

My story as a soldier

I was called to duty on October 22, 1942. Early that morning my parents drove me 15 miles to Riverside, California. There I boarded the bus for the 30 mile trip to Fort McArthur at Long Beach. Leona, my girlfriend, also met us at the bus station. She drove about 25 miles at 6:00 a.m. to say goodbye to me. She looked beautiful.

I was at Ft. McArthur for two days taking tests, physical, etc. After those days I boarded a train for Kentucky. Three or four days later we arrived in Kentucky. The whole trip was hot and humid, all the windows were always open. I arrived at Camp Campbell Kentucky between Clarksville, Tennessee and Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

At Camp Campbell, I met a lot of G.I.'s that would become my buddies and go into combat with. I was in the 56th A.I.B. - C Company as a mechanic on our Companies vehicles, later to be the 66th.

After three weeks of basic training our Motor Sergeant, Oakes, asked for Mossy McDonald and myself to move to the motor pool. What a relief, we went to the motor pool and had our own little room. Sgt. Oakes and Sgt. Hall were staying there already as cadre-personnel. Mossy and I had nothing to do because we had no vehicles yet and no tools etc. Most of the time he told us to get lost, go sleep in the boiler room which was about 20' square. We spent many a day in there, playing cards and sleeping.

Sgt. Oakes was gone half the time and spent most of the time back in Louisville with his girl friend. Sgt. Hall was with us until we went overseas. To this day, I don't remember him doing anything worth while over the two and one half years he was with us. He was a complete "Gold Brick" if I ever saw one. I don't ever remember him doing one thing. Only to collect his pay check.

In Camp Campbell, after we got a few half tracks, Mossey and I made drivers tests out of everyone in the Company that wanted to be a half track driver. I bet one third of the applicants had never been behind the wheel of a car.

By the time we finished training the drivers, Cliff Anderson had joined us and we picked about 14 drivers from about 45 applicants. I could almost say 90% of the drivers we trained were with us in combat two years later. I think they were great.

Our Company drove in the woods and open space around Camp Campbell spending nights away from camp. I Remember one time we had to shave in 10 degree weather at 10:00 p.m. and had no soap. Cuts were on everyone's face. Some time toward the end of our duty at Camp Campbell, Vince Melchonne joined the maintenance crew -- another "Gold Brick" or god almighty. He had nothing to offer to the maintenance crew. He seemed to be a "brown nose" at all times.

About one half way through Tennessee maneuvers, I was sent to Fort Knox Kentucky and went to mechanics school for six weeks. School was from 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and then to the bars of Louisville by 3 or 4 p.m.. After graduation from school, I rejoined my Company, who had moved to Camp Barkley Texas. I went there by train.

Soon after arriving at Camp Barkley I received my second furlough. I went home for two weeks and upon return, I drove my 1937 Olds Coupe back to Barkley; John Nemeth, Charles Fetty and Myself enjoyed driving the car around Texas and seeing the sites. We enjoyed every trip we made except one. One Sunday morning, driving out side of Sweetwater Texas, we saw two War Planes hit head on about one mile in front of us. We were the second car there. The pilots were girls and one jumped out about 200' above the ground. The other about one half out of the cockpit, both were dead. It was a terrible site for all of us. I'll never forget that morning.

Part of the time at Barkley, I was in the supply room helping Lester Beck as armor. My sleeping bunk was in a corner along with Beck and John West. We had gun inspections every couple weeks, we had about 40 rifles in store there. I flunked every inspection because of too much dust. (I thought you could wear the gun out by cleaning them every day and it would be better to leave the dust on them).

In the motor pool everything was about the same as Camp Campbell. Practice, Practice, Practice. We would have the drivers change oil, grease all fittings, repack the wheel bearings every 50 or 100 miles instead of every 1000 miles. Also wash the vehicles about every other day. That way we kept the drivers busy.

The day finally came to leave Camp Barkley and at that time we knew we were on our way to war. Looking back it really wasn't a happy trip. After arriving at Camp Shanks New York, they gave out passes for New York City. John Hunter and I went on pass. We landed at 42nd and Broadway. We looked around, went into a bar and stayed there until it was time to go back to camp. One thing I remember at Camp Shanks; Arthur Hall got a 3' cardboard box and we all had to get rid of our civilian towels, so he folded them all up and sent them home. (I'll bet he never bought a towel the rest of his life). I'm sure he dried on my towels. Time arrived to leave and board the ship. It was a thrill to go right beside the Statue of Liberty that morning. The maintenance crew did not have any K.P. or duties aboard ship. We had worked night and day at Camp Barkley the last month.

