost, and I was pulled out of my squad to replace him.16 This meant I would spend quite a bit of time with the company headquarters staff. This turned out to be a very hectic twenty-four hours.

The rest of the company was taking a hill, and 1st Sgt. Norton and I were taking a lot of artillery fire. We came across part of another company in a road corner, and they had lost several men. We moved on farther and dug in. I was in what was a previously occupied German foxhole. The sergeant told me to dig deeper. We were already at least four feet down, but I was all bent down digging as a shell went over and the first sergeant jumped in right on top of me. Later on, he said to me, "Pvt. Coomer, I have prayed today. I said God take care of me and my men." The way he said it sounded very sincere but also it indicated that he hadn't prayed very often before. (About a week later, I heard him cursing up a storm and when he saw me, he let up a little).

Later on, we joined the rest of the Co. Hdq. staff and dug in again. A shell went over from our own artillery, and the sergeant said, "That sounded like 'the Star Spangled Banner.' "

The next morning, when I woke up, I heard tanks firing cannon and machine gun fire on top of the hill. I shook Sgt. Norton and told him what was going on and he said they had to be our tanks. I looked again and shook him again and told him they were German tanks. He still didn't believe me. I yelled for the officers and got no answer. I shook the sergeant again and told him that the rest of the Hdq. staff was gone. He sleepily answered, "They would never do that." I threw some clods over in their foxholes and got no response. I looked up, and two companies of men were leaving the top of the hill in a rout. I told the sergeant this and grabbed my gear and said, "Sergeant, you can stay here if you want, but I am getting out fast!" This got his attention, and he was right behind me. The officers had left without telling us.

Of the two companies of men running through an open field, only one man was hit and the tanks were firing all the time at them. The guy's name was Robert P. Cosby. We had the same birthday.

We all retreated into a big wooded area and lost quite a few men because of artillery exploding in the trees. Toward the end of the day, the regular runner was back and I sure was glad.

That night or the next, our commanding officer ordered us to go out in front of the woods and dig in. We had no more than got started when the Germans opened up with machine gun fire. I remember laughing out loud because we got out of digging new holes. Later, I was on guard and getting sleepy when I heard a noise out in front of me. I took the safety off on my M1 and decided I would outwait whatever it was, but it wasn't long until I was getting drowsy again. It probably was an acorn dropped, or a squirrel. About fifteen minutes later, another soldier on down the line must have had about the same experience and threw a grenade at it. It was so

dark in this woods that you coudn't see anything.

We were pulled out of the line for a couple of days and given a 12-hour pass into Nancy. I was loaded down with three cartons of cigarettes and two or three rolls of photographic film.

I went to a photo place and asked if they would develop the rolls of film for the cigarettes and they agreed. I never got back to pick up the film, but I asked both the Protestant and Catholic chaplains to pick them up for me. I never got the pictures.

We had a soldier from Montana by the name of Negus. He was a sheep farmer and claimed to be an atheist. One time, he got pinned down with enemy fire and he said he couldn't move without drawing fire. He said he finally crawled for about a mile before he was free. I asked him, "Well, Negus, did you pray any out there?" He replied, "Well, Coomer, I did an awful lot of serious thinking." I remember another fellow from Kentucky saying, "My dad was in WWI and he said he never prayed and I am not going to either." I never got to see him after we were in France, but I bet he did.

One time, we chased some of the Germans out of their holes and found a whole set of silverware in one of them that I assume they had stolen from some French household. I gathered this up and carried it in my backpack for weeks until the day I was wounded. Of course, I never saw it again. Likewise, I never saw my camera or anything else in my pack again. Such as that big long loaf of French bread from back at Pont-a-Mousson.

One day, we were riding in some trucks along a wooded area and, hearing a loud explosion, unloaded out of the trucks. There was one bad casualty, a soldier who had almost all of a hand blown off, and a couple of others had been hit in the arm. As it turned out, the soldier with the bad hand was fooling around with his hand grenade, just in case he needed it, and got the pin all the way out. He almost got it out of the truck, but hadn't turned loose of it yet when it went off. The other two guys found out that their arms were only bruised a little and came back to the outfit. If that grenade had been in the middle of the truck, it could have been a lot worse. As it was, it was really outside the tailgate of the truck.

Another time, the kitchen crew had come near the front and were serving some hot coffee. I was shaking so hard with cold that the coffee was spilling out of my cup. Lt. Foley was there. I almost confessed to the lie I told him at Ft. Dix, but I didn't.

On the night of 9 November 1944, we were told that our division was put on reserve and there was no way we would see any more action. Not only that but our regiment was on reserve of the division, and our battalion on reserve of the regiment and so on down to our squad.

Since this was the first night available to sleep in a building in France, another soldier (I think it was Thornberry) and I became a little enterprising. We walked across the street and found bundles of wheat, carried them across and made our beds.

