

HOWARD W. RUPPEL'S STORY

DONATED TO WISCONSIN STATE CHAPTER 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION
ASSOCIATION SEPT. 8, 1992.

REFLECTIONS OF A PARATROOPER
A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF WORLD WAR II

BY

HOWARD W. RUPPEL

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS, F CO 517TH PARACHUTE COMBAT TEAM

DEDICATED TO:

My five sons: Howard, Gary, Richard, Scott and Brian.

My devoted wife, Mary

My Grandchildren, the other relatives and all my friends

And with humble reverence in perpetual remembrance for all the comrades in arms that
made the supreme sacrifice.

This scribbled odyssey came to be when I wrote about several events that happened while
serving our country during WWII. The few readers that read the stories complimented me on my
endeavors and encouraged me to write more, the complete military stint. I rarely talked about
these past events for reasons noted in the story. In 2 ½ years, I traveled far and wide, saw a lot,
did a lot and learned a lot. And there were many betides and befalls that were scary.

As I wrote, checked, revised and corrected I relived those harrowing moments, experiencing the
agony once more and shed tears thinking what may have been. I omitted some incidents that
were fuzzy, or I was not sure of chronological order. Most ordinary day to day soldier life, I
plumb forgot about. The escapes from destiny are as vivid today as the day they happened.
After reading, those that know me may regard me in a different light and perhaps understand who
I think as I do. And just maybe my sons might reflect on their own lives, understand themselves
better and count their blessings.

If I would not have written this, I would have taken it all with me when... And no one would
ever know about my trials and tribulations, how I changed from a boy to a man. The story is
more than an old soldiers account of the war. It's about history, geography, religion and
philosophy.

This story is about the war.

.....As I lived it

.....As I saw it.

.....As I perceived it.

.....As it affected me.

.....Then reflected.

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Howard Ruppel, 1989

HOWARD RUPPEL'S STORY BEGINS: (Ed. Note)

Howard's Aunt Viola surprised him one fine day and presented him with a bale of the letters he had written home during his time in the service. I am excerpting some (with relative dates and inserting them into his personally reated story of his war! Note how the stuff he wrote home told little of the horror and misery he endured in combat. This is charateristic of most of the men in the divisions. At times it almost seems prosaic and dull. But conversely his actual story as he relates to it puts a more true face on it. I am not including all his letter due to lack of space etc. I apologize, Howard. I wish there was space to put them all in. It makes a dramatic contrast!

Here are some of his letters to his Aunt: (out of the "Champaign Campaign" in the invasion of So. France) "Somewhere in Southern France".

Thursday, Sept. 28, 1944.

As you know by now I am somewhere in Southern France. I jumped on August 15th. That is a day I will probably never forget. I haven't had a rest since then, except in the last several days. I was able to visit the city of Niece. It is a pretty nice city compared to Rome, Italy. France is a better country than Italy. These people were glad to see us too.

I haven't heard from you lately. What have you been doing? Mother finally got a letter from Artie. I suppose you know that he's somewhere in Northern France. No, I am not part of General Eisenhower's "AIRBORNE ARMY" (Ed. Note: that was busy up in Holland at this time). And I am glad I am not! I've only made 8 jumps so far and I am satisfied. I don't care to jump anymore. I am in an "AIRBORNE TASK FORCE". Time has gone by awfully fast, here it is the end of Sept.; by the time you get this it will be October. I told mother not to send anything for Christmas. That song is becoming popular again. "I'll be home for Christmas!" I surely hope it comes true, all of us over here hope it comes true. I am in good health again, I can thank my lucky stars for that!

THURSDAY, OCT. 5, 1944

We have been in a rest period for a little while. I think I wrote you last week. Time goes so fast. All the foreigners I have met want American Cigs. Even the little kids smoke! Yesterday I received a letter from Artie. The first one in a long time. I answered it right away. He said he was proud of his little brother, meaning me. He right flattered me. Mother asked again what I wanted for Christmas. A fur lined parka, something to protect me from the cold! It is getting cold here now. I'm glad that is only at night tho. I don't expect you to send me anything. If you do send something, send a couple of magazines, airplanes or hobby books. I thought when I got older I would lose interest, but somehow I just like to work with my hands.

The questions you asked me are mostly military information. I'll do my best to answer. I am in the 7th Army AIRBORNE Taskforce. I don't know what the insignia is. My job is in communications. I lay wire, and put in telephones. The artillery breaks the wire, so it keeps me busy running to repair the wire, to keep it in working order. My superiors knew I had a big job, so they are trying to award me the "BRONZE STAR". It is just a medal for extra duty (Ed. Note: Come now Howard, don't be so damn modest! Read the citation!).

I am in good health now, but just had another tooth pulled. Good bye now. I'll write again when I can... (Ed. Note: we vets all know why he couldn't write just then)

Saturday, Oct. 14, 1944

My chance to write is small, I'll have to write when I get the chance. The rainy weather has started now. I have a cold too. There is nothing I can do about it. This morning the sun is shining which makes a person feel better. I can't tell you where I am now, but it is impossible to write when you are at the front, so I can't be there! Time is still going fast. I really don't know what to write, so I'll just stop and wait until I hear from you. How is everybody?

Thursday, Nov. 9, 1944.

This one is on "V-Mail". It is not exactly rainy or cold. It's snowy and cold. Sometimes we sleep in tents, but most of the time we dig a hole, or make some kind of fortification against artillery shells. I got my stationery, when I was in Niece, but now I'm out of envelopes so I have to lose "V-Mail". If you would, how about sending me those two magazines, "Model Airplane News" and "Popular Science". I don't have much extra time but sometimes I get too much time and don't know what to do. I have a piece here from our paper, "The Stars and Stripes", that tells where I am. I don't know if I will be allowed to send it home or not. I'll try. I'm feeling all right. Went to Hospital about Nov. 15th. Left about Dec. 10, 1944.

I received 3 of your letters and one "V-Mail" last night. I've been in hospital for about a month with dysentery. I'm just about ready to leave now. A task force is a group that is too small to be called an army. I don't want any models, just magazines. Something that will keep my head full of ideas and not go stale. I've got the "BRONZE STAR" all right, also Pvt. First Class. When I get back I'll have to catch up on my bowling! Dorothy sent me a box too. So I wrote her a letter. How's this stationery? She sent it to me. Artie got a Purple Heart all right. No, Betty is my one and only. She loves me I guess cause she sent me 5 boxes. One with part of her birthday cake in it. These girls aren't any good over here. We Americans are millionaires. They try and get all the cigarettes, chocolate, and chewing gum they can. They just love chewing gum. I haven't paid any attention to them. One great barrier is the language. All the girls want to come to America. That's about all the news I have. I'm always glad to get your letters. Merry Christmas and thanks for everthing.

