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A World War II Veteran Remembers: Roger Anderson



Roger Anderson of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is a volunteer at the National Archives and Records Administration, Pittsfield branch. He works in the Research Room, teaching and assisting patrons with their genealogical research. This is his story, in his words.

I was born in 1920 in Grand Rapids, North Dakota, a town of about 50 people, born and raised on a farm, like most people in North Dakota. I went to school there, finished high school there, and then went to the University of North Dakota for two years, majoring in Mechanical Engineering. That was in 1942. It appeared to me we were destined to be involved in military services so I did not continue with college.

I was drafted into the Army and entered at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, on December 16, 1942. I took my basic training at Camp Ripley near Little Falls, Minnesota. During World War II, the federal government took over Camp Ripley for use as an installation of the Army Service Forces. From July 1942 to October 1943, thousands of federal troops received basic and advanced training here, equipped for the cold and snow of a northern Minnesota winter. The Army, not wishing to contend with the difficulties caused by its first winter at Camp Ripley, decided in late summer 1943 to discontinue use of the post for wartime training. Nearly all federal troops were transferred out in October 1943 and that winter the post was returned to state control.

After completing Basic Training I was asked to take the Army's OCT-X3 Examination for Officers Candidate School (OCS) or Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Afterwards, I was told that I had scored high and would have a choice of either Infantry (only!) OCS or ASTP. As the average life expectancy of an Infantry 2nd Lieutenant replacement in Europe at that time was about 6 to 9 days after taking command of his platoon, I felt that I wasn't all that brave! Besides, being faced with this new chance of completing my college studies in mechanical engineering and then serving afterwards as an engineering officer in the Corps of Engineers, or in the Signal Corps, appealed to me. I therefore chose ASTP and was sent to the University of Oklahoma at Norman Oklahoma.

Being at the University of Oklahoma at Norman Oklahoma was really great, getting an education and being paid to do so (\$50.00 per month). No KP. Good food and lodging as we stayed in the dorms and ate at the school cafeteria. But the good life that we had there ended abruptly due to the Army's demand for more field soldiers. By January 1944, it was rumored that the ASTP program was not to last. On 20 February 1944, the axe fell. Over the nation, 110,000 ASTP students were to be transferred to combat units. The order read, "the time has come for the majority of you to be assigned to other active duty to break the enemy's defense and force their unconditional surrender..." In short order I was with the 103rd Infantry division, at Camp Howze, an army training camp near Denton, Texas. <<http://www.eastmill.com/103rd/Kens%20copy%20site/pages/camphowze.html>>.

At Howze, we endured much of the rigorous training that had typified life during our initial basic training but there was a difference. Every aspect of the training seemed much more serious—and it was. Everyone paid a lot closer attention to instructions. What we learned now might someday save our lives.



Clearly, the 103rd Infantry Division, also known as the "Cactus Division" because of the circular patch worn on our shoulder showing a green cactus against a yellow sky, was headed for one of the theaters of war. It had already gone through intensive training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana and had been through lengthy maneuvers involving many other units before coming to Camp Howze. We did not know whether we were going to fight against Japan or Germany but The 103rd Infantry Division was getting ready to fight someone.

In September of 1944, the 103rd moved in a troop train from their Camp Houze, Texas, to Camp Shanks in New York to prepare for embarkation to our combat destination. We had nothing much to do except eat, sleep, clean our weapons, and talk about the latest rumor as to our destination. Europe or the Pacific. Camp Shanks favored Europe, but the Army sometimes tried to confuse the enemy by sending troops in a direction that seemed to suggest one theater of war and then actually send them to another. <<http://www.eastmill.com/103rd/Kens%20copy%20site/pages/campshanks.html>>.

On October 6th, the 103rd embarked on board numerous troop transports including the troopships General J. R. Brooks, Monticello, Henry Gibbons, and Santa Maria. We arrived in Marseilles, France, on October 20, 1944.

Our ship, the Monticello, was formerly an Italian luxury liner, which was modified to meet the more modest requirements of an American troop ship. The enlisted sleeping accommodations consisted of a rectangular frame of steel tubing about two feet wide and six feet long with a taut canvas sheet laced to it. These were stacked four high and each soldier had to share this "bunk" with his weapon and his duffel bag packed with everything he would ever need.

