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COMBAT EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II

by

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I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 17, 1918. My education was kind of spread out over the country—went to eight schools in 12 years. My father was a traveling salesman, so it was started in Denver, ended up in Billings, Montana, Minneapolis, then went back to Michigan.

I entered the military about March of '41 before Pearl Harbor. I had about 9 months in before my year was up when they declared war. So then I was in for the duration, which was nearly 5 years. I was living in Grand Rapids when I entered the service and was working for a wholesale auto supply and machine shop. I was single then, went into the service—no children at that time naturally. I tried to join the air cadet program at Kelly Field, Texas, but did not pass the medical test. They told me I had too much overbite for my Gs I would get diving in the plane. So I just waited for the draft number to come around. I had a low draft number so I was ready because of the news that war would soon be starting up. I figured lets get it over with. I left Grand Rapids for Kalamazoo, Michigan for the physical and then went on to Fort Custer, Michigan. From Fort Custer I went down to Fort Knox, Kentucky for all my basic training. They promised about 13 weeks of training, but it turned out that they gave us only 8 weeks and assigned us to duty. The basic training was mostly drilling and long hikes since most of the rifles and side arms had all been sent to England and other countries in the Lend Lease program. That is why they assigned us back to duty at the regular company.

I was assigned to C Company of 69th Regiment at the medium tank outfit, and we were part of the First Armor Division. Our division was made up of a battalion of medium tanks and a couple of battalions of light tanks and artillery ordinance and other units.

Around January after Pearl Harbor we reorganized and we became "I" Company of First Regiment of the First Armored Division. I was probably assigned there because most of my life I had been on the farm. I'd been driving tractors. I'd worked in an automotive machine shop or sold auto parts, so I'd know something about the intricacies of tanks.

My joining the army did not caused any hardship on the family. When I joined the service, my dad and I were batching it as my mother had died a couple of years earlier. My dad had served in the army 1906-1909 and knew what that was all about. At the time I went in, one of my friends went in and, he was one of the fellows I worked with. After our medical examinations the army decided where they were going to send us. I wanted to go along with him, but they sent him one way and me another, and the poor guy ended up on the death march and then was sent on to Japan where he had some terrible experiences. He told me some wild tales that he experienced when he was there, and he was also close to the atomic blast over there in Nagasaki.

I had the feeling that in leaving my home a year out of my life was not too bad. I was only 23 years old, an only child, and my only family were my aunts, uncles and cousins that were quite close. Joining the army was no big deal.

My first day at Fort Custer was an eye-opener. I came from a long line of good cooks--I mean real good cooks--and the first army meal was absolutely the worse slop I had ever tasted. We fed even our hogs better. That night I was short-sheeted, meaning that the sheet was doubled up in half. I couldn't even get into bed until I tore it apart. I had never heard snoring like that before or after. It was a long, hard night.

In Fort Knox we trained on the care and maintenance of the tanks. We learned the tactics of a fighting team and were constantly cleaning tanks inside and out. Inside we kept them spotless. Later I found out why they were cleaned so well. If a tank was hit by a shell, the energy at the point of contact will set off any oil, padding, or ammunition and start a fire.

In the States my assignment was to be assistant driver. I spent hours sitting and watching the driver as he shifted gears and how he handled the controls. With the old style sliding transmissions one must shift at the proper RPM to avoid clashing gears and damaging transmissions. It was very boring as I waited my chance to drive.

Soon I was became qualified as a driver. That took me on maneuvers in southern states, to Ireland, England, North Africa, and finally to the defeat of Kasserine Pass in North Africa, where I became a tank commander. In Italy I continued in that position and became a Platoon Sergeant until I was returned to the United States. *It was easy to make friends as every one was lonely. we made close friends as we thought we were the best company in our Regiment with*

great esprit decorps. We lost many good friends in combat. I kept track of about a dozen friends, but through the years there were only about four of us left. I was just visited by one of my drivers, and was up to see my gunner in Kentucky a while ago. I see a maintenance man that was with us from the very beginning, and also one of our lieutenants was with us for a short visit. Combat brings the closest of men, which makes it a special family. You can't understand the trust and love we have for one another.

When I left basic for my first assignment, I lost a close relative and was allowed to have a three-day pass for the funeral. The army was very lenient, very considerate. The Pearl Harbor attack canceled all leaves for Christmas '41, but was reinstated a few days later. Also I got a 30-day furlough when I was returned to the States before I was reassigned to fort Sheridan. On furloughs I usually ate real well, slept in late in the morning, and visited friends and relatives—kept real busy 'cause my time was real short.

Before the war civilians were not very friendly with us soldiers, but later the civilians would take us to their homes for dinner Sunday after church—quite different. I was stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky, March '41 until about April '42 before they started to send us overseas. When we arrived at Fort Dix, there were too many men who moved in there so quickly to go overseas there was a shortage of food. As there was a shortage of green vegetables, many of the guys turned yellow with jaundice. Some of them looked golden. Several of the outfit never went overseas with us because they were so sick. We had plenty of potatoes, and bread, but only a small amount of meat. They made up for that with a lot of gravy. That way we had plenty of potatoes, bread and gravy. We had a lot of physical exercise, marching and so on, but it wasn't long until we took a ferry boat to New Jersey and to New York City pier 4 where we loaded ~~the tanks~~ on the Thomas H. Barry cruise ship. It held about 5,000 bodies, but they figured out they could get about 10,000 if we put half of them up on top deck and put the half of them down in the hold. Twelve hours we would be on top and then go down the stairway. There were two stairways—one for up and one for down. We ate our meals on the deck between the upper and lower deck, one time on our way down and the next time on our way ^{up} down—or vice versa.

When we rode down to that ship, we signed up in our assigned order.

