My World War II Memories
Ivan B. Madsen

(This history was written by Darla Madsen Tolman as told to her by her father, Ivan B. Madsen, in May 1998. It is mostly from Ivan's memory and in his own words with little research. It was revised in October 2011 to include more facts.)

In the late 1930's a man by the name of Adolf Hitler began to rise in power in Europe. Eventually he wanted to take over and rule the entire world. By the early 1940's nearly all nations in the world were feeling the effects of his dictatorship. The United States, with England and many other countries began to take steps to thwart this very real threat of loss of freedom for the world. And so the country became engaged in an effort to retaliate against the threats and World War II became a reality.

On January 9, 1943, at the age of 20, I was drafted into the United States Army at Fort Douglas, Utah, along with a large group of other young men from Sevier County. I was asked to serve my country for an unlimited amount of time, which turned out to be nearly three years. I went first to Camp Bowie, Texas, for basic training. On April 13, we moved by motor march to Camp Hood, Texas, and then on August 2 we moved to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

I was placed in the 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Company B, 2nd Platoon, as a Technician Grade 5 (tank driver). There were three companies in a battalion and three platoons in each company. There were four tanks in each platoon, and 12 tanks in each company. Lt. Neel was my first platoon leader and Captain Francis E. Wilts was my company commander. Warren Shurtleff was my first Sergeant and tank commander. My tank crew changed periodically during the war with a man from Texas being my last tank commander.

The 823rd TDB was actually formed in July of 1942 after the Germans had already taken over all of Europe. I joined the battalion 6 months later and the group of men I went in with from Fort Douglas completed the makeup of the 823rd TDB.

The 823rd TDB was originally a "Towed Tank Destroyer Battalion." We trained with halftracks and 3" towed guns. A halftrack is an armored personnel carrier that has wheels on the front and tracks like a tank on the back. They could travel up to 45 mph. We used these halftracks to tow our big machine guns and carry the crew of nine men used to set up and man this gun.

When we trained in the United States we had to be able to pull up into position, get out, unhook, and get the gun set up in a certain amount of time. The towed gun was on big rubber tires and had legs on it. We would unhook it from the halftrack and spread the legs way out. On the end of the legs were big diggers and when the gun bucked these diggers would dig into the ground and hold the gun in place. We would practice these maneuvers day after day after day until we got them perfect. I never did help get the gun set up because I had to drive the halftrack and get it pulled out of the way after the gun was unhooked. After I got the halftrack pulled out of the way, then I would go back and help the rest of the crew.

The halftrack had a big roller on the front of it that was on springs. When we would go through a wash or something where the wheels wouldn't touch the ground, the roller would roll us right up out of the wash until the wheels could grab hold. On the halftrack all the sides and doors were half-inch thick steel.

While at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, my battalion completed nine weeks of maneuvers training. We were the only towed tank battalion to receive a mark of "excellent" during this maneuvers period. It was also while in basic training at Camp Claiborne that I received my only injury of the war. The windshield on the halftrack had a metal cover made out of half-inch steel. This cover had three metal rods used to prop it up. When the halftrack was all buttoned up there was only a small hole approximately 2 x 6 inches to look out. It would nearly take two men to get this metal cover propped up, but after we got done doing maneuvers one day I tried to put up this metal cover by myself. I was sitting on the hood of the halftrack and had the cover on my knee trying to get the metal rods out to prop it up. It slipped and came down on my fingers and took the skin off right to the bone. I received a ten-day furlough for my injury. I didn't have enough money to get home, so I went to the Red Cross for money, but they wouldn't give me any. The men in my platoon took up a collection and collected enough money for me to get home on.

I spent over a year in the United States before we were finally ready to ship out to Europe. We left Camp Claiborne on March 9, 1944, and arrived at Camp Myles Standish in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 12th. While here, we spent some of our leave time in Rhode Island which was about 15 miles from the camp. On April 6th we left Boston Harbor on the USS ASea Porpoise@ and traveled across the Atlantic ocean to England. We spent 13 days at sea and participated in one of the largest convoys of ships ever. We arrived at Newport Harbor on April 18. We then boarded a train to Hertfordshire, England. We were stationed in England until D-Day, June 6, 1944. It was while here that we were attached to the 30th Infantry Division, nicknamed "Old Hickory," and would remain so until the end of the war.