On our crossing of the Atlantic, which was done under complete blackout conditions, we encountered a severe hurricane, which resulted in most everyone getting seasick. Because of the severe weather no GI's were allowed on deck. Fortunately, our company was assigned guard duty that included being on deck so the fresh outside air helped with the seasickness. One night while on guard duty I suddenly saw lights almost directly above me. Apparently the ship on one side of us had turned its lights so that the other vessel could avoid a collision. I often think of what the outcome would have been if we had collided.

Our ship entered the harbor at Marseilles early in the afternoon of October 20, 1944, but did not disembark immediately. We were the first convoy to arrive there since the invasion of Southern France only a couple of months earlier. The city and harbor had been pounded by bombers and there were overturned hulks of ships all over the harbor so there was much confusion in unloading the troops and equipment. When we finally got off the boat later in the evening, we had to make the 15-mile march to our staging area, a rocky plateau where our shelter would be pup tents. We had learned how to use these tents back in the states but we did not do well in the rocky French ground.

The Division spent the next several days assembling our supplies and equipment and also serving as stvedores for dock duty. And there was inspection after inspection to make certain that we had everything we were supposed to have and had nothing that we were not supposed to have. For these inspections, everything we owned had to be displayed on a shelter half (the one-half of a pup tent that was issued to each soldier). We did this in the unrelenting rain so everything we owned was soaked.

On November 1 we departed by 6 by 6's trucks for our 500-mile trip north to Docelles, where the 103rd was to become an operational unit of the Seventh Army. The trip offered an opportunity to see some of the destroyed elements of the fleeing German Army, the beauty of the French landscape and occasionally the opportunity to enjoy French bread, which some villagers would toss to our passing convoy. The final trip on the trucks was on November 8 when we were told the rest of the way to the front line would be by foot. I remember the day because that was my younger brother's birthday. I had marked that as our first day of combat but official record (Order of Battle, United States Army in World War II-European Theater of Operations, Office of the Theater Historian, ETO, Dec 1945) lists the official day as 11 November 1944.

After leaving the trucks we marched into the Alpine beauty of the Vosges Mountains for our first night on the lines. It occurred to me- Oh, to just be a truck driver.

We marched up a mountain trail to our designated area and were told to dig two-man foxholes and to place logs over the foxhole to help guard against shrapnel from artillery tree bursts. I believe this area was just above the town of St Die, the town we would attack in subsequent days.

It seemed that the period from then to early March of 1945 was just a series of attacks, holding actions, retreats all within the region of Alsace in the region of the Maginot and Siegfried lines. We lived in foxholes, barns, and houses and sometimes with no shelter at all. We survived on K-rations, C-rations and an occasional hot meal. In the states, complaining about the Army food was a favorite topic of conversation but in combat, the kitchen crew (Mess Hall) did everything in their power to get us good hot food, if at all possible. For our 1944 Thanksgiving dinner they prepared a turkey dinner with all the fixings but were not able to reach us with the dinner until several days later.



Roger, February 1945, in France

The 103rd Infantry Division consisted of three regiments, the 409, 410 and 411. It was my understanding that two of the three regiments would be on the front line with the third unit in reserve. It seemed that they did this rotation often and it was a matter of luck if your particular unit was subject to severe casualties. It seemed to me that our unit was very fortunate in that respect as our replacing unit was often hit severely.

But I did have one experience that has been with me during my lifetime. Our company, the 409th Infantry, was again facing the Siegfried Line; and on March 22, 1945, after four days of hard fighting around Reisdorf, suddenly punched a hole through the Sigrid Line. The Cactus Divisions Task Force Rhine, with our company supporting the lead tanks was speeding ahead in the night enroute to the Rhine Plain. The tankers machine-gunned some buildings of the first small town, we came to and there was soon a platoon of German soldiers surrendering. The Task force had more urgent business so myself and another soldier, Melvyn Foos, were assigned to take the prisoners back. We had marched back about a mile when one of the prisoners asked us if they could put their hands down as it is hard walking with your hands in the air. We said OK. That was a fortunate decision because we soon walked into a column of German soldiers. In the darkness the Germans in the oncoming column never noticed Foos was an American or that the other Germans were prisoners. The first man in the German column said something to Foos and he replied in a mumble he hoped would pass for German. It did and he kept going and when he reached a turn in the road he looked back. Seventeen of the twenty prisoners were still with him. When Foos reached the rear of the American Task Force he returned back to look for me accompanied by three light tanks. He didn't find me as I ended up being surrounded by German soldiers. In the column of prisoners we were marching back I was bringing up the rear and one of them was an older heavy man, thus the separation in our prisoner column. Fortunately I wasn't severe with him.

