

VETERAN'S HISTORY PROJECT - 2005

This is February 6th. Today I'm interviewing Paul Derber, Jr. for the Veteran's History Project and he's going to share some of his World War II experiences.

Can you tell us anything about your basic training?

Yes, basic training was in Texas at Camp Hood, Texas which was south of the Oklahoma border – I don't know how far, probably about 20-30 miles. We did our basic training in Texas, but at the time the war was being fought in Africa, and so we went to the Mojave Desert near Needles, California to do desert training to prepare us for the war in Africa. And while we were there training, the war in Africa was winding down, so we got done with our training and we went back to Texas and did some more training – a different kind of training that probably more like the kind of training we would be encountering in Europe. So desert training in the Mojave Desert was very hot. We slept in tents – these big pyramid tents held eight soldiers and the temperature quite often got up to 120 degrees. It was very hot. And when we went back from California we went back to Texas and retrained and it wasn't too long before we shipped out and went to England. If I remember right, it took us about ten days to get across the Atlantic because we traveled in a convoy and we had to zig zag to avoid submarines. There were about 70 or 80 ships in this convoy. There were oil tankers and everything else along with us, including destroyers. And we got up near Iceland and then we landed in England - I believe it was Liverpool where we landed. And there was a British ship that we had gone across on. It was his Majesty's ship, I believe it was called Liverpool – I'm not too sure about that. But we landed at Liverpool and we then were in England for almost six months before D-Day. And then of course, after we left England we crossed the English Channel and went into Normandy on Omaha Beach. And I went across the channel on an LST – a landing ship tank – which carried these tank destroyers that I was on, and we landed on Normandy Beach and from there went into Europe into France. Okay, what else do you want to know?

Can you tell us about the Battle of the Bulge?

Well, the Battle of the Bulge occurred in December and it was probably Hitler's last chance at chasing the Allies out of France and Belgium and Holland. And the Battle of the Bulge occurred in wintertime with snow, and the air power at that time was – we had air superiority, except the weather was bad and there was not a lot of planes that could protect us at the time, because the weather was bad for 3-4 days or longer. In the meantime the Germans with the tanks and stuff that they had put in reserve for this Battle of the Bulge, including some of the captured equipment that they had captured from the British and the Americans were used to attack the Allied lines. And the idea of this Battle of the Bulge was they were going to capture the seaport at Antwerp and give that to Hitler for a Christmas present, but they made quite an indentation in the American and British lines, and finally they were defeated. But they were primarily defeated because the weather had cleared and the Air Force was bombing the German positions and the German tanks. Also the Germans had run out of equipment, out of fuel, and so their attack against the Allies after they had penetrated for probably sixty-seventy miles, the Allies blunted the attack and closed the pocket. And this pocket when they closed it, all this German equipment was captured in there. And that was the last great German offensive in Europe, except there was a few times when we were crossing the Rhine River we had trouble there crossing the Rhine River, until they captured the bridge at Remagen, and after we crossed the Rhine that war was pretty well in our favor. The Russians had been coming in from the east and the American and British and Allied troops were coming in from the west, so they kind of kept the Germans concentrated in a smaller area, continuing to get smaller.

These are some more experiences from the Battle of the Bulge. Of course I was on a tank destroyer, 629th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and we had supplies that we carried along with our tank destroyer, and we ourselves never got too desperate for supplies because we carried a lot of things. But one thing we didn't have was good, warm footwear. And a lot of our soldiers, especially the infantry, froze their feet and we lost a lot of our troops, not by so much as gunfire as we did with frozen feet. So a lot of our troops wound

up in the hospital with frozen feet. But I had made myself a pair of booties, because when I was in the Boy Scouts I had learned how to make boots out of leather. I had found a sheepskin with the fur or the wool all on the leather yet, and I made myself a pair of boots out of sheepskin and I wore them inside of my galoshes (or rubber footwear), and it kept me from freezing my feet. Otherwise I believe I, too would have had frozen feet. But I did not freeze my feet because of that.

