

The combat stories of **WILLIAM PENNY**



Branch of Service: Army

Unit: 100th Infantry Division, 399th Infantry Regiment

Location: France

Wounded: Twice by shrapnel from mortar shells

William Penny describes dangerous missions and injuries he sustained while he was an Army rifleman in France.

These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



Before coming to the 100th, I was already in the Army and stationed in Puerto Rico, where I was attached to an anti-aircraft battery for nine months. The duty there was the best I ever had in the Army. My duty there ended in 1944 when I was sent back to the states on the USS George Washington and landed in Boston. After arriving, I was given orders to report to Fort Stewart, Georgia, which I found to be the pits with all the swamps and bugs. One day while a group of us were standing around, an officer dropped by and told us that if we didn't shape up real soon, they were shipping us out. We didn't believe a word of it but it wasn't long before we found out they were true to their word and found ourselves being sent to different places. The group I was with was sent up to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I was placed into the 399th as a rifleman.

After the training ended and we were sent to New Jersey, a buddy from the plains of Texas and I got leave to go over to New York City. Now, being an old country boy it was really something to see. I had never seen so many people in all my life in one place at once. There were so many it was hard to walk down the sidewalks. There we managed to get down to Times Square where we took in a show and met some girls. After the movie, we asked if we could see them again the following night and take in another show and they said sure.



Getting up the next morning we thought that we had dates that night, but we learned that all leaves had been canceled and we found ourselves making our way down the docks to a ship. As I boarded I asked someone, “What’s the name of this ship,” and was told it was the USS George Washington. At first I found the meals on the ship to be good and had some of the best bread you could ever eat, but after about the third or fourth day, all the meals started tasting the same.

I myself was never seasick, unlike many of the other guys who lined the side of the ship feeding the fish, as they called it. All the deck halls were slick from all the sick guys and made it hard walking around. I would also like to say at this time, some of the meals started looking like what the guys were throwing up. As we made our way over we ran into a bad storm and as if the guys weren’t sick enough, they were even worse. The smell below was getting to the point that it was unbearable and more than you could stand. At one point, I was lying in my hammock when all at once the ship shook so bad I thought we had been hit.

After the storm was over, things got back to normal. Poker, blackjack and other games broke back out on the top deck. This one old boy there on the deck was shooting dice and was ahead by \$20,000.00.

When we arrived in the port of Marseille, France we found it to have a number of ships the Germans had sunk making it hard for us use the port. It was dark by



the time I made my way down the cargo net on the side of the ship to a waiting landing craft. Being dark and having all my gear on my back, along with my rifle, I climbed down the net while being bounced against the side of the ship which was a real job. After finally getting to shore, we made our way outside of town to a field, where we spent the night.

It wasn't long after that until we loaded in the back of some good old GI 6 by 6 trucks and moved out for the front lines where we relieved the guys of the 45th. As we made our way down the road to the 45th, we could hear the faint sound of rifle fire off in the distance. As we did, this one boy kept saying "shit boys this is really it," so after that every time we heard the sound of rifle fire we would say 'this is it.'

I remember reaching out of my hole and pulling me a turnip. Boy was it sweet after eating so many rations. It was in that same field we were ordered to advance and as I started across the field some shrapnel from a mortar hit me. As my squad leader came by I told him I had been hit. Three medics cleaned my wound and asked if I could walk and I said I thought I could. With that, I made my way to the aid station where I was kept overnight. The next morning I was told I could return to my unit so I caught a ride with a jeep.

After returning to my squad, and before my wound had time to heal, I was wounded again by mortar fire and was hit in four places by shrapnel. This time I was



sent on to a hospital. Speaking of getting wounded, we had this one boy hit in both cheeks of his butt by a German while he was digging in.

Lying there in bed, I got behind on my eating until one day this guy in the bed next to me said, "Get our mess kit and go down and get into the chow line." There I learned that I could go through the line as many times as I wanted, which I did. During my second and third time through the line, this French worker that they had there serving the chow started looking hard at me.

The hospital itself was set up in this large house that had one bathroom. The day it came my turn to use the tub it was the greatest thing after going so long without a proper bath.

One day I went down and got a haircut and when I returned, one of the guys said that a nurse had been looking for me and that I needed to find her. The nurse he was talking about was a Lieutenant with black hair and a real looker, if you know what I mean, and when I found her she was mad. The first thing she asked was where was I when she came looking for me and I told her that I had gone and gotten a haircut. She said I needed to go down and get an x-ray.

It wasn't until January when I was able to return to my unit and by that time I found that some of the older guys were gone and there were a number of replacements. When it came time for us to cross the river, the engineers built a pontoon bridge across the



river and set up smoke machines to cover our crossing. As we made our way across, the Germans were shelling us from the hillsides.

One time four of us were put out on a roadblock that had a small building next to the road. Two of us would stand watch while the other two took a break. One night I had just stepped into the building to have a smoke when someone said “Hey Penny, you better get out here.” As I walked out, he pointed down the road at a shadow making its way towards us. I told him to get the other two guys. All at once, this man took off running back down the road and as he did I couldn’t see him but I could hear his boots. I raised my rifle and took aim at the sound of his boots and fired three times. After I shot, the sound of him running away stopped and the only sound I heard was him walking back towards me. As he got closer, I could see that he had his hands over his head saying “Comrade, comrade” as he walked up to us. He looked to be about 25 and one of the other guys took his pistol from him. Looking at him I could see that I had hit him in two places. One in the arm and the other had grazed him in his head. He was sent back for questioning. The following day our captain sent for us. The first thing he asked was who shot the guy last night. At first I thought I was going to be in trouble but I spoke up and said I was the one. He said, “Penny you need to adjust your sights on your rifle. You almost missed him.”



Out in the field, there were always two men to a hole. If there was hot chow, one would go back and get some for both of you. This one time the call for hot chow came and I told the guy with me to go ahead. He was gone for some time and when he returned he had a cup of stew. Thinking he had already eaten because he was gone so long, I ate the stew thinking it was mine while he was sitting there eating some rations. After I had finished the cup of stew I set the cup down and that's when he said he was going to eat his half. I felt so sorry and told him so and he said that it was okay and we became foxhole buddies after that.