The Germans took me to a farmhouse where they were staying and questioned me about fuel supplies. Being a PFC on the front lines means you have no knowledge of what is behind you. The Germans treated me well and gave me some rations, cigarettes and candy.

At dawn the next morning we started our march and one English speaking German told me that by tonight we would be in Germany. We had probably marched about five hours when all of a sudden an American Jeep surprised us. The Germans dashed for the ditch on one side and I wisely choose the opposite ditch. A short burst from the machine gun on the Jeep caused the Germans to raise their hands and surrender, and I believe killed their leader, who was trying to fight back with his pistol. And I was yelling to the Americans that I was a GI so they handed me a rifle and said "Help us round up these Krauts."

The soldiers in the Jeep took me to their CO who questioned me to the extent necessary to verify that I was an American and not one of the Germans dressed in American uniforms which the Germans used in the Battle of the Bulge, and who were dealt with very severely. He asked me baseball questions which I couldn't answer as I am not an avid follower of the sport. I suggested that he call my company which he did and therefore verified that I was truly missing from my unit. I was promptly returned to my unit and was delighted to see my fellow prisoner guard alive. I had assumed that they had captured him also. Apparently the prisoners we had were happy to end their war service in a PO camp. In the dark of night it would not have been difficult for them to overpower us.

In early April the 103rd Cactus Division now had another new role, it was placed in SHAEF reserve (technically, about as far back from the war as you can get but actually only about 30 miles from the front where bitter fighting was still in progress). We were charged with the occupation of a major part of the Palatinate also known as the Saar, Moselle, Rhine Triangle, and a big chunk of Germany west of the Rhine. The units of the division were scattered over a large number of towns with Division Headquarters located in Landau. The infantry units occasionally had to mop up pockets of resistance that had been bypassed. It was at this time, April 13 that we learned of the death of Franklin Roosevelt. I believe everyone felt that he should have been present to witness the defeat of Nazi Germany.

About mid April 1945 the 103rd Cactus Division was committed with Armored support to capture and secure Austria because of the possibility that "Here a specially selected corps of young men will be trained in guerrilla warfare, so that a whole underground army can be fitted and directed to liberate Germany" (Citizen Soldier, Stephen Ambrose.) Brenner Pass, one of two passes between Italy and

Austria needed to be controlled. So the last two weeks of April the division moved through Southern Germany and into Austria. The German resistance was not as effective as our earlier encounters but much of the travel was in open vehicles so everyone was exposed to being the last one killed in the war. We eventually ended up at war's end (May 9, 1945) in Seefeld, Austria, a small village about 20 miles north of Innsbruck, a site of previous Olympic games.

Shortly after the end of the war, I became ill and was confined to a field hospital for about a week. The only cause of my illness seemed to be battle fatigue. And this occurred when our unit was enjoying R & R. But I really had no reason to complain as I got through the war with no injuries. The 103rd Division suffered 4543 casualties during their 147 days of combat.

I was returned to the States earlier than many other GIs because I had not been overseas for very long and was destined to go to the Pacific to participate in the invasion of the Japanese home islands. My future didn't seem too promising because of the radio news programs that carried daily reports of the Japanese kamikaze attacks on Allied ships and bases in the Pacific.

On August 6, 1945 the first nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan by a B-29 Superfortress, named "Enola Gay". The report that a single bomb had wiped out an entire city raised my hopes that things might not be as bad as they seemed.

On August 9th a second nuclear bomb was dropped, by another B-29, named "Bock's Car", on Nagasaki virtually destroying that city as well. My hopes for the future went up another notch.

On August 15th, the Japanese agreed to the terms of surrender. The day was proclaimed V-J Day (victory against Japan) and there were celebrations all over the world.

After that I sort of marked time. I stayed in the service to get my teeth all fixed cause I hadn't seen a dentist all the while I was overseas. There was not much to do at camp.

I was discharged on January 6, 1946.

I have three brothers, all younger. One brother was in the Air Force during the war serving in England/Europe. He came home safely. Two cousins did not.

My wife and I traveled to Seefeld, Austria, several years ago. I tried to find the house where we lived, but I was never sure I found it. In fifty years things change.

Roger received the following decorations and citations: American Theater Ribbon, EAME Theater Ribbon w/2 Bronze Stars, WWII Victory Medal.

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Last revised 05/17/2006