Liege, Belgium, Replacement Depot..

Saturday, Dec. 23, 1944 (Ed. Note: the Bulge is at its peak!)

Here it is two days before Christmas. It doesn't seem much like Christmas though. I've been out of the hospital for two weeks now. Gutr I'm still not caught up to my outfit. While I was in the hospital the outfit left, so I was sent to a replacement depot. I'll catch up with them pretty soon, I think. Because of my moving around too much my mail will have to follow me. But in time it will catch up with me. While I was in Marsailles, I went to the Red Cross. I found that Jerome wasn't in the vacinity at that time. I know Artie is with the 3rd Army and approximately where he is. This won't be much of a Christmas. I'll make the most of it and keep thinking about everyone back home, and hope that they are happy. By the time you get this it will probably be next year (1945). So I hope that you had a merry Christmas, a Happy New Year, and a happy

birthday. I am in good health again, but I doubt if I will ever be the same again. I'm in a dry place so don't worry about me. I read the paper, you're having snow storms back home. At least I's a white Christmas this year. Keep writing. I am always glad to receive your letters. Let me know what kind of Christmas you had. Happy Holidays.

Somewhere in Belgium

The Battle of the Bulge.

Friday, Jan. 19, 1945.

I haven't written you for quite a long time. You know I was in the hospital. I left the first part of December. I didn't get back to my outfit until January. I spent Christmas in a replacement depot. I had all I wanted to eat. There was pie and cake on the table, but I was too stuffed with turkey to eat any pie or cake! But on Christmas Eve things were different. I was in a movie. A pretty good one too. About half way through we had an air raid. So we had to vacate the building. It's snowing too, a regular blizzard, but I'm inside a building. I'm plenty warm in the day time. Only my feet get cold at night. I got enough blankets to keep me warm. If I take my shoes off at night, which I always do, the shoes are froze stiff in the morning. Boy it is a job to get them back on. The other day we made ice cream! The way I make it is, just make a cup of cocoa, then add enough snow to make it thick. It doesn't taste bad. In the summer when we would like some we cannot have any! I haven't received much mail. Just one letter from Artie and one from Daddy, saying he broke his ankle. That is one way to get a rest. I haven't received any from you tho. I'm fine and on the line. I received a V-mail letter and your package, also the magazines. Thanks a lot. Now I have a little time to read and write. Betty sent me a heavy pair of wool socks, just what I need, but she sent size 13. I will wear them though. I'm enjoying a little rest but not in a rest camp. The other day I had a shower and got clean clothes. This is the first time I have had my clothes off in a couple of weeks! (Ed. Note: here notice the dates here and just past, he was and is obviously in combat and right here in "reserve"). Notice he makes no mention of it, you can only read between the lines.)

I'm up in Belgium now. I'm really getting around, seeing the world. Belgium seems a pretty good dairy country. I have been able to get some milk occasionally. I'm in good health yet and feeling fine. It is melting out today. I hope it gets warm pretty soon. This winter combat is terrible. It is too cold! It is all right when a person keeps moving. At night we freeze. The only thing is we have to "stay out" 24 hours a day. If we get our bed rolls brought up it is a little warm but if we don't get them, we freeze. When we get cold we have to stay that way. I haven't seemed to have any ill effects tho. So far! How was your Christmas? I hope I hear from you all soon. How is everybody? (Ed. Note: Again read between the lines. Here he comes close to actually saying what is really going on. I am surprised the censor missed this one!)

Somewhere in France, Tuesday, Feb. 13 1945.

(Ed. Note: they were probably actually in the Ardennes in here someplace)

I am finally enjoying a real rest! No, I wasn't in a rest camp before. The reason I didn't write is because I just couldn't. I received your box and the magazines all right. I got a letter from Artie that he actually wrote on Christmas. He was alright then and "enjoying" himself. I haven't heard from Jerome for months. I wrote to his overseas address several times, but no answer. Mom says he is in France now, so ALL THREE OF US are in France now. To my credit I have

160 COMBAT DAYS. That is better than 5 months on the front. My luck is holding, so far I haven't gotten the Purple Heart! Thank God! I don't know how long we will be here. I hope long enough to rest! The weather is just like spring now. The snow is all gone. It rains a lot tho. So now we have plenty of it. I don't think I will ever forget this winter! I actually spent most of it in Belgium and Germany! What I see of Germany is all blown to bits and pieces. I think the whole country should be destroyed, like **THEY DID TO ALL THESE OTHER COUNTRIES**. I am feeling fine and in a safe place for a change. So don't worry about me. How are all back home? Write again soon, I am always glad to hear from you. (Ed. Note: There are many more other letters, but this is all we can get in here. Compare these with the same dates in his diary.)

CREDITS

This narration was the sole effort of the writer. The refined and complete story was made possible with the encouragement and help of many friends. Information and statistics were received from many organizations. Complete strangers, prominent important people, took the time to courteously answer inquiries. I am greatly indebted to all of them.

U. S. Army Infantry Center, Fort Benning, GA - National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C. - Military History, US Army, Washington D.C. - 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team Association, Hudson, Florida - Tourist Bureau, Ventimiglia, Italy - The Milwaukee Journal, Milwaukee, WI, permission to reprint portions of The Milwaukee Journal Newspaper headlines - Lafarge Lifelong Learning Institute, Inc. Milwaukee, WI - Miss Doris Day of California - Joyce Williams, a friend, of Milwaukee.

of the United States



Honorable Discharge

This is to certify that
HOWARD W RUPPEL

36828543 PFC 2986TH REINF CO 103RD BN

Army of the United States

*is hereby Honorably Discharged from the military
service of the United States of America.*

*This certificate is awarded as a testimonial of Honest
and Faithful Service to this country.*

Given at

SEPARATION CENTER
FORT SHERIDAN ILLINOIS

Date

4 DECEMBER 1945

[Signature]

REGISTER'S OFFICE
RECEIVED
MAY 15 1945

DEPT. OF THE ARMY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

[Handwritten notes and signatures]

