

# Memories of World War II

by  
Paul Smatlak

I was inducted into the U.S. Army on January 6, 1943 in Altoona, Pennsylvania. This is also where I took my oath. I received a leave of absence from my job at Bethlehem Steel in Johnstown, Pennsylvania to serve in the army.

As part of a group of new recruits, I departed for active military service on January 13 and rode on a train to New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, near Harrisburg. Upon arrival we waited for further instructions. We exchanged our civilian clothes for army clothes and mailed our old clothes back to our homes. After three days, Security instructed us to board an old-fashioned train. We didn't know where we were heading, but knew it was southwest, because we could read signs in different cities like St. Louis.

After riding the train for three days, we arrived in Brownwood, Texas at Camp Bowie around 1:00 am. We were assigned to the 817<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion. We stayed there for about three months to complete basic training. This training included going through a commando course where we climbed a mountain and crawled on our stomachs with live ammunition being fired over us three feet above the ground.

After basic training, we were transferred to Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. Here we were assigned to various Tank Destroyer Battalion companies: A, B, C, Reconnaissance, and Headquarters. I was assigned to Headquarters Company as a medic but provided direct support to Company B. Sam DiFalco, from the Prospect area of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, was the only other person in Company B from my home town. There were usually three medics assigned to each company, with a total of seventeen medics in a battalion. A battalion consisted of 650 to 700 men. We stayed in Fort Hood for a number of months completing advanced tank destroyer training. While stationed at Fort Hood, there were six of us who were sent to the Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio to take a two-month course to become a Medical Technician. We were then promoted to T/5 or Corporal Technician.

We moved to Camp Phillips in Salina, Kansas for more advanced training. After four or five months, we moved to Camp Breckinridge in Morganfield, Kentucky and then to Fort Campbell along the state line in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee. While at Fort Campbell, we completed maneuvers in Tennessee. There we went without food for three days at a time and finished combat training.

Then, around July 20, 1944, we were transported by train to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts, near Boston. We were not

allowed to call home and tell family members our status or location, because there were many Nazi spies in all of the embarking areas.

After a couple of days, we boarded the ship U.S.S. Mt. Vernon and headed for Greenock, Scotland, but we didn't know where we were going until we arrived. Our ship traveled alone over the northern Atlantic, without any battleships to protect us from German submarines. We zigzagged across the ocean, changing directions every twelve minutes so the enemy could not target the ship. It took five days to reach Scotland. We arrived there on July 31 around midnight. Darkness had not set in yet, which was very unusual to us.

We boarded a train and headed for Chepstow, Wales. We completed additional combat training there. We boarded a Landing Ship, Tank (LST) to cross the English Channel. Even though there is a section of the English Channel that is only 20 miles wide, we crossed at a place where it was 100 miles wide and arrived in France.

We landed at Utah Beach near Cherbourg, part of the Normandy area of France, on August 25, 1944. It was about 11 weeks after the D-Day invasion occurred there. They distributed our vehicles after arrival at Utah Beach. I received a jeep with racks welded on top to handle three stretchers.

At Utah Beach I remember seeing cows in the ocean water along with elderly women washing clothes. I also remember standing by the ocean, looking westward and imagining where New York would be. We formed a convoy in Utah Beach to proceed to Saint-Lo, France and onto Reims, France.

At Reims, we remained a while to occupy the area. We stayed in Tent City, living in tents on a muddy field. I can't recall how long we stayed there, but it was during the rainy season and it was miserable.

From Reims, France we went to Belgium, Luxembourg, and Holland to occupy those areas. During our occupation of Belgium, which lasted about four to six weeks, we took turns getting a weekend pass to Brussels. They housed us in a brick, warehouse building, three stories high. I was in a large room on the third floor where they set up twenty cots. During the night while we were all sleeping, a Belgian thief came through our room, picked up our trousers, took money from our wallets, and threw the wallets and clothes into the hallway.

It was in Liege, Belgium where we received orders to go into face-to-face combat. We were given a large meal as a sendoff. We were told that many of us would soon be killed in action. After hearing that, one of our soldiers became so fearful that he went outside and shot himself in the hand to avoid combat. Consequently, he was sent back to the states. Our close combat with the enemy lasted for six months, from December 9, 1944 until May 11, 1945.

