

## THE WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCE

What do I remember about WWII? I recall the draft and some of the boys in the neighborhood who were first to enter the service. Names that come to my mind are Ernie Pio, Johnny Ezzo, Albert Tulio, (Albert later to marry my sister Nancy) and Funzy Margiotti (not sure of the spelling). There were others but I can't recall their names. There was a windowless wall of a house on Fairhill Street at Rising Sun and Butler. This home faced a large intersection. On this side wall of the Camuso home the names of all the men and women in neighborhood in the service were listed. If they were killed, a Gold Star placed beside their name would record it.

Many did not return. Two that I knew well were Ernie Pio and Johnny Ezzo. Somehow you always picture them as you last saw them. Ernie was in uniform and it was on a Sunday morning in our home on Butler Street and as for Johnny I remember him bending over an engine working on his car on Randolph Street. Both were great guys and well liked. Johnny left a young wife behind. Ernie was not married. They both lost their lives, ironically during the Italian campaign in the Naples area not too far from their parent's roots. I recall seeing a young sailor from the neighborhood walking past our house towards public transportation to return to the Philadelphia Navy yard. A few days later it was reported that his ship had been torpedoed and he was lost. I see that sailor's sister often when we shop at Genuardi's.



*The Falconians*

I played football with the Falconians (a neighborhood team) and we had just finished a meeting held in the basement of Diacova's house on Pike Street. As we left the house we heard the news that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. This was about 1 PM on Sunday, December 7, 1941. Shortly after that, since we were of Italian decent, we were required to bring our family radio to the closest Police Station because it had the ability to hear programs from overseas. I recall bringing it to the Police Station. We never saw that radio again.



*Me, Jay Nelson, and Brandy charging in our football gear*

These were the days when almost everyone was in some type defense work and were accepting War Bonds in lieu of some salary. There were many drives for scrap-metal, etc. Defense jobs paid more than other work. Both men and women went into defense work. My sister Rita worked at Bendex helping to make instrument parts for aircraft.

Frank left his job at Fletcher's, where my father and he worked, for a much higher paying job at the Baldwin Locomotive Works, located in Eddystone, PA and required a lot of driving to and from work. Frank was deferred from the military service because of his work for the duration of the war. But he served in the Army when the war was over.

I don't believe many fully remember the sacrifices and hardship that was experienced by so many Americans in the war and at home.

My general memory is OK, but I have forgotten many details. I had applied to the Naval Air Corps for cadet training, but my eyesight was not good enough for aircraft carrier landing. Instead I was told that I should allow myself to be drafted and I would be enrolled after basic training into the Army's A-12 program and returned to college.

I passed the physical and mental exam for the US Army in December of 1943 and after a short furlough during which I took final first semester exams at Temple University. I reported to the Army at New Cumberland, Pa. on January 20, 1944

I was the youngest of five children of an Italian family. Having three older sisters and an older brother I never had to wash the dishes or do the many menial tasks required in a household. I am not sure how it was in other families but well into my teens, I was always considered the "baby" of the family I am sure my siblings would agree I had it easier than they did.

You might ask yourself "what does that have to do with being in the Service". For openers I was given K.P. duty on the first day at New Cumberland, Pa. All day long starting at 5 am I peeled potatoes. They continually brought sacks of potatoes for me to peel. They didn't use automatic peelers. You just sat there with a knife and peeled the skin off the potatoes then tossed them into large (huge) steel containers. Kitchen duty was a major change for me.

However, K.P. for a recruit was sort of "a rite of passage". One morning I was at a Philadelphia train station with my family and close friends wishing me well. They spoke tenderly and lovingly. A few hours later when I left the train, strangers in uniform were yelling, not so tenderly, to "line up", to "shut up" and giving instructions as to how you were to demonstrate you did not have a sexual disease. They reminded the new recruits in very clear and explicit language that this was not home and we would not be receiving "Momma" like care. I was a private but I discovered in hurry that there was nothing private about a private's life in the army. The next morning I was awakened bright and early to peel potatoes.

While at New Cumberland, Pa. we were given uniforms and all the basic gear that we needed at that time. They also gave us very short haircuts, which did not bother me. I had been keeping my hair in a crew cut for many years. They also showed us a series of indoctrination films concerning the army and the enemy. The objective was to get you fighting mad. It showed the enemy at their worse. We also took IQ tests and other tests to measure other skills.

