

Veterans Day at APhA

It is a distinct honor for me having been asked to speak at this remembrance of Veterans Day. You have already heard about my pharmacy career. Now let me tell you just a little more about my service as in World War II. I especially want to tell you several of my experiences that you will not find recorded in any of the hundreds of books describing the history of World War II.

I was drafted into the Army on December 15, 1942, six months after I graduated from high school. After spending three months at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for basic training, in April 1943 the U.S. Army sent me on a two-and-a-half year tour of 13 countries in North Africa and Europe, and with no passport. I served throughout the war with the 20th Combat Engineers.

After I landed with the 20th at Licata, Sicily, on D-Day (July 10, 1943), and after a personal encounter with General George Patton who ordered us to clear out a mine field so he could move his tanks into Palermo, my company was transferred to the 82nd Airborne Division to clear out the western half of the island. The German troops had already fled the western half of Sicily, and the Italian soldiers had no fight in them. As our company moved to locate the 82nd troops, we rolled our trucks into the little town of Alcamo scattering Italian soldiers who had been marching down the street with their rifles. Realizing that the 82nd had not yet arrived in this area, our company commander quickly moved us and our trucks to a nearby empty field.

At about 4:00 p.m., an 82nd Airborne major came racing down the road in a jeep and asked why we were here. After explaining that we were looking to join your troops, the major responded that our 82nd troops have to walk while you engineers drive around in trucks. However, the major asked that he take a squad of four from our company to liberate the larger coastal town of Castellamare de Golfo about ten miles away.

I was a member of this squad of four that entered the town plaza that was crowded with Italian citizens who seemed to be expecting us. Few spoke English, but those that did yelled, "Mussolini a Son-of-Bitch" and "I Gotta Broder in New York." The 82nd major left us after he ordered a Curfew requiring everyone to get off the streets and stay indoors all night.

After nightfall, the chief carabinieri (Italian police) led us to a Fascist headquarters. After breaking the door down, we discovered an incredible bar full of about every variety of alcoholic beverages that existed. Within a couple of hours, my other three buddies were dead drunk, leaving me alone to welcome another carabinieri who insisted that I come with him.

With my trusty M-1 rifle in hand, I followed the carabinieri to a luxurious apartment where I confronted an Italian general who could not speak English. Even though I could not speak Italian, I soon realized that he wanted to surrender his garrison that was located on the other side of the city. He also wanted me to sign an impressive Italian language document which I could not read. You must remember that I

was a 19-year-old Pfc, alone without my buddies, but I was still able to convince the general that we will accept his surrender tomorrow, and we drank to that!

The next morning, I conveyed this information to the captain of our company who sent several trucks filled with large rolls of barbed wire to create a prisoner of war campsite. They then marched some 1,200 Italian soldiers out of their barracks and into their new home. The 82nd Airborne Division troops did not arrive in Castellamare de Golfo for another two days to takeover from the 20th Engineers so that we could move on to repair the airfield at Trapani.

The 20th Engineers then shipped to England and subsequently landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. However, the account of this invasion is well recorded in history books as well as in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. So let me move to August 18th when the major elements of the German Seventh Army were encircled and the race for Paris was on.

General Eisenhower had granted Charles De Gaule the privilege to liberate Paris. However, the French troops did not have any engineer units, so I participated in an engineer recon unit that became the first Allied troops to enter Paris. Our mission was to ensure that the bridges across the Seine were safe for De Gaule to cross the following day, August 25th, to liberate Paris.

Throughout the war, the 20th Engineers were attached at various times to more than 20 different divisions. Our missions was to construct hundreds of Bailey Bridges, clear out thousands of German mines, and maintained hundreds of miles of roads to permit the infantry and armor divisions to move forward.

On November 2, 1944, we were assigned to the 28th Infantry Division when they launched an attack in the Hurtgen Forest just inside Germany. However, strong German forces counter-attacked and virtually encircled us. General Norman Cota withdrew his 28th infantry soldiers, but ordered that the engineers remain to assist in their withdrawal and serve as infantry without supporting weapons. The V Corps commander finally ordered the withdrawal of the 20th Engineers on the night of November 10th after suffering 72 percent casualties.

Many of you may not have even heard of the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest because it was not a U.S. victory, it was not publicized. It took another four months and the use of five more U.S. divisions to finally capture the entire Hurtgen Forest. This made it the longest and bloodiest WWII battle, with casualties surpassing even D-Day in Normandy or the December 1944 Battle of the Bulge.

But enough of my various encounters. Following the end of World War II, I was discharged from the service on October 25, 1945, and returned to the home of my parents who never saw me in an Army uniform. I had served only three months and 12 days in the U.S., but I spent two years, seven months, and 28 days overseas.

After World War II, I continued to follow the activities of the 20th Engineers as they deployed to Korea, then to Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Iraq where they experienced casualties in each of these conflicts. Then on August 12, 2009, I was honored by the current commander of the 20th Engineers who invited me to come to Fort Hood to "share my WWII experiences with the new soldiers of the 20th Engineers in order to enrich their minds for their upcoming deployment to Afghanistan."

On October 27-29, 2009, I attended what they called a "Rugged Leader Conference" in Fort Hood. During this conference, six invited veterans of the 20th Engineers who variously served in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam reviewed their respective experiences and answered questions posed by the current soldiers of the 20th on "lessons learned." All six of us veterans were then surprised by being awarded with plaques designating us as "Alumni of the 20th Engineers."

This was indeed an unexpected honor. However, one week later we read of an unexpected tragedy. On November 5, 2009, an Army psychiatrist opened fire on soldiers at Fort Hood. In preparing for the forthcoming deployment to Afghanistan, a company of the 20th Engineer Battalion was receiving instructions at the Soldier Readiness Processing Center in Fort Hood where the killings took place. The 20th Engineers suffered the most casualties of any unit at Fort Hood with four killed and eleven wounded. This news was especially depressing for this "Alumnus of the 20th Engineers" to see soldiers who were ready to risk their lives in Afghanistan, little expecting that they might die even before their departure.

In closing, I am pleased to take note of the fact that Senators Jim Webb and John Warner led the move to establish the new GI bill to permit veterans to take part in a fully-funded degree program at a state college or university of their choice. An additional 1,100 private institutions have elected to participate in a special arrangement called the Yellow Ribbon Program.

May God bless the men and women who served in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, as well as the thousands who daily perform their lonely and demanding missions in the far away corners of Iraq and Afghanistan. God bless all of them on this Veterans Day 2009, and God bless our great country.