WOUNDED

On 10 November we were roused out and started moving out after the enemy. About 9:00 A.M., it began to snow just a little. By 9:30 or 10:00 we were temporarily pinned down with artillery fire. This let up, however, and we moved on. Somewhere, somehow we moved through a large woods. When we arrived on the east side of the woods, we took a short rest and regrouped. We were told we were going to take a hill in front of us so we had to be prepared and ready when

our orders were given.

The terrain sloped down for about one hundred feet and then up for an awful long distance. In this low place, several willows were growing. We all synchronized our watches. Phil Hall and another guy and I knelt down by a big tree and prayed. We were told that there was a little town just over the hill that was inside Germany. At ten minutes until 4:00 (or ten minutes after 4:00, I don't remember which) we were to leave the woods in a mass run. All of Co. G and Co. F, which was on our left. We were told not to fire until we were fired upon.

At the specified time, our two companies of men, about 180 to a company, charged out of the woods. We were not more than two or three steps out of the woods, when machine gun bullets kicked up dirt in front of us. A red headed soldier, whose name I don't remember, raised his rifle and start firing and almost everyone else was firing from the hip and running. I don't think that anyone turned and went back but just kept running toward the machine gun bullets. I was a very fast runner, and before I realized it I was way out in front.

Our platoon leader, Lt. Wilcoxen, was new to us and we were all concerned how he would be when we were in an attack. I thought to myself that maybe I should slow down a little, and I looked up and there was the lieutenant way up ahead of me waving his arms for us to hurry on.

About two-thirds the way up the hill, a mortar exploded real close to me, and I felt a piece of it hit my left leg. It just stung a little, and I thought that it probably didn't break the skin and kept running and firing. I remember thinking of the two guys in the truck. It's funny how many things you can think of in a short time.

I was probably in my third or fourth clip of ammo by this time, although I really only remember changing clips once. Well, the piece of mortar did more than sting. It went quite deep and is still there today. A few seconds after the mortar exploded, I was hit in the right forearm with either a rifle or machine gun bullet.

This time I knew that I was at the end of the row. I didn't even know what happened to my rifle for the time being. I looked around and I saw a long, low place and ran back to it and got as low as I could.

A little soldier of Chinese descent was in the back and came over and put my first-aid pack on my arm. He went on up the hill.

I heard a friend of mine calling to me, "Coomer, holler for a medico," and I replied I had, but didn't see any. This friend's name was Hedges and we regarded him as an old man. He was 39 years of age. After the Chinese guy left, I ran to where I thought Hedges was, but it was a guy from Evansville and he was already dead. He was lying on his back with his knee drawn up, and when I hit the dirt, my cheek hit his knee causing a pretty large bruise on my face. I looked around but never did see Hedges. I have a little twinge of guilt yet when I think I should have looked more for him, but right then there was still a lot of lead flying around. I went on back to the woods and was hurting pretty bad by now.

By the time I got to the willow trees, the hill was taken and the German prisoners were all around me. Our mortar men and machine gunners were yelling and cussing the POWs so loud, I thought they might start firing on them. I began to holler "Don't shoot me."

At a later date, back in the U.S., I ran across our first sergeant, and I also by chance ran into Phil Hall at Ft. Benning, Ga. I asked Phil if he knew what happened to several of the guys and told him I had wondered what I did with my rifle. One thing drilled into us was to take care of our weapon at all times. Phil told me that it was machine gun fire that hit me, and the butt of my rifle was splintered

to pieces. I really know only what Phil told me. If this is true, it probably saved my life as I always fired left-handed and it would have been right in front of my torso. When anyone got hit in any place but the arms and legs, he seldom survived back then.

I walked about five miles to an aid station with some others and from there went by ambulance to an evacuation hospital. About the middle of the second night, they worked on my arm and leg. The doctors were talking to me and getting ready to give me sodium pentothal to put me to sleep. They asked me if I knew a guy by the name of Elmo Tannka, and I said I did. They told me his brother worked there in the hospital unit and they had sent for him. Just as they put the needle in my arm, he came through the door and I said, "Sergeant, as far as I know Tannka is OK," and I was out like a light. I was so hungry that I had made one of the nurses promise to bring me some food as soon as I woke up. When I woke up about 2:30 in the morning, she brought me a cheese sandwich. The evacuation hospital was a series of tentsas I recall.

I was then sent to a field hospital somewhere farther back. About the second day there, an officer came down the ward handing out purple hearts. I was later transferred to a hospital just east of Paris. Yes, I got to see good ol' gay Paree during a blackout at midnight. There was a nurse here who told me my arm would be crooked and never let anyone rebreak it and try to straighten it out.

In Paris I met a soldier, Pvt. Albert Tackett from our company, and he told me that Hedges had lain out there on the cold ground all night but that he was going to be all right. He also told me that Sissel had got shot up pretty bad in the abdomen and he thought he had died. I guess Sissel and I were about as close as we could be under the circumstances. Well, Sissel didn't die, as I shall tell you later.

