

MY MEMOIR
IN THE SERVICE
DURING WWII

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My Memoir of Life in the Service during WWII
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The Draft

It was February 2, 1943. I was drafted at age 20 in Detroit. I had been working at the Hudson Naval Ordnance on Nine Mile and Mound in the blueprint department. Our company manufactured the 20 mm Orlekin machine gun and a 37 mm Orlekin model. I reported to the draft board in Detroit for physical assignment. I knew that I was in the Army when they sent me to Camp Custer near Battle Creek.

Camp Custer (Fort Custer)

Camp Custer received all draftees where IQ tests and other criteria were considered in deciding where one would become attached. An interesting fact was a decision that I should be held there until they were able to obtain a pair of Army shoes size 10B. That took 10 days.

When I took my physical I was in one line. At one point I was asked if I had to wear glasses. When I said yes, I learned that I was in a line of those who were 160 pounds and would have become a Marine.

After I finished with physical and IQ tests, they decided that I should go to Fort Warren, Wyoming in the Quartermaster Corps.

Fort Warren, Wyoming

My first exposure to basic training was at Fort Warren, Cheyenne, Wyoming, in the Quartermaster Corps to become one who would work keeping records. My address was Co. H, 16th Regt. QMRTC, February 21, 1943. Most emphasis was on company clerk duties. Really, it was the best assignment in the Army. In addition to keeping records the Quartermaster Corps was responsible for food, equipment, and other special services to maintain an army--most important K-rations.

Our basic training lasted three months and was very similar to infantry basics, which included hikes, calisthenics, rifle range, aircraft identification, picking up cigarette butts, marching, and drill.

Near the end of basics I was informed that my IQ test was high enough that I could apply for OCS (Officer Candidate School). OCS produced "90-day wonders" which in 3 months one would become a second lieutenant.

Becoming an officer seemed to be quite exciting and interesting—especially in the Quartermaster Corps. As one would expect, I went for an interview. I was accepted; however, the officer in charge said that I had a choice. I was also eligible for a new program called ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program).

The ASTP was set up to send qualified soldiers to college for 2 years and then become first lieutenants. It included two choices—medicine or engineering. I chose engineering and went from Wyoming to South Dakota State in Brookings.

South Dakota State (ASTP)

In May 1943, about 200 soldiers (GIs) were at one time added to the student body in a small college in a small town. Needless to say that made a big impact. We were billeted in the women's dormitory (Wenona Hall).

We wore regular uniforms and attended classes in groups of 25. There was a captain named Solem in charge. He worked in military activities when he could. I remember seeing the college campanile, a 50-ft tower, from the midpoint of a 20-mile hike. That's how flat the topography was. Our classes were regular college courses conducted by civilian instructors. Most classes were serious, but one history class was taught by a lady prof, and she could not maintain control. Personally, I felt sorry for her.

I established many friendships while at SDSC. One friend in particular was Gene Sayet—a Jewish city guy from New York. He was a natural comedian who could have become a talk show host if he had the breaks. Outstanding was a show that he produced involving many GIs. He joked good clean fun of our life at SDSC and ASTP. It was called “Army Sets the Pace” drawing from the acronym ASTP. Our friendship resulted in a visit of Gene and family to Barton City after we got home.

Naturally when a softball tournament was organized I became a third baseman. Our team won the championship.

A big change in my Army life came when the ASTP program was closed at the end of one year. Instead of becoming an officer we all were reassigned to the infantry as buck privates. It was a shock! Some of the guys were in the Air Force and would have had their wings had they not joined ASTP. I would have been a second lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps. I saw many grown men cry.

Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri

Transfer from ASTP to the infantry took me to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. Infantry basic training was tougher than what we went through for the QM Corps. More emphasis was made on hand-to-hand combat and true combat experience. We at one time had to crawl through the infiltration course under live fire that was 3 feet above the ground. With a pack on your back you cuddled close to the ground, believe me. In the last week of basics, I was carrying a buddy across a stony area. I stepped on a rock and sprained an ankle. I could barely walk. Thank goodness we took a long train ride to San Luis Obispo, CA for further training. My ankle improved somewhat.

Camp San Luis Obispo, California

The next phase of basic training was to go to Camp San Luis Obispo, CA in 303rd Infantry Division, for amphibious training for action in the South Pacific. I didn't really get complete amphibious training, because when we arrived in California there was the opportunity to try out for the baseball team.

