

Memories of My Service and Experiences during World War II

by Philip E. Louer

When I graduated from New Castle High school in June 1941, I wanted to go to college to study electrical engineering. Penn State was my choice as the best I could afford, but I did not have enough money to get started right away. I went to work to earn some money, first at the Telephone Company, then at the Johnson Bronze factory in New Castle.

After one year, I realized that I would be serving in the military eventually, and, since I still did not have enough money to go to college, I enlisted in US Army Air Corps on July 27, 1942 in New Castle, PA. By enlisting while still at age 18, I was allowed to pick the branch of service, and since I had experience and interest in radio maintenance and operation, I selected the Army Air Corps as the ideal branch to apply my experience, get additional training, and contribute to the defense effort.

With other enlistees, I went to Pittsburgh for overnight stay and induction into the Army. I stayed at my Brother Jack Louer's home that night in Wilksburg, a suburb of Pittsburgh. He and Virginia lived only two doors from the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, a noisy existence. They had just had a new baby son born the previous December, Jay. It was certainly a pleasant evening to spend with them.

I was sent to New Cumberland, PA the next day for initial medical examination, shots, and uniform clothing issue. The next move was to St. Petersburg Florida for basic training. The trip down there was on a slow troop train, it seemed like days to get there. The trains were old steam engines, and the cars were not air conditioned, which contributed to the travel discomfort. In St. Petersburg, we were quartered in resort hotels, doing marching, calisthenics and training in the streets. It was very hot down there in the (August) summer. There were many heat stroke casualties. After a month in St. Petersburg, we were moved over to Clearwater, Florida for continuation of the same training. We stayed in an old wooden hotel, reportedly owned by Henry Ford.

Radio School

In Sept. 1942, I was sent to Sioux Falls, SD for radio school training. This was a new base, and we were housed in wooden barracks that had just been completed, with no insulation, and heated by pot bellied coal stoves, three stoves in each barracks. The weather was very cold there; it even snowed in September that year. We received fundamental training in radio electronics, and in sending and receiving International Morse Code. Code was the basic long-range communications method in those days. I learned the code pretty well and was able to receive up to 35 words a minute,

which was the fastest I could write it down in longhand. In early November, I became sick with pneumonia, principally from sleeping next to those hot coal stoves, and then getting up and going out in the cold. I spent a few weeks in the hospital, and then got to go home for a week on recovery furlough at the end of November.

Kelly Field, Texas

When I returned from furlough, I found that I was among a list of students who were being sent to Kelly Field, Texas for assignment to the Army Airways Communications Service, (AACS). The others had already shipped out while I was on furlough, so I traveled by myself on trains to San Antonio, arriving there in mid-December. This assignment was for advanced training in the communications systems.

While at Sioux Falls, I had become a good friend with LeRoy Woerner from Fredericksburg, Texas, and Dick Phillips from Steelton, PA. LeRoy is on the right in the picture, Dick is in the middle. As it would happen, both Dick and I were transferred to Kelly Field, but LeRoy was not. Even so, LeRoy communicated with his parents, and they invited Dick Phillips and me to visit their home in



LeRoy, Dick, Philip

Fredericksburg for the Christmas holiday. It was about 80 miles north of San Antonio. We went up there for Christmas. The Woerners had three sheep ranches; along with a wool and grain supply business. On one of the ranches, while we were picnicking, I was riding one of the horses, which really didn't want me on him. He raced for the barn, across a field of small trees, one of which caught me on the top of my head, tearing off my scalp, and knocking me unconscious. They found me shortly, and called an ambulance. The trip to the hospital was 45 minutes, but a good doctor sewed my scalp back in place. The doctor happened to be an Army doctor home on leave, so he arranged for me to stay in the Fredericksburg hospital through the next week for recovery.

Control Tower Service

After further training at Kelly Field in AACCS organization and in communications methods, I was sent to Kearney Field, Nebraska, arriving there in mid January 1943. Kearney was a new base in the middle of Nebraska, and the small AACCS detachment had only one responsibility—to operate the control tower. I had not received any training in control tower operation, but it was easy to learn on the job. The tower was of wood construction, poorly heated, and equipped with four radio receivers to cover the frequencies in use. It was very cold at night in that tower; we had to have fur-lined flight clothing to keep warm. The radio transmitter for the tower was located in a shed on the ground, and failed quite often, sometimes when we had aircraft coming in.

