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August 6, 1943-December 5, 1945

COMPANY E, 346TH REGIMENT, 87TH INFANTRY DIVISION

Ralph recounts his experiences with the Army during WWII, which included a brief stint in the short-lived ASTP program, and fighting through the Battle of the Bulge and into Germany before being wounded by a German 88mm gun. Rejoining his unit right before the end of the war, Ralph returned to the United States, and was enjoying leave when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan ending WWII.

I registered for the draft in Norfolk, Nebraska on August 6, 1943, my 18th birthday. Everyone was required to register because of the war. I received "Greetings" from the Secretary of Defense about two months later and was ordered to report for a physical exam at Fort Crook, Nebraska. On Friday, November 5, 1943 I left Wayne, Nebraska by bus traveling about 90 miles to Fort Crook, just south of Omaha. The next day I was notified that I had passed the physical and was given the choice of joining the Army, Navy or Marines. They didn't give you a "sales job" for any branch or specialty (tanks, airborne, infantry) within each branch, and they also didn't give you a lot of time to choose. I chose the Army in large part because of my poor swimming ability and was mustered in by noon. I received orders to report for active duty at the reception center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas on November 27, 1943. Dad drove me to Wayne the morning of the 27th in a heavy fog. My eventual destination was the bus terminal in Omaha. About 4:30 that afternoon I boarded the train in Omaha headed for Ft. Leavenworth. We arrived in Beverly, Missouri by 9 P.M. and took a bus across the Missouri River to Fort Leavenworth. The next morning on the 28th, a Sunday, we were roused out of bed at 4:30 A.M. for a delicious breakfast of "SOS", the first of many such meals. I spent the rest of the day lying around doing nothing. I spent the next four days getting issued clothing and other necessary gear, taking tests and getting shots. I also had my first experience with KP. On Friday, December 3rd, I received orders to report to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) for Infantry Basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. The ASTP program was for guys who had done well on the Reception Center tests. My first real trip away from home started that evening, we took a train from Beverly to Kansas City. We spent three to four hours in the large and impressive Kansas City train station. It was packed with soldiers going all directions. We left for St. Louis about 11 P.M. arriving in St. Louis the next morning. The next 24 hours were spent on a train to Birmingham, Alabama. From there another train took us to Columbus, Georgia. By now it was late on Sunday afternoon on the 5th of December 1943. Army trucks took us to the Harmony Church area of Fort Benning where we finally saw the tarpaper huts that we lived in for the next 15 weeks. There was room for about 30 soldiers in each hut. They were built on posts to keep the floor off the ground and they had screens that could be opened during the day. There were about 15 bunks and a pot bellied stove that was turned off at 10 P.M. each night.

I was assigned to the 11th Company of the 5th Regiment of the ASTP Basic Training Center. Infantry basic training lasted for 13 weeks, beginning on December 13, 1943 until March 11, 1944. It included daily calisthenics, close order drill, hikes of up to 25 miles, obstacle and infiltration courses, learning how to use an M1 .30 caliber rifle, carbines, and light machine guns. It was my first experience firing a weapon. We learned to fire the M1 rifle at various distances up to 500 yds. from standing, sitting, kneeling, and prone positions. Weeks eight and nine were spent on the range firing and qualifying with these weapons. Weeks eleven and twelve were spent on bivouac, sleeping in tents at night and playing war games during the day. Week thirteen included a 25 mile night hike with rifle and full field packs, as well as a 4 mile in 50 minutes forced march with full gear. The obstacle course included climbing walls, ladders, logs, and water crossings. The infiltration course was performed with full pack and rifle and constant machine gun fire about three feet off the ground. The task was to crawl the length of the course, over logs and other obstructions while staying under the machine gun fire. Later, we got to do this at night when you could see the tracers whizzing over your head. The interesting thing was that every fifth bullet was the tracer so there were four live rounds between the tracers that we could see. We did these again after I was assigned to the 87th Infantry so it got easier over time. We did a 15 mile hike about once a week in basic, and after we got to our division we would also

do 9 mile forced marches in 2 hours.

