

War Era Story Project 2012

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As a member of the Princeton University field artillery ROTC, I was graduated on a wartime speed-up by Christmas of 1942 and sent to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to become a 2nd Lieutenant. After three years as Battery Commander of Baker Battery, 412th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant and my battery was sent to Europe as part of the 20th Armored Division to clean up after the Battle of the Bulge.

When we arrived at Le Havre, I was met by a chicken colonel who advised me to follow him rather than the 20th Armored. He took me and my battery to the headquarters of the Third Army, where I was met by none other than General Patton himself. He greeted me by name in a friendly manner and told me that he had found that my battery ("B" of the 412th) had won the War Department's "Fast Firing Exercise" three years in a row, as part of the 8th, then the 15th and finally the 20th Armored Divisions, all of whose enlisted men had been sent as replacements to the war in Europe. He then told me that he had chosen my battery to be the Armored Field Artillery Battery of the Advance Guard of the Third Army and that we were to leave France for Germany at once!

Three years of training and firing practice had made Baker Battery as efficient a warfare group as was possible under the circumstances. Among other things, I had determined that if we went to Germany, we would be shelled by the Nazi's 75 mm rifles, both tank-borne and towed by trucks. Since the 75's were fast-firing rifles, they plowed a nearly flat trajectory, very different from the firing pattern of our six 105 mm howitzers. So I trained our boys to seek out hillside country whenever we were given a firing order. We would spread our 105s in the lowest land we could find, with hills as near as we could accomplish. The result of this, of course, was to make the German shells hit the highest ground rather than find our low-lying firing area. Meantime, we could send our 105 mm shells high in the air and then drop them on our enemy with usually heavy casualties.

The net result of this location firing order was that we had no casualties at all during the six months that we drove east from western Germany to western Siberia. General Patton was terribly pleased with our results and I received an early promotion to Captain. Unfortunately, this good news was overcome by the disastrous happenings surrounding the death of our leader. General George S. Patton was killed in a head-on crash between his half-track and an M-1 tank. I never missed as man as direly as I missed General Patton.