

## **SOME FADING MEMORIES OF WORLD WAR II JAMES HUSTON MURPHY**

**The first news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that infamous Sunday, December 7, 1941 began to crackle on our Philco radio. I was 17 years old, at home with my parents in Macon, Georgia. We listened, trying to comprehend what was happening. My older brother Bill had recently graduated from North Georgia Military College where he had earned an officer's commission in the Marine Corp reserves. We knew we were at war.**

**I was in my final year at Macon's Lanier High School for Boys, a 5-year mandatory ROTC school. Life was good. At Lanier we were getting a good education and also frequently finding our way to Miller High School for Girls close by. ROTC was superb training, and also very competitive, as many of us worked hard to become officers our senior year.**

**ROTC Officer rank at Lanier was determined by scholastic and all around achievement. I was selected Major, Regimental Adjutant. Only four officers ranked ahead of me, a Colonel, Regimental Commander, and three Lieutenant Colonels, Battalion Commanders. We wore regular Army type officer uniforms every day except Fridays**

**As WWII became an instant reality, we in ROTC were learning much about military organization and rank, close order drill, parade ceremony, inspection, and other protocols. But we knew nothing about war. We would learn soon enough.**

**I graduated tied for highest honors from Lanier in June of 1942 and entered Georgia Tech in Atlanta as a freshman that fall. I had just turned 18. My hope at Tech was to earn a degree in Electrical Engineering and an Army officer's commission through Tech's outstanding senior ROTC program.**

**At the urging of high level Army and Navy recruiters, I and most college ROTC students all over the U.S. had enlisted in the reserves. That was the official U.S. military policy to remove us from the draft and have us complete college and officer training, as the military said they wanted. Then we would move to active duty.**

**That program was short lived for Army Reserve ROTC college students. In March 1943 President FDR called us to immediate active duty. The Army had decided that we were needed as ground troop replacements in the U.S. worldwide war effort. Navy reserves, however, were left at colleges to get their degrees and commissions as promised. That was OK with us according to the axiom "all is fair in love and war."**

**On March 31, 1943 those of us from Georgia Tech reported to Fort McPherson in Atlanta. Our world had suddenly and dramatically changed. There was confusion and uncertainty as we were processed and awaited our next orders. We were dispersed amongst hundreds of other recruits, coming in from all walks of life. Most of them did not look with great favor on a bunch of college kids coming into the Army with them, and we quickly learned never to mention our ROTC training. But we were ready to do whatever was asked of us and were eager to prove ourselves.**

**My first hurdle came at our induction physical examination. We were in line undressed for what seemed like hours as we waited our turn at each exam station. As we came to the eye exam I was dreadfully aware that I was blind in my left eye from birth, and would surely be disqualified, declared 4-F, and sent home. No way. I simply could not accept that.**

**I was told to cover one eye with my hand and read the chart. So I covered my left eye with my left hand and easily read the chart to the bottom. Then I was told to cover the other eye. I quickly covered my left eye again, this time with my right hand, and again read the chart to the bottom. 20-20 both eyes. I had passed. Later on I had to use this strategy twice more, once when processed into the 103d Infantry Division and again to be cleared for overseas combat duty. It worked each time. The army did not know.**

**The next challenge came a few days later when an Army doctor called me in to ask about a broken back injury. I was dumbfounded and the doctor was skeptical when I told him I had no such injury. It took several days for them to clear that up.**

**Meanwhile all my Tech buddies had been sent on orders to Fort Eustice, VA and other Army bases for basic training. I was finally dispatched alone to Camp Wallace Texas for Field Artillery basic training. I was not told why, but that was OK. Camp Wallace was located between Houston and Galveston in giant mosquito and hurricane country. We had more than enough of both while I was there.**