Even though I still had much difficulty in walking I wouldn't tell the coach. I went out to third base and cringed every time I moved. When I started batting practice the pitcher was a lefty from San Diego minor league team who threw the ball which appeared to curve and then come up. I must have closed my eyes because I hit the ball between the outfielders and it must have rolled a half-mile on the flat parade ground. I made the team!

My amphibious training was interrupted by being on the baseball team. I would take regular training with the troops and at noon a jeep would come out to pick me up if I had been on hikes. I was in big company with Jimmy Bloodworth (Tigers), Mel Parnell (Red Sox) and Don Tannehill (White Sox).

When it was time to ship out the baseball players did not have enough amphibious training so we stayed in San Luis Obispo until baseball season ended. It was great because we missed going to the South Pacific. However, I had enough training to be put on assignment in Europe.

An interesting incident happened while I was in San Luis Obispo. During a night exercise we were on an infiltration course and I spotted a major who was observing. Just to show him I was on the ball I got as close as I could before he could see me. As soon as he saw me I yelled the first part of the password. He must not have remembered it so I shot him with blank ammunition. The next morning I was made PFC.

While in California, I was able to visit Hollywood and see the famous "walk of fame" where names are engraved in the sidewalk.

England

In September, 1944, I was shipped by rail to a replacement depot in Boston, Mass. for shipment to Europe. On September 22 I bravely scaled the gangplank for the luxury liner, the USS Mariposa, in Boston Harbor. On the 8th day, we landed in Weymouth, England.

It was ironic that on the lower deck were members of the baseball team and unbelievably on the upper deck was one of my former QM buddies who chose OCS. He was Bill Bainbridge, by this time a second lieutenant.

We traveled to and were stationed at Warminster Barracks in Weymouth, England. I had a chance to see the White Cliffs of Dover en route. We kept busy training and one day I was asked to join a small group to report to a captain. When I arrived he asked me if I

needed glasses. Saying yes, I got the response that I should return to my unit. Because I had fired expert on the rifle range I had been picked to go to sniper school. In the meantime, my unit was shipped out. This was the second time that my glasses changed my direction. My unit had been shipped to the mainland and eventually got shot up badly in the “Battle of the Bulge.”

France

When I finally got assigned to a new unit October 22, 1944, we rode in an L.C.I. (Landing Craft Infantry) #229 across the English Channel to Cherbourg, France. I got seasick and my job was to guard C-Rations. I was so sick I had to lie on my stomach. We landed at Omaha Beachhead in the footprints and bloodstains of many comrades on D-Day. We were shuffled together in mud and pup tents for about a week, then we moved to Cherbourg airstrip awaiting flight for the MTO (Mediterranean Theatre of Operation).

While in Cherbourg, I visited the foxholes on a bluff that the Germans used at the time of our invasion. In one there were some wooden and rubber bullets. I understand these were designed for lateral fire in cases when they shot toward other foxholes. I wish I could have kept them for souvenirs.

The foxholes were near the top of a large bluff that overlooked the beachhead. The Germans had excellent positions for firing at our boys in the invasion, but were soon overmanned.

Italy

The Landscape and Our Situation

On October 30, 1944, we boarded a C-47 and flew to Pisa, Italy. On our way the pilot pointed out the Coliseum and then circled above the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I soon became a member of the 135th Regiment of the 34th Red Bull Division and began 22 months in the good ol’ Infantry.

I still had my PFC rating but was in no way favored above Buck Privates. We all joined combat units. Co. E of the 135th regiment of the 34th Infantry, Red Bull Division at Montecatini needed replacements. It was down to around 30 soldiers. My new platoon had nine, and was led by Sgt. Oris Goodey from Utah.

Memory tells me that the situation was typical and that we replacements were not filled with pessimism. I can’t think of any one of my buddies who thought about the risks and danger. We billeted in an old schoolhouse and waited for our next move.

It was fortunate for me that I became attached to a combat unit in the fall, because we stayed in defensive positions all winter long. We were relatively safe in comparison to being on the offensive. We would spend long periods of time on the front line and then

be relieved for a short period of time in a town. Each time we returned to the mountains we would go to a different location.

