

Ray Erickson

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Interview with Ray Erickson of Rockford, Illinois, about his World War II experiences.

Don Marston is the interviewer and this is being recorded on March 23rd, 1994.

DON MARSTON: When were you born Ray?

RAY ERICKSON: March 30, 1919.

DON MARSTON: Ray is going to tell about his experiences being accepted into the service and his experiences in the war. We'll turn it over to Ray.

RAY ERICKSON: Thank you. Starting out with the drafting of men into the Armed Services, right after the war had been declared all men between the ages of 18 and 40 had to register with their local draft board, which had hastily gotten created. Each man was then assigned a number and all these numbers were tossed into a giant fish bowl type of thing. The numbers were picked from the fish bowl, one by one, in a sequence to determine when you would be called up by the draft board.

As the Armed Services sent their requirements for men to the various draft boards, evidently I wound up with a very, very high number sequence. I would not be called for a long time. Most of my friends were called in two or three months after first registering having had low numbers. They were in the army when they used broomsticks instead of rifles.

My number wasn't called until April of 1944. It was June of '44 before I was processed into the Army. At that time I was working at Woodward Governor Company, what they classified as a vital defense industry and I probably could have gotten deferment on that cause if I had applied for it. By that time it had become quite embarrassing for me to even go down town with my wife. Remember I used to go down town on Saturday nights. I was one of the only young people down town wearing civilian clothes. It became embarrassing. All the Camp Grant boys in town, walking around looking at me, "What's that guy doing?" Anyhow, on June 6, I walked away from my Loves Park house with my wife and

daughter waving a tearful good-bye to me. I took the bus to the Illinois Central Railroad station on South Main. From there on in I was in the hands of the army.

We went to Chicago. From there on north to Fort Sheridan, about twenty miles north of Chicago, a large induction center. Typical of normal procedure, guys from Sheridan area were sent to Camp Grant for induction and guys from Camp Grant were sent to the Sheridan area. At Sheridan we had more extensive physical tests and also mental tests.

I recall a beefy red faced sergeant who was interpreting the results of my mental test saying to me, "From what the results of these tests show, you should be a general but right now Uncle Sam needs privates and that's where you're going". **WHAM** with a rubber stamp. Woodward Governor had always been test happy and I had taken a mental test, quite similar to this one the army aptitude test put out, two or three months previously to the one Woodward Governor had. I had an edge upon on them. I knew a few answers.

They processed us for three days then sent us home for a weekend to report back on such and such a date. After a week-end at home I returned to Fort Sheridan again for four days of army processing and actual swearing in.

We boarded a train at Fort Sheridan one evening and after all night and next day and following night arrived at our destination that was some place in Florida. We were then trucked to Camp Blanding a basic training camp situated in the swampiest snake infested area of Georgia interior, Florida interior, about fifty miles inland from Jacksonville.

As soon as we got off the trucks the camp cadre non-commissioned training officer started to throw the fear of God into us. They soon let us know they were going to do their damndest to make soldiers out of us or destroy us in the process, which they did — made soldiers out of us.

Blanding was very hot and very humid but nevertheless each day started out with a two-mile

speed hike that was walking thirty seconds and running thirty seconds. Each day one or more would collapse during the hike of heat exhaustion then the cadre would drag them to the side of the road and the rest would carry on.

At the end of the hike, breakfast was served if the mess sergeant could witness you swallowing the two required nauseating salt pills. All meals were hectic but breakfast was the worst. The food was served family style, bowls on the table and the hillbillies (I don't know if I should say that) who comprised most of the company seemed never to have eaten before. If you didn't get your milk or cereal before one or two seconds had passed then forget it. Some hill-billy had it. This happened every day like that.

Daytime was full of endless close order drills, calisthenics, and stupid classes. We would sit on the ground for all these classes. A few minutes after they were over some lieutenant would come around with an eight-foot rattler he had just shot in the area where we had been sitting. I worried more about the coral snakes, much more poisonous than rattlers and much harder to spot being only twelve to sixteen inches in length.

The cadre treated us all like we were idiots and of course some of us were. We had a lot of guys from South Carolina and Alabama to come in. Most of these people were illiterate. In my hut were six men. Only myself, and a little Italian guy from Chicago, could read or write. I was elected to read and write the letters for the other four guys and I suppose someone else did the same at the other end.

After six weeks we were allowed weekend passes and I think I went once into Jackson and then once to St. Augustine. The South Carolina boys headed home and then always returned with their bottles of "white lightning". This was way before my drinking days. One swallow of this stuff it would knock me out for the night. The final week of basic training consisted of what the army called bivouac. That was living out in the open more or less off the land. The first shovel of dirt that I turned over when starting to dig my foxhole revealed dozens of king

snakes from two to thirty-six inches in length, harmless, but nevertheless they did not make it pleasant sleeping. To make things worse, the next day a hurricane struck Florida and we spent the rest of the week trying to keep warm and dry. When basic was finished, twelve weeks that is, we got a ten-day furlough to return home before going on to the next camp. However, some stupid clerk had overlooked the fact that I needed glasses installed in my gas mask. This was very upsetting to me at the time but it probably was a lifesaver. Kept me from getting to Europe in time to get caught in the Battle of the Bulge. In that battle everyone in Company G of the 79th Division was either killed or captured. But for that clerk's mistake, I might not be here taping this record.

