

Recollections from my Army service by Bill Stephenson January 2007

These are my recollections of my Army service as it relates to me on a personal basis and not in any way depicting the military strategies and plans carried out during my time in the service. I hope some of my memories might jog the minds of my Army friends so they might tie in with me on some of their personal experiences of the World War II days. I even surprised myself in remembering as much as I did write about, in my greying years.

Having gone on active duty on October 30, 1943, I found myself on a troop train leaving Ft. Bragg, NC a few days afterwards. Unusual perhaps were the double bunk accommodation we had on the train, that is, two to the bunk. A revelation for my bunkmate and myself was the realization we had known each other in an earlier life. Harvey Horne asked me on the train if I had lived in his home town of Erwin and gone to school there in the fifth grade. I was a son of a tenant farmer who seemingly moved from one farm to another in the "thirties", always hoping to experience a more profitable farming experience. I told him I did go to the Erwin school, and he replied that he remembered both my sister and me entering his class there. Small world!

Both Harvey and I were awake when our train passed through the steel mills area of Birmingham, and we were amazed at the huge complex of the mill buildings, and the dinginess of the landscape there. Our eyes and minds were being brought up into the complexity of our country's industriousness and greatness.

In the time ahead we learned we were headed to Camp Crowder, MO for our basic training, winding up with our new housing arrangement a two storied barracks. We were told that we were the trainees for the Headquarters Company of the 1142nd Combat Engineers Group, a unit approximately the size of a regiment. I had read the story of the North African battle of the Kasserine Pass during which Combat Engineers were employed as infantry, and casualties ran high. The Battle of Kasserine Pass was a total disaster for Eisenhower's forces, their first really sizeable engagement with Field Marshal Rommel. I was apprehensive of our future. In the beginning of our training, we recruits were roused out to stand formation and rollcall alongside the barrack. Our first sergeant of the company was a short Yankee, and of the old regular Army, and somewhat "old maidish", and very meticulous. After several formations over the days ahead, I remember his pausing in his addressing us as to the designated uniform for the morning's activities. Class "A" would be the olive drab dress uniform; Class "B" would be fatigues. But one day after a his usual pause, he blurted out that the day's uniform was to be....."Naked". This was for our "short arm" physical check back inside the barracks shortly thereafter by our Medical Officer, Major Medof. These periodic physical checks followed our viewing training films depicting the ills that might befall us should we get involved with women "of the night" who had more to offer than simple sex.

During our training, we had to fire rifle-fired-grenades from our light carbines. The grenade was placed on the end of your carbine, and a special propelling cartridge was inserted in the gun's breech. At the launch of the grenade, the carbine kicked back "like a mule" to us country-oriented tarheels, giving us black and blue bruises on the shoulders the next day. However, we recruits endured these bruising experiences when we caught sight of our Commanding Colonel Frank I. Pethick, Jr. having his helmet shaken from his head when he fired his grenade launcher.

You bet we didn't laugh out loud, but reserved the image for later hashing over the event back in the barracks. Subsequently, the Army Manual on firing the rifle grenade launcher eliminated the recruits from firing it from the standing position against the shoulder, and replaced it with the instruction to place the gun butt on the ground to take the recoil. Guess we were the guinea pigs!

One of the training exercises for us was a 25 mile hike with full field pack, carbine, canteen, helmet, etc. We started out in the early afternoon, going out into the camp reservation area, returning after dark. During this hike, a storm caught us and we were pounded by marble-sized hail. We could hear it striking our helmets, and beating us on the shoulders, through our raincoats which we had pulled from our field packs for the rain and hail. Several of the company wound up with feet blisters and were picked up on a weapons carrier truck for transport back to the barracks. For the rest of us, returning into the barracks area, our gun-ho company commander, Lt. Keirstead had us running for show after all those 25 miles. His counting cadence came out of the corner of his mouth, which seemed to carry farther and more emphatically..

In the mess hall, we ate "family style" with bowls of food being placed on the tables before us. I don't know the derivation of the rule known as the "cinch", but we quickly learned that the person to take out the last helping from a bowl was expected to promptly go up to the kitchen window for a refill for his table. Of course, you hesitated to take the last, or took a minor portion, leaving some for the sucker who just had to have the last bit from the bowl.

Friday nights during the training was the time for all to scrub down the barracks floor, getting things tidy for Saturday morning inspections. So, we would get out the buckets, mops, and some would go down to the latrine for the soap and water. Of course, Saturday mornings were the time to straighten your bunk up and get everything ready for the inspections.

Out on the firing range when we were keeping score to establish the individual's shooting record, a red flag was employed in the target pits to let the shooter know that he had just missed the entire target. The red flag became known as "Maggie's drawers", and getting one was quickly heralded by others as a downer. There was a sense of competition at work.

