



World War II Experiences

Edward E. Oliver

(written July, 1987)

Issued at the time of his passing, December 8, 1999



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It was July 3, 1944 as we boarded a landing craft headed for the coast of France, on the Brest Peninsula. This was the moment we had been waiting for - to enter combat against the enemy. I had been training for this ever since I had enlisted in the Army on July 1, 1940 (not quite 19). In 1942 I graduated from the Infantry Officer Candidate School (OCS) and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant. Since December, 1943, we had been in Northern Ireland training for this encounter. We were a platoon of the 121st Infantry Regiment of the 8th Infantry Division. Our platoon consisted of 40 enlisted men and a platoon leader. I was the platoon leader. The platoon was made up of three squads of riflemen and one squad of machine gunners.

"D" Day (June 6, 1944) had passed, and the original American invaders had advanced inland approximately 15 miles up the coast of France toward the city of Brest. As soon as we landed we were directed to the front lines to replace the 82nd Airborne Division. We took up positions in the forest and started digging our foxholes for protection from German artillery fire falling sporadically throughout the area. In the early morning of July 5, we entered combat by attacking the German infantrymen scattered in the woods in front of us. As we attacked down a hill and across a dirt road, I was struck by a bullet that lodged in the buckle of my pack - just opposite my heart. Fortunately it was a ricochet bullet and did not hit me full force. As we advanced and looked over the hedge row we spotted many enemy soldiers partially hidden in and behind the trees. As one German stepped out to fire his rifle I shot him in the shoulder and he fell, but he got up and I shot him again. While moving forward I stopped to view my first victim. In his shirt pocket was a picture of him standing beside a young lady - maybe his wife. It was a very sad moment for me, but we had no time for sorrow or emotions - it was kill or be killed.

On our 2nd day of combat we were ordered to make a night attack on the enemy in front of us. This was a big mistake - many of our troops were shot by our own rifle fire in the darkness. As we started to cross one field we noticed the tracer bullets streaking well over our heads from enemy machine guns on our right. We decided to proceed by advancing under the tracers. To our surprise they were firing regular bullets in the space below the tracers. This was a trick we never forgot. All of our fighting during these first few days was against a scattered enemy acting as a delaying force. We had not met the full force of the German Army, but this was soon to end.

Our rations during combat consisted of "K" rations. These were packages containing well-sealed portions of meat, crackers, candy or fruit bars, and cigarettes. There was a breakfast, lunch and dinner package. Actually, they weren't too bad, very filling and full of proteins. The only times we received regular food was when we were in reserve, and things were relatively quiet.

In the middle of July we advanced to a river south of St. Lo, where we dug in on a hill overlooking the river and the enemy entrenched on the far side. I was dug in near a dirt road that led across the river and into enemy lines. Occasionally there was no firing from either side, and it would seem like a vacation spot. I remember an American jeep, loaded with rear-echelon soldiers, driving casually down the road headed into the enemy lines. They stopped by my hole wondering why I was hiding, and asked the direction to the division headquarters. I pointed out to them the enemy positions - I have never seen a jeep turn so quickly and drive off in the opposite direction.

We stayed at the river for two days and finally attacked across the river. The river was narrow at this point, and we were able to throw portable bridges across, some of us just waded across. As we entered the woods we suffered heavy casualties from a new type of artillery called "tree bursts." These shells exploded as they touched the tree tops, and scattered shell fragments and tree splinters over a large area. During this attack the platoon on our right was almost totally wiped out. I heard a muffled groan from the woods nearby and went in to investigate. Lying on the ground, face up, was the platoon



leader, a friend of mine. He was trying to speak, but as he muttered, the skin and tissue covering his face flapped back and forth. His face was completely obliterated and he had other injuries to his body - he died soon after. During this battle, our regiment suffered approximately 50% casualties, dead and wounded. As we received partial replacement forces we took off in another attack without even getting acquainted with the new men. The missions of our platoon were the same whether we had 40 men or 15 men. I remember seeing movies where the commander would write a letter to the family of a soldier who was killed. This was not realistic, they died so quickly that it was impossible to write a letter - I didn't even know their names.