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101

VOL

207 PAGE

**ENLISTED RECORD AND REPORT OF SEPARATION
HONORABLE DISCHARGE**

1. LAST NAME - FIRST NAME - MIDDLE INITIAL RUPPEL HOWARD W		7. ARMY SERIAL NO. 36 828 543	8. GRADE PFC	9. ARM OF SERVICE ADD	10. COMPONENT AUS
6. ORGANIZATION 2986 REINF CO 103RD BN		7. DATE OF SEPARATION 4 DEC 45	8. PLACE OF SEPARATION SEPARATION CENTER FORT SHERIDAN ILLINOIS		
9. PERMANENT ADDRESS FOR MAILING PURPOSES 1238 N 24 ST MILWAUKEE WISC		10. DATE OF BIRTH 3 FEB 1925	11. PLACE OF BIRTH SHEBOYGAN WISC		
12. ADDRESS FROM WHICH EMPLOYMENT WILL BE BOUGHT SEE 9		13. COLOR EYES BLUE	14. COLOR HAIR BROWN	15. HEIGHT 5-10	16. WEIGHT 138 LBS
17. NO. DEPEND.	18. MARITAL STATUS X SINGLE		19. U.S. CITIZEN X YES		20. CIVILIAN OCCUPATION AND NO. EXTRACTOR OPERATOR

MILITARY HISTORY

22. DATE OF INDUCTION 10 JUL 43		23. DATE OF ENLISTMENT 31 JUL 43		24. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE 31 JUL 43		25. PLACE OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE CAMO GRANT ILL	
26. REGISTERED X YES		27. LOCAL S.S. BOARD NO. 2		28. COUNTY AND STATE MILWAUKEE WISC		29. HOME ADDRESS AT TIME OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE SEE 9	
30. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY AND NO. 1 LINEMAN TELEPH&TELEGR 238				31. MILITARY QUALIFICATION AND RATE (I.e., Infantry, aviation and marksmanship badges, etc.) COMB INF BADGE PARACHUTISTS BADGE			
32. BATTLES AND CAMPAIGNS ROME-ARNO SOUTHERN FRANCE ARDENNES RHINELAND CENTRAL EUROPE							
33. DECORATIONS AND CITATIONS VICTORY MEDAL EUROPEAN-AFRIGAN-MIDDLE EASTERN THEATER RIBBON WITH 1 SILVER BATTLE STAR BRONZE SERVICE ARROWHEAD 3 OVERSEAS SERVICE BARS GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL BRONZE STAR MEDAL GO#33 HQ 1ST AIRBORNE							
34. WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION NONE							
35. LATEST IMMUNIZATION DATES				36. SERVICE OUTSIDE CONTINENTAL U.S. AND RETURN			
SMALLPOX FEB 44		TYPHOID AUG 45		TETANUS OCT 43		OTHER (specify)	
DATE OF DEPARTURE 13 MAR 44		DESTINATION ETO		DATE OF ARRIVAL 8 APR 44			
37. TOTAL LENGTH OF SERVICE				38. HIGHEST GRADE HELD			
CONTINENTAL SERVICE		FOREIGN SERVICE		YEARS		MONTHS	
YEARS MONTHS DAYS 0 7 18		YEARS MONTHS DAYS 1 8 17		PFC		19 NOV 45	
39. PRIOR SERVICE NONE				40. REASON AND AUTHORITY FOR SEPARATION CONVN OF GOVT RR1-1 DEMOBILIZATION AR 615-365 15 DEC 44			
41. SERVICE SCHOOLS ATTENDED PARACHUTE AIRBORNE COMMAND				42. EDUCATION (Years) Grammar 8 High School 2 College 0			

43. LONGEVITY FOR PAY PURPOSES		44. MUSTERING OUT PAY		45. DOLMER DEPOSITS		46. TRAVEL PAY		47. TOTAL AMOUNT, NAME OF DISBURSING OFFICER	
YEARS	MONTHS	DAYS	TOTAL	THIS PAYMENT	NONE	\$ 2 95	133.12	LELAND F. RICE	CAPT FD

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48. KIND OF INSURANCE			49. HOW PAID		50. Effective Date of Allotment Discontinuance		51. Date of Next Premium Due (One month after \$0)		52. PREMIUM DUE EACH MONTH		53. INTENTION OF VETERAN TO		
Nat. Serv.	U.S. Govt.	None	Allotment	Direct to V. A.	DEC 45		JAN 46		6.40		X		



54. RIGHT THUMB PRINT

55. REMARKS (This space for completion of above items or entry of other items specified in W. D. Directives)
**LAPEL BUTTON ISSUED
ASR SCORE (2 SEPT 45) 73
INACTIVE STATUS ERC FROM 10 JUL 43 TO 30 JUL 43**

56. SIGNATURE OF PERSON BEING SEPARATED <i>Howard W. Duggel</i>		57. PERSONNEL OFFICER (Type name, grade and organization - signature) <i>C A Wallace</i> C A WALLACE 1ST LT CE	
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Reflections of a Paratrooper
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by
Howard W. Ruppel
Private First Class, F Co. 517th Parachute Combat Team

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EDITORS NOTES AND APOLOGIES TO Howard:
Some of the above has been deleted, left out, edited. All
due to the necessity of page numbers..I have tried to get it all in
so it hangs together and makes sense..It is a wonderful history and
ie really the same as most of our own..Sure, there are
variations, but in the main it is "OUR" story too.

In The Army Now

World war II dictated my destiny, changed my life and shaped concepts that affected me forever after. I learned to tolerate and understand, rather than criticize or judge and my religious belief was confirmed. The repercussions of the war were both good and bad. The war shook off the doldrums of the great depression, providing full employment and prosperity. Women joined the work force, working side by side with men. The war was the common cause that united the people, restoring a sense of pride and worth to the people. But all was not easy, every endeavor was for the war effort. Food and creature comforts were in short supply. The government imposed rationing and ceiling prices on many items. The average motorist was allotted three gallons of gasoline per week. Automobile production was halted, there were no new cars. Rubber tires and womens's silk stockings were non existent except, maybe, on the black market. The war brought exciting changes; things were happening; the country was alive with activity.

The depression restricted one to his own back yard so to speak. From early on I was fascinated with airplanes and flying and hoped that some day I would own and fly my own airplane. But the depression limited ambitions, food on the table for the family was number one priority.

As a draftee I found military life wasn't that bad. I heard that some got their first pair of shoes in the army. Don't know if that was true or not but the story was repeated so often that it took on the ring of truth.

I got a chance to travel and saw first hand what I had read about in books. I saw places I never dreamed existed, learning for myself that the world was round. Traveled by bus, train, even rode in one of those fancy pullman cars. Flew in the Douglas DC 3, the army called it a C 47. Went up five times over Georgia, never landed though, jumped out with a parachute every time. Cruised across the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, saw passing glances of several foreign countries and trod on many others. But let's start at the beginning.

