



Chronicle of World War II as experienced by

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I was a Staff Sergeant when I went overseas, but on January 14th in the outside of Bastogne, I got a Battle Field Commission to Second Lieutenant. I served with the 11th Armored Division, 21st Armored Infantry, Company A.

This is May 31st, 2002 and I want to start a tape out that a lovely lady has agreed to type up for me and everything so that I might have something to give to my grandchildren and leave behind to my great grandchildren of what happened with me in World War II.

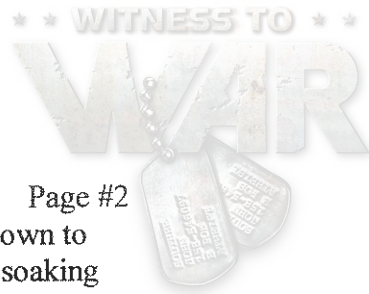
The lady's name and her husband are here in the retirement home with me and they are a lovely couple. The husband is David and this is Beverly Hammer and she has graciously listened to some of the war stories that I told when I had breakfast with them. The other morning she asked if I had any of this recorded for my grandchildren and I said, "No". And she said, "Would you please do it, Joe. I've got a tape and I will give it to you to record on and then I will type it up so that you might pass this along to your later generation."

So, I'm going to start out going into the US Army as an old country boy and I had never been anywhere else in my life and I was drafted into the army. I was married and had a wife and baby, not yet; but, I later had a wife and baby before I went overseas. And, we maneuvered through the swamps of Louisiana and the deserts of California.

Along in 1944, D-Day was June 6th, 1944 when the boys landed on Omaha Beach and Utah Beach in Europe. In September of that year, we were out on the California coast and they called me in and said, "Sgt. Coombs, we are going to send you overseas to draw our vehicles for combat." I had never traveled much in my life and had never been anywhere, but I was the man that was picked out of my company to go on the advance party. So, I rode seven days and nights on a train to Brooklyn, New York, and after a couple of days I loaded onto the Queen Mary with 11,500 soldiers and Winston Churchill and his party.

It took us five days to cross the ocean to England. I got off the boat in northern England and caught a train down to South Hampton and caught a boat from there to Omaha Beach and I landed on the foreign soil all alone. We still had to go down the side of the boat on a rope ladder and take all those things like field pack and wade in on Omaha Beach.

If you want to think of something sad that brings tears to your eyes—when you get up on the bank and look to your left, there are about 12,000 white crosses in a field of Americans who died getting up on that beach on D-Day and that was just a small part of them – so many were killed in the water in the channel and floated away.



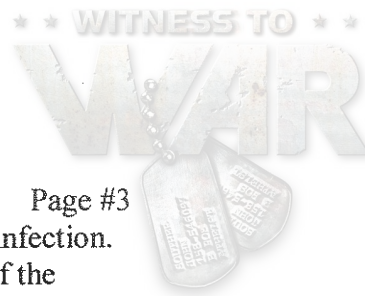
But then I got off the boat there at Omaha Beach and caught a truck that night down to Cherbourg. I laid in the apple orchard all night and the next morning I woke up soaking wet in pouring down rain. But, to make a long story short, Patton made a big push to Paris and he lost a lot of vehicles and he took all of our vehicles and I had none to draw. So later on, I caught a boat back to Southampton and joined my company back in England. And we got our vehicles and prepared for battle there.

Then we crossed the English Channel again and we are over in Rennes, the movie capital of France. We were guarding 20,000 prisoners that we had cooped up there. And the Battle of the Bulge broke out and we headed north. Patton was called up to Eisenhower's headquarters and all the generals were told that they were losing the Battle of the Bulge and the 106th Infantry was practically all captured, ten to twelve thousand men taken prisoners.

They needed help and they asked Patton how long it would take him to get up there and he said, "I'll be there in two days and attacking." And Eisenhower said, "Be reasonable, George." And he said, "I am reasonable, my men and I will do what I say and get the 101st Airborne who is trapped in Bastogne out." And so, we started out and we ran our vehicles wide open. You never stopped to go to the bathroom, you just got out on the turret of the tank or in your halftrack over the side running down the road wide open. And we were there in two days, and Patton had told the boys in the 101st, "We'll get you out of there by Christmas, Boys."

This was December 21, 1944, and we got in there. We didn't make it by Christmas, but we made it the next day. We opened the road from Neufchateau to Bastogne and liberated the 101st Airborne. We went on from there trying to get to Houffalize to close off the Battle of the Bulge, but it took quite a battle. On January 14th, 1945, we were in the little town of Foy, Belgium, and we were lining up getting ready to attack and try to get into Houffalize.

