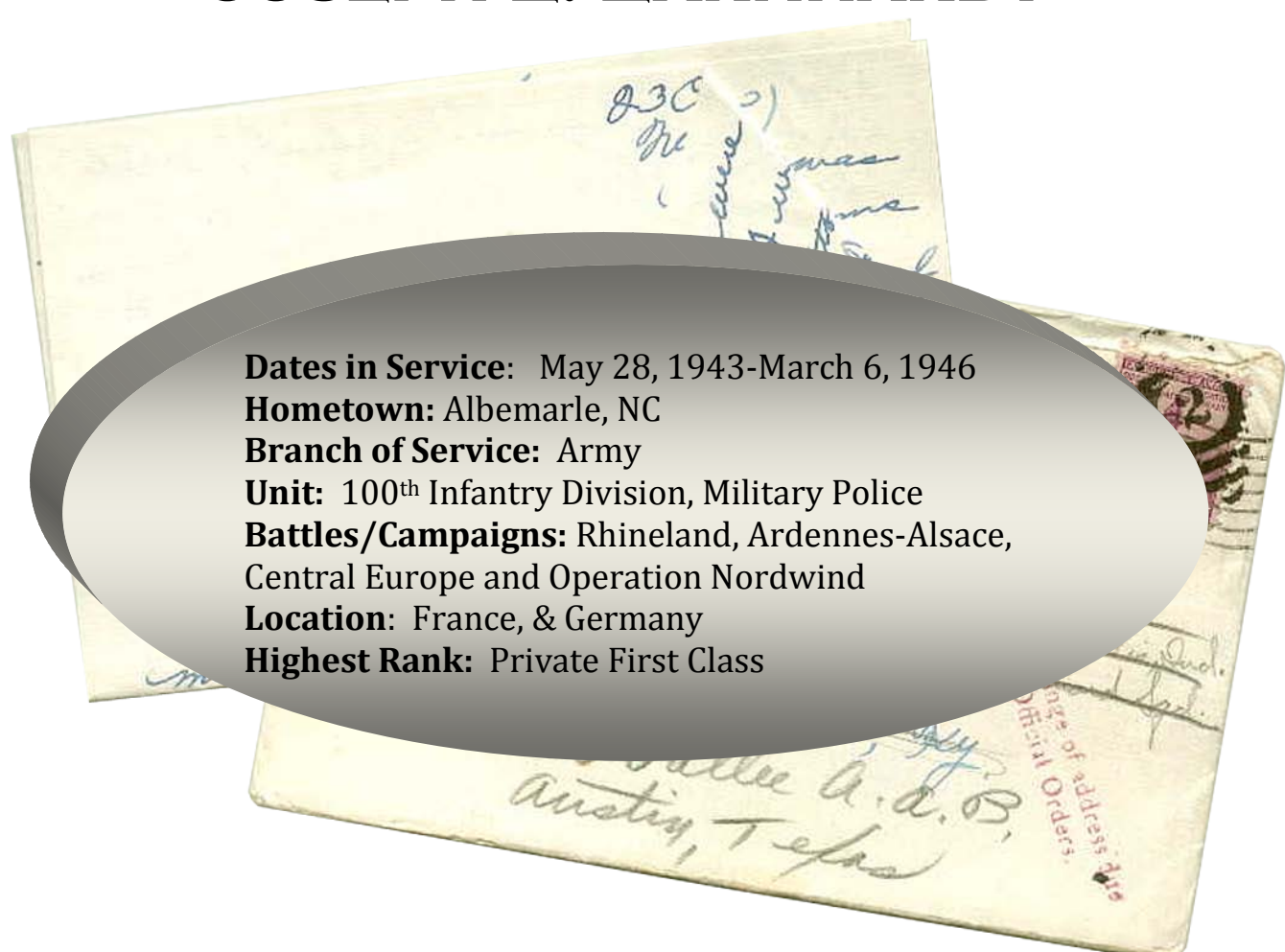


## The combat stories of **JOSEPH L. EARNHARDT**



**Dates in Service:** May 28, 1943-March 6, 1946  
**Hometown:** Albemarle, NC  
**Branch of Service:** Army  
**Unit:** 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Military Police  
**Battles/Campaigns:** Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace,  
Central Europe and Operation Nordwind  
**Location:** France, & Germany  
**Highest Rank:** Private First Class

Joseph Earnhardt recalls his time as an MP in Europe, losing his best friend, and earning a Bronze Star for his actions while moving tanks across a bridge the Germans were shelling.