On D-Day the invasion of Europe took place. I participated in the Normandy Invasion at Omaha Beach going in on the second day. My company was supposed to go in on the first day, but our landing craft hit a sandbar and we couldn't get off. We had to sit there all night and into the next day until the high tide came in and we could get off the sandbar. (Editor's note: The official history of the 823rd TDB indicates that they were supposed to go in on D-Day +6, but due to circumstances and error, they crossed the English Channel and disembarked on Omaha "Red Fox" Beach, in Normandy, on June 24th. I believe that in relating this experience to me it was not clarified as to what was meant by "the first day." I believe Dad must have meant "the first day" to be the first day of when they were "supposed" to land on the beach.)

St. Lo was a town about 25 miles off the beach when we first went in to France. During this battle we had 3" towed guns and lost a lot of men taking this town. The battle of St. Lo, during July of 1944, ended up being the second toughest battle we fought throughout the war.

The Battle of Mortain took place in August and was a very hard fought battle. My battalion set an army record for tanks destroyed in one day's action, and also for the number of enemy vehicles knocked out. My company received the Presidential Citation, which at that time was the highest award a company could receive. This was awarded to my company for "outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy" on August 7, 1944, in the vicinity of St. Barthelemy, France.

During the first few months after the invasion, when we still had the towed guns, we would live in fox holes, straw stacks, basements, or any place we could find. We had lice on us so big you could see them. After so long they had to take us back off the front lines for a few days to the rear of the war and delouse us. They gave us a hot meal, a bath and a change of clothes.

When we got over into France we found that the halftracks and towed guns were too bulky and not very maneuverable, and we also lost a lot of men with them. After a few months, they sent us to the back of the war and took the towed guns away and brought in the M-10 tanks. I went to a two week school in Heerlen, Holland to learn how to drive an M-10 tank. This was sometime during November or December of 1944. It only took a crew of five men to man a tank instead of nine like the towed guns. The tanks were more maneuverable and a lot more protection. After we got the tanks we lived right inside them most of the time.

Going through the hedgerows in France was very frightening. Hedgerows were 3-foot high mounds of dirt with trees and bushes growing on top. They had 2-3 acres of land inside and surrounded most of the fields in France. Once we got inside the hedgerows it was difficult to find our way out because there was only one entrance and we had to go in and out the same way. The army finally put a bulldozer on every fourth or fifth tank so we could make our own path out of the hedgerows.

Most of the terrain in France was made up of acres and acres of apple orchards, and every building we would go in had large cider vats in the basement that held four or five hundred gallons of cider.

When we reached Paris, they wouldn't let us, the American soldiers, take the city. The French didn't want the city destroyed and wanted to preserve as much of it as they could, so General Eisenhower made an agreement with France to let the French soldiers go in and take it.

The Siegfried Line was cement barriers placed in rows along the German border. Buried beneath these cement barriers were pillboxes. Pillboxes were cement boxes the size of a small room that the Germans manned and shot guns from. They had an opening along the top big enough to stick a gun through to shoot. After a while they abandoned these pillboxes because they were too easy to get buried in. The Siegfried Line was called Germany's "impenetrable West Wall." We broke through the Siegfried Line in September 1944 and found about 100 Nazi battle flags in a pillbox buried beneath it. I sent one home and still have it in my possession today.

When we got to the town of Aachen, Germany, in October 1944 we spent 13 days in what became some of the heaviest fighting of the war. The infantry had tried to take the town, but couldn't. They told the civilians over a loud speaker to get out because the allies were going to bomb it to the ground. But the Germans wouldn't let the civilians leave. Airplanes bombed the town for three days and then the tank destroyers sat outside of town and steadily fired artillery into it for several more days. We had to have the tanks with the bulldozers on go in first to clear the debris from the streets. After the town had been bombed and taken, and the townspeople started leaving, we saw many of them severely wounded with missing arms and legs as a result of the heavy fighting. We saw many of them lying in the ditches along the roadside to get away from the artillery. My platoon was credited with destroying two Panthers and a Tiger in exchange for a 3-inch gun and two halftracks knocked out. I received the Silver Star Medal for this action. This was awarded to me for "gallantry in action" during the period of October 10-12, 1944, in Germany. Major General L. S. Hobbs, commander of the 30th Infantry Division, awarded the Silver Star Medal to me.