The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) intended for us to be assigned to a college or university after completing infantry basic training. We were expecting to take engineering and other studies that would be beneficial to our later army service. However, approximately half way through basic training word came down that the ASTP was suspended and all of us taking infantry basic would be assigned to various infantry units when basic training was completed. During the week following basic training, I received orders to report for duty with the 87th Infantry Division at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

On Saturday, March 18, 1944, I boarded a troop train at Fort Benning, Georgia for the relatively short trip to Fort Jackson. Upon arrival, I was assigned to Company E, 346th Regiment of the 87th Infantry Division and began further training. On May 13, 1944, I received notice that I was to go on a two week furlough beginning that evening. I took the bus to the Columbia, SC train station and bought a ticket to Kansas City, MO. My family had moved to Forrest Green, MO after I had left for the Army in November. I was not sure how to get there. After studying the map, I decided to get off the train about 4 A.M. on Monday morning the 15th in Springfield, MO. I caught a bus to Marshall, MO and then another to Glasgow by a very circuitous route through Booneville, MO since the Missouri River was on a spring flooding rampage.

On my return to Fort Jackson, we continued training. Some of the guys over 19 were pulled out of our group to fill other outfits' replacement needs overseas. Our division was still receiving troops to bring us to a fully staffed level. We continued to train daily. D-Day occurred while I was here. We didn't know any more than anyone else about what was happening and we saw the same film clips as the rest of the country when they were available later. While it was good news, we still knew it soon would be our turn to head for Europe. Our turn came on Oct 10, 1944. We arrived at Camp Kilmer on October 11 and spent three days there in last minute preparations for boarding the ship to take us overseas. To our surprise, when we got to New York we found out that we would be sailing on the largest troop ship, the Queen Elizabeth. We went aboard the QE on Sunday, October 15th. Our battalion was the first to board since we had guard duty. This gave us the run of the ship all the way to Scotland rather than being confined to a designated area of the ship. There were about 15,000 troops including the 345th, 346th, and 347th infantry regiments, and also the 423rd regiment from the 106th Division. They were one of the unfortunate regiments that was completely overrun in the opening days of the Battle of the Bulge. After the Bulge, since the 106th Division had been destroyed, really before they got started, the surviving troops became replacements for other divisions. I also ran into a guy by the name of Fellows from Ohio who went through Basic at Fort Benning with me. He and many of the 106th troops were in the ASTP program with me so I've often wondered what happened to him and some of the others in that group. My Guard post was out on the boat deck. The ship was totally blacked out, and made the trip with no escort. The QE was fast, so the German U-Boats were not able to track her. We left New York harbor Tuesday morning and got to Glasgow, Scotland by Sunday night. One of my most poignant memories is heading out of the Harbor in New York, past the Statue of Liberty, and having feelings that are impossible to describe, wondering whether I'd make it back home again. I'm sure just about everyone on board shared that thought. The Guard quarters were at the very back of the ship, right over the propellers. There was a constant vibration like driving down a wash board road that made sleep difficult. I volunteered for extra Guard duty taking the place of guys who were sick. Although it was cold out on the deck, it beat indoors. The North Atlantic at night is absolutely and completely black.

Once in Scotland, we went directly from the Queen Elizabeth to the train that took us to

Congleton, England south of Manchester. It was about the 24th of October. We stayed in what appeared to be an old factory. We did very little training and got passes to Manchester. It had been bombed extensively earlier in the war. About one week later many of us were moved to Hereford, England, west of London. We prepared barracks for other troops who were on the way. We stayed there the first two weeks of November, and then went back to Congleton. From there we went to Southampton, a port on the English Channel on November 26th. We traveled across the channel in a small ship to La Havre, France. We didn't know it at the time but there were U-Boats in the Channel periodically. About one month after we crossed, a similar troop transport carrying the 66th Division to France was torpedoed in the Channel killing many of the soldiers on board. We were not able to go all the way into the La Havre harbor since it had sustained major damage from air bombardment and the fighting after the D-Day landings. We went ashore at 4 A.M. in landing craft like those used on D-Day. It was November 28th and another unforgettable morning. It was my brother Paul's birthday and our first exposure to the devastation caused by war. It was dark, raining, and we were walking into a town that had been reduced to rubble, our first look at France. We knew that we would see many similar scenes in the days ahead. We marched at least 10 miles out of town to a large open field and were told to pitch our tents for the night. It was still raining and the day had been pretty demoralizing. The bright spot was that there was a farm close by with a big barn. By morning it was full to the rafters with damp GIs. We were awakened the next morning by the French farmer talking to his young son. We hadn't been missed back in the camp so all was well. The next day's journey was by truck. We pitched our tents in the rain again that night. We stayed a couple of days and then were loaded on a train. The boxcars were known as 40x8s since they were made to hold either 40 men or 8 horses. Your duffle bag was your chair or pillow. Our destination was Metz, France which is about 200 miles east and the end of the rail line. There were old forts that surrounded Metz. Some of these were still controlled by the Germans even though the front line was about 50 miles east at Gros-Rederching. We stayed in some buildings overnight and during the night you could hear gunfire from around the forts. The next morning was another memorable day. We were loaded on 6x6 Army trucks headed for the front. The trucks usually had canvas tops, but since we were so close to the front lines the top was open and uncovered so you could look for enemy planes strafing the convoy. The weather was still bad, with fog, rain, and some sleet mixed in to make it very dismal and dreary. The whole environment seemed to grow worse as we progressed east. The fields had stiff, dead cattle strewn around that had been killed by artillery. Pretty soon we passed the large heavy artillery. As we progressed over the rolling hills, the artillery got smaller, further indications that we were getting close to the front lines. We stayed in tents that night and went into Gros-Rederching on Sunday night to replace the 26th Division. Oddly, the 26th was the other division that also trained at Fort Jackson, SC. There was one guy in our division who had promised that he would never go on the front lines. He had been a replacement soldier brought in to get us to combat readiness. He had already served as an antiaircraft gunner in the Aleutian Islands. He was a little older than the rest of us and was popular during basic training since he had a Buick convertible and drove the rest of us around. On the night that we marched into Gros-Rederching, he put his hand on the muzzle of his M1 rifle and fired the rifle shredding his hand. Under those circumstances, the Army considers that Desertion. There were several other guys who shot themselves in the foot to avoid further service. One guy had gone AWOL from Camp Kilmer just before we got on the Queen Elizabeth. That is also considered by the Army as Desertion. I never found out what happened to those guys but always wondered.

