

The WWII Experiences of Paul P. Weaver

By Steve Weaver

My Father enlisted in the army during WWII. I'm not sure of the date, but know that he enlisted for OCS (Officer's Candidate School). He was accepted, but before too long the program was halted, as the Army decided it had all the officers it needed. Daddy was given the choice of going home to await the draft or sign on to one of the "special" units then being formed. He chose Tank Destroyers (TDs). He was sent to Camp Hood (now Fort Hood), Texas.

The unit he was assigned to was the 630th TD Battalion. It was made up of a, mostly, Pennsylvania National Guard unit. The unit was originally equipped with M10 Self Propelled Guns (SPGs). Daddy joined after the unit had participated in the "Tennessee Maneuvers." They were getting ready for the Louisiana Maneuvers when daddy was selected to take special gunnery courses. He became a marksman with the M5 3" Towed Antitank Gun. After the unit reassembled at Camp Hood from the Louisiana Maneuvers, they were switched to a towed TD Battalion. The North African Campaign had just been waged, and towed antitank artillery had played a decisive role (especially the vaunted German "88" antiaircraft/antitank gun). This move was to prove tragic.

Once the 630th had been properly trained, as a complete unit, on the new towed weapons, they were attached to the 28th Infantry Division (coincidentally, also from PA). They were sent to Fort Dix, NJ for embarkation. One of daddy's fondest memories of this phase of the journey was his visit to the Bronx Zoo. He got a chance to see the Pandas. He really got a kick out of their antics!

As with all embarking troops, they were not told where they would be going. Most assumed it would be to Italy, as the Allies were engaged in heavy fighting there. The SS Niue Amsterdam was the vessel they sailed on. It was a large, fast, fairly secure vessel. A former luxury liner, converted to troop transport. It was the fastest ship at the time, and needed no convoy to travel to Great Britain (it could outrun any German subs that might stalk it).

About mid-ocean, the troops were informed of the Normandy Landings that had just taken place. Obviously they would be heading to France. The 630th disembarked at the Forth of Clyde in June of 1944, and were sent to a staging area

to prepare to make the Channel crossing. They arrived in France in July and were sent to the region around St. Lo, France with the 28th Infantry Division.

They initially camped on the edges of a small Normandy field surrounded by the infamous hedgerows. The story I can best remember is that some of the soldiers got up a game of baseball. There were cows in the field grazing, and a Norman woman came out to milk some of them. Daddy recalled that she had the milk bucket and a one-legged milk stool. As she sat down to milk a cow, one of the soldiers got a hit. Unfortunately for the lady, the ball hit the cow she was milking. I'm sure the soldiers found it amusing, but having milked cows before, myself, I don't think the lady was a bit impressed. He also remembers a Cajun in the outfit who tried to talk French with the Norman villagers. Apparently, Norman French is a bit different from Parisian French, and Cajun French even more so. Daddy ended up using what Latin he picked up when he came into the Catholic Church to try and translate. That must have been a sight!

My dad recounted to me that during the fighting around St. Lo, Company A was involved in a battle in which the Germans tried to use a captured M4 Sherman to lead a column of 7 Panther tanks into a wooded area on the opposite side of a river from where Company A was dug in. HQ was asked if there were any American tanks on the opposite bank of the river. When informed that there were no Allied units in that area, the order was given to open fire on the column. Two guns were in optimum firing position. The gun my father was gunner on, and one commanded by Sgt. Willie Bagley of Nichols, GA. Both guns fired on the woods with armor piercing and high explosive rounds. My father's gun was credited with 4 Panthers and the Sherman. Sgt. Bagley got the other three Panthers. Accompanying infantry with the 630th confirmed the kills.

It was at about this time that the commander of daddy's gun was injured in a bombing by German planes. He lost his hearing and was evacuated. The second in command was Sgt. Darnick. He would remain gun commander until after the Battle of the Bulge. It was probably about this time that the 630th was called away from the front to be sent to Bordeaux by train. The equipment was loaded on flat cars and the men rode with the halftracks. One fellow was riding in the machinegun cupola of a halftrack when French civilians, whom he was waving to, started shouting *atención!*, *atención!* and were pointing down the track. One of the other crew members had the presence of mind to look, and saw a low overpass head. He yelled at the waving soldier, who just had time to duck down and miss being killed.

