

Herbert E. Stokes, Jr.  
*422nd/Headquarters*

## **A CITIZEN-SOLDIER'S TALE:**

My World War II Experiences

By Herbert E. Stokes

When World War II ended in Europe in 1945, I was a member of the 106th Infantry Division, stationed near Nantes, France, helping contain some German troops that were bypassed during the invasion and were still occupying the French seaports of St. Nazaire and Lorient. I still have fond memories of going into Nantes the night Germany surrendered and participating in the celebration. In 1995, fifty years later, I thought there might be a celebration in Nantes, commemorating the end of the war in Europe, if so, I wanted to be in on it. I wrote the 106th Division Veterans Association to see whether anything was planned and who might be interested in going. They didn't know, but they included my letter in their quarterly publication, the Lion's Cub, suggesting that anyone who might know give me a call. I didn't get any calls, but it didn't matter because there wasn't a celebration of [V-E Day](#) in Nantes that year.

Even though I didn't receive any phone calls about the celebration, I did get an e-mail from Wesley Johnston, whose father had fought in Europe as a member of the 7th Armored Division. Wesley's father had died while Wesley was still too young to learn about his dad's experiences in the war, and he wanted to learn more about them. He did know that the 7th Armored Division had supported the 106th Infantry Division during the "[Battle of the Bulge](#)" in December 1944, and thought I might have some information he could include in a book that he was writing about his father's war experiences and especially in that particular battle. I had never written about my own experiences during the war, but since I was involved in that battle, I sent him an e-mail telling him what I about remembered about it. I told someone in my family about the e-mail, and several members said that they would like to hear more about my experiences. I hadn't talked much about them before, so I agreed to write something. Now, some 65 years later, I'm finally getting around to doing so.

Much of the reason for it taking so long is that I know that I didn't do anything heroic or particularly interesting and I'm sure that my experiences were not any more exciting than those of millions of others. Part of my reason for doing it now is that my Parkinson's disease seems to be getting worse (including my memory) and I know I probably won't be able to finish what I started writing about if I wait much longer. Since I've discovered that I can use a dictation program with my computer to make the job easier, I've run out of excuses for not doing what I promised to do years ago.

I've tried to make the account as reader friendly as I know how. Most readers will have access to a computer, so I have used "[hyperlinks](#)" to make it easy for them to get definitions and other information about events and topics of particular interest. Clicking on any words or phrases in the [blue type](#) that indicate the presence of a hyperlink, will take them directly to a source on the Internet. Or, if they should want to learn more about something that doesn't have a hyperlink, all they need to do is use the Google search box on their browser. I have included photos of places and people that I mention in the narrative in the references section at the end of the paper.

I plan to make this account of my experiences available at no cost to anyone who anyone who would like to have it. All I need is a request and information about how to get it to them. It will available as CDs formatted to play on Windows or Macintosh computers, as an attachment to an e-mail or as a printed copy by "snail-mail". I am in the process of building a web site, where the description can be accessed and read on desktop or laptop computers, iPads, iPhones and Blackberries. My phone numbers are (325) 695-3442 and 660-6857, and my e-mail addresses are (in order of preference) [herbstokes@aol.com](mailto:herbstokes@aol.com), [herbstokes2@me.com](mailto:herbstokes2@me.com), or [herbstokes@sbcglobal.net](mailto:herbstokes@sbcglobal.net).

### **Eager Beaver**

I'll never forget how excited I was when I heard the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and declared war on the United States. It was Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941 and I was at work as doorman at the Queen Theater in Abilene, Texas. I was a senior in high school, had just turned seventeen a month earlier and like most boys my age, I was eager to get involved. I was still seventeen when I graduated from high school the next spring, and had received a scholarship [Hardin-Simmons University](#) to play in the [H-SU Cowboy Band](#). I decided to go ahead and enroll in the

summer session. When I heard that seventeen-year olds were eligible for the Navy's [V-12 College Training Program](#) and that if I could get accepted, it could lead to getting a commission as an officer in the Navy, so I applied right away. But I wasn't accepted because I couldn't pass the eye test (I was near-sighted in my right eye). Then in November of 1942, just after my eighteenth birthday, Congress passed a law that lowered the draft age from 21 to 18. That not only made me subject to the draft, but also made me eligible for an army program that was similar to the Navy's V-12 program. It was the Army Specialized Training Program, the [ASTP](#), so I applied for it.



