

“Yes, We’re Brothers”

by Ralph P. Lilore, 397-M

During his research on WWII, NBC newsman Tom Brokaw asked for veteran’s remembrances. Ralph Lilore, sent a letter describing his experiences. It, along with all of the other remembrances that soldiers have submitted, is now part of the Tom Brokaw Collection at the Institute on World War II & the Human Experience Department of History, Florida State University.

Dear Mr. Brokaw;

This letter is long overdue and for that I apologize. I want to thank you for your book, *The Greatest Generation*. It was given to me by Pat Wallace, my step-son through marriage. At that time Pat was president of NBC TV Stations and you autographed the book for him. I also have *The Greatest Generation Speaks* and *An Album of Memories*. You have become the “voice” of all WWII servicemen and women.

My story begins in 1940 and is about three brothers; Carmen, then 23, Rocco (Rocky) 21, and Ralph, 19. That year the US implemented a one year military draft to prepare for possible involvement in the European war. Carmen was sent to Fort Jackson, SC for his one-year training. After basic training he was assigned to an MP Company. A few months short of his one-year tour, war was declared by the US and he was in for the duration.

In October 1942 Rocky and I entered service together and were assigned to a newly-activated 100th Infantry Division in Fort Jackson, SC. What a coincidence! Entering military life is traumatic but this was good news for us because Carmen had been there for almost two years and now he could show us the “ropes.” Rocky was assigned to Company E, 399th Infantry Regiment, a rifle company. I went into Company M, 397th, a heavy weapons company.

I can remember several occasions when the three of us would be in town, Columbia, on a pass having dinner. The waitress, doing a double take looking at one and then the other. “Yes” we’d say, “we are brothers.” After showing proof of this the drinks or meals were “on the house.”

Eventually Carmen shipped out to England with a newly-formed company of MPs assigned to SHAEF. (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces). Mission: guard and protect General Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was with SHAEF through the war years—England, France, and Germany. Now a staff sergeant, Carmen was an eyewitness to the historic meetings with Churchill, De Gaulle, Generals Montgomery, Patton and others. His platoon was the escort and guard for the German generals at the signing of surrender at the Little Red School house in Rheims, France. Carmen and I met in Paris in 1945.

Meanwhile, Rocky and I completed basic training. I could use a typewriter so I became the company clerk responsible for all personnel records including payroll, medical etc. Rocky became a platoon leader of a rifle squad.

In November 1943 the 100th left Ft Jackson to spend a tough three months of winter maneuvers in Tennessee. Then on to advanced training at Ft. Bragg, NC from February to September 1944. During all this we became a finely tuned fighting machine, but then the Division was called upon to furnish replacements overseas. Orders would come down to supply so many riflemen, machine gunners, mortarmen, cooks—whatever was required. As company clerk, I consulted with the first sergeant and company commander to select those men to go. Those awaiting medical attention could not be sent. The stories you’ve heard about men shooting themselves in the foot or pulling a tooth to avoid combat are true. I saw it first-hand.

The 100th, or Century Division, as it became known, was ordered overseas in October 1944. We left New York on October 6, sailing directly to Marseilles, France on the troopship *George Washington*. I landed October 22, was assigned to the 7th Army, and ordered into combat by November 1. We relieved the tired 36th Division who had driven the Germans up to the Vosges Mountains in Alsace-Lorraine.

Rocky was face to face with the enemy during these battles, attempting to crack the German winter defensive line. After breaking through near Raon l’Etape the stage was set to begin the 7th Army winter

offensive. On December 3 the 100th started its drive to breach the famous Maginot Line near Bitche—the heart of the entire fortifications system. The hills housed the four strongest forts on the entire Maginot Line. Fort Schiesseck consisted of eleven separate casements connected to underground tunnels. After heavy artillery and bombing, some of the casements were neutralized. This drive stalled and we went into a defensive position when the Germans counterattacked on December 20—in Belgium—the Battle of the Bulge.

At this time I was attached to 397th Regimental HQ. We moved into the mountain village of Sarrebourg, making a local high school building our headquarters. Seven or eight other GIs and I stayed in a private home owned and occupied by a French family; M. and Mme. Louis Bour and their sixteen-year-old son, Louis, Jr. The Bours treated us very well. They were happy to have us because the Germans had confiscated their home during their occupation of France.

During this period I would receive daily reports from the front of battle casualties—KIA, MIA, WIA etc. Losses were heavy. Knowing that Rocky was in the “hot zone” but not knowing exactly where caused me great anxieties. After going through my company reports I would contact the Company E, 399th clerk to see if my brother’s name was on any list. According to the natives that winter in the Vosges Mountains was one of the coldest in memory, Rocky was able to get back to Sarrebourg for a hot shower and some rest.

