

Safer to Use a Howitzer than a Rifle

by Thomas B. Bartlett, 399-Cannon Co.

Right after high school graduation, I had a couple of interesting jobs because I wasn't old enough to be drafted. I worked for the Corp of Engineers on the Arcata Airport (called the foggiest airport in the US) and on a road survey crew in Mendocino and Lake Counties with the Division of Highways with John Maurer who was to become a contractor.

Then there was a short stint at Humboldt State. I enlisted in the Army in November of 1942 while on a trip to San Francisco with Ed Traverse and Tom Baker. Baker had bands on his teeth and a Peter Pan collar! There's a picture of that occasion somewhere and we all looked smashed and very much underage to even be in a nightclub. Baker and Traverse both opted for the Air Force. I was called to active duty in March 1943, They had to give me month off to get over the measles!

My sister, Marcia, was only nine years old then and Pat was at Humboldt (later to graduate from Oregon University,) and I was eighteen. Basic training was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina at the FART Center—Field Artillery Replacement Training Center. (Pappy had been in the artillery) I went via train, first class. I even had a lower berth. In the "small world" department, I met an army cook there, Bruce Duffy, from California. After the war he became owner of Duffy's Cabins at Klamath Glen. There were only three Californians in the whole battery. Lots of kids in the outfit couldn't read, all from Oklahoma, and they were so homesick, cried a lot when they got together on weekends to play guitar and sing.

After basic, I was put into ASTP, Army Special Training Program, at Charleston South Carolina—The Citadel, also known as the "West Point of the South." In the short time I was there, I certainly learned a new version of the Civil War!

When this ASTP program was dropped, my friend Bartley (still my friend in 2003) and I were sent back to Fort Bragg, and I ended up, in the 100th Infantry Division which was getting ready to go overseas. Probably 100,000 other soldiers were in that area waiting.

The 399th Regiment Cannon Company was my assignment—that meant loading howitzers, and there goes my hearing. On many days in France we shot one hundred to two hundred rounds a day, without earplugs. (I was given a nineteen-day furlough before I went overseas. It took me five days each way by train to get home and ultimately back to New York.)

From there, I left for France on a freighter named the J. W. Mc Andrew, which carried sixteen passengers before the war. There were about four hundred of us now on that boat—as cargo. It was an awful trip, complete with hurricane in the Atlantic, and most men were deathly seasick. For some reason my only type of motion sickness is in a car, thank God. I learned to play bridge on that fourteen-day trip to Marseilles.

The misery continued when we reached France where we were flooded out of our pup tents on the second night we were in the staging area. We were proud that our division had made a record time coming from the US to combat.

We were ordered to Northern France, Alsace right next to Germany—getting close! For me, it was front-line action from then until VE day May 1945 when Germany surrendered. That was a boozy celebration where confiscated Rhine wine was made into one-day-old Cognac.

While I was in combat, my dad listened to Gabriel Heatter every night to try to figure out where my outfit was. He'd relay this information to me because I certainly had no idea where I was most of the time. I remember the rain, the snow, and the mud and then the frozen ground, difficult to dig a foxhole and move a gun around. It was called the "worst winter of the century."

It was better to use a howitzer than a rifle; safer, that is. It wasn't a safe place to be for anyone. We were strafed by Messerschmits a couple of times, and our own planes did it twice by mistake.

One of our jeeps strayed behind German lines and was blown up in a minefield. I got lucky twice, once when a shell landed between my legs and burrowed into the ground before it exploded, thereby saving my feet. Another shell landed about eight feet away turned out to be a "dud."

While in the service my monthly pay escalated from \$50 a month to about \$130. I sent home a \$10 war bond every month, plus I had to pay laundry and life insurance out of the monthly stipend.

I remember our army withdrawing only once, on a New Year's Eve when the Germans counterattacked, but as history reports, the whole 7th Army, including my outfit, later broke through to the Rhine River on March 15, 1945, the beginning of the end for Hitler and company.

I ended up a sergeant of many talents—shooting guns, driving truck, cooks' helper (cleaning grease traps and pots and pans), boxed some, and was generator operator of a prisoner of war compound.

There were good times like when we went on R and R in Nancy and Paris France, and in Denmark. (Use your imagination!)

I still correspond with my wartime buddies and have occasionally visited with them at their annual reunion of the 100th Division, and Tony De Rosa and Ernie Larson and Bill Bartley came to visit us here in Eureka.

The war ended in Japan before I could be sent there. I went home to Eureka via Camp Beale, California where I was discharged in April of 1946. I was twenty-two years old.

The following September I returned to college, courtesy of the GI Bill of Rights. After a summer in "Poison Oak Alley" (Bull Creek and Honeydew), I decided that engineering wasn't for me, and enrolled as a pre-optometry major at Humboldt, and no regrets about that.

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