

James Kennedy, U.S. Army 71st Infantry Division



Jim with his mother, Mary, and baby sister, Maureen, 1943 in Bonita, Texas

By James Kennedy

As told to Celeste and Bill Boyd

Like those of most World War II veterans, my experiences in the service changed me forever. I was part of the 564th Field Artillery Battalion, 71st Infantry Division, and served in a Headquarters Communications Battery through France, Germany, and Austria in 1945.

We saw combat under a variety of conditions, but the most horrible experience was liberating Gunskirchen Lager, a concentration camp in rural Austria.

Texas Native

I was from a family of nine children – six boys and three girls – living in North Central Texas in the town of Nocona in the 1940s. My mother had four sons in a row; I was the fourth, born in Lubbock, Texas, on Feb. 27, 1925. My parents were farmers, but I was never exposed to anything mechanical closer than a mule harness.

By June 1943, I'd spent a year traveling after graduating from high school at age 17. I'd constructed Army camps all over Texas and had just returned from visiting relatives in California when I received my draft notice from the Army. Two of my older brothers had tried to enlist, but only one was accepted. Now it was my turn to serve.

In the summer of 1943 a nationwide polio epidemic paralyzed thousands of children and adults, and killed many others. I spent my first days in the Army at the reception center at Camp Wolters, in Mineral Wells, Texas. We weren't permitted leave camp because of the danger of contracting polio.

I was there for only a few days but quickly learned my first lesson about the Army. A sergeant came along and asked for volunteers without stating what they were going to do. I raised my hand, and ended up folding Army blankets in the supply room with no air conditioning in 100 degree weather. I never volunteered again, except for troubleshooting phone lines.

Our first encampment was Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I had my basic training. I remember a buck sergeant named Tucker, who was responsible for making soldiers out of us. He was one tough son-of-a-gun. He took a bunch of fuzz-faced kids, some of whom had never been away from home, and by the time we finished boot camp several months later we were completely different people. One really light-haired kid from Michigan had never shaved in his life and got away with it for a month until the sergeant caught him and chewed him out so badly that he had this kid crying. After that, he shaved every day.

Sgt. Tucker did more to toughen us up than anyone else. When we were out marching we'd come up to a wall and stop and he'd yell "Who gave you permission to stop? Get your butt over that wall." He loved to have us "G.I." the barracks, that is, use brushes to scrub the floors. Then he'd walk in with muddy boots and say, "You call this clean?" I think he wanted to be hated, and we obliged. Our mutual dislike for him helped to create a bond among us that we didn't even realize was happening.



Age 18, at Fort Sill

Mountain Training

After boot camp I was transferred to Fort Carson, Colorado in October 1943, but when my group of 10 guys arrived at Colorado Springs there was no one there to meet us. Eventually we got transportation out to the base, and still nobody was expecting us. There were three battalions there and we tried all of them but still no one knew we were coming. Finally the 71st Division, 609th Field Artillery Battalion, said they'd take us, and I remained with them until I was reassigned to the Headquarters Battery 609th.

The day after Thanksgiving we were scheduled to march into the mountains for field experience and a huge snowstorm had moved in. We thought we were saved from the exercise, but that was just what they wanted us to think. About 100 of us slogged uphill on snowshoes trying to get 35 huge Army mules carrying all our equipment, supplies and food to move along.

They were also carrying a field artillery piece, the French 75mm howitzer, which could be broken into seven pieces, then reassembled when we arrived at our destination. The Army thought a lot of its mules, and whenever we returned from a 15- or 20-mile hike, we didn't take off our packs until we fed and watered them.

There was a favorite place to camp, up several thousand feet on a plateau, and when going uphill with our gear in a heavy backpack got hard, we'd grab ahold of a mule's harness until the sergeant would say, "Turn loose of that mule!" As soon as he was out of sight we'd grab on again because the mule lightened our load and couldn't kick you going uphill. We went to this particular spot several times, and the nearest water for the mules was down the mountain a short way. Whenever we watered them, we had to watch ourselves going downhill. They were great pack animals, but would kick you into the next county if they felt like it.