We had two-foot of snow and zero weather and we had nothing but ordinary shoes on because we had just come out of southern France. We had to lay and walk in the snow and some of the men got their feet frozen terribly bad. One of my men, trying to drive a half track, had his feet frozen so bad he couldn't get his shoes on and was trying to drive in his stocking feet. I went over to him and said, "Lawrence, I radioed back to Bastogne and we are going to try to get a jeep up here right away to take you back to the medics in Bastogne." I was standing there talking to him when the First Sergeant walked up and I stepped aside and about 30 seconds later, a shell hit the side of the halftrack and blew the two of them into pieces and blew me about ten feet into the air and when I come down, I had been hit in the face and shoulders and one of my men was yelling, "They've killed Joe, they've killed Joe!" My lieutenant started for me and they blew his right leg almost off and he was lying there wounded. The Medic was wounded and he couldn't help anybody, so my men took a knife (I could still walk and was not hurt, just had flesh wounds) and picked shrapnel out of me with their knife and patched me up.



They gave me a sulphur pill, or *wound tablets* as we called them to keep down infection. And three days later, I led my men into Houffalize to help close off the Battle of the Bulge.

But on the right of the road that morning that I got hit, I had a roommate, a sergeant from Cincinnati, Ohio, we had been in charge of the barracks in California together and slept in the same little room and they had killed him and forty men over on the other side of the road. There were not supposed to be any tanks in the area, but a German tank was hid in the bushes and painted white with white wash and nobody saw it and they started blasting into our men. One man somehow came through alive and they took him prisoner.

But, three days later, we went into Houffalize to help close off the Battle of the Bulge. I led my men in and we had fifty men left when we started in there out of 250. They told us to get on with one driver on the half track and one guy on a fifty caliber machine gun and blast away and burn all the ammunition we could going in there and they wouldn't know what we had. We made it in, what was left of us, and later on they brought in 200 new men to replace the ones that had been killed or wounded.

We went on from there to the Ziegfried Line after we had closed off the Bulge to fight with the 90th Infantry and the Dragon's Teeth. We didn't have any tanks at that time because they had knocked all of them out. Later on, they got our tanks repaired and they were waiting for us down in Luxembourg.

We drove that night in the rain and snow down the front line blackout line to West Whampark, Luxembourg. I had to be car commander, standing up to tell the driver which way to go and when not to get off the road. And, when I got down there at 2:00 o'clock in the morning, my shoes and mittens were full of water from the rain and melting snow I took off my long underwear and put it up beside me in a form-fitting bedroll in a barn loft. We had never been able to use the form-fitting bedrolls in battle because we were fighting hand-to-hand, and you could get a bayonet through you awful quick if you couldn't get out to protect yourself—you couldn't get out that quick. But we got into the Ziegfried Line where there were big pill boxes with eight feet of concrete in them and men in there shooting out at us.

So, Patton had dreamed up something that I hadn't thought of nor nobody else, but he said to the Infantry, "Get on the back of the tanks and hide behind the turrets." The tanks went down there and started shooting into those concrete boxes. The concussion got so great in there that the Germans came out with their tongues hanging out and the Infantry's job was to shoot them when they came out. We were there and finally got through the Ziegfried Line and pushed on and we were going up through Prum, Germany.



We pulled into this area sitting on a hill overlooking the city and one of the men said, "Do we dig, Sergeant?" and I said, "We surely do dig." We started digging our hole, this one man and I were digging together. The first shell hit down by the road and a little bit away from us, and the second was coming in and you could understand the sound of it after you had been under fire. I said, "It's coming close, Herb!" And we scooted down in that hole and we must have pressed it another foot deeper because that shell went three feet over us and blew the hole apart and covered us up in there. I can still hear Herb hollering, "I'm hit! I'm hit! I'm hit!" and so I got him out of there and I said, "Where are you hit?" and he said, "I don't know, but I'm hit!" He had a hole through his gas mask on his side, but he wasn't scratched. A piece of shrapnel had gone through his gas mask, so we shook ourselves off and pushed on.