Another seemingly stupid assignment was walking around the area watertank out on the edge of the barracks area.. I remember clearly how cold I got walking this guard duty in the snow and below freezing weather. For whatever reason or taste, back home I had never taken to coffee, but when I returned to the guard house following my stint around the watertank, I felt I needed some of the black coffee in the pot there to warm my innards, and this was my indoctrination to coffee for the remainder of my service time. I believe also that night the Sergeant of the Guard caught me chasing a rabbit at the watertank, so, I received some tongue lashing for my dalliance.

After a day's training, the PX was a favorite rendezvous for us. I can yet see the lights shining forth from the PX building and hear the blaring music from the juke box as we approached the PX. "Boogie-woogie", "The Beer Barrel Polka", and other popular records of the day would blast forth from the juke box.

The Parade Field was across the path to the PX from our barracks. We did our marching in this area, but also, the routine calisthenics were held there. There was a raised wooden

platform upon which some sergeant would direct the calisthenics routine, going through the same movements he demanded we execute to his instruction and cadence counting.

There is a detonating device called a "squib" that is used to set off either dynamite or blocks of TNT. Well, we had a Regular Army sergeant, Sgt. Rucinsky who undoubtedly regretted messing around with a squib, as the squib for whatever reason exploded with him, and the squib must have been in his lap or in front of him. We don't know just what set it off, but the Medics wound up extracting bits of metal from the squib from Sgt. Rucinsky's scrotum and thigh area. Henceforth, Sgt. Rucinsky became Sgt. Squib to all of us, never to his face though.

On a training exercise in the dark for recruits in another unit, GIs were riding in a "6 x 6" truck out on the reservation under blackout rules, using "cat-eyes" for the front lights. (The 6 x 6 designation refers to six driving wheels and six wheels down on the ground. Dual wheels were considered as one wheel in this designation.) They were just warning lights for other vehicles to see, not for lighting up the road or hazards ahead for the truck. But, on this night, the driver made a serious mistake, perhaps going into or across a ditch, and overturned. Some 5 to 10 soldiers lost their life that night by the truck overturning on top of them

When we departed Camp Crowder enroute to the Tennessee Maneuver Area, we bivouacked at the Big Spring State Park in southeastern Missouri. In this park, the water source for the stream is an underground water source which gushes water out of the earth. This stream flows into the Current River some 1/4 mile away. Today, this park is no longer a state park, but a National Scenic Riverways Park.

In the Maneuver Area of Tennessee, we found out very quickly how important it is to pitch you tent on a higher spot, and to dig either ditches around the tent or build up some dike to keep rain water from entering your home out in the wild. And did we have rain! And some snow! Another hazard perceived was the thought of one of the rumbling tanks on the road some 20 to 50 feet away from our tent traveling with only its cat-eyes lit up, to err and cross the ditch and come into our tenting area. A man from my home county in NC lost his life during a field exercise when a tank came through their tenting area.

Speaking of the excess rainfall, the nearby Cumberland River was near the flood stage when an Army boat loaded with twenty some soldiers with all their gear including overcoats were attempting to cross the Cumberland. The boat was swamped by the surging waters and sank. To my remembrance, 22 G Is that night perished in this unwarranted accident. Bodies of the soldiers were being found for days afterward through the following month.

Later, as the weather became more Springlike, I would set up my typewriter on a nearby stump and practice on the keyboard of my typewriter, to master the touch system. I had been picked for the Company Clerk position and I was determined to make the job a little easier.

When the Maneuvers were over, our Engineer Group had the job of repairing the roads, bridges, etc. that the military had damaged, and we were quartered in pyramidal tents in the edge of Lebanon, TN. Canvas tents were placed above a square wooden bottom section complete with a wooden floor. As the weather yet was cool enough to need some heat within the tents, we G Is

would burn coal in the little space heaters in the tents. Often, live cinders emitted out of the heater stacks would ignite the canvas in spots, burning holes through the fabric. I don't remember a full-fledged fire when the entire canvas went up in flame, but I remember seeing one or more that had so been wasted. Another recollection of our time in the tents, the latrine was some distance away from where we were sleeping and some of the men would not bother to go all the way to the latrine to relieve their bladders. So, the First Sergeant had to admonish us to desist and use the proper facilities.

And, just as we had scrubbed the floors of the barracks back in Camp Crowder, we likewise would bring water from somewhere, transporting it in one of our steel trailers, bringing it nearby our tents for easier access for the floor cleaning.

I don't believe I had ever had any beer prior to entering the service, but one Spring night, I joined several others going to town for a little R and R. That night I became acquainted with this medium of indulgence, experiencing my first "high". As I remember, I left the group ahead of the others, "finding" my way back home to our tent city. I remember how "different" things seemed on my trek back home.

Harvey Horne and I managed to get a furlough back home while in Lebanon. I think we travelled by train, because I wound up at the train station in Selma, some 4 miles from home in Smithfield. I caught a cab for the ride from the depot to my home. It seemed I had been gone for ages.

