

# Veterans Share Recollections of the War

by Jimmy Calvert

*Jimmy Calvert, son of James Calvert, 925-B, has taken many Centurymen under his wing. As a Progeny of the Century, Jimmy wanted to support the veterans and to ensure their stories were told. Every Sunday he calls many of them, encouraging them to remember and to talk about their experiences during the war. The veterans look forward to Jimmy's calls, and they have helped Jimmy craft their memories into stories to share in the newsletter.*

*Corporal Peter Likanchuk, was a member of Battery B, 925th Field Artillery Battalion. A first-generation American whose dad was a white Russian and mother came from the Ukraine, Peter came to the United States in late 1890s to find a better life. Peter was born in 1922 in Chester, Pennsylvania, and was drafted in 1942. When asked if he was worried about being captured by the Germans and what could happen to him, having a Russian background, he said he had heard about it, but never thought much about it.*

Mom and Dad couldn't speak or write real well in English, so it was up to my sister to write to me and translate my letters back to them.

After training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina had finished, we packed our gear and loaded in the back of trucks for our trip to an area near Lebanon, Tennessee for what was called the Tennessee Maneuvers. Here we paired up and lived in our two man tents. It was also here we had what we called a top kick (first sergeant) by the name of Gibbs. Sergeant Gibbs was a large older man and it took two ammo belts connected together to go around him. Each morning he would make his way down the line of tents waking us up in his own loving way. As he made his way down the line of tents, you could hear the guys behind him saying, "Coming Dumbo." Years later at a reunion I was setting in a room with some of the guys talking and as we sat there, I noticed this guy who kept walking past the doorway a number of times and looking as if he was lost. As he walked past once again and thinking it was Sergeant Gibbs, I called out "Coming Dumbo," but it turns out to be old Sergeant Sackett who had been forward observer with us.

I made the trip overseas on the USS *General Gordon*. As I was walking on the top deck one day, I came across my good friend Jack Crowley who grew up down the street from me and who was now attached to the 398th. Jack was just setting there at the side of a doorway sucking on a lemon drop for his sea-sickness. I asked, "Is that you Jack?" and as he looked up at me his face said it all.

We landed at the port of Marseilles, France, and spent a week unloading our gear and equipment.

On 1 November we moved in the vicinity of Houssaras. On the front lines I worked with the forward observers laying the lines from the CP battery to the forward post. Most of the time there were three of us, along with Lieutenant Phillips who lived in a small dugout covered with limbs for days at a time. Lieutenant Phillips was a tall, thin guy from Ohio with sandy hair and was well liked by all of us who served under him. He was one of those officers you could talk to. The other two enlisted guys were Tony Maffei, who was a boy from Long Island, New York, and was killed on 9 December.

The other boy was Otis Jefferson who was from Pennsylvania and was also killed on 14 November. On the day it happen, I had gone back to the aid station to have my ingrown toe nail removed and never received the news about Otis until I returned back to the post.

Our first casualty was Lieutenant Tison who was wounded on 10 November, but I don't recall him returning to our unit, but do remember running into him while I was in England.

The guys had an ongoing joke about me which was, if you are looking for Peter, just look up in the tree and you will find him. It was from then on that they called me "ape." To cut back repairs on the lines I would hang a lot of the lines up in the trees so the tanks wouldn't be running over them. I also had a mouth harp I carried and used to entertain myself with but my biggest request from the guys was always "KNOCK IT OFF"—a tune I never did learn.

One day as we were sitting on the side a road just outside of this small town, the Lieutenant told me and another boy to stay with the jeep and radio while he and his aide checked out the woods outside of town. With that the two of them made their way across the field and into the woods.

After sitting there for some time and thinking they should have returned by now, we decided to go on into the town, thinking maybe we would find the Lieutenant there. As we came into the town, I was stopped by two GIs who asked where I was headed. I explained to them that we were looking for our lieutenant who was checking out the woods. I was advised that we didn't want to go to those woods because it was being held by the Germans. As we sat there on the side of the street waiting, two girls came walking by and as they passed by us one of them said something in Polish. Hearing them, I replied in Polish and as I did, the two of them stopped, turned, and looked at me shocked to hear a GI speak their language. Later that day we finally caught up with the Lieutenant and his aide.

I had two close calls while I was a forward observer. Our post was always in view of the front lines and on this one day we had set up in this old French garrison; it was also the same day Captain Eddie decided to come up forward and direct fire himself. If I hadn't looked back and seen him and signaled for him to take cover, he would have gotten hit.

The closest call for me came the day we had set up in this stable, calling in German troop movements. Just as I stepped away from the window a mortar round came in and hit right in front of the window.

One day we were going down this road that ran along side a stream, looking for a place to cross. Finding a place that looked good, we started in and got about half-way when the Germans opened up on us from the other side. In no time the driver had the jeep in reverse heading back for cover.

We had heard the rumor the Germans had broken through to the north of us.