When they called out our last name, we'd answer our first name and middle initial. Only one guy went over the hill—didn't want to go with us. We carried a musette bag, which was about the size of little ^{PACK}peck sack—all our personal items in those, underwear and socks. We carried on board a large blue "A" bag containing class "A" uniforms and lots of extra socks and stuff and a "B" bag, which had our overcoat and other personal items. We also had two sets of khaki uniforms, and had a set of woolen O.D.s. They were hot and heavy. You had to grab those two bags, a steel helmet, and go up the gangplank. Down in the hold where we were they had bunks, three tier high made out of pipe and canvas and it was yours for every 12 hours. The only toilet they had was an enclosed swimming pool with 20 stools. The place was busy. They probably had some other ones that were upstairs that were for the officers, but we never saw them. We finally had to use number 10 tin cans for the bathroom, and it made a terrible smell. Would you like to know what was for breakfast? Well, the sea was a little rough. So we were around Halifax somewhere and it was making a lot of them seasick. You don't sit down to eat; you have a 12-inch plank along the walls to hold our dishes, and you stand up to eat. The ship pitches; there goes the dishes to the right. Some guys were vomiting in the dishes as they went by. Here comes the dishes back and with the vomit. Thanks a lot. Next time your dish comes by, grab it and hang on to it. Don't put it down. The first breakfast was spoiled cod fish, gravy and bread. The next few meals were chicken that had been steam cooked, and they were kind of—oh looked like it was red and not finished cooking, and it made the rest of us sick. The third day I was put on K.P. for a few days. When I went to eat, the cook said, "Don't eat that slop; we'll have steak like the officers." Man, it was good!

We were attacked by submarines several times, but lost no ships. The depth charge would rattle the sides of our ship Thomas Barre, and I looked many times to see if our ship was leaking. The convoy was made up of many hundreds of ships and stretched out miles and miles of choppy sea. The command ship was a cruiser. It was off to the right of us. One toot and everybody went to the left and two toots, they went to the right. We

zig-zagged all the way up to the coasts of Scotland.

One morning I was in the fog there standing by the rail and looking straight out 100 feet away and here this cruiser was gotten right up close to us and sounded their bell and horns and moved away. If it had crashed it could have been 10,000 men drowned all at once. We sailed into Belfast Ireland harbor. We unloaded and walked to those English side door trains and got ready to go to a camp. Before we got on, they gave us some English rolls and sausage—some kind of dough, kind of like a pigs in a blanket. I've never gotten sick on the ^{boat}, but did I get sick on that train ride to our next camp! We camped at Galley Will Will, which is 20 miles from the town of Belfast out in the country side. We were housed in a quanset building that housed about 20 men. These turret top buildings had cement floors with army cots for us to sleep on. There's one large mess hall, so we could all sit down to eat at once. Every couple weeks our division band would come and play for our evening meal. The band also served in our supply company hauling supplies and gasoline. The leader was an arranger for Glen Miller along with his good players. He had some real good music for us. Sleavehaney Mountain was across from us. It was a craggy rough with boulders all the way to the top. Each morning we had to run to the top before breakfast. It took about 10 minutes to run to the top. One night they called us out on alert, and it was about one o'clock, and the rain was coming down, and we had to run to the top of it. Several of the guys were bruised when we got to the top.

Our first month's rations were not the most tasteful. They were furnished by the British. Nights or late evening we would go out and hunt rabbits so we could fry them along with potatoes and onions that we had acquired. The rabbits are smaller and slower than those in the U.S. Three or four of us would go out and chase them, knock them in the head with a stick, and we'd skin them. We drove all over North Ireland in our tanks. Put on maneuvers clear up to Londonerry. We have found that the best officers we had were from West Point or the Virginia Military Institute and the Citidel. Some of the college officer candidates were pretty good, too. The O.C.S. turned out some men in 90 days to lead us, but they were not the greatest. We were free to go into town on the weekends. Not much to do in town except to eat, drink, and go to the big dance hall. We had movies

in our post area. Letter writing and playing cards was about all there was to keep us busy other than our duties. I remained in Ireland, oh about 4 months, I think it was. We went on the alert and went down to the beach to load into LSTs at the landing ship tank. When we backed our tanks onto the craft, they did not tell us where we were going, but just took us out into the sea. We supposed we had started out to an invasion, but we did not know where. The Irish Sea was plenty rough that night. The next morning we were glad to see that it was Liverpool, England, and we landed there. We proceeded to the town of Chester and spent a couple months there. We went to Cardiff, Wales, loaded our tanks and got ready for an invasion, but we didn't know where. We were assembled in a fake convoy. It was days before we were briefed that we were going to North Africa. We were lectured and given a book on the customs of the Arab Muslim religion. Being November, the seas were rough. We finally saw the Rock of Gibraltar, passing through the narrow straits. On a ship's crewmen saw the Germans were outside Gibraltar and would call for an air attack. Near sundown the torpedo planes flew in just above the water launching their torpedoes. I was on deck at the time, and the ship in front of us was loaded with ammunition. It made a big flash, and there was nothing left. All hands were lost. There had been four more ships sunk. We could hear their cries and singing of the survivors, but could not stop to save them. They were expendable although our destroyer escort saved some of them. The next morning we saw a destroyer go by with a deck full of people they had picked up. We then encountered the worse storm the Mediterranean had had in many years. I saw 50-foot waves we'd go down and not see another ship and then all of a sudden we were on top of a wave and would just shudder. The propeller would be out of the water.

Oran Algeria was the main thrust. They got the worst beating, loss of lives and equipment. Although the light tanks rushed to the air field catching planes on the ground. They had a great time blowing up all the planes. Our landing was just west of Oran, the little port of Arzu. Patton had landed at Rabat just west of us with little difficulty. We went into reserve, meaning that any big problems, we would be used—called to action. Since we were stable, we were put up in pup tents.