It was the middle of December 1944 and we were supposed to get ten days leave off the front lines for Christmas. We found some old houses to spend our leave time in, but after three days we received orders that we were to leave immediately. We traveled for three days and three nights not knowing where we were headed. We arrived at the

Battle of the Bulge which took place in the Ardennes Forest on the east side of Belgium next to the German border. It was bitterly cold and the snow was two feet deep. White sheets were taken from civilian homes to put over our tanks to camouflage us in the snow. The infantry also used white sheets to put over them for camouflage and they used snow skis to get around. We spent the first 10 days of the battle right in the tank and only got out long enough to put fuel in the gas tank. When we did sleep, we slept right in the tank. The infantry would sleep right out in the snow. A lot of times we would go for days and never sleep. The battle lasted for about 2 months and ended up being the third toughest battle of the war. We would use the bathroom in a can and then throw it out the top of the tank. All we had to eat were K-rations. We had a one burner stove and would burn propane fuel to keep warm and heat up our food.

When we first arrived at the Battle of the Bulge there weren't any lines set up. Nobody knew where anybody was. The first few days when our planes started bombing, they were bombing our own men and a lot of them got buried alive in fox holes. That's how confused things were. My company didn't get to the battle until after it had already started and was in full swing. The war had been moving so fast that the allied lines had been stretched very thin in that particular area and so the Germans decided to make a "bulge" at the Belgium border. This was a surprise attack and was the last major German offensive of the war. Some of the heavy non-battle casualties of this battle were trench foot, frost bite, pneumonia, and exhaustion.

We crossed the Roer River on February 24, 1945, and we crossed the Rhine River on March 24, 1945. When we got to the Rhine River we had no way to get across. All the bridges had been blown up. We sat on the river bank and constantly fired artillery while the engineers worked to build a pontoon bridge to get us across the river. We had one crewman steadily hauling water from the river to pour over the barrel of the gun to keep it cool. The gun would get so hot that the artillery would come out the end of the barrel and just fall to the ground. At night, every time we got the bridge about half built, the Germans would knock it out again. The army finally hauled in barges on trucks and took us across the Rhine River on barges one tank at a time. They gave us food rations to last us for about 10 days, because once we got across the river there was no way back.

I remember a little town that the infantry had tried to take, but couldn't. We went in at night and blew every house right to the ground. We went back and loaded up ammunition three times during the night to take this little town. We got credit for killing 600 Germans in that little town that night. When it got daylight there was a big wash and when we went down through it and had almost got on top we broke a track. We rolled right back down into the wash. There was nothing we could do but just sit and wait until the war went on by. As soon as the war had passed the maintenance crew or rear echelon came and used a big wrecker to lift us out of the wash and put a new track on.

Hitler's personal troops were called the SS Troops. Hitler didn't start using his SS troops until towards the end of the war when he started to get desperate. The regular German soldiers would surrender when they got in a tight spot, but the SS troops would not surrender, they would fight to their death. They all wore black leather suites and had the letters "SS" branded under their arms.

One time in Germany there was a highway that went down through a canyon and made a big bend down in the bottom. There were hills and timber and trees all around. Some of these SS Troops had a road block set up down in the bottom and nothing or no one could get through. My tank crew was sent down alone to go around behind and try to knock out the SS Troops and their road block. We had to go down a very steep incline

and our tank nearly tipped over. After we got around behind, we were successful in knocking out the whole road block and our company was able to continue on. All of the men in my tank crew were awarded the Bronze Star Medal for this "heroic achievement in action" on March 27, 1945. The citation indicates that we volunteered to go, but I don't remember volunteering. I don't know whether our tank commander, Warren Shurtleff, who never seemed to be scared of anything, volunteered us, or whether we just happened to be the ones picked to go. Brigadier General James Lewis awarded the medal to me.

I remember at times we were moving so fast that the infantry would get on our tanks and ride along with us so they didn't have to walk. The war moved so fast at times that they couldn't keep supplies up to us and we would run out of ammunition and gas. When we would run out of gas we would just pull off the road and park and wait until the war went by and a tanker could bring us some gas.

