

## War Era Story Project 2012

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It was June 1944 when Uncle Sam sent my draft notice. Six weeks later. I was headed to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic training instead of starting my senior year of high school. Up to this point, I had never been more than fifty miles away from my home town of St. Stephen, Ohio. After four months of basic training, I was able to return home for a short visit. This was to get my affairs in order and say good-bye. When it was time to leave, the snow was so deep, no vehicles were able to get through. My parents and I walked two miles to a main road so I could catch a ride to Tiffin. In Tiffin, I boarded a train to Fort Mead, Maryland.

On January 3, 1945 we shipped out on the English ship the *Maritaina*, heading toward South Hampton, England. There were 12,000 troops on the ship. I don't know if it was the "English Stew," high waves or nerves, but most had a tin can tied around their necks to throw up in. Once there, we crossed the English Channel to Lahar, France. It took two more days to get to the action.

The first night there, I drew guard duty from 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. I was to watch the horizon for anything that moved. Everything moved! In the distance, I could hear and feel the guns as well as see their flashes. The next morning I was on that front line.

They said "you are qualified as a gunner," so they put me in a tank with a 76mm gun. I was now a member of the 11th Armored Division 22nd tank battalion. The tank I was assigned to had just returned from battle and there were pieces of human flesh splattered and frozen on the inside walls. I slowly peeled it off. The first day out, we left for battle with fourteen tanks. At the end of the day, only six tanks remained. About a week later, our tank hit a land mine. The explosion blew the cab off the tank. The guy directly behind me loading and the assistant driver got most of the shrapnel. I was very lucky, I wasn't hurt badly. I just received some shrapnel in my leg. Three out of the five of us were killed.

From then on it was fight, fight and fight. This was at the tail end of the Battle of the Bulge and, because of the intensity of the battles, we didn't dare get out of the tank. We used spent cartridge shells when we needed to use the bathroom. It was so cold that at times there was at least a half inch of frost on the inside of the tank walls. On that rare occasion when we would need to get outside to refill canteens, you learned to stay low and move fast! Often there were dead horses and even bodies lying in the water but you filled your canteen, dropped in a chlorine tablet and hustled back inside.

Some days, we would go ten or twelve miles, and some days we sat until the gas man got to us. We always seemed to be in a battle. Besides the Battle of the Bulge, I saw heavy fighting at the Siegfried Line, the Rhine River and many others along the way. I "celebrated" my 19th birthday while in battle in Cobourg, Czechoslovakia. Most days I didn't know one day from the next, since they all ran together.

As we progressed along, we liberated concentration camps and took over airfields. We helped liberate the Flossenburg concentration camp at Weiden, Austria on the Czechoslovakian and Austrian border. They had people stacked up like cord wood, and some were still alive! They were so weak they couldn't move. All we could do is help liberate them, someone else took over from there. We saw the smoke stacks of the crematoriums and the trains carrying those poor people. I also saw the mass graves. We liberated three different concentration camps, but Flossenburg was the worst I had seen. I don't believe the regular German soldier wanted to fight any more than we did, but those S.S. soldiers were very mean. The brutality they inflicted upon the people in those concentration camps was inhuman and savage. A lot of times, they tortured those poor people for sport!

The air fields we took over were loaded with all kinds of guns and trucks. They were using horses to move the guns and trucks because the Germans had no gas. There were dead horses everywhere. I don't think the war would have ever ended when it did if Germany would have had gasoline. One of our outfits was instrumental in saving the famous Royal Lipizzaner Stallions from being used by the Germans to haul guns. To show their appreciation, they invited us to a show to watch these beautiful (all white) horses perform.

My outfit was then sent out of France with the intent of sending us to the war in the Pacific. Arriving back into the U.S.A. and seeing the Statue of Liberty was a wonderful sight. One soldier was in such a hurry to get to shore, he dove off the top deck of the boat. It seemed like it took forever for him to surface. It was then announced that if anyone else tried that stunt they would be court martialed as soon as we docked.

We were then sent home for a short leave. While at home, the war in Japan ended. Since I was still on active duty, I reported to Memphis, Tennessee where I served as a cook in the officers' mess. While there, I tried out for and was selected to play first base on the Army baseball team. After six months, I was discharged from the army and returned home. That date was June 26, 1946.

