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This narrative is based on my memory of what happened 43 years ago and is dedicated to the men of the 1O6th Infantry Division who were not as fortunate as I was.

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Buena Park, California

The time was approximately March, 1944. I was in an Army Air Corps Base in Illinois, waiting for an assignment for navigator training. The letter from General "Hap" Arnold said, "You are young, vigorous and well trained, and the Army ground forces need you." All of this was true except for the well trained - that was to come later.

When the train stopped at Camp Atterbury (about 30 miles south of Indianapolis) we were told to jump in any truck. These were the standard army trucks which were called a 2 ½ for their ton capacity.

Later, when the truck I had selected stopped along side the also standard two story army barracks, our names were taken. This was Company "M" - 424th Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division. Company "M" sent the list of names to headquarters and the army files that matched our names were sent back to Company "M". I had selected the group with which I was to have my "finest hour" by truck selection. This might have been the most important decision in my life because I'm sure the occupants of some of the other trucks were all casualties.

I was now classified as an 81 mm mortar gunner and we started to get the training General Arnold had said we had.

There was training on a variety of weapons, especially the mortar, the M-1 rifle and the 45 caliber pistol. Of course there was a lot of physical training. There were many days of 20 mile hikes carrying full field equipment. Being 20 years old and weighing one hundred and sixty pounds was a big advantage. Some of the men were older and not in good shape and had a rough time.

I was very aware of the seriousness of my future. If there was any training I missed or felt incomplete, I worked on this on my own time. I remember spending a Sunday walking across a ravine on a three rope bridge until I wasn't afraid of falling.

When I could I visited Indianapolis. There weren't usually hotel rooms available so I stayed with a private family. One Saturday night I visited a bar and had one drink of everything anyone in the bar ordered. The next thing I knew I was sitting on the sidewalk. An M.P. came along and asked if I had a place to sleep. I handed him a slip of paper with the address I was staying that night. The M.P. had a taxi take me there. The next morning the old man of the house (probably my present age) brought in a tray with orange juice, coffee and two aspirins. I didn't feel like the title of the Infantry song, "The Kings of the Highway," but the hospitality was never forgotten.

When we were getting ready to go oversees there were a lot of medical exams and other preparation. Apparently we couldn't get excess supplies transferred so we buried them. What bothered me the most was burying a lot of army shoes. My father, and of course other people, couldn't get work shoes during the war.

I was able to go home on a three day pass. Before we left we were advised that if we returned late it wasn't AWOL (Absent without leave) but desertion, because we were going to combat. The penalty for desertion in wartime is death.

I took the New York subway to 34th Street and Sixth Ave instead of Eighth Ave. I ran about a half mile carrying an overnight bag to catch my train. I ran past my Aunt and Uncle who were seeing me off. I grabbed the box of candy without missing a step. I didn't catch my breath until Philadelphia. Since then I have always been very early before any scheduled transportation.

Where we were going was supposed to be a secret known only by the Division's Commanding General. All our insignia was removed and when we called home from a camp in Massachusetts the operator said we were somewhere in the United States. My friend and I went to a USO dance in Providence, Rhode Island. One girl (about 16) said, "Where are you guys going and what outfit are you with?" The other girl (about 17) said, "They're with the 106th Infantry Division and they are going to England on the Aquitania next Tuesday. Of course, I didn't believe the girl knew.

Meanwhile we were practicing getting off and on trains and ships. The officer would say, "Weiner." I replied, "Milton, NMI (No Middle Initial)" and crossed over the painted line onto the make-believe train or ship.

The following Tuesday we went from our camp in Massachusetts by a very circuitous route to a dock in the Port of New York. It was the Aquitania as the girl from Providence had said. The last few months I had seen the movie "Someone Talked" about 20 times. The theme was a few people talking under a sign that said, "Loose Lips Sink Ships." At the end of the movie a soldier is drowning. As the last part of his body, his goes down, the screen is full of the movie's title - "Someone Talked."

There was so much activity with the many thousands on ship board that I forgot about "Someone Talked." We stood jammed at the rails getting a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. Even now whenever I pass the Lady with the Torch I am on the Aquitania again.