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.



In 1933, at the age of 9, I was placed in Oxford Orphanage after my father passed away, and spent the following ten years there along with 150 boys and 150 girls, who I always felt to be my brothers and sisters. In the years to come, that sentiment was also how I felt about all the guys in the 100<sup>th</sup> Military Police. The Orphanage had what was called a “Home Guard.” With the news of Pearl Harbor it made us realize we weren’t just playing soldiers, and a number of the boys joined the Navy, Army and Marines right after learning that war had been declared.

After graduating from John Nichols High School at Oxford Orphanage (Masonic Home for children) and their Graphic Arts school in 1943, I was inducted into the Army on the fourth of June in 1943 at Fort Bragg N.C. During the two weeks there, I was issued my uniforms and other clothing. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, I received my orders and found myself on the way to Fort McClellan, Alabama, where I received my thirteen weeks of basic training. As in all basic training, there was a lot of marching and we went on twenty-five mile hikes, along with the weapons training, which covered the M1 rifle and the Browning BAR.

After completing my basic training on September the 23<sup>rd</sup> 1943, I was transferred to Fort Jackson, South Carolina with eleven other guys who also had been in the ASTP. As we arrived on base, we were ordered to report to the Provost Marshal’s office of the 100<sup>th</sup>



Infantry Division. There he informed us that he would like us to join his Military Police Platoon. After explaining what it would be like as an infantryman in an infantry regiment, all twelve of us chose the MPs. It wasn't long after that I was part of a platoon sent to bring prisoners back to the base that had come in from Africa. Another duty we had to pull was patrolling around the base and in the city of Columbia, South Carolina.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1943 we left Fort Jackson to join up with the 100<sup>th</sup> on the Tennessee Maneuvers, which matured us and built our confidence in preparing us for what lay ahead in France and Germany. On these maneuvers, we learned how to operate in the mountains in all kinds of weather while directing traffic, as well as moving troops and equipment. Along with this, we also had the duty to patrol and police the town in the area. From Carthage to the vicinity of Murfreesboro, the 100<sup>th</sup> Division learned how to fight as a team and live under almost impossible conditions from rain to mud.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1944 we finished our winter maneuvers and moved to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for more training while the division built up to full strength. As Military Police, we continued in our duties of directing traffic on the base and pulled duty patrolling in the city of Fayetteville. For the most part, the troops from the 100<sup>th</sup> on pass in Fayetteville didn't cause trouble, whereas the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne on the other hand



gave us a few problems. Those who were arrested for fighting and drinking were locked up at the local jail and remained there until two o'clock in the morning.

At one point I became a little disappointed due to having been promised a higher rank, but never received it because most of the new troops coming into the division ranked Corporal to Sergeant. It was also while at Fort Bragg that I learned how to handle and ride a motorcycle, while receiving other MP training.

By September the 30<sup>th</sup> 1944, we loaded on a train and moved to a staging area at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where we waited for further orders. As we waited, I was able to get a pass and went over to New York a few times with a buddy who knew some girls who worked in a bank. It was quite an experience for this old country boy.

Word finally came down and we found ourselves boarding a transport ship bound for the European Theater of Operations. On October the 6<sup>th</sup>, I boarded the George Washington with our Military Police Platoon along with some 6,000 other guys of the 399<sup>th</sup>. It wasn't long after boarding that there was a outbreak of crab lice and everyone had to line up to be sprayed down, which became a very uncomfortable time. We slept in canvas hammocks that were tied to metal poles three high and if the guy above you was a little on the heavy side it didn't allow you much room to slide into your bunk.

