

## My Time in Berlin

When I left the 100th Division, we traveled very slowly on a troop train for several days. Travel on those “cattle box” trains was also very dirty. The windows had to be open since there was no air conditioning, no Pullman or dining cars. Box lunches were provided in the mornings and we ate at a transient mess on the side of the tracks at night. The transient messes were not too clean and I caught trench mouth, a disease of the gums. Our battalion dentist cured me by having me gargle often with peroxide. We went through a little part of Holland and then into the Russian Sector of Germany. We had to stop at Russian checkpoints where they checked the train very thoroughly before we could proceed. We finally arrived in Berlin. They had four sectors: American, British, French, and Russian. This city had taken a lot of punishment as we had bombed this beautiful city, the headquarters of Adolph Hitler.

I reported to the 1st Battalion, 332nd General Services Engineer Regiment, and introduced myself to Major Albert W. Sinnott. He was a gray-headed old man who I liked at first sight. He reminded me of my father because he was about the same age. I really respected him. I did not salute him, but rather shook his hand. I didn’t know until later that I had done the right thing as he told me he was glad I hadn’t saluted him. He was tired of being saluted. He asked me if I knew anything about building bridges, and I told him no. He also asked if I could handle men, and I told him that I could, that I was an infantry officer and had gotten a battlefield commission. “Well”, he said. “I know you can do the job, so I’m going to make you the company commander of Company A. You don’t have any officers, but don’t worry, you have some experienced NCOs who know

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what they are doing and how to construct these concrete bridges. Just tell them that you trust them, that you know they know their business, and you expect good results."

I left Major Sinnott and proceeded to my company headquarters. I met the first sergeant, supply sergeant, mess sergeant and motor sergeant. We had a nice talk and I explained what I expected of them. These four men were very good administrators. Also, three of them were to be my bodyguards.

All three of them were fairly large, but the supply sergeant was a former professional football player. I told them to get the company together for a meeting. I was very frank at that meeting. I told them I was an infantry officer who had come through combat and received a battlefield commission. I also told them that I didn't expect any favors from anyone, that I just wanted them to do the job. I also let them know that I knew nothing about building bridges, but that I was trusting them to do a good job by leaving it up to them.

I told them that I didn't care about saluting when we were alone, but that if there were any high ranking officers in the area, I expected them to adhere to their best military courtesy. They were told that any vehicle that left the area had to be signed out. This had not been the policy in the past.

The sergeant would still be allowed to transport the men at night to the battalion nightclub they had set up. Everything went quite well until we started getting officers assigned to the unit. We had just built a bridge and the results were great.

Major Sinnott put a 1st lieutenant under me who had been told that I had been put in for promotion to 1st lieutenant, but I was still the company commander as a 2nd lieutenant with a superior officer under me. I got my promotion on 3 January 1946.

We had a battalion officer's meeting and Major Sinnott told all the new college graduate civil engineers that, "just because you have that degree, you still don't know how to build a bridge. You do have the background knowledge to learn how."

He told them about me being an infantry officer who had sense enough to know my limitations and that I trusted and expected good results from my experienced enlisted men who were very capable. He said, "Tyson has just completed a bridge in excellent manner."

I had two civil engineers who did not seem to know their limitations and tried to overrun the experienced engineer doughboys, and everything went wrong. One bridge abutment fell because the college graduate thought he knew more than the experienced men. He really didn't know as much as I had already learned. The battalion commander held a staff meeting and he chewed out these civil engineers. After that we had no more difficulty as the engineers listened to the sergeants and took their advice.

Our job was to send German divers down into the canals to cut the steel into small pieces, clear out the canals and then we would proceed to build new concrete and steel bridges. The Germans had been doing this without wearing gloves. One time the temperature got to 40 degrees below zero, but it didn't seem that cold. When it got that cold, I had the men build fires to help keep warm. I sure didn't want anyone to get frostbitten.

Ordinarily, Berlin was not too cold and they had canals that wound throughout the metropolis. The German people had blown the bridges to slow the advance of the Russian Army. They would have gladly let the Americans take their city without a fight, but the agreement between President Roosevelt and Stalin gave the Russians that honor. The Russians paid a dear price for that honor as the Germans put up a fantastic last-ditch fight for Berlin.

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Our engineer battalion was the sole unit of its kind in Berlin and Major Sinnott had only to answer to General Bedell Smith and General Lucius Clay who were both friends of his as well as being on General Eisenhower's staff. As such, we did our own thing, and as we pleased, up to a point.

One time we were escorting several general officers on an inspection tour when some of my men forgot their manners and did not come to attention or salute. I apologized to the generals and went over and chewed the men out.

My company and battalion headquarters were housed in and old German Army camp. The officers lined up an apartment house in the next block from the camp. Each of us had a two-story town house apartment. I had a German worker that kept the apartment straight, took my clothes to the cleaners, and so on. I also had a maid who kept the apartment clean and made the bed.