While occupying a village near Brussels for six weeks, another medic, Cyril Reynolds, and I found a small evangelical church and

attended some Wednesday evening services. The minister was a middle-aged woman from Great Britain. After that occupation ended, we experienced a lot of combat in the Hurtgen and Kleinhau areas of Germany, where we stayed in foxholes for months. We remained outside all winter without entering any buildings, other than getting a shower about every two weeks.

Every night, two medics from each company were required to go deep in the front lines, where our gun positions were located, to deliver medication to the men who were in need of it and to bring back the severely injured. We listened to the needs of remaining soldiers and reported back to the Battalion Surgeon, Captain R.R. Licker from Michigan, for further medical instructions. It was too dangerous for the physician to go to the front, so we went in his place. The traveling was done daily, from midnight to 2 am, with our jeep's lights blacked-out.

Cyril Reynolds, from a farm in Iowa, and Sam Imelli, a pharmaceutical salesman from Reno, Nevada, were also medics assigned to Company B with me. They were in their mid-thirties. I was twenty-one years old. Cyril was a Christian who belonged to the Assembly Church of God in Iowa. He and I made those daily trips to the front lines together. I was happy to have him with me because he prayed out loud all the way to the front and back, which lasted about two hours each night. The Germans could hear our jeep but could not see us. They usually bombed our route right after we passed. Our return trip was always along a different route than the one we took going to the front.

While at Hurtgen and Hurtgen Forest, Germany our convoy of vehicles was often strafed from the air by German aircraft with 20-millimeter shells and shrapnel. During one attack, I jumped from my moving jeep after being hit in both legs with shrapnel. I quickly crawled from the road to a war-torn house and rolled down the cellar steps to escape further strafing. I declined the Purple Heart that was offered for the wounds I received. Late in life, an Army officer ceremoniously presented me with an "unofficial" Purple Heart, after seeing the scars on my legs and investigating official records of that airstrike.

We also had many close calls with German 88 missiles as the Germans traveled to their destination. On several occasions my jeep was covered with debris as a result of these missiles hitting close by.

While I was stationed in Hurtgen, we cleaned out a basement of a deserted house and turned it into a hospital to care for battle casualties and illnesses. Bunks were erected, a stove was salvaged to supply heat, and bathing facilities were installed. After we moved to Kleinhau we built another hospital, but this time it was underground. Twenty-seven patients were treated there, over a period of forty-four days.

On February 2, 1945 I administered first aid and evacuated a wounded soldier, Corporal Edward H. Myers, while we were under constant enemy fire and shelling. I also assisted in evacuating five other wounded men, again under constant enemy fire. I later was awarded a Bronze Star for these efforts.

When we reached the area near the Rhine River at Remagen, Germany in mid-March there was an order for seven men to leave the area on GI trucks for a three-day vacation in Paris, France. It served as a morale booster for those who lived in foxholes during the cold winter months. The trip took seven days including travel time. I was fortunate to be standing near Lieutenant Colonel Bardes, our Battalion Commanding Officer, when he received the order. He pointed to me and six other men nearby to leave. When we returned, another seven would go.

While we were gone, our company crossed the Rhine River using the Remagen Bridge. I enjoyed being in a clean motel with clean sheets and a bed. I went to bed early, slept until late and took long showers. Once, I took the subway to visit the Eiffel Tower. But, I spent most of my time near the motel and sidewalk restaurants. While standing outside one restaurant, a muscular woman came from behind and wrestled me to the ground, trying to steal my wallet. I fought back until she left without the wallet.

Just before entering heavy combat in the Battle of the Bulge, in late March somewhere near Lippstadt, Germany, we came across the 104<sup>th</sup> Timberwolf Division. I knew that Sam Boratko, my friend from home, was in that division. I received permission to go to the next village and try to locate Sam. Luckily, I found him, so we visited for a short time before I had to return to my outfit.

Our battalion was located on the northern front of the Bulge. This is where we came in very close contact with the enemy. I think it was the first time I ever trembled, standing on the porch of a war-torn house and hearing German voices. Twenty-one of us Americans rushed into the cellar of that house, which then became surrounded by the enemy. We remained hidden there for three days with nothing to eat except pumpernickel bread and homemade jam left in the basement by the owners of the deserted house. The three days we spent in that basement happened to be from Good Friday until Easter day on April 1, 1945.