Rainy California

In February 1944 we were sent to Hunter Liggett Military Reservation in southern Monterey County, California, for field maneuver training. The vegetation there is mostly grassland, chaparral and oak woodland, a lot like western Tuolumne County. In the months we were there, I think we got rain all but a dozen days. San Antonio Creek, which cut through the reservation, was usually about 15 feet wide, but when we were there, it flooded over its banks until it was so deep and swift that several recruits drowned in it.

On one occasion I was on KP duty, getting water from the creek to which we added chlorine tablets. There in the stream was the body of a dead soldier. It was the first dead person I'd ever seen, and it made me feel creepy. I reported it to command, and I think we used a little extra chlorine in the water that day. Rumor had it that we were going to the South Pacific and they had

us turn in all of our woolen uniforms except the “sun tans.” Then suddenly we were give a 15-day furlough so I went back home to Texas.

When I returned everything had changed and we were shipped to Fort Benning, Georgia on a troop train. As we crossed the country we came to the Mississippi River at Baton Rouge and they put the 15-20 railroad cars filled with troops, a few at a time, on a barge that had tracks embedded right on it. The cars were ferried across the river and reassembled on the other side. Being from Texas, I was amazed by the Mississippi River as I'd never seen that much water before.

Just after I arrived at Fort Benning, I was given another furlough, and while I was gone they came through and cleaned out all the privates and PFCs and sent them to the South Pacific. I lucked out that time, I guess. I had one more furlough at Christmas time, and shortly thereafter we were sent to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, to prepare for the trip to France.

Atlantic Crossing

At Camp Kilmer, we spent about a week learning how to abandon ship, use a rope ladder and a gas mask. A couple of the guys who didn't want to go overseas got real smart and suddenly developed a rash. The medics then decided to restrict us to the base until they figured out what caused the rash. It seems they had used GI soap underneath their armpits to cause the rash. Those guys ended up in the infantry. From Camp Kilmer we were transported on a dark January midnight to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where we boarded the U.S.S. Cristobal for the trip overseas.

As we marched across the docks a small Army band played “Over There.” That music still sends chills up my spine. That first night many of the men got very seasick just from the boat rocking tied up there at the dock. The Navy gave them orange juice for seasickness, and no one would get any for our First Sergeant because he was so disliked. He learned a lot on the trip overseas, and by the time we arrived in France he was a different guy. Rumor had it that the Cristobal was a converted Portuguese cattle boat and it may very well have been because we were really stacked in there. The quarters were so tight that we had to stand up to eat our meals, balancing the tray with one hand and eating with the other.

I will always remember being on deck the morning we left New York and seeing the Statue of Liberty fade away behind us. I thought it might be the last time I'd ever see Lady Liberty. Our convoy of maybe 100 ships zigzagged across the Atlantic because of the danger from German U-Boats patrolling the sea lanes. Although this was an Army transport ship, there were Navy guys aboard who literally ran to their battle stations whenever the Captain sounded General Quarters. The sound of that warning sure turned my blood cold.

We had a couple of sub alerts on the trip when the Navy launched and exploded depth charges, and you thought for sure the sides of the ship would cave in on you. Those Navy guys gave us a bad time teasing about being only two miles from land – “straight down.” I spent all my daylight hours and some of the nights on the deck since I didn't get seasick, but I did manage to get bronchial pneumonia thanks to the wild winter weather in the North Atlantic. The trip took 11 days. We stopped in Southampton, England for one day, and then sailed for Le Havre, France.

In France

In the harbor at Le Havre in February 1945 there were ships and boats upside down, over on their sides and sunk so that only a small section showed above the water. One boat that was overturned had that ubiquitous graffiti “Kilroy was here” written on it, and as we passed it coming into the harbor there was a black G.I. doing a tap dance on the side of the ship right next to the words. We all thought that was a crazy greeting.



