

The last two county 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion veterans reminisce

By Jennie Jones Giles / Times-News Staff Writer - Posted Aug 2, 2004 at 12:01 AM on the BlueRidgeNow.com news site

The bus was full of young men recently drafted into the Army when it pulled out of the Hendersonville station in December 1942. It was headed down the mountain for Camp Croft in Spartanburg County, S.C.

Sixteen of the men in the bus were selected by the Army to serve in the 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion. During World War II, they served with Gen. George Patton's Third Army in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria.

Today, only two of those men survive -- George "Buck" Lyda of Edneyville and Foy Israel of Hoopers Creek.

The 808th's reunion will be held here this year and the 82-year-old Lyda insists that Israel, 84, paralyzed and unable to attend past reunions, will be at this one.

Training

Though they were drafted, neither man thought of not serving. "When Mark Rhodes, my cousin, got killed at Pearl Harbor everybody in my area wanted to get in the service and go and do something," Lyda said. "I just felt I needed to go to war and help.

"I didn't want to go and fight, but I went on," Israel said. "Ended up getting three battle stars. They said we possibly should have one or two more."

Lyda and Israel stood out during rifle practice. They kept hitting bull's-eyes, winning numerous medals for marksmanship.

"I squirrel hunted and coon hunted all my life," Israel said. "On the firing range, I only missed one out of 100 shots, hitting the bull's-eye."

"I was 6 years old when I killed my first squirrel," Lyda said. "It was a 12-gauge shotgun and it kicked like a mule. It knocked me off the log."

The instructor insisted that Lyda stop using his left hand to shoot and switch to his right hand.

"And I went to hitting the bull's-eye that way, too," Lyda said.

The Army took advantage of the young men's skill, putting Lyda in reconnaissance and Israel as a gunner in a tank.

They finished basic training at Camp Bowie in Brownwood, Texas, and moved to Camp Hood in Killeen, Texas, for advanced training. After training, they were assigned to Camp Phillips in Wichita, Kan.

"While there, officers came asking for volunteers to go to Salema, S.D., and help the farmers harvest a hay crop and a wheat crop," Lyda said. "So, being a farmer, I volunteered to go and it took six weeks to finish the job."

The young men moved to Camp McCoy in Sparta, Wis., where they trained for winter weather. "We wore snow shoes and skied at 25 below zero at times," Lyda said. "We were in mock battles and tested equipment, crossing frozen lakes."

In Wisconsin, a lieutenant with the battalion, Louis L'Amour, who gained fame as an author of Western novels, was a guest speaker at the Rotary Club meeting.

In August 1944, the battalion was crossing the Atlantic to Great Britain on the flagship Hermitage in a 65-ship convoy. The ship was so crowded, soldiers were in sleeping bags on the top deck. Israel said thousands were sick.

Going through the chow line on the ship, Lyda saw someone from home.

"There was Rome Lyda," he said. "Me and ole' Rome Lyda drank about a half-cup of baking grease apiece and didn't get sick."

By September, they were crossing the English Channel for Utah Beach in Normandy, France, quickly finding themselves on the Moselle River.

Front Lines

"The second day in France I met Gen. Patton," Lyda said. "He got out of his jeep and walked up to me and said, 'I'm George Patton,' and I said, 'I'm Sgt. George A. Lyda, 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion.' He said when he needed information, he talked to the enlisted men. 'They tell me like it is,' he said. He was tough, but he was a soldier's friend."

"When we crossed the Rhine River, his was the second tank from the front," Israel said.

Israel found himself inside tanks shooting at Germans with a 76 mm gun and a 50-caliber machine gun. Israel said he had to crawl up the turret to handle the machine gun.

"We looked through two little peep holes. They were like cat eyes," Israel said. "Sometimes I had to go on foot through the towns, like the infantry. We were looking for targets all the time."

"I was out there looking to see what was going on and to see where we were," said Lyda, who was in reconnaissance. "I called in a lot of shots and got artillery and air power."

Many days Lyda found himself riding a motorcycle. He said the Germans had spread piano wire and he worried about getting his head cut off.

"I did reconnaissance for his (Israel's) company," Lyda said. "When we had a chance, we'd talk."

One day they were standing against a concrete wall talking when a sniper fired at them.

"He (Israel) and I were standing shoulder to shoulder talking about home when the sniper shot at us," Lyda said.

"He knocked the button off Buck's coat," Israel said.

"It was a German youth who had never shaved," Lyda said.

The young sniper was a member of Hitler's youth brigades. Snipers were the first people Israel sought when the tanks rolled into a town. "Snipers would hide inside churches," Israel said. "One threw his hands up standing behind the pulpit."

"They (Germans) put snipers on water tanks and church steeples," Lyda said.