I recall one test that we were simply to distinguish dots from dashes. This was to determine if you were a candidate for the Signal Corps. My guess is that all service units by that time in the war must have been full because I had recently completed a radio and code course at night while going to high school and was able to build and repair radios. I was able to distinguish dots from dashes and I could send and receive the Morse code. With that background I believe I would have been chosen for the Signal Corps if there were openings.



The general rule was that if you were not to be assigned, you could be given a pass to go home for the weekend. It would have been great to return home in uniform. It would be a short train ride home. As it turned out we were on the train that weekend for Fort McClellan, Alabama.

I would have many occasions to travel by Troop Train while in the Army. Most of the time we traveled coach class. It is OK to travel sitting up for several hours but after sitting for 24 hours it becomes very uncomfortable. After 48 hours you would do anything to stretch out. The Troop Trains were slow. They often parked on sidetracks. You looked for someplace to stretch out (lay down). You can't do that in the aisle because you would be stepped on.

I have stretched out on the steel platforms outside, between cars (the platforms move continually, particularly on curves). I have also climbed up on the luggage rack to be able to straighten out. It sounds strange now but I did do that.

From New Cumberland we went to Fort McClellan, Alabama. This may not seem distant now but then it was considered a long way from home. In those days people did not travel as they do today. A trip to Atlantic City was a long trip for us. I had thought of Alabama having a warm climate. I found out that it could get very cold there in the winter.

I trained as an Infantryman for about 17 weeks. From time to time I was called in to take exams concerning the Army's A-12 program. Infantry training was very difficult. The reason was that the tougher the training, the easier it would be to survive in combat. During that time we fired all the weapons assigned to the Infantry, threw hand grenades, fired bazookas, disassembled and assembled all equipment, took numerous 25-mile hikes etc.

There was physical training, such as crossing over streams via overhead poles (hand over hand). It was sad to see some of the older men (mid thirties) get half way across and drop into the cold water below. At 18 I did not have much trouble getting through the different training requirements. But some requirements were difficult and dangerous. Some soldiers lost parts of their hands in hand grenade practice.

The Infiltration Course, which we went through many times, was scary. Training cadre seemed to enjoy sending us through the Infiltration Course after a rainstorm. This is the training course where you must crawl very low through pools of water under barbed wire with machine gun fire overhead using tracing rounds to make your crawl more realistic. Of course you would make yourself as flat to the ground as possible. The objective of course was that the more difficult they could make it, the more realistic, the better trained you would be. Crawling through a muddy infiltration course played havoc with your clothes. They did not have laundry service so you washed the clothes yourself. To get the mud out required heavy scrubbing. We were required to complete many 25-mile hikes. They always started at midnight, ending in the morning with many foot blisters. It wasn't simply a walk because you had to carry a full size backpack, plus rifle, etc.

There were definite milestones everyone had to complete. If you were not able to complete everything scheduled in a 4-week cycle you would be transferred to the training group that was 4 weeks behind and required to repeat the 4-week cycle. It was routine to carry the equipment of the men that were having a hard time so they could stay with the group. Thirty years of age does not seem old now in civilian life but some recruits in their thirties had a hard time in basic training.

As a squad leader I had the responsibility of directing my squad in mock attacks of a town or a hill, etc. To attack a hill you might start a few blocks away. You would have to advance man by man, (calling them by name) running then hitting the ground and rolling on the ground in one direction or another to make it difficult for a defender to take a good aim and shoot you. You would really be out of breath by the time you arrived at your objective.



Another interesting event in basic training was to be told that you would be directed to a field and given 30 minutes to dig a foxhole to use because tanks would be coming through the field. The tanks would go over every hole to give you the experience of what it would be like if a tank were to go over your foxhole in combat. It was a unique experience having the tracks of a tank run over head.

We trained 6 days a week. However, on Sunday mornings we learned, in a hurry, that you could not sleep late. If you did not get up early and leave the barracks, cadre would come into the barracks and assign you to some physical work project. One Sunday when I lingered in the barracks I was assigned to a group building amphitheatres in the hills.

