

# Vignettes of WWII

by Stanley Clift, 399-AT

*Stanley Clift was a member of the 399th Regiment's, Anti-Tank Company Mine Platoon. He told his story to Jimmy Calvert, 925-B Progeny.*

In April 1943 while attending UCLA I only lacked two months for the term to end when I was drafted into the Army.

I boarded a train heading for San Pedro along with a number of other guys from the university who also had been drafted. Following my induction there, I boarded a bus with my orders to report to Sheppard Field, Texas, for basic training. Shortly after arriving at Sheppard Field I was placed in the ASTP program. Some of the guys who had arrived with me were sent to a class where they were taught Morse Code; my group was placed in an engineering class. During the third week there I received a notice that my father had died and I was given a three-week leave to return home. The second week at home I received a notice telling me I was not to return to Sheppard Field but I was to report to Charleston, South Carolina. By the time I had arrived at the Military Institution of Engineering it was the fall of 1943. By the spring of 1944, the Army had done away with the ASTP Program and I was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I was assigned to the 100th Infantry and placed in the 399th's Anti-Tank Company Mine Platoon. Our two-story barracks was just west of the Cannon Company barracks.

The training exercise that I recall the most was having to claw through the dust under a wire while they fired live machine gun rounds over our heads. As the round passed inches over my head, I hoped they had everything on the machine gun set correctly.

We had very few classes on mine detecting, and trained more with the 57mm anti-tank gun. We only trained a few times with a metal detector and spent most of the time learning to look for disturbed ground and how to probe the ground for mines.

I remember the day we were issued our M1s, which were covered in grease. As we sat there in the barracks breaking them down to clean, this sergeant, stripped to the waist, came in and yelled. Not knowing who he was and him being out of uniform I yelled out, "Ha! You can join us." The sergeant didn't find it funny and even tried to have me court marshaled. He was out of uniform, though, so I had no way of knowing who he was, and it was dropped.

Each Sunday morning we were sent out on what we called "Butt Detail" which called for us to walk around our barracks picking up the cigarette butts guys tossed down. Not being a smoker, I didn't like this and found it to be unfair.

At the end of our training, the 100th left North Carolina by train for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. I was able to get a pass to leave the base and spent the day in DC. While there I saw one of my high school teachers.

During the trip overseas on the USS *George Washington*, I was given KP duty in the officer's mess hall where I spent a lot of time peeling potatoes, keeping the floor clean and tables wiped down. Having the duty here also meant I was able to eat the same as the officers did, which was a little better chow than the other guys had. The convoy ran into a storm as it made its way across, bouncing us around pretty good. Luckily I was able to keep my stomach in one place.

One day as I watched the food go out to the tables, I asked the cook about making a more balanced diet for the officers. You know, less grease, but needless to say that didn't go over well and lead to a few words.

After arriving at Marseilles, France, those of us who had been working in the officer's mess were some of the last to leave the ship late that evening. As I stood there waiting to disembark, the cook came walking up carrying a large bag in his hand. As he handed the paper bag to me he said here's your balanced meal. Looking inside I found the bag was full of fried chicken which turn out to be great because by the time we had reached our company, chow was over.

From the muddy field outside of Marseilles that we called “home” for about a week or so, we followed the 399th up the road along the French river valley to Raon l’Etape and into the Vosges Mountains.

No sooner had I arrived at our first stop when I learned of our first casualty. Technical Sergeant Gurdon MacNevin, who was in charge of the mine platoon, had walked around a building checking for booby traps and mines, and stepped on a mine blowing his leg off. I had also heard that Captain Fenstermacher had cried when he learn the news.

One day as I was checking around a house for booby traps I came across a fuse hanging down and detonated it which sounded like a firecracker.

We were never in the foxholes on the front lines but were always close enough that if needed, we could be there in no time as we were when two guys from the 399th stepped on some mines. Arriving we checked the road for more mines but it turned out there weren’t any more.

As the weather started getting colder, we were able to spend two of the cold nights in a house and a school using the benches as beds.

One night while in this small quiet farming community I had the guard duty late at night. As I walked around in the dark alone I caught myself whistling and decided it would be best to be quiet and mingle into the shadows.

