

# “We’re in the Army Now!”

by Hank Williams, 399-AT

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In August 1939, I had just turned 15 and was walking down a street in Brattleboro, Vermont, with my parents when we heard a store radio blaring the news that Germany had invaded Poland. My dad, who had served in the Army on the Mexican border before being sent overseas and fought in France with the 27th New York Division during WWI, put his arm around my shoulder and said, “You’ll be in this one son.” This seemed really far-fetched at the time.

But in 1943 I was drafted right out of high school along with a large percentage of my class. We left on a trolley car for the induction center in Newark where we had our first physical and took a number of tests. My pal, Ray, was a gun nut and wanted to get into army ordnance. I, on the other hand, for some stupid reason favored fighting and wanted to be a Marine. During the day and all the procedures at the induction center, Ray and I became separated when it came time to make the choice between the Army, Navy, and Marines. Since Ray wanted the Army, I chose that branch.

As I left the induction center, there stood Ray waiting for me. I said, “We’re in the army now!”

Ray replied, “You wanted the Marines so that’s what I chose.” As it ended, Ray was in the Marine’s ordnance and I was in the Army infantry.

We returned home to await further orders. Two weeks later we were ordered to report to Fort Dix so my group took a trolley to Penn Station in Newark for the train ride to Fort Dix.

It was at Fort Dix that I received my first uniforms, was given another physical, and took a number of other tests. With the remainder of the three weeks we were on what we called chicken s\*\*t details, picking up butts and KP duty.

While I was here I was under a sergeant who had been a major in the Polish Army. One day in his broken English he called us out and said, “Today you go get tests,” and went on to say that he had gotten nineteen on his. No sooner had he said that than someone in the back shouted, “Who helped you?” Other times he would call out five guys and say, “OK, half of you follow me.” One day as we stood there he told a guy to jump up and then admonished the poor recruit by saying, “Who told you to come down?”

After three weeks of looking at the bulletin board each morning to learn my next assignment, I got orders to report to Fort Benning Georgia where I was placed with 3rd Platoon, 14th Company, 4th Battalion, 4th Training Regiment in the ASTP program and had my basic training. By the end of the thirteen weeks I was placed on a troop train for St. John’s University where I took my basic engineering. With the university only seventeen miles from my home, it made it real nice for me.

I had arrived at St. John’s during the beginning of December and by the middle of March the ASTP program had ended and I found myself on another troop train heading south for Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

We had arrived just after the 100th had returned from their Tennessee maneuvers. As I stepped off the train into a group of fifty to sixty guys, I heard someone yell out, “Anti-Tank Company had jeeps and trucks and they don’t have to walk.”

In the waiting room, we were called in one at a time to be interviewed and assigned to a company by a personnel officer. He started at the beginning of the alphabet by last name. As each guy came along he would say “A” Company then “B” Company and so on up to “M” Company. After reaching M, he would start over again with Company A. At the time I had no idea of the makeup of an infantry regiment, but with my last name starting with W, I knew it would be some time by the time he got to me. Listening intently I noted that the guys were only being assigned to Companies A through M. When my turn finally came, the officer looked at my records and said, “basic training at Fort Benning, ASTP St. John’s University. OK, I’m going to assign you to 399th, I Company.” At that point I asked him if I could say something and he replied that I could. So I told him that ever since I’ve been in the Army, I wanted to be

in the Anti-Tank Company (the thought of riding instead of hiking appealed to me). He looked over my records again and said "I haven't assigned anybody to the Anti-Tank Company so if that's what you want." He scratched out the I and replaced it with Anti-Tank. As I emerged from the office and announced "Anti-Tank," the other guys chorused, "You lucky son of a gun! How did you get that?" I was doubly lucky when I learned that Company I was under the command of Captain Travis Hopkins who walked with a limp. Company I double-timed everywhere they went and they were known as "Captain Hoppy's greyhounds."

One thing that surprised me was how well we were received in the Company by the old timers who by then had been in the 100th for nearly a year and a half and here were a bunch of college kids thrown among them. I fully had expected to be teased and ostracized but the fact that we were accepted began my lifelong love for the 100th.

Checking the bulletin board one day I saw my name on it and that I was to be sent someplace for basic training. Seeing it I went to the captain and explained to him I had already had basic training while at Fort Benning.