Dangers and Close Calls

Our foxholes were located in the mountains south of Bologna in the Po Valley. Our worst danger was when we went on patrols or by stray mortar shells and other artillery. The nine or so of us went on patrols nearly every night but rarely engaged in fighting. Our mission was to defend our position and to be on the alert for enemy activities. A typical patrol would take us as close as we could to the enemy line to listen and observe. Naturally we drew fire at times. One night we advanced into no-man's land and happened to be where some of our own artillery nearly got us. We immediately scampered to the right and the enemy opened up machine gun fire. I remember hitting the ground and seeing dirt on a bank being hit by bullets about 10 feet over my head. We ran from there through an anti-tank minefield. These mines normally were not triggered by the weight of a person. We ran for a barn nearby and just as I was about to enter it, a screaming meemy hit and tore off the corner of the roof. I then ran away from the barn and a white phosphorus shell hit about 30 feet in front of me. All of the white phosphorus blew away from me. I thanked my God for protecting me.

One of our patrols was to check out enemy activity near a small river or creek. This time we had the entire platoon. Our new platoon leader was a recently graduated second lieutenant (90-day wonder) just arrived from the states. We reached the river and could hear enemy talking and vehicles running. Our mission was accomplished. However, our new leader, who was still wearing leggings instead of combat boots, decided to lead us across the river to engage the enemy. As soon as he reached the riverbank he was wounded. If any of us would try to rescue him, we would get shot also. Sgt. McGaffin, second in command, asked us to provide cover and he retrieved him. We never saw him again.

One daylight patrol was set up. Three of us were asked to investigate a building near a railroad track. We went to about 100 yards from the building when a German opened a door and emptied a dishpan. He did not see us, and we returned to our company. The building was soon fired upon.

The tense position in the line included each shadow transforming into a Jerry and jumping out at you from every direction. There were many times when I could have been killed, as explained in the following examples:

One time I was sitting in my foxhole that had sandbags for a top. I heard a thump and a drop of water fell into my hand. A mortar shell was sticking out of the sand. It had not exploded. I thanked some German worker who left the detonator out.

One time I was between two buddies when a machine gun killed my buddy on my left and hit the one on the right. Both shells hit near their hearts. I guess that one bullet missed me on my left and one on my right.

When we were on offense we followed some tanks to take a strong hold. At one point a lieutenant commanded us to spread out and not stay behind the tanks. Soon machine gun fire opened up and my buddy and I saw a ditch so we ran for it. Just as we got in the ditch, a bullet hit a bush, and it dropped on my hand. My buddy said, "I have to go in my pants," to put it mildly.

Another time my buddy Davis Barton from North Carolina and I were in the foxhole. I heard a bullet go just over my head. It just went "pop." I threw myself down. Barton laughed. He said, "Jim, you are cracking up." Then Barton stuck his head up and "pop," he was down more quickly than I was! We both survived. Another one of my buddies was not so fortunate. A mortar shell landed in his lap, and he died instantly.

Everyday Life

It is interesting how we took showers. We would visit a place on some river where water was heated under a tent. We would enter the tent and throw our shirts in one pile and pants in another, likewise underclothes. We would take a nice shower. On our way out we would pick up a different clean set of clothes—all used. If your shirt was too small, you wore it until the next shower.

November 14, 1944, I was visiting with a buddy and I mentioned that tomorrow would be opening day for deer season back in Michigan. He asked me where I lived in Michigan, and I said Detroit, because I had been drafted from there. He said he was from Hubbard Lake, which is less than 10 miles from Barton City.

One day we were moving on foot near a railroad tunnel. It was a nice sunny day, and we took a break in the tunnel. Some of us stayed outside, and I took off my shoes and socks to get some fresh air. Just then a German plane flew by parallel to the tracks about 100 feet from me. I could see the pilot. Everybody ran into the tunnel. Being barefooted, I decided walking on crushed stone would be worse than facing the plane. Evidently, he did not see us. He didn't return.

An important service for the military was the USO. I saw Frank Sinatra. I wasn't even excited about seeing him, because it appeared as though he was appealing only to Bobby Soxers. He performed for two hours and I became a fan. The Andrew Sisters entertained us, and a few weeks later, my folks received a card from them stating that they saw their son Jim in Italy. Of course I gave them my folks' address. One of our boys was kissed by a Jinx Falkenburg and left a big lip stick mark on his cheek. He didn't wash it until it wore off.