Kearney was a staging base for B-17 aircraft on their way to England. A unit would come in, do some flight training for a few weeks, and then deploy to England. Some movie stars were in these groups. Jimmy Stewart was a pilot on one of the aircraft, and Clark Gable was a navigator on another one.

I spent six months there at Kearney. I enjoyed the tower operation, but sometimes it was rather hectic, especially when a lot of aircraft were coming in or going out at one time. We had many sand storms during March, very windy out there. We had opportunities to ride in the B-17 aircraft occasionally with the local base pilots. The B-17 was the largest bomber in the Army Air Corps at that time; it later became the staple of the bombing force operating out of England.

Army Specialized Training

In June 1943, I learned that I could qualify for some college education through the newly established Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Purportedly, this program was intended to lead to officer training. I was a corporal at the time, and I wanted the education, so I applied.

I was accepted in the ASTP, sent to Laramie Wyoming for initial orientation, and then to Yale University. At Yale, we were housed in Calhoun College, one of the dormitories. There were a total of about 400 of us there in the program. A lucky break for us, the Army Air Corps Band was stationed at Yale during that time under the direction of Glenn Miller, who had a big band prior to the war. They marched every afternoon for the flag ceremonies on the Green in New Haven. They also put on concerts for us to attend. I stayed at Yale through the winter of 1943-44, taking regular classes for the freshman year.

I did well, finishing number three in the class. I thought this would help me to go into advance classes, but, unfortunately, the whole program was canceled.

Infantry Assignment

On March 31st, they put us all on a troop train bound for Camp Pickett, VA. When we arrived there on April 1st, 1944, we found that we were now in the 78th Infantry Division, as replacements for the privates who had been sent over to England to fill a replacement pool for the upcoming invasion

of Europe. Since we had given up any rank we had to go to ASTP, we were all privates again, but now in the infantry. This was a real shock to all of us; there was no way out.

We had to go through the infantry training at Pickett through the summer of 1944, with division maneuvers at Camp A. P. Hill. This was a very rough time; especially in the way the division cadre treated us. They were of much different backgrounds than any of us, they loved the infantry and we hated it. The 78th division would deploy to Europe later in the fall.

I was in Company C of the 310th Infantry Regiment. A very energetic captain commanded our company; I can't remember his name. He was always leading us in marches and runs, and conveyed the impression that he was the very best, and that we should mimic him. Our first sergeant, Sergeant Hartley, was the ideal first sergeant; very understanding and fair to all.

My platoon sergeant was Sergeant King; an Army veteran of ten years, married and had a young baby. He was not very patient with us new guys; he played the role of a tough sergeant very well. This was the weapons platoon of an infantry company, composed of a machine gun squad possessing two .30 caliber air-cooled machine gun units, and a mortar squad possessing three 60mm mortar units. I was assigned to one of the 60mm mortar squad units, commanded by Sergeant Sperleng. We trained on the mortars, the machine gun, rifles, and pistol while there. We went through all the rigors of infantry training.

While training at Pickett, we were able to get passes to go to the cities near Blackstone occasionally. I met Marie Proffitt at the USO in Richmond on one of these weekend passes, I believe this was in May of 1944.

I went up there just about every weekend after that through the summer. The invasion of Europe took place on June 4th that year. This is a picture of me that summer in Richmond.

The division was getting ready to deploy about the end of September, so the first sergeant let me make extra trips to Richmond. I was able to get some of my savings money to buy an engagement ring the last week we were at Pickett.

Overseas Deployment

The division deployed first to Camp Kilmer, NJ for staging prior to loading into ships for transport. Some of us got a pass to visit New York for one day before shipping out to Europe. The picture below was taken on this trip. In our athletic training, I cracked a rib in my chest. This would not delay my deployment; they taped me up and sent me on.