"We took down the water tanks and church steeples first thing when we entered a town," Israel said. "There were too many snipers up chimneys. We would tear them down, too."

Injury and Death

Both men were injured from shrapnel at different times. Lyda received the Purple Heart. Israel said he turned the award down.

"I'm no better than anybody else," he said. "There's still a piece of shrapnel in my leg. It's there between two bones. They said they would have to cut nerves and muscles to get it."

Before entering the town of St. Avold, France, Lyda received a letter from home, relating the death of a neighbor, Frank C. Hill, who was killed attacking a machine gun nest in St. Avold.

"I didn't have time to go where he was buried," Lyda said. According to the World War II Honor Roll, Tech. Sgt. Hill died Dec. 9, 1944, and is buried at the Lorraine American Cemetery and Memorial in St. Avold, listed at Plot E, Row 27, Grave 43. He served with the 104th Infantry Regiment, 26th Infantry Division.

Lyda witnessed the death of a hometown soldier in his battalion.

"Willie Middleton was in recon with me," Lyda said. "We were sitting in a shed watching an old movie. Willie was long-legged and he had a carbine between his legs watching the movie with his chin on the gun, when it went off. I was right close when he shot himself. It was an accident."

Another local soldier, Clyde Raines, was driving a jeep when a soldier riding on the back of the jeep accidentally shot his own foot, Lyda said.

"Raines nearly crashed that jeep," Lyda said. "That bullet almost hit the gas tank."

Battle of the Bulge

The battalion was moving east along the French-German border when word came of the German attack at the Battle of the Bulge, which was fought in France, Belgium and Luxembourg after the Germans made a surprise counter-offensive behind Allied front lines.

The 101st Airborne was surrounded by Germans in the town of Bastogne, Belgium. When asked by the Germans to surrender, Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe delivered the return message, "Nuts."

"Gen. Patton sent us orders to turn around and rush to Bastogne as fast as possible," Lyda said. "We ran all night long. It was the first time we used headlights in war time. It was dark, snowing and foggy. But by the next morning we were there with our tanks set up."

At 4 p.m. Dec. 26, 1944, the American tanks had broken through the German lines and were linking up with the 101st.

A nurse was lost from her group after the Battle of the Bulge, Israel said. His company took her with them.

"She wore pants and put her hair up in a helmet," Israel said. "She stayed with us six weeks before she found the rest of the nurses. She got out on the front line and shot a gun."

Germany/Austria

"Once we got across the Rhine River, we began moving pretty fast," Lyda said. "We crossed the Danube River and moved on. At times we had to stop and wait on supplies to catch up."

The battalion came upon concentration camps in Germany. One was the Gotha Concentration Camp, where German soldiers massacred prisoners, mostly Polish, as the camp was liberated.

"The prisoners wanted our troops to give them our guns to go after the people who did them harm," Lyda said. "What a horrible sight -- naked bodies, stacked in long buildings, with lime thrown on them, in pits pushed out to burn bodies."

The battalion had covered 1,625 miles of fighting in 225 days and captured more than 3,800 prisoners from the time they arrived at the front lines in France in the fall of 1944 until the end of the war in May 1945.

When hostilities ended, they were at the Enns River in Austria.

"We were told not to cross the Enns River, to stop and put the guns aimed at the river bridge and not to fire unless fired upon," Lyda said.

The Russians were on the other side of the river, Israel said.

"They were shooting at the Germans trying to cross the river and get to us," he said. "The Russians were shooting at us. They just kept shooting. Patton got on a bullhorn to stop them. They hit one tank that had flares on it. Patton had to stop them."

Return Home

Israel, the son of the late Henry Israel and Georgianna Brackett Israel, lives one-half mile from where he grew up in Hoopers Creek. He farmed and cut wood before entering the Army. After the war, he married Bertha Drake Israel, who died in October.

He continued to farm with his father until he died in 1966. Israel then worked at English Lumber Co. in Biltmore and later did carpentry work. He has one son, Avery.

He has been a member of Hoopers Creek Baptist Church all of his life, he said. He is also a life member of the Hedrick-Rhodes Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5206, serving as a member of the Honor Guard at funerals for several years.

Lyda, the son of the late Gay T. Lyda Sr. and Beatrice Brown Lyda, took over the family's farm and orchard after the war. His wife, Edna Green Lyda, died in 1992. He is the father of three children, Sandra, Donna and Eddie; and has six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

"I'm the fifth generation of the Lydas in Edneyville," he said.

He is a member of St. Paul Episcopal Church, was a founding member of the Edneyville Fire Department, a life member of the VFW, and served as the state president of the Farm Service Agency in North Carolina for three years, he said. For 48 years, he was elected to serve on the ASCS board.