In the early morning of 1 January 1945, I was with some infantry guys down in the basement of a farmhouse trying to get some sleep, when all at once all hell broke loose. Shells were falling all around the house and as it started, someone at the top of the stairs yelled down to us, "Get up here! We're falling back." The basement was dark and everyone was running around grabbing things and that's when I noticed some SOB had run off with my white field jacket, leaving me their muddy one. As I made my way to the front door, a lieutenant was outside trying to get the infantry boys grouped up. Also from the darkness in front of me I could see flashes coming from German small arms fire. The three of us jumped into our jeep and by daybreak we had fallen back to the vicinity outside of Bitche where we took up a defensive position. That afternoon and night I recall hearing all our guns firing as I hugged the ground for all it was worth trying to keep from being hit by friendly fire.

Once in a while, we would be sent back for three days to the rear for some R and R to clean up, get a change of clean clothes, and have a hot meal. On the lines you hoped each morning the kitchen jeep would show up with a hot meal, but here again that was mostly wishful thinking.

As far as seeing a Red Cross doughnut wagon goes, I only recall seeing one once or twice and as far as a USO show went, I remember seeing the one that was set up out in a field with Bob Hope and the Andrews sisters. At that show was also Max Baer who was a big-time boxer back then.

As we made our way through the small towns and villages, you knew which was the mayor's house by the pile of manure in front of it. He always had the largest pile.

### **Private First Class Joseph Rotundo served in Battery B, 925th Field Artillery Battalion.**

Having been trained as an artilleryman, on the trip overseas my duty on the ship was to help man one of the five-inch guns. This duty allowed me to spend more time on the top deck in the fresh air. Believe me, with all the guys down below sea sick and as bad as it smelled down there, too, I didn't mind the duty at all.

We really never saw any action while at sea, but were scared all the time, worrying about U-boats. For example, one day on the horizon smoke was spotted and as we neared, we could see the smoke was coming from two burning ships. The word was that they had run into each other during the night, but we felt they had been hit by a U-boat.

During the winter of 1944 it was cold and I mean cold and all it did was snow and then snow again. If that wasn't bad enough our food was short at times and all I had for a coat was my field jacket and blanket.

At one point I remember them coming around and anyone who could carry a rifle was given one and sent to the front lines. It was also during this time a German plane came over and strafed us. I had taken cover behind a tree and as I sat there, I heard someone on the other side of me shooting a .45, I looked up only to see old sergeant Gibbs standing there shooting at the plane with his .45. I'll never forget old Dumbo, he was a real card.

In artillery, you were on duty 24-7, you ate at your gun and slept beside it or under the truck. Each gun was to be manned with a six-man crew but there many times there were only two of us to do the work. Each gun also had a man assigned to be a truck driver and ours was one of the best. I remember on 30 January they asked for volunteers to take a 105 and move to a place overlooking the German held town of Reyersviller. The guys who volunteered were Sergeant Drayer, Sergeant Krebs, Corporal Walden, and me. We were to move in without being heard and knock out the buildings the Germans were using. I'll have you know that our driver had us right in there, almost point-blank range, without them knowing it. And before the Germans knew a thing, we had hit the buildings and were out of there.

Talking about sleeping at your gun, one of the closest calls for me came the time I was asleep at my gun and never knew what happened until I got up the next morning. The night before I had placed my gasmask beside my head and when I awoke in the morning, I found a piece of shrapnel in it.

We would get our share of shelling and it was during one of these I remember Sergeant Thomas falling to the ground next to me. As the shelling stopped, I was picking myself up off the ground, there laid Thomas. The ground around his head was stained red from his blood. It looked as if he had been hit in the head by shrapnel and I thought to myself he was a goner. The medics, who I felt were some of the best, came running up to Thomas. As I walked away, I thought that would be the last time I would see him. Years later at a reunion, some of the guys told me to have a seat in this room and to wait there. They had a surprise for me. It wasn't long until the door opened and there stood old Sergeant Thomas. I thought I was seeing a ghost. Thomas spoke up and said, "You thought I was dead, you SOB," and from that day on we were big buddies and attended all the reunions together.

On Thanksgiving we were told that the kitchen was sending us a hot meal but with all the rain we had that day it was soup by the time it got to us.

I was down in the basement of a farmhouse with a number of infantry guys trying to get some sleep the night of 1 January, when all hell broke loose. The house shook and dust filled the air in the basement. It was a mad house down there with everyone running around trying to get their things and out of there. Those of us from the battery were to stay put until the all clear was given. As soon as we heard all clear, the three of us from the battery jump into our weapons carrier and headed out, stopping a number of times only long enough to set up and fire a few rounds to support the infantry boys. As we got to the river we had to cross, we removed our boots in case our truck turned over in the river. Boy, now that was one cold crossing.

There were times we would go through these towns and villages and there, painted on buildings and fences, would be "Kilroy was here."

Mail was always slow catching up with us and it was always good to hear from home. Along with the mail, there would be *Stars and Stripes*. I looked forward to the Willy and Joe in it and Sad Sack.

*[More veterans recollections, including Jimmy's own father, will appear in subsequent issues of the newsletter.]*