We deployed to England on October 13th, on Navy



Philip in Richmond, 1944



Visit to New York before shipping out to Europe

transports in a large convoy, protected by Navy warships. The ship I was on rolled badly in the rough seas, and I was sick most of the trip. We arrived in England on the 25th of October, a long trip because of the large convoy.

I don't remember where we landed in England, but we moved into some houses in Bournemouth, England. In mid November, we deployed to France, landing at Le Havre. We camped in tents in a muddy field just inland from the coast for a few days. It was cold and rainy most of the time.

Thanksgiving was the third Thursday in November that year (one of President Roosevelt's initiatives to give more time between Thanksgiving and Christmas). I remember having our Thanksgiving dinner in that muddy field, along with a short religious service prior to moving to the front. That service was very meaningful to me. We knew that all of us were destined for combat on the front in a little while, and none of us knew who would survive and who would not. I know we felt it very deeply when we sang the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers". The inspiration from the words of that hymn provided strength to me on many occasions after that.

In a day or so, we were then loaded into railroad boxcars, called "Forty and Eight's" (for the capacity limits of 40 men or 8 mules). Each boxcar was lined with straw, just like as if mules were going to be loaded. Instead, we were loaded 40 men to a car. Fortunately the trip was less than a daylong. The train took us to a small town, Eupen, Belgium, about 14 miles behind the front (which, at that time, was just inside Germany).

Movement To the Front

After a few days in Eupen, we were assembled into march formation to move up to the front during the night of December 5th. It was then that we learned that our highly energetic proud company commander was missing! We did not know what happened, but there were rumors that he deserted, but we really didn't know at that time. A First Lieutenant from Company "B" was assigned to command our company. First Sergeant Hartley was promoted to Second Lieutenant and given the platoon left by our new commander. We marched nearly all night to the front, carrying full packs and ammunition. It was about 14 miles to our destination.

While moving down a road near to the front, a shot rang out, and one of the men started to groan with pain. We all scurried off the road into the adjacent woods, thinking that a

sniper was nearby. I had to admire the actions of the medics, they responded by running up the road without regard for their own safety. It turns out a soldier had accidentally shot himself in his foot with his rifle, which was slung upside down on his shoulder.

We arrived in the small German town of Lammersdorf during that night. We immediately moved into the houses to get off the streets. Most of these houses had occupants, only women. The two women in the house we moved into wanted to get out, but we wouldn't let them, figuring they were going to get news to the Germans that we had arrived. We later learned that a few German soldiers were hiding in the village as snipers. These houses were within the range of German artillery, and since these German snipers were in the village, we needed to be very careful, especially when we had to use the out-house about 60 feet behind the house!

Into Combat

The 78th Division attacked the German positions across the Siegfried Line just outside of the village on December 13, 1944. The map shows the relationship of the towns, and the penetration accomplished by the division that first couple of days. The Siegfried line was a fortified line composed of many armed concrete pillboxes along rows of concrete "teeth" about four feet high, designed to prevent tank or vehicle movement through the line.



Our company was initially in reserve; however, we were called out the first afternoon to help out one of the other companies that was having a hard time near Rollesbroich. We moved out of Lammersdorf down a hill and up through the heavy forest. We came under heavy machine gun fire and pinned down. The fire was coming from over the hill and soon stopped – I could not see what made that happen. I was surprised at myself as I started scrambling up the hill behind the trees to see if I could do something about it.

Right about this time we were called back to Lammersdorf, and then up to the town of Simmerath, where the 309th Regiment and the 2nd Ranger Battalion were having a hard time. After advancing a few miles, a counterattack by the Germans had driven these units back from Kesternich, and one of our platoons was cut off behind the German lines in the town of Kesternich.

An interesting event took place on our move to this new position. When we approached Lammersdorf, there were US troops all stationed behind the houses with rifles aimed at us along with some tanks. It was then that we learned that an order had come down that US troops were not to wear overcoats. We had not received the order, so we had our coats on. This order was issued because many German soldiers had infiltrated behind our lines, all in their own

uniforms, but wearing US overcoats over them. Little did we know that this was the first activity preceding the attack they were preparing for a few days later, the Ardennes Offensive.