We spent our first Christmas outside of Oran. Not much to do—just

stand around and wait for the orders to move up. We needed to take up positions east of Tebessa in Tunisia. Since it was a long haul they loaded us on prime movers with low boy trailers. Lots of troops there on the road would pull us off to allow faster traffic to pass.

We went on East of Tebessa. We went through Kasserine Pass to Sebatla where we took up positions. Back in the desert our instructions were to go up left for an outpost and observe. We were several miles out of sight and came through a wadi and deep ditch and into a tilt that threw the right track off our tank. Our radio was only a receiver so we could not broadcast and tell them the problems at headquarters. So after we were there several days, we decided that we'd dig out the left side of it and let the tank settle back so we could put the track back on, which we did. And while we were finishing up that job, decided they ought to come out and try and find us. We then set up outside the Fiad Pass. The Germans, of course, controlled that. One day they sent us, one tank that is, up into the pass. As we got close and they opened fire and sent a plane to bomb us. One bomb made a direct hit—a direct hit on our back deck. It nearly knocks the wind right out of us from the concussion. We were hit in the track and eased down into the valley. General Orlando Ward came out to talk to us and debriefed us on what we saw. It was just a test to see if the Germans would repel us. The Air Force was non-existent at this time, February 10th. We never saw an Air Force until the African campaign was nearly over at May 15th, 1943.

Our unit was relieved from the point in the outpost and taken ~~hips~~ taken over by G Company. We moved to the right a mile back, and each morning we'd wake up at 4 a.m., stand to, and start the tanks and be on the alert. Nights we'd stand guard, two hours on guard for each man.

On February 14, 1943, we had our regular alert, but this time there were fire works. The Germans came pouring out Fiad Pass. The tanks were followed by foot soldiers. I was the lead tank starting down the road toward G Company and the Germans. Here I thought we should attack while they were busy, but headquarters said, "We're gonna feed you in one by one." They hoped only to delay the Germans. In two days we lost 300 tanks. And as we watched G Company's 17 tanks blow up in flames, it was a terrifying sight. Platoon 5 tanks went to the right and another platoon went to the left.

We were accurate shooting at 2,000 yards, while the Germans were accurate at about 5,000 yards. They had 88 millimeters. Their shells were about three feet long, and we had little 75s with much less powder charge. Apparently outgunned, we took a lot of direct hits, and we did not get penetrated until after they used high explosive and armor piercing shells. They struck like a sledge hammer, shaking the dust and the smoke on us. One round took off my periscope head, and leading me to think I had been blinded. I changed my old periscope and found that everything was O.K. My commander Sergeant Pierre got wounded in the right hand and arm. He was bleeding all over the place. He baled out over the side, went for the medics. This kind of cut down our vision, but no matter, there were so many Germans everywhere. We had all kinds of targets. The Germans outflanked us and they shot my motor out and fire followed. No matter where we were—no matter any way because we were out of ammunition by then. The gunner C.E. Norris from Grace, Kentucky, baled out. He was captured, and spent three years in a prisoner of war camp. The assistant gunner Tekert from Kansas was killed. My assistant driver Forage from San Anton, Texas, stayed with me the rest of the day. We grabbed our submachine guns as we baled out we headed for Citibusin, small oasis where General Eisenhower had visited our headquarters last night, checking the lines. All the time the Germans' stuka dive bombers were bombing and strafing our air field. Their air field was so close that they could dump their load, refill, refuel and be back between 10 and 15 minutes in a turn around.

I dove into a hole; I cried out to God. Not being church affiliated, I did not know how to pray, so I just cried out. I promised I would do anything He wanted me to do, if He'd just save my life.

I ran over to help the 27th field artillery carry ammunition. We were about to be over run so we were ordered to blow up the ammunition and disable the gun. A thermal grenade down the barrel had burned a hole in there and made it unusable. I crawled on to a half track to get out of the German tanks' way. It was kind of cutting off our escape. He fired two rounds at us, missing us, and he raked the sides of the half track with machine gun fire. No one was hurt. We got to Kasserine Pass where we quickly reassembled. I was one of 16 men of our company to return, the rest killed, wounded, or captured. They let me take my shoes off, gave me blankets, let

me sleep all night that night. And the next morning we drew some tanks, M-3 Grant tanks which Patton had worn out badly in his maneuvers. This needed seven men in the crew for that old style tank. Headquarters company gave us cooks and dog robbers, orderlies for the officers and so on, company clerks for our crews. One of my men was a bugler, one was a preacher, a couple of clerks. We had about 10 tanks is all we could get crews for, so we ran into the Germans to try to slow them down. Colonel Hightower and my tank were all that were left. As we withdrew, they found us again. Disabled Colonel Hightower's tank, so we towed him back to the Kasserine Pass.

The British 20-pound cannon were firing all day and all night repulsing the Germans to help save the situation. The Highlanders, they were called tall Scotsmen, came marching in to the bagpipes, playing as they marched to time.

General Bradley interviewed all the survivors from Fiad Pass days later. He had a sergeant as his clerk to take notes. He wanted to asses the damage talk freely without any repercussion from any officer. We lost all of ours, so we didn't have to worry about officers saying anything about what we would say. General Bradley was a kind, smart officer.

The Germans drew back to Fiad Pass. Our next attack was at Sened Station which was a water hole. Each little town was a water source that they tried to control. It rains sometimes in the desert. We were on the north edge of the Sahara Desert. It rained for a week, and we were in the soupiest sand you ever saw. We sank into the belly of the tank. We couldn't maneuver and neither could the Germans, so we just sat there. They couldn't get gasoline and food to us for about a week. String beans for breakfast is not for me, We used up our C and K rations. We finished up a 5-pound loaf of Spam under protest.

