

# From an Orphanage to a Bronze Star

by Joseph L. Earnhardt, 100-MP

*PFC Joe Earnhardt was an MP with the 100th from 28 May 1943 to 6 March 1946. He told his story to Jimmy Calvert. Progeny, son of James Calvert.*

In 1933 at the age of 9, I was placed in the Oxford Orphanage after my father had passed away and spent the following ten years there along with the 150 boys and 150 girls who I always felt to be my brothers and sisters. In years to come it is also how I felt about all the guys in the 100th Military Police.

The orphanage had what was called a “Home Guard” with uniforms we wore while out in the neighborhoods collecting scrap metal for the war effort.

The news of Pearl Harbor made us realize we weren’t just playing soldiers and a number of the boys who were of age joined the Navy, Army and Marines right after learning the news that war had been declared.

After graduating from John Nichols High School at Oxford Orphanage (Masonic Home for Children) and their graphic arts school in 1943, I was inducted into the Army on the 4 June 1943 at Fort Bragg, N.C. During the two weeks there, I was issued my uniforms and other clothing.

On 18 June, I received my orders and found myself on the way to Fort McClellan, Alabama, where I received my thirteen weeks of basic training. As in all basic training, we learned to march, took twenty-five-mile hikes, along with the weapons training covering M1 rifle and the Browning BAR. The one thing that sticks in my mind the most about there was that it was about the hottest place on earth. We would be on the parade field for long periods of time and they would have to carry soldiers who had fainted off to some shade trees. I usually liked Army chow because it was about the same as I had while in the orphanage with the only difference that, in the orphanage we had ten tables we sat at, with bowls of food that was passed around, whereas in the Army we had to line up with our mess kits and go down a serving line.

After completing my basic training on 23 September 1943, I was transferred to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, along with eleven other guys who also had been in the ASTP. We were ordered to report to Major Cherry in the Provost Marshal’s office of the 100th Infantry Division. There he explained what it would be like as an infantryman in an infantry regiment, and said he would like to have us join his Military Police Platoon—all twelve of us chose the MPs.

The other eleven guys were, John Boswell of Indiana, Ernest Braswell of Oklahoma, Francis Browne of Conn., Vincent Clark of New York, Russell Dean of New York, Thomas Elly of New Jersey, Hewlett Fagan of New York, Joseph Patt of Illinois, Carlton Vance of Indiana, John Wagner of New York, and Clifford Wood of Massachusetts.

It wasn’t long after that part of a platoon was sent to bring prisoners back to the base that had come in from Africa.

Another duty we had to pull was patrolling around the base and in the city of Columbia, South Carolina.

On 7 November 1943 we left Fort Jackson to join up with the 100th while it was on Tennessee Maneuvers, which matured us and built our confidence in preparing us for what laid ahead of us in France and Germany.

On these maneuvers we learned how to operate in the mountains in all kinds of weather while directing traffic, moving troops and equipment. Along with this we also had the duty to patrol and police the town in the areas. From Carthage to the vicinity of Murfreesboro, the 100th Division learned how to fight as a team while living under almost impossible conditions from rain to mud.

By 17 January 1944 we had finished our winter maneuvers and had moved to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for more training while the division built up to full strength. As military police, we continued our duties of directing traffic on the base and pulling patrol duty in Fayetteville. For the most part, the troops from the 100th while on pass in Fayetteville didn’t cause trouble, whereas the 82nd Airborne on

the other hand gave us a few problems. Those who were arrested for fighting and drinking were locked up at the local jail and remained there until 0200 hours.

At one point I had become a little disappointed due to having been promised a higher rank, but never received it because most of the new troops coming into the division ranked corporal to sergeant.

It was also while at Fort Bragg, I learn how to handle and ride a Harley 45 motorcycle up embankments and to dismount it without getting hurt. Other MP training included judo, how to defend ourselves with a night stick, and learning to fire the .45 pistol.

By 30 September 1944 we had loaded on a train and moved to a staging area at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where we waited for further orders.

As we waited, I was able to get a pass and went over to New York a few times with a buddy who knew some girls who worked in a bank. It was quite an experience for this old country boy. Word finally came down and we found ourselves boarding a transport ship bound for the European Theater of Operations. On 6 October, I boarded the *George Washington* with our Military Police Platoon along with some 6,000 other guys of the 399th.

It wasn't long after boarding there was a outbreak of crab lice and everyone had to line up to be sprayed down which was a very uncomfortable time.

We slept on metal-frame-covered-with-canvas bunks that were attached to metal poles three high. If the guy above you was a little on the heavy side it didn't allow much room to slide into your bunk.

A lot of my days on board were spent hearing a lot of lectures and orientations on the main deck.