Our first assignment was to take the town of Rimling. As usual it was raining and it didn't take long before we were pinned down by machine gun fire, taking quite a few casualties including the first fatalities. After dark we were able to fall back and regroup. We did take Rimling a couple days later. We had progressed a little way into Germany by December 23rd. We were unaware that the Battle of the Bulge had started one week earlier. We pulled back into France and were put on trucks heading north. We had been the right flank of Patton's Army, to our south was the 7th Army. When we headed north, the 7th filled in for us although they were spread pretty thin. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we were traveling on trucks. We were strafed Christmas night and finally arrived in Reims, France on the west side of the Bulge. By the 28th of December we were on the front of the Bulge heading into Belgium. The snow was very deep and it was very cold. Even the tanks had some trouble moving uphill because of the ice. We got chased off of one hill near Tillet by a couple of Tiger tanks. There was a soldier in the 87th who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his courage during the fighting by Tillet. He received the award posthumously.

The forest was dense and very eerie. We heard that there were German soldiers in US clothing that made it all the more unsettling. We slowly headed toward Bastogne. We did some patrols from the town of Bras-Haut, Belgium. Reconnaissance patrols were used to scout out enemy positions and Combat patrols were meant to engage the enemy. On the New Year's Eve recon patrol, a guy I knew real well named Jim Connell from Detroit stepped on a mine and was killed. We were behind enemy lines so we took off really fast since the Germans had heard the explosion and would come to investigate. Two nights later on a combat patrol, also behind enemy lines, we found a bunch of Germans in a house and had a fire fight. It probably only lasted ten minutes but we had a Colonel with us who wanted to see some combat. He got shot up very badly so a couple other guys and I rescued him and got him back to Bras-Haut. I received a Bronze Star for helping to save his life. One of our Sergeants got shot that night too. On the way back to town he was smoking a cigarette and the smoke was coming out of his chest. We also brought back three or four prisoners so it was a very successful patrol. We had mostly rifles, some automatic weapons and machine guns. Sometimes there was a bazooka available. They worked on smaller tanks but not the big Tiger tanks. You felt bad running but we didn't have anything to use against their 50 caliber machine gun or their 88 mm cannon.

We stayed on the front lines of the Bulge until about January 11th. Our unit was replaced because we were so low on troops. We had taken so many casualties that out of the original 40 in my platoon only four of us were left. We went down to Luxemburg in a static position along the Sauer River. We received a bunch of green replacement troops to get us back up to full strength. After about two weeks we resumed our movement eastward toward Germany. We went through Schneifel, east of St. Vith, which was the area where the German offensive that became the Battle of the Bulge started. We saw a lot of the 106th's vehicles that had been damaged or destroyed when they were overrun. There were also uniforms and GI clothing in the houses of the town of Auw from the 106th. We also passed by the Siegfried Line and all the pillboxes that comprised it. We tried to check all the pillboxes to be sure there were no combatants hiding inside. It was towards evening on February 12, 1945 and we were heading down a valley toward Neuendorf to take over the position of the 4th Division when we were spotted by the Germans. It was at dusk when they started shelling us with their 88 mm artillery. The 88s were unsuccessful so they started mortar fire. One of the mortar shells landed right behind us killing the guy directly behind me. He was one of the new replacement guys that had just been brought into my squad so I really hadn't gotten to know him yet. I had two wounds from the shell and although