Once the 630th got to Bordeaux, they found it was a clerical error. A unit of super heavy artillery (either 8" guns, or 240mm howitzers) was supposed to be sent. Once back at the front, the 630th supported the drive on Paris, and, with the 28th Infantry Division, got to march down the Champs-Élysées and past the Arc de Triomphe. Once through with the parade, they marched on out east of Paris to take up the battle again.

As the fall weather set in, the 28th, with its attached battalions, was transferred to the Hurtgen Forest region of Belgium. The 28th was assigned to attack and take the town of Schmitt. The town had already withstood one major attack. The region is comprised of a series of ridges and ravines with villages atop many of the ridges.

One pleasant aspect of this move was that daddy met some Belgians who took them in and made them feel at home. He would later correspond with them, and in the late 1960s my brother Peter, who was stationed in Germany, went to visit them. These folks had a woodworking shop, and the grandfather, who had died before the war, had been working on a set of carved doors for the Belgium Royal family. Daddy got to see the unfinished doors, and remarked at how absolutely beautiful they were, with carved vines and grapes.

The 630th was assigned to guard one of the 28th Division flanks. They took over positions in the village of Vossenack, Belgium. They were occupying one end of the town, the Germans controlled the other. They were there about nine days, if memory serves me and most of that time they were under German artillery fire. The situation became so desperate that daddy said they were down to eating LifeSaver candies (daddy never could stand them after that).

It was here that daddy's halftrack was set on fire by shelling and eventually blew up when the ammunition stores burned. One of the gun crew had a brother in the USAAF who had sent him a pair of flight boots (fleece-lined, and very warm, but not practical for ground combat). I wish I could remember his name, but, anyway, this fellow was standing near the door when the halftrack took the hit. As it started burning, he ran to it to retrieve his boot. They were buried under a lot of other stowage in the vehicle. My father yelled at him to retrieve a fruitcake that my mother had sent him. The fellow replied, "To hell with the damned fruitcake, I need my boots!" He finally got his boots and just had time to get back in the cellar they were staying in when the ammunition cooked off.

The 3" gun was damaged by an un-exploded round that hit the gun shield, gun sight, and one of the trails. The shell actually bent the trail and lodged on it. They

used an M29 Weasel (light tracked vehicle, like a jeep, but amphibious) to pull the gun out from under the shell. The halftrack was replaced, and the gun was repaired at a nearby field ordnance depot.

From Vossenack, they were withdrawn with the rest of the 28th Infantry division to the Ardennes (a "quiet" little sector) for rest and refit. They were posted near Malmsey, Belgium. Daddy got dehydrated while sleeping on a mortician's slab in the building they were billeted in. He was sent to a field hospital at Malmsey where he was when the Battle of the Bulge started.

When the Germans began their offensive, the soldiers at the field hospital were evacuated further to the rear. Daddy was given some rations, and because he was able to walk, was directed to head west to safety. He got to a collection point and, after things had settled down a bit, was able to get transportation back to the unit. The 630th suffered pretty heavy losses during the Battle of the Bulge. Most of its equipment was lost when positions were overrun by the Germans.

When the unit was finally reorganized, they were attached to the French First Army. They pushed through the Vosges Mountains toward the town of Colmar, in what was to become known as the battle of the Colmar Pocket. During this period, Sgt. Darnick was killed when a mortar round landed among a group of gun commanders. Daddy was promoted to Sgt. and took over the gun. It was also during this fighting that two incidences took place that he told me about.