We had a brief religious service. The Rabbi said he expected all of us to be at each daily service no matter how sea-sick we might be. The next service the Rabbi attended was when we were docking in the Firth of Clyde, Scotland, eight days later.

Almost everyone was very sea-sick for the eight day crossing. The crowded living quarters with bunks eight high did not help the sea-sick soldiers. I realized somewhat too late that I should have joined the Navy. I was happily singing, "Over the Waves" and enjoying the motion of the ship. Of course, it was rough because it was October in the North Atlantic. To add to the ship's motion, we changed direction every few minutes so a submarine could not get a good aim at us. We were alone without escort until we were close to England when we had a destroyer and plane escort.

The Aquitania was a beautiful ship, especially the wood paneling. The meals were different than the usual Cunard line food. There were two meals a day. Each one lasted for about six hours to feed the thousands of people. During the black-out instructions the Captain of the Aquitania said, "It doesn't matter if you or I get to Scotland, the ship must get there."

Years later when on the QE2, my son and I were talking to two officers, one my age and one much younger. I said I hadn't been on a Cunard ship for many years because I hadn't liked the Captain's attitude when he said, "It doesn't matter if you or I get to Scotland, the ship must get there.' The older officer laughed and remembered, while the younger officer, of course, couldn't follow my conversation.

After our landing in Scotland, pretty Scottish lassies gave us K-rations. One looked at me eating and really laughed, saying, "You Yanks!" I was eating the canned cheese along with the waxed paper cover. I guess I was hungry.

We took a train ride that lasted all night. There was a full moon. Scotland and England were beautiful and very romantic. All of this was wasted under the circumstances.

We arrived at our temporary destination - a little English town named Chipping Norton. We stayed at what must have been an English Manor House. Since I was a Private First Class, my quarters had special doors. Each door was divided horizontally in two. We could always get a laugh standing at the half opened door braying like a horse.

We continued our training. The English people were very friendly. We were told that food was very scarce and if someone asked us home for dinner Mess Sergeant Jim Hires would give us food to bring. There was very little for us to buy. Occasionally there was fish and chips for sale in the town of Chipping Norton. It came in a newspaper inverted cone.

I was fortunate to be among the few that had a three day pass to London. Sightseeing in the daytime was very interesting and I felt really fortunate to walk with history. Night was strange because there was a complete black-out along with Wernher Von Braun's early space efforts which we called Buzz Bombs.

Shortly after my trip to London we boarded trains for Southampton. While the English Royal Marine Band played, we boarded a small ship - at least small compared to the Aquitania. Many years later I boarded the P&0 Line's Canberra for a Mediterranean Cruise. It looked like the same dock and the same band playing, but the trip was quite different. Getting back to 1944, we sailed for Le Havre and then anchored outside this French city for 3 weeks. Our quarters were very limited. We had a choice of sleeping in a hammock or on the cold, hard steel deck. I really didn't have a choice because every time I got into my hammock, I was quickly on the deck. The food was also limited. I don't think they planned on three weeks for a 30 - 40 mile trip. We were all very anxious to land. "When ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise."

We finally left the ship and transferred to an LST (Landing Ship Tank). We were wearing full field equipment weighing over 50 pounds including a steel helmet and carrying a rifle or a pistol. Both the ship and the LST went up and down in the current and tide of the English Channel. But they didn't go up and down together. Two profootball lineman types stood on each of the ship and the LST and handed us over at the appropriate time according to the ships' movements. It was considerably worse than any other experience

I was to have. To this day, when I transfer from a cruise ship to a tender, I remember and again feel the anxiety.

Finally the very crowded LST landed on a beach in Le Havre. The LST was so crowded we all stood and sort of held each other up, since we couldn't move. Le Havre was not an improvement. Most of the buildings were destroyed. I was grateful I didn't land at D-Day with enemy fire added to the experience. I guess there is always someone worse off than you.

We were warned that Le Havre was mined everywhere except in the marked paths and never to stray. That was the truth. All during the night there were explosions and terrible screams.