My daughter was asking me about the experience I had when I had a German Leica camera that I had obtained in Europe, and I had taken a lot of pictures. It was a very good, efficient camera and I had this camera on the tank destroyer. One day we were advancing up the road and they had advised us that there were Germans up ahead and to be on the alert for them. Well, evidently down in the small valley on the other side there was either a tank or an 88 field artillery piece that had us zeroed in. I was looking through the scope – I was the gunner on the tank – and I was looking through the scope up ahead to where we were advancing. All of a sudden a German shell hit the side of the tank and took the suspension system off, but the shell did not penetrate our armor. And the reason it didn't penetrate our armor – it had hit alongside of the road that were huge chunks of granite or rock that had been cut out of a hill someplace and put along the side to keep the vehicles from going off the side of the hill into the valley. Well, it had hit that first and demolished that rock and that was enough to slow that shell down so it did not penetrate our armor, otherwise I'm sure it would have. But it took that suspension system off and it looked like you had taken your hand and had run it through a big chunk of butter. It was just gouged – the steel was just gouged right off of the side of the tank. Well, then we thought we were probably going to start to burn, so we all bailed out. I had no time to take any of our supplies along with us, nor my camera. But that evening the tank was still sitting there in the road; I snuck up and crawled through the ditch and crawled into the tank to get my camera – which I managed to bring home with me after the war. I still have that camera today and I'm still taking pictures with it.

This is a story about a party that we had over in France. We were in the rest area and we had some troops that were brought in from an area where the replacements. When we'd lose a soldier or a member of the tank crew or when one would go to the hospital, then we'd have one of these men come from this area that were replacements. They were usually young guys from the United States that hadn't been trained too good. There was one young guy who was about 18 years old, and if I remember right, his name was Morarity and his dad was a police chief in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Anyway, he was a great big guy, but he looked very lonely and very homesick. So we thought we'd cheer him up and give him a little welcome party. So we had a few bottles of beer that we had managed to save, but we were looking for something a little better, so we wanted to get some wine. So we went to one of these – what you might call a tavern, and we went there and wanted to get a bottle of wine. But the proprietor would not sell us a bottle of wine because he would not accept occupation money, which was all we had. In Europe when we were over there, nobody had American money - it was occupation money. So they didn't want this occupation money, but they would trade us for something. So we didn't know what we could trade him – we really didn't have anything to trade. But we went out in back of this building and there just happened to be a vehicle there that was up on blocks. They were not using this vehicle because there was no fuel available to run this, so they put it up on blocks. But we opened the hood and there was a battery inside. So we took that battery out and went around the front of the building and went inside and we traded him his own battery for a bottle of wine. And we thought that was hilarious! So we had a little party with the bottle of wine and a few bottles of beer. We initiated this new recruit that came in to replace one of our crew members who had wound up in the hospital.

This is a story about when we were in France and we were not far from Paris at the time. I really don't know how far, because when you're in the service like that you don't know exactly where you are. You don't have any road signs or mileage to this or that place. So we were advancing up the road with our tank destroyers and Sherman tanks and the Germans were up ahead of us – probably a mile or two ahead of us. Alongside of our tank destroyer all of a sudden here comes an open top vehicle like a convertible with a bunch of French FFI - which is the French Forces of the Interior. And they're all shouting and hollering and waving their rifles and they wanted to know which way is the bosh. They called the

German soldiers the bosh. So we pointed up ahead because that's the only place they could be – they weren't in back of us. And we thought, boy those guys are really hot. They're really going to go get them Germans. So about a half an hour later all of a sudden they come roaring back again, but what they had been doing – they were not up there to fight the Germans, they were up there for looting. They had a bunch of clothing and stuff that they had been stealing and bringing back for the black market. That was our experience with the FFI.

This is a little story about the picture with the Arch de Triumph in the background. When the liberation of Paris, and we had been called off the line at that time there wasn't too much going on. And there was the fall of Paris – the capture of Paris from the Germans. And we were all lined up getting ready for this parade and our tank was sitting alongside and we had a diesel engine in our tank, so we didn't have gas to worry about burning, although the diesel would burn, too if you got hit with a shell. But anyway, we had just filled up with fuel, and in the warm weather the fuel tanks probably had a little bit too much fuel in and the fuel expanded. There was some dripping out of the fuel spout, just a small amount. The Frenchmen see this dripping and they were all running up and filling their cigarette lighters with diesel fuel. I tried to tell them that I didn't think the diesel fuel would light with their cigarette lighters, but they really must have been hard up for tobacco because they were taking leaves off the trees and drying them and smoking leaves off the trees. There was no such thing as tobacco to be had.

