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168th ENG (C)

***My WWII's Memories***



I'm honored to pay my tribute to my buddies and comrades who died for their country, including one that I had never met - my wife's (Ann) brother John. Immediately after graduating from high school in June of 1943 I was inducted into the Army. We went straight to Fort Devens, Massachusetts and then on to Camp Carson, Colorado Springs, Colorado. The 168<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was originated and made up mostly of 18 to 20 years old men. The battalion consisted of approximately 700 men. We went thru all our training and then went to New York Harbor for debarkation.

We boarded ships and headed for Europe There were many ships in the convoy with aircraft overhead guarding us. We landed in Bristol, England in May 1944. For a short while we billeted in private homes in Wrexham Wales. Then we went to a wooded area where we bivouacked until it was time to cross the channel to Normandy. We landed on Utah Beach on July 14, 1944. We were in five major battles.

My most memorable experience was at the Battle of the Bulge in St.Vith, Belgium. The Germans had concentrated everything they had to this area where we were dug in at the Siegfried Line. I was a truck driver and at the time my truck was having a 50 caliber machine gun mounted over the cab. So, I was temporarily assigned to a kitchen truck. I volunteered to drive a jeep to the front lines, which was a short distance away, with coffee and blankets. While I was there an officer asked to borrow my jeep. I never saw it again.

All of a sudden the German 88 shells started to fly. Pete Bregolli hollered at me and said, "*You'd better get in this foxhole with me.*" I said, "*There's hardly room*". But, a couple seconds later I dove in as the tree branches started flying. In the middle of the night a messenger came from foxhole to foxhole informing us that we were going to hold hands and form a human chain, which we did. That night it was cold, with a wet snow, and we walked on and on. As daylight approached we found ourselves on top of a hill in the woods. It seemed like there were thousands of men there. The officer that spoke to our group told us that we were completely surrounded. He advised us, if we had any weapons, to dismantle them and throw them away. He also advised us to go in groups of 6 to 12 men, "*Go and Good Luck!*"

We started out with about 12 men, but, somehow, the next time we looked, there were only 6 of us. The first thing we did was to look in foxholes for K-Rations and blankets. We found enough blankets for each of us to have one, but little food. We started walking and as we approached the road we saw the Germans coming so we hid in the bushes not too far from the road.

There were many Germans and also many, many, Americans that they had taken prisoners. After it turned dark we started walking again. As we crossed the first fields there were thousands of rifles on the ground. The first night we walked right into a German bivouac area. The guard hollered at us and I said to myself, "*Oh, my God! I'm dead*". But it so happy that Captain Pliske was the leader of our group and to my surprise he spoke back to the German guard in perfect German. He said we were German officers.

I was in Co. "C" and I don't know which company he was but was sure glad he was with us as he saved outlives. The German guard then apologized and we were on our way again. We had our blankets folded over our shoulders and I suppose, in the dark, they looked like German officer capes.

We came across a railroad and walked down the tracks. I saw a German body lying on the ground. I wanted to make sure he was dead so on the way by I kicked his foot. He was stiff. My French class in high school paid off. As we came by any houses I would go and ask for bread and directions to Bastogne. One of our men happened to have a compass which helpful. We walked at night and hid in barns in the daylight.

On Christmas Day we went into a barn, climbed up into the hayloft and pulled the ladder up with us. Captain Pliske read a little from a small pocket Bible and we shared one K-Ration between the 6 of us. Later, three Germans came into the barn, talked for a while, relieved themselves and left. Thank God we pulled the ladder up with us. Night came and we walked again. While walking thru a field I saw a pile of dirt, which had some turnips buried in it. I dug one out and ate it. It was frosty, but it was food.

During the 8 nights we were halted several times but Captain Pliske got us thru each time. The 8<sup>th</sup> night we walked into a German area again and were halted as before, but our fearless Captain Pliske told the guard we were German officers and again we got thru. While walking over foxholes I stepped on a German Soldier (He must have been dreaming of home). We walked on and before long we were halted again. Captain Pliske said, "*We're Americans.*" I said to myself, "*He's giving up after all this?*" When the guard said, "*Advance to be recognized*" (in English) I was ecstatic. Captain Pliske had a keen sense as he seemed to sense we were right on the front line.

After proving that we were Americans we were taken to a building that looked somewhat like a hospital and were given some C-Rations. Being dirty, unshaven and hungry, that food was like heaven. We had walked about 55 miles in 8 nights - from

St.Vith to Bastogne. How good it was to be on the American side again. To my knowledge, the 6 of us were the only ones to escape without being killed, or

captured. We were later interviewed by a radio newsman and our story was aired on the Sunday Army Hour.

After losing so many men we had to get replacements. Our next battle was at the Rhine River Crossing (March 26, 1945).

I'm proud to be an American. I love my country. I love my flag. I love God.

*Source: The Bulge Bugle, May 2013*

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