**Basic training went well at age 18. I wanted to be a good soldier, worked hard, got along well with my superiors, made friends, and learned survival through bivouacs and field training. I even earned an unheard of 3-day pass in basic training for being the only soldier in my outfit who knew that the Military Chief of Staff was General George C. Marshall, which I remembered from ROTC.**

**My next assignment was a most pleasant surprise. The Army had come up with something called ASTP, the Army Specialized Training Program. In late summer of 1943 about 250 of us with some prior college were ordered from various bases to report for ASTP at Texas A & I, a delightful coed college in Kingsville, Texas, home of the famous King Ranch.**

**There we were to receive additional college education and simultaneous Army officer training, about the same program as I was in at Georgia Tech except now we were active duty military. Perhaps the Army felt guilty for removing thousands of us from college while our Navy counterparts were left to get their degrees and commissions as promised.**

**It was hard work but also fun at Texas A & I. The military and scholastic regimen was very demanding. The coeds were wonderful and enjoyed us as we did them. My favorite was Maxine Willoughby, a delightful sophomore from Robstown Texas. We were together whenever possible and were falling in love. I would go back to visit her at her parent's ranch after the war. I would have asked her to marry me except for another wonderful girl who had come into my life.**

**Sadly for us the Army soon changed its plans again and declared that we in ASTP were urgently needed as combat ground troop replacements. Army ASTP was ended. In March 1944, most of us at Texas A&I were ordered to Camp Howze near Gainesville, Texas, to join the 103d Infantry Division already in intensive combat training there.**

**I'll never forget the long mournful blowing of the steam engine's whistle as the train pulled into the station at Kingsville to take us away. We knew the good life had ended for us. It was cold and sleeting when we arrived at bleak Camp Howze, with its acres of wooden barracks covered with black tarpaper. The cold would soon change to unbearable heat as summer quickly came on. Heat rash was a new experience, absolute hell on earth. We ate salt tablets constantly, like candy.**

**Because of my artillery basic training I was assigned to Battery C of the 928<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, a 105 mm howitzer (cannon) unit of the 103d Division. We trained long and hard, knowing that we were soon headed for war. We learned the mission of artillery, to support advancing infantry ground forces in combat. We learned artillery fire command and execution, and how to bracket our target area by trial and error. "Battery Adjust". Then we would give specific war map coordinates where we wanted the shells to land. Hopefully they would land somewhere close. Then adjust again. Find the target.**

**My job was to be a Forward Observer radio operator when in combat, and jeep driver when the battery was moving long distances. I was promoted to T-5 corporal. There was recommendation by my Battery Commander for Officer Candidate School, but that was not to be. There was not time.**

**A Forward Observer team was usually 3 men, an Officer, a Sergeant, and a T-5 (corporal) radio operator and communications specialist (me) whose job was to provide communication by radio or by ground strung field telephone wire when possible. In WWII there was absolutely no other way for Forward Observers advancing with front line infantry to give fire commands to the artillery crews several thousand yards to the rear.**

**The Division's expected orders to combat came down. In late September 1944 the 15,000 men of the 103d Cactus Division boarded trains, headed we knew not where. We soon figured out we were rolling East, and two days later we arrived at Camp Shanks, New York, a staging area for embarking overseas. It was on short leave there that I saw New York City for the first time and found my way with buddies Burt Walker and Bill Thomason to the top of the Empire State Building.**