In the first incidence, they were driving through the Vosges Mountains and were going down into a valley when the hitch to the gun came loose. The 3" antitank gun weighs a bit over two tons. The long barrel of the 3" gun makes the piece almost perfectly balanced. Their gun, tipped back when it became unhitched, (they were towed trail first) until the muzzle struck the cobblestone road surface. It then tipped forward until the lunette (long springy rod with the towing eye) struck the pavement and the process repeated itself. The fear was that the gun would overrun the halftrack, and the trails would crash through the rear door and possibly kill some of the crew. Daddy ordered the driver to top speed, and hoped that the gun would run off the road in one of the numerous curves of the mountain road. Unfortunately, the Belgium road engineers were too good at their job. The road was built with "banked" curves to help control down-hill travel. The gun just kept right behind them, teetering between muzzle and lunette, all the while getting closer. So, finally my father, judging the seesaw motion of the gun, ordered the driver to stop. In doing so, the lunette hit the ground and the trails drove under the halftrack, raising the rear partly off the ground. This did, however, bring the gun to

a halt. After collecting their wits, the crew reattached the gun, making sure it was secure, and continued down the mountain.

The second incident earned my dad his Bronze Star (Lieutenant Jones Winston actually put him in for a Silver Star, but at that late date in the war they were being saved for officers). BTW, that last bit of information was related to me by Lt. Winston at one of the reunions I attended with daddy!

Near the Belgium village of Flamierge, the Germans launched a counter offensive. The unit that Company A was attached to was an airborne unit that was new in combat, and the Colonel was unfamiliar with Tank Destroyers and their tactics and abilities. The Colonel ordered Lt. Winston to send units of TDs over a hill to attack the Germans. Towed guns are virtually useless in the attack, as they have to be unhitched from the halftrack, dug in, and then laid on target. Daddy was part of the discussion, as a gun commander, and without directly disobeying orders suggested that the Colonel should accompany him on a reconnaissance patrol to find firing positions for the guns. At about this time, an ambulance, with a prominent Red Cross emblem, took a direct hit as it was trying to get to wounded soldiers. The ambulance was destroyed, and the Colonel left in a huff. Lt. Winston was quite relieved that daddy had spoken up, as he was at a loss as to what to do next.

Daddy ordered his gun crew to mount up, and they worked their way around the ridge that the Germans had under fire. They found a spot with good cover and an excellent field of fire. Sgt. Bagley's gun dug in nearby, and a couple of SPGs also took up positions in the area. The Colonel found them in their new position, and asked daddy, in a sarcastic way, if he planned on "running again." Daddy replied that he hadn't run, and when the Colonel asked what he needed, he said "ammunition." The Colonel did get them ammunition, and they waited for the German armor.

The ground was frozen at this time of year, and they had not been able to fully dig the recoil spades on the trails in. Also, when my father told one of the crew to call the shots (literally watch for shell hits and correct fire); the man was reluctant to do so. So, my father called the shots, and they engaged the German armor. They succeeded in knocking out several tanks and additional halftrack personnel carriers. As the gun was firing, however, the recoil was causing it to lurch backward. Two of the crewmen were trying to put pressure on the trail ends to drive the spades deeper, but the ground was too hard, so the gun moved back and soon the muzzle was about even with daddy's position. He was subject to the muzzle blast for several rounds, and always after had hearing trouble.

The flanking maneuver succeeded in halting the German advance and broke up the attack. Unfortunately, Sgt. Bagley's gun received a direct hit and several crewmen were killed. I believe at least one of the SPGs was also knocked out. Daddy was thanked by the Colonel for this action, and Lt. Winston put him in for the Silver Star. Daddy did receive the Bronze Star, and was just as proud of that medal.

Daddy was not very impressed with the Airborne unit they were attached too. Besides being new in combat and having little experience, some of the men were itching for blood. Daddy saw a group of German prisoners that had surrendered during the fighting. One of them was probably 14 years old. He said that there was a look of relief on that boy's face that he would not have to fight anymore. A detail of paratroopers was assigned to take the prisoners back to HQ for interrogation. Instead, they marched the whole group behind a barn and shot them. One of the 630th men had bragged about "helping." He was pretty much shunned by the rest after that. Daddy never did quite get over that tragedy.

On a lighter note, the same airborne unit stole a side of sheep that daddy had bartered off a farmer. His crew had slung it to the side of the halftrack, where it remained frozen in the brutal weather. On morning they got up to find it gone, and the airborne guys having a big "cook-out."