The barracks were one-floor wooden buildings, loaded with double-decked bunks. The toilet facilities were about a half a block away. Using the bathroom in the middle of the night particularly, during the winter was a chore. In the morning it was a scramble to wash and shave, since the number of washing bowls was limited. The same was true for toilets. Time was always short. So whatever you did was done in a hurry. That is another reason they want young men in the service. The older men would know what I mean.

Where would you go on Sundays? Perhaps to Anniston, Alabama, the closest town, loaded with soldiers. People generally avoided you like you had the plague. Most soldiers were well behaved but there were some that would drink more than they should and produce a problem. After Mass you could walk the streets of the small town. Or go to the communication center and place a call for home. It was usual a 3 hour wait to get a call through. And there was always the PX where you could drink coke all day long. One weekend late in training we were allowed passes to Birmingham, Alabama. It was an interesting trip. It's funny but I don't remember how I got there. Did I take the bus, or the train, or did someone have a car?

During my basic training the Army decided to terminate the A-12 program. They anticipated a need for more ground forces. I decided that I would become a paratrooper and signed all the

necessary papers to jump out of a plane with a parachute. We were scheduled to go home for a furlough and afterwards report to Fort Benning Jump School for 4 additional weeks of training. In addition to the training I completed, 5 jumps were required to get your paratrooper wings.

At that time, which was May of '44 the Allies were planning the invasion of Europe and the US decided that those who had volunteered to join the paratroopers would not go home on furlough but would go directly to Jump School. I believe they were anticipating a need for paratroopers because of the planned invasion. Most of us that volunteered for Jump School had not been home since entering the Army and complained that we wanted to go home first. I believe there were 13 volunteers from the 250 in our group. The initial answer was no. However, at the last minute, the army reversed its decision and allowed us to go home on furlough.



### *On furlough*

During my furlough after Basic Training, Congress decided that you had to be at least 19 to be transferred overseas for combat. So instead of going immediately overseas to be part of the invasion forces, as most of my training unit did; since I was 18, I was instructed to report to the 89<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Camp Butner, North Carolina. On arriving at Camp I again signed to go to Jump School but instead I was transferred to the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division that was on the alert to go overseas. I often wonder if my life would be the same if I had gone directly to Jump School. I probably would have been one of the paratroopers on “D Day”.

The 75<sup>th</sup> Division was in training at Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky. I was disappointed that I was not allowed to go to Jump School. It had been a challenge and I had made up my mind that if I would freeze at the airplane door I would ask the person behind me to push me out. Instead I was assigned to an Infantry Cannon Company. After training at Breckenridge we were transported overseas in October of '44. From Camp Shanks we were transported to the ship which brought us to Swansea in Wales, England.

It was a 10 day trip in convoy. There were thousands of us below deck. The bunks were 5 tiers high. Some men got sea sick and heaved regularly. It was mess, particularly if the soldier was heaving from the top bunk. We were given injections for everything imaginable. They walked you down a narrow corridor and medics on each side administered shots in your arm. Many soldiers just keeled over. We were given cards which entitled us to two meals a day. They

punched the card after each meal. The odor below deck got so bad that Don Veitch and I decided to find some other place to stay and sleep aboard ship. We climbed up high in the superstructure of the ship and found a place to stay. After that we just came down to use the facilities or get our meals. "Inconvenience" is a word I never heard used in the Infantry. One day we were discovered by one of the sailors. He promised not to tell any one. I gave him my address and phone home phone number and asked him to phone my family and tell them where I was. The ship the George Washington returned to Philadelphia. He called my home and was invited to a spaghetti dinner at our home.

We were transported by train and truck to Haverford West, South Wales where we were stationed and continued training. Training in South Wales was different and interesting. Our long hikes were through the UK countryside. We saw many old churches, abandoned castles, and old homes with thick stone roofs and some with thatched roofs. We lived in rounded steel structures that are called Quonset huts. They were easy to build. All that was needed was a concrete slab as a floor and corrugated steel made into a semi-circle for a roof. We were on the grounds of Picton Castle.

We were in the UK for approximately 6 weeks. Haverford West was about 6 miles away from Picton Castle. When allowed we would walk into town. Somehow we didn't mind the 12-mile round trip. It was mostly in the evenings and because of the "blackout" all the streets were dark. Walking through town you would occasionally see a small light. That would be an indication that it was a bar or some store that might sell "fish and chips". This would be French fries and pieces of fish in a cone of paper made of newspaper. The paper was usually saturated with cooking oil.