After ten swift days at home I was to head for Fort Meade, Maryland, a gathering spot for troops heading overseas. My father came down to see me off at the train station in Chicago. It was good to see him.

My only memory of the three-day stay at Fort Meade [is] a record of the Inkspots singing "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall". My barracks was next door to the canteen and soldiers were arriving and leaving all hours of the day and night. The canteen never closed.

Then north to Camp Miles Standish outside of Boston. The first night there they bussed us into Boston. I wound up with some guy that seemed to stick to me like glue. I cannot recall his name. Anyhow, I went to a fancy restaurant and ordered their turkey dinner. Having had one or two drinks before hand, I could not finish my meal. I left part of a huge drumstick on my plate. Many were the times in Europe when I longed for that delicious drumstick setting on that plate back in Boston.

The second and last night at Standish I and this same nut were called up for guard duty at the paymaster's office. The Army always paid wages in cash. This being the night before payday the office had a lot of cash on hand. We were given Thompson sub machine guns but not really given much in the line of instructions as how to use the guns. In the wee hours of the morning,

I got curious and took off the safety forgetting that I still had my finger on the trigger. I stitched a hole in the door up to the ceiling. That thing just rose before I could shut the damn thing off. The lieutenant Officer of the Day came in. He was ready to kill me. The only thing that saved me he said was the fact that I was shipping out to Europe that day and they needed live bodies over there.

That morning they trucked us to the dock crammed us into the ship and after a few hours of useless waiting, we sailed out on the calm harbor. Before we left the harbor I got seasick and I remained so for twenty-four hours of the next ten days it took us to get to France.

This was a large ship. It had formerly been a passenger ship on the South American run but now all holes, dancing holes, all swimming pools, etc. had been converted to hammock strung bunk holes. My bunk was four flights down the lowest hold and I was second from the floor in a tier of seven high bunks. Being this low made be very vulnerable to splashes when the guys above me leaned out of their bunks and vomit which happened day and night.

The next morning going up the deck I could see literally hundreds of ships of all sizes and descriptions. We had joined a convoy during the night and this was a very thrilling sight to see. All the troop hauling ships had Navy men manning the anti-aircraft guns on board and one of them even told me the ships ___?___ was continually circling the convoy and darting in and out of the perimeter were Navy destroyers. The second night out the destroyers began dropping depth charges. The noise that came through the hull and the vibrations was tremendous. Evidently they either got the sub or scared them off because we never lost a ship in the convoy.

The next morning a hurricane struck. The next following three days was up and down, roll left, roll right, tempers growing ___?___. It is impossible to conceive the power of the sea unless you have seen it. Also impossible these metal man made ships could stand up to the battering the hurricane gave it. The first day of the storm we were not allowed to go on deck. It abated some

the second day so we took turns spending some time on deck lying flat on your back. On the upper most deck was a place that seemed to ease my rotten stomach the most as the ship plowed through the storm. You could see the sea fifty to seventy feet above your head and the ship would roll 30° to the right and then to the left. You could see the water fifty feet below. Almost impossible for that damn ship to stay afloat. At this stage a lot of us didn't really care.

That night with typical army fore sight, they served spaghetti for the evening meal. The cooks would slam the stuff in the mess kits and soon we walked to the line the ship would roll 30° to the left and we'd hit the deck with the spaghetti flying through the air. The mess hall was completely covered with spaghetti with GIs sliding helplessly back and forth upon it.

After ten days of this nonsense we arrived at LaHavre, France in the dark, of course. We then proceeded to load about two thousand men into landing barges that could not possibly hold one thousand for the trip to the shore. Being the smallest of the pack, I literally thought I might be smothered to death but some how I managed to breathe enough to sustain me 'til we arrived at the dock. I cannot recall how we spent the remainder of that night but the next morning they marched us a short distance to a railroad yard where three or four tracks of French box cars were standing. "Hit the box cars" they shouted and we all headed for what looked to be the most sturdy of these little cars.

Another typical army ___?___ of Othe week, someone got the great idea of scrounging up wood throughout the railroad yard. We all rushed out to get any type of wood that looked burnable and proceeded to get a fire going in the corner of the boxcar. These cars were all wooden as was the floor but we did not have a furnace. The floor would have to do. This fire lasted two days before it burned through the floor. Then we just moved to a different corner and start another fire. It was wintertime in January.

This turned out to be a three-day and night trip. We seemed to be stopping more than we were going. It was obvious the army was able to con-

duct a fighting war without this bunch of raw recruits. The strange part about our railroad trip was that the guys in our box car ___?___ with me.

This was a “C” ration-trip a lousy can of cold stews. Any time we stopped near a village, we rushed there searching for better or anything else they might have to eat. The villagers were always happy to see us but they seldom had any food for us. I looked in one ___?___ it was literally ankle deep in “C” ration cans and “C” ration boxes. I could not imagine how they’d ever get those tracks cleaned up. At the end of the line, ours that is, we were trucked someplace up in the ___?___ mountains to a repo-depo, replacement depot. This was a gathering place for the new members to be distributed to the company to replace the casualties. My vague memory of the repo depot was a big guy continually striding around shouting how tough we had been at the Anzio Beachhead and what he was going to do to the Germans the next chance he got. Believe it or not, this lovable bantam wound up as an ammo bearer in my mortar squad. His name was Wimpy and he came from some place in New York state. I did not learn his name until forty-five years later, Raymond Jennings, when I tracked him down in Styrevant New York. He was always good for a laugh and maybe sympathy. As I said, the boxcar boys and I ended up in G Company the 314th Infantry, the 79th Division and then luckily in the weapons platoon. I say luckily because the weapons platoon was always fifty to one hundred yards behind the rifle platoon the guys that really had the ___?___ of the enemy.