Our next attack was to Maknassy. We Got Lt. John Ruppert in our platoon. He was fresh out of school. He called us together and said, "I'm going to win some medals. You boys are going to help me win them." We started to hate "old gung ho" right from the start. Outside headquarters one day I heard the officers talking among themselves putting each other up for bronze stars, silver stars and so on for bravery under fire.

While trying to go into Maknassy, Lt. Ruppert got in front of me, and my driver, Red O'Brian, let a burst of machine gun out on the back of his

tank. After that, he was always behind us. I once saw him shoot at one of my sergeants to get his attention because he wasn't paying attention on the radio.

Meanwhile we were resting beside the road. The German air force showed up, bombing, strafing us. Once we were out of the tanks, so we took cover in the ditches and ground depressions. One kid went crazy—battle fatigue—running wildly, pointing at the air craft. He would dive in a ditch for a second or two, and then leap up again, holler pointing up at the sky. He ran about a quarter of a mile before somebody hauled him down. We had this same thing happen to two of our men later in Italy.

We never saw any American planes to chase the German's air craft from us until a year later in Italy. We proceeded to cross the deep gorge by a cement bridge. The Germans had the bridge zeroed in and blasting it to pieces. We had to cross it real fast. It was critical to get there real fast. Each of our first five tanks rushed across in about 10 miles an hour. Two of us were left on the far side of the bridge, and the other three to the right. In the confusion of battle our tank lurched into the ravine, lying on our side. So we crawled out of the tank and the ravine to safety. That night our tank retriever maintenance came up, and pulled it out and put the track back on, and we took McNassey the following day. All these towns are water points, and they're very important. Sened Station held out because it was a good water source. It's so important to have fuel and water.

When we finally stabilized the southern flank of the line, we traveled north and west a couple of days to the mouse trap area in Medjes el Bab. There was a mountain—I call it a hill—609 was the number that held up the drive to Mateur and into Tunas. The 34th infantry had lost a lot of men trying to capture it. A million dollars worth of ammunition was expended without success. Our Captain ^{G.W. W.}Glen said, "This is no place for tanks." It was nearly straight up, probably 45 degrees. At six a.m. the next morning we started our climb. Some places I thought we would tip over backwards. Our platoon five tanks were on the right flank. Half way up the mountain we encountered anti-tank fire. We blasted all of them except one on my right front. We laid down fire on them, but he was well protected by the rocks, and he could not depress the guns enough to get me, although he fired over my head and set the tank next to me on fire. The fellows baled out. Private

Herald A. Goldstein, the only Jewish boy in combat I knew of, helped pull that wounded gunner out, Corporal Hall. He had been a soldier of fortune, this Corporal Hall. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War and several other republics. He was hurt bad—had a belly wound, right leg and arm, and the lower leg had a compound fracture. We did not have any splints, so while they patched up his belly, I went for a tree limb. Most of them were gnarled olive branches. Each time I reached up to get a limb, they would shoot through the trees, and I'd drop to the ground. I finally got enough to fix up his leg and arm and load him on the back of a tank and put the rest of the crew in two tanks to take them down to safety and the medics. Captain Glen called us and said to come on back. The rest of the mountain was secure, and we just by-passed these guys and the mission was accomplished. I told him, "I still have one gun up here."

Well, the first tank got out O.K., and as we started down, I had guys inside, so I stood on the back deck over the motor. We took a shot below my feet that shook the tank and made me dance a jig. It took one of the cylinders off the engine and struck the gas tank shield. The motor almost quit. I kept hollering on the intercom for Red O'Brian to floor board it keep her running and get the hell out of here. We got out of range and stopped. We had to be pulled to the base of the mountain. Hall died that night. The others recovered. Hill 609 was secured for the next day's advance. We got a new motor the next day and welded the hole shut on the back. I still have a piece of the 57 mm of the piercing shell as a souvenir.

A couple of days later General Harmon showed up and called us tank commanders together at a sand box of the area and showed us our objective. "This is what you are to do." His plan worked beautifully. We blew up a few anti-tanks and rolled into Mateur. It was a milk run from there on—Tunis and Bizerta.

On Mothers Day May 15, 1943, the fighting ended in North Africa. We fired our last rounds that morning. About 40 German soldiers surrendered. After we disarmed them and searched them, we had to feed them. Our orders were if possible, give them food and water. One could speak English, and he stated to me he was going to America while I would be going to Germany. I should have killed him. I had a hard time forgiving them for all my friends they killed.

As the morning wore on several hundred came to us with their hands up carrying a white flag. For about three days they streamed past—40,000 prisoners of war. We could hardly believe it. Some walked, some road trucks. This went on into the night. It was the first time we had seen head lights turned on since leaving the U.S. in June, 1942, to this May, 1943.

When the roads cleared, we moved to Cape Bonn and parked on the seashore to stop any stragglers who tried to leave by boat. After a few days we paraded through Tunis and Bizerti. We were given bottles of wine and big bunches of grapes—plenty of kissing and celebrating. We bivouacked at Bizerti to get replacement men to build our company up to full strength.

The next day I was chosen to go with prisoners to the States, only it did not work out that way. Harry Huff from H company joined me in the detail and it grew to about 30 men. We were shipped back to St. Bard de Zigzig east of Oran in Algeria. What we had to do was to prepare a prison compound for the prisoners. They gave us Germans to put up the barb wire fences and pitch the tents, and they built guard towers around the enclosure, and put 30 caliber machine guns in each tower. We filled the POW camp right away and took a bunch down to the dock a few days later to put on board so we'd go to the U.S.A. Instead of going with them, there were military police who took them instead of us. That was a bummer!

Disappointed, we wanted to go back to our outfit that had gone west of Oran to Rebat, Morocco, but they refused. One fellow said, "I know how to do it." The next morning he started firing his machine gun in the tower at the prisoners' tent. He wounded a half a dozen of them. He was found guilty, fined a dollar, given a carton of cigarettes, and sent to his outfit. Because they heard we were planning to do the same thing, they brought in some new recruits in right away. They had too much explaining to do to the Red Cross and the German Geneva convention who looked into this incident.