Coast of Normandy, 1945

When we unloaded on the docks at Le Havre it was more than a little cold and raining like crazy. All we had were 2 ½-ton open trucks with no canvas cover and we were jammed in like sardines for transport to the camp site 25 miles away. By the time we arrived we were soaked to the skin. What a miserable ride that was!

The camps were all given the names of cigarettes – Pall Mall, Lucky Strike, Camel, etc. Ours was Camp Old Gold, right out in the middle of a Frenchman’s muddy field. The camp consisted of squad tents with a wooden floor holding either six or eight men. The ground outside was saturated with rainwater standing three or more inches deep. The first thing the Army did was bring in tons of gravel to make walkways to the tent areas. I doubt much ever grew on this field after that.

We worked to improve the conditions of the camp seven days a week except for a couple of hours on Sunday when you could get excused to attend chapel. It was surprising how many men who had never gone to church before suddenly became religious. All of our gear and equipment had to be unloaded in Le Havre, transported to the camp and serviced. Every piece of equipment that made the trip on the ship’s deck was packed in Cosmoline to keep from rusting on the trip overseas, so it all had to be cleaned.



Captured German Gun Emplacement, 1945, Normandy Coast

It took a month or so before we finally got everything cleaned and reassembled, and in the meantime once a week we had to drive about 20 miles across dusty roads to Rouen to take a shower. By the time we returned to our camp we were just about as dirty as when we left, but it was “new dirt.”

Swath of Destruction

As we drove through the French landscape and small villages, I was appalled at the destruction in Normandy. In places hardly a stone stood on another because of all the bombing and artillery fire before we arrived.

Our unit was assigned to the Seventh Army under General Alexander Patch, and entered into combat in the first week of March 1945. We stopped briefly in liberated Paris and then went through the cities of Metz and Nancy, in Northeastern France. My battery ended up in a place called Montbronn, just outside of Bitche, a strong point of the Maginot Line separating France and Germany where we relieved the 100th division.



Jim's pal "Shorty" (left), Richard Tagessell (center) and Jim Kennedy, in German gun bunker, Normandy

It was a very interesting place: Everything was underground, including the living quarters and the kitchens, all in concrete. All the fixed-position heavy guns were permanently pointed toward Germany, but the German army outwitted the Allied plans by going around to the West through Belgium and the Netherlands, outflanking our gun emplacements.

I was primarily in the communications battalion assigned to the 564th headquarters battery. My designation was telephone lineman and installer, plus switchboard installer and operator. We laid wire between the infantry regiments and the battalion headquarters, or wherever else they needed it.

Most of the time the roads were checked for mines and a sign posted "roads cleared to ditch" before we laid wire along the edge of the road. On the back end of a $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton weapons carrier we had a reel of wire several miles long and a pole sticking out one side, which helped us lay the wire along the ditch so the tanks didn't chew it up. On occasion we had to climb trees and string the wire across the road, but we stayed on the ground as much as we could.

My outfit came under sniper fire only once, but we were more often strafed by German Messerschmitts. In fact, on our first day in Montbronn, seven of us were stringing wire in an open area when we received our "baptism of fire." Nazi fighters strafed the area, but we were all able to get inside a nearby French building, which was stucco with a tile roof, and it provided some cover for us. The German planes would circle around us for hours and every once in a while zoom down for a strafing run. But if a few P-47s or P-51s showed up, those German planes were gone in a hurry. Our only defenses were 50-caliber machine guns mounted on Jeeps, weapons carriers or trucks, but it was very hard to hit the planes with them.

We were always out in the open, and in addition to harassment by the planes, we had to watch carefully for mines and booby traps. The Germans often placed a booby trap at the entry door to a building so if you were the first one to open it, you and those with you were killed by the explosion.

Siegfried Line

We encountered strong resistance at the Siegfried Line which consisted mainly of German pill boxes scattered all over the terrain and situated to provide crossfire support for one another. The engineers had to blast their way through this area. When we came to the Rhine River, we crossed it on pontoon bridges built by combat engineers. Now there's a tough bunch! We crossed near Mannheim and engaged the German 6th Mountain Division "Nord." Despite the number of casualties suffered by the infantry and the engineers, we defeated them.

