

## MILITARY LIFE STORY

By Frank Edward Baranski, Jr.

At the draft registration I was classified as 4-F so in April 1944, I decided to have an operation to repair my hernia at the Northwest Hospital in Chicago, IL. (There were no hospitals in any of the suburban towns at that time, except for the one in Evanston.) Shortly after this time I was reclassified as 1-A and in August was called to report for duty at the Des Plaines rail station to travel to Chicago then to Fort Sheridan in North Chicago, IL. Probably because I was older (20) than the rest, I was given a list of those who were there and off we went to Ft. Sheridan. After four days and receiving our clothing, etc. we were sent to Chicago for a train ride to Camp Blanding, near Gainesville, FL. (Forts were permanent facilities while Camps were "temporary" facilities.)

My most memorable thing about that train trip to Florida was the first palm tree I saw was in front of a colored family shack. Welcome to Florida. Here I met John Kenesovich a fellow student from Maine H.S. He was placed in training group #211 while I was placed in #210; however, we were able to secure passes together sometimes to visit town, etc. I was trained for heavy infantry which meant 75 and 155 mm howitzers. I had my first leave to return home in October of 1944; and then on December 27, I was given a ten day leave with four additional days to travel to Ft. Meade, NJ. at the end of my leave for embarkation to Europe.

Upon arrival at Ft. Meade I was given orders to ship out only four days later and reported to the ship *USS Brazil* for a ten day voyage directly to France with about 5000 troops aboard. Most of us wore the "replacement" shoulder patch, which easily identified us as "the new guys." Thus started my actual WWII experience.

## MY WAR TIME SERVICE

Upon our safe arrival at La Havre, France in January 1945 we were segregated and assigned to various companies and then Divisions. Mine turned out to be the 629th Anti-tank Battalion and initially assigned to the 99th Division of the 3rd Army. The 99th Division was a newly formed Division in late 1942 and was called the "Battle Babies" as it had very few combat experienced troops. Its shoulder

patch was a checker board pattern, but being in a Tank Destroyer battalion we wore the patch showing a tank being crushed in the jaws of a tiger. The 99th made a name for itself however, in the "battle of the bulge" by protecting the northern flank and holding its position however with many casualties. The 629th was attached to it and also served with distinction. I was proud to be attached to this unit as they had shown their grit as untested battle soldiers. The German high command had chose to hit this untested American unit thinking it could easily smash through the thinly line that was strung out for 20 miles.

Anti-tank battalions were formed to counteract the strong and heavily armored Panzer and Tiger tank units that Germany was able to bring to battle. Our own Sherman tanks that were attached to the infantry divisions were no match as they had only 75 mm cannons and unless they scored a direct hit, the Sherman's could not stop the German tanks. In fact sometimes the hand held Bazooka was more effective than a Sherman.

Initially, the US anti-tank units were composed of two types of equipment. The first was regular 75 mm or 105 mm howitzers towed by half-track trucks. The other type was a lightly armored cannon mounted on regular tank treads with the more powerful cannons, but built for speed. Although effective, the towed anti-tank equipment was slow to set up, required more personnel, and was easily over run by enemy infantry. Many times the towed vehicles had 75% losses.

I was assigned to the treaded type and was very happy to have a "tin roof" over my head. As a replacement I joined the 629th about January 26th after it had bridged the Erft River and was preparing to battle our way to the Rhein River where it curves northwest from Cologne to Dusseldorf. The 393rd infantry battalion of the 99th on the Division's left flank swung in a 20 mile arc toward Dusseldorf spearheaded by "Task Force Lueders" a special designed armored unit commanded by Capt. Ray Lueders that was composed of the 99th recon Troop, including units of the 786th Tank Bn, and my 629th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

We staked a claim on the Rhein River west bank at Grimling-Hausen and then had a fight at the woods below Gohr while the 394th took Delrath. The 99th was the first to reach the Rhein River near Neurath and then we moved on southeast

to Remagen and its still standing bridge across the Rhein. On March 10th on the fourth day of the bridgehead drive east of the Rhein, the 99th crossed to relieve the 9th Infantry Division just south of the Remagen bridge crossing.

The 99th then expanded the bridgehead to Festing Germania then south to Honningen and East to Weid River by March 22nd. After a rest here on a very rainy dawn we reached the Cologne-Frankfurt a/m Autobahn highway. We were elated that we now could push forward for Berlin, but our orders were to turn around and head westward and assigned to clear the Ruhr pocket of German troops that had been bypassed. We moved through Wetzlar and Giessen cutting off up to 150,000 German troops. We followed the Eder River toward Rothaargebirge to the Red Hair Mountain and by April 15th had captured 36,450 prisoners and then captured Iserlohn. Here we helped create a huge German PW camp at Sundwig. I do not recall the town now, but at one place, we put our cannon through the front door of a bank and blew open the bank vault.