After the battle of St. Lo we started advancing in the direction of St. Malo, on the coast. A large group of Germans was holding out in the city in order to hold the peninsula. During this period our division became a part of the 3rd Army, commanded by Gen. George S. Patton, "old blood and guts." Some soldiers said it was out blood and his guts. We were assigned to the task of accompanying an armored division in its attack directly up the roads to St. Malo. Tanks always draw heavy enemy artillery fire, so we were in constant fear as we trudged up the open fields on the sides of the roads. En route we had to advance across a railroad track that had been built up. As I was leading my platoon over the tracks a German train approached slowly a mile or so in front of us firing mortar shells from a platform in front of it. One of the shells exploded near me and I was thrown several feet into the air and down into the ditch beside the tracks. I did not feel any sharp pains, but I knew I was hit. When the medic arrived he poured sulfa powder into the wound in my right side and told me that it hit my lungs. How did he know that? He could see smoke coming out of the wound - I was smoking a cigarette, as usual. My smoking had become a superstition because I never saw a person killed with a cigarette in his mouth or hand.

I was evacuated to a combat medical unit, a tent hospital, for the removal of the fragments. I was put in a line with other casualties awaiting surgery. Most of the men were unconscious, except me. Each tent was used for a specialty, one for legs and arms, one for heads, one for stomachs, etc. I could see orderlies removing large garbage cans with legs and arms protruding from the tops of the cans. Not very comforting to me. The surgeon removed 4 fragments, 2 of them from my lung. After a few days I was further evacuated to a large Army hospital in England until the middle of November.

I still had bandages on my wound when I was ordered back to the front lines, now in Germany. Infantry officers were hard to find, so many had become casualties. Especially in demand were the experienced infantry officers with MOS 1542. None of us, however, were anxious to return to combat, contrary to the popular belief. We were very lucky to still be alive - and now we had to go back. How much chance did we have of surviving again?

I rejoined my old regiment (121st Infantry) in Hurtgen Forest in Germany. It was a gruesome sight - all the trees had been leveled and the ground was almost full of bloated bodies of American soldiers from the three divisions that had fought there previously. Fortunately, it was very cold and all the bodies were frozen. I was assigned as company commander of Company C and promoted to 1st Lieutenant. It was Thanksgiving Day when I arrived. By the order of the President, we were all served Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings in our fox holes. Who could eat turkey with the bodies lying all over? Near me was a cat eating on the head of a dead soldier.

Combat brings out the worst in some people. A sergeant I knew became a collector of jewelry - watches, rings, and whatever else he could find on the dead bodies. He didn't care if it was American or German - he was not bigoted. When a body had bloated he often had difficulty, and he had to chop off the finger or the hand. And we often wonder if there are people in the U.S. who could commit the same atrocities of the Germans killing Jews.

We managed to hold our positions in Hurtgen Forest against heavy German artillery and ground attacks. We had the advantage of occupying the high ground. A few days after my arrival, the 2nd



Ranger Battalion came in on our right flank to secure a very strategic hill. The Rangers were a group of well-trained and dedicated soldiers - almost suicidal in the way they fought. When the Rangers arrived there were 500 of them - the next day there were only about 50 left. I was ordered to take my company to join the Rangers and to defend the forward slope of the hill. Normally, we never fight from forward slopes but from the sides and the top. I saw some Rangers stand up on the slope and fire machine guns directly down the hill in the face of the enemy. This is bravery - or stupidity, I don't know which. Eventually, we were replaced by another regiment of infantry.

I have never heard or read it, but I can assure you that the German infantry soldier had a definite advantage over us in terms of the quality of their weapons and ammunition. First of all, the cyclic rate of fire of their machine guns was at least twice the rate of ours. This meant that when they fired their machine guns at our lines, they would hit almost all of us. We couldn't do the same. Another thing was that they used smokeless ammunition and we couldn't locate their positions. Whereas we were almost afraid to fire our machine guns because we could be located quickly by the stream of smoke. Why couldn't we have the same type of ammunition?

