

**An Oral History  
with  
Robert E. Hahn**

**Intelligence & Reconnaissance Platoon  
Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion  
410th Infantry Regiment  
103d Division**



*Album of Remembrance Oral History Project*  
**103d Infantry Division Association**

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From an interview conducted at the August 2012 Association reunion, Kansas City, MO  
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I was born in Chicago, Illinois on January 17, 1925. I was going to high school when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I had a year and a half left to finish high school. When I turned 18, I was drafted. While my parents were lukewarm, they didn't interfere with my wishes to join the Army. My brother-in-law was in the Army Air Corps, where he trained to be a pilot. I did basic training at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas in a program for tank destroyers.

I was then selected to go to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). First sent to Texas A&M, I ended up at the University of Oklahoma at Norman, where I did coursework in acoustics and optics designed for artillerymen for counterbattery fire. But we didn't get very far. I had been in the ASTP for only six months when the program was largely dissolved and the ASTP trainees were called back to active duty.

I was transferred to the 103d Infantry Division at Camp Howze, Texas on March 8, 1944. I was initially assigned to D Company, the heavy weapons company of 1st Battalion, 410th Infantry Regiment. Finding out that I spoke pretty good German, they transferred me on March 27 to the Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon, Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 410th Infantry. We trained during the spring and summer. While the I&R section had special information-gathering functions, we trained as infantrymen to be able to engage in direct

fighting; I went to sniper school for a week that summer. On July 17, 1944, I was promoted to PFC. In September, the division travelled from Camp Howze, Texas by train to Camp Shanks, New York. Before we shipped overseas, I went into New York City one day and looked around.

On October 6, 1944, we set sail, bound for Marseilles, with the three ships carrying division troops and equipment in the center of a convoy. The destroyers protecting our ships were always on the lookout for German submarines. During the 15-day voyage, an aircraft carrier joined and then left the convoy. We ran into a storm that lasted a few days and caused just about everyone to get seasick.

Landing in Marseilles, we traveled north up the Rhône river valley to the Vosges Mountains in northeastern France. On the way up, we saw the chaos of destroyed German equipment and debris of war all around. With the Americans' rapid advance up the valley, the Germans had abandoned a lot of their equipment. We saw all that; it was a picture of an army on the run.

Committed to action in the Vosges Mountains, we relieved the 3d Infantry Division. The Vosges were hilly, not really mountains like the Austrian Alps where we ended up when the war was won. That winter of 1944-45 was the coldest, wettest winter northwestern Europe had experienced in 30 years. Because of the wet, cold conditions, a lot of soldiers developed trench foot and frostbite; some had to have their feet amputated. On our push through the Vosges, we had different units pass through us; so we were continually on the attack.

In combat, our I&R platoon worked in close coordination with infantry. We would interrogate prisoners to identify and locate German positions in the area. The information we gathered was used to support the infantry in taking our objectives. While the main function of the I&R section was to gather information to support the infantry in taking our objectives, we carried standard infantry small arms and equipment. I had an M1 rifle.

By the end of November, we had broken out of the Vosges Mountains into French wine country. One incident stands out in my memory. We had captured a chateau in that particular area of the front. In the process of advancing, they had brought up a lot of manpower with different duties to make a concerted attack again. We had a group of people who were constantly trying to put communications equipment up, including telephones back to the CP [Command Post]. As I remember it, B Company, 410th Infantry was on that front, but there were parts of different rifle companies up there.

It was a dark night. The people who were waiting to make the attack were digging foxholes; we had received a lot of German artillery fire in that area. There were many people in this chateau; in a huge room, 60-70 men were waiting to be called on to carry out whatever duty they were to be assigned. There were a lot of wounded on stretchers on the floor, waiting to be evacuated for first aid attention. Some were quite severely wounded. There were a few jeeps around and they would parcel out men to the jeeps as bodyguards for the wounded soldiers and the driver of the jeep. I was grabbed by the collar and told, "You go on this jeep." This jeep driver was a terrific driver. He just knifed through the mud on this path.