We didn't learn our lesson after leaving the ship and once again we were anxious to move. The next move was about a 24 hour ride in an open Army truck. It was December, 1944 and very cold. Later - years later - I found out in Rotterdam that it was one of the coldest winters in Europe. There was a statue of a family dedicated to the survival of that winter. I sat near the back of the truck so I could see Europe by day and nothing by night. It was black-out conditions. How those drivers could drive 24 hours with the tiny lights was amazing. I think it was called the "Red Ball Express." In the truck the field artillery song kept going through my mind, especially the part, "To the front, day and night."

As we neared our destination the signs gave the message of why we were there. I'll never forget the sign that said, "You are now entering Germany courtesy of the First Infantry Division." If that message wasn't clear, the signs stating, "Achtung Minen" with the skull and crossbones made it clearer.

Later the newspapers all said that the 106th Division occupied a quiet front. It was quiet when we got there. We were in dug-outs and sheds covered with dirt. The living conditions were quite good for combat. We were in rough structures and not exposed to the weather. Of course, we took turns with our mortar and on guard duty. The forward observation people could see the enemy. We fired our mortars with rationed ammunition and the Germans fired back in small amounts also. Each night after dark an enemy observation plane flew over. We called him "bed check Charlie."

It was quiet for about a week. Then one of the sergeants said that the Germans were moving up every thing they had. This was about a week before the Battle of the Bulge started. One mystery to me is how the sergeant knew what was happening or going to happen and the commanding generals thought it was a big surprise a week later.

I clearly remember December 16, 1944. I wrote a V-mail letter to my parents. I wrote, "It is a beautiful day in Germany. The sun is shining on the snow covered pine trees." I didn't want them to worry as they already had one son missing in action.

That same night I was on K.P. It seemed I was always on K.P. I was sleeping near the field kitchen when, in the middle of the night, it became very light and there was so much artillery aimed at us that the ground shook. It would have gone off any Richter earthquake scale. The shells kept coming for a long time. The next thing I remember was

the sergeant (I think it was Sergeant Duncan) calling us together. He said, "Don't be alarmed, men, but we are going to withdraw."

Up until then I didn't know I knew the 23rd Psalm, but I kept saying it frequently for the next few weeks. It was real life, not just a prayer. The Ardennes was certainly "the valley of the shadow of death." When we crossed the several streams I thought, "He leads me beside still waters." When I wasn't where the shells were landing and exploding I thought, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

I really felt, "I fear no evil, for Thou art with me." I didn't think anything could happen to me. Nowadays when I have a close call on the freeways, I wonder how I could have been so sure nothing would happen to me then. Whether it was faith or being 20 years old, I don't know. Probably it was a combination of both.

The expression there are no atheists in the fox holes was certainly true. All of us prayed. The chaplains moved around to lead small groups in prayer. Their denomination was inconsequential to all.

I do know that everyone who thought they would die in the war did. Everyone who told me they wouldn't come back didn't. I often wondered whether these men had premonitions or whether their preconceived opinions influenced their actions and thereby their fate.

The next thing I knew was that we were firing the mortar in 360°, or a complete circle. Since the 81 mm mortar has a range of about a mile or less, obviously we were surrounded. When the sergeant told us we were surrounded, he also told us not to worry because they would air drop food and supplies. One man asked how we would get our mail. He was serious and not trying to be funny.

During this time, which lasted a few weeks, we moved quite a bit. We slept very little. I remember once in a farm house I was standing up and fell, asleep. I woke up when my M-1 rifle hit the floor. Fortunately, the safety was on and the rifle didn't fire. I had changed my 45 caliber pistol for an M-1 rifle when the heavy stuff started. It was no problem getting the M-1 as they were available along the sides of the roads.

We ate even less than we slept - mostly emergency chocolate ration bars. When we had nothing to eat these sure were good. But we only got one or two of these a day, and not everyday. I resolved never to eat a chocolate bar after the war. To this day I never have.

One day we had the beautiful sight of American tanks coming toward us.

We asked what outfit they were in and they replied, "We're with Patton." I know Patton was a controversial figure, but to me he did no wrong. I am convinced he saved my life and no one could do more for me than that. I understand he moved troops faster than was ever done in military history. I was a benefactor of his record. The bottom line was no longer being surrounded.