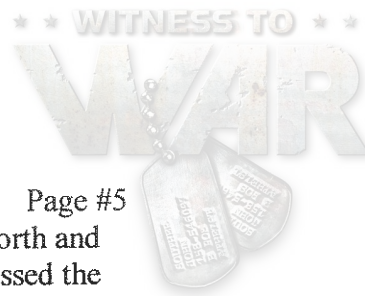
This one night we were bogged down on a little river, I think it was the Kyll River, when Patton came down and said that the Ninth Armored had taken the Remagen Bridge intact, 80 miles north of us. They were trying to hold it and they needed help. Patton came down and told the general that he had to be in Remagen in three days, and the general said to Patton, "General Patton, we can't get across that river tonight, there is no way we can get there." And Patton relieved him of his command and put the second-in-command general in charge of us. We finally crossed that river that night and fought all night and the next day and when we stopped we were 57 miles up there.

We got there in three days and supported them but during that three days, we took 10,000 German prisoners. The Germans didn't know where we were at and after that first morning in the big push, we took a German general and his staff eating breakfast who didn't know we were there.

We got to the Remagen Bridge and helped them and then they swung us south to go to the city of Worms on the Rhine River. We started off on a seven day push to make 100 miles and we were going down there through a pretty big city of Trier, and Eisenhower sent word to Patton to bypass Trier because it would tie up at least four divisions to take the city. Patton sent back, "I've already taken it with two, what do you want me to do, give it back to them?"

But, we went on and fought and made Worms one night and we were under tremendous machine gun fire and pinned down and there was one man laying there crying for his mother, couldn't move. You never know what you are going to do under conditions like that. Fear is when you say you are not afraid, but you are lying. One man came to see me after the war when we lived over in Clarksville. As he stepped out of his car, my wife went out to meet him and he told my wife, "This man I owe my life to. He saved me, I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for him." And I kinda liked that.

But then we got on down the Rhine to Openheim, south of Frankfort and the Germans had told us that they had stopped them dudes when they got to the Rhine River. Patton sent word back, "Pardon this, girls and boys, but when I get up there I'm going to urinate in that creek." And, he did. I have a picture of him doing that.



But then, Eisenhower and Montgomery were going to cross the Rhine first up north and they had all the air force and artillery set up there to protect them when they crossed the bridge at Remagen where the Ninth had taken it intact. So nobody was supposed to cross the Rhine. The day before they were supposed to make the big crossing, guess who crossed! General Patton had got hold of some Coast Guard floatation devices, and they floated the tanks across the Rhine River down there and we crossed the Rhine the day before they were supposed to. And that upset them, I'll tell you that. They had all the photographers in Europe to take pictures up there, and we didn't have anybody. We crossed and he called up there and talked to General Bradley, Eisenhower's assistant, and said, "Brad, I'm on the other side, fighting." And Bradley said, "Where are you at, George?" He said, "I've already crossed the Rhine and we're going on fighting."

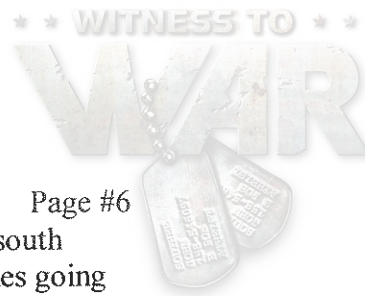
Our mission was given to us as Arnstads, Germany, 230 miles north along the Rhine, and he was so happy. He thought we were going to go ahead to Berlin and he wanted to get a chance at Hitler, he wanted to do that pretty bad.. We would spearhead and we had the foot infantry mopping up behind us, our prisoners and things, and we would just keep ahead fighting. We made 200 miles and got into the town of Oberhauf, Germany, and we found out that the foot infantry was 57 miles behind us. They hadn't been able to keep up. We did not have gas and stuff to fight and get out of there so we were just sitting there in this little town of Oberhauf.

They had attacked us three mornings in a row. They tried to get in there, but the Air Force did a good job on the tanks and things and they were blowing them up out there on the road. We had quite a show. There were two hotels there in town filled with German wounded and some of those dudes kept trying to direct artillery fire.

We would go up seven stories in the Post Office Building and watch the Air Force fighting those German tanks coming in. It was quite a battle and the Air Force did a good job for us and protected us.

We didn't have much food and I'll tell you something, there were packages in there mailed to the German soldiers from their mothers. And, I'll tell you, those German women could make good cookies and candy. But, we didn't steal it, we just liberated it.