I turned eighteen in February 1943 with expectations of being drafted any time. I anticipated doing my part because my two older brothers, Arthur and Jerome were already in service and I certainly wasn't a shirker. The government con-

scripted most young men shortly after they turned eighteen. I say most because a few were unfit in some manner to serve. I heard some feigned to be left handed and couldn't operate a rifle, but that didn't wash. Few young men were around and about, those that were, were continually asked, "Why aren't you in service? What's wrong with you?" It was no haven to escape the draft.

Then around May I was offered an apprenticeship in drafting at the great Allis Chalmers Co in West Allis. This was quite an honor because one of my boy-hood goals was to be a draftsman and now opportunity knocked on my door. The problem was that Allis Chalmers was engaged in defense work and if I accepted the position I would be deferred from the draft putting me in a dilemma. Be selfish and grab the opportunity, forsake my brothers or think of my country, Mom and apple pie. So I declined and shortly after received the draft notice: Greetings! Why does the government send irresistible invitations under such a heading?

The first stop was Camp Grant in Illinois. I was there only a short while and never went off the base so never really knew where Camp Grant was located. All of us draftees got haircuts, inoculations and GI clothing. We were issued two types of uniforms, the winter wool khaki and the summer cotton tan colored one that was called, sun tans. Both these uniforms came in two sizes, big and small. After the preliminaries were accomplished, we appeared to be stamped from the same mold and were loaded onto railroad coaches and headed south, destination unknown. The coach reeked of smoke from the coal fired steam engines, this was before the day of the diesel. The terrain was relatively flat, miles and miles of corn fields, some oil derricks and many cities. The rail lines always passed through back yards, with their wood fences, gardens and clothes lines.

This was my second train ride, the first being to Camp Grant and the farthest I had ever been from home. I was enraptured by sights I'd never seen before and didn't want to miss a single one. So I remained glued to the window throughout the day and into the night, too excited to sleep. The countryside turned dark, lights of any kind were few and far between. But the cities and villages came alive. The wail of the train's whistle warned the city of our approaching train. Funny thing about those train whistles, the wail of each whistle, from each train sounded the same as if the whistles were tuned to the same pitch before leaving the factory. Crossing gates would be down, some automobiles waiting to cross, kids on the sidewalks, all visible for a fleeting moment, then through the darkened countryside once again. I didn't want to sleep, there was too much to see and I was seeing it for the first time in my life. We didn't have this stuff in a small town

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew the sun was coming up. The land was flat and almost barren, sparse grasses, round or rolling bushes, was that sage brush?

The sun was coming up from the rear of the train which would indicate we were heading west. But headed where? The prairie was relatively flat, and the track was straight, no need for any curves. Off in the distance a town rose up, as we approached the buildings increased in height and looked to be a large city with tall buildings. The sunlight coming from the rear shone dead ahead directly on the buildings, illuminating the face of every structure, creating a shining picture of a city on the prairie. That was my first glimpse of Dallas, Texas.

The ride ended at Camp Wolters which was near the little town of Mineral Wells, which is just west of Weatherford, which is just west of Fort Worth, which is just west of Dallas. It was here the army taught me basic training, how to be a soldier. Among other things the army taught me how to make a bed with the top blanket so taut a dropped coin would bounce. The army taught me discipline and orderliness by holding inspections. Our personal gear had to be laid out on the bed in a precise military order. We were warned about, "passing inspection." As recruits we felt the army was just keeping tabs on the inventory. Ours was not to reason why only to do and die.

I guess basic training is basic training, we were taught many things about weapons of war and self preservation: the care, cleaning and firing of the M1 rifle; how to use and fire the 30 caliber machine gun, mortars and hand grenades; map and compass exercises; hand to hand combat; parade drills like right shoulder arms, left shoulder arms, parade rest, right face, left face, about face. Every action was prompted with a command. We were learning to do things the army way, by the numbers. Whenever we were gathered about, here or there, the activity, whatever it was, was always started with the same command, "Aah Ten Hut!"

Most of us were appalled by the aspect of using the bayonet. Plunging a dummy bag is make believe, but to visualize stabbing a human was as repulsive as visualizing eating human flesh. This perception is easy when there is no danger or one has a full belly, but I remember reading that under certain tragic conditions and circumstances in California some did eat flesh. So who knows what the future holds for us?

This was the hottest part of the year in these parts, July to September, but the heat never bothered me. I may have been uncomfortable, however if one found a shady spot there always seemed to be a breeze and then the heat was bearable. While at Camp Wolters I saw: armadillos, texas turkeys as the locals call them, buzzards, snakes, refrigerated glass candy display cases, named creeks and rivers without any water, clean haze free air, sage brush, a lot of prairie and at night many many stars in the sky. In fact the stars were so noticeable a song was written about them and was a favorite on the juke box at the beer garden. The beer garden was the social drinking area of the post exchange. And at Camp Wolters it was a garden out in the open under the stars and so we would have a few beers and sing, "The stars at night are big and bright -- Deep in the heart of Texas,"

After completing basic training, a couple of instigators incited some of us to sign up as paratroopers. I was swayed by the prospect of an airplane ride. If I couldn't fly a plane maybe I could ride in one. The training was known to be tough, the wash out rate was high and being voluntary, one could quit anytime. I had nothing better offered or anything to lose, so I signed up.

Enough of us volunteered to fill three pullman cars. A pullman was the ultimate in rail travel. It had plush cushiony seats that folded into a bed and an additional berth that folded down from above. This was first class rail travel. Three cars do not make a troop train, so the cars were jockeyed to Fort Worth, then hitched to a civilian train that was headed for New Orleans. I settled next to a window once again and glued my face to the glass, all set to see more of this great country.

Clacking through Texas and Louisiana I saw scrub waste land, long horn steers, cotton fields, oil donkeys ever pumping, wooded rolling hills in east Texas. Louisiana is bayou country and was it ever. Swamps, cypress trees growing in the water, causeways, that are miles and miles long, and the mighty Mississippi. Resources and scenery, boy this country has it all, I can verify that.

Arriving in New Orleans we were told there would be a 12 hour lay over, waiting for the next scheduled train going to Columbus, Georgia. That sounded great, we weren't in a hurry. So I spent the day in New Orleans. I remember the day was sunny and unusually warm, about 80 or 90 degrees. And it was so pleasant. The buildings were built side by side extending the length of the city block. Many had projecting balconies with iron railings, very different and picturesque. I don't remember any specific names or places. At the end of a perfect day I got back to the station and the train departed just before dusk. I was tired and looked forward to a good nights sleep on the soft mattress. The porter, yes those deluxe pullman cars came with porters, made up the beds and it was so comfy and cozy. The rhythm of the clack clack, of the wheels proved to be a lullaby. I thought this army life wasn't so bad.