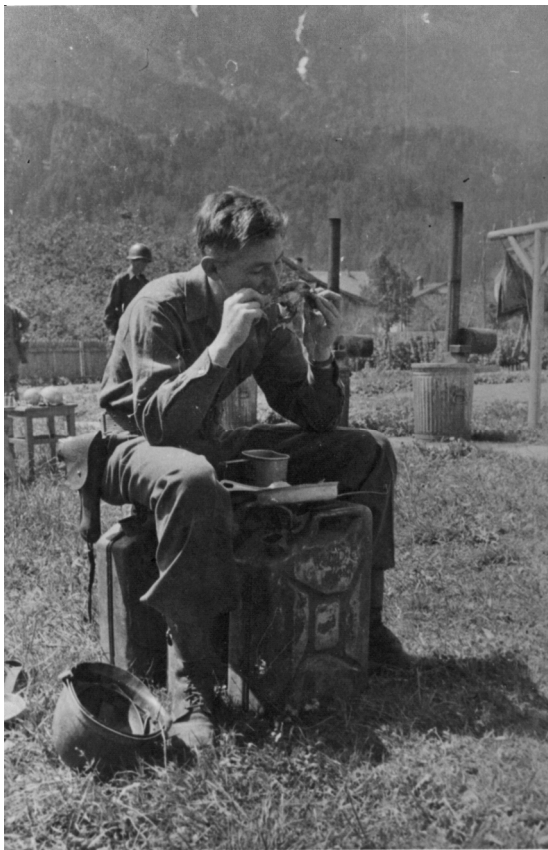
**A few days later on October 5 we boarded ships, again headed we knew not where. I was on the largest ship, one that carried much of the 103d, the USS Monticello, a converted Italian luxury liner. I will not attempt to fully describe our journey, except to state that it was anything but luxury. It was dreadful in every sense of the word. I well remember but cannot begin to describe my emotions as we sailed past the Statue of Liberty and watched it disappear behind us. Maybe like a child feels leaving its mother the first time.**

**It took about two weeks to cross the Atlantic. The trip itself is its own story and much has been written in description of it. We were packed like sardines in bunks 4 high, with our full gear and rifle with us in each narrow bunk. We encountered days of severe stormy weather and indescribable seasickness throughout the ship. There was almost no light in the steamy holds to see by. Occasionally we were allowed on deck, a few at a time. We passed ships burning at sea, and were in constant fear of submarines and torpedoes.**

**Our first indication of where we might be headed was sighting the Rock of Gibraltar. Then we passed through the Mediterranean Straits and on to Marseilles in Southern France, arriving just before dark, October 20, 1944.**

**Much has also been written about our first few days in France, unloading, trudging loaded down all night that first night through Marseille and miles Northward in the cold rain with absolutely no light, and the next day setting up muddy acres of tents in our staging area. Then slowly getting reorganized into our combat units, all of which has been described in graphic detail that I need not repeat. But we survived somehow and prepared to start our long trek up the Rhone River Valley in cold rain and sleet to reach our first combat encounters as we approached the Vosges Mountains of Northeastern France.**

**My Forward Observer team was Lt. Michael Allison, Sgt. Harvel Bennett, and myself. We were all very young and near the same age. We liked and respected each other and worked well together. When moving distances we traveled together in my jeep. In combat our lives depended on each other, and so we strongly bonded.**



**In one of the first of those encounters on November 28, our team officer, Lt. Allison was killed by rifle fire, very close to me in the small town of Barr, France. Another forward observer, Lt. Jim Vidal had been wounded and would be hospitalized for several weeks. This meant Sgt. Harvel Bennett and I would carry on for the remainder of the war as a two man forward observer team without an officer. We knew we could do the job and we did. For this we were awarded Bronze Stars.**

**I will not attempt to describe all of my war experiences during the record cold winter months of 1944-45. Movies, documentaries, and pictures have well described the ordeal that all of us suffered in Northern France, Belgium, and Germany. Our artillery battalion supported the 411<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 103d Division, so the 411<sup>th</sup> war route was ours except for occasional special assignments. Thank God the fear, death, destruction, dismemberment, despair, and agony of the war somewhat diminishes from our memory over time.**

Some experience, however, can never fade. On Thanksgiving Day 1944 I was with an infantry patrol that had become cut off by advancing German forces. We had no rations and no way to escape death or capture except to cross a raging, freezing cold very large stream. In sheer desperation we managed to cross it with our full combat gear and rifles, using two unsteady small wire cables strung across, one to try to catwalk on and one higher up to hang on to. We all made it except one who fell and was swept away. We found our way back to U.S. forces the following day, exhausted, starved, and very grateful.