When we needed the Air Force, there was a code we used for them, and when we got pinned down on the big drives you would hear the old general say, "Has anybody seen Kelly?" That meant, *we need the airforce*. Here they would come. One morning we were going down the road and the Germans had come out with their jets, the ME109's and they were strafing us and giving us a pretty tough job. We kept hollering for Kelly. Of course their ME109's were a lot faster than our P47's that would be coming in to help us, so everybody was wanting to know where they were. Pretty soon you looked up and here came eight of them diving in a nose dive because they had a lot of speed but they couldn't catch the ME109's if they just came in behind them. And they dove in there and shot five out of the seven on the run in and the other two got away. We had a lot of help and a lot of good men and we needed the Air Force to win, too.



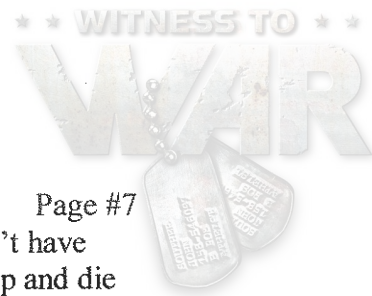
After we got out of there, they decided to change our route and they swung us south down around into Czechoslovakia and Austria. We had some pretty tough battles going down through there. One day the Air Force contacted Patton and said, "We've got a massacre up ahead. They are killing our American prisoners. They were marching our prisoners away. I want you to go get them."

We fought for 48 hours and we finally caught them and the Colonel rolled up and said, "Let the prisoners take care of them." Well, needless to say, when we left there, there were no German SS troops alive. Somebody must have given one of them a machete and he had cut off the head of one of them and was holding it up by the hair and laughing, as we pulled out of the area. But before we left and the people behind us moved in to take care of them, these prisoners were just laying on their hands and knees. There wasn't enough weight to throw them either way. They had been shot in the back of the head and were just lying by the hundreds along the road. That's why we were so rough on the SS Troopers. They had no respect for anybody, they treated them like dogs and they got the same treatment. In a way, we didn't have to spend a lot of money trying them in Nunberg trials after the war. Before we left there, we had shot a couple of cows in the field and the prisoners were skinning them and eating them raw because they were so hungry.

While we were there, we captured about thirty-eight of the German's planes on the ground that were there in the airport because we got there so fast. They didn't think we were coming. During the last 30 days of the war, we fought 610 miles of running combat pushing them back. We made the longest drive, farthest east toward the Russians of any other combat outfit in Europe and we far ahead of them. They gave us a lot of credit for that and for several other things we had done.

We then pushed on. One Sunday afternoon, I had come out of church and the chaplain had come up (we were in Linz, Austria, along the Danube River) and Captain Dowd hollered up, "Sgt. Coombs, get them ready to role. We've got to go into a prison camp up here." We got going and went up the river about 20 miles and got into Mauthausen Prison Camp where there were 15,000 alive and 3,000 dead laying ricked up there. We had to take bull dozers and cover them and just dig long slit trenches and throw them in there and bury them because they were lying there and stinking. Nobody knew them or anything. It was a pretty rough time. They had a lot of lice and typhus and things; so, we were sprayed like they spray sheep and cattle to kill lice and things. You've seen in the movies where cowboys spray the cattle. That's what they did to us – we stripped off and they sprayed us with this stuff to kill the bugs and typhus on us and we got them all buried.

But there were so many things that came out of that which were unbelievable. There were Russian and Polish people in there together in the camp, and the first thing we had to do really was to almost separate them. They hated each other so bad they were in the prison camp fighting each other when they were liberated. We finally got them settled down, men and women running up there, falling on their hands and knees, kissing your



feet and wanting food and we were not able to give them food because we didn't have any ourselves hardly. If you would give them a can of food, they would knot up and die after they ate it. They had to be brought back on watery soup. There were about 60 a day in a month dying after we were there.

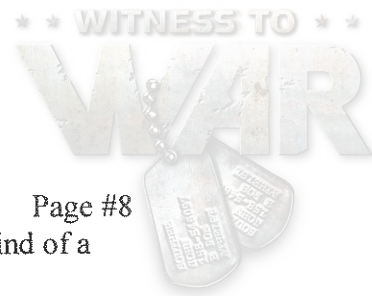
One guy came up to the fence, begging for food and to see what was going on. A sergeant handed him a bar of candy through the fence, a Hershey Bar, and the prisoner said, "That's the greatest meal I ever ate in my life." This man came to us in later years. Down in 1980's, we had a reunion (we had a reunion somewhere each year) and he came to us down in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and he asked to speak with us and address the assembly. They told him, "Yes." And, he said, "You people freed me at Mauthausen and I want to come back and I want to have the privilege of thanking you for what you did for me. You know, I was in there and my father and mother were killed there and my two brothers and my two sisters. I was nineteen years old and I weighed 60 pounds when you liberated me. When I got out, I had no way to turn, no where to go. I didn't have anybody. I made it to Linz, Austria, and an American Red Cross got me to America. I now own a business down in Texas and am very successful." Recently he has written a book about his life in Mauthausen Prison Camp.