*In the AHS Eagle Band*



*In the Cowboy Band*

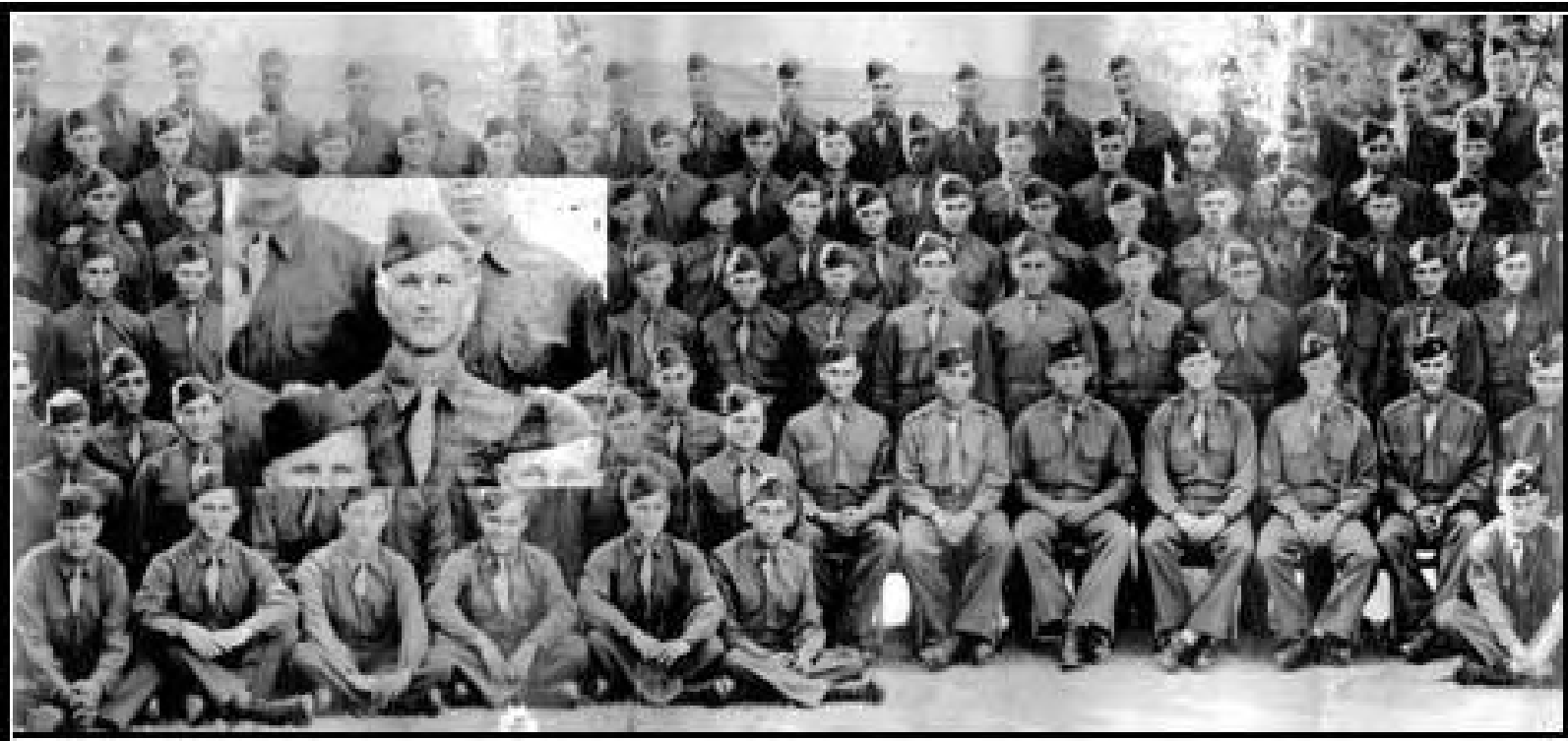
In the spring of 1943, I knew I could be called up in the draft at any time, so I did not enroll for the summer session at H-SU. Instead, I took a job at an oil refinery in Prewitt, New Mexico, a small town on the Navaho Indian reservation just a few miles east of the city of Gallup. The job was driving a tank truck loaded with 4500 gallons of gasoline from the refinery to Flagstaff, Arizona. It was the first time that I was on my own and it turned out to be good preparation for military service. Then in July, I received an order from my draft board to report for induction into the army at [Fort Sill, Oklahoma](#) on August 9, 1943. So I quit my job, went back home for a brief visit and received a very emotional send-off by my family as I boarded a bus and was on my way to Fort Sill to become a "[citizen-soldier](#)" in the Army of the United States.



*Relaxing in Gallup, NM*

### **Induction and Basic Training**

At Ft. Sill, we were tested extensively to determine assignments. I was happy when I heard that I had scored high enough on the tests to be accepted in the ASTP. Soon, I boarded a train and was on my way to the Infantry School in the Harmony Church area at [Ft. Benning, Georgia](#). I spent the next three months there, going through basic infantry training. The training included learning about the army, how to take orders, how to do "close-order drills", a lot of callisthenic exercises and other physical conditioning stuff, such as running obstacle courses and going on "forced marches". The marches were designed to build endurance while wearing a 45-pound back pack carrying an 8-pound rifle. It also involved a lot of "dog work" such as [KP duty](#) and spending hours cleaning "cosmoline" grease off old [Enfield rifles](#) that were left over from [World War I](#). We also learned how to find our way at night through a Georgia swamp without being bitten by water moccasins, armed only with a flashlight and a compass, and how to crawl on our bellies under barbed wire without getting our rumps or hit by a machine gun aimed about six inches over our head. The training was tough, but it was good preparation for the events to come.



*My Basic Training Unit at Fort Benning, Georgia*

### **In The ASTP**

We completed the basic training phase the first week in December 1943 and I was happy to learn that I would be going to the [Alabama Polytechnic Institute](#) (API), in Auburn, Alabama (now known as Auburn University) for the college training phase. API was a respected and well-known engineering school and I had wanted to become a chemical engineer some day. I was given a ten-day furlough and ordered to report in at API afterward. The train ride to Abilene took

two days of my furlough, but when I finally arrived, it sure felt good to be back in familiar territory among friends and family. Much time was spent talking about what it was like being in the army and learning what had been going on in Abilene while I was away. I was very proud to be wearing my army uniform and wore it every place I went. Though I hated to leave my family and friends, I was anxious to get to Auburn to learn how to be effective as an officer in a combat engineering unit.

*With My Parents*



*In My Army Uniform*



When I arrived at API, I was told that as a member of the ASTP, I was a soldier first, and a student second. I would receive regular army pay; be under military discipline at all times; wear uniforms and march to classes and meals; stand all normal formations, such as reveille; be subject to Saturday morning inspections; and would have lights out at 10:30 PM. The standard workweek was 59 hours of "supervised activity," including 24 hours of classroom and lab work, 24 hours of required study, six hours of physical instruction, and five hours of military instruction. I was pleased to find



the living accommodations at Auburn were nothing like what they were at Fort Benning. The women had been moved from the dorms on campus to fraternity houses in town, and the dorms were used to house the ASTP students. We had a lot of free time after classes each day and on weekends and there was always plenty to do during our free time. There were movie theaters and bowling alleys within easy walking distance of the campus, frequent dances and plenty of girls to date. While there, I formed what turned out to be some long-lasting friendships but it was just too good a life to last.