Landing in England at Tidworth Barracks, the first night was the coldest night I have ever spent in my life. I remember going on a three day pass, by truck. Back at camp we were issued our guns that we had packed and boxed at Barkley. We also got our new vehicles there and soon headed for the east coast of England, boarded a ship and crossed the channel.

After arriving at France, we drove a few miles and stopped at houses and stayed there a couple of days. That house we stayed in had a 1 car garage with a 4'X5' dirt bottom for the oil drippings. About 9:00 p.m. and after 2 or 3 bottles, someone said there were German bodies buried there. Four of us took turns digging -- 4 or 5' deep, no bodies! After another bottle the Lt. (I don't remember which one), fired about 10 shots from his pistol, into the hole and then we went to bed.

Driving from that town across France to the Monastery, I had a boil on my butt. It hurt so bad that I drove most of the way sitting on the steel seat to kill the pain. Arriving there in the late afternoon, after chow, the medics laid me on the floor, four guys held me down and one pulled nine cores from my butt. (There is still a scar about the size of a quarter).

Time is getting close to December 7th, 1944. As the maintenance track is driving toward the front in the evening. Melchonne was driving and he can't see at night with the lites out. Oakes is in the turret trying to guide him, Oakes gets scared and goes to the back of the half track. By now Melchonne runs off the road. Cliff Anderson and myself get up in the turret, Mossy McDonald gets behind the wheel and Lester Beck is mad at all of us. Now we have a new crew and away we go. Oakes never said a word the rest of the night.

The next day as we replaced the 4th Armored we put the camouflage net over the half track and the 4th Armored laughed at us. That was the last time we used it. As night arrived the shells were going off ahead of us. We all had our foxholes dug except Oakes, he wouldn't get out of the half track. Sometime after dark, Oakes carbine went off. As we got to the back door, he was moaning that he shot himself in the foot. He was still in his sleeping bag and his carbine was in the bag with him. (He could hold the barrel right up to his foot that way and not miss). I never saw him again. As our Company moved into combat, the maintenance crew never really knew where we were, we just followed the column. We had no map or radio. If one of the vehicles broke down, which often did, we would have to change a tire, put the tracks back on, change plugs, distributor, work on the carburetor, clean fuel lines or simply fix whatever went wrong. Once we got everything going then we had to find our Company. Sometimes our Company was as little as a quarter of a mile or as many as 5 or 6 miles away. We would be passing other half tracks, tanks, trucks etc., until we caught up.

When our Company was on foot taking one small town after another, the vehicles, including our maintenance track was usually in one town back or in the woods somewhere keeping out of site. That's when we had time to steal some eggs out of barns in the area. One time a lady walked about 200' from her house and brought an entire basket of fried chicken and biscuits, poison or not, we ate it. I'm sure we only took that area less than an hour before. Another time I remember, Pafford had four chickens in a cage that he carried along in his half track. I don't know what driver it was, but he had about a 40 pound pig in the half track. I still remember when he opened the back door and shoved the pig out on the street, probably due to the smell. We also had our sad days as well as you in the front lines. Two very sad days when my good buddy's Franklin Brown and John Rossman were killed and there were others as days and weeks passed. We in the maintenance also suffered at Herrlisheim and were at a loss for words.

Getting back to combat, we in the maintenance dreaded the wet weather and dirt fields where we usually followed tanks. Their tracks were wider than the half tracks. One track would be tracking in the tank tracks and when our half track driver tried to get out, one of ten times, he would throw a track. I think it was John Higgins who threw his track off three times in one day. Walt Bodensick was another track thrower. George Setra, he always broke distributor shafts, even in the states.

