

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Donald James Robinson

Current home town: Cincinnati, Ohio

Age: 89

643rd Tank Destroyer Battalion

Donald James (Robbie, Jim) Robinson was born in 1922, at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. He grew up in Amelia, Ohio, on a working family farm. Following his graduation from Amelia High School, he met the Jr. Dean of Agriculture at The Ohio State University. Aware of Jim's dream to coach basketball, he convinced him to attend Ohio State, where he was enrolled in ROTC. While exiting a movie theater in Columbus, Ohio, on December 7, 1941, he was stunned to hear a newsboy shouting the terrible news "Pearl Harbor Bombed!"

By 1942, he had become part of the ERC (Enlisted Reserve Corps). He was officially sworn in, but remained inactive. By April of 1943, he was reporting for Active Duty at Ft. Thomas, Kentucky. Although he asked for the Air Force, his prior ROTC experience in Artillery got him assigned to Ft. Bragg in North Carolina. Here, while taking his basic training, he developed a case of the mumps. He would become "One of the Best Trained Soldiers in the Army." He was forced to complete not one, but two cycles of Basic Training! Ultimately, this would prove to be a fateful event, for if he had gone overseas with the first cycle, he would have gone in on D-Day in gliders, where the mortality rate was stunning.

While stationed at Camp Gruber, OK, he was moved by train to POE from Boston, MA, and boarded a ship called the *Exceller*. He was a member of the 643rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, initially as a loader on a half-track, pulling a three-inch gun. This was a defensive weapon of dubious distinction! He would later become a Gunner. In August, 1944, after thirteen days at sea, landing at Cherbourg, near Normandy, Jim saw the fresh graves of D-Day. They proceeded across the Channel Islands to Fountainebleau, France.

December 21, 1944 would find him south of Manhay, Belgium. This is the Ardennes Forest. This is The Battle of the Bulge. It was fought in Belgium during their coldest winter in 40 years! The combat boots that replaced the older "hook" style were a blessing. They were in position at what would become known as Parker's Crossroads. After a night engulfed in fog, cold and snow, at about 4 a.m. that next morning, they could hear soldiers only about 75 yards away being captured by the Germans. They would barely escape the same fate. (Those soldiers were to remain prisoners for nearly eight months.)

Christmas Eve 1944 would find the men, with a missing Lieutenant, inexplicably returned, set up in the Town Square. A line of Sherman Tanks rolled into the town. One tank looked different. History would record that this German tank, driven by Ernst Barkmann, recipient of The Iron Cross, had accidentally gotten in the 7th Armored Column! Barkmann managed to sneak out and hide. Adding to the danger, the Germans had taken some American equipment!

The Germans, who were running out of gasoline, got to Manhay. But when the sun came out the morning of Christmas 1944, our Air Force could take off! The Germans began to retreat. And on January 10, 1945 the Battle of the Bulge ended.

The 643rd was a part of the American plan to slow down the Germans with roadblocks. They lost four men, had 16 taken prisoners, and had other wounded men.

February 1945 took him into Holland in a Hellcat. They were attached to the 83rd Division. They were the only unit to cross the Elbe River, about 40 miles from Berlin. As gunner, Jim would knock out a locomotive at Barby, Germany.

They were then sent to the airfield at Bad Nauheim, and the soldiers all thought that they were going to be sent to Japan. Instead, they boarded the *Sea Robin* and sailed into Newport News, Virginia! Then, it was on to San Luis Obispo, California. With the dropping of the Atomic Bomb, they were de-activated and assigned to the 104th Division, from which Jim would ultimately be discharged. Jim celebrated Christmas of 1945 at home!

One evening, in May of 1947 he met Sarah La Jeune Senger at Moonlight Gardens in Cincinnati, Ohio. They were married November 22 of that same year. They raised two daughters over the course of their nearly 60 years of marriage. At present, Jim takes great pride in, and enjoys the company of daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren and Great Grandchildren! To date, his family is continuing in the Army tradition. His son-in-law James McGath (Sergeant) served in VietNam. His grandson Brian Dunlap E-7 served two deployments to Iraq and remains in active duty based at Fort Bragg, NC. His great grandson Captain Andrew Meyer graduated from The Citadel, has served in Afghanistan, and is based at Fort Campbell, KY.

Jim has taken The Honor Flight! He is very active in the American Legion and has spent many years speaking to students about World War II. He remains a Proud American!

1942- 1945 Jim served in Active Duty.

December 15, 1945 he was discharged from Active Duty.

He held the rank of Sergeant First Class. (E-7)

1951- 1955 Army Reserve