The Front Line

There are many interesting things that I remember while on the front line. Some of these experiences are described in the following paragraphs:

One soldier kept putting his foot above the foxhole hoping a shell would land nearby and wound him enough to get a discharge. It didn't happen, but when we were on break, he was cleaning his rifle, and it went off accidentally and shot him in the foot.

In the mountains, our drinking water was obtained by filling our canteen from a small flowing stream along a path. We would make it drinkable by putting in a pill. One patrol, we were walking up the path and saw where the water was coming down. A dead cow was in the path.

Another incident involved a dead cow. A neighboring army unit was occupying a barn. A couple of us visited, and 4 or 5 GIs were playing poker. They were using a frozen dead cow for a table.

I found an M-1 rifle where evidently a GI was killed. I carried it back to my foxhole and consequently earned the nickname of "Two-Gun Jim." Incidentally, I did send an Italian rifle home.

Four of us were in an outlook type of foxhole about 20 feet wide, when a German came up to within 20 feet. He wanted to surrender. At the time of his arrival, we were comparing weapons. One of us had a Browning Automatic Rifle, one a rifle, and for some reason none of us had our own rifle. I am glad he didn't come shooting.

Incidentally, my first prisoner was named Schad. Back in Barton City, my neighbor was Otto Schad.

Since I promised my mother when I was 11 that I would not drink or smoke until I was 21, I did not smoke in the service. One day a buddy asked me why I didn't smoke while I was in combat. Evidently, it helped settle his nerves. My response was that it bothered me more when he would light his match under his blanket, because the light could be seen at night no matter how hard he tried to hide it. At 81, I still do not smoke or drink.

Since Barton and I were alphabetically named, we became foxhole mates. He had a background in North Carolina and did a lot of hunting. Many nights he would go on a patrol on his own after our regular patrol or when we didn't have one. Although I knew that he did it, he never asked me to join him.

Each unit was responsible for its own ammunition. We could not leave ammo or give it to those who relieved us when we went on break. The countryside in Italy has a lot of shells when GIs would empty their rifle clips by throwing shells away to the tune of "She loves me, she loves me not."

When we were on the front line we stayed in foxholes. We had a sleeping bag and used it fully clothed including combat boots. When we were on break, we stayed in large buildings and sometimes schoolhouses. One time we stayed in a barn. When we extinguished our candles, everything was dark. Soon we were among a bunch of rats. I felt something get on my sleeping bag by my feet. Soon it came up to my elbow. I flipped it, and soon it came back, and I flipped it again. It did it several times just like a game. We couldn't get any sleep until we lit candles.

We stayed in a complex once and some civilians were living with us. I remember a bambino about 2 to 3 years old. It shocked me to hear her speak fluent Italian. Then I realized she couldn't speak English.

The Quartermaster Corps did a great job. We always had C- or K-rations every day, even in combat. My memory failed me in being able to describe what was in the C or K, but we had food (dry or canned), candy, cigarettes, and more. I gave my cigarettes away or sometimes sold them.

The End of the War

Early December was spent in extensive training for a major drive scheduled for the last part of December, but it didn't materialize. We had Christmas dinner in Barbarino, and on December 27, we were called to Lucca or Pietra Santa to back up 92nd Colored Division. From there we went back to the front. January 7 to February 11, it was extremely rough. At that time, I became Monty Wooley Jr. I sent a picture of me and my beard to my family, and a few weeks later I received a package of razor blades from my sisters. At this time snow and ice were at its worst. Often the entrance to our foxhole was completely covered with snow.

We spent Easter in Barbarino, a little town. It was nice to see a movie, and we didn't even carry a rifle to the movie theatre. Early April found us ready for a push into the Po Valley. We were in reserve until Bologna fell, and on April 26, were on the point to make a thrust through Parma to Piacenza. It was a rugged day riding trucks, taking prisoners, routing German defenses, and continually going forward despite boys dropping on either side. There were both Americans and Germans lying in eternal slumber on the side of the road and Italian civilians applauding our arrival. While riding in the truck it had to stop unexpectedly for a pisano pushing a cart, and my third finger got caught on the side of the rack. It was skinned and several buddies said I should have gotten the Purple Heart. The medic looked at it, put the skin back, put a bandage on it, and sent me back to the truck. I couldn't even load my rifle.

Never as long as I live do I want to spend another day as horrible as any of those few days. We arrived in Brescia after crossing the Po River at night and the next day we drove to Milan. I was on the first truck into Milan and the 75th German Army Corps surrendered to Major General Charles Bolty, our Commanding General, and the war was officially over in Italy on May 2.