I'm going to close now for a while and I'll get together another story. I might go ahead and finish this Mauthausen Prison story.

The Medics were coming in to help us with the sick. The men and women, skin and bones, were lying in bed, sick. We saw a man lying in the ditch there beside the road he looked like he was chewed to pieces. The Captain went down and inspected him and said, "Boys, there isn't any use trying to save him." The boys said, "We think he ought to have a chance, Captain, can't we give him a chance?"

And the captain said, "Okay." So he gave the man some penicillin on May 5th, 1945. He said, "That's the first shot of penicillin I ever gave." They didn't have it too long at that time, it was just coming out. And they picked him up, fed him in his veins, took him to the hospital in Mauthausen Camp and he doctored him and in two days he became conscious. He spoke five different languages the doctor did, and he knew the man was Russian from the way he looked and he asked him, "What happened to you and how did you get down along the road?" He said, the Germans tied me to a pole and sicced their police dogs on me and they were trying to eat me alive, and I have no idea how I got loose and lying down there in the ditch." But anyway, they doctored him and he got well and the doctor and him became great friends. They wanted to bring him back to the United States. He said, "I don't want to go back to Russia." But, the Colonel wouldn't let him do it.

I'm going to end up with that for now and give Miss Beverly something to do. I hope that the later generations might read this and remember the men that were killed in the Battle of the Bulge and realize that we lost 60,000 men in a few weeks and the Germans about 100,000.



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I'll see what happens here and maybe talk with you a little later on, but that's kind of a loose history of some of the days I spent.

Oh, I think I should tell you – back in the Battle of the Bulge, I fought for 90 days laying in that snow and zero weather. I didn't have a bath. I walked along the road there one day and I felt something going down my leg. The stitches in my long underwear had rotted off and fell down around my ankle. I know that sounds terrible. I told my wife that that didn't hurt me. Your grandmother wanted me to take a bath every Saturday night whether I needed it or not. But, your granddad wasn't too bad of a man and right now we are going in on 61 years of married life and God has blessed us wonderfully.

Thank you, young people, God knows I love you all. You are great people to me and my family. Take care and we'll see you all in Heaven.

I may come back a little later, Thank you.

Well, I would like to start out this afternoon with May 16, 1945.

I was still in Mauthausen Prison Camp, scheduled to leave for London, England, on a seven-day pass on the next day, the seventeenth. The Captain came over and said, "Sgt. Coombs, I've got a job that I want you to do today, this one thing and this one thing only – keep this man from killing the mess sergeant." The mess sergeant was part Indian and kinda rough and he slapped this guy, one of his cooks, up the side of the head. The boy happened to be from Kentucky and he was determined he wasn't going to take that kind of stuff, and he was going to shoot him. And the Captain said, "All you have to do today is keep him from shooting the sergeant." So I took care of all of that that day, and the next day the mess sergeant was gone – they shipped him out overnight to get him away from there.

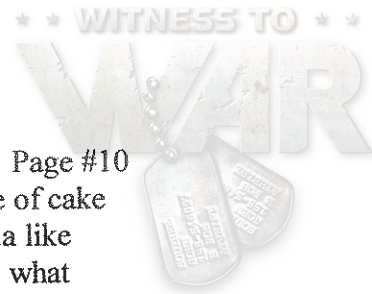
But, I started out telling about my furlough trip to London. The Captain told the first sergeant to come over and tell me that I could go, he said that I deserved this pass, and I was the first one that got to leave the company. We started out in the back of a GMC 6x6-army truck and rode two days and nights into Luxembourg City. Then we took a train to Paris and had to lay over there all night and then a train from there to LaHarve and then we caught a boat to South Hampton and from South Hampton a train to London for my furlough.

All in all, it took me twenty-three days to go and come back to my company. Coming back I had a two-hour layover at LaHarve to get my train and a guy said, "Come on, Sarge, let's go get something to drink, let's get some coffee at the Red Cross." I didn't want to go, but he said, "Come on and go with me." So, I went with him, and as we were walking down the street, somebody hit me on the back and said, "Where are you from, I would know that country-walk anywhere." It was a boy from Henryville that I grew up with. It was quite an occasion to meet him on the streets of LaHarve.

