

June 2, 1992

Dear Betty,

I have lost contact with all of my war buddies since WW II ended. I have also changed my address many times and so was not aware of the 776 Tiger tracks Editions. They certainly help keep the veterans in touch.

I want to commend you on your effort and immeasurably difficult work keeping the 776 TD together through correspondence and reunions for so many years. At least, until I finally woke up and joined your roster.

I know nothing of my 776 TD friends since the end of the war so I can only write a little about myself. Incidentally, I am a reconnaissance company veteran.

With the European war over in 1945 and the battalion in Austria, I looked forward to returning home early as I had joined the army in March 1941 and had been wounded. I was a high point man for returning home. Not to be !

I was selected to join a cadre of a few individual veterans destined for the Pacific war zone. I parted company with my friends and the 776 TD battalion at that time.

The atomic bombing of Japan in August 1945 halted my trip to the Pacific zone of war operations. I found myself in a small group of veterans with no clout or voice to help us receive transportation orders back to the states. We finally arrived home in October after many delays, promises, and a hitch hike ride on a liberty ship with a bent propeller shaft. The ship could cruise at only half speed so I had time to win a considerable amount of money playing poker before arriving in New York.

I arrived home at Duluth, Minnesota and joined the 52-20 club. You know, \$20 for 52 weeks until you find a job. It was a while before I got my feet on the ground and settled down.

February of 1946 found me taking flying lessons. I received my private pilots license that summer. During the fall of 1946 I started using my GI bill benefits at El Monte, California to pursue a flying career. I earned my commercial pilot's license along with a flight instructor rating by the end of June 1947. I returned to the Midwest as I had a flight instructor's job waiting for me in Wisconsin. I received all the airplane ratings and ground school instructor ratings possible during the course of my 20 year flying career.

I spent several years in the early 1950's as a civilian flight instructor for the air force in a contract flight school at Stallings air base, Kinston, North Carolina, teaching cadets to fly. In fact, one of my student's father, General Blackmere Bryan Sr., was commanding general and superintendent of West Point army

academy at the time. Incidentally, the general had been the chief peace negotiator at the Panmunjon peace talks in North Korea earlier.

My next move was to return to my original flying job in Wisconsin. Mainly, I patrolled power lines with the aircraft in very low flight throughout the Midwest. Four large power companies were serviced in all kinds of weather and temperatures. This type of flying involved dodging birds, trees, church towers, kite strings sometimes wound around the propeller shaft, dogs chasing the aircraft, and hunters drawing a bead on you within their gun sites.

At one time during the 1950's I landed at the Marshall Minnesota airport because of bad weather and spent the night with Donald Friend who was from Recon company. Seems like he and I always managed to get into trouble during the course of our leisure time away from the battalion. We certainly had many events to talk about so this made for a short, but very memorable night.

I had always vowed to end my flying career by the time I was 45 years old. This I just managed to do.

This was a difficult decision as I love aviation which was very good to me. I immediately missed piloting sea planes and flying boats in Northern Minnesota and Wisconsin, also charter trips into Canada fishing. I still miss the same dogs chasing my aircraft while on power line patrol.

I no longer take part in search and rescue missions by air and the anticipation of what I may find or the later drama carried on in occasionally bad weather and some night searches.

In May 1964 I moved to Benson, Minnesota and began a discount store business which proved very successful for eleven years.

In June 1975 I moved to Santa Barbara, California and purchased a business called Monty's Sports Bar which I still own. My daughter manages it while I play golf, ski and travel. You see, I am semi-retarded, I mean semi-retired. No, I am far from being wealthy. This business is my only pension plan as I never worked for a large corporation with all the benefits.

In 1989 along came Laura and her little dog. (He was really a monster.) Laura was a new neighbor and a physicist from Los Alamos, New Mexico. It seems her big beast would eat up anybody but me. Laura maintains that this dog picked me out to be her friend and future husband. Maybe there's something to that - we were married in 1991 and are now a happy family of three counting Todo, the dog. Once in a while I say to Todo, "You could have prevented this !!!".

Laura's employment as a research scientist requires her to travel to various parts of the country. I travel along with Laura but remain in the background as I cannot add two and two on my fingers. On these trips, as Laura says, she

works while I play. I think I could almost begin to write "tour guide" books. Actually, I think Laura does not trust me to stay home with the dog.

Last February we went to Pocatello, Idaho. I decided to take along my 776 T.D. informal history manual so that I could look up the addresses of any T.D. veterans in that area. I knew that part of the battalion originated in Pocatello.