Still in Hurtgen Forest, on the 17th of December, 1944, I was ordered to attack down a hill into the town of Untermabach on the Ruhr River. The town was crucial because it was the location of the only remaining dam and bridge for many miles. My company was at 100 men - full strength it was 193. Intelligence assured us that there were only a few Germans left in the town. As we charged confidently down into the town we were met by thousands of enemy paratroopers who pursued us into the basements of the houses. We attempted to keep them away by firing from the windows. The following morning, out of ammunition, we surrendered to the enemy.

How should a person react to surrendering to the enemy? Is it cowardly? Should we have run back to the woods and try to escape? One officer and several soldiers did try to run but they were shot in their tracks. Surrendering is not necessarily the easy way out. A big question in my mind was, did these German paratroopers know what our 82nd Airborne troops did to their prisoners? They shot them in cold blood to avoid having to escort them to the rear. Surprisingly, they allowed us to let our hands down after searching us. They didn't even remove our watches and other personal belongings.

I should add that the Battle of Hurtgen (also spelled Huertgen) Forest is known as the bloodiest battle of World War II, and I am sure bloodier than any battle since that time, including Korea and Vietnam. From September through December, 1944, 24,000 American soldiers were killed or wounded winning this battle. This is especially paradoxical since many experts have since confirmed that the battle was strategically unsound. What a price to pay for stupidity.

We were marched out of combat into Germany by a group of German military police. They were mostly old soldiers who were too old for combat. The Germans had removed our helmets and gloves before we started the march, so it was very cold and our hair and hands were very icy. The guards told us that "one man fly, ten men die." One of the Americans had been wounded in the leg, and he fell out of line and collapsed by the side of the road. We were worried that they would shoot some of us - I believe they thought about it but never did. During our march it became obvious that they were leading us through many towns to show off the American prisoners. Many town people would shout at us, some even threw rocks. On Christmas day we stopped in a little town and were given some knockwurst and coffee - the only food except bread we had received en route. As we approached the city of Cologne we could see the Rhine River and a large bridge - I was surprised that it was still standing after all the air attacks. As we approached the bridge we could see hundreds of German civilians crossing the bridge with their belongings. Some of them were riding a streetcar across the bridge. One of our guards stopped the streetcar, ordered the passengers off, and loaded us on board. He was tired and wanted a ride. How many people can say they crossed the Rhine on a streetcar during the war?



Cologne was almost a pile of rubble, parts of old buildings protruding all across the landscape. We were put in the basement of a partial building and given some soup if we could find containers for it. In a garbage heap, outside of the building, we found some old cans and used them.

The next morning we received new guards and were boarded on freight cars - 48 men to a car. Fortunately our trip was short, into the town of Falingbostel, near Dusseldorf. We got off the train and walked a short distance to Stalag XI B, a French camp for enlisted men. The American enlisted men were taken together to one part of the camp, and the officers put into a small enclosure in the camp. We joined 10-12 other American officers already there.

Our stay at Stalag XI B consisted primarily of sitting around in a small block building trying to keep warm. Since we were not furnished any fuel, we burned our bed boards. We were given 1/6 loaf of bread and a bowl of soup each day. Our conversations were mostly about exotic food, and about combat. Never was there a mention of women or sex. I guess when you are hungry, sex doesn't interest you - if you had a choice between a beautiful woman and a loaf of bread, the bread would have won without question. Our restroom consisted of a small room with 2 holes in the cement floor. We each had a wooden bed with a straw mattresses placed on 8-10 boards - that is, until we burned some of them. The mattresses came with built-in lice.

Sometime in February, 1945, more American officers joined us. One was a Major who was very outgoing and outspoken. Whenever the Commandant visited us the Major would say something like "You ignorant bastard, you don't know which end is up." Of course the Major knew that the commandant did not understand English. The German interpreter, who always accompanied the Commandant, apparently did not translate the Major's remarks correctly, because the Commandant always smiled. We later learned that the interpreter was actually a British intelligence officer who had lived in Germany for many years.