my leg went numb, I fortunately didn't have life threatening wounds. The shrapnel just missed my spine. I was taken to the town of Neuendorf where we were replacing the 4th Division. They put me in a house for the night. The town was shelled all night so I was lying there all night hoping a shell didn't come through the roof. The next morning I was placed on a stretcher and loaded on a Jeep for a ride back to Schoenfeld, Belgium on the river. From there I went on a regular ambulance with three other guys. Our destination was Brussels, Belgium. The roads had started to thaw and they were very rough so it took most of the day. We had to travel by ground since the airfields were also too muddy to use. The night of the 13th I spent in the hospital in Brussels.

The next day I boarded a hospital train bound for Paris. The hospital was called the First Army Field Hospital and was located in a southern suburb of Paris. It was a great feeling to be away from the front in a place where you actually felt safe. I was very thankful to the Lord that my wounds were not life threatening especially in relation to many of the other soldiers who were there. There was a guy from Omaha, NE two beds over who was missing a foot from stepping on a mine. He was sent back home a couple days later and while I was envious that he was going back, I wouldn't have traded his situation for mine. It was a soft, uneventful life in the hospital. I slept and ate and went to the movies. One night at the movies I ran into a roommate from the time I went to business college in Norfolk, NE. Another guy at the hospital was back for a second time. He had been wounded on D-Day, returned to duty and now was back again. The nurses who ran the place were American but there were French aides too. The GIs liked to goof around and tease the French girls. Thermometers often spent as much time in a water glass as in your mouth and the GIs learned enough French to welcome the nurses into bed. This summoned an emphatic NO from the nurses. I was in the hospital till April 10th when I was moved to a rehabilitation ward in a nearby building. During rehab we got passes to go downtown to Paris. There was an Armed Forces Service Club where I got to hear Glenn Miller's Orchestra in person. That was a real treat. Glenn Miller went missing over the English Channel in mid-December of 1944. Ray McKinley was the new leader of the band. The band was terrific with guys who had been "drafted" from other well-known orchestras and other branches of the service. They even had a full string section.

The rehab only lasted one week when I was sent to Etampes, 30 miles south of Paris. It was the first stage of working back to the front. During the seven to ten days I was there, I got another pass to go back to Paris so I could hear the Glenn Miller Band again. The guy I was with, from the 90th Division, disappeared, probably to a house of ill-repute, so I almost missed the train back to Etampes. We were moved to another replacement depot somewhere in eastern France. We did some Army drills and marching, played volleyball and cards, mostly we just waited. We did have to fallout every morning for roll call but even the guys running the depot didn't seem to take anything too seriously. Everyone there had already been through the mill, were heading back to the front, and didn't give a hoot about anything. The whole process from leaving the hospital to getting back to the front took about a month. From there we took the train all the way to Mainz, Germany on the Rhine River. That was the end of the rail line since there were no more bridges over the Rhine. We crossed the next day on 6x6 trucks over a pontoon bridge. We were driving on the Autobahn to and beyond Frankfurt except where there was an overpass or bridge that was blown up. The Germans destroyed these to slow the American advance. There was nothing like these Autobahn highways in the US and the spring countryside was very pretty too. We arrived at the next replacement depot on April 12th, the day President Roosevelt died. Another interesting sight while we were looking around was an original Volkswagen bug that

was parked in one of the buildings. The first of many Volkswagens I'd see in my life.

I rejoined my same unit in the 87th on April 18th. Since I'd left them, they had come most of the way across Germany so there were only a few guys left that I knew. Lengenfeld was the town the 87th was in. They seemed to be waiting around since the end of the war seemed close. There wasn't a lot of opposition left for the most part. Sergeant Zenecheck had gone through the whole war but was shot and killed by a sniper the day before I got back. The sniper was a 14 year-old kid who was caught. Since the Sergeant was popular and there was a lot of frustration about his death so late in the war, I was told that most of his platoon put a round into the sniper so he was very dead. We would still go out on patrols many nights even though there wasn't much to find. We stayed in Lengenfeld until May 6th when someone decided that we needed to take some more towns. We moved out that morning toward Auerbach and Rodewisch, and we encountered more snipers and a few machine guns. We took the two towns but lost a couple more guys in the process. By then, the US had larger tanks that could compete with the big Tigers. They had 90 mm cannons. In Rodewisch, we were pinned down by a sniper until one of the new tanks showed up and leveled the house he was in. On May 7th we got the cease fire order while in Auerbach, not too far from the Czech border. Our first stop was the liquor store. We emptied the store, taking all the contents to a nice fourplex we were living in. Each unit in the fourplex had a nice Grandfather clock. A major party ensued as we all celebrated our survival. We all finally felt like we had made it. Over the next few days German prisoners came in waves mostly marching in ranks. Most of us collected a few Lugers, P38s and other weaponry from the prisoners. Since the war was officially over, we no longer could sleep in the houses. It was back to the tents in a field by Falkenstein.