As I recall we ate twice a day and I found the food to be good. During bad weather we were given sandwiches.

After being at sea for some two weeks, we pulled into the harbor of Marseilles, France, on 20 October. Late that night I climbed down a rope ladder to a landing craft which took us ashore and boy, was I glad to put my feet back on dry ground once again. As I said it was dark by the time I got ashore and no sooner had we arrived when we were strafed by a plane. After the all clear was given, we climbed in the back of a two-and-a-half ton truck which moved us the twelve miles to an area where we set up our tents for the night. The following morning I helped in the digging of the latrines.

Within days we again began our duty of directing traffic, equipment, and troop movement as they came ashore and moved into a staging area. At the end of the following weeks orders came to pack up to move out and we found ourselves heading north to the area near the Rhine River where the 100th Division was to relieve the 45th Division near St. Remy.

As the convoy moved north, we would go along in our jeeps, keeping things moving along. Civilians along the way would be waving as the convoy passed by and give wine and flowers to the GIs. It was here that began what was called the Vosges Mountain campaign on 3 November 1944.

From 15 to 24 November, the 397th and 399th liberated fourteen towns from Raon l'Etape to Oberhaslach and covered some thirty-five miles with the taking of 1,037 prisoners. As we came into Raon l'Etape, we right off set up in the town hall, with Division Headquarters arriving the following day and setting up in the town's square. No sooner had we arrived than we came under sniper fire and had to have troops take out the sniper who was in the church steeple. The civilians had rounded up some women who had collaborated with the Germans and were shaving their heads before they stripped them of their clothes and ran them out of town.

Captain Alden K. Small was in the headquarters as an assistant to General Burress. After the war and retired he became an active member of the 100th Infantry Division in the North and South Carolina Chapter.

Second Lieutenant Ewing G. R. Miller received a battlefield commission from sergeant to second lieutenant during the war. We were on duty together quite often.

Before directing convoys down a road we would check with the engineers to see if the roads were clear.

Sergeant Henry L. Houston was my squad leader and after the war worked with the Charlotte, North Carolina, school system. Henry and his wife along with me and my wife attended some ten 100th

Division reunions together. He and his wife always invited about a dozen MPs couples to their mountain home each year.

PFC Joseph F. Myers was with me the day he was hit as we returned across the bridge. Joseph passed away the following day from his wounds.

Other men I served with were PFC Edward S. Bahm, PFC Thomas A. McPherson, PFC Joseph M. Patt, PFC Edward J. Roberts, Sgt. Walter S. Moll, CPL John C. Morgan, Sgt. Robert W. Pace, Sgt. George W. Greene, CPL John L. Wagner, Sgt. Lester D. Young, and PFC Hewlett Fagan.

One of the first things we had to help in as we came into the towns and villages was the collecting of all the firearms. By the time we had finished there would be a wagonload of guns. I recall this one time of having received a letter from my grandfather—with whom I had lived before being sent to the orphanage—asking if I came across a shotgun, he would like it. Returning to the town and after explaining to them how I would like to send one to my grandfather, I was told to leave his address and it would be taken care of. As I left I thought that maybe they will, but if they didn't it wasn't going to be a big deal. Do you know they didn't sent him just one, but three!

From Raon l'Etape we worked our way north liberating towns and villages along the way through the Maginot Line until we reached the area of Bitche.

While the battle for Bitche was going on, it was the duty of the military police to guard a large motor pool.

While at Rohrbach Fred Mills was the only one in our squad who was wounded. He took a hit in his leg by a sniper and was the only one in the MPs to receive a Purple Heart.

I don't recall anything special about Christmas. If we were near our mess tent we had some warm food, but most of the time I was out on duty and had either had C or K rations with me. I myself was Protestant and a lot of my buddies were Catholic, so I attended Mass with them as time allowed.

For the most part, it was our duty to keep all the convoys moving as they made their way to and from the front lines keeping the guys up there with the supplies they needed. My biggest problem during the winter was trying to keep my feet from freezing off as I stood in knee deep snow while directing traffic at night. To keep my feet warm, I had started wrapping my feet in paper before putting my boots on.

We had even directed some British vehicles. These British soldiers would stop along the road side and have tea.

Most of our duties were behind the lines but that's not to say we were far from the shelling and strafing. There were times I would be directing convoys and had to jump into the roadside ditch due to being strafed by enemy planes. As individuals vehicles came by, we would stop them and ask a number of questions because we were told German troops were dressing in American uniforms.

After Bitche was taken, it seemed like the Germans started surrendering by the droves.