This is a story about we were in France and we were trying to get ahold of some fresh eggs. We ran into some French women that were down along the stream washing their clothes. They had no soap; what they were doing was washing their clothes in the stream and then putting it in a pile and beating it down with a wooden paddle, and then rinse it out and then do the same thing over: put it a pile and beat it down with a wooden paddle. And so we wanted some fresh eggs and of course, I didn't know what eggs were called. A friend of mine - his name was John O'Toole - we were trying to trade them something for eggs and we didn't know what they were called in French. So I knew they were called eier in German, eggs in the United States, but in French I didn't know that they were called oeuf. So this one woman finally says, "Oh, oeuf, oeuf, oeuf." And John says, "No, no! We don't want no dogs." The end of that story was after we laughed because he said "We don't want no dogs." So we finally figured out that oeuf was eggs, so we traded a bar of soap for some fresh eggs. End of story.

What about the story about getting the beer?

This is a story about when the war was over in Europe and we were doing occupation duty. At the time we were not supposed to fraternize with the German people, we were not supposed to speak to them. But we were allowed to have our own – we rented a building like a gasthaus – which is a tavern. We rented a building. We hired a German bartender and we hired any musician if they could play a piano or a fiddle. It didn't make any difference what kind of instrument – we hired them. We had one German who played the piano quite well. And usually we'd always buy him a beer – quite a few beers. And he usually went home quite inebriated at night from drinking this beer. But we bought the beer. I could talk German, so I would go to the brewery and I would buy a truckload of beer for \$60 equivalent to our money. Well, we'd bring that beer back and we'd drink that up in one week. We'd charge 5 cents a glass, equivalent to our money. Really, the glass was like a stein with a handle on. When that was gone, I'd take the money and I'd go buy another load of beer. Of course, we didn't charge very much for this beer, but we always had enough money to go get another truckload of beer. It was a funny thing, because we weren't supposed to fraternize with these people, but still, we hired bartenders and musicians and we had our own tavern that we were running by ourselves. One time I went to the brewery and the German brewer said in German, "I kann Ihnen kein Bier geben," which means, "I can't give you any beer." So I thought, "Well now what happened?" And then when I asked why he couldn't give us any beer, he says, "I haben keine Hopfen," which means "I don't have any hops." So I asked him, "Well, where do you get this hops?" So he told me where the place was where he could get the hops, so we took the truck and drove to this place and got some hops for him so he could make some more beer. When I brought the hops back he said, in

German "jetzt kann ich Sie etwas Bier bilden," or "Now I can make you some beer." That was the most wonderful beer that I believe I ever had.

This is a story about fishing in Germany. The war was over and we had a place that had a stream close by and the stream had trout in it. I believe they were German brown trout. We had some extra hand grenades and we thought, well maybe go get some fish out of that stream. So we kind of located where the deep holes were and threw some hand grenades into each hole. The fish that were in 10-20 feet of the vicinity of these holes would come floating to the surface. So we had a couple of guys downstream that were gonna catch these fish when they come floating by. We went down below and there were no fish coming by and we couldn't figure out what had happened. So we went back upstream and here were all these little German boys in their lederhosen - the leather pants - and they were wading in the stream catching all of our fish, taking them out. So we didn't get any fish, they got them all. But that's the way we were catching fish over there with hand grenades.

This is another fishing story. This happened in England. We were in England just about six months waiting to go into France at Normandy. In the meantime, our camp was next to a stream, which was about half a mile away. That was all full of trout. You could see in; the water was clear. And there were eel in there, and there were whitefish in there. There were a lot of fish in that stream. But nobody was allowed to catch those fish in there because the land belonged to the nobility and nobody was allowed to go after these fish. But that was a chance, too, when we had some grenades and we went down to the stream, getting ready to catch some of these fish with hand grenades. All of a sudden here comes a bicycle with a British bobby - which is a British policeman. He had a helmet on like you see in the Keystone Cop movies, and he stops and he looks at us and he hollers down, "I say, you chaps can't fish here. This is the king's land." So we looked up at him and said, "We are not fishing. We've got no fishing poles." Of course we didn't tell him we had hand grenades. So he looks at us. He says, "Well, the dumb Americans don't know anything anyway." So he takes off and goes down the road. Then we threw the hand grenades in some of these holes and it turned out we had about sixty pounds of fish. We had one very good fish fry that day, instead of eating mutton - which we were kind of sick of eating. Nobody wanted this mutton any more because nobody liked it.