We headed back to France by train. The camps along the way were named after cigarettes, i.e. Lucky Strike, Chesterfield, and so on. We started the process of getting back to the US. Mostly we goofed off in the camps, not working too hard and playing a lot of cards. The food was bad. We ate a lot of lamb, broccoli, brussel sprouts and other bad stuff. Finally, we left the last camp and got back on a Liberty ship, the USS Frederick Lykes, in LeHavre on July 8th. The port was in much better shape than on our arrival approximately 8 months earlier. It took nine or ten days to cross the Atlantic this time. The Liberty ships weren't nearly as large as the Queen Elizabeth so the ride was much rougher. We were supposed to land at the port in Boston but the ship didn't have radar and the fog off the Massachusetts coast was so thick that we waited offshore for two days. We sat in the dampness with the fog horn marking our location for any other ships passing by. We quickly grew tired of the monotonous tolling of the foghorn. Finally on July 19th the fog lifted and we landed in Boston Harbor. It really felt good to have my feet back on American soil. We were all anxious for our scheduled leave to begin. The nearest Army base was Camp Myles Standish. We only spent one night there and were loaded on trains taking us the camp closest to our eventual destination. Since Mom and Dad lived in Missouri now, I headed for Jefferson Barracks south of St. Louis. It was the middle of July and this was a steam locomotive. I was in the first car behind the coal tender, so with the windows open, we caught a lot of soot. The seats were benches so they didn't lend themselves to sleep. We headed south through New York City and then north along the Hudson River to Albany. From there we headed west to Buffalo, then Cleveland, followed by Chicago. From Boston to Chicago it took two full days from Friday morning to Saturday night. The Chicago to St. Louis leg was overnight so we arrived at Jefferson Barracks Sunday morning. We were covered with soot and a shower never felt so good. As usual, the Army had to process your paperwork before you could do anything so once that was done at Jefferson Barracks, my leave officially started. My next stop

was Forest Green, Missouri. The closest town that I could find a train to was Salisbury, Missouri. I spent the whole day in the St. Louis train station waiting to leave at 6 P.M. My Dad was in St. Louis for a synodical meeting but there was no way to contact him. I found out later that he went to the train station to look for me but our paths didn't cross. Mom, Paul and Loren met me at Salisbury for the final leg home. It was July 23, 1945.

While on my four week furlough, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, August 6, 1945. The Nagasaki bomb was delivered August 9th, and Japan's unconditional surrender was made on August 14, 1945. It was a great relief to know that all the death and destruction was over. My orders after furlough were to report back to Fort Benning, Georgia by August 27th. There had been rumors among the soldiers, which later were confirmed, that the 87th was removed from Europe quickly for a short break and more training before heading to the Pacific. Some other divisions stayed behind in Europe as part of the occupation force. After I returned, there was no new training since the Division no longer was heading to the Pacific and it was getting deactivated. If the atomic bombs had not finished the war, an invasion was planned for November 1945 on the southern most Japanese islands and a few months later to invade from the east of Tokyo.

Your remaining time in the Army depended on a point system that was based on months of service and how long you were overseas. Battle ribbons, other decorations, and medals were all worth 5 points. Starting in September, guys with 85 points or more could get out. I worked at Regimental Headquarters at Fort Benning for a month doing some of the paperwork needed to get the first guys out. Each month the limit was lowered by ten so by December 1st my 58 points got me out. To move the process along we were also allowed to go to any Separation Center in the country, so I went to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas late in September. I continued to help process the guys getting out, part of which was that everyone getting out got a three month separation check. Anybody from Nebraska, Kansas, or Missouri had to be processed out through Leavenworth. The only other thing of note was that the last World Series that the Chicago Cubs were in took place while I was at Fort Leavenworth. My last day in the Army was December 5, 1945.