Having finished our work in the Tennessee Maneuver Area, our unit was assigned to Camp Campbell, KY, for more training prior to going overseas. We made this trip to Campbell on 6-1-44 by motor convoy. At first we were housed in tar-papered shacks at Campbell where we would gaze across the road at the German POW fenced enclosure, watching them playing soccer, it seemed most of the time. They were prisoners mostly taken in North Africa from our understanding. We felt they were the favored ones as we struck out most days into further training programs. They all wore shorts, and most were really tanned above the shorts, while we were sweating in the hot weather being fully clothed.

Standing out in my mind is the news of the landing on the Normandy beaches while we were quartered in two storied frame barracks. We had been upgraded from the tar-papered shacks. Our conversation and thoughts ran to discussions that the war now would be over before we would have to go overseas. A morale booster for us, but time took care of such aspirations.

On 8-20-44, we departed Camp Campbell for Camp Miles Standish, a few miles south of Boston, preparatory for overseas service. On the train ride up, we were wearing our summer weight khakis, and in our walk through some civilian occupied cars going to the dining car, we overheard some of the people commenting how dirty our uniforms were. This came from the open windows of the steam engine equipped train which provided plenty of drifting soot from the coal burning. No air condition, so we certainly had the windows open. We thought the comments were out of line, and shouldn't have been spoken for us to hear. We were told that we could not carry our cameras overseas with us, so I shipped mine home. Drahos on the other hand carried his Kodak 35mm camera with him so he was able to continue recording a picture chronology of our

movements.

At Miles Standish, we were instructed how to escape over the side of a troopship, as well as some other training, most likely some more sex instruction films.

With some leisure time available at Miles Standish, several of us took in the carnival in the town of Taunton, MA. As the majority of the population in Taunton was of Portugese descent, I met a little brunette girl of Portugese heritage, named Madeline Machado. We corresponded some while I was overseas.

I don't remember much about Boston as we went straight through to the port for loading aboard our troopship, the Mariposa. Going up the gangplank with my duffel bag thrown over my shoulder, I remember the band on the dock below playing "Over There". Shades of World War I. We departed Boston on 8-30-44. The Mariposa was a British liner, and had a British crew aboard. A post note regarding the Mariposa: several years ago, my wife and I were in the Annapolis Museum in MD and saw many large pictures on display taken during the construction of the Mariposa in an American shipyard. Life comes around!

Other things come to mind about the trip across the Atlantic. The gentle rolling of the big ship somehow led to nausea for me (and others), but I never threw up. Just affected my appetite, and for several days, I think I survived on the three layer ice cream bars the kitchen passed out for a dessert. I don't think other more solid foods would have stayed put in my stomach. Another thing we lived through was our salt-water showers - for the enlisted men. The officers had fresh water showers. When we, the enlisted men, strolled down the corridors of the huge ship, we confronted barriers across the hallways, barring us from the officers quarters, which included some nurses. We would occasionally glimpse them from a distance.

The gun crew on the Mariposa was from the American Navy, and they provided some entertainment for us in the times they would hold target practice by shooting at a large balloon they had released behind the ship. Once, in the middle of the night, the big ship stopped, and I think the engines were completely shut down. Of course, we were concerned, thinking of potential subs prowling about. The Mariposa was supposed to have been fast enough not to require a destroyer escort, but we had visions of subs sitting waiting for us to come to them. After a little time though, the Mariposa continued our journey eastward.

We found out just before we reached it that our port of call was to be Liverpool, docking on 9-6-44. The view from our ship was of a bleak, dingy looking city sitting on the land rising upward from the ocean. It didn't help any for the weather to be overcast and dark. No matter, as we were quickly loaded on a train headed south from Liverpool on our way to Bournemouth on the south coast of England. The train's windows had blackout curtains which we were instructed to keep pulled down on our trip down.

The Southcliff Hotel was to be our home for the next 17 days. Bournemouth is somewhat the Miami of England, a very popular beach in more normal times. There is a winding walkway down to the water's edge from the high cliff on which several hotels rested. While eating in the dining area of the hotel, we could gaze across the water and see the prominent Isle of Wight, probably

some 4 to 10 miles off shore. One English difference in plumbing for their bathroom was the location of the water tank for the commodes several feet above the seat, the tank being mounted near the ceiling. That certainly gave them more water pressure for flushing.

A very popular pastime for us G Is was to walk into the Bournemouth Park with its beautiful gardens and Pavilion building. And, there were English girls about, doing some of the same, walking. One Sunday afternoon I did meet one, and wound up going to a church service with her. Don't think that would have been my first choice for the evening, but she was the guide. Later, I caught a bus back to our area with the Southcliff.