This is a story about when the war was over, and the war was over in the Pacific, and we were going to be sent home. We had gotten on our troop train that took us to the coast of France and we were waiting at this camp near the coast of France. We were at a place called Camp Lucky Strike. All these camps were named after cigarettes. So the camp we were at was called Camp Lucky Strike, and we were waiting for the ship to come in that we could get on to take us back to the United States. While we were there nearby the German soldiers that had been captured were out removing land mines. They were lining these land mines up in piles and then blowing them up. But in the meantime, where they had removed these mines, the French were out there hunting birds. They looked like meadowlarks. And they were out there amongst the field where they had removed these land mines. But there were some places that hadn't been 100% cleared. There were still some land mines. So these guys out there hunting these meadowlarks, they should have had their heads examined. But anyway, we waited for this ship to come in, and when it did come in there were hundred of thousands of troops being shipped home at the same time when the war was over. The boat that I got on to come back to the United State was called the James S. Parker. It took about 4-5 days to get back across the Atlantic, but when we went over it took ten days. The reason it took ten days was because they were zig zagging avoiding submarines. But coming back, they just made a straight line. The Statue of Liberty when we got into the harbor of New York looked pretty good. I'll never forget that with the Statue of Liberty out there with the ship coming in and all the other boats blowing their horns and welcoming us home. There was a big sign on shore that said, "Welcome home troops. Well done!"

Tell us about the Russians.

This is a story about the Russian soldiers when we were doing occupation with the Russians. We had met the Russians and the Russians were on one side of the road and we had a little guard house on the other side of the road. There were about eight Russians that I associated with. One Russian could talk German because he had been a German prisoner, and he had picked up German being a prisoner. They had taken over a schoolhouse in Germany. This schoolhouse was quite modern. The schoolhouse did have indoor toilets with running water. But because of the war and the bombing, the water had been shut off or the mains had been destroyed. The only one that I could talk to was this soldier who could talk German, and there were all these other ones who couldn't read or write. They'd get letters from home and somebody had to translate for them and read the letters to them. Getting back to this schoolhouse... the plumbing water had been shut off, but there was still water in the traps of these toilets. So these Russians would sit on a chair in front of the toilet and wash their feet in the toilet. When they had to go potty they would go in the dishpan, open the window and throw it out. So evidently they didn't know what a regular toilet was. And when I think of that, I wonder just how those Russians got that Sputnik up ahead of the United States. But the only reason I think they got it up was because they captured all these German scientists to send up their rockets.

A few years ago I had an interview about the Battle of the Bulge and the person that interviewed me asked when I fired the big gun on the tank destroyer, did I hit anything? And I thought the question was a little odd. So I told him when I fired, I didn't bother to get out of the tank to go see if I hit it.

I had mentioned the LST earlier, (the LST was a large ship – stands for Landing Ship Tank), anyway, this ship that we got on carried 12 of our tank destroyers. We got on in England and went across the channel and landed in Normandy. Just before you get to the beach – probably a couple blocks out – this landing ship tank drops a huge anchor and strings a cable out. The reason for doing that is that after the ship is unloaded with all the tanks and vehicles that they have aboard, then they can winch themselves back out into deeper water. The front of this LST opens up with two huge doors and a ramp comes down and then the tanks or the tank destroyers go off this ramp into the water. The water can't be too deep, because if it would be you'd go under. But the back of our tank had a snorkel on it. (I should say the back of the tank destroyer). Then after you get up on solid ground you pull a rope and this snorkel falls off and there's a couple of wires attached to a cover that has a cover over the top of the motor hatches, and it rips these covers off so that you can get air into the motors. The motors that we had (or the engines) on the tank destroyer were diesel. The one M10 that we landed with had a 3" naval gun and it was better than the 75 that the Shermans had. It was stronger; it could shoot further. But we carried high explosive shells and armor piercing shells. Also we had 50 caliber machine guns with us. As we got further into Normandy, quite a while later, they gave us a better tank. They gave us the M36, and the M36 had a 90mm on, which was just a little bit bigger than the German 88. The German 88 was a very good gun. It was used for anti-tank and anti-aircraft fire. This 90mm was supposed to be equivalent to that. It was a very good gun, and we carried high explosive and armor piercing shells for that, too. In addition we carried three special shells that had a special tip that we used in case we ran into these huge tiger tanks that the Germans had. This was supposed to take care of that heavy armor that the German tanks had – the heavy tiger tanks. If we used one of the shells, you had to fill out a special report and report on what this shell did. And so we only carried three of those shells, that's all we had in. Although we carried about 85-90 of the big shells in our sponsons (ready rack) of the tank, so we were always well-prepared in case we ran into heavy armor. And we did us quite a few shells.

