

My Army Experience: Gilbert Waganheim

I was drafted into the Army in November, 1942 and was assigned to the newly formed 11th Armored Division at Camp Polk in Louisiana. I had my basic training in Company C, 42nd Tank Battalion as a Tanker. I earned an expert medal with the Thompson Sub Machine Gun as well as the 45 automatic pistol and medal for 75 mm cannon. I qualified to go to Officers Training School, but an anti-Semitic incident occurred and I took the opportunity to transfer to Battalion Headquarters as an Assistant to the Adjutant.

On December 16, 1944, the Germans launched a massive counterattack on a 50-mile front in the Ardennes. The thinly held American lines were pushed back in what would be called the Battle of the Bulge. The Americans needed reinforcements; the 11th Armored Division was ready and dashed 500 miles across France to the battlefield.

At first, the 11 AD was ordered to hold a section of the Meuse River where a German attack was expected. But on December 26th the 4th Armored Division broke through the German lines and relieved Bastogne, where the 101st Airborne Division and other troops had been surrounded. Bastogne's relief was a turning point in the Battle of the Bulge.

The evening of December 31st 1944, 42nd Tank Battalion (part of Combat Command "A", 11th Armored Division and Third Army) was on alert and staying in the small town (village) of Rechival, Belgium. A patrol of D Company discovered over a hundred 101st Infantry dead bodies. They also brought back an SS Officer to our headquarters. He had a smirk on his face. I tried to interrogate him but did not know enough German to understand him. The Captain of D Company was so angered with the discovery of the American dead bodies; he took the prisoner behind a wall and killed him. The body was dragged out and I was told to put a tag on him and send him back with the next empty supply truck. From then on, in addition to my other duties, I was the Battalion Graves Registration Non-Com. I would have a crew that would retrieve the bodies from a destroyed tank. That Captain, by the way, was killed three days later in a tank battle.

After Belgium, our division then went on and fought thru Luxemburg, Germany and then Austria. One time, on the road to Frankfort, Germany, there were four of us in a jeep, catching up with our battalion when all of a sudden, two mortars landed on the right side of the road. I told the driver to stop and we all got out and hid on the left side of the jeep; I then immediately told them to get in the jeep and we took off. The third mortar landed in back of the Jeep as we were fleeing.

Prior to the Germans surrender our division had linked with the Russians. The link was near Czechoslovakia where tens of thousands of the Wehrmacht had been in battle on the eastern front. The Red Army would not go easy on kraut prisoners, and they knew it. When word came to the German soldiers that all was lost, thousand began a desperate trek westward to surrender to the American forces. As far as the eye could see countless enemy soldiers dejectedly trudged down the road toward us, to what they knew would be a better fate than the one awaiting their comrades imprisoned by the Russians.

A very dark time in the history of the world occurred during World War II. Adolph Hitler, the leader of Germany, had conquered much of Europe. Hitler built concentration camps to contain the people that he used as slave labor to work in mines, factories, farms, and other activities. One concentration camp was the Mauthausen Concentration Camp located twenty kilometers from Linz, Austria. (In caves, near Linz, Hitler had hundreds of paintings and other valuables stored)

Mauthausen was selected as the site for a concentration camp because of the granite quarries that were there. "The German SS-owned 'DEST' company was to purchase the quarries and to exploit them economically. The prisoners of the concentration camp were to be used as a cheap labor force in the quarries. In the initial stage of the camp, the prisoners were confronted with utterly inhuman conditions as they had to work in setting up the camp and in the quarries. Many people, most of whom were innocent of any crimes, were tortured to death in its rock quarry. The policy of death through work was instituted by the Chief of the SS. Prisoners were to be given only the most primitive tools, and also, whenever possible, they were to work with their bare hands".

The Mauthausen Concentration Camp was liberated by the First Platoon of Troop D, 41st Cavalry Reconnaissance, of our 11th AD. On May 5, 1945, the First Platoon was out on patrol when a motorcycle and a white touring car with a red cross on the hood drove up. The Germans in the vehicle said that the Mauthausen Concentration Camp was down the road and the Germans guarding the camp wanted to surrender. When the First Platoon got to the camp, the prisoners started cheering. They were so happy to see Americans. The First Platoon calmed the crowd, and the German guards came and surrendered to the Americans. The American soldiers told the Germans to give up their weapons, but the Germans said that if they did that, then the prisoners might not listen to them. The Germans were more afraid of the prisoners hurting them than they were of the Americans; which was understandable. The 23 men of the First Platoon returned to their base camp with 1,800 German soldiers that had surrendered.

While our 42nd Tan k Battalion was fighting in Linz, Austria, the Battalion Commander, my Adjutant and I went into the Camp. While there, I witnessed the piles of shoes and clothing outside the Camp, the dead bodies, the gas chambers and what was the worst of it all for me, the ovens. (When I was in the teens in Baltimore, my father had a bakery route where he delivered rolls, bagels and bread to customers' homes). The same type of ovens that baked the round black breads and challah was in the Camp. I was very shaken up by that scene. While in the building, I asked what I could do for some of the survivors. I was asked if I could write letters to relatives in the States, to tell them that they survived the harsh treatment and that they were alive. I did manage to write some letters, before I was told that we had to leave and return to Linz, where the fighting continued. We stayed in Austria until the war ended and brought back to the States.