Departing Bournemouth on 9-24-44, we motored in convoy to a British camp near the port of Weymouth on the central southern coast of England. The camp was in a rolling countryside, void of any trees as I recall. We stayed at the camp only a day or two, before boarding an LST for the Channel crossing. The LST conveyed the vehicles and men but had no sleeping accommodations, not that we expected to be aboard that long. The Channel was not all that quiet - the large cans of boiling water used to heat our "C" ration cans sloshed water out, and we had to be careful as we reached into the can with some retrieving tool so we didn't get scalded. We arrived at Omaha Beach on 9-26-44 and the LST dropped the ramp onto the beach for us to drive our vehicles off into the shallow water. We were amazed at the amount of military ordinance debris that remained on the beach and in the water

We bivouacked close to the beach in the hedge row area where early battles with the Germans were waged. In the camping area there was a black unit that seemed to like to show off their parading or marching prowess. They had such synchronized movements for the marching, putting in some extra steps for show, and of course, their sounding off in cadence was coordinated with the marching. A real show! We staged in this area from 9-26-44 to 10-6-44.

Hauling military supplies to the front from the coast fell to the famed Red Ball Express, staffed entirely with black soldiers. And they took great delight in driving the big trucks at a fast clip across to the front; others knew to give them plenty of room and not contest them. For us enroute by truck convoy toward the front, one day we stopped at a Red Ball unit and ate in their mess. It wasn't C rations, but overall great fare. Another recollection during this travel across France and Belgium came during a stop we had made in Belgium. A Belgian woman came out with a pot of hot soup and I know there were a lot of appreciative G Is holding out their cups for some of her soup.

Our farthest movement to the East was at Kinroy, Belgium, but staying there only one night; from there we moved to an area near Aelbeek in Holland. There we suffered from a flooded camping area from several days of rain we had. I think Bernard Wicker and I had dug in with our pup tents joined for the tent, but our blankets got water soaked when the dug hole took in water. From there I remember going with some others in a cleanup party for our next billet. My memory leaves me dry here: seems like we cleaned up some rooms in something like a hotel or at least a building that had some bathtubs and running hot and cold water. I had one wonderful hot bath in a tub here. I really don't know if the 1142nd ever made use of this building because it seems our next stop was at a school building in New Einde, Holland. While in the school building, one day a German plane flew down the street out front strafing all along the street. None of our men or

trucks were struck. I never saw the plane, just heard it and the machine guns strafing.

Our next billeting was in Zichen, Belgium, arriving there on 10-25-44. We were quartered in several houses, while our work areas were in a nearby school building. One morning right after we had breakfast down by the mess truck, I was in my work area inside the school, when 1st Sgt. Buckner burst through the outside door exclaiming a buzz bomb was falling. I dived beneath a table, and before I could get too frightened, the bomb hit in the field near the mess truck. Glass from the school windows was blown in on us, and a piece of glass struck Pvt. William Pace, our switchboard operator, for which he later received a purple heart award. The 1,000 lb. explosive charge in the bomb blasted a sizeable hole in a beet field. The school had a rather crude toilet for the kids. The boys relieved themselves against a wall beneath a shelter that also covered some stalls for the girls. I guess there was a runoff from the boys' facility, and maybe the boys used the girls stalls for more serious relief. Another memory of the Zichen area was our going into an extensive cave network with some local guides. Seems the locals sawed out sandstone blocks for buildings, thereby creating the caves. We were told you could travel some 15 to 20 miles through the caves, going to the next town. What impressed me mostly was the complete darkness you experienced when the flashlights were doused. Wow!

Leaving Zichen, we moved to Heer, near Maastricht, Holland. The site there contained an old castle which became our headquarters, and some slept in it. My billet along with several others was in the hay in a large barn nearby. The hay made a great bed for the approaching cold weather, but the nightly visiting of buzz bombs overhead got to some of us. Losing too much sleep even in the comfortable and warm hay berth caused Thomas Reilly of New York and myself to dig in outside with our pup tent pitched over it. This move certainly enhanced our sleeping, and I for one, ceased to fret with the buzz bomb putt-putting by. I do remember it snowed while we were sleeping outside, but our blankets kept us warm enough. There was one buzz bomb though that gave us some excitement at suppertime one day. When its rocket engine stopped, we could see a glow on the bomb which seemed to be stationary, making most of us think the bomb was coming straight down on us. Everyone scrambled to clear the area or seek cover. I dove beneath the mess truck, but others fought a barbed wire fence, trying to get on the other side of a nearby RR embankment. We felt a welcome relief when we heard the engine of the buzz bomb restart or fire again, sending it away from our area for a later falling to earth. Speaking of the railroad, here I will insert a clip I believe I gave to Nick Drahos, and he included this in his booklet of his experiences with the 1142nd.