But, I finally got back to my company. They had moved out after I had left and went to St. Gallen, Austria. It took 23 days going and coming to get my furlough. We were on one side of the river and the Russians were on the other. We had two outposts so our company was divided and one of them went up river and we had to cross into Russian territory and go up the river to get up to this bridge. The Russians kept anybody from coming across to our side and we kept anybody from crossing over to their side. And that was our job and we stayed there in St.Gallen for several months.

But, we got hungry up there and the Captain went and killed an old cow to get some meat for us to eat. We bought the cow with Austrian shillings. We butchered her so we could have something to eat.

When I went back to division headquarters, they were looking for sergeants to send to Japan. The Captain sent me down to division headquarters on a big lake in Munden, Austria, for three days to stay out of the way while they were looking for them so I wouldn't have to go. But, as I walked in down there a friend there said, "Sergeant, would you like to come in and have some coffee and cake?"



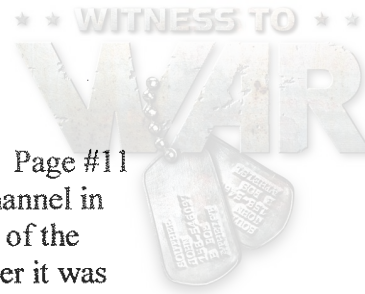
And, I still remember that piece of cake today that I tasted. It was the first piece of cake that I had tasted for a long, long time. But, they had everything to eat. It's kinda like this; we were the farthest ones up front so by the time the food got to us, we got what they didn't want. And the cigarettes, we got the 10¢ a pack cigarettes and they got all the 15¢ ones back in the lower echelons. You know, just like the Infantry, you got all that they didn't want. But, it was enough to keep us going.

It was funny to watch the Russians and the Americans. The Russians had been paid in Austrian shillings, and the Americans were paid in Austrian shillings. The Austrian shilling was worth about two bucks to us and it was worth 17¢ to the Russian. And, they would pay \$500 for a wristwatch and \$50 for a carton of cigarettes, and there was a lot of trading going on out in the middle of the bridges. Neither could speak the other's language. He would mark down in the dust on the bridge how many shillings he would pay and they would holler "Nix, nix!" Then the Russian would holler "Nix, nix!" and he would mark down what he would pay, then the American would holler "Nix, nix!" and scratch it out and mark down what he would pay. Finally they would compromise and the Russian would get the watch.

They traded a lot of stuff like that. They claimed that this went on with the Russians wherever they were and it is said that it cost the American government maybe a couple million dollars. I didn't get involved in any of it, but it was a big operation. After we finished up while there and got back, they told us one day that we were ready to move out.

I wanted to tell you a little story: this young lady came down to me up there.
#13 All the houses were built side by side up there in St. Gallen. She needed some benzene, which was gasoline. She wanted to wash some clothes to get the stains out of them. In addition, I gave her half a gallon of gasoline in a bucket – never thinking that we had a lot higher-octane gasoline than they did. But, she took it down and took it in the house where they had a wood fire. The fumes from that gasoline exploded in the house. She came up there screaming "Marxnell, Joe, Marxnell!" And I ran down there, saw the bucket on fire, and I yelled, "Get me the broom I got that bucket on the broom handle and took it out in the street and let it burn itself out. I almost burned the town down. I never again gave away any more gasoline. That was an exciting time. Well, it scared me, too.

Then we came back to Nuremberg and split up and I came over to Czechoslovakia to come home with another outfit. We loaded on the old boxcars there where everybody was crowded. Two or three of us could not lie down at the same time. Of course, it leaked and it rained. We spent five days and nights on that thing to LaHarve to catch a boat home. We went to Camp Lucky Strike waiting to get out (they called all the camps in there by a cigarette).



We got on the boat, a little old hood victory ship, coming out of the English Channel in October of '46. I got so sick on that boat, I had to lie on a cot down in the back of the boat, and I could hear that old rudder a'grinding. It jumped clear out of the water it was so rough. I was scooting across the floor back and forth on that old cot. I didn't have enough weight to hold it down. I got awfully sick – threw up and threw up. I didn't eat anything through the day. My old Jeep driver was up there, and if there was a dollar to be made, Ole Barney would get involved. He was cooking for the officers and they had a separate place to eat. He saw me and he said, "Sergeant, what's the matter?" And I told him that I was so sick. I went to the chow line, but I was so sick I couldn't go through it. He said, "Well come down here with me and let me fix you some soft-boiled eggs and get you some tomato juice, and I'll fix you up." And, I said, "Well, Barney, I can't eat in there with those officers." And he said, "The heck you can't, you are my friend!" So, from then on, I went down and ate with him and he brought me ham sandwiches and ice cream I lived on that for the next seven days crossing the ocean. Finally, I ended up reaching home in late October 1946 to see the wife and baby for the first time in 13 to 14 months.