Early in March we had a visit from a German Naval officer who called out the names of 8 Americans, and told us to be prepared to take a train trip in the morning. One of the other officers advised us that he had the experience earlier and that we would go to an intelligence center for two weeks. The next morning we were boarded on a regular passenger car, with bars on the windows. After a day-long trip we arrived at Bremerhaven, on the coast. Bremerhaven, near Bremen, was a naval base and navy prison for American and British Naval officers. We were put in a small compound near the prison camp in isolation, one room for each of us. A guard paraded up and down the corridor in front of our rooms. Our meals were real good, they tasted surprisingly similar to our American "C" rations. On the 2nd morning, I was individually escorted to the headquarters and seated in an office. As a navy officer entered I stood up but did not salute as we were required for a superior officer. He bawled me out in Americanized English for not saluting. I informed him that we were the same rank and he backed off. He talked for some time about the ridiculousness of American involvement in the war against the Germans. He informed me of his life in America, and in Hawaii and in the Philippines. Then it struck me - I knew this man from Manila, Philippines. He was several years my senior, and he looked much like he did in 1937. He lived at the YMCA and so did my Dad and I. I can't remember his name now, but when I returned to the U.S. and told my Dad, he verified that was his name. I did not reveal my identify to him, because I didn't know what he might do. During the next two weeks we were interviewed continually by Germans in civilian clothes who spoke exactly like Americans. Sometimes they were nice, other times nasty. They asked me many questions about my trip over to Europe - how many ships on each side, in front, etc. When I said that I didn't remember I was told how stupid I was. Then he would proceed by explaining American ship formations. One day near the end of the 2 weeks, a German civilian came to my room and asked me if I wanted to radio a message to my family in America. I immediately said "Yes" and was escorted to a nearby building. A woman was there with the microphone in her hand, and I later learned that she was "Axis Sally" - the same woman who made numerous daily radio shows directed to Americans. They really wanted me to say that I was in good



condition, but I got by saying that I was "OK." The message was relayed to my family by some American ham radio operators.

One particular question was repeatedly asked of each of us, "How did you land in LeHavre, France - did the ship come into the dock, or did you come in by landing craft..." This was all they were after, because a short time later, German submarines made their last attack on LeHavre in a futile attempt to cut off the American supply route. They failed.

Shortly after being returned to Stalag XI B, we were marched inland to Brunswieg to a British officers camp (Oflag). As Americans we were boarded separately from the English officers, with Indian officers. This was a large prison camp with many prisoners. Several prisoners had radios they had made from various scraps, so we knew pretty well how the war was going. In early April, both the American and British forces were moving our way and we knew it wouldn't be long before we were found and released. The British officers hoped it would be a British unit that would free us, we of course hoped it would be Americans. On April 12, 1945, the American 30th Infantry Division arrived and we were free. Well, we weren't quite free because the Americans had to wire-photo our fingerprints to Washington, or London, to verify our nationality. During the two or three weeks we waited we were under American guards, but we managed to sneak out - they weren't too strict. One time we went to the city of Brunswieg and "visited" the homes of several German families. These were the same people who yelled and threw rocks at us before. We took their food and dared them to do something about it. No question, we were bitter. By the way, April 12 was the day that President Roosevelt died.

On about April 15, we were transported by truck to a newly-constructed American airfield to be flown back to France. When we arrived there were crowds of foreigners lining the airstrip waiting to board aircraft. We were a group of about 10 American officers wearing dirty clothes with no identification nor money. We found a small building that had a sign "Officers Mess". We went up and into the dining room while many of the staff and officers were demanding that we leave. One of our group advised them that we were American officers and that we would be fed - and we were. That day we were flown back to LeHavre, France. While at the American camp we were denied a new issue of clothing - do you know why - because officers were supposed to buy their own clothing, and we had no money. That is government red tape at its worst.

It was early May before we were boarded on a transport navy ship for our return voyage to the U.S. While en route, on May 12, I believe, we heard that the war in Europe was over. On our arrival in Boston we were welcomed home by a General, who told us that we shouldn't be ashamed that we had been prisoners. The thought had not entered my mind until then.

I was sent to Miami, Florida to be physically examined and to recuperate at a Miami hotel. After a month or two I was assigned to an Infantry training center at Camp Blanding, Florida. I was promoted to Captain and awarded the bronze star, the purple heart, and the combat infantry badge. On December 18, 1945 I was put on terminal leave at my request.

- Edward E. Oliver