*My ASTP Unit at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*

## In The Infantry

The invasion of Europe was being planned and additional troops were needed, so the ASTP was discontinued in February 1944, and along with the rest of the unit, I was assigned to the [106th Infantry Division](#) at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Upon arrival at Atterbury we took a series of tests to determine what our assignments would be, and I ended up being assigned to the Headquarters Company of the [422nd Infantry Regiment](#) for training as a radio operator. Camp Atterbury was about 30 miles south of Indianapolis, which was a great town for soldiers. We received weekend passes nearly every weekend, and I spent nearly every Saturday evening and Sunday in Indianapolis, since one of my closest friends, Bill Clift, had lived there when he was in high school. He knew a lot of girls who invited us into their homes and to dances, making the our months I was stationed at Camp Atterbury very special.

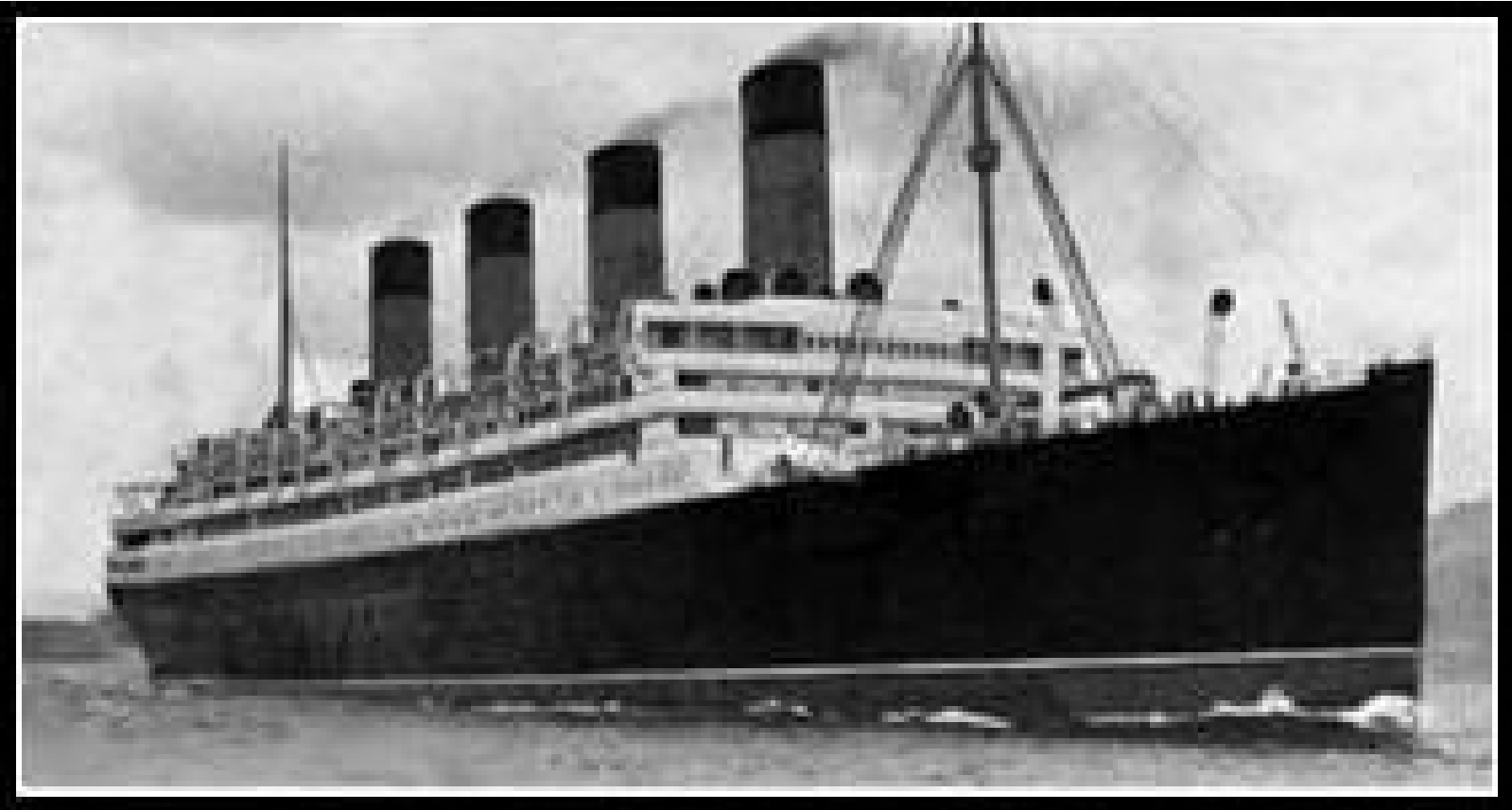
Something else that made it special was a 10-day furlough in August. I knew it would probably be the last opportunity to see my parents before I went overseas, so my parents, my youngest sister and I went to New Mexico to visit relatives and enjoy some time together. Even though it was a fast trip, it was very relaxing and gave me an opportunity to spend more "quality time" with my Dad than I had ever spent before. My Dad was a bricklayer, and when I was growing up, he was away from home most of the time, on the road looking for work. We both knew it would be a while before we had another chance to be together so we took full advantage of the time we had.



*With my Dad*

**Deployment to the European Theater**

When I returned to Atterbury, we were in the final stages of training and early in October 1944, the Division was ready for deployment. We went to [Camp Myles Standish](#), near Boston, to prepare to ship out for Europe. My regiment, about 9,000 men, along with various support units boarded the Aquitania, an old World War I era British passenger liner, that had been converted into a troop ship for the war. The ship was originally built to accommodate approximately 3200 passengers, but carried more than 10,000 troops. About 20 of us were packed to a stateroom that had been built to accommodate two passengers in peacetime. In addition to our bodies, we had find space to cram our clothing and other gear. We slept on canvas bunks stacked six high, about eighteen inches apart.