After a brief stay here, I was flown to a hospital just outside of Taunton, in Southern England. This was 30 November 1944. One day while I was in England, I was walking down one of the walkways and met a colonel, but didn't salute him. He stopped me and said, "Soldier, don't you know you are supposed to salute an officer?" I replied, "Yes, Sir, I know that but I can't salute you properly." I raised my arm with the cast and indicated I couldn't get it in proper position to salute, although I know I could have. The colonel said, "Oh, I am sorry. Carry on."

I was ZI'd within just a few days. That is, I was put on a list to return to the Zone of the Interior, meaning the U.S. I wrote Wanda that I would be home for Christmas.

But such minor wounds as mine kept me at the bottom of the list, and I departed on 6 February 1945. I was surprised when I saw the Queen Mary waiting again. I was in England during the Battle of the Bulge. I was sure that I would be sent back to the front. Fortunately for me, I missed both D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge.

HOME

I arrived at Halloran General Hospital on Staten Island, New York, on 12 Febrary 1945. I had lost one of my two front teeth in England because it was abscessed, and on the trip to New York the one next to it also abscessed, and I lost it, too. This delayed my departure a couple of days. While I was here, I got to hear one of the big-name bands; I think it was Benny Goodman. I was still listed as a stretcher patient although I had always been able to walk around. They came in for me, and just as I was lying down, they brought in another guy on a stretcher. It was my good friend, Pvt. Elmer J. Sissel.

We were both glad to see each other, but by then I was leaving.

My next stop was Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver, Colorado. I was here for some time because they started working on my teeth. I got to come home on a 3-day pass but had only about 5 hours at home. I was eventually transferred to Wakeman General Hospital at Camp Atterbury. I was given a 30-day furlough home.

When I returned, I was given a 33-day delay in route furlough, and I was to report to the Sands Hotel at Miami Beach, Florida. I was to be reactivated with a new unit. I was sent to the 4th Infantry at Ft. Benning, Ga. When I got there, my job was to teach young soldiers to fire mortars. I had never touched a mortar and, of course, I knew nothing of firing them.

I knew this wasn't going to work, and I also knew that this outfit would be going to the Pacific War. The only way that I could think of to get out of this predicament was to go on sick call. Each day that I was to teach mortar firing, I went on sick call. Finally the doctor, who was an officer, asked me, "Pvt. Coomer, what do you want? I know you are not sick." I told him, "Well, Sir, I figure I was living on borrowed time in France. I think this group is going to the Pacific to fight and I don't intend to go with them. Not only that, but I know nothing about mortar, except that those shells explode when they land." He asked me what else I could do. "Can you type?" I told him I had four weeks of typing and had played around with typing every chance I got. He sent me back and also sent a recommendation back to Company Headquarters.

Next day, I was transferred to the First Parachute Training Regiment as a typewriter commando. I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion Headquarters. The sergeant major gave me a book and told me to type a certain page. I did hunt and peck typing and took it to him and he said, "You'll do." I was here about two weeks or so and they needed a clerk-typist at Co. Hdqr. I was transferred to the building next door.

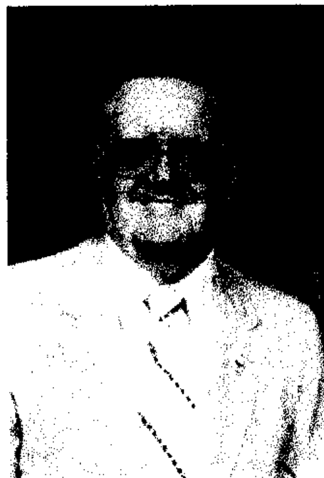
When Wanda first came down to Columbus, Ga., we rented a room out in the country from an old man. The cracks in the floor were a half inch wide and we could see the red clay underneath. There was no running water and we had to use an outside toilet. Needless to say, this didn't meet Wanda's approval, so we rented an apartment in Columbus . Our landlady was an old maid, Miss Ridenhower. When we left, she gave us a set of cornucopia vases. Wanda had a job in a Catholic Charities organization in Phoenix City, Alabama, just across the river. She was stuffing envelopes with pleas for money.

By this time, the war was over in Europe and the program of discharging by points was installed. The Sgt. Major was discharged, and I was given his job. I was promoted from P.F.C. to Sgt. I made a better Sgt. Major than a clerk-typist.

When 28 November 1945 rolled around, I received my discharge and began making preparation to come home.

MORE

Click here to send email to Mr. Coomer's son Mark!



(he'll see to it that his dad gets it!)

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Mr. Coomer (in civilian life) is a vigorous retiree. He's graciously consented to allow LivingMemory to present his WWII memoirs.