During our stay in the Haverford West area the residents did their best to make us feel welcome. We were invited in small groups to tea on occasion or athletic matches were arranged with the UK soldiers in the area. For a young man who grew up in a "little Italy" being served tea and trying to balance tea and cookies on my knee was a challenge.

I can recall going to a dance one evening. This was a small town and they didn't dance as we do back home. This was where I saw the "Hokey Pokey" performed for the first time. This is a dance where you form a circle and moving around in a circle and singing "you put your left foot in, you put left foot out and you shake it all about, you do the "Hokey Pokey" etc. You would repeat that routine with your arms and other parts of your anatomy. They didn't do the dances popular back home like "jitterbugging". But you know the saying "when in Rome".

Our campsite on the grounds at Picton Castle wasn't much of a campsite. Just huts. There were outdoor latrines as well as out door wash basins. It was challenging on cold winter mornings using the outdoor latrine buckets and wash basins. Fortunately the temperature was above freezing in November and early December. I recall the farmers coming each day to take the "honey buckets". I guess to use as fertilizer.

I remember Haverford West as hilly. The streets were constructed of cobblestone. It is an Old Welsh town. There was an abandoned castle in the town's center that went back to the 12 or 13 century. During most of my working life I have had continuous contact with the English. They



are pioneers in my line of work. I continually researched English literature when I had a problem and was looking for a solution.

It wasn't until recently that I finally met a UK coworker that came from Haverford West. The residents from Wales are quick to tell you that they are not English but are Welsh. Will Williams, the new Director for LLC, the company that I am presently Chairman, lived in Haverford West at one time. On a recent trip there he clocked the distance from our camp to town and confirmed that it was 6 miles. There were no lights on that road, at least there wasn't then so it was always a dark walk back to camp after a visit to town.

We had a great Mess Sergeant in our company. His name was Gould. He would wait for everyone to return from town. He would keep the kitchen open and would allow us to have coffee and toast or what ever he could get together for a snack. It is because of things like that I still remember him some 60 years later. He was at least 10 years older than most of us.

Midnight one evening we were marched the six miles or so to the Haverford West train station. This was the first leg of our trip to the combat zone in Belgium. I recall putting on my long john underwear. I am glad I did. We were brought to a seaport in Southampton, England and we boarded a transport ship.

There was a storm in progress so we could not be unloaded easily to the waiting LCI's. There were no usable docks in Le Havre, France. We were starving on board. They had not anticipated we would be on board long. Some of the men were so hungry that they broke into the bakery for something to eat. The British who were operating the ship considered it a mutiny. We were warned that an inspection would be held and if anything from the bakery was found in our possessions that person would be court-martialed.

We disembarked the ship at midnight by going over the side of the tall ship with all our equipment and down a long rope ladder. We were several miles away from the shore. It was a long climb down to the LCI. Since the sea was still rough we did not make the final jump into the LCI until we were told by an attendant on the LCI to jump off the rope ladder. If you jumped too soon you would be crushed between the LCI and the ship. The LCI was banging against the side of the ship because the seas were rough due to the storm.

It is strange but I don't remember being afraid. It was a slow process and we were packed in the LCI standing. I estimate it took about 2 hours to load the LCI. We were brought by the LCI directly to the beach and unloaded right on the sand several hours pass midnight. We were eventually transported from there by train and truck to the front lines. As we passed over each bridge we saw soldiers attaching explosives to the undersides of the bridges. They were preparing to blow up the bridges perchance the allies could not stop the German advance.

The Germans evidently knew that the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was new and many of their weapons were still covered by cosmoline and not ready for use. A part of their division was taken prisoner. A week or so ago I had breakfast with Bill Elliot a friend who works for Bechtel. He told me his father was in the 106<sup>th</sup>. I asked him immediately if his father was taken prisoner. His answer was yes. It can be a small world. We were also a new division. One of us had to go

first. As luck would have it the 106<sup>th</sup> was chosen to go in first. One wonders what would have happened if we went in first instead of immediately behind them.