A funny recollection which could have been much worse I have regarding Lt. Voss. At Heer where the RR track ran by our bivouac area, Lt. Voss was the Officer of the Guard on a night I pulled guard within some 50 feet of the RR track. Lt. Voss was walking down the RR which was elevated from the surrounding ground, and my vision of him was clear against the night sky. Standing behind a tree with my carbine trained on the man walking down the track, he failed to answer my first "Halt" order. I pulled off the safety and had my finger on the trigger, and prepared to fire at a second failure for him to heed another halt order. You recall we had received a message from Corps to be on the lookout for German parachutists disguised in American uniforms dropping behind the line. Everyone was alert to this, to wit, I'm sure I would have fired after the second Halt and failure to stop. Of course, he did stop, I was relieved, and I never told him of course how close he came to being shot at.

Cpl. Pickard became our Recreation Assistant to Lt. Mohr, and he did a splendid job of getting us some decent movies to view. These were of course 16 mm, and the first movies I remember viewing was in the Heer castle. Some of the movies were Westerns, and even though we had seen some, they were enjoyed again as if we had never seen them before.

There is a mystery of Heer for me that I never have found what exactly happened. Pt. Luchsinger and I had been picked to dig a new latrine trench between the castle and the mess area. No sooner than we had finished it, when suddenly we heard a succession of fairly large explosions nearby we thought. I was the first to dive into the dug latrine and Luchsinger was instantly atop me. He weighed nigh 200 pounds if any, and there was no chance of me emerging from the latrine trench until he got off of me. To this day, I still think a German plane unloaded some small bombs nearby, perhaps trying to knock out some of the railroad, but we never found out.

While at Heer, I went with one of the Jeep drivers to see the American Margraten Cemetery over the line into the Netherlands from Belgium. This was a few days after the start of the Battle of the Bulge. Units attached to the 1142nd had built a corduroy road into the graves area, by placing cut tree trunks, some 4 to 6 inches in diameter across the road. The many rains we had endured had made a quagmire of many roads. I don't think I can ever forget the sight of a 6 x 6 truck coming into the cemetery with G I corpses piled 6 to 8 feet high, completely filling the truck. Especially memorable was the random manner in which they were situated on the truck. Either from being frozen or from the effects of rigor mortis, the soldiers' limbs projected in all directions.

Another memory I have relates again to the large numbers of casualties coming from the battle areas involved with the Battle of the Bulge. I went over to the Army hospital at Maastricht and picked up a pair of combat boots from the 8 to 10 foot high pile of them outside the hospital. The boots were discards from wounded or dead G Is from the front. Up to that time, only front line troops were issued these newly available boots. They were a welcome addition to our uniform, especially in inclement weather. In the photo 209.1 on the 1142nd site, you see the newly-acquired combat boots. They seemed to be "brand new".

None of us will forget the move from Heer to Laurensberg, Germany on Christmas Eve in a persistent snowfall. Laurensberg was only a mile or so from the outskirts of Aachen, which had been heavily bombed and shelled before capitulating. The front south of us was yet very active and unstable, in the continuance of the Battle of the Bulge, so we were somewhat alarmed when we began to meet tanks of the Second Armored Division coming back from the front where they had served. But, we figured they were being re-deployed into the Bulge affray.

At Laurensberg, most of us were quartered in some German homes. The one I stayed in had blackout curtains that you just pulled down to effect complete darkness when viewed from the outside. The road that ran beside our billets was lined with rows of artillery ammo. One day I was walking from the camouflaged headquarters building to my billet when a truck skidded on the snowy or icy road, piling into the stacks of artillery shells. I thought my time had come, just knowing the shells would go off. Of course, with no primers in the noses, this did not happen, to the relief of both me and the truck driver.

Standing outside the headquarters building one day, a German fighter flew low over us. It sounded different from any plane I had heard before; I saw the swastika on its tail, and I really believe it to have been one of their new jet fighters, as I never had seen a plane go that fast. I think the only guard post I remember having to pull was the one at the bottom of the drive down from the headquarters building. That was some frigid guard time with all the snow on the ground about. One night, a German home some 200 yards away had a window or two lit up with an inside light. Roscoe Jordan walked by my post and he had his Thompson submachine gun slung on his shoulder. Before I knew what he was up to, he had pulled the Thompson up and let off a burst toward the house with the lights. I don't think anyone could turn lights out with a switch on the wall any faster than that resident did that night.

I happened to receive my camera from home while at Laurensberg, so I began again to take pictures to send home and to keep. Picture 224 of my photos on the 1142nd Web site will give you an idea of the snows we had about this time.

One night a German plane tried to knock out the nearby RR bridge with his bombs, but he failed to do so. As to bombing, I hitched a ride into Aachen and we traveled down some streets that had been bull-dozed open. This was my first sight of a city being so completely wasted with the guns and planes of war. This was the first of others yet to see.