I'm making this recording now – it's April 10th, 2005 – and this is just 60 years ago that we were approaching the Russian soldiers. We were in the eastern part of Germany and as we got closer to these little towns, the German people were hanging white sheets out of the windows. They were motioning us to continue on because they wanted us to come in and occupy their little towns or keep going through their towns, because they were afraid the Russians would come in. So they were encouraging us to continue on. As we got further east and we did meet up with the Russians, I do have pictures where I was

talking to some of the Russian soldiers. There was one who had been a German prisoner and he knew a little German, so I could talk to him pretty good. He could talk a little German and I could too. There was a small town – it was very small – probably just a village of 300 or 400 people who lived there. At night the people would sneak across the Russian zone into the American sector to try and get away from the Russians before the Russians built the Berlin wall. In the morning, this town was always loaded with people - there'd be a couple thousand people. And then the busses would come and load these people up and haul them away and take them into the American sector. The next night it would be the same thing again. In the evening the town was deserted, but then during the night the people would sneak in and be there in the morning for the buses to pick them up and go back into our American zone. I do have some pictures of Russians that I took. Most of them carried a tommy gun and their uniforms weren't very clean, but they'd be very willing to have you take their picture. All you had to do was offer them a cigarette and they'd let you take a picture. And then they'd stand there with a cigarette in their mouth and then they'd stand there at attention and let you take their picture. I have a picture of 4 or 5 Russians that had their cigarette or cigar – if you had a cigar, they loved cigars.

I have a little story about shooting rabbits. When we were in England, about six months before going into France on Omaha Beach, they were feeding us a lot of mutton over there. Nobody could eat the mutton. We got sick of eating this mutton. We probably threw as much in the garbage can as what we ate. Anyway, another guy and I decided to go out and shoot some rabbits; there were a lot of rabbits over there. In the evening, they'd come out and sun themselves in the sun and we'd go out with a carbine and shoot a couple of rabbits and then we'd go to the mess hall and get a gallon can, put some water in there and put these skinned rabbits in the water with some salt and pepper and cook them. We enjoyed eating the rabbits more than we did the mutton.

Okay, this is a story about a bridge that we helped build when the war ended. The Germans before us had retreated and blew this bridge up, and figured we couldn't get across this river or creek. Then when the war ended there was no bridge in this town and this was either Isendorf or Gussenheim. But this bridge that was blown up was rebuilt by a German contractor with German prisoner that helped him build this bridge (under our supervision), and all we did was get the concrete for them and furnish hot coffee. One woman who lived right next to the river there, and kept hot coffee going. These prisoners were very willing to help build this bridge. After the bridge was built, we named it the Sneden Bridge. The reason we named it that was one of our tank commanders in our company had gotten killed. And so we named the bridge after him. For the life of me, after sixty years I cannot remember just exactly what the name of this town was, but it could have been Gussenheim.

Then I have some more pictures of our tank destroyer. One morning bright and early we had a tank commander – his name was Jordan, but we called him Jack Armstrong, All American Boy because he was very eager to capture some Germans. So very early in the morning, even before we had breakfast, he wanted to get on this tank destroyer and go get some Germans. So we went up the road and we came to a German farmhouse with a barn. The farmer was just getting up so he came out after he heard the noise of the tank destroyer. I asked him if there were any German soldiers around and he told me in German that there were a few around last night and he thinks they were sleeping in the barn. We went down and looked in the barn and there were about seven of them just getting up. They were in bad shape because they didn't have any socks on, their feet were all swollen and they had rags wrapped around their feet for socks. They made no resistance, or offered no resistance and were happy to surrender to us. We loaded them on to the outside of the tank and we took them back about three miles to where our headquarters was. They started to get off the tank and I told them in German to hold it, that I wanted to take their picture. I told them to crawl back on the tank, and so I took the pictures of them on our tank – on the tank destroyer. It brings back a lot of memories to me when I look at this picture. So there were seven of them that we didn't have to shoot – they were willing to surrender.