There were cases where they simply lined up American soldiers that had been taken prisoner and shot them. I have forgotten that division or unit designation. When the Germans attacked the 106<sup>th</sup> Division, a new entry without any combat experience they broke through the allies' front line and many of the U.S. units could not retreat fast enough and were captured. The "break through" on a map looked like a bulge in the allied forces front line. Hence the name "Battle of the Bulge. It was officially called "The Ardennes Battle". It was here that I had my first experience with death on a large scale.

Cannon Company was equipped with 105 mm Howitzers. The objective of this company was to give close support to the rifle and heavy weapons companies. Excluding sniper fire we were not subject to much rifle fire. However, since we had the most damaging support weapons we would be subjected to considerable artillery and mortar attack.

In contrast to rifle as well as heavy weapons personnel, firing the short-range cannons (the barrels were about 4 feet long) required a minimum of three men to be out of their foxhole or slit trenches and at the guns. When the shells start to come in (you will not hear the shells that might hit you) you would be permitted to dash for your foxhole. In combat it seemed to us that the German always knew where we were. They must have had good forward observers. They were probably directing fire from one of the German homes in the area.

Our first combat experience was in the Battle of the Bulge. This was one of the major battles of WWII in Europe. The only other battle of great importance was the invasion at Normandy. Hitler's war was not going well so he ordered General Von Runstead to launch a major offensive against the allied forces in Belgium. It would be in the Ardennes. The Germans hit with all their strength. They dropped American speaking paratroopers behind the Allies lines in American uniforms to confuse the Allies in the German's advance and used their elite SS troupers that had the reputation of seldom taking prisoners.

It was a terrible battle, during which, to blunt the German offensive, the Allies would attack every morning. There was a terrible loss of life. It was very cold and a lot of snow had fallen. The snowfall prevented the Allies from using their aircraft to give support to our troops. There were heavy casualties on both sides. I said many "Acts of Contrition" during the "Battle of the Bulge". It is strange looking back. On some of those very cold nights, when we shivered the entire night I had thoughts that if I was home I would build a fire in the corner of our living room. The extreme cold evidently can give you crazy thoughts. We were not permitted to make a fire. It would have drawn enemy fire.

Some soldiers just had bad luck. One group of soldiers in another company unluckily in daylight built a fire over a buried land mine (explosive). They were either killed or seriously hurt.

When you see a jeep from WWII you can rapidly tell if it was a combat jeep. The Germans would string strong steel wire across a road, if the windshield was down it could decapitate the passengers. If the windshield was up it would damage the jeep and depending on the speed of the

jeep knock it off the road. To limit damage we would weld an angled steel bar to the front bumper in line with the windshield with a 45 degree bend at the top that hopefully would catch and cut a steel wire if strung across the road.

I guess we have all heard of combat fatigue. This doesn't necessarily take a lot of time in combat. We were in combat perhaps a week and under continual artillery fire; the type of artillery that would continually shower your foxhole with dirt and debris from close hits. We noticed that one of the men was walking around our position silently, strangely carrying his rifle in front of him. He had a strange look in his eyes. He was a great athlete and was always an entry to the boxing matches we had, particularly in England but evidently he could not take the constant artillery fire. He was taken away and we never saw him again.

This battle lasted about 6 weeks. We lost all our officers but one. I don't believe they were killed but they were either wounded or became sick, were taken away; only one returned. When the weather cleared, our aircraft gave great support to our advancing forces. During that time I dug many foxholes and experienced many artillery barrages. Typically you would have to dig through the a few feet of snow before you could attempt digging a foxhole. The ground was frozen solid. Someone in the squad always had an ax. The first thing I would do was ax out the outline (top) of the foxhole. When you chop into the frozen ground it sounds like you are chopping wood.

There was no opportunity to wash. You were happy to survive. We did not have special clothing or shoes for the cold, snowy weather. We had the same clothes that you would have been issued in the States. Once again I was glad I had enough sense to put my "long johns" on before I left England. Many soldiers got trench feet. When the battle (Bulge) was over and General Von Runstead was stopped, the American forces reorganized and they arranged for us to take showers and change clothes. We were in the same clothes that we wore when we left England more than six weeks before. That last evening while we were in England we were told to dress warmly and prepare a backpack and place the rest of our belongings in a green barracks bag. These bags were stored in a barn in France and we did not see them again until the war was over.