I was very hungry when I rode out of our surrounded condition on the outside of one of Patton's tanks. The tank commander gave me two chocolate bars which was an unheard

of luxury. It was difficult to eat them slowly so I wouldn't get sick. It was the 23rd Psalm again, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

We were relatively safe now, but the turning point didn't come until the first clear day. The weather had been very bad - prohibitive for our planes to be flying. On the first clear day the sky was almost black with our planes. I've heard we had 6,000 planes in the air and some of them made more than one trip. It was a sight I'll never forget and, paraphrasing Winston Churchill, it was the beginning of the end, as opposed to the end of the beginning.

Like everything in war, there was a big price. I saw quite a few planes blown up by German anti-aircraft. Some had big white parachutes coming out, some did not. I wondered what the fate of my brother was. His B-17 had been shot down about a year before over the English Channel.

Before the big air action, I and another soldier were given an almost suicidal mission. Our lieutenant told us our troops were moving up on a certain road. It was thought that Germans were parachuting into the area to cause what confusion they could. The two of us had 800 yards of road to cover. The lieutenant said to walk up and down the road and see what we could see and do whatever we thought best. The important thing was to fire our weapons to attract attention if we saw any enemy filtration. It was in the middle of the night, about 0°F with deep snow everywhere. While we were walking along the road, a General in a jeep stopped us and told us to hide behind a tree and not to walk up and down. The other man was ready to do this, but I said, "We can't do our mission behind a tree and he is not my General, so keep walking."

There was another incident where I was checking everyone's identification before crossing a bridge. A car with a Two Star General, a One Star General, a Colonel and a sergeant driver was coming toward us. While the other soldier couldn't decide what to do, I stopped the car. I checked each I.D. card carefully - blue eyes, grey hair, etc. The Two Star General said, "Good work, soldier, you did your job.":

These last two incidents lead to poem written by Private MacMurray,

"When the going gets rough

And the sergeants get tough,

Generals with stars

Lieutenants with bars

Milton takes them

Just as they are."

I believe the worst thing in a war is being shot at on an individual basis. Artillery shells, mortar shells, etc. are bad, but t~cy seem to give you some odds. Also, you can increase your chances by hitting the ground. When I heard the first shells coming at me, I couldn't

move. The same Private Murray yelled, "Duck!" and I always told him, only partly kidding, that he saved my life.

Being shot at by enemy rifle fire is something else. I was shot at at least 5 or 6 times. Most of these times I was silhouetted against the sky. This made me an easy target. I don't know if the Germans were poorly trained with their rifles or weren't motivated. Either way, I am very grateful. I can still hear the bullets going by an unforgettable sound and experience that time cannot erase.

I am glad I never had to shoot anyone with a rifle. It's easier to aim for someone with a mortar. Once I almost fired at two Americans. They didn't know the daily password. I shouted, "Halt!" They heard my rifle safety go off and started yelling that they had been captured by the Germans and escaped. With the M-1 rifle sight aimed, I asked them some questions about Indianapolis. They knew the answers. At that time the Germans parachuted their soldiers dressed as American soldiers behind our lines to cause confusion. The two American soldiers were sure scared and I'm glad the incident ended the way it did.

About four weeks after the Battle of the Bulge started, I had time to take off my shoes. We had been on the move constantly through snow and water. Most of the time my feet were wet. There was no time in the struggle for survival to change into dry socks. Besides, there were no dry socks.

When I took off my shoes my toes were blue. The lieutenant sent me to the field first-aid station. I walked about five miles to get there. The doctor said I had trench feet and must go to the hospital. They insisted on carrying me on a stretcher about 100 yards to the ambulance. After a 5 mile walk this seemed ridiculous. The army recovery technique was to move you from hospital to hospital every few days until they thought you were better, then send you back to combat. I was moved by truck and train frequently for a few weeks and then sent back to my company. Most of the hospitals were in big tents, but one of the hospitals was an old hospital in Paris. All I saw of Paris was a patch of blue sky through the window.