Putting on his hat he said, "follow me." We made our way across the parade ground to regimental headquarters and went down to a major's office. He knocked on the door and was told to come in. He curtly said, "You had my man Williams on the list to report for basic training. He had made basic training before you had. Take his name off the list." He saluted, made an about face, we left, and I heard no more about it. Boy, I don't know how he could get by with talking to a superior like that.

One day I had the detail of clipping the grass around company headquarters when three or four newer arrivals approached me asking what kind of company it was. I told them that it was a terrific company but I didn't think much of the company commander. The following day the first sergeant approached me saying, "Williams, you're stupid." When I asked why, he explained that he heard me downgrading the captain to the new arrivals. I asked if the captain had heard me and he told me that my voice came through the captain's window before it reached him. The company commander never said anything but he never seemed to care for me after that.

Although all of the vehicles had drivers, several of us were sent to driver's school to learn how to drive our jeeps and 6x6 trucks we used to pull our guns with. After completing the school I was supposed to have been available as a backup driver, but be darned if they didn't assign me to a jeep or a jeep to me, making me the Platoon Messenger.

The 100th was unofficially known as the Furlough Division. We were led to believe that General Burress directed that his troops receive the maximum amount of annual leave allowed by the Army, which was supposedly thirty days. This meant two ten-day furloughs and the remainder in two and three-day passes. In my short time at Bragg, I did receive one furlough plus about three three-day passes. I soon learned that with a three-day pass, a soldier could walk over to Pope Air Force Base on Friday morning and sign up for flights where pilots were earning flight time. On two occasions I was lucky to get a free flight to LaGuardia Airport in New York, about 20 miles from my home. The only cost was \$1.00 for a parachute rental. I didn't know what I'd do if I had to use it. Upon landing, the pilot advised us that if we wanted to return, the flight back would be at 3PM Sunday. Of course I had to be back. On one occasion, there were no flights to New York, but I observed that a very large British gull-winged glider was being towed aloft and then landing again. I asked what was going on and was told that US pilots were practicing on this glider and I was welcome to ride along if I wanted to. Surely I wanted to and boarded the glider.

What surprised me the most was that as the C47 tow plane took off, the two ropes uncoiled and as it did, I sat there waiting for the jolt as the tow rope was totally uncoiled. In no time we were airborne without a jolt at all. But when the pilot released the tow rope, it felt as if we had ran into a brick wall. Although I don't know the exact airspeed at which we were being towed, but I would guess it was 150 MPH and upon the release the airspeed dropped to 75 MPH.

In October we had packed up and boarded a train for our move north to Camp Kilmer, our last stop before being transported overseas. We were there for several days as we waited for the convoy to be assembled. It was tough on me because I was only 20 miles from home, but because our whereabouts was top secret I was unable to go home.

From Kilmer we took a train to a ferry terminal along the Hudson River where a boat took us to the dock where our troopship docked.

I made the trip overseas on the *McAndrews* which was one of the smaller ships in the convoy. At one point during the storm we ran into, we came within five degrees of capsizing and nearly collided with the *George Washington*. The *McAndrews* was what we called a banana boat, not built for crossing the Atlantic.

As for my duty onboard the *McAndrews*, three of us were picked to work in the pantry of the officers mess. Working there was pretty good duty because we ate the same food as the officers, which was better than the other guys on board. Another plus was that when not working I had a convenient porthole I could lean out of.

At Marseilles, France, we were the last ones to leave the ship. As we got ready to leave the officer's mess cook presented the three of us a large bag containing fruit and a whole roasted chicken. It was nearly dark by the time we had gotten ashore and started our twenty-four-mile hike carrying all of our worldly possessions plus the large bag of food the cooks had presented us with. As we walked along it began raining and by the time we had reached our bivouac area, we pitched our tents in a muddy field. For the following two weeks we lived in our tents in this muddy field while they delivered our equipment, guns, and vehicles which we had to clean off the cosmoline from and make ready for use.

The mine platoon had a number of duties on the front lines, including removing mines from roads and booby traps from buildings that would be occupied. At times we were right alongside the rifle companies, removing mines from the roads so that jeeps could bring up food, ammunition, and other supplies needed.

During our first week in combat we were called to the front lines to remove some mines from a dirt road. Using a mine sweeper we found nine large anti-tank mines. As we found them, we placed them in a pile to one side of the road. Now talk about sweating! You step slowly forward, swinging the mine detector back and forth just inches above the ground. Then there was the removal of the mines. You had to get down on your knees, probing the ground around it and very carefully digging it out.

