

Return to the Thunderbolt Trail:

11th Armored Division Roger Mockford's 2011 Tour of Europe

By Jim Mockford

My father, PFC Roger Mockford served in the 11th Armored Division 55th Armored Infantry Battalion in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. Known as the "Thunderbolts" the 11th Armored Division was part of General George Patton's Third Army that counterattacked the German Army in the Ardennes Forest for a brutal month of combat after December 16, 1944 when the German attack began The Battle of the Bulge and in four days encircled American 101st Airborne troops at Bastogne. The 101st held Bastogne for a weeklong siege from December 20-27 while Patton's Third Army pushed up from the south led by the 4th Armored Division followed by others including the 11th AD Thunderbolts who responded to the German offensive in the surrounding area of the Ardennes Forest. It was in the cold snow of this forest and isolated farm hamlets that Dad spent most of the month of January 1945 after his first combat experience near Magerotte, Belgium at the end of 1944. The battle at Magerotte remained one of his most vivid memories of the war for the next 67 years.

PFC Roger Mockford made it through the Battle of the Bulge and the Siegfried Line (twice) but somewhere in western Germany he left the battlefield on a stretcher after the half-track he was walking next to hit a mine and the explosion left him with a concussion among other injuries. Roger was sent from field hospitals to hospitals further from the front and finally to Paris where he was present on VE Day May 8, 1945 to witness the remarkable victory parade under the Arc de Triumph and celebrations that lasted for several days. While Dad recovered in hospitals the 11th AD Thunderbolts continued their trail of rapid advance across Germany to its southeastern state of Bavaria and then on to Czechoslovakia and Austria. It was a trail of importance to millions of liberated peoples including thousands of survivors of concentration camps such as Mauthausen Austria.

I was eager to join Dad on his return to this "Thunderbolt Trail" and we made reservations for the 2010 tour to Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany but he had a heart valve replacement and double bypass in January 2010 and he was not recovered well enough by spring to make that trip so we had to cancel. But by August we are able to go to Louisville, Kentucky for the Final National Convention of the 11th Armored Division and a Memorial and Retirement of the Colors at the Patton Museum at Fort Knox. We flew a thunderbolt pattern from Portland, Oregon to Salt Lake City to Minneapolis to Louisville, as Roger remembered his first cross country trip that happened to be by troop train in 1944 from Camp Cook California to Camp Kilmer New Jersey the staging area for the trans-Atlantic voyage to England where preparations on the Salisbury plain including training and waiting for deployment to France in the fall of 1944.

When Roger had a weekend pass to visit relatives in London he was able to find a jewelry store near the bombed out St. Paul's Cathedral and there he bought a necklace to send home to his mother Frances Mockford in Oregon City. It was a gift she treasured especially during the next few months when she did not hear from him. It brought back memories again in July 2011 when my daughter and Roger's granddaughter Jenny Mockford-Farmer wore this "something old" heirloom necklace at her wedding. It was quite a year of memories in 2011 because as plans for the summer wedding were unfolding Roger was feeling well enough to go on a special veteran's tour to Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic organized by German author Anna Rosmus.

We met Anna Rosmus at 11th Armored Division Conventions including Louisville 2010 and fortunately she was organizing a tour to Bavaria and Austria that would take us on the final segment of the "Thunderbolt Trail" culminating in the annual memorial observance at Mauthausen, Austria. Roger had been hospitalized from a battlefield concussion in March 1945 and he never made it as far as Austria during Patton's Third Army Advance across Germany in the spring of 1945. But he had always wanted to see the places his 11th Armored Division liberated. We finally did it 67 years after Dad first arrived at the Battle of the Bulge.

This was a VERY active tour with much more to relate than can be briefly stated in this brief "After Action Report." We traveled with three other WWII Veterans (Mickey Dorsey 71st Infantry Division, Robert Patton 65th Infantry, and Roy Heatherly 65th), a Holocaust survivor (Dr. Robert Fisch), and a General (Stanley Eric Reinhart Jr. son of Patton's Third Army General Stanley Eric Reinhart who became Military Governor of Austria during the occupation) and in addition to our "special six" tour members the family members brought our group to 20 persons including our guide Anna Rosmus. Along the way Anna Rosmus drew on more than several books she has written such as "Out of Passau: Leaving a City Hitler Called Home" (2004) and years of research to tell us about each town's story of the war and she often invited local historians to join us for a day.

