

Rocco R. Caponigro

I enlisted at age 18 from Montclair, New Jersey. I did basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. I was part of a new Infantry Division, the 100th. They had cadre with 12 to 14 years of service who had been promoted from PFC to SGT or in some cases to First Sergeant. Many were short on education and didn't know how to handle men or the responsibility. The enlisted guys were generally sharper and sometimes ran the sergeants.

I went to Ft. Jackson for 7 months, then to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma for 6 weeks of advanced training, then joined the 100th at Ft. Bragg. I was trained on the radio to do forward observer work. I went on the Tennessee Maneuvers in November and December of 1943 and it was bitter cold and wet. We weren't allowed to make fires, and at one stretch I didn't have a shower for 3 weeks. We stayed busy. Towns people at Murfreesboro were very nice. They'd pick up soldiers, take them home, feed them, and let them sleep in a real bed. I remember Christmas Day I ate turkey in the rain with water running off my helmet into the gravy. We had orders not to get in or under a truck. We had 2-man tents. We heard the story about putting rope around the tent on the ground to keep snakes out. It doesn't work, we got a couple in our tent.

I was scared to death, it was my first real time away from home. I wasn't homesick because it was all a new adventure; I was with the same guys for 3 years, some from New Jersey and some from Connecticut or New England. In September 1944, we went overseas but we had no idea where we were going. I think our orders were changed while we were on the way. The ride over was bad. For 30 years I couldn't stand the odor of boiled eggs nor the smell of oil in gas stations. Those were the smells I remembered from the trip. Our convoy lost 2 ships and we could not stop to pick up survivors. We had to stay in our life jackets for a long time. We could only go as fast as the slowest ship.

We landed in Marseilles in southern France. Eight days after landing we were in the line near Aix. Our first combat was at Rambersville above Marseilles. Our division helped take the citadel of the town of Bitche in France and we were all made members of the society of the sons of Bitche. I still have my membership card. The first time I was in combat I was scared to death and never got use to it. The darkness made it even more eerie. I remember miles and miles of nothing, no birds, no animals, just devastation of the war all around. The first time I saw a German I was surprised he wasn't over 6 feet tall. I am Italian and short and had certain ideas about ethnic groups all my life.

USO shows were great. They came to the guys in the second echelon, not the front line or the rear area. A show lasted 2 to 2½ hours. I saw Ingrid Bergman and fell in love with her, Jack Benny was good and Marlene Dietrich played a musical saw while wearing long johns--it was bitter cold. She really looked good in long johns. There were anywhere from 200 to 500 who'd watched a show. It was always a surprise when a show came. They didn't publish schedules and after the performance, they'd get on trucks and go to the next bunch of

soldiers. The shows weren't too serious, just entertaining and didn't make you think about home. It was just good entertainment and the good feeling lasted for several days.

We liberated a couple of places where they had Polish POWs and some of the healthier ones followed us unofficially. They helped with the KP and other work and got food in return. We sort of adopted them. I learned a little German and Polish and saw a few Italians. When the war ended, I was outside of Stuttgart with a group of 4 or 5 sitting in a field. I remember it was early in the afternoon and we were without shirts listening to one of my radios. When we heard the news we just sat there for 2 hours and did nothing. No yelling, or throwing things in the air or getting drunk. Just sat there.

I rotated back in December 1945 and was discharged on 18 December at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. I was in a rush to get home so I didn't consider staying in. If they had made me come back in a couple months I might have stayed in but the initial urge was to get home away from the Service. I had 3 brothers in the war at the same time. An older and younger brother were wounded within 4 days of each other, one in the Navy and the other in the battle of the Bulge. They were not serious wounds but that did a lot to undermine my mother's health.

To me the war was a big process, not any one thing really stands out. I never got the 52-20 club or any other benefits because I never had occasion to. Never asked for anything.

*Rocco A. Caponigro*