

Recollections of the Fifth War Loan Drive

by Bruno Viani, 399-I

Bruno Viani, was with the provisional battalion that was sent to New York for the Fifth War Loan Drive.

In the spring of 1944, as we were preparing for our eventual deployment overseas, the 100th Infantry Division was selected by the army to provide assistance to an important campaign on the home front. By then, America's participation in the war was well into its third year, and to finance the ongoing war effort, the federal government conducted a series of war loan drives. By means of these drives, war bonds were marketed and sold, in various denominations, to the general public. A \$25 bond could, for example, be purchased for \$18.75 and, after a fixed number of years, was redeemable at face value. By this time, the Fifth War Loan Drive had begun. To promote the sale of war bonds in the New York City metropolitan region, a provisional battalion of Centurymen was chosen from among our ranks at Fort Bragg. This provisional battalion, of which I was a member, numbered approximately 400 men. Following our train trip north, we were quartered at Camp Shanks, located in a rural, now suburban, area north of New York City.

On a typical morning, the provisional battalion would board transport trucks at Camp Shanks and then motor south along the New Jersey Palisades. Upon crossing the George Washington Bridge, we arrived in upper Manhattan and continued on to our destination, which was usually somewhere in midtown. Upon disembarking, we coordinated our day's activities with representatives of the War Finance Committee, which sponsored the war loan drives.

Our activities almost always took place in the busiest areas of Manhattan. These areas included City Hall, Rockefeller Center, Times Square, and Wall Street. Accompanied by music provided by our band, the provisional battalion marched, on a number of occasions, along well known New York thoroughfares, such as Broadway and Fifth Avenue. Lining our route were a number of famous buildings, including the Empire State Building, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With uniforms sharply creased, flags unfurled, and equipment gleaming in the spring sunshine, we Centurymen proudly lent our division's support to this important national campaign.

In addition to parades and marches, we conducted drills and rifle inspections at the bond rally sites. Our objective was always to promote the Fifth War Loan Drive and to represent, before the people of New York City, the American armed forces. Needless to say, we were warmly received by the many New Yorkers who attended these rallies. In addition and equally important, we earned the gratitude of the War Finance Committee, as the sale of war bonds was going well.

Along with our provisional battalion, distinguished individuals readily provided their assistance to the selling of war bonds. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and, as one might expect, notable female personalities, including actresses such as Merle Oberon, gave their enthusiastic support to these rallies. At each rally location, tables would be set up, and following our drills and a few speeches by local dignitaries, war bonds would be sold. The buyers of these bonds encompassed a wide cross section of New Yorkers, ranging from secretaries on their lunch hours, to advertising executives on Madison Avenue, to Wall Street bankers.

Being a native New Yorker, I was, for the most part, in familiar surroundings, but I am sure that for many of my fellow Centurymen, it was a particularly thrilling experience to be in New York City for the first time. Upon reading Frank Hancock's book *An Improbable Machine Gunner*, I learned that in addition to Frank, two other men from Company M (399th), Langley and Revere, were also members of this provisional battalion.

After several weeks, most of the provisional battalion, its work completed, returned to Fort Bragg. To provide a few additional weeks of support to the war loan drive, a contingent of approximately 80 men, of which I was also a member, remained behind. This contingent was comprised of a close order drill team, an honor guard, and a drum and bugle unit and was under the able command of the late Captain Fred Batrus. As a first lieutenant who enjoyed close-order drill, I had the privilege of directing the drill team.

Our ceremonies were usually held early on weekday evenings in Rockefeller Center, with the objective of attracting, among others, midtown office workers on their way home.

In addition to Captain Batrus, I also served with First Lieutenant Bill Law, a long-standing member and past president of our Association, and the late Technical Sergeant Walter Bull, who was the first man in the entire United States Army to earn the Expert Infantryman Badge. This distinction has since been commemorated with a plaque at Fort Bragg. Lieutenant Law served as the narrator and master of ceremonies for the evening's events, and Sergeant Bull was our drill team's platoon sergeant.

Each evening, our ceremony included close-order drill and rifle inspection, with music provided by our drum and bugle unit. Upon the ceremony's conclusion, the honor guard lowered the flags of the various allied nations, which were on flagpoles surrounding Rockefeller Center. These ceremonies always included a solicitation for the purchase of war bonds. I should add that in addition to their noteworthy efforts in support of the Fifth War Loan Drive, Captain Batrus, Lieutenant Law, and Sergeant Bull distinguished themselves subsequently on the field of battle.

As a New Yorker, I had the option of spending nights at my family's apartment in the Greenwich Village section of lower Manhattan. One evening, at the request of a few community leaders and with the permission of Captain Batrus, I had the opportunity to direct the drill team at one of the local Greenwich Village playgrounds. Upon disembarking, our transport trucks quickly attracted the attention of almost every boy in the neighborhood, most of whom had never seen a platoon of rifle bearing soldiers nor an army vehicle, except in newsreels. These boys were understandably delighted when we allowed them, within certain limits, to climb on board the trucks.

It was a memorable evening for both me and for many of my Greenwich Village neighbors, especially those with sons who were already serving in various theatres around the globe. As an example, the Spina family, with whom I was quite close, had four sons in uniform. All of whom, I should add, returned safely home.

During our stay in New York, D-Day occurred. After months of preparation and anticipation, U.S. soldiers were now fighting and dying on French soil. Although this historic event certainly helped the sale of war bonds, it also served as a stark reminder that much hard fighting was still ahead for the American armed forces.

By the end of June, our division's assignment to the Fifth War Loan Drive was completed, having been done in a manner consistent with the finest traditions of both the 100th Infantry Division and the United States Army. Naturally, we were proud of the valuable service we had rendered on the home front. Within a few days, we were back at Fort Bragg. We soon joined with fellow Centurymen in preparing for our division's deployment, just a few months away, to the battlefields of France.

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