During the Battle of the Bulge, the Army pulled several units, including the 71st Division, and reassigned them to the Third Army under General George Patton to replace those sent to Belgium. We were attached to the Third Army for the rest of the war. Once as we were laying wire in a small town, a German soldier came around the corner of a building where I was standing, startling both of us. I think I just out-fumbled him, but I did manage to take him prisoner and assist in the capture of several others. Thankfully I never fired my carbine, and if I killed any Germans it was in an indirect way.

In April 1945 many of the German soldiers were seeing that the war effort was hopeless and were eager to surrender. By this time they had lost most of their heavy weapons and were much weakened. Another reason they were surrendering to the Allied troops by the thousands was because they wanted no part of the Russians approaching from the east.

After a short time we could not handle any more prisoners and told them to just keep going and maybe someone further back would accept their surrender. In spite of taking so many POWs, we always had plenty of supplies and food — if you call C-rations food. I developed a strong distaste for stew, which was one of the standard meals, eaten cold with about an inch of grease on top because often we had no way to heat it up.

Gunskirchen Lager, Austria

One bright May morning the 71st Division anti-tank unit discovered a German concentration camp, Gunskirchen Lager, about six kilometers north of Lambach, Austria. It had held about 18,000 prisoners, including many well-educated Hungarian Jews. It was in a dense patch of pine trees invisible from the main road and from the air.

The American soldiers who arrived that morning saw hundreds of dazed, vermin-covered people alongside the road shuffling feebly in their weakened conditions away from the horrors of this "living hell." Dozens made it only a few yards from the camp and died in the woods next to the road. The Nazi guards, knowing that the U. S. Army was coming soon, had abandoned the camp a few days before, leaving the prisoners with neither food nor water.

By this time the Germans were very short on gasoline and began moving armament with horses, so along the road to the camp were the corpses of dead horses and the prisoners



*Many bodies lying in thick woods;
from "The Seventy-First Came to
Gunskirchen Lager"*

digging at them with their bare hands and eating the flesh and entrails of the horses raw because they were so starved. The U.S. soldiers encouraged them to stay inside the camp because help was coming but once the gates were open the people who were mobile were overcome with a kind of hysteria to escape the “hellhole” prison.

[Source for the preceding description is a booklet titled “*The 71st Came to Gunskirchen Lager,*” written by members of the 71st Division “in order that more people may know about the record of German inhumanity and barbarity revealed at Gunskirchen ...”]

That afternoon, as about 10 of us drove in an open truck down the narrow wagon road toward the camp, the nauseating smell hit us a hundred yards away. As we entered the gates of the compound we were immediately surrounded by living skeletons, insane with hunger who crowded around to touch us. They clawed at us and wanted to kiss our hands and hug us. I felt immense sympathy for them but at the same time I couldn't help but feel revolted because of how badly they smelled and the horrible condition they were in.

We gave them anything we had on us, candy, gum, cigarettes and they ate it all, even the cigarettes complete with paper. Some of them spoke to us in English, and one man who was still lucid told me he had a brother in Cleveland.

We got out to walk around and looked into the mud-floored barracks, buildings built for 300 but now housing about 3,000. They were filled with hundreds of dead, and the barely living who were too weak to move lay right on top of them, sometimes three or four high.

The U.S. Army quickly brought such food and water as they had, and sent in medical teams to transport the sick and dying to a better site and try to provide some care. It made us angry when we found out that about a mile from the camp was a warehouse filled with all kinds of food, but the prisoners had been given none of it, proving that the policy was one of deliberate starvation.

Even though I spent only about an hour there, the horror of that experience remains with me to this day: the stench of human excrement mixed with ankle deep mud and of rotting bodies inside the barracks, and the sight of hundreds of emaciated corpses.

I was in a rage at the German soldiers who caused the prisoners to suffer like this. My emotions were all mixed up in me until I could start to sort them out after reflecting on it later. The sights and smells of that place will stay with me until I'm in the grave, and I think anyone who witnessed it would have gladly shot any German soldier on sight.