After being at sea for some two weeks, we pulled



into the harbor of Marseilles, France on October the 20<sup>th</sup>. Late that same day, I made my way down the rope ladder to a landing craft, which took us ashore. It was dark by the time I got ashore and no sooner had we landed than a plane strafed us. As we got to the beach, I climbed in the back of a two and a half ton truck, which moved us the 12 miles to Septemes, where we set up our tents for the night. The following morning we helped with the digging of the latrines.

It wasn't long until we began our duty of directing traffic, equipment and troop movement as they came ashore and moved into a staging area. At the end of the following weeks, orders came to move out and we found ourselves heading north to the area near the Rhine River where the 100<sup>th</sup> Division was relieving the 45<sup>th</sup> Division near St. Remy. It was here we began what was called the Vosges Mountain campaign on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 1944.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> of November to November the 24<sup>th</sup>, the 397<sup>th</sup> and 399<sup>th</sup> liberated fourteen towns from Raon L' Etape to Oberhaslach and covered some 35 miles, with the taking of 1,037 prisoners. As we came into Raon L' Etape, we set up in the town hall, with the Division Headquarters arriving the following day and setting up in the town square. No sooner had we arrived than we had to have troops take out a sniper in the church steeple. The civilians had rounded up some women who had collaborated with the Germans and





were shaving their heads before they stripped them of their clothes and ran them out of town.

During my time with the MPs, I came to know a number of the guys I served with. Captain Alden K. Small was in the headquarters as an assistant to General Burrell. After the war he became an active member of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the North and South Carolina chapters. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Ewing G. "Red" Miller received a battlefield commission from Sergeant to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. during the war. We often checked with the engineers to see if the roads were clear when directing convoys. We were on duty together quite often. Sergeant Henry L. Houston was my squad leader and after the war worked with the Charlotte, N.C. school system. Henry and his wife, along with my wife and me, attended some 10 of the 100<sup>th</sup> Division reunions together. He and his wife always invited about a dozen MP couples to their mountain home each year. PFC Joseph F. Myers was on duty with me the day he was hit as we returned across the bridge. Joseph passed away the following day from his wounds. Other men I served with were PFC Edward S. Bahm, PFC Thomas A. McPherson, PFC Joseph M. Patt, PFC Edward J. Roberts, Sgt. Walter S. Moll, CPL. John C. Morgan, Sgt. Robert W. Pace, Sgt. George W. Greene, CPL. John L. Wagner, Sgt. Lester D. Young and PFC. Hewlett Fagan.

One of the first things we had to do as we came into the towns and villages was collect all the firearms. By



the time we finished, there would be a wagonload of guns. I recall this one time having received a letter from my grandfather whom I had lived with before being sent to the orphanage, asking if I came across a shotgun, that he would like it. Returning to the town and after explaining to them how I wanted to send one to my grandfather, I was told to leave his address and it would be taken care of. As I left I thought that maybe they would but if they didn't, it wasn't going to be a big deal. Do you know, they didn't send him just one, but three!

From Raon L' Etape we worked our way north, liberating towns and villages along the way through the Maginot Lines until we reached the area of Bitche. While the battle for Bitche was going on, it was the duty of the Military Police to guard a large motor pool. Fred Mills, who was in one of our squads, took a hit in his leg and was the only one of the MPs to receive a Purple Heart.

I don't recall anything special about Christmas. If we were near our mess tent we had some warm food, but most of the time I was out on duty and either had C or K rations with me. I myself was Protestant and a lot of my buddies were Catholic, so I attended Mass with them as time allowed.

For the most part, it was our duty to keep all the convoys moving as they made their way to and from the front lines, keeping the guys up there in contact with the supplies they needed. My biggest problem was trying to



keep my feet from freezing off as I stood in knee-deep snow while directing traffic at night. To keep my feet warm, I started wrapping my feet in paper before putting my boots on.

We even directed some British vehicles. These British soldiers would stop along the roadside and have tea. Most of our duties were behind the lines but that's not to say we weren't far from the shelling. There were times I would be directing convoys and had to jump into the roadside ditch due to being strafed by enemy planes. As individual vehicles came by, we would stop them and ask a number of questions because we were told German troops were dressing in American uniforms.