From Lammersdorf, we moved up the roads for about a mile to Simmerath, the last half of which was openly exposed to German artillery fire. This was in the middle of the day, and it turned out to be almost disastrous. We were constantly under artillery fire, able to move only very short distances between volleys. I don't know how many were lost during this move, but our own platoon lost about 12 to 14 men out of the 35 assigned.

After getting into Simmerath, the company and platoon leaders moved into the basements of the stone houses there, (no local residents living here at this time), but the rest of us had to dig holes for positioning our weapons to defend against a counterattack which had already started. We were constantly under fire during this time. Because we were located out on a point, we received German artillery fire from three directions, and, for a while, our own artillery was falling short. It was like we were boxed in from all directions. The ground was very cold and frozen in some places, and, with snow, we had a difficult time digging holes for our protection.

Right after we got dug in, a patrol was organized to rescue the trapped patrol in Kesternich. I was not a part of this patrol. They were successful in rescuing the platoon, I don't know if any casualties occurred.

During this time, our company was detached to the 2nd Ranger Battalion, the nearest 78th Division units were about a mile north of us. We were informed that the division's objective was to reach the Schwammenauel Dams on the Roer River. The Roer flows north under the main road from Aachen to Cologne. The US forces had already occupied Aachen, and were preparing to attack towards Cologne. It was expected that the Germans would flood the valley when the Allies were attacking towards Cologne from Aachen. Capturing the dams was a conditional requirement before initiating that attack. The dams were not very far in front of us.

Being attached to the 2nd Ranger Battalion was interesting. Whenever there was a sniper in one of the houses, (and this occurred very often, like at least once a day) they would launch a full scale invasion of the house to get the sniper.

Both of our .30 caliber machine guns went non-functional, so they loaned us a .50 caliber air cooled machine gun. This was a very heavy piece of firepower, not one we were familiar with, but we used it all right.

I remember seeing those rangers launching 60mm mortar shells from a hand held tube, i.e., without the bipod to support the tube. We had to abandon our mortar because some shrapnel hit the bipod and damaged the collar that supported the tube.

Further attacks by our division were affected by the German plans for the Ardennes Offensive (Battle of the Bulge). The Germans were mobilizing for a large attack toward the west, in hope of reaching the port of Antwerp, and cutting off the Allies already in Germany. They had massed considerable

artillery in front of us, and more infantry than we had expected. This was not very good tank country, so we did not see many German tanks.

We had only been dug in there for a short time when the German artillery fire picked up seriously. The skies were overcast day after day, keeping our air support grounded. As a result, the German guns could operate freely. The Germans had a rocket propelled artillery shell that had holes in the rocket tubes (called the "screaming-meemie"). These holes caused a deafening roar when they came in at high velocity; intended to instill fear in the troops under attack. That did happen with a number of men.

The German attack came on the night of December 15th. Air dropped flares lit up the sky over us all night, and some paratroopers were dropping into our positions. We could see them descending in the light of the flares. We managed to capture these paratroopers easily; they did not come down in any massed formation, but spread thinly around. The next morning, there was a lot of incoming German artillery fire, and attacks were coming all along the front. Fortunately for us, we had plenty of friendly artillery supporting us, along with tank destroyers, both of which helped us to hold back the German attacks. The sky was still very cloudy, so we did not get any support from the tactical air force. This went on for several days, and eventually the Germans ceased attacking our positions. With the artillery we had, I couldn't imagine a field mouse surviving out there. The following days, we could see the Germans moving along the ridges to the south of us towards the west, and we were alarmed that they were moving in a direction that would put them in our rear.

We eventually learned that the Germans had broken through to the south of us, and could possibly cut us off from our support forces. Some of the officers traveled to the rear to select positions for us if we had to move back. We were still receiving incoming artillery fire from three directions most of this time, so we were aware that we were still out on a point. As it turned out, we did not have to move back, and we spent the next five weeks in these positions, with snow falling and the coldest weather in years. There was no opportunity to get any heat, although the platoon leaders and company commander stayed inside of the basements of the houses.