I arrived in Rebat at the company's place in a cork forest. Cork trees are about six inches in diameter, and if we ran over one, they tried to charge us \$40 per tree. Here they had a separate mess hall for NCOs (non-commissioned officers, corporals and sergeants.) For about two dollars a week we got special vegetables and fruits and ate on plates at a table for a change. This is how the British army does it, but it did not last too many months.

We prepared for the invasion of Sicily, but did not have enough boats to take us. That was great with me. Italy was next. They moved us to Oran to get on an LST, (landing ship tank) also known as a large, slow target. One of our train rides was an old steam engine. It had and 40 and 8 cars of World War I—40 men and 8 horses to the car. We had spoiled food, so we had disentary. If the train was moving and you just squated over a hole in the car and let go. When the train did stop, we'd get out, drop our drawers, and go. The train would go and you'd have to catch it on a good run. At the town of Fez they hooked up a fast electric, and quite a few of the guys missed the train. They had to catch another one later. When you're waiting to be loaded for an invasion, you're usually isolated in a barbed ware entanglement closure like the prisoners.

In November '43 we went into Italy near Salerno. I don't think we actually hit the Salerno beach, but we were just above there somewhere and ended up in Capua. Rain always seemed to find us everywhere we went. It was cold and miserable. One night we made a dash to try to capture Mussolini at his castle, but he got away as we proceeded. Cold rain turned to sleet, and it froze on my hands and face. It always thawed enough so that it drizzled down my back.

One day we were in reserves, so I washed my pants and shirt in the aviation gasoline. I held them up to dry and a few minutes later we had to crank up and run up to the Rappido River. My clothes were damp with gasoline which burned my body all over just like a sunburn.

They kept moving us up to Valturmo and the Rappido River to get a bridge head across to take Mount Porchia and Mount Cassino where the Abbey was right on the right flank holding down everyone. The Jap/American 443rd division were trying to take it.

Then on January 27th we went for an end run, so to speak, to Anzio Beach Head. A tank on our LST got loose in the rough water because someone evidently didn't get the chain fixed quite right and it snapped. Each way the ship would pitch, a 30-ton tank would slam against another tank and gasoline spilled on top of the water. We were afraid that a spark would ignite it and set the whole ship afire. Two of us jumped on a loose tank as it came out to our walkway, while another guy jump on a second tank with a chain. A couple guys brought us new chains, and we secured them. The

rest of the trip was uneventful until the landing.

Anzio and Nettuno were two small resort towns for the Italians, just north of the town called The Overpass Bridge. Beyond that was what we called the factory, an agricultural display building like a fair. It was a large cement block construction. We rode off the ship through the town into the outskirts. The British general had us stopped, because he wanted more troops. We pulled into a pine forest and dug the tanks to the top of their tracks. It would take four hours for five of us to dig the tank deep enough so that the exploding bombs would not damage the tracks. Just the turret and part of the tank showed above the ground. Then we made a dugout hole, which would be covered with logs and dirt to fend off the bombs and artillery shells. Our area was only about 10 square miles, so anywhere they shot they were bound to hit something. Abe McClary and I shared a dugout. We'd go on a firing mission and then return to the dugout. Sometimes we'd be a week and then return. We would harass the Germans each night, firing a few rounds from different positions on the beach head, and then return to the pine woods. They shelled and bombed us night and day.

Since we ended up staying there for five months until the weather cleared, the engineers dug an underground room so we could have movies. Most of the movies were "Stormy Weather" and other Negro movies that were the vogue. We didn't particularly like them, but that's all they sent us. This area was swamp land, but it was drained and had lots of ditches. They were deep cement lined, but some of them a tank could not cross. As we could not maneuver, we were relegated to the roads. The Germans had mined the roads and blown up the bridges.

When we had been there a few days, the weather got so bad LST ships could not bring food and ammunition. We could only fire five rounds a day for a while. The Germans then put on a drive to push us into the sea.

The Company commander called us together one evening about 8 o'clock and told us the Air Force had spotted a thousand tanks coming down from Rome. We would go out to do battle with them in the morning. "Now go to bed and get some sleep." O.K. I laid there in the dugout and shivered there for an hour. Later they told us to crank up and move out. The tank commander always had to walk ahead of the tank to lead them out to the road so they would not run over anybody or crush a dugout. When we moved along the road

out of the woods, men appeared out of the darkness waving good-bye to us.

All of a sudden I saw a light, a shaft of light, and it shined on one man, and that was the chaplain, Captain Davison. He was a minister. I could see his insignia. Most of the officers never wore insignias, but he did on his helmet and shoulders. I think God was assuring me that all would work out for me for the morrow. Had I been any Christian I would have remembered Isaiah 43:5, "Fear not, for I am with you."

We arrived at front on one side of the highway waiting dawn to arrive. The Germans were given wine and were told that they were getting ready to push us into the sea. They would walk up to the tanks, firing crazy like. All of a sudden we were hit in the turret. It rocked that 30-ton tank of iron like it was a baby carriage. When an armor piercing shell hits the tank, the iron gets red hot, and if there's any paint or oil there or rubber parts, they usually catch fire. I didn't know if it came in or not because of the smoke. I told the crew to bale out, and as we lay in the ditch, smoke quit, and no more rounds were fired. I crawled in, backed the tank up and saw that the damage to the turret was such that we could not control the gun. I called the captain to report the damage. He said, "Stay there and put up a bluff it until dark, as the attack has been repulsed." Instead of a thousand tanks there were a thousand vehicles and about a hundred tanks.