We moved a couple more times, remaining in the Laurensberg area. On the third location for us, we took over more German homes for our shelter, and managed to garner enough of German creature comforts such as mattresses, blankets, etc. to improve our living quarters. With the skies cleared of the clouds that seemed to stymie the Air Force in the Battle of the Bulge, eating out of mess gear outdoors in the warming sunshine, we got to watch dogfights overhead, but as Drahos wrote about, they were too far to identify who was who.

I think it was at our last billet in Laurensberg that we stood outdoors and listened to the one to two hours of shelling across the Roer River, prior to our forces effecting the crossing. In S-2, we knew the "jump-off" was to be that night of the shelling. Sounded like rolling thunder a long ways off. Another move on 3-4-45 carried our unit to Hongen which had been badly shelled in the American push toward the Roer River. At Hongen, our mess was located in an old school which was more intact than other buildings in the town. Our billeting was mostly in damaged houses, but in those least damaged. Lt. O'Connor got the bright (?) idea of driving a pulley mounted generator to power up some of our billets by jacking up a jeep and letting the rear tires drive the generator. The tire was brought to run against the pulley. This arrangement may have lasted one hour, abruptly brought to a halt when the tire blew. Needless to say, we didn't get much electric service from this scheme.

Our next move on the way to the Rhine River was the town of Wickrath. Here, again we took possession of some vacated German homes for our billeting. In rummaging through a German home, I picked up some snapshots of the German leaders, as Hitler, Goering, and others which I included in some of my Army pictures posted on the 1142nd Internet site.

Next, we traveled to Kempen, arriving there on 3-20-45, where we found some nice

quarters for the men in an apartment complex. Here, I remember we received through our PX supplies our first crates of bottled Coca-Colas. That was a taste of home for us, for we had not had carbonated drinks for many months. Also, as the days were getting somewhat warmer, we held Protestant church service on Sunday in an open area across the street from the apartment complex.

Having been picked again for a billet cleanup crew going to Rheinberg on the Rhine, our weapons carrier was passing a large gun im-placement right beside our road, unknown to us in the back of the truck, when the 240mm gun was fired for a shell to bombard across the Rhine which the American Army had crossed on the morning of March 23rd. That was probably the loudest sound I had ever heard at that time, and since we did not have any ear plugs or protection, it indeed was loud! At Rheinberg, our crew cleaned up some billeting space in a German beer hall.

Later that day, when we were returning to Kempen, near Rheinberg we passed what remained of a Jeep that had been struck by a German shell since we had passed by that location earlier that morning. I remember the back half of the Jeep was intact, but the front including the front seat and engine compartment was gone, blown to bits. The Germans apparently were yet firing some artillery across the Rhine to impede the rear assistance to the front.

The next day when our unit moved up to Rheinberg, my quarters for sleeping was on the second floor of the old beer hall. That first night there, we didn't get much sleep as there was plenty of machine gun fire in the sky. I never did find out just who was firing at whom, but not taking any chances of stray bullets coming through the window, I moved my bed gear immediately beneath the window, getting away from being out in the middle of the room. As we continued in Rheinberg, some of us would go outside and watch the truckloads of German POWs being hauled by us, moving them to camps in the rear.

When we departed Rheinberg, while crossing the Rhine on a floating treadway bridge some of the units attached to our Group had constructed, it was a little disconcerting sensing the give of the bridge as our weapons carrier carried us across the tracks laid atop the steel boats. And, you hoped our driver did a good job keeping the wheels of the truck in line with the bridge tracks.

Our next stop after the Rhine River crossing for the 1142nd was Wulfin. Here we used a school building for our headquarters and another building nearby for the mess hall. The German Army actually used both of these buildings for the same purposes. On the school ground was a knocked-out German 88mm antiaircraft gun - see my Army picture no. 248. With the war yet in progress, the "non-fraternization" rule with the German civilians was still in effect, but not well adhered to by the enlisted men. In fact, I visited with a German girl in the neighborhood, carrying my carbine (loaded) slung on my shoulder when going to her home. She spoke English quite well, and played the piano in her home for me. However, for this infraction of the rule I did experience an uneasy moment when one day I came upon her in a hallway in the school talking to an officer or two. It seems she was being the interpreter for a German civilian or family who had some member struck by an American military vehicle. Passing by them in the hall, I was afraid she would speak out to me, but she didn't and I hurried past. That night in my visit with her, she told me she figured I went past because of the non-fraternization rule. Whew!