With the dispersion of American and German units in the area, the front line wasn't always clearly defined. There were many parallel paths through the vineyards, and driving back we could hear Germans milling around, whispering, and talking, on another vineyard path below; both pathways followed the contours of the side of the hill. We were as quiet as we could be, though there was the noise of the jeep engine. The jeep driver had the blackout lights on. The Germans never came after us. It was about a fifteen-minute drive, but, not wanting to alert the Germans, he was going very slowly.

We got all the way through to the command post and the aid station, which were together. We unloaded the wounded soldiers from the jeep. Then we went in and talked to the

lieutenant there, who reported to the commanding officer of our regiment. We found out that the entire group of soldiers up at the chateau had been captured in a German tank and infantry attack. We hadn't had a tank up there.

I said, "Boy, oh, boy, we lucked out again," though it didn't immediately sink into my brain how fortunate I was. I had escaped by the skin of my teeth. That was the scariest experience that happened to me, being an unknown situation in which the unexpected happens. It set me back. One minute you're certain that you're winning the war, and the next minute you suffer a setback in your area. We were very sorry that the Germans had captured a lot of our people in communications, equipment and supply. It was startling, especially where we knew many of them. We had gone into attacks with them for German prisoner interrogation and other I&R duties. They spent the rest of the war as POWs. It was a very unsettling experience; but you learn to just shrug it off. After a while you just forget about it and continue to do your job.

At Christmastime, we were up on the southern flank of the "Bulge" in a holding action while the German offensive was being pushed back. On Christmas Eve night, I was in a hole with a machine gunner from the machine gun section of B Company. We had a .30 caliber air-cooled machine gun. It was so cold that the snow was dry. All we had were the GI blankets. Two men in a hole, two hours on and then two off. Two hours you'd sleep in the bottom of this hole. It was very uncomfortable. The snow was coming down on you. You'd shake it off every once in a while. Then you'd change positions and were on "watch" and the other guy would sleep two hours. The Germans were down in the valley at a little town. We were poised to put on an offensive into that town. We thought about this being Christmas Eve night and that we shouldn't be killing anyone on that night. So, nobody came up that valley from the German side and we didn't go down there because we didn't want to wreck Christmas. We talked about it a

lot. We didn't get to use our machine gun because we weren't going to kill anybody, and they weren't going to kill us.

In March 1945, the offensive started that ended the war. With fresh troops, we had more manpower than the Germans did in our section. Breaking through the Siegfried Line was a slow process because there was a lot of resistance, with many gun emplacements and concrete bunkers. March was a bad month in terms of casualties. But in April, the Germans started to thin out. We kept pushing and pushing. Finally the Germans capitulated on May 8, 1945.

We ended up in Innsbruck, Austria, where the 103d Division had a victory parade. We stayed in Innsbruck for approximately a month, mainly doing guard duty.

On July 5, 1945, I was transferred to the 45th Infantry Division, bound for stateside training and the Pacific to invade Japan. Before we set sail for home, however, the Pacific war ended. When I heard about the atomic bombing of Japan, I was elated. It was a very somber situation because initially we weren't sure that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would bring Japan to surrender.

When I found out that the Japanese had capitulated, I said, "Wow, I got out without a scratch!" I had gone through artillery barrages. I was just lucky; that's what it amounted to. But that close call of almost being captured was such a lucky break because many POWs got mistreated, even killed.

I arrived back in the United States in September 1945. I was sent to Camp Grant, Illinois because I was short about ten points. I didn't get out of the service until January 17, 1946, which happened to be my birthday. So, it was on my birthday that I was discharged from the United States Army.



I have never met anyone from my unit. At 87 now, I'm not likely to. Still, I enjoy the reunions and the camaraderie we have in the 103d Infantry Division Association. I like the people here and I consider them my family. So, there you are.