The weapons platoon had small mortars, 60mm and small machine guns, thirty caliber. This was as compared to the weapons Company "H" that had 81mm mortars and fifty caliber machine guns. Back of them some place was artillery with 90s and 105s. While our artillery had the edge in caliber size, the German eighty-eight caliber artillery had a superior muzzle blast and that is what caused the most destruction. There 88s were devastating. When I joined G Company they were stationed in a farmhouse that was back of the front line. This was mid southern France at the edge of the [Auvergne] forest. G Company was in reserve at the time. That night

a fellow named Arthur Cubadore(?) and myself were appointed to stand guard duty. For some reason this was not a regular two on and two off duty. Cubie and I were on guard all through the night. We could hear the cranking of tank treads. Then airplanes dropped flares that really lit up the countryside. Shortly thereafter Sergeant Pittman our platoon First Sergeant came around and told us the tanks we heard were German and the flares dropped also were German. He also told us not to worry. We were well over a half-mile back of the front lines. Our only trouble would be if they dropped paratroopers, which they did. As this was both Cubie’s and my first introduction to war we developed a close bond between us that lasted throughout the entire conflict.

Sergeant Pittman was a small guy, just a shade taller than I. He was a regular army guy having been in for twelve years already. He seemed to be very well in charge of himself and all the platoon business. The next morning he gathers together for introduction to our new platoon leader Lieutenant Henry Cullom. The lieutenant was a raw recruit just as we were but he presented a very competent man. I think we remained in this area for two or three days before they started us north by foot and by truck; mostly by foot. The rain was constant and the mud was deep. So along this march I threw away my overcoat and also my gas mask. At this point I had become only a foot soldier needing only a mess kit, rifle and shovel and my particular of the mortar, that base at that time. Everything else was useless (I don’t know if I should tell this or not)

Here I can begin a chronological account the reason being that I had written the following down about thirty years ago when it was fresh in my mind. The paper had become yellow with age so I am duplicating it here.

February 23rd, 1945: After our truck driver had dropped us off expressing his great happiness that we were heading forward while he was heading backward we stormed up the road to the first farm house, cut across the field and back to the barn. I was wearing a fur pilot jacket beneath my field jacket and the sun was shining. It became hotter than hell. I was sweating profusely

carrying a forty-five pound mortar base plate, my nine-pound M-1 rifle plus everything else I owned. The field was full of dead cattle and only a couple of live goats wandering around bleating plaintively.

Word was sent back to walk in the footsteps of the guy ahead of you, as there was danger of land mines. Being the fore guy I was #1 in the column. I can't recall of any more terrifying than the thought of you might be walking through a mine field. With every step your imagination ran wild. Between my sweating, the weight I was carrying thinking about land mines, it was not a pleasant afternoon stroll.

About one-half mile further on the lieutenant sent the machine gun squad straight ahead then led the mortar squad to the right around a small barn into a small patch of woods. Climbing through a wire fence, I stumbled and the edge of the mortar base plate hit me in my stomach driving what little wind I then had out of me with a rush.

Beyond the woods we dragged ourselves through a knee deep swamp for about five minutes and then emerged on the edge of a cleared field with a full view of a village about two or three hundred yards ahead. Sergeant Pittman and the Lieutenant took off running towards the village and beckoned us to follow. Sergeant Powell, my squad leader, took off running following them and I turned to Wimp and said, "Stay here Wimp until I catch up with them. I can't try to run now. I'm too winded". He nodded his head and I started off. I got about half way to where the Lieutenant was crouching and all of a sudden the war started for me. I heard the "zing" of bullets around me and then the crack of the rifles from the village and I suddenly realized that those guys were shooting at me. At this point I was not the least bit frightened but I did quicken my pace somewhat heading for a small screen of shrubs where Sgt. Powell was burying his face in the mud. Powell was visibly shaken and he told me to take the barrel from him and set up the mortar. By the time I got that completed, our four ammo bearers had arrived to our spot. The bullets were snapping through the brush around and over us so heavy

nothing better to do than imitate Powell and bury our face in mud also. Bill Montgomery was a platoon runner for the event He carried the walkie-talkie. He was about twenty feet and he shouted, "Hey, Erick, I'm getting a blow by blow account on the talkie and the Krauts are pulling back across the river".

Each company man __?__ their high explosives and sent in smoke to cover the riflemen that are moving into town. Suddenly Sergeant Powell lifted his face from the ground and screamed, "That's coming in". A second later the shell hit with a tremendous noise about fifty yards or so to the rear. I thought if that's artillery Coming at me, it's not really too bad. How wrong could you be? Above the constant crack of the small arms and the whining of bullets the high pitched scream of the aviates started again. This one landed somewhat closer to the rear. They kept coming in each time landing nearer. By now I'm getting scared. In fact, I'm terrified. Each one of those 88 shells seemed to be heading right for the middle of my back. The few seconds between their whine and their landing seemed to be an eternity. Here comes little Sergeant Pittman walking along gathering up some __?__. "It seems like you guys are pinned down". The lieutenant was following Pittman. You could tell he was just as scared as we were but little Pittman behaved as if he was going to a Sunday school picnic.