One other incident happened about this time. When Lt. Winston and daddy were trying to get things organized their position came under German shell fire. Daddy and Lt. Winston hit the ground and crawled under a truck belonging to an engineer unit. When the shelling was over, one of the engineers came up to them and asked what had possessed them to get under a truck full of dynamite! Of course, they had not been aware of that.

The 630th, and most other TD outfits were often used as support artillery. The 3" gun had a very long range, and the high explosive (HE) rounds were fairly effective. Daddy remembered one occasion when they were being used for indirect fire on German positions. One of the men had gotten into some liquor and was pretty wired. As the Germans moved back, the guns had to raise their elevation to increase range. They were firing over intervening high ground, and finally some of the rounds (which were set on Super-Quick detonation) hit some power lines that were in front of the position. Of course they detonated on impact. The poor inebriated fellow thought the Germans were returning fire, and ran up and down the firing line yelling "counter-battery, counter-battery." until daddy gave him a kick in the pants as he ran by. This got his attention, and he finally settled down.

There were several men in the outfit who had a bit of trouble with the wine, beer, and liquor they “liberated” from places they stayed. One fellow was a real trouble maker. Always getting into arguments, and failing to follow orders. He was the halftrack driver, and daddy had to constantly keep on him to do periodic maintenance on the vehicle. Well, this fellow and two others got into some booze and then ran into a young woman. They let the alcohol get the best of them, and tried to have their way with her. Daddy caught them before anything happened, and put a gun on them and threatened to shoot the first one to lay hands on her. He saw that she got home safe, and determined to rid himself of the trouble maker soon.

One of the other fellows was really a very nice person who just couldn't handle his drink. He was very grateful for what daddy did. I had the privilege to meet him not long before both he and my father died. This man used to act as security for the gun, He was a marksman with the M1 rifle, and daddy saw him pick off three Germans at several hundred yards. He also was a loader on the 3” gun, and once, after a bit too much drink, he was loading on a fire mission. They were averaging about ten rounds a minute (pretty fast). This fellow was heaving the rounds in just as fast as he could, and finally miscalculated with one and jammed it into the end of the gun breech. The high explosive rounds have what is called a “bore-safe” mechanism that keeps them safe until the shock of firing frees the detonator pin. The impact of that shell on the breech was not enough to arm the round, but it did put a dimple in the breech block, which is hardened steel! They let him sit the rest of the fire mission out.

Daddy had a favorite side arm, an M1 Carbine. These weapons were issued to second echelon troops, tankers, and other units that were not supposed to engage infantry directly. They were light handy weapons with a bit more power than a pistol, but not the same kill-power of the M1 rifle. The particular carbine daddy originally had given was a good one. He babied that carbine and was making plans to somehow get it home. Then, one day while they bivouacked in an orchard, they came under mortar fire from the Germans. They had already dug foxholes, and so were prepared to some extent. When the shelling ceased, daddy crawled out of the foxhole to find his bedroll mangled by shell fragments. In the bedroll had been a tin of coffee-grounds and some butter from a C-ration box. The shell fragment that tore up the bedroll had mixed the coffee and the butter up as if it had been in a blender. Unfortunately, it also cut the stock of his prized carbine in two. Daddy had to turn the mangled carbine in to ordnance for repair, and drew another as replacement. It just wasn't the same.

He also told of the time they caught some Germans running from a building. They were armed with their carbines, and Daddy had a grenade launcher and rifle grenade attached. In the excitement of the moment, he raised the carbine and fired the grenade. It sailed through the air and landed at the feet of one of the fleeing Germans. That poor fellow just kept running. Daddy figured he didn't stop till he got back to Germany. In his rush to fire, daddy had forgotten to pull the safety pin, and the grenade never exploded.