We thought we had “won the war with the 1142nd when we came to dwell in the 5-story castle at Ermsinghausen, near Lippstadt. A moat around it, beautiful paintings on the walls and ceilings, and yeah, hot running water for showers. We arrived here on 5-1-45 and remained here through the victory in Europe celebration, when each soldier was given an alcoholic bottle of some description with which to let off steam. Some let off more steam than others. A delightful treat was had in the strawberry patch back of the castle. Also, Pvt. Getz and I went into the woods some half mile perhaps behind the castle with our carbines for a little game hunting. I managed to shoot down a land heron sitting in the top of a tall tree. As the castle was part of a farming estate apparently, there were quite a few workers housed in the two long buildings in front of the castle. In the buildings were both housing for the workers’ families and other space for some farm animals. In the afternoon, when some of the residents came out into the yard beside the long buildings, there was a German girl who entertained with her accordian playing. To my level of musical appreciation, she did play rather well, and even some of the music was familiar to us G Is. Sometime while yet quartered in the castle, I was strolling out into the farm countryside perhaps some mile or so from the castle, when I came upon this girl’s home. She was leaning out the window - I stopped, and we talked some; she knew more English than I the German. She offered me a small glass of cognac, which together with her, we downed two little glasses of the German brandy. Life was getting better all along!

Moving south from Lippstadt, we established billeting and headquarters in a small agricultural town called Treysa on 6-12-45. Here, we found accommodations in “borrowed” German houses. There was active railroad traffic through Treysa, and a lot of it was German soldiers released from POW camps or disbanded German Army units returning home most likely. In the afternoons, we would walk down to the depot and watch the soldiers passing through, standing in open gondola cars. Another afternoon pastime was a stroll through town down the hill to the stream where some of the local girls would go into the water. Some of the G Is claimed the girls would change into their bathing suits behind towels, but I was never privileged to witness that. There was a German girl speaking good English in the town, and she seemed to like to talk with us. However, she rankled us somewhat when she made charges we shouldn’t have bombed RR trains that had civilians aboard. We reminded her of the indiscriminate bombing the Germans did in England. I figure she was 18 to 20. One day on a Jeep cruise off the road on a hill outside of Treysa, we came across her gathering grass for her penned rabbit, she said. On July 4th, most of the company went on a picnic beside a fresh water stream. We played softball, and generally enjoyed the outdoors setting. Most of the fellows went into the water, as the weather was warm enough for swimming. As I had my camera with me and was taking some pictures, I had not donned my swim trunks, and apparently, Reilly had not done so either. At any rate, the ones that had been in the water threw Reilly in, and someone pointed to me, and I likewise got the same treatment, but someone held my camera thank goodness. While in Treysa, Harvey Horne and I began to develop and print our film. We improvised a darkroom in one of the houses, and after developing the film, we would contact-print them. Harvey was able to get the supplies on his runs for supplies. Since we had no timers for determining the exposures of the paper, one would stand outside the darkroom, calling out the time to the one inside doing the printing. We were not into automation.

Sometime while at Treysa, all the men who did not have enough “going home” points were

transferred into the 1104th Combat Engineer Group, while the 1142nd became a unit headed to the States with high pointers. Subsequently, the 1104th relocated to Bad Nauheim, some 30 miles approximately north of Frankfurt. Here we were housed in an old German Army barracks which was very nice, with showers and plenty of room for both living quarters and headquarters. This location was within a few hundred yards of Hitler's "southern redoubt", which included mostly underground installations for both living and military operational space. Entering the tunnel, I remember walking for some time in it before you would reach some of the underground rooms. Hitler reportedly never came here, and disliked the concept of a southern redoubt.

For those who wished, on Sundays we would be trucked to a Protestant church in the town. Most of the buildings in this town were intact I believe. While here we had access to a building where you could get beer and more potent drinks. My recollection of this facility was an occasion when Hausbeck and I traipsed over to it for the evening, and I remembered sitting beside another GI from California who had a little dog with him at the table. The last thing I remember from this evening was patting the little dog and sipping away on my cognac, apparently past the sensible point of imbibing. My good friends got me back to our barracks and the next thing I remember was awaking the next morning on my cot. I was yet fully clothed, but the uniform was as little soiled from "tossing my cookies". For the next several days, I had a long enduring hangover and headache, for which I declared I would never get in that fix again. I have kept this promise for myself. Another treat most of us enjoyed was the visits by the Red Cross vehicle with their coffee and donuts. See my picture no. 321 for a view of this service.

In August, John Hausbeck, Lewis Carper and I took a furlough to visit Switzerland, as others had already done. We traveled by train, and stopped overnight in Karlsruhe. To get to our billet and mess, we had to go through a pedestrian tunnel, in which we passed quite a few African Senegal soldiers in their colorful uniforms. A lot of red in them, and the soldiers seemed to be unusually tall, and carried sabers sheathed on their side. I was glad to get past them, and on to our quarters for the night.