When the artillery shelling stopped, Lieutenant Cullom told us to withdraw back across the field about a hundred yards from a small creek bed and set up the mortar there. Sgt. Powell took off like a bat out of hell leaving the mortar, his jacket and his carbine for the rest of us to carry. I broke down the mortar, picked the barrel and gave the base plate to Wimp and told the rest of the squad to head back to the creek. I was the last guy to leave the spot. I was still too tired to run. Hunched over I made the safety of the creek bank. By then Sgt. Powell had become useless frantically trying to dig a foxhole and sobbing loudly and shaking like a leaf in the wind.

Collum saw him and told me to take over the squad using Cubie for the assistant gunner and he would get us another ammo bearer tomorrow.

He had me set up the mortars then and await further instructions.

I started to dig a foxhole near the creek bank. Then I was so tired I seemed to spend more time resting than digging. Now and then an 88 shell would come in not landing too close to us and Sgt. Powell would dig like a mad terrier. As the shells kept coming closer, he curled up in what little hole he had and implored me to dig around him. That night I got the distinction of being the first man to dig a foxhole around another man.

Thirty to forty minutes later I got both mine and Powell's foxhole completed looking forward to a very miserable night of sleeping in the mud and wondering if the Krauts would be counter attacking. As usual the walkie-talkies were not working. The company runner come around and told us the village had been taken plus ___?___ we were to move on in to town. Somehow in the dark we found a house complete with mattresses and blankets. Fantastic compared to sleeping on that muddy creek bed. Cubie and I volunteered to the first shift of guard duty. He'd go in the front and I'd go in the back. Before entering the village we had been warned to be on the lookout for booby traps. I was quite relieved to get out of the house for a while. By now it had begun raining and then turned into sleet. The snow and cold wind. I had now wished I had not thrown away my overcoat. I had been at the post for a short while when orders came down to dig in the mortar for a counter attack. Digging in the mortar means a hole about four feet in diameter and two or three feet deep, one tough job for a very worn out little soldier with a small shovel. I had never, never ever experienced such tiredness before that. I soon found out was one of the worst things about war. The eternal exhaustion was almost as bad as the constant fear of death.

Walking all through the day carrying such a heavy load, digging holes and never getting over two hours of uninterrupted sleep besides worrying about those other bastards out there trying to kill me.

February 24th, 1945: this day, our first in the village dawned raining and cold. We spent the whole day just loafing around and looting

through what dresser drawers we could find that had not already been cleaned out. It seemed that Gerry had taken most everything of any value. We did get a look at the Ruhr River with a very quick ___?___ looked quite deep and approximately fifty yards across.

We had only occasional 88 shells dropping in throughout the day. Of course, they new the exact range because they had been living there only the day before but in spite of that, we did not have any casualties.

That night or the next morning Wimpy awakened me at 2 a.m. as I was going on guard duty with Russ Osborn(?) another mortar squad leader. It was dark as pitch and awfully quiet and Russ and I got the post on the edge of some nearby woods. Russ and I were worrying about one of the 35th Division men had told us early that evening about Gerrys had sent a combat patrol in the village a few nights ago and they had taken town from the 35th. The 35th Division is the one we replaced on the front line in this sector. The 35th had taken this town twice before and twice before had been kicked out again by the Krauts. Evidently this was ___?___ ground fighting defense on the Ruhr River. Our guardship was uneventful. When we returned to our house at 4 a.m. the lieutenant was there and told us we'd have to spread out the platoon. The captain did not want too many men concentrated in one location. That meant another search by Max for booby traps. We found none but did find a cellar with only six inches of water on the floor. We also found two beds that stood high and dry in the basement so my squad had good sleeping. Remember two out of six guys were on guard duty so we only needed sleeping room for four. The only thing we took off is our shoes and some guys did not even do that.

February 25th 1945. Montgomery ___?___ and Cubie ___?___ 04:00 hours. It was our turn to go on guard. We spent two cold miserable hours with only a few flares coming down on the German side of the river and some of their aviates dropping in around us just as though they wanted us to know they were still over there. Coming off guard at 06:00 we awakened the rest of the platoon broke open our K-rations made

some instant coffee, ate our biscuits and began feeling a little more human again. About 7:30 the lieutenant came around and said we could move closer to the river so there goes our ___?___ and ___?___ beds. A land tree had been felled across the road. Probably as a tank stopper and a dead Kraut was lying back of it. He must have been hit by automatic fire because his chest was a mass of dried bloody holes. Such a young man. Such a waste. About a hundred yards or so to the left in a field were the bodies of two young GIs, casualties of mine ___?___ They could not be removed until the field had been cleared of the mines.

We had a hill billy named Moran with us. I think he was from Alabama. He was a member of the machine gun squad. He smashed his rifle butt into the dead German's mouth and removed some gold teeth that he had knocked loose. The last time I saw this cold tough guy was about one week later. He had crawled underneath a tank and was screaming for help ___?___ at that time. We went about half way through the village when Lt. Colman had directed to what looked like a combination store and a house. He told us to dig in the mortar in the back yard and make sleeping arrangements. Colman moved in what must have been the kitchen. We moved in the hall across from that. The house had been ransacked by Germans but Wimpy and I were able to find five mattresses on the second floor and we dragged them down to the first floor. Then we even managed to find clean sheets in some drawers upstairs. We could make up the beds just like the comforts of home. The sheets on our room did not stay clean very long as Sgt. ___?___ came tramping in all over them. He never removed his shoes. ...Joe wanted was tap, ale a just retreat.