*The HMS Aquitania*

After an uneventful crossing of about 6 days, we arrived in Scotland late in October at Greenoch, a small port city on the Firth of Clyde. We loaded our gear onto barges and I rode a barge up the Clyde River to [Glasgow](#). We were there a few days while our gear was transferred from the barge onto a train. A thick fog made it impossible to see much of the town. The only thing that I remember about Glasgow is that one night I went to a political gathering of some sort and listened to a couple of guys debate about something in their Scottish brogue and left wondering what they were talking about.

### Brief Stay in England

We soon boarded a train for an overnight trip to [Cheltenham Spa](#), a town in the Cotswold region of England. We were housed in [Quonset Huts](#) on an estate called Guiting Grange for a few weeks while waiting for our vehicles to arrive by ship from the States at the port of [Liverpool](#). While we were there, I got my first promotion – from a “buck private” (no stripes) to a “buck corporal” (two stripes) – and was proud of it. My pay went up from \$50 per month to \$65 per month – a 30% increase, and percentage-wise, the largest pay raise I ever received.

I was sent to Liverpool with a group to pick up our vehicles. Soon after we arrived, a fog came in so dense that we could see only a few feet in front of us. We stayed there an extra night. The next day it looked like it wasn't going to lift, so we decided late in the day to head back to Cheltenham. We formed a convoy and drove all night in “[black-out](#)” conditions, and even though the fog stayed us with the whole way, we managed to get back to Cheltenham without a single rear-ender. It was late in November, but we were finally ready to go into action.

### Arrival in France

We left Cheltenham and headed for Southampton on the southern coast of England near the English Channel. I was driving a radio section [jeep](#) with the assistant regimental communications officer, CWO Tom Holland, as a passenger. When we reached Southampton we spent the night and late the next day I drove the jeep onto an [LST](#) and after an overnight trip across the English Channel, we arrived in the harbor at LeHavre, France. Le Havre had been heavily damaged during the [D-Day](#) invasion and the harbor was in bad shape, but I was able to drive the jeep off of the LST and onto the beach without any trouble. From LeHavre, we drove a few miles to an abandoned chateau where we bivouacked on the grounds for two days while waiting for the rest of our regiment to arrive from England.



*At the French Chateau*



*Hurrying Up While Waiting*



*With Squad Leader Ray Jones*

The ground was muddy from drizzle and intermittent rain, so we spent most the time in the jeep trying to stay dry. That wasn't too bad, but it sure wasn't very comfortable for sleeping. When the rest of the regiment arrived, we formed a convoy and headed to Belgium to relieve the 2nd Infantry Division, which had been in action ever since [D-Day](#). The weather had been cold and rainy ever since we arrived in France, and it started changing to snow and ice as we entered the Ardennes Forest region of eastern Belgium.

The terrain was hilly, and with ice and snow on the roads, the going was slow. It took several days to get through the forest to the front and we had had enough of trying to sleep sitting up in the jeep, so we decided to sleep on the snow. We laid the windshield cover from the jeep on the snow and, although we only had two blankets to use as cover, we managed to stay warm enough to get some sleep. I served as a road guide the next day, directing troops to their positions in the front line. We had not been issued overshoes, so my feet were wet and cold the whole trip.

### Arrival at the Front



We finally arrived at our destination on the 11th of December 1944 at Schlausenbach, a little farming village about 5 km inside Germany. It was near the [Siegfried line](#), which had been started by the Germans before WWI and finished by Hitler in 1932. My radio squad moved into a two-story house, which had already been commandeered from its owners by a squad from the 2nd Infantry Division when they captured the town. For the first time in weeks, I had a bed to sleep in, but my feet hurt so much I couldn't really appreciate the luxury. The next morning, my feet were so swollen I couldn't get my boots on so Sgt. Battrick, the platoon sergeant, sent me back to a collecting station for treatment.

I left my belongings (including a camera with a roll of exposed, but undeveloped film) in the house and took with me only a small ammunition bag with a shaving kit, a carton of cigarettes and some writing paper in it. There was only one other passenger the ambulance that took me to the collecting station. He was one of the riflemen from an infantry platoon and had been hit in the legs by shrapnel from a mortar shell explosion and was the first casualty from our regiment.



The Collecting Station in Schönberg

The collecting station was in a small schoolhouse in the town of Schönberg, back in Belgium, about five kilometers from the border with Germany. When we got to there, I was put in a room with a bunch of others with frozen feet and spent the next three days flat on my back on a cot, with my feet elevated, waiting for the swelling to go down. I got bored, just lying there and one night I noticed some books on a shelf and decided to see what they were about. One was a book of children's poems written in [old German script](#) with a lot of hand-drawn illustrations. The first poem was about a mischievous

boy named Fritz who tried to catch a raven with his cap and in the process, fell out of a tree. The title of the book was [Hans Hucklebein](#) and the [illustrations](#) were so clever that I could follow the story without knowing any German or how to read the script. The illustrations of the other poems looked like they would be equally interesting, so when I began to get sleepy, I decided to save the book and look at them later. I put it in a small bag with some personal belongings for later reference. At the time, I did not dream that it would much, much later. The reason for the delay was that early the next morning, I was awakened by the sound of explosions of artillery shells.

Fritz and the Raven



## The Bulge Begins

The date was December 16, and the explosions were the beginning of a two-hour [barrage](#) of artillery fire that marked the start of the last major German offensive, better known as the "[Battle of the Bulge](#)". The barrage started around 5:30 and soon after daylight, a close friend, Irvin Roger, stopped to see how I was doing and told me the Company was under heavy attack by the Germans. He was driving a message center jeep and was on his way to the 106th Division Headquarters in [St. Vith](#) with information about the attack. It wasn't long until we began to hear rifle and machine gun fire as well as the artillery fire as the fighting moved closer to Schönberg.