In Lucerne, we were put up in the Montana Hotel up on the side of a mountain. Great accommodations including great food in a beautiful dining room, including Swiss yodelers and other musicians while we ate. In 1993 on a European tour, we took a Lake Lucerne tour boat, and saw the Montana Hotel on the mountain, as if time had indeed stood still! Leaving Lucerne we went by train to Davos, a present day exclusive ski resort city. A watch dealer in the town told Hausbeck and me that many air crews ditching their planes over Switzerland or escaping into Switzerland became temporary citizens of the town. These were both Allied and Axis plane crew members. The Swiss government gave them living and spending allowances, and allowed them to roam throughout the area. The crews did intermingle freely according to our spokesman. Of course, after the war, the Swiss government expected to get payment for their outlays to both combatant groups. On our stroll downtown in Davos, Hausbeck and I met a couple Swiss frauleins and we wound up going to an American movie, complete with German sub-titles for our Swiss friends. A bizarre experience, but we capped it off visiting an ice cream bar. Nearby the hotel in which we stayed was a cog-railroad going to the top of a ski mountain there. Of course, we took the cog RR up, and found ourselves enjoying a good snowfall in the month of August.

Sometime in October 1945, some of us from the 1104th Group not having enough points to

remain with the 1104th that was headed to the States were transferred to the 1265th Combat Engineers Battalion in Giessen. We were housed again in German houses, along with our operational quarters. It was here that several of us, I believe four, decided we would like to motor some 20 to 30 miles to a movie in Bad Nauheim. Somehow I was the designated person to get the Jeep out of the motorpool for the trip. We enjoyed the movie diversion, but someone in the unit had reported the Jeep had been taken without proper authorization, so the next day I was summoned before Capt. Keirstead for a session. As a result, I was reduced in rank by one stripe. One change for us who came out of the old 1142nd was the issuance of the Garand M1 rifle, instead of the carbine. The M1 was a much longer and heavier weapon.

Leaving Giessen, we convoyed to the heavily damaged city of Bremen, where once more we moved into a vacated German Army barracks, with all the conveniences you would expect in a service barracks. The street car ran from our area to the city's main commercial area with the bus streetcar stop near our barracks. Quite often, several of us would journey by streetcar to the city's heart, not having to pay anything to ride the streetcar. Paying riders were the civilians on the same streetcars. I'm sure they were acutely aware we G Is were riding free. Downtown, we visited the Red Cross center for service people and other places such as a nearby ice cream parlor. I managed to meet a German girl downtown and continued to see her over a 2 to 3 month period. When she would direct us to some type of quick service place of refreshments, it was disappointing how little they had to offer. Seems there was some type of fruity drinks, but I don't remember having baked goods as cookies and the like in those places. The Red Cross had a lot more to offer, but you could not take your German girl friend into the center.

When someone you had known for a long time got the OK to head for the States, it was a little sad, leaving you with a sense of being left out. No matter, because it was not long before I had the points required to head out, which meant I traveled with some others to the port of Bremerhaven on the North Sea. George Staton though was the only old 1142nd soldier that went with me to the port then. For taking care of the G Is at Bremerhaven, an airport hangar had been revamped with bunks, mess, and other accommodations for us while we were staged for the later embarkation. Time really drug by for us in the several days we were here; we would walk all around the area including the shore of the harbor, going by a lighthouse and cemetery I recall. But the day of climbing aboard boxcars that would carry us to the port where our Victory type ship awaited did come. It was hard to take in that finally after some 20 months in Europe, we would soon be aboard on the high seas bound for the USA. Our ship was the USS Williams Victory, our home for the next 7 to 8 days.

Aboard and afloat, again that old bugaboo boredom set in. We constantly found ourselves wandering all over the ship - front to back and back again. When the sun was out, we would stretch out and find a comfortable spot where we could get some of the sun's heat, because the North Atlantic in the Springtime of April was cold. My luck didn't hold for long because I was picked one day as a Staff Sergeant to head up a policing (cleanup) crew of lower ranked G Is to keep a latrine cleaned up. As the ocean became more turbulent with the Spring storms, it seems more G Is got seasick, and headed for the latrine for relief. But the latrine duty was only one day I think, so it was soon over. For the Victory ship voyage home, I never did sense any queasiness as I did a year and a half before on the large troopship. And the weather degenerated into rough seas that prevented anyone of us from coming up on deck for 2 to 3 days. If you didn't enjoy playing

cards below deck, time would weigh on you, unless, you like to read and had some good reading material. I think the most marvelous sight I had ever seen at least up that time in my young life was the sight of the New York skyline, including the Statue of Liberty. Docking near the Staten Island Ferry slip, we offloaded and were trucked or bussed to Camp Kilmer, NJ. Standing formation and roll check outside our barracks after just arriving in the camp, I couldn't believe there could be a G I who would steal my camera out of the top of my duffel bag. What burned me the most was I lost the pictures I had taken of the New York skyline and other docking scenes. These shots were yet in my camera. My comrade for the crossing of Atlantic George Staton had an uncle living in the New York City area. He treated Staton and me to a swell steak dinner in New York while we were at Camp Kilmer.

A final train ride for me carried us to our discharging destination at Fort Bragg, NC, being discharged on 4-26-46. I had served two and a half years in Uncle Sam's Army, and I would be quick to add these years helped most of us young men to mature with insights and views seldom gained outside the military.