The next morning I was awakened by the constant ringing of a crossing signal. The train had stopped at a street crossing and as I raised the shade I was surprised to see two young negro faces at arms length looking right in my face. The young boys were on bicycles on the sidewalk and we were virtually eyeball to eyeball. I asked where we were and one answered, "Tuscaloosa." The name didn't ring a bell so I asked what state? The answer was, "Alabama." That meant the train ride wasn't over yet. I had another day of sight seeing.

Airborne

When the train arrived at Columbus, Georgia we were taken by olive drab army buses to Fort Benning, the Home of The Infantry. We were issued the distinctive uniform of the airborne forces; pants and jackets with big expanding pockets and special leather jump boots. We were also issued a special knife. You could hold the knife in one hand, press a button and the blade would swing open, a very handy tool for who knows what? Indoctrination began immediately and the cadre was intimidating and gruff, almost abusive. The daily routine consisted of calisthenics, tumbling, push-ups, strenuous exercises, leg and arm exercises, more push-ups, apparatus work, a combination of walking and running, called double time and more push-ups. These were alternated throughout the eight hour day. The pace was hectic and grueling, taxing one's physical strength and endurance, and those with little fortitude dropped out. No one need tell us that the daily ordeal separated the men from the boys.

At times I was huffing and puffing, almost tempted to call it quits, but I saw these old guys, at least five years or more my senior, huffing and puffing as much as I and they were still going. I felt if those old men had determination and guts, then by golly I'm not going to let them show me up. Their example spurred me on.

This was my first Christmas away from home. Being a holiday we were allowed to relax and lounge, do as we almost pleased. The monotony was interrupted when the clerk bellowed, "Mail call!" I remember standing outside in the cold, the temps in the middle thirties, with a cold raw wind anticipating a letter from home as a present. But there wasn't any, so it was a poor Christmas. Little did I suspect the next one would be worse.

In our training various harness apparatus and plane mock-ups were used. Individual attention was given with each command followed by a firm tap on the body. Little did I know I was being programed to react in response to a friendly tap. The physical work-outs continued daily, the pace was increased. I felt limber, rubbery and strong. In the meantime, some continued to drop out.

The third week we were taught to pack chutes, learning the importance of doing the job right because someone's life depended on it, like mine. The chutes were marked in a manner so that the chute each of us worked with would be the same chute we would be jumping with. Is there a better incentive to strive for perfection? During this week we were also harnessed into a guided chute then hoisted to the top of the 250

foot towers. There would be a momentary pause before being released, just enough time to get a quick look see of the army base. The chute was then released in a free fall, floating straight down effortlessly and smoothly. WHEE, look at me. After the initial fear proved unfounded the ride was fun. The fourth and final week was the actual jump from the airplane, five jumps in all, one each day. Again we were reminded we didn't have to do this, we could quit any time. Heck, the worst was behind, now comes the airplane ride, I wasn't about to give up now.

The cadre encouraged us to have faith in our chutes because they were guaranteed to open. If the chute failed they told us to bring it back and they would give us another one. Say what? On very rare occasions chutes have failed to open. What usually happened was that when leaving the plane the body would rotate or tumble, twisting the shroud lines like a braided rope, preventing the canopy from opening. The reserve chute is there if one doesn't panic. But some do panic and in these cases an observer has two choices, watch in horror or turn his head. It is known to happen, it has a name, it's called a streamer.

Monday morning we harnessed up and boarded the Douglas DC-3. What an airplane, the forerunner of the modern airliner. The DC-3 proved to be so sturdy and reliable that some are used as commercial craft to this day, but that is a story by itself, which has been written by others. The engines revved up, the plane vibrated, rattled and shook as it gathered speed, then when it became airborne smoothed out, just like gliding on air, and we were.

I felt lucky because I had a seat next to the open door. I saw the ground from the top to the bottom of the door opening. Thats strange, looking out the side of a plane and seeing nothing but the ground. Then it dawned on me this was caused by the banking of the plane. Gee this is fun. The choice seat I occupied happened to place me in the position of being the lead man, the first one out the door. Realizing that, I had second thoughts about this choice seat. Then the commands were barked: Stand Up! Hook Up! Check Your Chute! Stand In The Door! I obeyed like a sheep lead to slaughter. Standing in the door and looking down I saw little trees and furrowed peanut fields. So that's how it looks to a bird. My mind reminded me I was supposed to look at the horizon, so I did, but I managed to peek at the undulant earth all around down there. Hey Mom! Look at me! I'm in an airplane! I'm flying!

Here I was standing in the door, soaring 1000 or 1200 feet above the ground and yet only one step away. The moment of truth had come. Should I or shouldn't I? Wasn't time to even consider the question as I felt a firm tap on the leg, just like in training and just like in

training I reacted and responded as trained to do, I reflexively leaped out the door. GERONIMO! One! Two! Three! and I felt the bear hug of the harness as the chute opened. We were told the chute was expected to open by the count of three and if it didn't, then it was recommended to release the reserve chute, IMMEDIATELY. So far so good. Looking up, checking the shroud lines gives a different view of that inverted white dome, reassuring to see it. Floating down was ever so gentle and quiet. Nothing obstructed my view of the peanut field below. Nothing between me and the earth except the soles of my boots. Checking the drift to keep the wind to my back I turned into position as the earth began rushing toward me. Then I hit! And tumbled! And rolled! And it was so easy. All I had to do was leap from the plane, hang on for dear life and say a prayer. I made the other four jumps without fear or qualms and it came to pass I earned my boots and wings, I was now a paratrooper, a member of an exclusive group.

Our graduation address from the cadre was a tribute, with words to the effect, "Congratulations, We're proud of each and every one of you. You gave your best and now you are the best. You're the cream of the crop." I believed he was right, I was standing ten feet tall.

The original instigators chickened early. They proved to have jaw bone but no back bone.

After training I got a furlough and went home for a short stay before going to Camp Patrick Henry, in the state of Virginia, near the city of Newport News, located on Chesapeake Bay. This camp was a processing center or port of embarkation for sending troops overseas. This revelation came as a surprise, but not necessarily unsuspected, everything was secret in those days. Since becoming a paratrooper I had not been assigned to any airborne unit. So my group was labeled as replacements. We were a group of young men without a home. In military jargon a bunch of (deleted.)