We were kindly greeted by many German mayors and deputy mayors at the city halls or important town landmarks and nearby historical sites including Landshut, Plattling, Metten, Cham, Regen, Deggendorf, Passau, Kircham, Pocking and Wegscheid. Historical re-enactors led by Heinz Zach provided us with a WWII vintage jeep convoy to Landshut's Trausnitz Castle (see <http://www.youtube.com/user/Jimstory11#p/f/3/QEOGpVNmKRc>) and again from Passau to Freinburg, Austria overlooking the confluence of the Danube, Inn, and Ilz Rivers. It was easy to see St Stephen's Cathedral rising over Passau and we could almost hear the organ again from the wonderful concert we attended there earlier in the day.

At Plattling a Memorial Marker was dedicated by Mayor Eric Schmidt to the 65th Infantry for their humanitarian assistance to concentration camp survivors and remarks were given Robert Patton at the cemetery of St. Jacob Basilica. Following a reception at the St. John of Nepomuk Museum we left Plattling for Metten Abbey where Father Norbet gave us a rare tour of the

Baroque Library and told us of the surrender of the Hungarian Generals at Metten Abbey in 1945.

We made a day trip to the Czech Republic to see the Patton Museum at Plsen via Zinkovy Castle and conveniently close to the museum the famous Pilsner Urquell Brewery for lunch. Colonel Milan Jisa Curator of the Patton Museum told us of the founding of the Patton museum in 2005 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Pilsen and South-Western Bohemia in 1945 and central to the continued memory of the history that is also celebrated at an annual Festival of Liberty. The museum provides a web site too <http://www.patton-memorial.cz/en/museum/>.

In Passau the veterans visited with students at the Gymnasium Leopoldium and set out for an afternoon riverboat tour of the Danube River. At Kircham and Pocking a memorial wreath was laid at the marker to concentration camp victims and General Stanley Eric Reinhart Jr. whose father commanded the liberators gave remarks followed by a flute solo was played by Lena Altweger. Here a special ceremony at the children's memorial was also conducted with music by flutist Altweger.

In Austria we were again greeted by mayors and deputy mayors at Kollerschlag, Scharding, Kremsmuenster, Haid Ansfelden, Gunskirchen, Edt, Gusen, and Mauthausen. The delights of local beers and delicacies continued as in Germany at every stop and some with lively Oompah music such as at Maidult in Passau and at Kollerschlag, Austria with a 19th Century Style Band (see <http://www.youtube.com/user/Jimstory11#p/f/1/ACpRSQTrxqg>)

When we arrived at Linz, Austria we were finally nearing the end of the "Thunderbolt Trail" where the 11th Armored Division had arrived on May 4, 1945. It was just the next day that reconnaissance from the Calvary reported the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Gusen nearby. The liberation of the camps brought an end to horrors to the survivors inside and testimony by survivors of many thousands who were murdered in the camps. Among our tour group was holocaust survivor Dr. Robert O. Fisch who survived Mauthausen and Gunskirchen Camps. He talked about his experiences during our trip and he is author of books that describe the holocaust to both adult and youth audiences such as "Light From the Yellow Star: A Lesson of Love from the Holocaust" (1994).

We also had US Veteran Mickey Dorsey whose story of finding the concentration camp was told at the annual liberation ceremony in the forest at Edt. Barbara Prammer, President of the Austrian National Council led other dignitaries in the presentations and school students presented an interpretive dance as part of the memorial ceremony.

William C. Eacho III, US Ambassador to Austria invited us to join him in the procession at Mauthausen and you can see Dad in his uniform in the photo posted on the US Embassy Austria web site at <http://austria.usembassy.gov/amb-speeches/mauthausen2011.html> We toured the great granite walls that were built by slave labor and saw interior rooms where the atrocities of gas chambers and crematory rooms took the lives of thousands of Jewish people from many

countries across Europe. Today delegations from these many countries participate in the annual memorial. I posted a video of the somber procession on YouTube at that captures some of the feeling of this experience. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6NpbSXgOkw> but it is too much to put into words. Following the wreath layings by dozens of country and organizational delegations in a parade that is witnessed by thousands of visitors we took our leave of Mauthausen with a heavy sense of the horrors of the holocaust.