One time in the middle of the night we ran out of gas. We were near an abandoned house and decided to sleep in the basement of this house for the night. Pretty soon five Germans came along in an armored car. They had hit a land mine. We could hear some jabbering going on and knew they were going to occupy the upstairs. They were in the upstairs all night while we were in the basement. We posted a guard at the stairs, but they never did try to come down. Needless to say we didn't get much sleep that night for fear they would discover us. As soon as daylight came, they took off and we were able to come out.

Throughout the war there was death all around me, but the closest time I ever came to death was one time when I was walking back to the rear to pick up the mail. We didn't get mail very often, and I had to walk back through an open field to get it. As I walked through this field I could hear the sound of artillery coming. I couldn't tell from which direction it was coming, but I could hear the whistle of it coming through the air and knew it was going to be close. I just lay down on the ground. The artillery hit the ground about 30 feet from me, and when it hit, nothing happened. It was a dud! Had it gone off, I wouldn't be here today! I got up and continued on my way to get the mail.

When driving a tank, we would have to look out of a periscope to see where we were going. There was a dead space of about 20-30 feet in front of the tank that we couldn't see. When we didn't have intense fire on us, the tank commander would sit up through the open turret and watch where we were going. He would sit with his feet on my shoulders and he would step on the shoulder of the direction he wanted me to turn. The helmets we wore were equipped with radio earphones. We could all talk to each other through these earphones and the tank commander could talk to the other tanks around us. The radio operator was also trained to be the assistant driver. He sat next to me so that if anything happened to me, he could take over the driving. Each of the five men in the tank crew had his specific job--gunner, loader, radio operator/assistant driver, tank commander, and driver.

We could fire the tank from any side. The turret would swivel to the direction we wanted to shoot. When we'd fire the gun it would really shake the whole tank. We had three different guns on our tank--a 76 mm gun, a 50 caliber machine gun, and a 30 caliber machine gun. The ammunition was stored inside the tank on racks. We carried 300 rounds of ammunition for the 76 mm gun, 20,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition, and 50,000 rounds of .30 caliber ammunition. The projectile (bullet) from the 76 mm gun weighed 25 lbs.

At times we would hit a land mine. It wouldn't hurt us inside the tank, but it would blow the track off and immobilize us. We would have to wait until the war went on by and the rear echelon could come by and fix the track.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was in charge of all the Allied Forces which included the French, British, and Canadian troops. Bernard Montgomery, from England, wanted to be in charge of the war, but the Americans wouldn't stand for it. Montgomery was always looking for glory and he and General Eisenhower didn't get along. There had to be one man in charge in order for things to run smoothly. General Eisenhower had a lot of trouble with his counterparts from England and France and trying to keep everybody working together on the same page.

Montgomery wanted General Eisenhower's job and he was determined to get it. General Eisenhower finally wrote a letter and sent it to President Roosevelt and the other allied country leaders telling them to either get Montgomery out of his way or he would quit. Montgomery finally figured out that they weren't going to let General Eisenhower go, so he'd better straighten up. After that he started getting along better with General Eisenhower. Most of the big shots were out for glory, but not General Eisenhower, he always wanted to save as many men as he could. I did get to see General Eisenhower one time when we were back at the rear of the war during a break. General Eisenhower never did get up to the front lines. I have a lot of respect and admiration for General Eisenhower and the way he handled things during the war.

I remember the only time we retreated during the war, we did it in an orderly fashion. We had to retreat because they were just kicking the “hell” out of us. The company commander ordered us to retreat. We pulled way back to the rear and spent a couple of days there until we finally got with some other companies that could help us. Then we went right back to where we retreated from. I remember that as we retreated we were going backwards and were shooting our guns from behind us as we went. General Patton once said, "You don't want to have to pay the price for taking the same ground twice."

A lot of the streets in Germany were cobblestone. They were shiny and just like glass. Some of the tanks had rubber on the tracks and they wouldn't slide, but the tanks with metal tracks were just like skates on ice. Every time you'd make a turn the tank would slide. After the war we were making a road march moving from the Russian sector down to our sector. A lot of the streets were very narrow, just barely wide enough to get a tank through it. On this road march as the last tank went around a turn, it started sliding and went right through a house and into their living room. The people started bawling and screaming and really raising a ruckus. They had gone all through the war and their house had withstood all the fighting and had remained intact...until now!