Well, After the Colmar Pocket, the 630th was pulled out of line and reorganized for the push into Germany proper. For this, the army had decided to make as many TD units self-propelled as possible; this was so they could keep up with the fast moving armored units they would be supporting. The towed guns required a crew of ten to man. The big old 3" gun was hard to handle and needed every one of them. When the 630th was pulled from the line, they received brand new M36 SPGs. These vehicles were very similar to the original M10 SPGs they had first trained on at Camp Hood. The big difference was the 90mm gun that they carried. This gun was capable of dealing with any German armor out there. The old 3" gun of the towed units and the M10s was having trouble with the heavy Panther and Tiger tanks the Germans were fielding closer to the Homeland. With the M36, The gun commanders had to cut their crews in half. Daddy had a young fellow in his towed crew whom he had taken under his wing. This fellow was illiterate, and had not been away from home before joining the army. Daddy used to read him his letters from home, and write letters for him. He wanted this fellow in his crew so that he could look after him. Somehow though, this fellow was sent off with the other non-chosen crewmen to be transferred to an infantry unit. The last daddy saw of him, he was sitting in the back of a truck going off down the road. Daddy never did know what became of him.

With a crew of five, driver, assistant driver, gunner, loader, and commander, daddy's crew set off with the rest of the 630th across the Rhine and into the German heartland. They were assigned the Ruhr region, an area filled with factories and coal mines. This region was vital to the German war effort. The Ruhr had seen repeated bombings from the USAAF and British RAF, but was still producing coal and war machines. The drive into the Ruhr was planned to finally bring the German army to its knees. The 630th was broken up into its three gun companies, A, B, and C, and assigned to protect advancing columns that pushed into the region. In Company A, they expended most of the ammunition they used on road blocks and factory chimneys (a great position for German lookouts). The 90mm was devastating to the piles of logs and old horse carts piled in the road to

slow them down. It only took a round or two in the base of the huge chimney stacks to bring them down.

Daddy's unit ran into very little armor, and no tanks. They knocked out some trucks and a few halftracks, but enemy tanks were getting scarce. Daddy's driver, a fellow named West, he took great delight in driving through the narrow streets of the villages in the Ruhr valley. The M36 and M10 hulls were built with sloped armor, thinner than a tank's armor, but better able to deflect shot. The sloped armor extended out beyond the track by a good bit. West would go through the narrow streets and swing hard around corners. The rear overhangs of the M36 would bash into the corners of the buildings, knocking huge chunks of masonry out of them.

Finally, on the 16th or 17th of April, 1945, just a few days after President Roosevelt had died, Company A was assigned to follow a Lieutenant, in a jeep, out of the town of Hilden, Germany. They were supposed to support a column of M4 Sherman tanks on a drive eastward. The Lieutenant took off, daddy's vehicle followed, and the tanks just sat there. There were several 88mm guns in the area, firing on American positions. My father guessed the tanks just didn't want to tangle with them that close to the end of the war. Anyway, he followed the jeep, and as it rounded a curve and he lost sight of it, he saw a German soldier rise out of a ditch and aim a Panzerfaust antitank rocket at them. They were going full speed, about 25 or 30 MPH. The rocket landed just in front of the M36 and exploded. The M36 lost high gear when the explosion brought them to a sudden halt. When the driver finally found a gear that worked, he turned off the road and skirted around behind a house. There they were set upon by a 20mm flak gun. The 20mm rounds didn't penetrate the turret, but did dent it. There were 88mm AA guns in sight, and daddy wanted to get some distance from them. Their main gun was not usable at that close range, they had no coaxial machine gun, and the .50 cal. AA machine gun on the turret top was jammed. To clear the ditches of any more Germans, they broke out a case of hand grenades and started lobbing them out of the open-top turret.

Daddy was wounded in the neck, taking a shell fragment from the anti-tank rocket. The drivers, Smitty and West, whose heads were out of their hatches, were injured (though not seriously) by sand from the sandbags that were attached to the front armor of the M36. DeCarlo and Prevatt, the gunner and loader, were uninjured, as they were inside the turret. The driver got them back to the start-line, and they found an aid station with a captured German doctor who gave daddy first aid. After he was treated at the aid station, he was airlifted back to Paris, in a C47. It was the only time he ever flew in a plane! He was there until after VE day, when he

returned to the unit, they were on occupation duties. Daddy never saw the Lieutenant, from the leading jeep, again, nor heard what might have happened to him. He always supposed that the jeep was destroyed. He had a very low opinion of those tankers.