Around noon, the medics at the collecting station were ordered to load the patients into ambulances and move them back to St. Vith. There weren't enough ambulances for everyone, so anyone who could walk at all, which included me, was told to find a ride or head for St. Vith on foot. About that time, Irvin Roger stopped by. He had been on his way back to the 422nd Regimental HQ in Schlausenbach, but the Germans had blocked the road and he couldn't get back to

the company. So I got in his jeep and luckily for me, he had found a pair of arctics and brought them to me so I put them on and we took off for St. Vith.

We got there early in the afternoon, reported in at the Division HQ, but there was a lot of confusion and we waited the rest of the day, expecting someone to tell us what to do. We were still there when it got dark, so we bedded down on some benches in a hall and spent the night. The next morning we still hadn't been told what to do, so we left the building to look around town to see what was going on. There was a convent near the headquarters building with a tall brick wall around it. We saw an American Sherman tank parked next to the wall and stopped to talk to the crew. They told us that they were part of a Combat Command from the [7th Armored Division](#) that had been sent to St. Vith to provide armored support for the 106th Infantry Division. Things were pretty quiet, and while we were talking, we saw a good looking Belgian girl in some tight-fitting ski pants walk down the street and go into a large stone house on the other side of the street. Roger and I decided that we probably should try to get acquainted with her, since we had parked Roger's jeep right in front of the house.

## Under Fire

As we started to cross the street, there was a loud explosion, scaring the hell out of us. It was from a shell fired by a German tank that was on a ridge just east of town. Apparently, the tank was a lead tank of a German assault force that was scouting out the town and when the crew saw the 7th Armored tank parked by the wall of the convent they decided to take a shot at it. When we parked our jeep in front of the house we had noticed that it had a side entrance going into a basement, so we made a beeline to the basement for cover.

We had "rescued" a [Bazooka](#) that we found unattended at the Division HQ, but had left it in the jeep. Soon, there was a lull in the shelling, so we ventured out of the basement to get it. When we got to the street, however, we saw a member of the tank crew lying on the ground, obviously in pain. We ran across the street to see if there was anything that we could do to help him. As it turned out, he had been hit in the rump by a piece of shrapnel, so we ran back across the street to get the jeep and see if we could find a medic. When we got to the jeep, we saw a big hole in the hood right over the engine. We raised the hood to see what damage had been done, and saw that a big piece of shrapnel had gone right through the block. We looked to see where the shrapnel had come from and saw that the shell had hit the house right above where we had parked. While we were standing there trying to figure out what to do, someone started shooting at us from down the street. We assumed that it was a sniper, so we ran back to the basement to get Roger's rifle so we could return the fire. When we came back out, the sniper had disappeared and an ambulance had arrived to pick up the wounded tanker.

The German tank had also stopped firing and disappeared, so we went back over to the Division HQ building, where we learned that they were getting ready to move back to the town of [Vielsalm](#), about 10 km to the west of St. Vith. We were told to get back to Vielsalm as soon as we could and report in to the personnel officer for re-assignment. We had seen a couple of other guys from the 422nd driving a message center jeep, so we took off to see if we could find them. We found them, got in their jeep and were just about to take off for Vielsalm when a couple of commissioned officers showed up, ordered us to get out of the jeep and took our seat, leaving us without a ride to Vielsalm.

## Becoming a Straggler

We had seen a supply depot in town, so we went there to see if we could find a ride. While we were there, we liberated couple of carbines. I had left my [M-1](#) rifle with my other stuff back in Schlausenbach, and Roger thought a carbine would be easier to carry than a rifle. We also liberated a small kerosene space heater and I found some really warm, English-made woolen socks I requisitioned to wear with my arctics.

*591st FA, 106th Infantry*



We saw a truck being loaded with some artillery ammunition and asked the driver if we could hitch a ride. He said we could so we climbed on top of the load and rode back to the artillery unit. It was dark by the time we arrived so we helped unload the truck and spent the night in the back of the truck that night listening to the sound of 75mm artillery fire. We didn't get much sleep, so early the next day, we took off walking to Vielsalm.



The road was clogged with people and vehicles, both civilian and military, so the going was slow. We had just lit the little kerosene heater and stopped to warm up when a [Red Ball Express](#) truck, driven by a black guy, stopped and he offered us a ride. We thanked him and hopped in the truck and we took off. In those days, blacks were not allowed to serve in combat units, but were allowed to drive the express trucks. When we finally got to Vielsalm, he asked if we were hungry, and when said that we really were, he took us with him to his company's mess tent and we had the first hot meal or we had eaten in a couple of days.

After we had eaten, he drove us to the 422nd Division's rear echelon personnel office and we reported in to the personnel officer (Lt. Mel Crank), who told us to stow our gear, then come back and take charge of setting up a defense perimeter around the buildings that housed the rear echelon units. We acted like we knew what we were doing, and soon had the personnel clerks digging [foxholes](#) all over the place. We checked on them from time to time during the night, and in the course of doing so, we discovered that Lt. Crank had just received his monthly liquor ration and left it sitting out on his desk. We decided that after what we had been through, we probably needed it more than he did, so we "rescued" a couple of bottles for our own personal use. There will be more said about them later on.

### Life as a Straggler

The next day, an officer from an artillery unit rounded up all the stragglers that he could find to form a defense perimeter that he was setting up around Vielsalm. A "straggler" was a soldier who was separated from his unit and was susceptible to assignments by anyone with a higher rank. Roger and I were told to man a 37 millimeter antitank gun and use it to help defend against the German tanks that were headed our way. It would have been like fighting against the German Tiger tanks and their 88 mm guns with a peashooter. We didn't even know how to fire it, but as things turned out it didn't make any difference since the Germans were delayed trying to take St. Vith and didn't reach Vielsalm that day.

The day before St. Vith fell to the Germans (which I think was 23rd of December), combat engineers had placed explosive charges on a railroad bridge that passed over the road from Vielsalm to St. Vith so it could be blown up to block the road when the last of our tanks that were retreating from St. Vith had made it through the underpass.