I remember one night we went into a little town that the infantry couldn't take. This one tank drove right through the side of a house and ended up with his gun barrel sticking out the living room window. This house had a basement in it, and the floor gave way. The tank went right through the floor and into the basement.

One tank weighed 50-60 ton and could go 40 mph out on the highway. The German Tiger Tanks could only go about 3 mph. We only got about 3 or 4 miles per gallon and had about a 300 hundred gallon tank that we had to fill by hand. Everything inside of the tank was solid steel with no padding. You drive a tank just like you drive a caterpillar with no steering wheel, just levers. We just had room enough to crawl in and sit down. The maneuverability of the German tanks was not very good. We could get up on a ridge, fire 10 rounds, and get back down out of the way before the German Tanks could even turn around. But if they ever hit you, you were gone! The Germans did have better

equipment than we did, but not much of it. On the other hand, we didn't have quite as good of equipment, but we did have a lot more of it.

After the fighting was over at the Battle of Aachen, we went back and looked at some of the German Tanks that we'd knocked out. The 25 lb. projectile we shot from our 76 mm gun only went in to these tanks about an inch or maybe two and most were still stuck in the sides of the German tanks. The steel on the German tanks was 8 inches thick, while the steel on our tanks was only 1 1/2 inches thick. The speed of the bullet coming out of the 76 mm gun was 3,000 feet per second. A string or cross hair was placed on the end of the barrel to use as a sight. The gunner used a telescope with a big rubber pad on it so that when the gun would recoil the telescope wouldn't come back and hit him. The loader couldn't stand right behind the gun in the back end of the tank because there wasn't enough room. He would have to stand off to the side so when the gun recoiled it wouldn't come back and hit him. The loader would also have to use asbestos gloves to load the ammunition and unload the shell. The hot shell would come back in the tank and the loader would have to throw it out the open turret. The ammunition all had to be loaded by hand and you would have to have your hand doubled up in a fist to push it in. You couldn't push the bullet in with your fingers sticking out or your fingers would get caught.

While the war was going on we did pretty much as we wanted. During the war we ran into a chicken farm and took a case of eggs back to the cook, we butchered a hog and had fresh meat, we came to a big place where they made fancy accordions and guitars, and some of the guys each took one. There weren't any big shots around to stop us, so we did a lot of looting and just helped ourselves to things which we shouldn't have done. After the war was over we had to play by the rules because the headquarters personnel were around.

There were 120 men from Utah that all went in at the same time. Twenty-one of us were from Sevier County and we all stayed together in the 823rd TDB. Me, Leon Shaw and Lamont Mason were the only ones from Aurora to stay in the 823rd TDB. Lamont Mason was my first cousin and ended up in a different company. Leon Shaw was my assistant driver and radio operator for a while.

I was getting paid $21 a month during the war, and I sent half of that amount home to my mother. The army would match the amount of money that I sent home. We did get extra pay for combat duty and with an increase in rank. When I left home Audra, my sister, was still there and mother didn't have any way of making a living. I was her sole supporter and she was dependent on me. When the war took me away, the war had to compensate for that. Mother always appreciated it and often told me so after the war. She was always trying to do things for me to pay me back. My mother often wrote me letters and always told me to be careful, but you couldn't be careful. I always figured if a shell had my name on it I would get it. A lot of men volunteered, but I didn't go until they drafted me.

A lot of guys got married just before they left for the war; however, most of them didn't still have their wives when they got home. All the women wanted was to get the money from their G.I. because the government would match the money that the service men sent home.

We would attack right along with the infantry. At times we were close enough to the German fox holes that our tank commander could take a grenade and drop it out of the top of the tank right into their fox holes. On the tank along the side of the turret, were straps we could tie things on with. We usually had bed rolls with us and a can of drinking

water, both tied to the outside. A lot of times when we were ready to get out and use our bed rolls or get a drink, everything tied onto the side would be shot to pieces.