By November 5, and the war in Europe was over, I was transferred to the 88th Division, 350th Infantry because I did not have enough points to return to the States with the 34th.

I remember some of the sites I saw after the war ended. We visited Venice with the water streets. We saw the beautiful cathedral in Milan, which was dubbed the fruitcake. We took a tour to Switzerland, where we had a beautiful trip. Then we hitchhiked to Austria where I bought a Luger, flare gun, and pistol. Unfortunately, these guns were all stolen in later years from our cabin in Barton City.

Seeing Benito Mussolini, also known as *Il Duce* and his girlfriend Clara Petacci hanging by their feet in a small gas station in Milan was a sight to behold.

Rank

On 19th of November 1945, I became sergeant, and on 20th of December 1945, I became staff sergeant. My experience with rank was frustrating. My IQ when I first joined the army was such that I could go to Officers Candidate School (OCS) and graduate as a second lieutenant or go with Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) and after two years become a first lieutenant. I chose ASTP, which would give me two years in college. The program closed after one year and we were sent to the infantry.

The very day that I was interviewed for a field commission, the atomic bomb was dropped, and there was no need for more officers. In 1945, when I was near discharge, I was offered a commission if I would reenlist. I refused. A friend of mine took it, and I was made acting first sergeant until he came home from a furlough. I was discharged as a staff sergeant.

When I was acting first sergeant, two officers visited my office one day. They asked me if I knew the 90-day wonder second lieutenant that got shot on his first patrol. The officers were looking for supportive information for a nomination to present the silver star to this man for bravery. I could not with a clear conscience have him rewarded for possibly having his platoon shot up.

Decorations

I earned Battle Star Southern France ETO ribbon, Battle Star North Appenines End of War, Battle Star Po Valley, Combat Infantry Badge, Good Conduct Medal and Victory Ribbon.

Coming Home

On my return home I boarded a C-47 in Udina on December 15, 1945 and flew to Naples. On December 22, 1945, I boarded an aircraft carrier, the USS Monterey, and landed in Newport News, Virginia, on December 31, 1945. I was discharged on January 6, 1946 from Camp Atterbury, Indiana.

On the USS Monterey flight deck we were able to play basketball and even softball. When the ship would lurch we could miss the net as much as 10 feet. The softball was 10 inches in diameter. We didn't lose a ball.

On board I was made responsible for the service records for 200 soldiers. One day a young soldier asked me if I could show him his record. It was interesting. He came from the South to Michigan and walked into Camp Custer and told them he had been transferred. His records didn't arrive, but they let him stay. Soon he was shipped to Europe. After a few engagements in combat he had enough. He said, "I don't even belong in your army." He had to pay back any money he was paid and he was inducted legally into the army in Italy.

Lili Marlene

One of the greatest feelings I had about the war was the fact that we literally stole the song *Lili Marlene*. I fell in love with the song and then learned that it was written by a German about a German girl waiting for a loved one.

War

There is always the question, "How did you handle the 'kill or be killed' situation?" I felt that if I didn't provide cover and a buddy got killed it would be like killing him. Also, we all shot at machine gun nests or flashes of fire. It wasn't like shooting at deer because you couldn't go over and see if you hit or missed. I was lucky in that most of my combat was in defensive conditions. On offense, we usually had tanks to wipe out opposition.

There seems to be a better way to resolve international problems than war when soldiers on one side fight against soldiers on the other side. It is told that a person had a dream while sleeping during the Cold War. In his dream the leader of the Soviet Union and the leader of the United States agreed on a plan that each country develops a vicious dog. These dogs then would be put in a ring and the winner would win the war. The Soviet Union developed the most malicious German shepherd. It was bad. The Americans worked on a dachshund. When the two were put in the ring, the dachshund tore the German shepherd apart. The Americans were asked how they found such a vicious dachshund. "Well, it took a lot of disguising to get that alligator to look like a dachshund."

It took me a long time to write down my military experiences. As I expected doing it would stir up bad memories. It did and for over a month I would wake up at night thinking about what I could add. It was painful to do but my son, Bob, wanted me to do it, and I love him so much that I had to do it. I am now glad I did.

I am grateful to my granddaughter Stacia Pleasants for typing and editing my memoir. She has electronically stored this document on CD-ROM.