After taking Bitche, it seemed like the Germans started surrendering by the droves. I recall in one town having to stand guard over about 100 prisoners during the night as we waited on the arrival of the trucks to pick them up and move them back to a POW camp. We were getting so many prisoners at a time we couldn't get trucks fast enough to take them off our hands. As we received the Germans, one of the first things we did was search for their wallets and as we came across the SS soldiers, we separated them from the others. For the most part they never gave us any trouble and were glad the war was over for them. The civilians of the towns and villages we liberated were all glad to see us. They would come out to hug you and offer you something to





eat or drink. As far as giving us any trouble, they didn't once they learned we were in control.

My most impressive memory was the battle for Heilbronn, Germany. We had just laid our bedrolls out for the night in an old mill building in Eppingen Germany, which is near Heilbronn. Around 2:00 in the morning, an officer came in saying he needed a detail to go into Heilbronn. Joe Myers and I were picked to go with him. On our arrival to a building they were using to direct tanks across a pontoon bridge, I advised the officer we were from the 100<sup>th</sup> MP Platoon and were there to help in the directing of the tanks across the bridge. No sooner had the engineers completed one track across the bridge than I ran for the other side and, as I did, the bridge took a hit from the Germans, knocking out a part of it. I had taken cover against an embankment.

On the other side, Joe and I dug a hole just under the old bridge in the embankment and were maybe about 100 yards from the pontoon bridge. As we sat there, a signalman came running across, dragging a phone line and phone. After putting a stick in the ground next to our hole he hung the bag and phone on it. Looking at him I said, "Ain't no one going to be calling here." Low and behold a colonel from the artillery called a number of times for help in directing fire.

As we sat there waiting on the engineers to finish working on the bridge, we could hear the fight raging on



just above us in the factory. For the most part as we sat there, we had more incoming shells there on the banks of the river than small arms fire. A few hours later the engineers laid a new track and the first tank made its way across. No sooner had we gotten it across than I guided it a 100 yards to a place behind a building. From there the tank made its way down a narrow dirt road and every time it left the cover of the building, it came until small arms fire. While this was going on, the second tank started making its way across the bridge and, as it did, another round came in and hit the bridge, knocking a track out again. This went on for about twelve hours, starting with us arriving at six in the morning and continuing until six that evening, which by that time we had only gotten four tanks across safely.

By evening Joe and I were advised we were being relieved and we started running back across the bridge. Just as I made it into the building where headquarters was set up, Joe took cover behind the old bridge. Just as I got inside, they told me my buddy had been hit by an incoming round. Hearing it, I rushed back and there was Joe just lying as they were placing him on the stretcher. The following day Joe died from the shrapnel that had hit him in his head and I felt as if I had lost my brother.

We learned later they found some German youths in a tower who had been sitting there and directing fire for the German troops who were shelling the bridge. Joe Myers was the only person out of the Military Police



Platoon, which was made up of ninety men, lost during the war. Joe was awarded the Silver Star and I was awarded the Bronze Star for our action during the battle for Heilbronn. Joe's father and brother were members of the New York City Police Department.

Following Heilbronn, the division liberated town after town until we had reached Stuttgart, Germany where our platoon lived in Gieslingen until July 3, 1945, my birthday. It was also there that we built a ball field honoring Joe Myers.

After the war was over, we were sent to Stuttgart, Germany as occupation troops where we did our usual MP duties working with the local police until November the 20<sup>th</sup> 1945. We didn't have any real big problems with the ex-German soldiers or civilians. The biggest problem we had to deal with was the Black Market that was going on in the plaza in the middle of Stuttgart. Even there, the big thing was having to break up arguments.

From there we were moved to Esslingen, Germany and remained there until January the 25<sup>th</sup>. Our next stop was Elwaugen, Germany and we were there until February the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Our last stop before heading home was Camp Top Hat in Antwerp, Belgium where, after living in twelve man tents, rain and mud for two weeks, we crowded on board the victory ship SS Sheepshead Bay and headed out through the North Sea. As we passed the Azores we ran into a big storm causing the ship not to



make any headway. On March the first of 1946 as we arrived in the port of New York and passed by the Statue of Liberty, a big shout went up. I think everyone was thankful to be home again and able to start a good life.