Our hit had pushed an inch and five-eighths armor away from the traverse race of the turret, but it did not enter. I found a piece of the 76 mm shell to bring home as a souvenir. God had taken care of us again.

We got a new tank the next day. Then we went to another front, parked by a farm house for several days to see what developed.

One day a P-40 started to dive bomb. The last minute he saw our white star to identify us as friendly, pulling out his dive without releasing his bomb.

The Germans used a water tower as a forward observer so they could lay artillery fire on our every move. Now this was ^{APPT} an ordinary water tower. As I remember each leg (there were four legs) was five or six feet square. We tried to knock them down with shell fire, but with no luck. The water tank was all brick and the legs must have been brick and cement because they were so big. They sent rangers across to set charges on the legs and blow them off, but the rangers got trapped. The engineers built a bridge for

us to go across to rescue them. We failed and were driven back. I think only 5 came back out of the 120 of the rangers that went in there.

Another day we made a drive to the factory area as far as the blown out bridge. Bill Ward's tank got hit. They all got out all right. A funny thing happen though. Willy Osborn was lying in the ditch. (He was from Turner, Michigan.) About five feet away was a German soldier, who pushed his gun to Osborn, and Osborn pushed it back. He didn't want to be captured. There was too many Germans there. This went on for quite a while, pushing the gun back and forth. Finally Osborn just turned his back and crawled back. The Germans right behind him gave up.

Don Vore was a driver on another tank that was hit and set fire. He remembered his girl friend's 9 x 11 portrait was in the tank. He reached in to get it and it is a wonder he was not captured. When he got his mail call that night he got a "Dear John" letter telling him she was married to another guy in the States.

We had a road down to the factory area that we called the bowling alley. It was straight to the strong point of resistance. Since it was too wet to get off the road we traveled it to and from that section of the front. The Germans had the road targeted for a half mile or so and we had to get on it from a hard left turn and then run like mad, maybe 20 miles an hour to get through that area.

While on the front near the factory area, some American infantry were wounded. All the fighting stopped while the medics attempted to walk out to get them waving a large Red Cross hospital flag. When they got to the men, the Germans fired on them wounding them, too. Since the incident was under a white flag, it caused extreme anger followed by international investigation. They had to wait for darkness to retrieve the wounded.

I want to tell you something about our church services. Usually the chaplain had a little portable organ, and he had one man who would play the organ while he did the preaching, and they had a little altar they would set up, and of course, they had the services interrupted several different times when shelling would happen. This church service here was held Sundays. One day when we were on the front and was ... The runner came around and said we could go back to the church services if we wanted to. So a couple of us went back, my gunner, Johnny O'nan and I, and we got there but there

was no one else. So he talked to us about Matthew 18, verses 20, "Where two or three gather in my name, I will be there with them." It was short, but very moving.

The air raids came several days and nights. They dumped bombs that exploded scattering anti-personnel bombs that were enclosed. My guess is that there were 30 small ones in one bomb. You had to be under ground a few inches to be safe. They caught us going to the kitchen truck one time and started bombing and strafing. Usually four or five of us would go at a time, but we got careless this time. I made it in a hole, but Ed Polack Markowski got hit in the knee cap as he dove into a hole. It took five of us to get him out of the hole, and his leg was hanging by skin and muscle. It was a bloody and there was terrible screaming. A medic was close by, and they took him to a field hospital about a mile away.

One day we found a wounded heifer. Well, it ended up as hamburg for us that night.

Every night we'd be shelled from the mountain. It was probably a railroad gun. We hadn't seen it. It had to be a monster because it made awfully big holes when the shells came in. It sounded like a freight train, chug, chug, chug. It would start an artillery duel, but they never could stop it. They sent to the States for a 280 mm, about a 9-inch gun, a battery of 8 guns. It took three weeks to get there from the States to us. They fired one gun every day until they made a hit, and then they closed the other seven guns on the target. It shut down the big gun. After we broke out of the beach head, we found there were twelve—it was a 12-inch railroad gun in a mountain cave. With the water tower knocked down and the railroad gun silenced life was more bearable. Only night bombings and artillery harassed us. The land started to dry, so we could maneuver up the roads in preparation for the break out of the beach head. The Five months, were like being on an island.

For about two days our artillery started shelling around the clock. Over eleven hundred guns firing one night made it look like daylight. The navy was also firing close off shore. We moved into position one night awaiting a tank with a special hookup on it to push a device through the mine field to blast a hole for us to drive through. I think it was called a bangalore torpedo. It consisted of double shield tubing like is on highway

guide rails. Fifty feet to the tank was packed with sand, while the next three hundred fifty feet was packed with explosives. A fuse was set to explode by a gun shot when the snake, as it was called, was pushed through the barbed wire, in the mine field. First tank veered off to the right and hit a mine field. The second and myself got through O.K. The Germans were caught by surprise and shocked by the blast. The gun emplacement still had cover on his gun when we neutralized him. That means we blasted his (blank) off. This area had been contested for us in the past and changed hands almost daily. Some of the machine guns had trenches in a complete circle so they could be fired from either side. I walked back later after we consolidated our position and found dead Germans on one side had not been removed and dead Americans on the other side, from a fight a couple days before. We took a lot of prisoners. Our regular gunner, Johnny O'nan, was in the hospital with a broken foot, so my assistant gunner took over. But he could not hit the broad side of a barn. I had trouble getting him on target. One German had a withering fire on our tank. He drove me down inside. Our assistant gunner finally got the machine gun going so he could see the tracers, and then I got him on target. He hit the ammunition and blew the guy sky high just like in the movies. I can still see his surprised face as he was blasted straight up. Later in the day we moved east to cut off the highway, and we got into another mine field, losing more tanks.

