

A talk with Leo Norkewicz
about his World War II Experiences

The following is an account of some of my grandfather's memories of his WWII experience that he shared in a conversation with me in July 2002. At the time, I was majoring in history at the University of Illinois. I am now a history/government/social studies teacher at Niles West High School in Niles, IL. - Michael Wasielewski

I knew my grandfather served in World War Two; however, he never really shared many of his memories about his experiences with our family. On a summer night on July 21, 2002, my grandparents were visiting us and after dinner my grandfather happened to be sitting outside on the deck by himself and I went to join him. I was a college sophomore at the University of Illinois majoring in history at the time. I talked to him about what was going on in my life and he shared with me what his life was like at about my age. Grandpa was 22 when he was drafted into the army in the summer of 1942 and later shipped out to Africa from New York in 1943. He was in the Reconnaissance and his job was to drive a three-and-a-quarter-ton truck behind the front to bring up supplies and do other random tasks. His truck also had a trailer hitched on to carry mines just in case they had to fall back and lay a mine field. He also drove half-tracks and jeeps. His task that he most often had to do was uncover enemy mine fields at night.

He had a lot of random mine stories. He would have to go out at night or early morning and probe for mines in the fields. They would literally get down on their bellies in a long line of 20 guys spread out, and poke for German box mines and other such mines with a knife or wire.

These little wooden mines were unidentifiable to metal detectors but could still take off a foot or limb. When he came across a mine, he would have to carefully fit a wire into the side of the mine so the trigger could not go off. One time he found a mine and uncovered it and asked the corporal what to do with it. The corporal said he'd handle it. The corporal picked up the mine carefully and slowly out of the ground. He then chucked the mine up into the air and it went off in the air as Leo dove for cover.

He said that he tried to stay away from that corporal the rest of the war because he was "nuts." The same corporal would also play jokes on other men by unscrewing the bottom of grenades, releasing the powder, and then pulling the pin and throwing it at buddies to spook them. Guys would dive into the ditch to avoid it and come up pissed saying they could have dived on a mine. But anyway, all the mine work was done in complete darkness because Germans would be surveying up in the hilly Italian landscape, looking for any light or signs of their enemy.

Surprisingly, he could only recall about 10 casualties from those two years he spent in combat. Since his unit was behind the front line, most casualties came from "lucky" German artillery shots or mine accidents. One accident happened, he recalled, while he and some other men were all sitting around a shell crater. One guy walked up and asked Leo to move over so he could sit. My grandpa scooted over, and the guy sat down right on a mine and severely wounded himself. Dirt flew all over Leo and in his face. He said he remembers laying there and feeling his face to make sure it was still there. Leo never learned what happened to this soldier afterwards. If my grandpa had sat inches in the wrong direction, I would not be here today. Mines were a big problem as he recalls another guy was just walking and got his foot blown off. This happened because the mines weren't always easy to find. He recalled that group spent one night marking a mine field and sneaking back before daylight.

To their horror, they realized that they hadn't even uncovered half of the mines. They had all walked back nonchalantly through a mine field that they thought had been cleared and everyone made it out ok.

He also recalled how nerve racking and scary the nights were as the Germans would exchange fire with American artillery which would often leave his outfit dodging the shells. He told me how one evening a few guys were drying their socks around a little stove in an Italian house. One guy was standing by the window about 8 - 10 feet from him. A mortar shell hit the windowsill and blew the wall and soldier to pieces. He recalled that the man's "blood and guts" got all over his shirt and hat. After telling me that, he was reluctant to say anything else about the incident. The nights were usually terrifying as they were forced to sleep in fox holes or some type of shelter. He said often they'd try to get in a basement of a house to stay dry.

He recalled that the scariest weapon the Germans had was a "six repeater." This weapon could be heard fired in the distance with six distinct bottle rocket type sounding fires. Then there was silence. Then there would be six explosions. He said the wait in between the fire and the explosions was "really scary." He talked about another time where he was running errands for a major and found himself in a large hole dug out with a large pile of dirt from the dugout right next to it. He was sitting in there when two shells came down and landed into the pile of dirt directly next to this dugout that he was in. He said all he thought in his head was "oh, here we go" and held his breath waiting for the impact of the explosion. Luckily, he thinks they were armor piercing shells aimed at tanks and were not set off by the dirt pile. Yet, it could have just been a dud. He recalled that he had quite a few "close shaves." Yet another time he was writing a letter in his truck and some other guys were gambling and playing cards nearby under a tree in the middle of a hot afternoon.

All of a sudden, a shell struck right by everyone causing a massive explosion and a huge cloud of dust so no one could see each other anymore. He laughed about it as he recalled everyone yelling out "everyone ok? Everyone ok? Ya. Ya. We're ok." He did say though that the cash and cards were thrown everywhere as they dove for cover.

My grandpa won the Bronze Star in the war and didn't even know about the honor until he returned home. He believes he was recognized for his actions on the night he was working to clear a mine field and a fellow soldier had his leg blown off by a mine. Leo gave his coat to the injured man. His Lieutenant asked for any volunteers to run back to town and get help. Leo volunteered without thinking about it and came back with medics in a jeep. We are sure there is more to the story, but my grandfather didn't give us any more details. He didn't even know that the Lieutenant recommended him for the Bronze Star.

After talking with my grandfather that summer night, I sat down and wrote down the details of the notes I took when he told me about his experiences.