We and the other two stragglers from the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regimental HQ message center were assigned the job of staying at the bridge and we were to told that we should detonate the charges when all of the American tanks had made it through the underpass and get back to Vielsalm as best we could. None of us knew anything about blowing bridges, but the engineers had told us that all that we had to do was to push the plungers on the detonators and the explosives would do the rest.

*Combat Engineers Placing the Charges*



Someone had already dug some foxholes on the top of the railroad embankment and the other guys got in them, but I decided to try and get some sleep while we waited for the American tank columns. I got in my sleeping bag and lay down on the ground near one of the foxholes and had just dozed off when an artillery shell hit the embankment and exploded somewhere close to where I was sleeping. I started rolling toward my foxhole, or so I thought, but I rolled the wrong direction and rolled all the way down the embankment. As soon as I stopped rolling, I got out of my sleeping bag and yelled at Roger to see if he and the others were okay (they were), and scrambled back up the embankment and got in my foxhole just as another shell exploded. It wasn't as close, but the shelling continued intermittently all night. The shells must have been coming from some heavy artillery, because the shrapnel was large enough to cut through the trunks of some large pine trees near the embankment, and we could even hear them coming in before they hit.

Fortunately, Roger had brought along one of the bottles of whiskey that we had liberated from Lt. Crank's desk, so we passed it around during breaks in the shelling, trying to shore up our spirits. Shortly after daylight, some guys from the 82nd Airborne Division came up relieved us. In contrast to us, they seemed to know what they were doing, so we were more than willing to turn the job of blowing the bridge over to them.

We hitched a ride back to Vielsalm on one of the trucks retreating from St. Vith, and found the Division's rear echelon loading up to move further back from the fighting. Our next stop was in the town of Ferriere, 10 km or so west of Vielsalm. I won't forget that place for several reasons. One was that some 55-gallon barrels had been elevated on a wooden platform, fitted with short lengths of rubber hose and filled with hot water to serve as makeshift showers. It was my first opportunity to take a shower since we left the Cheltenham area in England, almost a month earlier. I was wearing the same smelly, dirty clothes and after taking a much-needed shower, finally got into some clean ones. The swelling had gone down enough in my feet that I was able to put on some boots and toss the arctics.

Another reason for remembering Ferriere was that the weather had been bad all week, but the skies cleared on the day before Christmas and I watched several formations of B-17 bombers heading toward Germany. There were puffs of black smoke as [flak](#) from the German 88 mm anti-aircraft guns bursting all around them. Some of the planes turned into big orange balls of flame when they suffered direct hits. Others started spiraling down when the flak hit them and the crews could be seen bailing out. I had always sort of envied the "flyboys" with their snazzy uniforms and cushy life, but from that day on, I wasn't the least bit envious of them and didn't have anything but good to say about them.

### A Memorable Christmas

The Division HQ rear echelon's next stop was Lince-Sprimont, a small town near Liege. Roger and I had not been re-assigned to a unit, so we went with them, still on foot. It was Christmas day, December 25, 1944. As we walked into town looking for a place to sleep, we saw a young girl and asked her if she spoke English and whether she knew of anyone that might let us sleep in their house. She did, and led us down one of the narrow streets to a small house that was built over a cowshed. She introduced us to Angelique and Nicholas James-Gilsoul, an old couple, who greeted us warmly. The girl told them that we were looking for a place to sleep and they said that we could stay with them and gave us a couple of mattress covers and showed us where we could get some straw to put in them.

We filled them and they showed us to a spare room with a pot-bellied stove in center so we put the straw-filled mattresses on the floor by the stove. Then we went into a kitchen and dining area that also served as a sitting room. They asked if we would like to have dinner with them and we accepted. They shared what little food they had and it was a real treat.

Home of Angelique and Nicholas



It was the first home-cooked meal that we had eaten since we left the States. We reciprocated by giving them some #10 cans of corned beef hash we had scrounged from the mess hall in Ferriere.

They didn't speak English and we didn't speak French (the language in that region of Belgium) but we all enjoyed trying to carry on a conversation. They both could speak a little German and Roger could speak Yiddish, which is similar to German, and using that knowledge along with a lot of gestures we did pretty well. Whenever Angelique referred to the Germans, she used the term "[Boshe](#)" so derisively that it was obvious that she didn't have any love for them.

They had a radio that picked up a short-wave broadcast from a station in [Andorra](#) (a tiny country between France and Spain in the Pyrenees Mountains) that had both French and English-language newscasts. It was our first opportunity to hear any news from the outside world in several weeks. We listened some "news" about the Bulge by "[Axis Sally](#)" and "[Lord Haw-Haw](#)", a couple of English-speaking German propagandists. That night, we listened to the put-put of "buzz-bombs" ([German V-1 rockets](#)) as they came over us heading for Liege. Occasionally, their motors cut out, which meant that they were staring to descend, and within a minute or so, there would be a loud explosion when they hit the ground. It was a bit nerve wracking because we never knew where they were going hit and explode.

Fortunately, none of them hit the town.

It was the most memorable Christmas day that I have ever spent. My mother saved the letter that I wrote her that night. It begins with " Dear Mother, "This is Christmas night and I couldn't let it pass without writing you. Everything that happens that reminds me of Christmas reminds me of home . . . . .

### **Transfer to 106th Signal Company**

While we were still there, Lt. Crank told Roger and I that we were being re-assigned to the 106th Division Signal Company. Carl (Pat) Patterson was a radio operator in the company who was a friend from my ASTP days at Auburn so he, Roger and I formed a 3-man team to provide radio communications between the 106th Infantry HQ and one of the infantry battalions in the 424th Regiment. The German advance had been halted by the first week in January and the battalion joined several other American and British fighting units in an effort to drive the Germans back to where they were at the start of the offensive.