We would set his timing on his half track and he would always change it so it would backfire when he let up on the gas. We always kept a supply of shafts just for him. He almost got us in trouble once. In the middle of the night, high trees on both sides of the road and pitch black, he broke a shaft. By the time we got everything disconnected and removed with only a small flashlight and canvas over us to hide the light, fifteen minutes went by. All of the sudden you could hear the roar of a German convoy coming. We all took off into the forest. That convoy came less than 200' in front of us on a crossroad. They were all talking German but didn't see us. We went back to work and got the half track going. George drove so fast, (with lights out), that when he finally caught up with our Company, he ran right into the back end of the last vehicle. He was a tough guy so I never argued with him very much. Half way through combat, Melchonne is still with us!! Remember we, (the maintenance crew), pulled a 2 wheeled trailer, well he took a captured German motorcycle and he couldn't ride it, but we threw half the spare parts from the trailer so we could haul his motorcycle. It rode in the trailer for a month. Remember the warehouse your buddies took that was full of champagne. Well that's when we threw the motorcycle out of the trailer and loaded a 3X3X3 ft. box in the trailer that was full of champagne. The champagne bounced in the trailer and was hot, so when we opened a bottle one half of it would fly three feet into the air. We enjoyed the next week or so. John Nemeth, Swede Anderson, Rankey, Harry Kealber and a few other drivers would visit us quite often.

One afternoon the Company had stopped in a small town we had just taken. We had stopped probably 30 minutes in front of a row house. A woman with two children kept looking out the window up stairs. Cliff and I decided to go up to their room and give the kids some candy. We went upstairs and could not find their door. Finally we found their door and opened it. (We forgot to bring our guns in case there was a German soldier there). We got in and could hear our Maintenance Crew shouting at us. We went to the window and the rest of "C" Company had moved out and was out of site. Tanks and the whole column was sitting there waiting for Cliff and I. We probably prolonged the war for at least 15 minutes. Lester Beck, I remember was mad at both of us for leaving.

One day our half track were sitting on the back side of a hill while our buddies were pushing on in the town ahead. As we were waiting for you to advance, here comes Moroski walking over the hill. His platoon leader had sent him back to his squads half track. He had a small bullet hole through his steel helmet and the German bullet had taken his hair and scalp for about two inches on top of his head. (Lucky man).

On a cold and snowing night one of the half tracks broke a brake line. I remember Cliff Anderson and Mossy McDonald moving snow under the vehicle so they could get to the broken line. They replaced it with rubber flex, filled the brake cylinder and we all moved forward.

The maintenance was also in combat; Late one evening as our Company was pushing through a town, we were stopped for a while. I was driving and all of the sudden someone knocked on the drivers door. (at night). I lifted up the 3" X 5" slide window and here was five German soldiers with guns wanting to surrender. We didn't know who was going to get shot first. We told them to drop their guns, which they did. We finally got out, took their guns and ran over them with our half tracks. We sent them on their way back and we became "Heros".

We were also "Heros" again. Our Company left a town, a German civilian stopped Lt. Radicahl and said there was a German Officer in the hospital on the third floor. So Radicahl got the maintenance crew and we went up to the officers room. With guns ready, we took him, (He was not pleased), and made him bounce on the back of the half track until we caught up to the Company an hour later. (By that time, the German officer had forgotten that he had a bandaged head).

One of our maintenance jobs which wasn't so pleasant was our first experience on the "Autobahn". We hadn't been on the road for more than a minute when a German jet dropped a bomb about seventy five feet from Swede Anderson's track. the shrapnel went through his front armored door and ripped part of his neck apart. We got him out and, after a time in the hospital, he survived. (He passed away about four years ago). At the same time, Mossy McDonald said if a plane drops a bomb and you cant see the plane, the war is over. (This was a German jet, the first we had heard and not seen). Mossy got into a German tank trap and we could not get him out. The medics picked him up later and I never saw him again. He was a great buddy and mechanic during combat. A big thrill for all of us, was the day we drove through this German town and there was George Carpenter waving at us. He had been captured a couple weeks before.

As the war was coming to an end, the Germans had a lot of horses and wagons. At one time, we were waiting for the front to move and horses were all over the place. Cliff and I got on two horses and rode to the forest about 300 yards away. Wagons and horses were all over in the forest. We again went without our guns. Soon we decided someone was going to shoot us if we didn't get back to our buddies, so again, Cliff and I rode back on horses as "Heros".

As the war came to an end, most of us drove with our half tracks and Company about 150 miles north to Rosenberg for about a five month rest.

Herrlisheim is another day. Our hearts and souls poured out to all of you that day because the drivers and maintenance really didn't know what was happening that day, but we really felt it at the days end. God bless all of you who were there that day.

Through all of our fun, work and sadness, I think our maintenance crew kept all our vehicles going threw thick and thin. Always working hard to keep our "C" Company 66th on the move even in good weather or snow, mud or fire. we kept all the vehicles moving.

*Bob Kampling*