February 26th, 1945: This morning Wimpy scrounged through the town and brought back two chickens for us. We had a delicious lunch. Burned chicken and dry K-rations. Bob ___?___ found a quaint pipe curved stem and all and ___?___ the bowl and smoke all the time breaking up cigarettes in the bowl. Wimp and I broke up some rifle cartridges and managed to sneak the pipe and pour some powder in the bowl ___?___

right in his face the next time he lit the pipe. I can remember that ___?___.

February 27th, 1945: The previous night they told us that the 35th Division was going to launch an attack across the river at a point a few miles south of us. We were to send over a smoke screen also some high explosive as a diversion tactic to take the pressure off. Before the day was over we got the news that the 35th Division had crossed and met little resistance. The Krauts had again pulled back towards the Rhine River. The Rhine ___?___ a big one. After we crossed that we had ___?___.

The army expected lot stiffer resistance once we got into Germany after our fake smoke attack we loaded our trucks and headed north winding up in Belgium a couple of days later. When the army moved up to Belgium it never moved in a direct line the fastest way. There were always stops and delays to keep this route ___?___. We were billeted, my squadron, at a Belgium farm ___?___, taking our meals with the family. I suppose the army gave these people rations to cook for us and they treated us like kings. It was at this time ___?___ I learned that my brother Wayne was nearby in ___?___ about forty-five miles away. I asked for and received an overnight pass to visit him. I hitchhiked to ___?___. When I got to his outfit, I found that he had taken a jeep and driven to my company area. Wayne was a driver of some colonel at headquarters and had the use of a jeep at any time.

The guys in his outfit made me very welcome and they got in touch with my company and sent Wayne on his way back. Wayne and I had never been too close but still it was an emotional meeting concerning the place, time and events going on there.

The next day Wayne drove me back to my company. One of these days these days he drove the company out into the country and showed us thousands of landing crafts stacked up ___?___. That was our training for crossing the Rhine River looking at those landing crafts.

The good times ended. Then came the time to move to the Rhine River. We got to a point

about a half-mile from the river I found out later. Then we were instructed to dig in for the night. I dug a hole about three-foot deep with a standing ledge around it, a real classic model of a fox-hole. I spent the night sitting on the ledge sleeping fitly until our artillery barrage opened up sometime early in the morning. Later on in life I learned that this barrage was a large piece of pipe that had never been used in a war before. The barrage lasted for about an hour and I was bouncing up and down in my foxhole like a rubber ball even though the artillery was a half a mile in the rear. The concussion was tremendous. If it was so bad on this side where the shells were ___?___ what must it have been on the other sided where the shells were landing. It was impossible for us to be _____?_____ on the far side of the river. We found out later though that just went in the (inaudible)

SIDE 2

To the landing boats were waiting for us. We piled in them and crossed the river with nary a shot being fired at us. We could hear some Ber-man “burp” guns in the distance ahead of us. That was all ___?___. A “burp” gun was a hand held machine gun that fired so fast it sounded like an elongated burp. We did see some dead cattle in the field but only one dead German soldier. Now we are across the Rhine River heading into the highly industrial Ruhr River Valley, the heart of the German’s industrial section. I can recall one day coming over a hilltop seeing a vast panorama of factory rubble and most everything in rock piles and just the smokestacks standing. So many smokestacks it was almost impossible to believe. The big picture was the ___?___ where I was to sweep to the east on the northern border where General Patton’s Third Army went east on the southern border where of the valley. Both armies to meet and encircle the final majority of the German army. The plan worked and the Krauts were running by the hundred of thousands. Of all those thousands my little squad only captured one prisoner. We got him as he rode up to his home on a bicycle starting his furlough. We had moved forward so slickly the Germans did not know how far forward we were. We just stood on the stoop of this guy’s apartment and he dove into our arms. His

mother had a fit until Sgt. Rogers consoled her with the fact her son was now out of danger. He was probably going to the United States and surely return home at the end of the war. Sgt. Henry Rogers came to ___?___ after Sgt. ___?___ went back to the hospital. Rogers had been put in charge of all three-mortar squads as he had been in experienced combat. Rogers had been born in Hamburg, Germany but he had left home as a young teenager and wound up in Brooklyn. He had left two brothers behind in Hamburg and so supposed at any time he would be fighting against his own brothers. Rogers had a lot of guts and of course was invaluable as a translator. From then on we were always moving forward at a fast pact sometimes walking, sometimes riding in trucks, sometimes tanks. Most of the time we were walking. Even though we had the Germans on the run they still shot back and they still had those dreaded 88s.

As I say, from now in I have no real chronological memory as when these incidents happened. I just remember that the occurred.