It was in the Battle of the Bulge, just south of us, that Albert Rucek was gunned down by the enemy. He was a faithful member of the Woodvale Church of God, where he also played the piano. Toward the end of April 1945, we thought the war was almost over. But, to our surprise the German army, under Hitler's command, continued fighting to extend the Battle of the Bulge. It was unfortunate that German officers continued offensive operations when they knew they could not win the war. There were many lives lost on both sides for no reason during the last month of the Battle of the Bulge. It was only weeks

later, on May 11, 1945, when the 817<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion ceased offensive operations.

From June to November, I was re-assigned from the 1<sup>st</sup> Army under General Bradley, who was quiet-mannered, to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army under General Patton, who cussed all the time. We were sent to occupy the town of Furth, just outside of Nuremberg in the southern part of Germany, to prevent further uprisings. I happened to pass through the Nuremberg area again, on a bus tour in 1990 when I went to Europe with my granddaughter and the Richland High School band.

It was sometime in November 1945 when we were sent to the Atlantic coast in Le Havre, France in preparation for our return to the United States. A number of camps were set up to hold us until we were given orders to depart. These camps were named after cigarettes, like Camp Lucky Strike and Camp Pall Mall. I was stationed at Camp Herbert Tareyton. The method of transportation back to the United States was by boats and ships. Since there were so many soldiers scheduled to return home, a point system was used to determine exactly when, and on which ship each would return.

I departed for home on December 16, 1945. It was unfortunate that I was assigned to a small boat called the S.S. Coaldale Victory. With the rough Atlantic Ocean in December, it took us ten days, instead of the normal five days, to reach the New York harbor. The ride was so rough that a lot of us stayed in the baggage section under the water level. We were all sick on our journey home, including the crew assigned to that boat. I still remember realizing after five days passed that we would not be home for Christmas, as promised. We all started to sing "I'll be home for Christmas; 1999". It just so happens that I'm writing this letter on December 31, 1999, fifty-four years later.

We got off the boat at the New York City harbor on December 26 and were then transported to Camp Kilmer in Edison, New Jersey. We stayed there for several days to be processed to return to civilian life. There were some men hanging around nearby Fort Dix with vehicles, offering to drive us to our hometowns. I believe it cost me ten dollars to go as far as Ebensburg, Pennsylvania since the driver was going on to Ohio. It was a hazardous ride on icy roads with several near accidents.

From Ebensburg, I took a traction company bus to the Woodvale steps near Hiram Swank's Brickyard in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I walked up the familiar steps I used many times before, going back and forth to the Woodvale Church of God. I carried my duffel bag on my back and walked up Horrocks Street, where the whole Smatlak family was waiting for me. Over eighteen months passed since the last time I was home.

My time in active military service was three years, from January 13, 1943 until December 31, 1945. My honorable discharge was dated April 25, 1946. I spent eighteen months training in the United States

and eighteen months overseas in six different countries. I put 13,000 miles on my army jeep. Our rate of pay in the service was \$50 per month for a private, \$56 for a private first class, and \$66 per month for a T/5 or Corporal Technician. Pay was slightly increased during combat duty. Mail from the United States was available to us about every month in combat areas, and about weekly in occupied areas.

Because I was raised in a Christian home with many caring brothers and sisters, and proper parental guidance, I was able to go into battle feeling very confident I would make it through. As I left my home to go overseas, my parents told me to "remember how I was raised". Those words always stayed with me. Following my discharge from the Army, my favorite hymn became "Victory in Jesus".

After the war, Cyril Reynolds enrolled in the Southwestern Bible Institute in Waxahachie, Texas. He wrote to me and convinced me to join him in attending the same school from 1947 to 1948. I completed a two-year program as a math major, which included many courses on the Bible. Again, I received a leave of absence from Bethlehem Steel, this time to attend college.

While at college, I had to make an emergency trip back home to Johnstown, Pennsylvania by train to attend my brother John's funeral after he died in a fiery accident at age 27 while working at Bethlehem Steel. Because I did not have enough money for a train ticket, I borrowed money from a stranger on the train after showing him a newspaper article about my brother's tragic death. I repaid him by mail immediately after my arrival back home. My brother, John, and another brother, Mike, also served in the military during World War II. A third brother, Joe, served in the Korean War.

Following graduation, I returned home and worked at Bethlehem Steel as a scheduling clerk until retirement. During those working years, I married, had five children and thirteen grandchildren. My wife and I raised our family to have a strong faith in God.

Paul Smatlak  
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Edited by his son, John