While in that area I was impressed with the tall evergreen trees, like a forest of telephone poles, the lowest branches being 20 feet or so above ground level. Now that I knew where destiny was leading me and I was still wearing my civilian dress wrist watch, I felt it appropriate to buy a more functional and sturdy time piece. The popular watches were waterproof, shockproof and anti-magnetic. So that's the kind I purchased. It cost a small fortune, about \$30, over half a month's pay. And that was the discounted post exchange price and without any tax. More about that watch later.

After one evening meal I volunteered for KP duty if for no other reason than to while away the time. Had to clean the entire dining area, scrub and mop floors, wash down the tables and benches, then reset everything for the following day. The reason I remember this duty is because just

The Parachute School

Airborne Command
United States Army



This is to certify that

PVT.

HOWARD W. RUPPEL

36828543

has satisfactorily completed the prescribed course
in Parachute Packing, Ground Training, and
Jumping from a plane in flight. He is, therefore,
rated from this date, 15 January 1944,
as a qualified Parachutist.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rudolph L. Luther". The signature is fluid and elegant, with large loops and a clear, legible style.

Brig. Gen. H.S.A.

as we were finishing up, around midnight or so, the mess sergeant quietly asked each one of us how we wanted our steaks cooked. A steak of any kind was a rarity in those days. That was our compensation and it tasted so good.

Then one day in March, the 13th, it was my turn to board the olive drab bus and ride to the docks at Newport News. A band was playing as we arrived, just like in the movies. But this was for real. The time had come for me to pay my dues, my obligation of allegiance. I was proud to be able to do what I had to do for my country.

The ocean cargo vessel looked big tied to the dock. This was a Liberty Ship named the George Bancroft and was slightly over 400 feet long. On board I could feel the ship vibrating, or pulsing with a heart beat, as if the ship was alive. These ships were mass produced and hauled everything across the seas. This one was outfitted as a troop carrier. Each hold held a horde of soldiers the object, as we saw it, to cram as many people as possible into those holds.

The final design was probably inspired during lunch when some engineer opened a can of sardines and exclaimed, "Thats it!" And that is why folding web cots or bunks were stacked three and four high, one above the other, just like sardines in a can. The Liberty Ships proved to be seaworthy, tough and reliable.

Leaving Chesapeake Bay, the Liberty Ship headed southeasterly toward Bermuda. The ride was pleasant and smooth but even so, most of us land lubbers got sea sick anyway. The constant rolling gets to one. This was two more firsts for me, a passenger on an ocean liner and being on the Atlantic ocean. The ship looked pretty big at the dock, but now on the vast ocean, with water all around, the ship looked much smaller. I knew the bridge was the command post but all the mechanics and working parts of the ship were hidden from view. I got the impression the ship moved mysteriously on its own. The hugh gun at the bow had a barrel that looked big enough to swallow a basketball. Automatic guns were in front of and slightly below the bridge, one on each side, that would be port and starboard. There were more guns to the rear, or aft, but I didn't see them because our group was restricted to the forward part of the ship.

About the third day or so, the time most of us had acquired our sea legs, a daily exercise program was initiated and boat drills were practiced. We were told by a voice: "This is the largest convoy to date bound for Europe. As a precaution all the ship's radios will remain silent and maintain a speed of 8 knots. Before reaching the continent the convoy will split up, with some ships going to Africa and others to England. This ship would continue on into the Mediterranean, bound for Naples, Italy. Enjoy your cruise." End of voice. That was

the first time we were told in advance where we were going, everything was secret in those days. Passing Bermuda, the ship headed eastward on calm seas. The sun shone every day, temperatures were warm and pleasant. We were allowed to sprawl most anywhere on the deck and hatches, that is if you found room to do so. Card games were continuous, wherever room could be found. The only other diversion was a windup phonograph with about 20 records. The records were the 78 rpm variety, the 33's weren't invented yet. The phonograph was passed from group to group, each attempting to find seclusion here or there. Wherever the group huddled the strain of the songs filtered out and about. Throughout the day and into the evening and the next day and the next evening, these 40 songs, one song on each side, were repeated and repeated like broken records. The most popular song was, Paper Doll, sung by the Mills Brothers.

While on board I learned a new word, potable. Didn't think much of it or the taste either just that the water was fit to drink. Taking a shower I learned something, don't use soap, that is not regular soap. The showers were sea water and the soap would congeal into little grease balls and stick to your body hair. It was a heck of a job getting that mess off, consequently, we didn't shower often.

Every once in a while destroyer escorts would weave among the ships and toss out depth charges, or garbage cans as we called them, stirring up some excitement. These Escorts were much smaller ships with very little freeboard. When they poured on the coal, or whatever they pour on, they skimmed over the water fast enough to pull skiers. During the day we could watch the ship's blinker lights as the ships communicated. During the night there was no communication of any kind. In the morning the ships would be in the same relative positions they were the night before.

Then one day out of the clear blue sky there it was, just like I had seen so often on the advertising literature of an insurance company, with the slogan, "Solid as the rock of Gibraltar." The rock rose abruptly out of the sea, zooming straight up to a towering height of almost 1,400 feet. The "Rock" sure looked solid. It was a biggin. After passing through the strait of Gibraltar, the voice came on again: "The ship was now in the European Theater of Operations, there would be no more boat drills, if the warnings were sounded it was the real thing and we were to act accordingly." End of voice. The ships were entering the battle ground of World War II. Unbeknownst to us, at that very moment the enemy was preparing to attack this convoy, and attack he did, but that's another story.

FIREWORKS

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! A slight pause and the bell sounds again; CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! The din jolts me awake, the signal is to abandon ship. ABANDON SHIP! What a way to start the day by jumping into the frigid water at 5 AM. Maybe around noon the water might be inviting, but at this hour, Burr.

The ship was two days passage beyond the Striat of Gibraltar and ironically the first of April. Was this some one's idea of a joke? That notion was quickly dismissed as the clanging commenced once again. CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! I had to act in a hurry if I had any concern for self preservation. I pulled on my boots and put on the pillow that doubled as a life jacket. The ladder that lead to the deck, as well as the limited open area was jammed with a frantic mass of humanity. Being a sound sleeper and a slow riser has its disadvantages. I couldn't go anywhere no matter how I tried. Discerning the gravity of the situation I was learning about fear. In the annals of military history this may be a minor incident, but to me this was a life threatening crisis.

The voice interrupted the clanging apologizing that the wrong signal was given. The convoy was under attack by enemy aircraft and all troops ordered to remain below decks.