On Christmas day 1944, I was at the German border manning a dirt embanked log covered forward outpost, constantly watching a German outpost less than 200 yards away. It had turned clear and very cold with several inches of frozen snow on the ground. Because it was Christmas, we were not shooting at each other. I could hear German Christmas music coming from their outpost station.

A runner from our infantry unit, hundreds of yards to the rear, somehow managed to bring me up a mess kit of warm Christmas dinner with turkey, dressing and gravy. It was a total surprise and I cannot describe my gratitude. There had been no cooked food for days, only C rations. Christmas night I became very sick, an awful pain in my side, and vomiting. I was bent over and could barely move. I wondered if I had been shot. Something was definitely wrong with me.

I called for the medics. Two quickly came up, at risk of being shot, and carried me back on a stretcher to the Infantry field position. There they strapped me onto the back of a jeep and drove me to an emergency medic tent a few miles back. I remember lying on that stretcher, hurting, wondering if I was dying, and looking up into the bright full moon and millions of stars and thinking of the fate of our badly wounded, and the horrors of war.

At the tent an Army MD examined me, said I had acute appendicitis, and ordered me taken by ambulance some miles further back to a field hospital. In the light of a full moon on the white snow, my moving ambulance was strafed by a low flying German plane, thankfully a near miss. The Battle of the Bulge was getting underway.

I was operated on in the early hours of the morning and the surgeon confirmed that my appendix was ruptured. Surgery was mandatory. After surgery I was carried to a bed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the old brick building used as the field hospital. The cries and moans of the severely or emotionally wounded in the building were unnerving beyond description.

The next night all Hell broke loose. Shells and bombs were coming in, German troops were advancing, and the hospital had to be quickly evacuated. Surgery notwithstanding, I had to walk down 2 flights of stairs and climb into the back of an Army transport truck full of other very sick patients. We had a cold and agonizing rough ride some distance back to a larger and more secure hospital.

A few days of recovery in that hospital was enough. I was feeling better and knew my Battery needed me. I asked for release to my battery and was told no, I was to be reassigned. So I put on my uniform, left against orders and somehow hitched rides on military vehicles forward to find my outfit. I don't know how I managed that, but I did.

**I caught up with them on January 1, 1945, having a brief New Year's Day break with mail call. I was delighted to find mail waiting from my parents and from Rosa Schofield, a high school sweetheart. The men warmly cheered and welcomed me back and I knew I had done the right thing. Harvel Bennett was ecstatic. He was going on an observer mission alone the next day and I insisted I was able to go with him. I don't know how I managed that either, but I did, carrying my heavy radio pack and nearly passing out several times.**

**Capt. Scott, our Battery Commander and Staff Sgt. Copeland graciously commended me and having also learned of my blind eye wanted to put me in for a Silver Star. I said no. I told them that any citation earned should go to the entire Battery, not me.**

**There are so many other stories, like the time I loaded my jeep with fine champagne from a castle and took it back to my Battery, and the time road signs had been switched and I drove my jeep into a German occupied town, and the time I went to Paris for two days.**

**I had flown there with our Battalion Reconnaissance Officer in his tiny 2-seat plane and intended to return to our combat area with him. We became separated in Paris, could not find each other, and I had to hitch my way back to Strasbourg in a freezing cold French railroad mail car, alone and feverish with flu.**

**A wonderful French girl in Strasbourg not much older than I saw how sick I was and took me to her apartment, fed me soup and medicine, put me to bed, and soon nursed me back to health. I have thought about her so many times with gratitude, but sadly could never remember her French name to ever contact her again and thank her.**

**My stories, like everyone who was over there, could go on and on. Some are good. Most are dreadful. War is Hell says it best.**