After we got into Germany and closer to Berlin the harder the Germans fought. When the war ended, we were on the Elbe River, only 20 miles from Berlin. We sat at the Elbe River for about 3 weeks, from about April 17 until May 8, 1945, waiting for the Russians to take Berlin. May 8th was V-E Day (Victory in Europe). The war in Japan was still going on. The American troops stopped at the Elbe River in accordance with a political agreement made towards the end of the war between the United States, England, and Russia. Also in this political agreement were plans for the occupation of Germany after the war. Germany was divided up into sections between the countries. Berlin was part of the Russian sector and so General Eisenhower let Russia take it. General Eisenhower didn't want to lose any more men.

When we got to the Elbe River it was lined with barges for as far as you could see. They were loaded with whiskey. When we left the Elbe River after the war ended we did what was called army occupations. Army occupations was occupying the area and helping to maintain peaceful conditions in Germany after the war. We did this until the country over that sector could take over. Then we would leave and go to another section and do army occupations there until we got down to our own sector. We continued this until time to return home to the United States.

When we left the Elbe River, the soldiers took a ten-wheeled army truck and loaded it full of whiskey from the barges and took it with us. We would stop in the town where we were going to do army occupation and the company commander would go through the town and find the best building and make that our headquarters. Pretty much every restaurant and motel had a bar in it and they would back up this ten-wheeled truck and unload the whiskey into the bar. The Germans worked for us. They did all our cooking, shined our shoes, did our laundry, cut our hair, etc. About the only thing they couldn't do for us was guard duty.

Just before the war ended we were going through a town when a German soldier threw a hand grenade down from the top of a house into the open turret of one of our tanks. All five men inside were killed.

While doing army occupation in Germany, and before we turned our tanks into the motor pool, we took them out into some fields and chased deer with them. After we got all the tanks turned into the motor pool in August, 1945, they gave us a 10-day furlough to go into Paris and have a good time. We had a good time after the war was over. The poor pheasant people out in the hedgerows were really good to us, but the people in the big cities really took the GI's for a ride. They would charge a lot of money to buy things. The Holland people were the nicest people we met and would do anything for you.

As the war ended, there were rumors we would be sent to fight the Japanese. Thankfully that didn’t happen as the war in Japan soon ended as well.

I came home from almost three years of World War II service and was very lucky to have gone throughout the war with no major injury, only two smashed fingers I got while in basic training. This was extraordinary as the fatality and injury rate was very high. Very few of my original company were still together at the end of the war. Many men also spent time in Prisoner of War Camps.

In addition to the Bronze Star, the Silver Star, and the Presidential Citation, I also received five battle stars, one for each major battle I participated in. I also earned one gold star and 2 arrow heads. The gold star and one of the arrow heads are attached to the Silver Star Medal, and the other arrow head is attached to the Bronze Star Medal.

Receiving these arrow heads is the same as getting another Bronze Star and Silver Star Medal.

I participated in most of the major battles of the war, including the Normandy Invasion, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge), and Central Europe. It was almost one continual battle from D-Day, June 6, 1944, until the war ended almost a year later.

On October 13, 1945, the 823rd TDB was deactivated and we departed Europe to return to the United States. We left Marseilles Harbor in France on the APontotoc Victory.@ We arrived back in the United States on October 23rd. As we entered the Harbor there was a boat that came out to meet us that had some bands on it that played music to welcome us home. Later that night they took us up the Hudson River. It was in the middle of the night when they let us off onto a barge. There were a lot of women there working for the Red Cross feeding us fresh milk and food. The guys started eating a lot of it, but since we hadn't had any fresh milk or food for so long, our bodies couldn't handle it and a lot of guys got sick. We continued up the Hudson River to a dock where they unloaded us. We marched down the middle of the street in the middle of the night and into New York to a big army barracks named Camp Shanks, where they fed us a big steak dinner. After we had eaten the steak dinner we went back to the barracks and spent two days getting prepared to go home.

I traveled from New York to Salt Lake City on a train with a layover in Denver. One of the men, Austin Meacham, missed the train in Denver and had to find his own way home. He was just arriving at Fort Douglas when the rest of us were just leaving.

I was discharged on October 31, 1945, at Fort Douglas, Utah. Merrill Gurr and I started hitchhiking from Salt Lake City to Aurora (a distance of about 150 miles.) A man picked us up and after finding out that we were just returning from the war, drove us right to our homes. I didn't quite get home in time to hunt deer that fall!