Lt. Elliot was assigned to us at the breakout time and had never been a tanker. We ran out of armored force officers so they sent us inexperienced people. Some lasted ... He was very likable, and I have kept in touch with him through the years. He was soon transferred to another unit company. When I called him up about ~~30~~⁵ years ago, he recognized my voice right away.

After we cut off highway 6, we consolidated our positions, stopping for two days. They took us to get a shower bath. It was the first one since leaving North Africa. The shower truck had six stalls in it. You took off your clothes, climbed into the shower truck and waited for a whistle to blow. Then the water came on so you could soap up. I think the water would be on three minutes. Soap up, another blast on the whistle and water'd come on and for about 3 or 4 minutes, and you were handed a towel to wipe off, and you were handed clean clothes—not your own, but they were clean. Then the truck took you back to the front where you'd come from.

On the way back we were shelled and the driver went to the ditch by some trees. Someone said, "Duck," and I thought they said "Ducks" and I looked up and wang—side and face and I ended up hanging over the tailgate. Bill Warden and Lt. Elliot took me across the field to a medical field hospital. They fixed me up and wanted to keep me because of my concussion. I did not want to stay as the lieutenant would be lost without a senior NCO. He had trouble with map reading anyway. He has thanked me several times for my staying with him. My face was swollen and scabby for a few days.

Then on to Rome on June 5, 1944. Last fighting was on the edge of Rome as it was declared an open city. That night we parked in Rome. M.P.s pulled guard duty for us, and the colonel said to us, "Take off your shoes and have a good night's sleep." It was heaven!

As we had stopped in the square before we bedded down, a civilian came to greet us. It was Major Parsons, who had been captured in Africa and had escaped from the prison train. He stayed at Rome for over a year. While he was talking with us, he was spirited away by some intelligence officers. We never saw him again after that time. It must be that they wanted to debrief him.

The next day we moved north of the city and were relieved for a couple of days. We got some leave to go into Rome for a day. We found some food in a restaurant consisting of fried potatoes and eggs. Eggs had a going price of a buck each.

The next day we moved on north to Lake Brachinio to reorganize. That was about a week before moving on again. The next heavy engagement was in Campa Morte, meaning the town of death. I guess years ago they had an epidemic and so named it. In the afternoon we rested momentarily and did what no soldier should do, that is to lay down his weapon and walk away to explore. A small distance away there was a small shed, and there was some noise coming from it. All I had was a hunting knife, so I sent a guy for a gun. We found one German, his leg badly shot, so we got him out to the medics. I was lucky that time, but I always carried a gun even if it was cumbersome.

As we got in to more hills, it was slower. We set up below a ridge by some farm buildings and homes not knocked down. That was unusual when we didn't have something not knocked down. Some of the guys slept in the

house and the barn. Those that chose the barn ended up with lice. Hundred octane gas washed them off the clothes and GI soap got them out of their hair. Of the 16 of us that returned to Fiad Pass - Kasserine Pass defeat we felt our time was running out.

I must tell you about chicken Reeves. He lied to get into the army at age the age 16. He was from Kentucky. His mother died at his birth and his family blamed him and punished him, so he had to run away to the army for a family. He lost 13 tanks before he went crazy. They were sure he would recover in time.

Another day of the shelling found us protected between two hills. The shells fell in front of us or behind us over the hills. So we were quite safe if they didn't change their range. We got out to stretch even though the shelling continued, and our assistant gunner, Jimmy Whiticker lost it and started to cry and run, I grabbed him and laid him down. I talked to him quietly, telling him they couldn't get us. Just then a round hit the tip of the crest of the hill and covered us with dirt and trash. I needed help to hold him down. He lost it completely. With help we took him to the medics half track where they injected him with something and hauled him to the base hospital.

Several days later we consolidated our position, so we would visit from tank crew to tank crew. Johnny O'Nan, my gunner always had a pot of coffee going, so it drew visitors. William B. Ward came over to partake some. While we were visiting, we got shelled. I clamored into the tank, and he went under it. The next shell hit our track wounding Bill. So we pulled him out and found that he had severe wrist wounded and along the inner part of his thigh. The gash was about 9 inches long, and I dumped the disinfectant powder in it, and tied a couple bandages around it, and a couple dragged him down the valley into the medics. He recovered in the States. He was another of our 16 survivors from North Africa.

Later in the week we were held up in the mountain pass that was well defended. So we flanked them by going straight up the side of the mountain. It was so steep, I saw mostly sky and a few tree tops. I expected to roll backwards most any time. When we hit the top, there was a horse drawn train of wagons that were easy targets. We cut down in behind the German guns in the pass. There was a nice farm house there abandoned. This was the

only time I looted the spoils of war. I took a set of beautiful dishes, green and orange in color. The next day a shell hit the back of my tank and broke them. So my ill gotten gain didn't pay. A couple of the fellows from the platoon went out at night and broke the teeth out of the dead Germans for the gold. They were found out the next morning and were sent to a stockade.

The next day we were moving on, and Lt. Brown (he was an OCS lieutenant, and he turned out to be quite a good officer) was motioning to some prisoners to go back, and he leaned out to wave to them when he got shot in the back of the head. It blew the top of his head off. Then we found out that he was General Marshall's stepson. The general came out to the outfit to talk to his crew.

I don't know if I have ever written about Johnny O'Nan, my gunner. He's kept me alive by his excellent shooting. In one building I could see a German forward observer in the second story. Got Johnny on the building, but I thought he was missing it. He wanted to know what window I wanted taken out. It turned out that he put a shell straight through the window and blew out the back of the building. That was the end of the forward observer. One time we got pinned down in this mountain pass and couldn't back out without getting hit or go forward. The shells just kept going over the top of the turret. I could feel the whizzing of them, and they were armor piercing, and they were trying to get it down on the turret, and it would hit in the dirt on the other side of the tank. They just kept whizzing over there, and my gunner said, "Come on down—you'll get your head blown off." Well, later that day Sgt. Schwartzlander in his tank got under the gun and could not get out free. So we kept the Germans' gunners busy from getting to him. So he had to button up for all night. He kept rotating his turret all night long to keep anybody off of it. Next morning we took care of the guns to free him. His hair turned white over night.