After the war, the 630th was assigned an area to occupy until they could be shipped home. Unlike some units, they were not sent back as a whole. Many of the men who had joined up before daddy had acquired more rotation points and were sent back first. The unit did have one big scare after the war. They were called up, armed, and sent to a town to search for a hidden weapons cache. They never did find anything, and settled down for the long wait. Daddy took the opportunity to visit Switzerland. During the war, Switzerland remained strictly neutral. Any troops who crossed the border, whether Axis or Allied, were detained by the Swiss for the duration of the war. Unlike some countries though, the Swiss treated detainees like guest and they had a lot of freedom so long as they didn't try to leave. Anyway, daddy took a trip to Geneva and saw the Alps and enjoyed the sights of a place untouched by war. He even got to swim in the lake of Geneva, which, due to its altitude, allows one to swim with little danger of going under. Air pressure is so low that high up that it counters surface tension and one floats on top.

Finally, in late 1945, daddy was called up to go home. He boarded a ship in Southern France and sailed out of the Mediterranean Sea through the Straights of Gibraltar. The vessel he sailed on was nothing like the SS Nieuw Amsterdam. The SS Sommelsdijk was a small transport formerly part of the Holland America Line. The weather did not cooperate much either. On the voyage over, the trip was about five days. On the return, it was about nine, and they fought a storm most of the way. Daddy, as an NCO, had to stand deck watch at times. On one such occasion he made his way to the bow and rode it through several pitching swells. I found it exhilarating. Another down side to being one of the "late-returns" was that when the ship got in to port (I'm thinking Newport News, VA), they were greeted by a committee of one. A lone WAC met them and escorted them to their barracks.

Daddy finally arrived home in late 1945. He was greeted by his wife, parents, and father-in-law, as well as his first-born son, who was born while he was in combat in France. It took daddy many years to open up about the war. When jets started flying supersonic (making a boom), he would sometimes hit the floor, thinking it was a shelling. He had flashbacks. He was generally a very kind and patient man, but with nine kids, bills to pay, and a garden and livestock to keep us fed, he had so much on his plate that at times his temper got the best of him. Thankfully, he never

was physically abusive. His anger would flare, and then he would be silent for a long time. It hurt him that he could lose control like that. He bore a scar on his neck from German shells, but he wore a wound in his heart that never truly healed.

In the mid-sixties, he heard from a friend that the 630th had had its first reunion. He got in touch with the organizers, and made the second one, and most others, every two years, until his death in 1985. I remember the first reunion he attended. He took several of us kids and an old war buddy, Red Mckeel, who lived in Chattanooga (our home-town). I was probably 6 or 7 years old. I remember these "old men," younger than I am now. I listened to war stories and saw people I had never heard of.

Poor Red had always had drinking problems. After daddy took command of the gun crew in early 1945, Red developed frost bite. He could not feel his feet, and, because he had been drinking heavily, he couldn't get warm (his blood was too thin). My father knew if he stayed on the front, he would surely freeze to death. So, he ordered Red to walk back to the rear, giving him written orders so he wouldn't be picked up for desertion. Daddy didn't think he'd make it, but they had no way to get him back and it seemed the only choice. Red stumbled back to the rear, and found an aid station. They were able to save his feet, and he survived the war.

After that first reunion, daddy started to talk about the war a bit. I was starting to develop an interest in plastic models, and had a voracious appetite for history. Daddy and I developed a friendship around his war-time experiences. I also have great interest in old things, especially crafts and such. Daddy did too! He would talk to me about all these things. Some of my siblings wanted him to start writing things down, but his hands were failing him, too many years of hard use and suffering. They got him a recorder, but that was a bit too "new-fangled" for him. I guess I became his recorder to some extent. I've tried to relate as much as I can of his war years. As I remember other things I'll put them down here and add to this brief history of my father, Sgt. Paul Prentice Weaver, and his war.