When bunk space was allocated I wound up in a corner, formed by the side of the hull and a bulkhead. Within several feet of the bunk was a hatchway that separated the troop compartment from the galley, which was declared off limits. The hatch to the galley was always left open for air circulation. I could see another bulkhead on the far side of the galley with a ladder to another hatchway that opened to the deck. I perceived an easy unobstructed way out.

In one direction there was a mass of frantic humanity blocking the only authorized way out. The other offered a simple escape to the open deck. I had qualms staying below, sensing a potential catastrophe. A maverick by nature I could see the folly of following the crowd. Orders notwithstanding I scampered to the forbidden hatchway. Reaching the open deck I gaped, dumfounded by the exhibition. Hundreds of tracers were arcing skyward illuminating the darkness. I stood in awe, fascinated, as clusters of fiery trajectories exploded from every ship in the convoy. The batteries were rattling a rhythmical crescendo.

The sights and sounds were fantastic, the most spectacular fireworks display I ever saw.

When the batteries stopped firing the exhibition faded away. All was dark and very quiet, but only momentarily, as the batteries came to life again spewing tracers upward to invisible targets. The guns fore and aft as well as starboard fired rapidly to starboard at about a 2 o'clock position. Fire trails arced up and away then faded from sight. **WOW!** Slowly the trajectories swing upward overhead whereupon the port batteries commence firing, the starboard batteries cease and the trajectories slowly sink lower on the port side, stopping at about the 10 o'clock position. **WOW!** Evidently the planes were passing over from side to side but they were too high or it was too dark for the planes to be seen.

After a short delay the performance is repeated once again. In time the batteries remain silent, all is quiet, the air raid is over and the convoy continues eastward toward Italy. It is said we learn from our experiences. I sure did. I learned that looking out for number one was paramount. I learned to think for myself, not blindly follow the pack. This frightening experience reinforced my concept of the value of being a maverick.

When the all clear was sounded the voice informed us: The ship suffered no damage and would continue on with the convoy, end of voice. I heard some talk that several ships got hit, maybe even sunk. But in those days we were told, "Never believe anything you hear and only half of what you see."

We were aboard the ship for about three weeks and during this time we enjoyed pleasant weather and calm seas but the view never varied. In every direction the landscape, or was it seascape, was monotonously the same, day after day. The sky above, the sea below and off in the distance on the horizon the sea and sky met, like a great circle around the ship. Several days after the air raid this panorama changed abruptly as I saw a mountain rise out of the sea. I didn't understand or comprehend how this could happen.

One morning looking off the bow in an easterly direction, off on the horizon I saw a triangular peak jutting up out of the water. What could this be? As the day wore on the peak gradually increased in height, as if the peak was rising up out of the water. As the peak rose in height the base widened and the tip was white. It looked like a snow capped mountain. But a snow capped mountain in the ocean? As the ship got closer, foothills and land mass came into view. The white capped peak was indeed a very high snow capped mountain. At the time I didn't comprehend this illusion was caused by the curvature of the earth. I learned about that later in life. I didn't know I was looking

at Mount Etna, the highest active volcano in all of Europe and that it was 10,800 feet high. I didn't know the volcano was in Sicily, near the city of Catania and that this city was destroyed in AD 122, Then partially destroyed again in 1381. A radio news cast, even as I write, informs me Mt. Etna is erupting. In time the ship dropped anchor in a harbor somewhere near Catania and I experienced a new pleasurable taste. It happened like this.

While on deck soaking up whatever sights I could, several small row boats approached. When they got near the peasants began hollering in a strange tongue and tossed what I thought to be grapefruit into the air for us to grab. I managed to hook one and dropped a pack of cigarettes in exchange. I was holding an orange colored grapefruit, or so I thought and a big one at that. As I peeled the grapefruit a lot of red juice spurted out. I took a big bite and, Wow! This was no grapefruit, it was an orange with red juice. An orange that was allowed to ripen on the tree. An orange as big as a grapefruit with lots of red juice. This was the orangiest tasting orange I ever tasted. This experience initiated me to the delicious flavor of tree ripened fruit.

In time the ship moved on to the bay of Naples, Italy. Only one ship at a time entered the inner harbor and tied up to the dock. Eventually our turn came and I disembarked on 8 April 1944. What a voyage, almost a month at sea, 26 days to be exact. I was now on foreign soil. In my school days this part of the globe was called the old world.

In Naples I remember bomb scarred buildings, very few people about, except two little children, a boy and a girl about 8 or 9 years old. As they came toward me I assumed they would be begging for food or cigarettes which at the time was universal tender. They walked up to me repeating a word that sounded like, "saa-poo-nee." I perceived they wanted soap. When I handed them a bar I was rewarded with two beaming jubilant faces. My first encounter with the Italians and I was panned by a couple of little kids!

I remember riding in a 2½ ton truck, a real work horse that could go any where. There was an improvised camp made up of 10 man tents as they were called. These were square in shape with a single peak in the center. As it was in the spring of the year, the entire camp area was a sea of mud. There was no firm footing any where. The chow line was mud: there being no floors in the tents, they too were mud. You went in, sat on your cot, took off your boots and that's where you stayed. The soil didn't drain or dry out; just stayed muddy.

There was another volcano nearby, Mount Vesuvius. It had gradually sloping sides covered with vegetation and looked more like a big hill than a towering mountain. I didn't know that Vesuvius was 4,230 feet

high and had become famous when it erupted in AD 79 and destroyed parts of three cities, one of them Pompeii. I was unaware that the most recent eruption occurred just several weeks before, on 18 March 1944.

I, also saw a fairly new or modern looking amphitheater. It was a huge oval shaped excavation in the ground, like a bowl ringed with rows and rows of seats. Entering from the ground level you walked down to your seat, rather than up. The top of the amphitheater was encircled by a low masonry wall about waist high. Evenly spaced statues stood majestically atop the wall. I thought where drainage is no problem this may be an economical method to build an arena. The walls and floor of the rest room were covered with white tile and were very clean. But the room was empty, no fixtures of any kind just some evenly spaced holes in the floor. As a rest room it looked rather primitive, or maybe the room wasn't finished.

After the fall of Naples, the enemy retreated northward and set up a line of defense with Mount Cassino as a natural and strategic point where an observer has a magnificent and commanding view for miles around. The Benedictine Monastery was perched on top of Mount Cassino and the Allied Command assumed the enemy was using the monastery as an observation post. The city of Cassino at the base of the mountain is about 45 miles distant from Naples. The Allies reached the outskirts of the city in December 1943. Attack after attack on the mountain was repulsed. The combination of the enemy's military advantage and the harsh weather stalled the Allies for the winter. Finally on 16 February 1944 the Air Force and the artillery reduced the Monastery to rubble. The Infantry attack that followed was once again turned back.