I had to dust off the history manual since it had not been used since the day I received it. I found Rico Benedetti's name in the manual. I then found his number in the local telephone book. So while Laura was involved with her meeting, I called Rico. His phone rang for a long time and I wondered if he was still alive after so many years. I was reminded of the time I called an old friend from Wausau, Wisconsin only to be informed from his wife that he had passed away many years ago. Anyway, Rico's answering machine finally kicked in. After all these years I still recognized Rico's voice - "macho" sounding.

At the sound of the bell I told the machine that "September 29, 1943, 51 years ago, I was blown out of the half track at Salerno beachhead which you (Rico) were driving. It was an Italian road that had been mined by the Germans." I told the machine my name and return phone number.

Rico did call me that same evening and we managed plans to meet the following morning in the lobby of our hotel. When I saw him in the lobby, I knew that I still could have picked him out of a crowd that day as easily as 51 years

ago. He sure looked good. We shook hands. I gave him a big bear hug just as I had done that day at Salerno after the half track blew. He was the first comrade I saw and thought at the time we were the only survivors.

You see - out half track was leading a reconnaissance platoon. Rico was the driver - I was the radio operator. 1st Lt. Paul Brunt was platoon commander - 1st Lt. Sheldon Thompson was company commander. Rico informed me that Leslie Racine was with us but we do not remember who the sixth soldier was.

We all survived this experience, however Lt. Thompson was seriously wounded. In fact, we were all wounded. Lt. Brunt took over as company commander.

Lt. Thompson and I were evacuated to the beachhead and placed on a hospital ship bound for Algiers, north Africa. I never did see Lt. Thompson again after our evacuation from the explosion site.

I had shrapnel wounds in my legs. My body was very stiff and sore. I was able to rejoin my company in Italy six weeks later and continue combat.

Well, as you can imagine, Rico and I had a lot to talk about. During the course of the day we visited Nyle Rasmussen, also from recon company, and his wife. we also visited Lt. Robert Bunce. We talked about old times. I had no trouble remembering their faces and mannerisms.

Rico informed me about you, Betty, and your 776 Tiger Tracks editions. he also mentioned the past reunions as well as the one coming up in September in Cedar Rapids. Since talking to you last week, Laura and I have made airline and hotel reservations for my first battalion reunion. I received the past Tiger Tracks that you mailed. They will keep me busy for a while.

I am going to press Rico and Donald Friend to meet us at the coming reunion. I anticipate a memorable time. I can hardly wait for this big event in my life after so many years.

Meanwhile - back to Pocatello. The next morning we met Rico's charming wife, her name is Betty also, at breakfast. Laura was unable to spend very much time with us because of her meeting. We took some pictures. We are looking forward to visiting with our friends again - hopefully soon !

Well now, Betty, I plan to read the 776 tiger Tracks, the 34th through the 43rd editions so that I can keep abreast of the happenings of the T.D. veterans since May of 1989.

I have also started to read the informal history of the 776th tank destroyer manual for the first time ever. I want to jog my memory bank so that I look like I remember something when I arrive in Cedar Rapids. Maybe I will have a few stories to tell too.

In fact, I have read the manual this far through - our troop train transit starting at Gatesville, Texas on December 24, 1942 and arriving at Fort Dix, New Jersey at 02:30 hours on the morning of December 28, 1942. We were in preparation to embark on our troop transport ships - destination unknown.

This event has jogged my memory. Seems that Christmas day en route we had very little food on board the troop train and we were very hungry. Word finally came down through the train that we would be stopping early evening at St. Louis, Missouri to take on board food and supplies. remember- this was Christmas.

I believe that Lt. Vernon F. Hovey of Recon company , (maybe others too), had a lot to do with wiring ahead for a wonderful roast beef dinner with potatoes, hot gravy, and all the trimmings for our belated Christmas dinner. Lt. Hovey later became a captain.

It is my understanding that Lt. Hovey had something to do with the manufacturing or distribution of ice cream and sherbert products - I believe in Schenectady, New York.

I am certain that he was responsible for pulling some strings at St. Louis in order to place on board all the ice cream and sherbert that we could possibly eat. What a wonderful treat ! I shall never forget Christmas, 1942. Thanks a million to you and others responsible for this wonderful surprise.

Now I seriously think that playing "catch up" with my 776 reading and the Cedar Rapids reunion will place a little zap into my life. I am on cloud nine.

Again, I want to thank you for keeping the battalion together. See you in September !!

God Bless You,
Paul P. Gibbs

Footnote: When Rico and my husband first got together, it seemed to me that they spent most of their time arguing about each others memory. I am anxious to see if this is a common pastime for all these old guys. I wonder if they all say, as Paul does when he forgets something he's just done -

"But I remember Pearl Harbor !!!".

Laura