It was slow going and it took the rest of January just to push them back to the German border. The battalion saw lots of action, but our job was pretty dull – just sending coded messages, day after day. It was a real treat when we were relieved for a couple of days and went to Spa, a resort town located just a few kilometers north of the Bulge. Spa is famous for its warm waters and its bathhouses with deep copper Bathtubs. Besides getting a much-needed bath and clean clothes, I got my back scrubbed by a not very attractive middle-aged woman who also massaged my feet, which were still tender from being frozen.

George? Irv Roger, Patterson and Me



### **Seeing the Effects of War**

Around the middle of January the battalion pulled into the town of [Stavelot](#). right after the Germans had been driven out. There were a lot of burned out German tanks, half tracks, and Volkswagen jeeps in the town, several with dead German soldiers in them, some still at their guns. A particularly gruesome sight was a burned out Volkswagen jeep with the bodies of two men still in it, one burned so badly his head looked something like a burned porcupine with charred bristles still on it.

The Germans had committed a lot of atrocities, both in their advance and their retreat. During their advance they used machine guns on a tank to kill over 80 Americans prisoners in a field outside the nearby town of [Malmedy](#). In Stavelot, they had killed a lot of civilians, including some women and children, just before they were driven out. The citizens of the town had dug a mass grave and were still putting the bodies of the dead civilians in it as we arrived. I don't know why they were killed, but one possible reason is that it was in retaliation for the fact that civilians had killed a lot of German soldiers when American forces liberated the town in September of 1944.

Civilians Being Buried in Stavelot



For all practical purposes, the Battle of the Bulge was over when we reached Stavelot. However, it took most of the rest of the month just to re-take all the positions that we had occupied before the Bulge began.



Our next stop was in the town of Hunnigen, a small town in the German-speaking region of eastern Belgium. Now, to give you an idea of how inconsiderate soldiers can be during times of war, I'll relate a tale that I'm not very proud of. When we learned that we would be spending several days in Hunningen, we found a house that was in pretty good shape except for one corner that had been blown off by a tank shell. We wrapped a tarp around the corner to block out the cold, and settled in for what looked like what might be a few of days of living in some fairly comfortable quarters. There was a wood-burning stove in the main room, but the only wood we could find was the wooden floor of the house, so we took an ax and chopped up part of the floor for use as firewood. I don't think that it ever occurred to us that the house belonged to a Belgian family that would want to move back into it once the fighting was over in the town. A couple of days after we had taken over the house, a man and his wife and a couple of children showed up and the woman took one look at what had happened to her house and started crying. Between sobs, she kept saying "mein haus, mein haus!" I don't think I have ever felt so sorry for anyone in my life, and I still have feelings of guilt when I think about it.

### **Back to the 422<sup>nd</sup> Infantry**

Around the middle of March, before we got to the Rhine River in Germany, the remnants of the 106th Division (mainly stragglers, the two battalions from the 424th regiment and various headquarters units) were pulled out of the fight and sent back to [St. Quentin](#) in France to re-group. While we were there, I got a 3-day pass to Paris. It was one of the highlights of my stay in Europe. I toured the city, had some excellent meals, went to the [Folies Bergère](#) and a concert by the [Glenn Miller](#) band (Miller himself, had just been classed as "missing in action" when his plane disappeared on a flight from England). I learned to get almost anywhere I wanted to go on the Metro, the French subway system.

Shortly after I returned from Paris, the Division moved to the west coast of France to contain a couple of pockets of Germans in the coastal cities of St. Nazaire and Lorient that had been by-passed during the invasion. We traveled in the "[40 and 8](#)" boxcars (forty men, or eight horses) made famous during WWI. We were located near the city of [Rennes](#) in Brittany. There, we took on a couple of "bastard" regiments that had been brought in from the Aleutian Islands to replace the two regiments that had been lost during the early stages of the Bulge.

A reconstitution ceremony was held at the St. Jacques Airfield near Rennes in April. There, the surviving members of the original 106th regiments presented their colors to the new members of the 422nd and 423rd. I was transferred from the 106th Signal Company back to 422nd Regimental HQ Company, where I picked up my third stripe and began to feel at home again. We then moved to an abandoned air base near the city of [Nantes](#). That's where we were when the war ended.

The Reconstitution Ceremony



### **Celebrating Victory in Europe**

One of my main memories of that experience was driving into the city of Nantes in an open jeep with some buddies on [V-E day](#) and being treated like conquering heroes. We ended up so stoned on green wine that none of us could remember how we managed to get back to camp. I'll never forget the hangover that I had the next day when I came out of my stupor. We stayed around there long enough to accept the surrender of Germans who had been holding out in the two pockets, taking their guns and herding them into boxcars for shipment to prison camps in Germany.

We completed that job late in May, so we loaded back into boxcars and went back to Germany to get ready to go to the Pacific and have it out with the Japanese. I don't remember just where we got off the train and picked up our vehicles, but I do remember driving a jeep across a [pontoon bridge](#) over the Moselle River at [Koblenz](#). The city was mostly rubble from repeated attacks by American and British bombers. The rubble was still being cleared from streets by bulldozers when we went through. There were thousands of "[displaced persons](#)" in and around Koblenz, many of them living in camps along the Rhine River and many were near starvation. When we were on the road, our meals were

prepared in field kitchens and served in mess kits. There was always a bunch of such people waiting by the garbage cans asking us to dump everything that we had not eaten into their containers instead of the garbage cans. Needless to say, we were more than glad to do so.

## Training To Go To The Pacific

From Koblenz, we drove fifteen or twenty kilometers on the west side of the Rhine to the city of Mayen, then turned back east for ten or fifteen kilometers to the village of Boos. There, our mission was to get the replacements trained so we could go to the Pacific Theatre of Operations and "have it out with the Japs". We pitched our two-man pup tent on the side of a hill, and spent the next two months living in it while we trained new replacements to bring our squad back up to strength. We set up a radio school in a schoolhouse in town and began teaching the replacements how to operate radios, climb poles and string telephone wire. My buddies, Irvin Roger, Trotter and Schneider and I were the only ones left from our original platoon. Roger and I were the only radio operators that didn't get captured during the Bulge, so we and Jack Parsons, a radio operator from the 424th Regiment, ended up with the job of training the new radio operators.