When we had a pile of about ten mines, I was sent back to get some TNT and fuses out of the back of our truck that was parked in the small town behind us. As I made my way back and got to a wooden bridge, the Germans were trying to blow it up with their mortars. I hit the ground, but with shells hitting all around me I decided here wasn't the place to be so I got up and ran towards town. Being a farming community all the houses in the village had a barn attached to them and the usual pile of manure by the front door. As I passed by this one barn with the doors open, I saw this ox with a ring in its nose and chained to the floor. There beside the ox stood two farmers, one of which had a large knife he was using to cut the throat of the ox. Blood from the ox was everywhere. Getting to the truck I filled my pockets with TNT and fuses and as I headed back to the front lines, I noted that the farmers had the ox on its knees and were hitting it on the head with a large sledge hammer. What a sickening sight.

By the time I had made it back to the bridge area, the Germans had finished shelling and the bridge hadn't been hit. The ground had a number of holes where the shells had hit, one of which was the spot I had been laying. Getting back to the platoon I walked up to the sergeant handing my watch to him and saying, "If you want my watch that bad here, it is and don't send me back for TNT again."

It was late by the time we started our way back and found ourselves lost in no man's land. Before we knew it, we were catching it from the Germans. As I laid there I thought to myself I had no plans on spending the night out here. Not knowing the password for that day I decided I would cuss as loud as I could as I made my way back towards our lines with the others following. Hoping that our guys would realize that no Germans would have a vocabulary like that. The ruse worked, our guys didn't fire at us.

It was dark by the time we made it back to the church we were staying in so I asked the guys to go out to find us something to eat. It wasn't long before they came back with potatoes, cabbage and such, but this one guy returned carrying this piece of fresh meat! We cooked it in a frying pan on top of a pot-bellied stove.

The meat was like shoe leather, but it was meat! As we set there chomping away, I asked where he got it from and soon realized that it was the ox I saw being murdered.

Our platoon sergeant was a guy by the name of Gurdon MacNevin who was old enough to have been my father and who taught the Division mine school. We felt perfectly safe under his wing.

One day while searching a house suspected of being booby-trapped, one of the guys rushed in saying that Mac had been hit and we saw no more of him. Several years after the war while attending a convention in Boston, Sergeant Mac showed up. It seems that outside of the house we were working at, a rifleman stepped on a shu-mine. Sergeant Mac was there and using his bayonet, he probed a path so the medics could pick up the wounded soldier. As the medics carried him out on a litter, the rifleman's helmet fell off. Mac stepped off the path he had cleared to retrieve the helmet and stepped on a shu mine himself. It blew off his lower leg and in turn unnerved the rest of us to continue without our expert leader. As Mac said, it was a stupid move because the rifleman didn't need his helmet anymore.

The duty as the platoon messenger (jeep driver) was to drive the platoon leader to stay in contact with the three squads which made up the platoon and contact with the company headquarters where we received our orders.

My platoon leader, Lieutenant Stanley Lloyd, had received a battlefield commission. Since I was slightly proficient in French and German, when we entered a town where we were going to stay over, he would pick a billet and send me in to check it out and ask the inhabitants to leave if we wanted it. The inhabitants were never eager to leave their homes to a bunch of soldiers and oftentimes claimed that grandmother was deathly sick. You had to ask/order them to evacuate within twenty minutes or there wouldn't be anything left in the house.

I spoke with the French people but I do not recollect ever asking what laid ahead. A couple of times, however, they warned us that the Germans were going to blow up a small bridge that the people didn't want blown up.

One of my best buddies was an Indian from California, John Weddle. A lot of the guys were very cautious of him. John had a wooden handled carving knife he kept stuck in the side of his boot. It was sharp enough that he could slice paper with it. Occasionally, with our rations we would get a loaf of the lousiest bread you ever put into your mouth, but it was edible. I'd ask John for his knife to slice it with. I would lay the loaf on a board, slice it up and after I had finished John would spend a half an hour sharpening it until it had a razor edge.

A couple of times, we received a couple of pounds of ground beef and it always amazed me how nobody wanted or offered to do anything. So with my runny nose and dirty hands, I'd make hamburger patties to fry while the rest stood around all bundled up, shivering, with their hands in their pockets, complaining. All the while the palms of my hands were getting clean handling the meat. With all the complaining they did, they still ate the finished product though.