One evening we came upon Hitler’s autobahn the four lane super highway that was built to facilitate troop movement. Adolph got credit for inventing this concept of road. It was an unusual for us to see. We crossed this and entered a thick woods. After walking through the woods for about a quarter mile we came to a fairly large brick farmhouse set in a clearing. We moved into this house. Right away we heard the clanking of tank treads and looking out the window openings we saw an American tank moving into firing position about a hundred yards down the farm lane. Then we heard the “F” Company Commander on our walkie-talkie directing the tank to open fire on this farmhouse he’d seen the Krauts just move into. As per usual when you really need it our damn walkies would not send; just receive. The shells and the machines gun bullets and tanks started crashing through the brick walls and we were all hugging the floor. One shell crashed through the wall and hit ___?___ on the shoulder. Thank heaven for American “goof offs for making dud shells. It didn’t explode. At that time I was laying right next to ___?___. Lt. Cullen ordered us to crawl back to the barn. We would have the house between the

damn tank and us. We did but the trouble there was that three or four horses were still tethered in their stalls. I wound up with my head less than a foot from the back feet of a very skittish horse. You lie there and get trampled to death or you stand and get fifty caliber machine gun bullets through you. The Lieutenant solved my predicament by directing me to take Pop our way back to battalion headquarters and have that tank called off. Pop was an older—I think 39—Mexican guy that had joined us just a few days back. Pop and I crawled on our bellies out of the barn and through the woods with machine gun bullets clipping over our heads all the time. We finally got out of range and we stand up and run. We came to the autobahn at a place where another road crossed over it. Underneath the viaduct great was a doorway. By now it was pitch black dark. Thinking the battalion might be in there, we went in to discover hundreds and hundreds of German civilians huddled inside for protection against the artillery dropping all around. The only light we had was by matches. It would have been very simple for the people to disarm us and kill us. By that time I think they were very glad to see the war coming to an end and they were welcoming American soldiers. We left a minute later back through the factory rubble until we finally found the battalion. But by the time we'd gotten there though I walked inside the ___?___ function and the tank had been called off. That left Pop and me having to make our way back through the dark to find our platoon.

We did get back to the farmhouse but our platoon had moved on so we spent the night in the farmhouse planning to find the rest of them the next morning. Pop and I were sleeping two hours on and two hours off. ___?___ side arm I still am ashamed of.

Each soldier had what they called sulfite pack that was carried on their belt. This contained a medication to swallow and also a paste to apply to your wound. This was a preventative for shock one of the big killers of wounded men.

We were walking in a deep ravine headed for the front. Another line of men was walking the opposite way returning from the front. That's how

the army replaced troops on the front line, one for one. This guy came limping back asking everybody for their sulfite packet. He'd been hit and was afraid he might not be able to make it back to the aid station. I was one of the guys he asked and I refused him thinking I might soon need that pack in the front line myself. I'm very ashamed of myself for not helping this guy out. He was a walking wounded but I will never know if he made it back okay to the company station.

A long ___?___ at Pine Lake suddenly this airplane with pontoons came zooming over our cottage and lands on the lake. It taxied to the first island when a girl in a green bathing suit went out and went swimming. About thirty minutes later it taxied up there and roared down the lake taking off. A mystery. The reason I mentioned this is because it brought back memories of "Bed Check Charlie". Every night a lone German airplane would come flying over our area and once in a while he would drop one little bomb. I say little because it was a one hundred or two hundred pound bombs. You cannot imagine the noise and concussion from that one bomb. I now blamed "Bed Check Charlie" for my hearing loss later in life. When our air force had those thousand plane air raids dropping one or two thousand-pound bombs, the havoc they reaped cannot be imagined.

My most frightening experience comes to mind now. We somehow wound up—must have been either army camp or else a camp for displaced workers. I think the former because I cannot imagine them building their own bomb shelters for just the workers. It had small wooden shacks all over the place and long concrete structures that protruded about three-foot above the ground. As per usual we did not stop until it nearly became dark so you could not get a really good lay of the land as to what surrounded it. Lt. Cullom ordered me to take my squad to one of the huts on such and such perimeter directed the other squads likewise. These wooden juts were about ten-foot square with dirt floors. We were at least out of the elements for sleeping and it was raining again. I volunteered to take the first shift to guard again not being a hero, just trying to get my turn over with. I stumbled through the dark

toward what I supposed to be the enemy direction 'til I came to one of these long concrete structures probably fifty yards from the hut. I had no sooner gotten there than all hell broke loose. Mortars came dropping and heavy mortars. Being a 60mm mortar man myself, I could tell these were the 81mm mortars and the mortar shells gave no advance warning. **BANG!** They just hit. I retreated to the shelter of the concrete bunkers and started to descend the steps that were built into the opening. I got to the second step and hit water, the third step more water, the fourth step still more water. The fifth step put me in water up to my hips and my head was still sticking out of the opening where the shells were dropping. I had two choices. I could go down into the bunker and drown. I had no idea how deep these bunkers were or I could stay above and get my head blown off. I chose to stay above the water drawing my head inside the bunker as much as I could. It must have been dozens and dozens of mortar shells they dropped and then, of course, I knew what was going to follow. The Krauts were going to send in their infantry to follow up the mortar barrage. Suddenly the barrage stopped. What to do. I'm out there in the dark and all alone. I can fight with my life and probably get killed or I can raise up my hands and surrender when they get here and maybe stay alive. I was up to my hips in water and completely unnerved by this horrible mortar barrage and all alone and don't want to die alone. If I'm going to die I thought it would be so much better to die with some friends of mine than to die alone in the dark foreign place. The war cannot go on much longer. I didn't want to die so close to the end so I ran back to the hut where my squad was. To hell with the outpost. I have never never in my life been so glad to see friends again even though they were just as scared as I had been.

I think then that we decided to fight back and in a group there is much more strength. Alone you are nothing. To solve our dilemma nothing happened and later on a company runner came around to see if there were any casualties in the accidental barrage of "H" Company. Their range had been too short. I think that I forgot to mention that Wimpy had been wounded in the "F" Company attack on us he being the only of that

escapade. It is amazing that "H" Company did not kill or wound half of our platoon.