On 15 March the Monastery was again bombed and shelled, making more rubble out of the rubble. After the shelling and bombing the mountain was attacked once again. And the attack was repulsed once again. This was the status of Cassino when I saw this impregnable enemy stronghold.

Before I left Naples I had an opportunity to see actual front line fighting. It happened in a strange manner. For some unexplained reason a 2½ ton truck pulled up and the driver shouted that he was headed for Cassino inquiring if any of us wanted to ride along. With nothing else to do and without any other offers we couldn't come up with any whynots, so two of us hopped in. We assumed the driver wanted somebody to ride shotgun and away we went.

I remember a road, tanks, trucks and jeeps. The right side of the road was obscured from enemy observation by trees and shrubs atop a shoulder high bank. A couple of high ranking officers were huddled by a tree surveying the battle field with field glasses. I scampered up the bank

and flattened myself against a tree. The plain below the mountain as well as parts of the city of Cassino, resembled a moonscape. The entire countryside was completely battle scarred. The Monastery on the mountain top looked ominous and forbidding, no wonder the Allies couldn't move, they held no secrets from the enemy.

The reason I mention Cassino is that this military battle was the costliest in the entire Italian campaign. Historians have documented the cost in terms of tanks, trucks, jeeps, supplies, ammunition and counting both sides at about 100,000 lives. Although I didn't participate in the fighting, I saw the battlefield and learned to appreciate the hardships and suffering of all those brave, gallant and courageous men that came before me. To finish the story of Cassino. On 11 May the mountain was attacked once again. After a week of fierce fighting the Allies were at last king of the mountain.

Shortly after this we went for a train ride to the southern tip of Italy. We went military first class at the time, in box cars, that held 40 men or 8 horses. That's how those cars got their name "40 & 8." The part of Italy I saw was very mountainous and accounts for all the railroad tunnels. These rail cars were pulled by electric locomotives, with the electricity being supplied by overhead wires. It was then I noticed the absence of wood utility poles. All the poles were cast concrete. I assumed this country was not blessed with great forests as the U S of A was. The train finally stopped at the southern most city in Italy, Reggio di Calabria. We remained on the rail cars as they were jockeyed onto a ferry boat, then ferried across a strait to the city of Messina, in Sicily.

After an overnight stop, we continued on our way to a permanent camp. The camp must have been a military garrison, because there were many red brick buildings in military like rows and a large open parade ground. The US Army must have liberated the complex and hung a sign over the entrance gate designating the place as the, 103rd Reinforcement Battalion. This was a temporary stop over for me, someplace where I could be found, a location with a mailing address. The army hadn't found a home for me as yet. I was just another replacement at a holding compound. While at this camp a training routine was established and I made at least two practice parachute jumps.

On the first, I drifted down to an airport. There were several hangers that had walls but no roofs, just steel girders spanning side to side and a lot of asphalt. I managed to clear the girders and landed on the asphalt. Boy oh boy did the soles of my feet hurt but I walked away and any landing I can walk away from I consider to be a good one. A few of my friends weren't as lucky, they had to be carried away due to broken bones.

The other practice jump was at night made by the light of the moon. I was surprised to learn that you are able to see shapes and forms by moonlight. Details though are hazy. I saw farm buildings, a barn yard, a dark pile of some thing, a road and a double wire power line. I crossed my ankles just in case as I skimmed over the power line, with that obstacle behind me, the air current carried me toward that dark pile in the barn yard. Was it hay, straw or manure? Time and altitude disappear rapidly when gravity is in control, you can maneuver sideways somewhat, but never gain altitude. With that limitation I closed my eyes and mouth as I slammed gently into the side of a hay stack! The canopy continued billowing over the top of the stack and acted as a brake, lowering me gently to the ground. After the smack on the asphalt, I deserved a soft landing like this.

I remember visiting several cities. One was Trapani, which is located at the northwest tip of Sicily. I recall strolling near a wharf and seeing people gather as several fishing boats were returning to the docks. The waiting peasants bought the fish as fast as the fishermen could unload their catch. Besides strange looking fish the catch included baby octopus and bunches of red prickly balls, about the size of big chestnuts. I learned later these were sea-urchins.

The city of Palermo, is located on the north side of Sicily. My memory recalls big churches and other large masonry buildings. During the short period of time that I was in Italy and Sicily I noticed that most all the buildings; the individual dwellings, the farm barns and sheds as well as the large city tenements, churches, government offices, were constructed of field stone, cut or quarried stone, brick or concrete. Another outstanding and common characteristic was that the buildings looked old, like ancient. I'm talking hundreds of years old, two maybe three or even more. Another common feature was the stone thresholds, all with obvious signs of wear. The center of the stone threshold, the area receiving the most traffic, was usually worn down an inch or more at the center. I assumed the stone was ground away by the mere scuffling of bare feet or shoes over eons of time. As I entered a building it could be said with certainty that I was following in some one's foot steps.

About this time the Allies launched the invasion of Northern France. The date was June 6, 1944, another date indelible in my mind. We heard some grisly stories about troopers hung up in tree branches and not living to tell about it. Creating specters of our future.

In the near neighborhood the Rome Arno campaign was underway. Arno is the name of a river in northern Italy that originates in the mountains then flows westerly and empties into the Sea of Ligurian at the city of Pisa. That's the place where that leaning tower is. Rome was declared an open city which means no military engagements were fought on that

hallowed ground. The city itself was occupied by the Allies on 5 June 1944.

Somewhere in this time frame some of us replacements were shipped back to Naples. We all expected to be sent to the "front" sooner or later and this looked like sooner.

When we got to Naples we were trucked into an extinct volcano crater, a flat circular area surrounded by the volcano's rim. This depressed bit of real estate reminded me of a ship's hold with limited escape, something like a feeling of claustrophobia.

The 517th Parachute Combat Team was occupying the premises and our group of replacements were permanently assigned. I now had a home, I belonged somewhere. The 517th was purported to be a top notch outfit, composed of hand picked men that trained together for a year and set many records with their accomplishments. I was assigned to Company F, 2nd Battalion. The army finally found me a home, if it was good or bad only time would tell. With the addition of the replacements the 517th was now over strength, a forbidding indication that the unit was going to war. And that we did, but that is another story.

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