As we were coming across the ocean, one of the boys had a police dog with him that bit one of the sailors on the boat. The Colonel demanded that they throw the police dog into the ocean and let him drown. They had to throw him overboard.

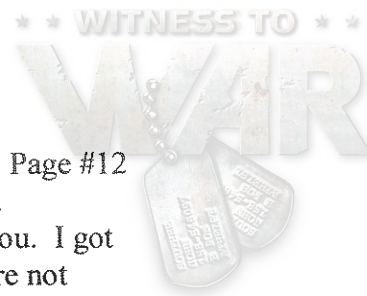
Down in the hole where I was there was a man who had a little puppy dog that he was taking home, and he said, "They ain't gettin' my dog. I'll shoot that Colonel before he gets my dog." Word got around and the Chaplain came down and told him, "Son, you are saying some pretty mean things." The soldier replied, "I've been taught for three years to kill people, and if he comes after my dog, I'm gonna' kill 'im!" The Chaplain went up to the Medics and got some sleeping pills, and they gave them to the little dog, which put him to sleep. They put the sleeping dog into a duffel bag. The soldier made it home with his dog.

Concerning the Colonel that threw the police dog overboard: they got hold of Claire Booth Luce who was in Congress, and she had that Colonel held there at the camp, and there were headlines in the newspaper "*COLONEL THROWS DOG OVERBOARD*" and he didn't get discharged when the rest of them did.

When we came into the harbor at Boston, Massachusetts, they had the bands out there to play for us. Girls were dancing and all of this stuff going on, but most of the people were hanging over the side crying their hearts out just to see America again and for the buddies we left behind who would never make it home.

We went over to Camp Miles Standish. I hadn't had any ice cream for thirteen or fourteen months and I loved ice cream. About the first thing I did was to go over to the PX there, buy me half a gallon of ice cream, and sat down there and ate it all.

In a few days, we shipped out for Indiana and I got my discharge.



One of the worst times that broke my heart so bad was when I was on Louisiana maneuvers and our daughter Sharon was born. She is Grandmother to a lot of you. I got the telegram to come and I took it to my Commanding Officer. He says, "You're not going anywhere, you are on maneuvers and you are going to stay here." So, I had to ride it out.

My Lieutenant told me, "Joe, when we get back to Camp Polk, I'm going to give you a twelve-week schooling at Ft. Knox and you can go home and see your wife and baby." So, when we got back, he set it up for me to come to Ft. Knox, Kentucky, where I could get home to see Elinor, your grand-mother. But I had to bring sixteen guys with me and I was in charge of them.

I finally got them into Ft. Knox and checked in to the desk in the orderly room and the Sergeant said, "Wait just a minute, Sergeant, I have something here for you." And he gave me another Red Cross telegram, "Come at once, wife in serious condition in St. Anthony's Hospital in Louisville." Before I could even set my bags down, he told me, "I'll get you a jeep right away and send you into Louisville to the hospital." That's the first time anybody ever did anything kind for me in the army.

However, I went in to the hospital and my cousin, Margie, was head nurse on that floor, but they had said that there was no hope of Elinor's living, and she was lying there in the bed unconscious. Margie broke down so bad they had to take her off the floor and get another nurse to take over. I sat there talking to her, crying and holding her hand and praying and all of a sudden, she woke up enough to say, "Joe, is that you?" and I said, "Yes, that's me, Honey." And, bless her heart, she never lost consciousness again, but she had a blood clot and was near death lying there white as a sheet. They couldn't bring her to, but the sound of my voice and sitting there, she recognized me. I thought this was just wonderful, but she got better and after a couple of weeks, she got to go home to my parents. No, she went to her sister's home, Margaret.

I would come in each night from Ft. Knox. Coming in late, I had to get up at four o'clock in the morning, walk a couple miles across the bridge, and catch a ride on Broadway in Louisville to Ft. Knox. I would do this every day just to come home and be with them. But after the fourteen weeks were up, I had to say "Goodbye" to my wife and baby again. Those were very hard moments.

But, I just wanted to put that in here so you would know some of the things that happened and how many broken hearts that we had over the three plus years that I was in the service.