After that tough night we moved forward passing an American tank burned out with two blackened bodies protruding from the hatch. After that I never envied the protection the tankers had over us. We moved to a farmhouse that had a patio in the back. It was about twenty feet square with a wall around. My squad and ___?___ squad was sitting there on the patio probably talking about the price of oats when suddenly heavy mortar started dropping in again. We hit the ground behind the two-foot wall. Before we could do that, one of the guys was hit. He got what we called the million-dollar wound. That was a wound that would not kill you but would get you out of the front lines back into a safe hospital. I have no idea of this guy's name and the shrapnel hit him in the top of his upper leg, lots of blood and pain but not any danger. We, of course, congratulated him on his million-dollar wound and became very happy until the order came for us to move on. We had not been able to find a medic for him so we had to leave him alone in this little place. We promised him we would send back a medic. I remember he was very frightened when we left. Moving on I recall we went through a large city riding on tanks just like the movies waving our rifles in the air and shouting.

The sobering effect though was when we began to see so many dead civilians lying upon the sidewalk. Then you realize how horrible war really is. The tanks dropped us off at the edge of a large city. From there we were once again infantry, sliding our way through the mud. Need I say it was again raining? Now we were going up hill and down hill. These hills are damn near straight up and down. We dragged ourselves up and then hill literally slid down the other side. This went on for about thirty minutes. Then we came over the top of a steep hill to see the panorama of the Ruhr River Valley before us. Along the river were hundreds of factory buildings at least the rubble of former buildings. High above the valley was a very large mansion. We entered the first one we came to. A beautiful room with light colored carpeting or flooring, huge enough for a baby grand piano in the corner. A well-

dressed gentleman came walking down the curved stairway very very nervous as he welcomed us into his house. Our boots and also our uniforms were covered with mud that we tracked into his house. Immediately David ___?___ sat down at the piano and started playing. This was the first indication that we had a musician in our midst. I hate to think about it but the only heat in the place was a fireplace. We kept that going by breaking up the high priced furniture in that room. This area must have been the suburbia of all the executives that worked at ___?___ the largest factory in the Ruhr Valley.

The next morning as we were sitting on the large deck overlooking the hills we heard the news about FDR's death. It really saddened all of us. We knew that he had been the leader of our country during the war and had not been able to see its conclusion.

I thought I was about done but now a memory jogged. This happened earlier in the day when I told you about the American tankers and they're burned our tank. We had been advancing when suddenly we were stopped by a machine gun nest and everyone was pinned down. The lieutenant had me set up the mortar in the back-ground of a two story-house and he would direct my fire from there. He called down the range and elevation directing et cetera and we fired off three rounds. Then he gave me a new range and we dropped three more shells into the barrel. That did it right into the bomb crater the machine gun had been firing from.

Later on when we passed this crater I saw two teenage dead boys lying amongst the wreckage of the machine gun. Nothing I like to remember but what else could I do. Many of my friends could have been killed if my mortar shells did not spot them. One of these days as we were advancing through the rubble of bombed out factories near Essen a news photographer took my picture. Of course, I never saw the picture but I thought it was very brave of him to be that close to the front without having to be there. Shortly thereafter I was walking through this ___?___ with Pop following me when bullets began zinging in around us. Pop shouted, "A sniper. I'll get that bastard". He took off running

toward the block of apartment buildings that was still standing off to the right. He turned saying, "I got the bastard" and I guess he did because the bullets had stopped. Later on I was walking some ahead of the rest of my squad and aviates came in like mad. I ran to the nearest bomb pit and jumped in only to land right next to a German soldier. Scared the hell out of me until I realized he was dead. At this time we were approaching a famous Shrinehertz, a ball bearing factory, one that the Air Force had bombed so many times. However for about one-half mile leading up to the factory the ground was covered with bomb craters. The closer to the factory we got the less were the bomb craters. The place must have been surrounded with hundreds of flak ___?___. The air boys must have dropped their bombs a little bit early and got the hell out of there. In fact the factory was practically intact. Carrying on moving forward again ___?___ just before dark toward another small village we came to a creek about twenty feet wide and the engineers were building a bridge over it. There were three or four tanks sitting there waiting for the bridge to be built so they could cross. This is the place I saw that tough guy, Moran, lying on the ground underneath the back of one of the tank crying for somebody to help him. That ___?___ was the last I ever saw of him. The infantry doesn't wait for bridges to be built. We waded the creek. It was only about knee deep. Meanwhile the engineers had search lights going, machinery running full gear and 88 shells were dropping all around them as they worked. This was the first time I'd ever seen the job these guys did. I thought it was tremendous. As I waded, the creek one of them shouted down at me, "Go get those aviates, Shorty, they're getting on my nerves." Continuing on to the village I recall standing in the door of a house three or four steps up from the street getting some protection from the artillery shell come in. Suddenly a shell hit between me and Bob Margas who was in the street following me. We charged up those steps at the same time knocking both of us into the house. No damage done to me though. Just knocked the wind out of me temporarily. This must have been sometime in late April. The days and nights seemed to blend all together to me not ___?___. Sometime around this area we were encountering less and less resistance be-