When I returned to combat there was much less action than during the Battle of the Bulge. It was February, 1945. We were very short of personnel. A mortar squad was supposed to have 7 or 8 men. We had two - my buddy Frank LaPenna and myself. One night the lieutenant on the observation post had us zero in on a road crossing. He said the Germans were moving up reinforcements through this road crossing. All night, about every half hour, we fired about 10 rounds staggering the time so our patterns couldn't be determined. That was the hardest I ever worked in my life. Unpacking almost a few hundred shells packed for overseas shipment and arming the shells, not to mention firing them, took every bit of our time and effort. That was the most I ever fired at one time. We must have been successful. Success for a mortar gunner is hitting the enemy before he hits you.

The forward observation post is undoubtedly one of the most dangerous places in combat. The lieutenant must be where he can see the enemy and direct our fire by field telephone. He has to do this without the enemy seeing him, of course.

One of the lieutenants who did this was William Campbell of Ohio. He was one of the people that didn't expect to return. During our farewell party at Camp Atterbury, he told

me he wasn't coming back when I told him we would have a great party after the war. When the Battle of the Bulge started, Lieutenant Campbell's position was being overrun. He gave the command, "Fire on me." I am glad it was another squad that had to follow that order. To me Lieutenant Campbell's sacrifice represents American patriotism at its greatest. I think of him whenever I hear the Star Spangled Banner.

Both before the Battle of the Bulge and afterwards, I was taking a correspondence course in calculus. My calculus book got captured during the Battle of the Bulge. It was stored in my duffel bag 60 miles to the rear of my position. The professor of the University of Wisconsin wrote that he normally didn't replace lost books, but that he would make an exception for me.

When conditions permitted, my friend Corporal Don Hubert, who was

studying Trigonometry, and I would sit together on a log studying. We received some strong comments. Typically, someone would say, "You can get killed, why are you both studying math?" I replied, "If I die, I'll die knowing more calculus, and if I live, I'll do better when I return to college." Don Hubert just smiled. This was typical of Don. Later, after the war, once Captain MacLynch asked me where Corporal Hubert was. I said, "He is flying a kite, sir." I almost got in trouble then until I pointed to the kite in the sky.

The German's mined their dead, typically using Lugers. Once another soldier was going to grab the gun when I showed him the thin wires going to the mine. I saved one life but heard the mine explode a minute later.

I was close enough to hear the guns firing near Malmedy. Later, I found out what had happened there. All the previous action had not prepared me for the massacre that was committed.

We went to the same German town both in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge and near the end of the war. The first time there were no children in sight, the women looked the other way and the old men gave us dirty looks. The second time the children were asking for chewing gum, the women were more than friendly and the old men said, "Nicht Nazi" and told us about their relatives in Wisconsin. It looked like a good adjustment to the times. Our soldiers that had recently joined us didn't believe our description of the first visit.

Well, the war finally ended after we crossed the Rhine River on a Pontoon Bridge courtesy of an Infantry Division whose number I have forgotten but whose efforts I'll always remember.

We were given the job of watching thousands of German prisoners behind barbed wire. We had two soldiers with machine guns on each corner of the enclosure guarding so many men. But they weren't going anywhere anyway. It was strange seeing the men that had caused us and the world so much trouble at close range, almost like a human laboratory. Probably they all thought like the English sailor on the Aquitania that told me, "All I want is a bit o' bread and butter and to be home."

Epilogue

To sum up the 106th Infantry Division experience to me, I would like to quote my Sergeant Jack Spiegel's Christmas Card of last year, "The war we were in has just about gone away. But we'll never forget it. That was Hell on earth and I hope and pray it'll never happen again."

Jack signed the card Old, Old Moe (for Missouri). Jack still calls me the Base Plate Kid (the part of the mortar I carried).

Whenever I think of war I always remember what a Frenchman said. He lived along a river bank near a bridge. Our Air Corps missed the bridge and leveled his house. I asked him how he felt about this and he said, "La guerre est finie mais la misre ne sera jamais termine." (The war is over but the misery will never end.)

I prefer to use one of my grandfather's favorite expressions, "Good or Bad, as long as it was an experience." The 106th Infantry Division was an experience, but it certainly was not a good one. The most positive effect for me was that every other bad experience, viewed in perspective to the war, was not as bad as it seemed. Many times combating life's adversities, I've thought that if I could handle what I did in 1944-45, I can handle this. Someone recently asked me if something would intimidate me. I replied without hesitation, "I haven't been intimidated since the Battle of the Bulge."

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