Winding narrow mountain paths have guns waiting in almost every curve. I think the worse memories are that we ran over men. I hope they were dead—now that's Germans I'm speaking of. I just worried whether they were wounded or not. I can still hear the crushing of the heads, and popping like pumpkins being squashed, and our tank tracks collected flesh and blood. And it was a terrible smell, but it went away grinding through the sand and

rocks.

As we approached Casole del Elsa, which was just below Pisa, and it was in the mountains. Resistance grew mightier and mightier, and we lost some more tanks. There was a T-road junction turning left and another T-road where I lost my last tank. That night my dear friend, O'Brian, pleaded with me to go with him, but there wasn't much I could do just going along being assistant driver because the lieutenant was in charge of this tank, and he said, "I'm afraid he's going to get me killed." Well, they were killed the next morning. This was probably the heaviest loss. Red had been with me from the beginning—torn in half by a projectile. I often wondered if I hadn't transferred him off the tank days before, he'd been saved—a guilt hard to overcome. It is each decision you make may change many lives and your own. Red and I entered the army the same time. We met at C company 69th and were together "I" company first armor regiment '41 to '44. Another week and he'd a gone home with me.

The next few days we had to reorganize with so many losses. I told Captain Ruppert I had some men that I thought should be rotated as they were pretty jumpy and couldn't take it any more. He said I should not worry 'cause I was going home. That was welcome news. I hated to leave the men. Within days we were sent to Naples by truck to a depot, and were there a couple of weeks waiting for a boat. I guess I should say, "ship" and not a boat. We had a small convoy and an aircraft carrier. Some protection. All the aircraft were damaged goods. They were going stateside to be repaired. Only one attack, as I remember. We ended up in Fort Dix, Jersey again. This time the Italian prisoners there were considered allies, so they were free to walk all over, and this didn't seem right to us. There were so few phones that we didn't get a chance to call home. I finally got a phone. I'd been away three years, so I had 30 days leave coming.

Let me tell you just a little story here. I got back to Flint where my wife lived. I found out we had to share cabs because of the war. A lady got in and insisted being taken to her house first because her husband needed his supper. The cabby said, "The soldier got in first." She carried on so much, I said, "Take her home first. I haven't seen my wife for three years, so another 30 minutes won't hurt." Boy did she ever shut up!

After 30 days I was ordered to Miami Beach for reassignment. I stayed

at the Royal Palm Hotel. Each day we were interviewed for placement. They needed tank commanders in the Pacific, so I was ticketed that for another tour. The medic checked me out as I had crying jags daily and the heat in Miami was too much for me and I would pass out. Captain Dunn rerouted me to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, north of Chicago. It was good duty. I was NCO for a motor pool. I had 90 men and 34 WACs. The women gave me more trouble than the men. To get special jobs, the girls would do anything—offer hotel rooms and so forth.

I finally got out in July of '45. You're asking if any officers stand out in your mind—I would say that General Harmon gave us more information and led us more successfully than any other. Of course, General Ward did a good job, too, but ... We had a Captain Gwen that came up through the ranks, a lieutenant, and he was an outstanding young officer until he got killed by a mine that got his jeep. We had General Patton for a while after the Kasserine Pass defeat, and we did very poorly with him. He was a lot of spit and polish, but he just never accomplished very much with us. And when General Harmon took over from him, that's when we really moved in North Africa. The last rank I reached while I was in service was sergeant. I was doing the duties of staff, but they had transferred in some staff sergeants and other NCOs, but they couldn't use them anywhere because they weren't trained in anything to do with tanks. And as far as honors, medals, all we got was "good conduct" badges handed out in the mess hall or in mess line. And that's about it.

Of course you were asking about my spiritual life. I didn't have any until I got there. That has changed, of course. That is utmost in my life at this time. And now let's see—humorous incidents?—Well, I told you about the taxi deal. What did the family do when you were gone? My dad just kept on working. I was gone almost five years, all told—nearly three years overseas. And I was discharged for the convenience of the government—that's what it says on the discharge. And homecoming was good. It'd have to be, after being over there for so long. And it was not too difficult. I went back to my regular job in the automotive supply, and from there I continued in the machine shop and auto work, and then I went to southern Michigan and started an International Farm Tractor implement business, and ran that for 30 years. Took my retirement to Florida. And—how do I feel when the war

was over? Well, why not the greatest, and Asia? The best—that was a terrible one over there. And did the military change my life and how? Yes, I had to learn to take charge—it gave me some leadership, and prepared me for things, but also it did something to my psyche. It was not until 1988, which would be about 45 years, before I could speak of all that I have told you. Even my wife never knew. But I always heard in coming rounds—nightmares.

In 1988 a questionnaire come from Army History and Military History, Carlyle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and it was 18 pages of questions about my combat, and I wasn't going to do anything about it, but I finally did. My wife talked me into it, and that helped a lot. It's still hard. The service made a difference all right. It taught me to kill people, and to kill Germans in particular, and it's been hard to get over that, trying to forgive them for ... They fight to the last man and all of a sudden give up, and you're not to kill them then, and it makes you real mad. I'm trying to get over it. You've got to give forgiveness or you're really in big troubles. So I married a girl who is of German descent. You can't top that, and here I'm talking to a interview lady that worked for German Air Force. And we're getting pretty good, I think.

John



Between my "Pressing Duties"



The old Ironsides
Come from the wooden
frigate "Constitution" of
the 1790-1820s winning
so many battles - It is still in
Boston Harbour, Training ship-Mercy,