*With Dick Bowman*



*Just Me*



*Trotter and Schneider  
Camp Allen W. Jones*



*Me and Parsons*

## Parting Company

You can imagine our relief when the Japanese surrendered in August, and preparations were made to return the 106th Infantry Division to the States where it was to be de-activated. A [point system](#) was used to determine who got to go back with the division, with the number of points being based on length of service, medals received, time spent overseas, etc. Very few of us who came over with the Division had enough points to go back with it, so we were transferred to other units. This led to Irv Roger and I being split up for the first time since we had arrived at Camp Atterbury over a year earlier. Roger went to the 159th infantry, one of the regiments that were brought in from Alaska to replace the 422nd and 423rd Regiments that were captured in the first week of the Bulge. I ended up in an anti-aircraft battalion, living in a tent at an old landing

strip near the town of [Dole, France](#), teaching in a radio school. Dole was famous as the birthplace of Louis Pasteur, the chemist who developed the art of pasteurization. While I was there, I had the opportunity to visit well known cities that were nearby, [Besançon](#), famous for its wine and [Dijon](#), famous for its mustard.

With My Friend, Jack Falber in

While I was working in Dole, I got a ten-day a furlough and went to [Nice, France](#) with Jack Falber, a buddy from New York. Nice was a famous resort city on the French Riviera. We stayed at the Hermitage, a swanky hotel with a beach on the Mediterranean, with everything paid for by the Army. It was the first week in October and the weather was still warm, so we spent some time each day sunning on the beach, then took a bus to [Monaco](#), which was nearby, and went to the Monte Carlo Casino where



*Nice*

we sometimes won enough francs to have dinner at one of the excellent French restaurants in Nice.

**Final Assignment**

After a month or so in Dole, I was transferred to a military police unit in [Nancy](#), France. I was member of a three-man crew, operating a dispatch radio at the MP headquarters. It was truly an ideal assignment. We worked eight-hour shifts, so when my shift was over I was free until it was time for the next shift. Nancy was a fairly large city with an interesting history, some beautiful plazas and lots of culture. I was billeted in an old French army caserne near the center of town and there was a small French bakery nearby. I liked their bread and pastries and one day when I stopped in to buy some, the owner’s wife introduced me to her daughter. Her name was Fernande, a very attractive eighteen year old who had just returned home from a Catholic convent where she stayed, going to school during the German occupation. She spoke fluent English and told me she was training to become a ballet dancer and enjoyed going to the opera.

In the band in high school, I had played overtures to some famous operas, and when we discovered that we had similar interests, we hit it off right away. There was a first-class opera house in town with performances of both ballet and opera, so we made a date to go there and soon became regular patrons. The city hall, or “Hotel de Ville” was being used by the [USO](#) as its headquarters. It had been a palace at one time and had a large ballroom that was used by the USO for dances and some other soldiers and I had formed a band to play for the dances.

*Opera House in the Place Stanislas*



Fernande had told me that she liked to dance, but I wasn’t much of a dancer, so she would go with me and dance with the “stags” while I played with the band. There was always a bunch of [GI](#) lined up, eager to get a chance to dance with her. With an attractive girlfriend, a good job, lots of free time and free food and lodging, what more could a 20 year old GI possibly want? What I really wanted was to be on a boat headed to that little old West Texas town of Abilene.

*The Hotel de Ville in Nancy*



**Heading Home**

Around the first of December I finally accumulated enough points around to return to the states and went to Camp Philip Morris, one of several ["cigarette camps"](#) that had been set up near LeHavre to process GIs for their return.

I was there a couple of weeks and then boarded a <a href="#">"victory ship"</a> named Sea Tiger that really lived up to its name. It had been used to transport equipment and supplies from the U. S. to Europe during the war and then was re-fitted for use as a troop transport after the war. Going over we made the trip from New York to Scotland in about 6 days. It took us 13 days to get from LeHavre	
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back to New York. The trip over was smooth and uneventful. The trip back was about as rough as it could be.

*Camp Phillip Morris Quonset Hut*



We bucked a winter storm for almost a week, with waves so high that the front end of the ship would come all the way out of the water then slam back down with a loud creaking noise and such a force that we thought it would surely break apart at any time. We had to supplement the crew to dump the garbage, so we would tie our belts together and form a line from the galley to the edge of the ship. When the ship rolled in the right direction, we would slide the cans down the deck and dump them into the ocean. Almost everyone would get seasick at one time or another and wasn't able to get across some hatch covers to the latrine before throwing up.

*Victory Ship*



The hatch covers got so slick with vomit that we couldn't keep our feet under us, and can you imagine how relieved we were when we finally arrived, safely, in New York harbor.

There, we boarded a train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where we spent a few days being processed. I boarded another train and went to [Camp Fannin](#), near Tyler, Texas where I received my official discharge from the Army on the 23rd of February 1946. And since I was no longer a citizen-soldier in the "[Army of the United States](#)", you might think that would be the end of this tale. Instead, I succumbed to a sales pitch and signed up for a hitch in the army regular reserve, but I got out just in time to avoid being called up for the Korean conflict.

I regret not having kept a diary or a journal while I was in the service. I have always had a problems remembering details, so what I've ended up with are mostly general recollections of some high spots. I do remember that I never killed anyone, enemy or friend. In fact, only time I seriously thought about shooting at anyone was when Roger and I thought that someone was shooting at us in St. Vith. I have had access to letters I had written to various members of my family, but since we were limited in what we could tell about where we were or what we were doing, they don't provide much information about what I had done, seen or experienced during the war. My hope is that this brief, and admittedly general, account of my experiences will be of some interest to my children and their descendants.

Herb Stokes, April 2011