When the German Ardennes offense began, the 3rd Army under General Patton was on our left flank and the Free French Army on our right. The 3rd Army was ordered north to Belgium to help in that defense. Our 7th Army, under General Patch, was ordered to extend coverage of the front to the area vacated by the 3rd. Therefore the 100th Division was spread thin and went into defensive positions by December 22.

Noting the thinning of the 7th Army lines the Germans on New Years Day, decided to strike through our lines centering at Bitche in an attempt to push south to Strasbourg and split the Allied armies. This action was called Operation NORDWIND. During this counter-offensive Private Leon Outlaw, a machinegunner from my company, was credited with killing over one hundred German soldiers.

Rocky’s company was actively engaged in successfully defending Ft. Schiesseck on the Maginot Line. The net result of NORDWIND which ended on January 10 was that the 100th was the only division on the entire 7th Army front to hold its original ground.

Our non-offensive stand ended on March 15, 1945 when the 7th Army joined with the 3rd on a drive to wipe out German resistance in the Rhineland. The 100th returned to Bitche and in a fierce two-day battle finished the job started in December by taking the forts at Bitche. This feat shattered two hundred years of military defensive history—never having fallen to any enemy in the past. To honor the members of the 100th for this feat, “The Society of the Sons of Bitche” was created. After that battle we sensed the war would be over soon. Morale was high—we were optimistic—and we had our sense of humor. By March 17 we arrived at the Rhine River. There were more battles in Germany. Staff Sergeant Rocky was now involved in house-to-house street fighting in Heilbronn, then on to Stuttgart. After taking that city the next objective was Munich. Peace was declared on May 8, 1945 so the 100th returned to Stuttgart.

After leaving Sarrebourg I corresponded with the Bour’s for a time. When the war ended a point system was implemented as a means of sending us home or to the Pacific. Most of the Centurymen fell a few points short of the required number so we remained in Stuttgart as Army of Occupation. Staff Sergeant Rocky and Sergeant Ralph waited in Altbach, Germany for orders to go into Stuttgart. After taking that city we were ordered out so that the Free French could make their entry. That was strictly a political and diplomatic move. Carmen came down from Frank fort on a pass and we were together to celebrate the end of the war in the Pacific. Carmen left for home shortly thereafter. Rocky and I left Antwerp, Belgium on February 18, 1946 for New York and were discharged March 6, 1946.

We three survived the war without a scratch. God was on our side. So was our family. Their letters and packages of food and “goodies” went a long way in boosting our morale. Carmen married, became a printer, raised two daughters, had a great Army career, and a good life. He passed away in 1996 at the age of seventy-nine. Rocky married, was in manufacturing, and raised two sons. Unfortunately he passed away in 1965 at age forty-six. As for me, I went to college under the GI Bill. I worked for American

Standard, plumbing fixture manufacturer, in marketing and sales. I married in 1949 and adopted two boys. Ralph, Jr. is an assistant prosecutor in Bergen County, NJ, and Mark is a restaurant owner in Long Beach, NC. My wife, Mary, died of breast cancer in 1985.

Through mutual friends, I met a widow, Marie Dykstra, and we married in 1988. She has three children. Susan, married to Pat Wallace; Paul, an attorney in Bergen County, and Peter, executive producer of environmental shows for CNN in Atlanta. I retired in 1987, will be 80 in August. I have been lucky and blessed.

Fast forward to 1993. I received a letter from Louis Bour, Jr., the sixteen-year-old kid from Sarrebourg. It seems that while he was going through his mother's papers when she died at age ninety-six he found letters from me to his parents written during the war. This triggered correspondence between us. He invited me to his home for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day. I was undergoing radiation treatments for prostate cancer at that time so we postponed the trip to 1995. In September of that year Marie and I went to London, then to Paris where we met Louis's daughter, Isabelle. After a few days, on to Strasbourg to meet Louis.

He wined and dined us and it was quite a reunion. We visited the home in Sarrebourg which is now an elementary school. The building we occupied as regimental headquarters in 1944 and 1945 is now a junior college.

The highlight of the visit was at the office of the mayor, where I was presented with the medal "de Ville de Sarrebourg." What an honor! I accepted the medal on behalf of Carmen and Rocky and members of the 397th who fought and sacrificed in those campaigns. We were written up in the French newspapers.

That is my story. Thank you again for bringing the stories of our generation to the attention of the public.

Sincerely,
Ralph P. Lilore

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