The officers ate at an officer's mess until my mess sergeant told me how much better our Company A mess was. I decided to eat there one time to see. I think the mess sergeant must have been dealing with the black market. Anyway, the men were eating really well. I told the major about the food and soon all of the officers were eating there.

The battalion employed a maid to make up the GIs' beds, a barber, German bakers, and cooks. The men only had to think about their engineering problems. I never shaved while stationed in Berlin, my barber did it for me.

The black market was very big in Berlin. Our men could sell a carton of cigarettes for \$200.00. A candy bar or bar of soap for \$25.00. A bottle of Cognac went for \$100.00. Most of the men quit smoking to get that much money. The "money" was paid in Allied "invasion" currency. So money was plentiful in Berlin. The American government finally tried to put a halt to a little of the black market traffic. After

a certain date one could only send home the maximum amount of the army pay. A lot of the men were not drawing any pay; they were having it all sent home. One of the men in my company bought a large apartment house with his "money."

The men of this battalion with their excess of "money" had their own nightclub. The motor pool ferried them to the club at night. Most of the men had girlfriends who went with them to the club. There wasn't much of a morale problem due to that. The biggest problem was with venereal diseases (VD). I had a talk with the men concerning VD and we had set up doctors to examine the women; hopefully before they had dates. Most of the women were cooperative so this helped a lot.

The city of Berlin, though heavily damaged by the bombings, had many nightclubs going and were frequented by the American and Allied officers and enlisted men. Our officers and their dates had bodyguards many of those nights. These are the sergeants that I described earlier. They saw to it that the Russians did not bother them as they, the Russians, were getting a reputation for roughness. One night at a club, I went to the restroom and got to talking to some Russian officers and we were all laughing when my bodyguard came in thinking I was in some sort of trouble. They threw the Russians to the floor while I was trying to tell them everything was OK. We picked them all up, shook hands and slapped them on their backs. The Russians said, "Americans are good."

Major Sinnott sent for and got truckloads of Spanish brandy and gave me a whole truckload. For some reason he treated me like I was his only son. I gave every man in my company a bottle of that brandy for Christmas and again at New Years. I still had a pile of it when it was time to ship home so I gave that away, too.

Army jeeps did not have tops or side curtains on them. It was so cold once that we had a German carpenter make

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tops and sides. It sure made it warmer while riding around in Berlin.

My driver was from Florida and had never driven on icy streets, which I learned on our first outing, so, after that, I did most of my own driving. Berlin had been so badly bombed that it was difficult to have landmarks to remember; consequently it was very easy to get lost. I finally learned my way around that big city.

I attended a good football game at the Berlinda Stadium. It was awfully cold that day. I wore a facemask, wristlets, gloves, winter underwear, and a heavy trenchcoat. It was still bitterly cold. The game was between the 82nd and the 101st Airborne units. This was the first organized football game I had seen since leaving home.

I was involved in two courts martial while there also but nowadays all the participants are lawyers.

I met a German girl, Gerda Franka who could speak a little English and I learned enough German from her to communicate with the people. Of course, I "murdered" German grammar, but I could converse fairly well. A lot of German sounds a little like English, but it sure doesn't write like that at all.

The Germans had just started cleaning up the city hauling off the debris. They did a lot of it by hand at first. There was lots of hunger and some raided American garbage cans. We gave them some food when we could. We were always giving the children gum and candy.

The major found out that our battalion was going to be transferred to southern Germany. He wanted me to go with him. He even promised to promote me to captain and then in 90 days to major. I wanted to get home to the good old USA and marry my girlfriend that I had left back in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I had proposed to her in a round-about way.

I purchased quite a few officer's uniform items and shoes at the PX in Stuttgart. We had a clothing card and I

bought the maximum amount. This presented a problem because now I had to get them all shipped back home. German carpenters at the company made plywood boxes to ship them in and I got ready to depart from Berlin. I really hated to leave in one way because it had been the best duty I had ever had in the army. Everything was so lax.

We departed on 23 January 1946. The first part of the trip to the Port of Embarkation was by truck through the Russian sector to their border stations. We all had to unload and be searched. We then proceeded to an American-built train that carried us to Antwerp, Belgium, our destination.

By this time it was 2 February. While waiting there, Captain Berlowitz, another company commander from Berlin, and I went to Brussels for 2 days. We stayed at a very famous hotel where all the spies had infiltrated during the war. It was a beautiful city. We went one of the nightclubs and I tried to order my dinner in French; it was rather hard to do and then the waiter said to me in perfect English, "what would you like to eat?" He then laughed. We saw most of the high spots in Brussels and then returned to get ready for the voyage back to our native land. We sailed on a large Victory ship on 15 February 1946. This time I was traveling with a lot more prestige as a first lieutenant than as a staff sergeant and I rated a bunk.

