

## War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Richard C. Johnston  
Current home town: Grove City, Ohio  
Age: 90

September, 1943, I entered my senior year at Capital University. In October, I was drafted, and spent three months in basic infantry training at Camp Blanding, Florida, in the coral snake infested sand, a few miles from Jacksonville. Since I was a music major and played the trombone, my papers had BANDSMAN in bold letters on them. I guess they needed “cannon fodder” instead.

Following a short furlough, I boarded a train in Columbus, and headed for Fort Meade, Maryland. After a short stay there, I boarded a huge troop ship in New York with several thousand other sea-going travelers. At 5:00P.M., the loud speaker (always a loud speaker) ordered us to the chow line, where we stuffed ourselves with a delicious beef stew. We hadn’t eaten all day, and I was hungry.

Around six, our huge ship took on a strange movement, and I realized that we were on our way. In a short while, I was as sick as a dog, as were the rest of my buddies. I grabbed my helmet (container), and headed for the head, about half a mile to the East, as did every other sick land-lubber. Most didn’t make it in time, and we slipped and fell in the “return of the swallow,” as I called it. I recalled Bob Hope saying, “I’ve flown so much, I can say where’s the container in nine languages.” My container was made of steel, and I used it for many things at later times.

When I reached the large head, I was overwhelmed. The long, deep urinals lining the walls were completely full of beef stew. I finally slipped back to my bunk, in a tier of about twelve, with my nose rubbing the canvas about twelve inches above me. I ate very little after that episode, and I figured this was the navy’s way of saving food.

Nine days later, we embarked at Casablanca in North Africa, and spent a few days basking in the hot desert sun. Then, we boarded little, French boxcars and took off through Algiers to Oran on the Mediterranean. Again, we boarded transports for a pleasant Mediterranean cruise to Naples, Italy.

It was the raining season in Italy, and it rained all the way to a huge camp, as we stood in crowded trucks. There weren’t enough tents for all of us, and most of us threw our blankets down in the mud, where they immediately disappeared. That night, and every night, the sky, at about twenty miles north of us, lit up like a giant Fourth of July celebration, and I thought, “Holy Cow! So that’s what we’re going into?”

After a few soaked days, we again boarded large troop ships, and headed up the Italian coast to the Anzio Beachhead. We climbed over the side of the ship, with rifle, and full field pack, and descended down rope ladders into landing crafts. Fortunately, for us, the front line was in a few miles, so there was no resistance.

I was immediately assigned to Co. D, a heavy weapons platoon, and our weapon was a thirty caliber, Browning, water-cooled machine gun. Our squad leader, a sergeant, carried the tripod, a corporal carried the gun, and me, a P.F.C. (by act of Congress, when we hit the ocean, and who wished it stood for "Poor Foolish Civilian"), carried the water can and one box of ammo. The rest of the squad all carried two boxes of ammo. This was the same outfit in which Audie Murphy was honored with The Congressional Medal of Honor. I didn't see him, but I saw him in the movie TO HELL AND BACK, which was also the 3rd Division.

Once the sergeant had placed his tripod and the gun was set up, I dropped my water can and box of ammo, and dug in with the rest of the squad to protect the gun. I soon discovered that machine guns were the first thing the Germans tried to knock out, because they were deadly: 500 rounds per minute. In the next thirty days, as we pushed the Germans up the peninsula, I dug at least forty foxholes, and most of them filled immediately with water.

I was disturbed not only by the bodies of young men lying like cordwood beside farm houses, young men, with loved ones waiting for their return home, but by the atrocities laid upon the Germans. I will never forget the smell of burning flesh from a huge convoy, which had been strafed, and was still burning. My ancestors, on my mother's side, were from Alsace-Lorraine, in Germany, and I couldn't help but think that I might have a cousin or two in that convoy. As General Sherman said, "War is hell," and I saw it at first hand. What a waste of young lives, and the overall cost.

General Mark Clark and I finally took in Rome one day before the invasion of France on D-Day. I was sitting on a curb in front of the Coliseum, when he drove by in his Jeep; the lucky devil. I had to walk. I spent about a month in Rome, standing guard at the historic ruins. The Coliseum was fascinating, and I saw the Chapel, where Michelangelo laid on his back and painted the ceiling. I didn't get to see the Pope.

I was in 4F for several months because of a terrible operation for appendicitis and bowel obstruction. Following my recovery, I finally passed the physical and was drafted. I was happy that I could finally stand up to things such as a twenty-five mile hike with rifle and full field pack in basic training. Now, in Rome, following a month of rough going, I noticed that my incisions from my two operations were swelling and red. Also, I had some pain, so I decided to go on sick call. The Doctor looked at my stomach, and said, "Soldier, you have a million dollar wound."

I said, "What is that?"

He said, "You're going home." I didn't argue with him, because I had had enough war, and there were rumors that the 3rd Division would soon head for Southern France.

I was sent back to a hospital in Naples, and was shortly on my way home. Our ship was in a convoy, and as we passed the Rock of Gibraltar, I couldn't help but think of the time that F.D.R., Churchill, and de Gaulle met at Yalta. Charles de Gaulle almost broke the party up when he insisted that The Rock of Gibraltar be changed to "de Gaulle Stone."

A couple hundred miles after we passed this edifice, our engines gave out. The convoy kept going, and we were stranded. I figured that a U-Boat would soon find us, and we would be swimming in the deep, blue sea. Fortunately, in a couple of days, we were on our way, and it wasn't long until the Statue of Liberty winked at me, and I knew we were home. What a pleasant feeling.

I went home for a few days, and was then assigned to a company in Entertainment and Welfare in Miami, Florida, like I should have been in the first place. I spent several months there and was finally discharged at the convenience of the government; my convenience, also. I finished my senior year at Capital University on the G.I. Bill, and later got my master's degree in music at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, also on the G.I. Bill. What a wonderful thing.