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Recollections of My World War II Experience
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Before graduating from high school, I recall walking in Saratoga, NC with two of my friends, Irvin Harrell and Wallace Ellis, to Irvin's house. Irvin's father told us that war had broken out. All three of us thought we wouldn't have to serve, thinking we were too young and that the war would be over by the time we got there. However, all three of us went. At some point months later, I saw Irvin when his unit camped beside mine. I was thrilled to see him and we stayed up all night talking.

I graduated from Saratoga High School in Wilson County, NC in 1943. I was drafted in the Army in the spring of 1944 and completed basic training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. I was assigned to the 313th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division, Company G.

In the fall of 1944, I was shipped to Germany on the Queen Mary. We sailed out of New York harbor and were assigned to cabins for 2, however 24 GIs had to crowd into each cabin. The ship had a top speed of 37 knots per hour. It took us about a week to make the trip to LaHarve, France where we landed. We arrived after D-Day as replacements for D-Day casualties. We were taken to the front lines on freight train box cars.

We crossed the Rhine River, and in crossing, my boat capsized and I was saved by a life line stretched across the Rhine. The Rhine's currents were known to be strong and the Army had strung the lifeline as a preventive measure. It saved my life and the lives of many others. However, I believe there were some casualties. I came to ashore by pulling myself along the lifeline. I was treated by medics for some cuts and scrapes and then crossed back over the Rhine to the front lines the following morning.

In Europe, I received 5 battle stars at different times. One was for the Rhinehern Canal and one for the Rhine Crossing. I don't recall what the others were for. After particular battles, we were told to form a line to receive our stars. At the time, I was young and inexperienced and didn't think that receiving a star was important, particularly since they were distributed in such an undignified manner. I chose not to collect most of mine. Many other GIs felt the same way.

Particular battle-related events I recall:

Early in my experience in Germany, an officer came to me and told me that I had been promoted to "first scout." My job was to run across the battlefield and "look" for enemy troops. I was feeling very proud of my promotion that had occurred so early in my military experience. I was unaware that I received my "promotion" to scout only after the

unit leader had been unable to recruit an unsuspecting volunteer. In actuality, a scout flushes out hidden enemy troops by running out on the field and getting shot at. Fortunately, there were no enemy troops around us and I returned from my scouting duties unharmed and wiser about staying out of harms way.

We went back from the front lines for R&R (rest and relaxation) and were standing in the chow line when we heard a plane coming. We were told it was a U.S. plane and to stay in line. In fact, it was a German plane that began mowing down the chow line. The line was formed in zigzag fashion and I happened to be in the recessed part of the zigzag that enabled me to miss the bullets. To my knowledge, this U.S. misreading of the plane's identity was not reported and those who died were reported only as killed in battle.

In one battle, we dug and settled into foxholes near the Autobahn, waiting until dark to cross over. An elderly man came by riding a bicycle with a backpack strapped to him. One of our GIs shot him. I thought how cruel that was. When we checked his backpack, we discovered it was full of hand grenades that he would have used on us. Our military intelligence knew that this was a common enemy strategy and our GIs were prepared to respond appropriately to the threat.

A general came to one of our battlefield sites to make an inspirational speech to our troops. One GI a few men down from me asked another GI who that man speaking was. He buddy told him, "That's the reason you're here, because of that man right there." The GI, apparently out of touch with reality due to "battle fatigue" began firing at the general. The general wasn't injured, but the GI was removed from the premises. I don't know what became of him. It was clear to all of us that he had been in the heat of battle too long.

Later on during my time in Germany, I was driving a truck filled with rations for the troops. Along my route, I saw U.S. engineers digging trenches to hold many bodies, most of whom were Jews who died in German concentration camps. I saw the bodies being pushed into the trenches, into what became a mass grave for the victims.

One night, I found myself alone in enemy territory and hid from German gunfire in an old building. I kept feeling something hot and sticky leaking from over my head down onto me. I thought it was blood, perhaps from someone above me who was bleeding from a gunshot wound. When daylight came, I was relieved to discover that it was coming from a steam engine above me, and I looked around and saw I was actually in a railroad building.

Other recollections of my military experience:

During my time overseas, I tried to save as much money as I could to take back home with me. In addition to the small military pay we received monthly in U.S. cash, I earned money selling my cigarettes to other GIs. Since I didn't smoke and we were allotted 4 cigarettes with each meal, I had many GIs eager to buy my allotment. Because I saved my money, I had funds on hand to lend other GIs in exchange for a reasonable amount of

interest. We were allotted only a small sum that we could take back to the states with us. The remainder would revert to German currency and have to be left behind. Knowing this, I sent money home with several other GIs who were being discharged and leaving before I was scheduled to leave. I'd give them a percentage of the money (I think it was 10%) as a carrying fee to take my money to the states and mail it to my parents who would save it for me. Nearly everyone I gave money to mailed it to my parents as promised.

When the war ended in Europe, we were assigned to go to Japan. I was on guard duty one night before we were to leave for Japan. In the wee hours, a GI approached me and told me that the war had ended. The other GIs didn't learn the news until they awoke at daybreak. We were shipped home in the summer of 1946. I received an honorable discharge at the rank of Private First Class (PFC).

Before being discharged, I was advised by other GIs to sign up for the reserves to keep from being drafted again. I was also told that joining the Air Force Reserves would ensure that I would not have to serve in the infantry and would be least likely to be called up. After my Army discharge, I joined the Air Force Reserves, but much to my surprise and disappointment, mine was the first group called to serve in the Korean Conflict in 1950. I spent a year in Biloxi, Mississippi at Keesler Air Force Base and completed service in 1951 without having to see battle. I left the reserves with the rank of Sergeant.