**In the cold winter and early spring of 1945, following the Battle of the Bulge, we had fought our way down through Germany and into Austria. I was with the front of the task force that went through the Brenner Pass into Italy to join up for the first time with our forces there. Then we pulled back and held for a few weeks at the small town of Oberperfus, Austria, near Innsbruck, awaiting our next orders.**

**The war in Europe ended with Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945. Thousands of us were soon selected to return to the U.S. enroute to the ongoing war effort in Japan and the Pacific Theatre. I was reassigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which sailed from LeHarve, France on July 6, arriving at Boston ten days later and then on to Fort Dix, NJ.**

**There I was given a week's leave, and headed home by bus to Macon to see my parents and younger brother Dan. They did not know I was back in the U.S. and so it was a wonderful reunion. My older brother Bill was in California, having just returned from Guadalcanal and two years of fierce South Pacific fighting where he had been a Company Commander with the First Marines. He had been through the Hell of war for much longer than I, half way around the world from me.**

**The 5<sup>th</sup> Division was moved by train to Camp Campbell Kentucky. There I was granted another temporary leave and again returned home to Macon. I was at home when the horrendous but heralded news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima first came over our**

**Philco. WWII would soon be over, and life would be good again. I was honorably discharged from the Army at Camp Campbell on November 28, 1945.**

**Then it was home for good, this time to the East Tennessee mountain town of Erwin, where my parents had just moved after living in Georgia for many years, where I was born. In Erwin I started up an Office Supply business, and on September 21, 1947 married a beautiful red haired native, Margaret Ann Gossett. First son Tim was born in 1952. In 1953 we sold the business and moved to Atlanta, to begin a long and successful executive career with the Ivan Allen Company, one of the nation's leading office products firms.**

**One of the good things that came from the war was the establishment of solid friendships that have endured for more than 60 years. Bill Thomason, Burton Walker and I became great friends from the earliest days of our Army life, no doubt because of our upbringing and shared values. We went places and did things together on our off duty time whenever possible. In those days we were known as the Three Musketeers.**

**In 1943 Bill Thomason and I went by bus from Texas A&I to Monterrey Mexico for Christmas. We did not have time or means to go home. In 1946 I went with Bill to a Baptist retreat in North Carolina. I remember being seated on the stage there with him while a charismatic young man strode back and forth in front of us addressing the group. I did not know who he was, but his name was Billy Graham. In 1947 Bill would be in my wedding and 21 years later I would be in his daughter Linda's wedding in Nashville.**

**Burton Walker and his family live above Seattle and my wife and I visited him there some. We have always stayed in close touch. Burt, Bill, and I communicate often by telephone and email as we continue to cherish our old wartime friendships.**

**My contribution to WWII, from enlistment to discharge, was 2 years, 11 months, and 14 days of my youth, including 9 months in combat. For this I am proud, and have no regret. I did not have to go to the war. I believed it was my duty and I wanted to go.**

**These memoirs were written Memorial Day 2006, for my sons and grandsons and others who may have interest. Special thanks go to Lt. James H. Vidal of my WWII Battalion, who now lives near me in Atlanta, and his friend Jack Durrance who sent me a copy of his superbly written and recently published WWII memoirs. Jack's book, written for his grand children, about his WWII experiences with the 409<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of my Division inspired me to record some of my own memories.**

**I am very pleased to have a copy of Jack's book, Jim Vidal's descriptive letter of response, and two books about the 103d Infantry Division's role in WWII available for my family and others who may desire to know more about our war effort more than 65 years ago. Also, A Dangerous Assignment, written by William B. Hanford, a Forward Observe same as me, from Battery B of my Battalion, describing our observer mission in graphic detail.**

**May God always have cause to bless The United States of America.**

**James Huston Murphy, WWII Serial No. 34201042**

**Sad Footnote: Burton Walker died 2007, heart attack, and Bill Thomason 2008, cancer.**