Steyr, Austria

The 71st Division went farther east than any American division in Europe stopping about 30 miles west of Vienna in Steyr, Austria, at the Enns River. It was there that we met the Russian Army moving west. At first everything was very buddy-buddy, comrade this and comrade that, but after a few days the supposed allies were fighting with one another like cats and dogs.



*Prisoners' bodies were covered in sores;
from "The Seventy-First Came ..."*

The Russians were on the east side of the river and we were on the west and the Armies had to post a guard on each side so no one would cross to keep the fighting down. The Russians were desperately short on almost everything and they would buy anything we had: candy, gum, toilet articles, etc. In France and Germany, the Americans had invasion francs and marks, and the Russians had the same but theirs had a dash in front of the serial number. I think they must have been printing thousands of invasion marks because they had so much money they would pay any amount you asked. A very active black market developed, and for a time a carton of cigarettes went for \$200.

We were still in Steyr when the war officially ended on May 7, 1945. That evening and the following morning we stood retreat and reveille, but after that we had very little to do. Our section was staying in a private home that had a wind-up Victrola and only one record, Glenn Miller's orchestra playing "In the Mood." We played that record so much that the needle got flat.

After a short time we were pulled back to Wels, Austria, a resort town where those of us in Headquarters Battery, about 112 soldiers, were quartered in a plush hotel. It had an unheated pool, sauna and a fat Austrian who gave massages with a G.I. brush. We had maid-service and the hotel staff did the kitchen work supervised by the mess sergeant. We "liberated" five gallon glass jugs enclosed in basketwork and filled with what we called "buzz bomb juice." Fortunately you could sober up fast by getting a massage, sitting in the steam room and then jumping into the pool.

We were ordered to guard several warehouses filled with food, candy and liquor and after I became acquainted with one of the office workers in the hotel's liquor department, I discovered a secret. She asked me to meet her down by the river and, despite the rule about not fraternizing, I agreed to.

She told me that the owner of the warehouses was SS and we were guarding his stolen goods for him. Sure enough, when I reported this and it was investigated they found that it was true. I might add that the liquor stock declined drastically after that. Shortly after that we were moved out of the hotel and into pup tents out in the middle of nowhere.

We later learned that all foreign troops were required to leave Austria, but it was sure good while it lasted.

Postwar Germany

After VE Day we had very few military duties, so we came and went as we pleased with an occasional shift of guard duty in front of the battery quarters. We did have a midnight curfew at least part of the time and once I got nabbed by the MPs and punished by being restricted to quarters for 30 days and having to sign in every hour until lights out at 10pm.

While we were stationed in Neuburg, Germany, we organized teams in baseball, football, basketball, etc. and scheduled regular round-robin matches leading to a Third Army and then a European Championship game in the Nuremberg Sportsplatz with the event broadcast by Armed Forces Radio. The Army provided transportation to and from the games, so I got to watch some great professional baseball players who had been drafted, such as Ewell Blackwell (Cincinnati Reds), Dixie Walker (Brooklyn Dodgers), and Bob Ramazzotti (Chicago Cubs).



Jim Kennedy, Altotting, 1945

I was given a furlough and with a buddy went to visit all the tourist sights in London and take the “Flying Scotsman” train to Glasgow. We were quartered in a hotel run by the Red Cross for American servicemen. That is where I where I found out that my name is actually Scottish, not Irish. So of course I had a photo of me taken in a kilt but due to the cold weather I quickly decided that kilts were not for me. It was heady stuff for a country boy from Texas.

We had a little extra time when we returned to London which we spend sightseeing, including London Bridge. Fifty years later I saw it again – on the Colorado River in Lake Havasu, Arizona, where it had been disassembled and shipped from London and then reassembled.

Altotting, Germany

Upon return from furlough, we were transferred from Neuberg to Altotting, Germany and our life in the army of occupation was almost completely unstructured – no reveille or retreat, and almost no regular routine. I had guard duty only twice in six months and I was called on to operate the battalion switchboard every so often.