As we entered a town, Germans were ordered to turn in all firearms, which many did. Sometimes as we went into the houses we would come across a weapon that hadn't been turned in and I would liberate it, such as the .25-cal pistol that I wore in my belt. Sometimes I would bump into John, and as I did, I'd pull the pistol out and tell him that I had put 15 shots into him. He would reply, "that would just make me mad as hell" and in a flash he would have his knife at my throat. The guys would gasp watching to see what he was going to do.

He was twice my age and knew how to do everything. We would be talking and he would ask what I planned to do after the war. Having a girlfriend at the time I'd tell him I wanted to get married. He'd reply, "Don't get married. Get yourself a good horse. Then when you want to go hunting for two or three months, you don't have anybody giving you a lot of lip about it." After the war I got a Christmas card signed "John and Edna," with the excuse, "She loves hunting as much as I do."

## **Christmas**

On Christmas Day 1944 we were called back to the town hall in some anonymous town where our cooks served a Christmas dinner beyond compare! It always amazed me that in such trying times the Army would go to so much trouble to boost morale.

After trying the first time in the taking of Bitche, our platoon was ordered to take up a position in some heavy woods. There we dug two-man foxholes that were large enough to lie down in. Using an ax, John

cut down pines with several licks that the rest of us would have hacked on forever. After clearing the limbs, in no time he would split the whole tree and then we'd cut the split timber to lay across our holes. We covered the logs with dirt to protect against tree bursts and snow, then laid pine boughs in the bottom and were very comfortable gophers. Squad leader Pink Grant and I were roommates during this sojourn. There was nearly two feet of snow on the ground and during the day we could build a small fire to huddle around. We were filthy dirty as were our clothes, but who cared? John did. He had picked up a round galvanized tub which he put on the fire and filled with snow until he had a tub of warm water to take a bath. Then as the rest of us sat huddled around the fire dressed in every piece of filthy clothes we owned, John would strip and stand in his tub and take a bath. Unbelievable! Luckily this period outside of an occasional tree burst or machine-gun fire, it was relatively quiet.

When the weather improved, we liberated Bitche. We hoped we could stay awhile and celebrate, but had to keep going, then had to wait our turn to cross the bridge that someone else had captured intact at Manheim. After crossing the Rhine River we headed south towards Heilbronn and Stuttgart.

Our regiment commander, Colonel Tychsen wanted the 399th to be the best regiment in the division, so he was a tough taskmaster and was not loved by the guys. At one point, John who was one of the 6x6 drivers took a load of us to a medical station somewhere near regimental headquarters. When we went in for some kind of a shot, he stood there leaning on the truck's front fender, when came along Colonel Tychsen and a couple of his aids. When he got real close, John changed to his other elbow, turning his back on the colonel instead of coming to attention and saluting as he should of. This incident was reported to our company commander who called John down about it, but luckily no further action was taken.

As time went on a number of us had liberated pistols but didn't have holsters for them. We came across black German officer's boots where the top part was excellent, tough leather. John Weddle showed me how to move the top of these boots to make holsters. We molded the leather around the pistol to shape it and then made needle holes with an awl. Two needles were threaded and the sewing was done on a figure eight pattern. One needle on each direction through each hole. With his help we became quite proficient leather craftsmen.

One day John figured that we needed some fresh meat and he knew of a field back on the forest where deer might be grazing. So we got in the jeep and headed for it. As we drove through the forest on this small road—no more than two ruts—I noticed that the jeep seemed to be following the ruts by itself, so I took my hands off the steering wheel and said, "Look John, no hands!" No sooner had I said that than the jeep left the road and started up the steep embankment. As it did, I jumped out, leaving John sitting there in the passenger's seat. Luckily the jeep stalled out. As John looked to where I stood he said, "That's a hell of a place for the driver to be." I got back in and resumed the trip. As we neared the clearing, John told me to stop and turn the engine off. He got out with his rifle and continued on foot. In no time at all, I heard a shot, so I started the engine and headed to the clearing. By the time I got to him, he had the deer dressed and ready to go. We loaded the prize on the hood of the jeep and headed back to our bivouac area for a feast to share with our buddies.

Sometimes I was able to get to see a USO show. The entertainers were a bunch of hacks who couldn't earn a living any other way. The show was terrible. After hostilities, Bob Hope played a show in the division area, but I didn't get to see that one.