

MEMORIES OF WORLD WAR II

George Wiltsee shares his story

DICK KRUG

Editor's note: The following article comes from interviews with residents at the Concord Deaconess and has been put into a book titled, "Memories of World War II."

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, I was in my second year of college. It had not occurred to me to join ROTC in my first year, so I, like most of my classmates, began to apply for various alternatives to the draft. (One of my friends joined the Marines right after Christmas and was killed in Guadalcanal in 1942.) My eyes were not up to the standards of the Navy or the Air Force, and I ended up volunteering for the draft in the spring of 1943. Because we had gone to school through the summer of 1942, by May of 1943 I had completed the first half of senior year, and Yale said that was enough — I would get my degree.

I entered the Army in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, across from Cincinnati and was soon shipped to Camp Haan, near Riverside, California, to be a member of a new anti-aircraft battalion that was being formed. We spent that summer, fall, and winter training there and in Camp Irwin, out in the desert near Barstow. It was good duty, because we could get into Los Angeles on weekends; in addition to which, it had been decided that I would be assigned the position of Intelligence Sergeant, and that meant that I didn't have to work KP and latrine cleanup.

In the spring of 1944, when we had finished our training, and the battalion had been qualified for duty, the Army decided that it did not need any more anti-aircraft. We were all shipped to a miserable little camp in Texas, on the Oklahoma border, to be converted to infantry. This meant that we had to learn to be real soldiers, and it was hard work — plus it was hot in the summer in Texas, the chiggers were fierce, and Dallas sure wasn't Los Angeles. At the end of our training, we were sent to Ford Ord, California, near Monterey, to be shipped to the Pacific Theatre.

In our first week at Fort Ord, we did a training exercise in the hills, and I came down with a severe case of poison oak. It was so bad that I had to spend three weeks in the base hospital. While I was in the hospital, my group was shipped out. When I returned to duty, the powers that be looked at my Military Occupational Specialty, i.e., the job I had qualified for, and opined that I was an Intelligence Sergeant in the anti-aircraft, but in the infantry, and that I needed further training. So I was sent to Fort McClellan, South Carolina, near Spartanburg, where the intelligence school did take me in after a few weeks. That training lasted about six weeks and was mostly map reading, as I remember it. Now I was prepared to go!

I was shipped to Fort Meade, Maryland, then on to England. We landed in Cardiff, took a train to Portsmouth, England, then a small Polish ship to Le Havre. From there, a train consisting of box cars took us to Nancy, then to Metz. After two days in a fort in Metz, a truck came and took me to a little village in Luxemburg not far from the town of Wasserbillig, on the Moselle across from the German city of Trier — a lovely place that Jean and I have visited several times in the past few years. I got out of that truck in the middle of the night and found that I was now in the Intelligence NCO of the First Battalion, 346th Infantry Regiment, 87th Division, assigned to Patton's 3rd Army, with a squad of four to five guys. It was early January, 1945, and the Battle of the Bulge was in its final stages.

For a few days we maintained an observation post in a big church in Wasserbillig. Then we moved by truck up through the town of Wiltz, Luxemburg, from which according to some legend my family gets its name, and then mostly by foot through Houffalize, Bastogne, and on to St.

Vith, where the Bulge has begun and where it now ended. A few miles east of St. Vith we ran up against German border fortifications known as the Siegfried Line. There we sat for about three weeks getting shot at until we moved through the Line and onto the Rhine. Our division crossed the Moselle upstream from Coblenz, liberated the city after some difficult fighting, (and also liberated some good Moselle wine), and on March twenty-sixth we crossed the Rhine in landing craft at Boppard, south of Coblenz. We have been back to Boppard quite a few times now — it is a nice city, and on the river bank there is a viewing platform called the “Lorelei Blick,” as the legendary Lorelei is just a short distance up river from there. Needless to say, on that morning of the twenty-sixth, with all the noise, the smoke generators, and some shelling, we were not aware of what are now important tourists’ sites.

From our time near Wasserbillig until after we crossed the Rhine, we were almost continuously in contact with the enemy, and this was the toughest time of the War for me. My squad and I found ourselves looking straight down the barrel of a German tank one day, and fortunately he missed. My closest call came when we were moving out one night and one of our vehicles hit a mine within a few feet of me. I was blown some distance, lost my rifle and helmet, and had a hell of a headache for a few days but was luckier than some of my buddies who were closer to the mine. Generally during this period our squad set up observation posts whenever we could, we did some scouting, and we helped the long-range artillery observers identify targets. This all subjected us to frequent mortar and artillery fire, and one of my squad was right next to me one day when he was hit in the chest, but I was never really hurt. (I always said that as long as I didn’t get seriously hurt, I wouldn’t have missed it for the world).

After we crossed the Rhine, it was a matter of chasing the Germans each day until finally we were almost at the Czech border, and on May eighth that war ended. About ten thousand Germans came into our battalion area that day under surrender, and we took care of them as best we could. Some of them were hurt, and I worked for a few days with a German officer to get them settled in a building with bunks. The rest of the prisoners were corralled in a large field. Very shortly we received orders to move west, as the province we had taken was to be turned over to the Russians under terms of the Yalta agreement. I don’t know what ever happened to those prisoners. If they were turned over to the Russians, they probably came to a bad end.

Then we received orders to ship back to the States for home leave en route to becoming part of the invasion for Japan. (It is interesting to recall that the embarkation camp near Le Havre was called Camp Lucky Strike. It was assumed that most of us smoked, which I did not, and in fact in the time that we were in the line we received a pack of cigarettes everyday, and there were cigarettes in the K-rations.)

The Japanese surrendered while I was on home leave. We reported back to our division in Fort Benning, Georgia, and the division was deactivated. I didn’t have enough points to be discharged yet, and I was sent to Fort Devens where I was stationed for about six months. That gave me an opportunity to visit the Harvard Business School one day, where I learned that they had room for me in the next class. So in March, 1946, I was discharged from the Army, and in June I started the MBA program, and the rest of my life.

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