In March 1946, Headquarters Battery was reassigned to Munich. I was tapped to go with an advance party to Munich and set up a communication system. However, after only about 10 days there, I got notice that I was being rotated to Regensburg, then to Le Havre and back to the U.S. for discharge.

On the trip to the coast we were jammed into rail cars with not even enough room to lie down. I had to sit with my knees up under my chin and every so often we disembarked at a field kitchen next to the railroad tracks for a hot meal – otherwise it was C-rations. Since we were going home and had experienced far worse than this, we could handle it. The rails were still torn up in many places and the trains were running in both directions on a single set of tracks, so the trip from Regensburg back to Camp Lucky Strike took seven days.

After a few days at Lucky Strike, we were transported to Le Havre where we boarded the USS Wilson Victory for the trip home. It was quite an improvement over the USS Cristobal, as it had a sit-down dining room. The North Atlantic had some wicked weather and very large waves. The bow of the ship would dive down and the waves would go all the way over the ship and off the stern. The ship would creak and groan until you thought for sure it was coming apart. After seven days we finally sighted the New York skyline.

Work and Family

We arrived in New York Harbor in mid-afternoon and I was thrilled to see Lady Liberty once again. We were taken to Camp Kilmer and then to the Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, Separation Center. My discharge was effective April 30, 1946, and I received my mustering-out pay plus travel expenses to Dallas, and from there home to Nocona. I was proud of my service, earned two battle stars to be displayed on my ETO (European Theatre of Operations) ribbon, and was happy to be home.



Jim in his wire truck, Altotting

I thought I had no job skills and no idea what I wanted to do, so I went to work in the oilfield cleaning rigs for a couple of months. That was hard, dirty, dangerous work and very seasonal, so when I found a newspaper ad from the railroad for a telephone-telegraph operator, I applied and was hired by Southern Pacific. I spent some time training and then traveled on a free train pass to Oakland because I wanted to live and work in California.

The first few years of my career with the railroad was spent in the Central Valley as a relief operator until I got seniority to apply for a permanent position. I spent the rest of my working career as a telegraph agent in various cities in the Bay Area and Northern California. I met my wife, Louise Bollinger, when she was also a railroad telephone operator. Oddly enough, we were raised about 30 miles from one another in Texas, but never knew each other.

I was working relief on the graveyard shift in Kerman in the Central Valley where she was also a relief operator. She didn't have a car or know how to drive and the first time we met, she was supposed to relieve me at 8am, but arrived 20 minutes late. I really chewed her out. She was never late again, but we got to know one another and started to date. She had an apartment in Niles and I traveled there from wherever I was working to see her until we were married on Sept. 15, 1947.

After our three sons – James, John and Michael – came along, we raised our family in cities in the Bay Area. We've been married for 63 years and have seven grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.



Mr. Kennedy, 2011

Lessons of War

I spent my 18th birthday in Texas, 19th in California, 20th in France, 21st in Germany and 22nd back in California. I experienced a lot during that time and it influenced how I spent the rest of my life.

Being from Texas, I was not unfamiliar with Jim Crow beliefs. In Georgia I witnessed this in the extreme. I was embarrassed, ashamed and thoroughly disgusted with the treatment that I saw the blacks endure. This is just one of many things that I think helped change and shape me.

The concentration camp at Gunskirchen was the most horrible thing I have ever witnessed, and it remains very vivid in my memory to this day.

There were other incidents that also were not pleasant but none compared to that. I think it made me more tolerant, understanding and compassionate. I had always been an introvert and through my Army experiences I became more confident, assertive, and unquestionably more mature. These traits helped me to succeed in my marriage and my career.

Mr. Kennedy, 86, was interviewed in 2011 by volunteers Celeste and Bill Boyd through the Tuolumne Veterans History Project (VHP). Based in Tuolumne County, California, the project is an all-volunteer effort to record local veterans' memories of their wartime experience. More information may be found online at www.seniorfan.com, where the project's stories are archived.