I finally got the sixteen guys back and we went back to California and crossed over Needles line to a little town of Byce, California; and that ole train stopped and dumped us off out there in the middle of the desert. There was nothing there but desert. The trucks picked us up and took us to some big tents pitched there where we lived for the next three months while we had desert maneuvers.



I hope that Jared gets home alive, bless his heart, we love him dearly. I hope none of the rest of you ever have to go.

I think I mentioned before about making 610 miles in thirty days near the end of the war, and you probably wonder how we did that. I think it would be good to explain it to you.

We had small artillery planes that would fly over and direct artillery fire. They made up some pamphlets that said, "If you would like to save your town, put sheets out the window." And, if there were white sheets hanging out the windows, we just rode on through the town and wouldn't stop. But, we would talk to the pilot and ask, "Do they have their laundry out this morning?" And, if they had their laundry out, we would just ride on through and keep going. One place didn't do that and a tank hid back in an alley, shot an armored car and killed all the men in it. But when we got through with that, I'm sure they were sorry.

If they didn't put the sheets out, we would throw white phosphorus shells on them which would set the town on fire. After that a couple of times, they didn't play around. But, that is how we covered that many miles of battle in thirty days.

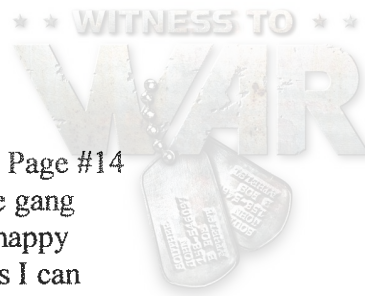
My son, Joseph, sent me a book *The Battle of the Bulge* which had practically everything explained in it. Elinor read several pages of it to me the other night. Since I have only one eye, I don't see too well. But, I wanted to tell her the memories that came to me as she read these towns. After we had chased the Germans back in the Battle of the Bulge, they came back, walking down the road, a procession of them and carrying all they had left. They moved out and got out so they wouldn't be killed.

One thing that broke my heart – they had made a makeshift stretcher and had this little girl lying on it. She had been killed; she looked like she was about eight years old. They had some boards nailed together and they were carrying her back to be buried near her home.

Another thing that I recall as we went into a building one night. We had pushed the Germans back and we went in to see the Captain. We were standing there talking when we heard some noises. "What in the world is that?" It was voices saying, "Wassa, wassa, wassa" which means "water" There were about fifty people hid and crammed in that basement and they were thirsty. They could tell when the Captain and I were talking that the Americans had control, and they were hollering and asking for water. They wanted to identify themselves before they came out.

There are a lot of pitiful things that I keep forgetting and want to say to you. There are many memories to call back.

May 1945: Carl "Joe" Coombs, recalls the horrible events of World War II in a letter to his wife, Elinor.



“Well, honey, I’m happy, but not half a happy as I will be when I walk down the gang plank and put my feet on American soil again. One reason, Elinor, I’m not too happy now is because of our task at the present. This will be hard for you to believe, as I can hardly believe it with my own eyes. Darling, we are here at a prison camp with around 15,000 slave labor which are starved. We are told thousands have been killed here, some say millions – which is right, I don’t know, but yesterday an American bulldozer was digging a deep hole to bury the piles of naked bodies lying around the building which was supposed to be a hospital.

“I saw this with my own eyes. Human bodies, nothing but skin and bone, piled up like stove wood. I also saw where thousands of other bodies were buried. Also, the torture chamber covered with human blood two inches deep, the gas chamber, shooting gallery and the big ovens for cremating bodies. These are things hard to believe.

“We saw several thousand of P.W.’s along the roads from starvation, others who could hardly walk. Also, I’ve stood arm in arm with some of my buddies that were killed only a foot from me, but this is one memory that can never be erased from my mind.

“I myself have doubted some of the pictures you see in papers, but not now. Thirty tons of food was brought yesterday by our trucks and a hundred or more medical men. Things are beginning to look better already. Of these people there was 2,000 women and some children.

“There were five American soldiers, one with whom I had a long talk. He had spent 10 months here and really knew what had gone on. He told me of one day when 5,000 Jews were lined up at a rock quarry and if they didn’t jump to the rocky bottom 300 feet below, they were shoved over or shot and then thrown over.”

Joe’s company in the U.S. Army, Co “A: had 250 men at full strength. “There were 50 of us left after the mission,” said Joe, who now lives in Brandenton Florida. “I thank God every day I was able to live through the terrible times and return home to my wife and darling little girl.”