We went to a luncheon at Haid followed by a presentation led by Joseph Pühringer Governor of Upper Austria and dedicated the memory of the liberators led by General Stanley Eric Reinhart and the 65th Infantry Division with remarks by Robert Patton. Then it was off to another convoy with historical WWII vintage vehicle waiting for us arranged by Austrian Military Magazine Einsatz at the Hoersching Barracks where a memorial presentation was conducted at the Captain Hayes Monument (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nCbXns6u0I>). Einsatz Television broadcast coverage of the convoy and visit on Austrian TV and Einsatz Magazine ran a story by Von Helmut Wimmer, “Die Ruckkner Der Glorreichen Sechs” (The Return of the Magnificent Six) a highlight among the numerous newspaper articles that covered our tour in Germany, Czech Republic, and Austria.

At our final luncheon with host Mr. George Holtl at his Muhlhiasl Inn and our farewell dinner at Dreiburgensee Hotel we marveled at how magnificent our return to the Thunderbolt Trail had been even with the deep sadness of remembering the horrors of war and the sense of loss of loved ones remembered by the thousands who return every year to bear witness to history there was hope that in the remembrances shared by generations a better future can created.

While traveling with Dad in Germany we talked about his combat in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge and how his 55th AIB had suffered tremendous on December 31 when they were ordered to attack near Magerotte and take the high ground near Acul. Dad had been with most of his 2nd Platoon since Camp Cook including Lt. Michaels who was transferred to Headquarters in the days before they reached the Ardennes Forrest and a replacement Lieutenant was injured from a self inflicted gunshot wound just before battle so 2nd Platoon went into combat without a commissioned officer. They relied on the leadership of First Sergeant Marvin Dorsey who had been with them since Camp Cook but Dorsey was killed in action with the first volley of artillery and shrapnel that rained down on the battalion. Thanks to the American Battle Monuments Commission web site I was able to find that First Sergeant Melvin L. Dorsey 55th AIB, 11th AD was buried at the Luxembourg American Cemetery, Plot A Row 3, Grave 24. Out of the 5,076 graves in this immense cemetery there are at least 18 other graves with names of men from the 55th AIB of whom at least seven other men who like Sgt. Dorsey were killed in action on December 31, 1944. Now I am researching the story of the 55th AIB in Belgium so any information about others KIA but not at this cemetery and any stories about the 55th AIB will be much appreciated.

On a happier note we found someone that Dad had not talked to since in 1945 and after 66 years he turned out to be very much alive. Dad had often mentioned to me that he wondered whatever happened to Bill Chorney a member of the 55th AIB whom had been his foxhole buddy during the Battle of the Bulge. After Dad was injured he was sent from field hospitals to Paris where he was present at VE Day on May 8, 1945 to witness the remarkable celebration and victory parade under the Arch de Triumph. But he

never returned to his unit and many of them had gone with the 11th Armored Division all the way to Austria. After the war, whenever Dad had asked a member of the 11th Armored Division and asked them if they had heard of Bill Chorney from New York but the answer had always been negative.

On our return from Europe in 2011 I went through the roster of 55th AIB survivors and contacted Clarence Blazier who surprising told me that he had seen Bill Chorney in Wisconsin in the past couple of years and had his phone number. I called the number to confirm it was correct and had a great talk with Bill. It turned out that Bill had been removed from the field after mortar fire collapsed tree limbs over him and pieces of wood were embedded in his back. Bill recovered but was reassigned to the to the 21st Infantry and would eventually make it as far as Linz, Austria where his Russian language skills were put to use at the war's end and during the occupation of Austria where communication with the Russians in the Czech Republic was needed. After returning home from the war, Bill to the East Coast and Roger to the West Coast, the men went on with completing their college education, career plans, and starting family life and community activities that kept them very busy with life for over a half a century after the war.

Dad never talked much about the war during that half century and he did not become involved in veteran's organizations until well after retirement. When the 11th Armored Division held its national convention in Portland, Oregon in 1990 he went to the event and began attending meetings of the Northwest Chapter of the 11th Armored Division Thunderbolts Association. He later became the last President of the Northwest Chapter presiding over its dissolution following the Final National Meeting in Louisville in 2010 but not before making sure that the chapter name was changed to the "Dan O'Brien Northwest Chapter" of the 11th Armored Division in honor of the National Association President and his life-long dedication to the 11th Armored Division Veterans Association. The re-connection to his generation of World War II Veterans and particularly Battle of the Bulge veterans that he made at these national and regional meetings became increasingly important to Dad and with the help of the internet he also connected by email and sometimes telephone across many miles and years with Thunderbolts across the country. I can still hear the satisfaction in Dad's voice after his telephone conversation with Bill that took place after 66 years. It was a happy "rest of the story" for two old foxhole buddies from the Battle of the Bulge.