I overheard a young second lieutenant tell some enlisted men that officers did not believe in those rumors about getting seasick, but enlisted men would believe them and would get seasick. I told him he was crazy as hell. Well, the seas became very rough as we got into the March winds and our ship was tossed and turned profusely. I saw that same second lieutenant and he was very seasick. I went up to him and told him that he shouldn't believe in those rumors, that he really wasn't seasick. He had his over-superior attitude as an officer broken off inside him.

I asked the first mate if we weren't having hurricane force winds and he said it was just high pressure. About

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that time, one of the steel beams broke in two and fell but did not do any damage. I didn't sleep much for several nights. Finally the winds abated and the rest of the trip was not that bad. I made a vow that there would be two things I would never do again: one was never to bivouac in the woods and the second was never, never to take another ocean voyage.

I had never really cared for cabbage in any form until that sea trip. They fed us quite well and we had cole slaw nearly every day. I had not had many vegetables since leaving home over 18 months earlier and the best taste to me turned out to be the slaw with onions in it. I've craved it ever since.

Ten days after leaving Antwerp, Belgium, we got a glimpse of land and pulled into New York harbor on 25 February 1946. We were so happy to see the Statue of Liberty once again. Many of my buddies never got to see that sight and I thanked God for my safe return home. There were loved ones meeting the ship upon our arrival and they had a happy reunion.

A band was playing for us also. We were transported to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, for a few days. This is where we had shipped out from 18 months ago. We didn't stay very long before we boarded trains for different destinations. I was hoping to get my final processing at good old Fort Bragg, North Carolina, but no such luck. We went on to Fort Gordon, Georgia.

I had planned to get a discharge because I had no plans to stay in the reserves. I felt the delay in transferring would delay me from getting home. An announcement was made that those who opted to join the reserves would be processed first and therefore get home quicker. So I joined the reserves.

It seemed like an eternity before they finished processing me and gave me my "Relieved from Active Duty" certificate and I was on my way home. It was late afternoon and



I caught the first bus out of the fort. My mother had passed away while I was overseas and my father had moved back to Durham, North Carolina, to live with my grandparents whom we called "Big Daddy" and "Big Mamma."

I wanted to surprise everyone so I didn't call them on the phone. When I got to the Durham bus station, I took a cab to Big Mamma's. There was real excitement when I walked in unexpectedly. They knew I was on the way home but didn't know how long it would take. It sure was good to be home. Of course, Big Mamma wanted me to stay with them as she always has plenty of room. I took the room over the old cigar factory in the backyard, where I stayed until Jean and I married.

At times during the war my grandparents had rented out their whole house and had lived in this room. They even rented out an old storage room that had been converted into a little bedroom. All of the renters had to share the bathroom in the main house.

I called Jean early the next morning and met her that afternoon. It sure was great being able to see her after 18 long months in Europe. We wanted to get married, but felt it would be better if she finished her registered nurse training. She was due to graduate in September but had lost some time to illness, so it was October before she graduated. She had already taken the State Board exam and passed it with flying colors. She had been afraid she wouldn't pass.

Soon after arriving home, a friend, Marvin Reep, had a CM Headache Powder rural route and he wanted me to ride with him to hear about my combat experiences in Europe. Something told me not to do it, but since I didn't have any plans, I went. Marvin had never been a good driver and we were on a rural road that was very bumpy. I asked Marvin to slow down. As we approached a bridge he lost control and it looked like we were going down an embankment.

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I think he froze at the wheel and rammed the car against the side rail of the bridge. He was thrown out and my head hit the steering wheel and the horn started to blow which added to the confusion. He had a hunk of skin torn off under one eye and got up and started picking up headache powder packages. My head was bleeding, but I hadn't felt any pain yet.

I told him we should get to a hospital and to heck with the powders. Another driver came along and took us to Watts Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. His clutch kept slipping and I thought we were never going to get there. We finally made it and while one doctor took care of Marvin another took care of me. He wanted to shave my head before treating me but I wouldn't allow it. He just shaved enough on top so he could sew me up.

I called to have someone pick me up from the hospital. That was really something. Go through combat, with a couple of slight wounds and then nearly get killed in a car accident soon after getting home.

**Footnote**

I was a member of the Active Reserve. I received my bachelor of science degree from the University of North Carolina in 1946. I attended the 6-month Associate Company Officer's Course at Fort Benning, Georgia; the Infantry Officer Career Extension Course; the Command and General Staff College; the Industrial College of the Armed Forces; the Air War College and completed many other courses for the Army and the Navy.

I was promoted to the rank of colonel on 2 April 1972 and retired five years later with a total time in service of 29 years.