I recall in one town of having to stand guard over about 100 prisoners during the night as we waited on the arrival of the trucks to pick them up to move them back to a POW camp. We were getting so many prisoners at a time we couldn't get trucks fast enough to take them off our hands. As we received the Germans one of the first things we did was searched their wallets and as we came across the SS soldiers, we separated them from the other soldiers. For the most part they never gave us any trouble and were glad the war was over for them. They would even give us the pictures they had and tell us about their families.

The civilians of the towns and villages that the division liberated were all glad to see us. They would come out to hug you and offer you something to eat or drink. Once they learned we were in control they didn't give us any trouble.

In these towns and villages the civilian made a homemade whiskey and on one occasion Edward Bahn, from Denver, Colorado, had overdone it, so to speak. We all had to take cover as Eddie stood there firing his rifle in the air until he had cooled off.

My most impressive memory was the battle for Heilbronn, Germany. We had just laid our bedrolls out for the night in an old mill building in Eppingen, Germany which is near Heilbronn. Around 0200 hours, an officer came in saying he needed a detail to go into Heilbronn. Joe Myers and I were picked to go with him. We arrived at a building from which they were directing tanks across a pontoon bridge. I advised the officer we were from the 100th MP Platoon and were there to help in the directing of the tanks across the

bridge. No sooner had the engineers completed one track across the bridge than I ran for the other side and as I did, the bridge took a hit from the Germans, knocking out a part of it. I had taken cover against an embankment.

On the other side, Joe and I had dug a hole just under the old bridge in the embankment and were maybe about 100 yards from the pontoon bridge. As we sat there, a signal man came running across dragging a phone line and phone. After putting a stick in the ground next to our hole he hung the bag and phone on it. Looking at him I said, "ain't no one going to be calling here." Lo and behold, a colonel from the artillery called a number of times for help in directing fire.

As we set there waiting on the engineers to finish working on the bridge, we could hear the fighting raging just above us in the factory. For the most part as we sat there, we had more incoming shelling there on the banks of the river than small arms fire.

A few hours later the engineers had laid a new track and the first tank made its way across. No sooner had we gotten it across, I guided it a 100 yards to the right and behind a white two-story house. From there the tank made its way down a narrow dirt road and every time it left the cover of the building, it came until small arms fire. While this was going on, the second tank had started making its way across the bridge and as it did another round came in and hit the bridge, knocking a track out again. This went on for about twelve hours starting with us arriving at six in the morning and continuing until six that evening, which by that time we had only gotten four tanks across safely. By evening Joe and I were advised that we were being relieved and in so doing we started running back across the bridge with Joe behind me. I made it into the building where headquarters was set up and Joe had taken cover behind the old bridge. Just as I got inside, they told me my buddy had been hit by an incoming round. Hearing it I rushed back to where Joe was lying just as they were placing him on the stretcher. The following day Joe died from the shrapnel that had hit him in his head and I felt as if I had lost my brother. We learned later that they found some German youths who had been sitting in the top of a tower directing fire for the German troops who were shelling the bridge. Joe Myers was the only person out of the Military Police Platoon—which was made up of ninety men—who was lost during the war. Joe was awarded the Silver Star and I was awarded the Bronze Star for our action during the battle for Heilbronn. Joe's father and brother were members of the New York City Police Department.

Our English teacher's wife, Mrs. Ligon, was the manger of the bakery at the orphanage and kept up with the boys who were in the service. She would write me if one of my classmates was near me and I would try to look them up.

I remember this one time she had written to tell me about a boy who was nearby and after getting permission I went to see him only to learn he had been killed the day before. Following Heilbronn the division liberated town after town until we reached Stuttgart, Germany. Our platoon lived in Gieslingen until 3 July 1945, my birthday. While here we built a ball field honoring Joe Myers.

After the war was over, we were sent to Stuttgart, Germany, as occupation troops where we did our usual MP duties working with the local police until 20 November 1945.

We didn't have any big problems with the ex-German soldiers or civilians. The biggest problem we had to deal with was the black market that was going on in the plaza in the middle of Stuttgart. Even there, the big thing was having to break up arguments. One of the areas I had to patrol was the autobahn, which I did on a motorcycle. From there we were moved to Esslingen, Germany, and remained there until 25 January. Our next stop was Elwangen, Germany, and we were there until 3 February.

Our last stop in Europe was Camp Top Hat in Antwerp, Belgium, where after living in twelve-man tents, rain, and mud for two weeks we crowded onto the victory ship *SS Sheepshead Bay* and headed out through the North Sea. As we passed the Azores we ran into a big storm causing the ship not to make any headway. On 1 March 1946 as we arrived in the port of New York and the Statue of Liberty came into view, a big shout went up. I think everyone was thankful and glad to be home again and wanted to just get home to start a good life.

Two years later I married Nancy Price on 11 September 1948.