

War Era Story Project 2012

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A Kentucky Boy in World War II

In the spring of 1944, all of us in the 97th Division were in Fort Leonardwood, Mo., preparing mentally and physically for war. As a country boy who had never been far from home before being drafted into the U.S. Army, this was the most exciting time of my life. Patriotism ran high during the war, and I wanted to be a part of the action.

After months of training, we were ready to be shipped out but had no idea where we were headed. In high spirits, we boarded a troop train heading west, ready for action. Two days later, after getting very little sleep and enduring crowded and unsanitary conditions, we arrived in Camp San Luis Obispo, Calif., a beautiful town on the Pacific coast. We still didn't know what lay ahead for us. After weeks of amphibious training at Camp Callan, we boarded another troop train that took us eastward across America to Camp Kilmer, NJ. We knew then that we'd be sent to the European Theatre for land battle.

The 97th Division embarked from New York on February 19, 1945, landed in Le Havre, France on March 1, and moved immediately to Camp Lucky Strike, where we regrouped. Raw recruits and seasoned soldiers alike, we were ready for action. We boarded a freight train and sat on the floor in straw, traveling through France and Belgium. I can still taste the straw dust. On April 11, we arrived at Siegburg, Germany to perform mop-up operations that the front line troops had bypassed.

That first battle was terribly bloody. We captured 10,000 German prisoners, but many others weren't so lucky. Seeing dead German soldiers lying alongside the road was almost more than I could bear. They'd been young kids just like us, with families, girlfriends, people who loved them.

After fighting our way through many towns, we closed in on Dusseldorf, which the Germans finally surrendered without one shot being fired. Moving up the Rhine River, we saw the horrific cost of war everywhere. All the bridges had been knocked out, destroyed by American bombers, but we cheered when we realized that our engineers had built pontoon bridges over the river. In another town that we completely covered with mortar shells and machine gunfire, it turned out that the only thing we'd killed was an old lady's pet chicken. She held it up to show us, tears in her eyes.

Heading to Czechoslovakia in convoy, I drove a Jeep and trailer at night, no headlights, loaded with mortar ammunition. Terrified, I kept my eyes glued to a small reflector light on the vehicle in front. If a German 88-shell had hit the trailer—and they came mighty close—I would have been blown to Kingdom Come.

The final penetration by the Division extended 37 miles from the Czech border to Pilsen, where we liberated Flossenbürg, a concentration camp. We had no idea of the Holocaust, knew nothing of the

unspeakable acts of horror perpetrated here. I can still see those gaunt prisoners running toward us, their thin arms outstretched, their bodies just skin and bones. Completely unprepared for this, we gave them all we had: little packs of cigarettes and chocolate bars from our K-rations.

During the final push, the Germans ran out of gasoline and used horses to pull their heavy artillery. They began to surrender. One soldier would come out of the bushes with his hands over his head. If no one shot him, dozens of others would slowly creep out from behind him. They didn't want to surrender to the Russians, only to the Americans.

Then suddenly, it was over. On May 7, 1945, near Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, Lt. General Karl Weisenberger, Commander, 13th German Army Corps, surrendered to General Herman F. Kramer, Commander of 97th Infantry Division. The last official shot of the war in Europe was fired by Company B, 387th Regiment, 97th Division.

We traveled by convoy to Camp Old Gold, and then boarded the ship that would take us home. We were exhausted and dizzy with excitement. As we sailed into New York harbor, I thought how beautiful the Statue of Liberty looked. No longer kids, we'd all lived a lifetime in those months together, and we'd formed close bonds that would never be broken.

Along with everyone else in the 97th Infantry Division, I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my family, especially my girlfriend, Ruby. We were given a 30-day furlough, and our orders were to report to Ft. Bragg, NC. But the war was not over. While we were on furlough, President Truman gave orders to drop that terrible bomb on Nagasaki. Everything changed for the 97th Division after that.

The Secretary of War ordered our division to prepare for the invasion of the Japanese homeland. We were to sail to Japan to make an amphibious landing. Once more, we boarded a troop train that took us to Ft. Lewis, WA. Crossing the Pacific Ocean in a troop carrier ship, at one point we had to detour about 100 miles to avoid a typhoon. The news came that the second atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Japan surrendered just before we arrived, but our unit was ordered to stay there as part of the occupation force. We set up camp inside a huge Japanese aircraft hangar.

I had not seen my brother Hobert since the early days of the war, at least three years. I knew he'd been serving in the South Pacific theatre of operations and believed that he was in the Philippines. I wrote him a letter from Kumagawa, Japan, asking him to let me know how he was doing. A few days later after lunch, I walked outside. I could hardly believe my eyes—Hobert was standing there, right in front of me! He'd been stationed in Tokyo and had located me through the military hotline after receiving my letter. My sergeant told me to take the afternoon off, and Hobert and I had a wonderful reunion that day. We were able to visit each other often during that time in Japan.

Along with occupation forces, I was in Japan for most of the next year. The country had been nearly destroyed, but there was a spirit about the Japanese people that could not be killed. As bad as it was everywhere over there, they would rebound. My division was reassigned and I reported to the Quartermaster. My job was to drive a two-and-a-half ton truck and make runs to Tokyo to deliver rations.

In the spring of 1946, the Army told me to go home, so I went back to Kentucky for a month to visit my family. In June of that year, I married the loveliest woman on earth and we enjoyed the next 61 years of life together.

In 1993, Ruby and I traveled to Montana to reconnect with my Company D Army buddies and their wives. What a wonderful reunion we all had. We've gotten together several times since then, and the numbers keep shrinking. But the bonds that connect us are stronger than any other connections in my life.