I had brought a small camera with me and as we went into the French towns I was able to find the film I needed. I was also able to put my hands on the chemicals I needed to develop the film. As time passed, I became the unofficial person in charge of developing the negatives and printing the pictures for the guys who trusted me.

By January 19, 1945 we had moved into some heavy woods that laid close to a road and weren’t far from the front lines and Hill 340. There we were told to dig dugouts and to cover them with limbs and logs over them. It was also at this time I had started a daily log. On that day I wrote that T5 Richard Sandridge was sitting there in our dugout repairing his socks.

Another guy in our company was a southern boy by the name of Bob Johnson. We would stand watch together and as we walked around, we would talk about the ills of the world. Bob was a little high strung and moody at times and wrote poems. It was also at this time after reading some of his poems and telling him I liked them that he gave me permission to copy some of the poems that he wrote.

### **Sit and Wait**

The hardest job of soldiering is just to sit and wait.  
Wait for this and wait for that, and wait, and wait, and wait  
The toughest thing a soldier does in this or any clime  
The hardest task that ever was, is killing precious time.  
Cooling heels in Italy, waiting for the drive  
Wondering where the push will be, and why he’s half alive.  
Waiting for a railroad train, waiting for a boat  
Waiting for the winter rain, it gets a soldier’s goat.  
Sailing across in a tub, waiting in southern seas,  
Drinking beer in a London pub, or scratching at tropical fleas.  
The rottenest hand of soldiering that’s ever dealt by fate  
Is never the fighting and never the hate.  
But to wait and wait, and wait.

### **A Prayer**

The storm is over, now we can leave our dungeons of despair  
No longer does the angry tempest sour  
So let us lift our arms to God in prayer.

Our Father who art in Heaven, let your guiding light  
reveal the pitfalls leading to our goals

and let the singing fire of truth engulf the night  
and cast away the hatred in our souls  
and Lord we pray it be Thy will that love will rule  
the hearts and minds of every man a willing tool  
that we might build a realm where Peace is dear  
and let us God, our trespasses and sins atone  
and with your wisdom let us carry on.

—*Bob Johnson, France 1945*

One day as our truck was making its way up the road, I noticed a line of dust puffs marching their way up the road towards the back of our truck. The truck came to a sudden stop and as it did we all jumped from the back of it and ran for the nearby ditch. Being one of the last ones to dive into the ditch, I landed on top of two other guys. The “all clear” was given and we climbed out of the ditch and back into our trucks. To this day I don’t recall seeing the plane or hearing it as it passed over.

Our platoon was called up for backup in the taking of the town of Bitche. As our driver, Henry B. Williams, pulled in front of a farm house, we came under mortar fire. Jumping from the truck, we all scrambled down into the basement for cover. A number of rounds hit near the truck and the shrapnel hit some of the tires.

As soon as the shelling stopped, our sergeant moved the truck to a place to keep it from being further damaged. Returning to the truck to get my jacket which had two books in its pocket I was reading, I found small pieces of shrapnel in the pages of them. Luckily none of my photo chemicals had been hit.

One night this guy came in mad as heck at me, asking me what was in the bottles that I kept in the truck. Only HYPO, not schnapps.

After crossing the Rhine, we in the Mine Platoon found ourselves pulling more and more guard duty over German POWs.

At the end of the war, one of the German towns we had passed through had been reduced to no more than rubble. At one time it had been a town where they made watches, but during the war they made the fuses used in their bombs and V2 rockets.

Before being shipped back home I was able to travel and see a number of places otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to. Some of the places included the town of Nice on the Riviera and a ski school in Gersfeld that was staffed by former German ski troops. One was Paul Rirhfer Weilheimlterk, who was a ski teacher. He signed the back of a photo for me. While here I was able to learn the basics of staying on my feet with skies. From there I made my way to the Austrian Alps and even made a trip on to Switzerland where I bought two watches.

For the most part I found the German civilians I met to be friendly to us. In Dillstein I came across a group of women who invited me to one of their church services. I found out that they were members of the same church I belonged to back home and asked if we would administer the Sacrament to them. As we talked, I was told how all their men and boys had been drafted into the German army and still had not returned home.

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