At Hemer we freed 20,000 starving Russian Prisoners of War. At this point we were transferred to General Patton's Third Army and moved toward Schwabach and Salzburg. We followed the Danube to capture Landshut. On April 29th my company "C" was dispatched to Moosburg which took us two hours to travel the 18 miles where we helped liberate a German military prison camp containing over 6000 Americans. There were about 500 from the Chicago and surrounding cities alone. Among them was a soldier from Des Plaines, IL, my home town, whose name was Wilbur Minnish. What a small world. At Moosberg we bivouacked in a hay barn and it sure was good to not be on the move every day. We again had orders to be on the road through Bavaria to the Austrian border when on May 8th, the order was given to "Halt in Place!" We stayed at Moosburg for three months and it sure was good to sleep in that hay barn. The war in Europe was over.

### MY POST WAR SERVICE

At first we stayed at Moosburg for about three months and had two main duties. First to disarm all the German ex-soldiers and civilians that might pose a threat to us. Next we created a motor pool or "stable" as they were called for our tank destroyers by constructing shelter or

parking spaces for them in a very neat and military manner. Each day we started the vehicle engines to be sure they were in good running condition and made all repairs to recondition them back from their wartime service.

In August 1945 we moved from the Moosburg area to Pressig near Thuringia, southeast of Nurnberg and right on the Bavarian border with Czechoslovakia. Again we constructed a military pool or stable for our TD's. At Pressig, I recall one time there was a serious alert caused by the Russians mobilizing a force on the Czech border and we grouped and moved to the West German side of the border. After a day or two they returned to their bases and we did likewise. This was only one of the occasions that the Russians tried to aggravate the tensions with the West.

Again we had orders to move, this time to Bad Nauheim some time in November. But before we moved, we used our bulldozer to dig a hole as large as a basement and filled it with Jerry cans of gasoline and covered it up. I wonder if it is still there. On that move I received severe sunburn which was not from the sun, but from exposure to the wind.

At Bad Nauheim life was becoming more normalized with replacement troops arriving to replace those with enough service time to be rotated to the ZI. Passes were easy to come by so I was able to do a lot of sightseeing. I acquired a German police dog and named him Champ after my childhood part husky/German Sheppard dog. He was very intelligent and easy to train. I recall one time we went hunting with our M-1 carbines and I shot a deer. Another time I visited the "Eagle Nest," Hitler's mountain top estate at Berchtesgaden and many other places of interest. I even had a chance to visit Switzerland and tried my hand at skiing. Unfortunately, one time when I was away Champ disappeared and I never saw him again. I always thought a German had killed him for a meal.

During this time frame, I began sending home various purchases and war souvenirs. It was easy enough to find a German carpenter who would construct wooden boxes just for the price of a pack or two of American cigarettes. One of the best purchases I made was a pair of very antique hand carved wooden chairs that were put together with pegs. Supposedly, they had quite a history of ownership. I also sent a lot of bayonets, helmets, cameras, coins. Rings, uniforms and such, but we were not allowed to mail any of

the pistols I had collected. I sold some to others and finally threw about six or eight of them in the Main River.

In order to be rotated home, you needed a certain number of "points" and by arriving in the war zone late in the war, I did not have the required number. The administrators of the US Zone were looking for certain accounting skills so on October 31, 1946, I received a discharge from the U.S. Army and went to work as the supervisor in an auditing section in Frankfurt. I was 24 years old and managed the work of 35 American citizens assigned to me. One of the main chores of our section was the control and auditing of gasoline ration books that we soon found were being recirculated. I was able to find lodging in the town of Hoechst, a suburb of Frankfurt.

As I no longer was billeted on a military base, It was like being a tourist on vacation with all the places I could go and do without the cloud of the military about me. However, I found that not to be completely true when I decided to marry my German fiancée, Margaret Thurauf of Lohr a/m. The Occupying Army command had put into place a de-fraternization rule and any marriage required the permission of the commanding general.

In applying to be married, I contended that I was a civilian and the Army's rule did not apply to me. After being rejected at first, I had to appeal to higher and higher levels until I finally reached General Hobart Gay. When he heard my argument he immediately yelled at his aide, "Get this man out of here and sign his request now." After a wedding celebration on October 28, 1947 with my new wife's relatives, off to Paris we went for a honeymoon financed by several cartons of Beachnut chewing gum!

Frank Edward Baranski, Jr.  
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Submitted by:  
Thomas G. Baranski - Brother  
6190 Quince Road  
Memphis, TN 38119