cause of masses surrendering. We had been moving all day through rubble strewn factory buildings huge bomb craters and late in the afternoon were stopped by machine gun fire. Lt. Cullom had Makenral set up his mortar in a large bomb crater in an effort to knock out the machine gun placement. The rest of us along with the riflemen found refuge in a huge sewer tunnel near by. This must have been about twenty feet in diameter. It had concrete benches built along the sides. The Germans must have used it as a bomb shelter for the factory workers. It had a ladder built along the wall to descend into. We had only been in there a few minutes when an 88 shell smashed down real close. Engler came scrambling down the ladder shouting "Mac's been hit. Mac's been hit." Engler was Mac's assistant gunner. I asked Engler if Mac was coming in too and he said that Mac was unconscious. The Krauts were very good, too, at picking up the puff of smoke the mortar gives off when it's fired. It had only gotten off two or three shots before the aviate got this direct hit on them in the bomb crater. I said, "We've got to get Mac in here before they drop some more rounds in. Who's going to help me carry him in?" I got some blank stares and down turned eyes and I found it hard to believe. I said, "Come on," and headed for the ladder. Finally a guy; named Ball, I can't remember if it was Bob or Don, got up and said, "Let's go." We got Mac and lowered him into the sewer. He'd been hit very badly in his lower back and although he was unconscious he was moaning loudly so we knew he was still alive. I found out later in 1990 that he had had to endure two years in an army hospital and numerous operations before he regained the use of his legs. Ball was a BAR man in the rifle platoon BAR standing for Browning Automatic Rifle, one of our better weapons. I got to know Ball much better after the war. He and I were the only two men in the company to play on the baseball team. We spent many an hour riding in the jeep together as we were going to battalion headquarters to practice and then around the regiment playing games. We must have been called out of the safe sewer because the next thing I recall was seeing this "mad Lieutenant" come charging back to us waving his rifle over his head and yelling "Come on you guys. Your buddies are pinned down out there.

You going to stay here and let them die?" Lieutenant must have been nicked on his forehead by shrapnel so blood was running down his face profusely. It was just like a scene out of a John Wayne movie but it worked. He got the riflemen going and we saw them shortly. This lieutenant had gotten the battle field commission a few months previously for bravery under fire. This guy wasn't afraid of anything. Bullets and artillery were just apple pie to him. He was in charge of one of the rifle platoons. This must have happened sometime late in April because I know I don't remember too much of any more skirmishes, just advancing with less and less resistance. You know only one bullet whizzes by your head, only one artillery shell lands in your area; it is still a war as far as you're concerned. Looking back at this story I can see where I mixed up the dates __?__. The incidents I remember all through. Aside from this, I am now writing this after I had my reunion with these guys after forty-five year hiatus. Many of these stories I related here were remembered quite differently by my former buddies. It was strange hearing two or three of them come up with completely different interpretations of the same incident. It is a common thing with all people from what I've heard. There may have been many more incidents. We would all be similar. __?__ being cold, tired and scared. It finally ended. But now we're going to __?__ in __?__ path of war.

Just a couple of [things] that came to mind while lying awake in bed this Sunday morning, I recall, the time when somewhere, somehow we ran into a bunch of automobiles along the way and they were all in operating condition. There were enough of them so that each squad had their own vehicle. We were then the motorized infantry of Company G. I can also recall feeling some remorse when a couple of weeks later we were forced to abandon them for some reason or other. I think it was because we were heading for a deep woods and cross a large creek.

Another time it was in the Ruhr Valley when we entered a fairly large city. We had column of tanks and we were told to climb aboard and then roared through the city on the tanks waving our rifles and acting like Hollywood soldiers going into battle and the war was over.

DON MARSTON: When did you get back home?

RAY ERICKSON: I didn't get back home 'til April of '46. or the end of May. It was eleven months before I got back. You know they had the point system. _____?_____ Just after the German __?__ we were up on a mountain top waiting to head for Japan and they started the point system and our company clerk had been with the company for months, years, he got shipped out, went home. The captain said, "Does anybody know how to type?" I said, "Oh, yeah". He made me company clerk. I could type. One day, a different captain we had during, Capt. Cassidy, we called him "Chicken Shit Cassidy". He's dead now. Any how he came to me and said, "Hey, Erick, we got our allotment of Silver Stars and Bronze Stars. What do you want?" "What do you mean, Captain? How come they give out so many"? It turned out they had a proportion.

"I didn't do anything to deserve a Silver Star or Bronze Star. He said, "I'm writing you up for a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts". I said, "That wouldn't be right." He said, "_____?_____". I had to write it up. But I saw from the First Sergeant refuse him. Then the damn points came out and the Bronze Stars and Silver Stars were worth five points. I could have come home four or five months earlier. We should have kept those darn things. I was so damn mad at him. He had never been in combat this Capt. Cassidy. He came with us after the war ended. He came from Battalion Headquarters, I think. But there is just and allotment. Each company is allotted "X" amount of those medals.

DON MARSTON: Anything else?

RAY ERICKSON: Oh, I did get my Bronze Star two years ago. Because some General in his wisdom ten or twelve years ago decided every guy who had a combat infantryman's badge deserved a Bronze Star. I found this out from one of my meetings. So I wrote the Army and sent me one back. It looks good to my grandchildren. They say if you stayed on alive long enough to earn the combat infantryman's badge which thir-

ty days on line, then you deserve the Bronze Star, too. That's about it. We had a lot of fun playing baseball.

DON MARSTON: Thank you Ray.