Our squad's 60mm mortar was hit by a piece of shrapnel which cracked the bi-pod collar and put it out of action. Being out of a weapon, I was then assigned to a machine gun position for a while, and then picked to be the platoon runner and bodyguard for the platoon leader. This was a high-risk attrition assignment as it was necessary to travel around the battlefield a lot any time of the day. Exposed to artillery, rifle, and sniper fire so much, the previous runners had been wounded and evacuated to the rear. I still did not get to stay inside anywhere; spending nights in the foxholes when not pulling guard duty outside headquarters positions, or on patrol duty behind the German lines. By this time, my senses to incoming fire of any kind became very sharp. This helped me many times to survive through my stay at the front.

This was, no doubt, the worst experience of my life. We faced death many, many times a day, and we had to harden ourselves to the consciousness of shooting to kill the enemy. Otherwise we ourselves would be the casualties. Our destiny while there was to endure this traumatic life until physically unable to carry on. My faith in God carried me through those days. Many times I could visualize my life on earth ending right there, and my faith assured me I would be my Lord and my family in full spirit. I can remember saying over and over just before the rounds would impact; "Here I come".

I remember thinking that, if every legislator and high government official were forced to endure the experience of combat; there would be no more wars. I have tried as hard as I could to erase many sights and experiences from my mind, and I have generally been successful. I have not tried to resurrect those memories for this piece, and I never will try. What I am covering here are only the highlights that are the least troublesome to recall.

Christmas, 1944, was a beautiful day there. It was the first day that the sun had shone since early December. The sky was clear, and this allowed opportunities for the US Air Corps to fly support over our positions. With them flying overhead, we had freedom to get out of our holes and move about without being pinned down by artillery fire. It was also the first day the cooks brought us a hot meal, a Christmas dinner. The cooks were not able to get to us prior to this time, so we were living on cold K-rations. This break from constant fear of artillery, rockets, mortar, and sniper fire certainly answered many prayers.

Remember Sergeant King, our tough platoon sergeant? He holed up in the basement of one of the houses during these heavy days, staying down there all the time. One very quiet day he came out to visit with us in our foxholes. To answer why he stayed in the basement, he explained that, since they had just had a baby, he just had to go back home to take care of his wife and baby. But we were single and really didn't have to go back home. Sometime later after I left the line, he was killed by artillery fire.

Except for patrol activity, sniper and artillery fire, things were pretty quiet after Christmas. The weather continued pretty good most of the time permitting our aircraft to attack enemy positions, and this gave us much more freedom to move about in the daytime.

Remember the time before we advanced to the front when we had changes in command, the replacement of our company commander, and the promotion of our first sergeant to a platoon commander in another company. One night I was selected along with another soldier to go on patrol into the German lines. I was directed back to the battalion forward HQ to get briefed by the intelligence officer. He showed us where he wanted us to go and just how to get there, with the objective to listen for any German activity.

When we got to the line, we checked with the platoon HQ before crossing the line. By coincidence, the platoon commander was our former first sergeant. He was glad to see us and he then warned us not to travel the path outlined by the battalion intelligence officer. He told us how it was mined and under observation by the Germans. He then showed us how to travel safely, which we did over to the German line. We spent most of the night there listening as best we could- but it was sleeting that night and the sound of sleet hitting the steel helmet mostly drowned out any sounds we might hear. I am so thankful for the advice from our former first sergeant (now the lieutenant) and the earlier event that produced this scenario.

With no opportunities to spend time in any warm basements during this time, my feet got worse and worse from the very cold weather that endured. There were times I could hardly walk, but that was not enough for the medics to send me back.

Evacuation

One time when I went to the aid station for dysentery, they looked at my feet and saw that one toe was turning blue. That did it; they put me into the ambulance for evacuation to a field hospital near Liege, Belgium. I had essentially given up any hope of relief by this time, so I remember giving my carbine to my squad sergeant for safekeeping, telling him I would be back soon. I never returned to the front.

The hospital at Liege was a tent hospital; large tents housing about 20 patients each. I was bedridden there for about two weeks before being evacuated to France, and then, to England. During that time in the tent, the Germans were bombing that area with the V-1 cruise missiles. The missiles would come over each night about 9:00 to 10:00 PM, usually preceded by a spotter aircraft to provide information for guiding the missiles to the targets. Those V-1 missiles had 3000-pound warheads—a very big explosion on impact. Many of the impacts were pretty close to the tents; they were aiming at coal mines in the vicinity. The tents would shake a lot from the blasts. Fortunately, none impacted on the tents while I was there.

After a few days in the hospital in France, I was evacuated to a hospital near Birmingham, England. I stayed there for about a month, still bedridden. While I was there, an officer visited me and awarded me the Purple Heart. Although I was not wounded by enemy fire, the frozen feet sustained in combat was considered to be incapacitation caused by enemy action.

I then went through rehabilitation for another six weeks in England. I was pronounced fit for limited duty only after this stay, not to be sent back to the infantry division. Since I had done drafting work before the war, they sent me to the Information and Education Division in Paris. I arrived there early in May 1945, right after the Germans capitulated.

After the War - Paris & Versailles

The Information and Education Division was located in the old Czechoslovakian embassy, right near the Arch of Triumph in downtown Paris. We had quarters near there. My work there was mainly drafting charts and other material used for educational purposes. Later in the summer, the office and quarters were moved out to an old Gendarme camp near Versailles. It was just up on the hill overlooking the palace in Versailles.

While on this assignment, I did get to visit a lot in Paris and vicinity. Saw many sights and points of historical interest. This picture was taken in August 1945 while on a visit to one of the palaces nearby.

Return and Discharge

The war was over in August, so troops were being returned to the United States after they had accumulated enough points representing their time in service, combat, and overseas. My time to return came at the end of December 1945. I returned on another one of those troop ships, which was light in the water, departing France the 27th of December, across the North Atlantic, and arriving in New York the 5th of January 1946. It was a rough 10-day trip; I ate very little, as I could not keep it down.

After arriving in the US, I was sent to Indiantown Gap Military Reservation, PA. for discharge. I was discharged on January 10, 1946. I traveled to Richmond, VA. to meet with Marie and get married, as we had planned before I went overseas. The Methodist minister of Saint James Methodist Church in Richmond married us on January 12, 1946 at Marie's home in Richmond.

Summary

My service period lasted three and one half years. I was almost 19 when I enlisted and 23 when I was discharged. Of course there were many of us who went through this experience, giving some of our best years to the service of our country. And, there were those who gave their lives, and many who were seriously wounded and disabled from the weapons of war. For myself, I continued to be plagued by lack of feeling and aches in my feet left over from having been frozen. This finally went away after about 10 years.

Fortunately, my year at Yale in the Army qualified me for continuing my education there. I could afford it only through the GI Bill of Rights, fortunately, having accumulated sufficient potential funds from my service experience. I accelerated my program by attending summer sessions so I was able to graduate in June 1948. One prominent member of this graduation class was George Herbert Walker Bush, who became President of the US. He was Captain of the baseball team, played first base, and a very good player.

After graduation, we moved to Hampton, VA where I went to work for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) as an electronic engineer. This agency later became the Space Agency.

Reflection

I was very fortunate to have grown up in a Christian family during a period in which virtually everyone attended churches regularly. The nation was universally patriotic in the face of the totalitarian aggression in the countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia. This unification contributed significantly to the nation's strength needed to oppose the threat presented by the warring countries. This same strength was also present in the other free world countries. This was so evident by the way the soldiers fought on the front lines, on the sea, and in the air against very determined enemies with considerable experience in all types of combat aggression.

I worked for the NACA eight years developing electronic telemeter systems for use in experimental missiles and aircraft. I then went to work with the Air Force at Langley AFB as an analyst doing operations analysis (OA). OA was a relatively new profession earlier employed by the Air Corps and Navy during WWII. It is basically the use of scientific methods to analyze real world operations. It was earlier employed by the British before and during the war. I worked for the Air Force for a total of 15 years. Then, I worked for a company for about eight years under a contract to the Army doing analyses of Army operations and developing computer simulations for use in studying Army operations in the field. I returned to government service as a civilian working for the Army in studies and analyses for another 15 years. I retired in 1992 as Deputy Director of the U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency.