

## Taped Interview

Nashville 2009

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### Alfred H. Kent, Co. G 411<sup>th</sup>

I was born in Boone, North Carolina but we were living in Winter Park, Florida when I heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor on the radio. I was ready to graduate from high school in less than a year and my appeal for a six month deferral was granted. I recognized only one other guy on the bus which took us to Camp Blanding in Florida. From there, I was sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama for Basic Training; mostly drilling and physical fitness. There were five of us who took a test and qualified for ASTP, a comprehensive two year college program.

After Completing ASTP at Texas A&M, I went to Camp Howze, TX and was assigned to G Co., 411 Regt., 103d Infantry Division. There were probably 800 men at that Infantry Training Facility. We eventually went to New York to be processed to go overseas. Our troop transport was an Italian Luxury Liner called the *Countess of Savoy*, which was reconstructed to function as a troop ship. There were three layers of canvas cots in the hold where we slept. Escort ships protected the transports all the way to Marseilles. It would scare us to death when we heard the escort ships sound their horns. Fortunately, we never had a problem with the enemy on our trip.

The ocean liner was too big to go to the docks at Marseilles so we went to shore in D.U.K.W.s that could carry fifty or sixty soldiers. We were loaded on trucks and driven five or six miles out of town to an old Swiss Army Campground. They would truck us back down to the docks to reassemble the vehicles, turn the motors, shake the batteries, etc. When we were finished a driver requisitioned the vehicle and drove it back to his unit. Sometimes at night when we were in our pup tents the Germans would bomb the harbor.

We were transported by truck into the mountains. We traveled through the mountains on "troop trains," formally French deluxe style passenger trains, approximately 60 men to a car. We were teased because of the comfort of our "tourist style trip."

On November 16th, 1944, in La Bolle, France, in the Vosges Mountains, I was wounded by enemy fire and received a Purple Heart. We had stopped for the night close to the front and I was lying on my stomach. Thick woods surrounded our position and we began taking fire with such intensity it seemed like a swarm of flies. We had tracers and detected the position of the Germans but they were hitting us hard, wounding many of our soldiers. I was behind a tree, on the ground, when a limb was dislodged by fire power from the enemy and it fell on my legs. In addition, I was wounded in my mid thigh by shrapnel from a German 88mm. Medics dressed my wound and laid me in a foxhole with another wounded soldier, who was having trouble breathing. The soldier's name was Sergeant Fuhr. While I was waiting to be transported away from the action I was able in that very small space to apply pressure to his chest wound. He also survived his wound. They operated on my leg in a field hospital which was overcome with wounded men. After two months I returned to my same unit, platoon, and mortar squad.

I rejoined the outfit as a jeep driver for the 4th Platoon, 411th. The Germans had backed off and we were on the move toward Schillersdorf. The first time I dug a foxhole was in Schillersdorf, France. Sometimes we used abandoned German foxholes instead of digging new ones. I was a driver in the tactical convoy but at one point we got off the trucks and marched through an area not knowing whether the Germans were there or not. Our march led us to Landsberg concentration camp which we liberated. The barbed wire gave me the impression of an animal pen. I used my hatchet to break the padlock.

We gave the prisoners food and medical attention. The poor sanitation, the stench, and the sight of so many dead, as well as the dying men and women proved overwhelming. They seemed like walking zombies and were terrified even of us. The Americans had established camps where we could take the people to receive treatment but they resisted; we could understand the lack of trust.

I was in Salzburg, Austria when the Japanese surrendered. I had been transferred to the 2nd Chemical Mortar Bn. in July 1945 and was waiting to be sent to the Pacific. Instead, I was sent home and discharged in March, 1946 with the rank of Pvt. First Class. I initially worked for a wonderful man who owned a dairy; I dug up Palmettos. I eventually went back to school.

I was admitted to Duke University Undergraduate School in Pre-Med and graduated in '49. I had also taken an examination to get into ROTC.

It was generally tough to be accepted to Medical School; we went before the Medical School Admissions Committee of Professors. My "rival," Willie Evans, was called in before me and I thought I would not have a chance. During my interview, one of the professors of surgery asked me some questions about my experience in WWII. He asked me if I could describe a "mermite can." I described it to him. This professor was really down to earth; he had asked me about the can because he had invented it! His invention was a large, insulated can, similar to a road side trash can. It had properties like a thermos; it would hold heat or cold. He also asked what I thought of this can. I said it was "God's gift to the frontline soldier!" I think my answer earned me a few points! This committee member had worked in the food service area during medical school and was inspired to invent this mermite can.

(I had been concerned that Willie Evans might fair better because he was interviewed ahead of me. As it turned out they asked Willie to explain how the scientists went from a lump of coal to the Atomic Bomb!)

The committee had no more questions for me. This committee was the jury. You were in or you weren't in. I received my M.D from Duke University in '53 and became a thoracic surgeon. I am now retired.

# We Were Soldiers Once and Young

by Bridget Booher

Alfred H. Kent '49, M.D. '53



Lifesaver: Kent came to rescue of gravely injured sergeant.

Kent was assigned to the U.S. Army's 103rd Infantry Division. Several years ago, he wrote an essay for a compilation by 103rd Division officers. This excerpt is an account of an incident that took place the morning of November 16, 1944, in La Bolle, France, when he was wounded by enemy fire. The battle, part of a winter offensive through the Vosges Mountains, was the 103rd's first combat operation. Kent is a retired thoracic surgeon and lives in Auburn, Alabama.

Our medics were overwhelmed by the number of wounded. Finally, there was a pause in the enemy fire, and two medics dressed my wound and carried me about a hundred feet to a foxhole. A few minutes later the medics dumped a second wounded man in on top of me. He had a sucking chest wound, and it was difficult for him to breathe. We were wedged together on our sides. I was able to pull his shirts up and put my hand over the hole in his chest. He coughed a lot but eventually began to breathe more easily. He was Sergeant Fuhr.

We were to stay wedged in that small hole all the rest of that day and all night.

At some point, he became convinced that he would not survive. He made me swear that I would take his wedding band and return it to his wife and tell her all that had happened. I reassured him as well as I could, but I wasn't so damn sure myself that he would survive.

We were finally taken out of the hole and moved to an aid station a little over twenty-five hours after being wounded. Eventually, we were both evacuated to field hospitals for surgery, and we both survived.

Fuhr died a few years ago, but his family told me that he related the story of his wound and my efforts to help him many times. They said he credited me with saving his life.

## Duke

January-February 2009

We Were Soldiers Once and Young

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## WELCOME TO THE 103rd!

by Fred Kent

ASTP was being phased out and many of us had orders to join the 103rd Infantry Division at Camp Howze, Texas. The thought of leaving our college dormitory and going to the absolute boonies of Texas hit our morale pretty hard. Word trickled down that the core troops already there were real toughs from places like Chicago, Hamtramck, Kanarsi(Sp?) and Brooklyn. Furthermore they had survived Camp Claibourne so that made them tough and trained. We were apprehensive, really apprehensive, but the regulars at Camp Howze were ready to welcome us.

There were barely enough cots to go around but the old timers told me to take "that one", a choice bunk at the end of the row. They assured me that the previous occupant had been transferred a few days before. I threw my duffle bag down, took my boots off and laid down for a short rest and to feel sorry for myself. My respite was brief.

He was over six feet tall. His arms were crossed against his chest. His face and sergeant's stripes glared down at me. Our end of the barrack fell silent. He stood so close to the bunk that I had to scoot up to swing my feet around. I stood on bare feet. "Who're you?", he asked. "I'm Fred Kent. Who are you?", I replied. He answered that he was Sergeant Rudolph Trapp and that I was in his bunk. I stated that I thought I'd better look for another bunk. He said no I would not, he would, and he did.

Looking back on it, I think he must have realized what had happened, that I had been set up. He was telling the men that was no way to treat a kid from college who one day would be shoulder-to-shoulder with them in battle after battle. Over the weeks I watched him closely. He worked hard to blend the "old men" in with the "new men" and he succeeded. He was looked up to by all of us. He was a leader and a hero.

On our first day in combat, far in front, leading his squad, Sgt. Trapp was killed instantly by a German sniper's bullet.



"Bitte, nicht schiesen"

by Fred Kent

During February and early March of 1945 we were in defensive positions just outside of Schillersdorf, France, awaiting the Spring Offensive. We took turns being out on the line for twenty-four hours and then resting in town for twenty-four hours.

During one of my twenty-four hour respites I was preparing to shave in the animal courtyard behind our commandeered house. I positioned my shaving gear in a pile of split fire wood and leaned my carbine nearby. I rolled my field jacket, coveralls and shirt down over my pistol belt. My 45 was covered by rolled down clothing.

As I began to lather, a young German soldier slowly walked around from behind the wood pile with his weapon at sling arms. We saw each other simultaneously. He came to port arms as I grabbed my carbine. We both stood frozen at port arms about ten feet apart. This was my first eye to eye confrontation with the enemy. He was young, very young, maybe sixteen. His face was fair with cheeks reddened by the cold and covered with adolescent fuzz. Fear consumed him. He looked at me with a pleading expression, shook his head slowly, and said, "Bitte, nicht schiesen". He turned his back on me, laid his weapon on the ground, held his hands high over his head, walked slowly around the corner of the house and was taken prisoner by several of my colleagues who were milling around at the front of the house.

He had brought none of the terror that had seized Schillersdorf a few weeks earlier.



#4

15 March 1945---SPRING OFFENSIVE

by Fred Kent

After wintering over in Schillersdorf we started the Spring Offensive at first light on 15 March, 1945, in tactical march toward Mulhausen. By daylight we were tiptoeing through a mine field, walking in a narrow path of footprints made by those who had successfully passed through before us. At its edge we saw a pale G.I. lying on a litter covered by a blanket. His severed leg lay on top of the blanket.

Next came grazing machine gun fire about two feet above the ground. I got false security by hiding behind a cow turd! Sgt. Brenner called for mortar fire to silence the machine gun. We ran to the cover of a gentle terrace to set up our mortar. As we laid the tube we were hit by a barrage of enemy mortar rounds right on target. Miraculously no one was hit. We immediately went "out of action" and the mortar barrage was not repeated. It was obvious that the Germans had spent the winter well. They had planned excellent grazing fields of fire, had zeroed their mortars and had excellent observation posts.

The machine gun was silenced by a flanking move and we continued. The mortar section was stopped in the open at the edge of the woods. Ed Karkut and I found a huge log on the down side of the terrace. We snuggled close to the log for cover. Sporadic enemy artillery rounds began to fall to our left on the far side of the log. We felt protected.

Then one of those terrible accidents of war happened. Friendly artillery came in on us. It was not sporadic. It was awesome! We saw at once why the Germans had started the rumor that U.S. artillery was "belt fed". There were no longer puffs of smoke. There was a large cloud of smoke. We could even feel the heat of so many explosions so close together in time and space! During the barrage I would pull Ed on top of me and then he would somehow get underneath with me wrestling to get back on the bottom. After a few minutes of wrestling we stopped and both of us began to laugh. The mind acts in strange ways when it is truly stressed. And our minds were truly stressed.

In the course of one day we had traversed a mine field and come under relentless, grazing machine gun fire, a mortar barrage and an awesome artillery barrage. We were glad to see the day come to an end and spent the night in an abandoned German machine gun position.

#5

## THE SIEGFRIED LINE

by Fred Kent

On 18 March, 1945, the 411th crossed the German border near Bobenthal and was to assault the fortifications of the Siegfried the following morning.

To our front was a strip logjam laced with booby traps and concertina wire. Behind the logjam on a steep hillside were the massive concrete fortifications of the Siegfried.

Our first assault was preceded by extensive artillery and fighter-bomber preparation. We walked cautiously along the upper layer of logs like tight-rope walkers. Initially we received only sporadic sniper fire. When our artillery cover stopped we received heavy machine gun fire. I dived through the logs for the ground but became entangled in the concertina wire in mid air like a spider in a web. After a frantic struggle I reached the ground between the logs. Then came mortar fire. It was well zeroed, marching fire up the strip of logs at about thirty foot intervals. A quick estimate indicated that my spot would receive a round. My worst fears were confirmed by the hiss of the incoming shell. I closed my eyes, held my breath and went stiff. I was peppered with dirt, chips, bark and debris but I was alive. I raised my head and opened my eyes. A half buried, 120 mm mortar round was no more than 18 inches from my head. It was a dud!

The sun was warm. I was overwhelmed by a strange fatigue. I went to sleep. When I awakened the Company was withdrawing and I crawled out with them.

Our second assault at 1600 hours that afternoon was no more successful and we withdrew to the relative safety of the holes on "our hill".

Word soon came down that we would make a third assault the next morning! I immediately went to Captain Schultz, our Company Commander, to deliver a dissenting personal opinion. After a short discussion he convinced me that I need not discuss it any further with him and that I did not, as I had suggested, need to discuss it with General Eisenhower! All I needed to do was to move out smartly with the Company in the morning and I did.

Our third assault the next morning was stopped at the edge of the logs by withering, enemy machine gun fire. We called for more artillery support and got it! A friendly white phosphorus spotter shell fell in our midst and showered us with flecks of burning phosphorus. Ed Karkut and I brushed the fire spewing flecks off of one another and neither of us was seriously burned. The FAO screamed into his phone for a cease fire.

The next morning our regiment was relieved by the 410th Infantry Regiment who passed through us, crossed the logs and assaulted the fortifications on the hillside. They met no resistance!

## THE RUSH TO INNSBRUCK

by Fred Kent

The 103rd was moving rapidly south toward Innsbruck and the Brenner Pass with the mission to link up with the 5th Army in Italy. Somewhere in the vicinity of Oberammergau I was told to go to Corps to drive for a Colonel at Corps Headquarters. I'll never know why I was selected.

The Colonel told me that I had twenty-four hours to get him into Innsbruck. He didn't say why.

The convoy of bumper-to-bumper tanks, trucks, armored cars and jeeps was barely moving and literally clogged the road. We traveled for the most part on the shoulder of the road and slowly worked our way toward the head of the column. As we approached Mittenwald the convoy drew to a complete stop. We pressed on at a snail's pace.

In Mittenwald we were stopped by a roadblock of American M.P.s. The road south was not "cleared" and was not passable. The road was extensively cratered and the Germans had built several strong, mined, booby-trapped, heavily defended roadblocks. They were being cleared by our own artillery, tanks and the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion but it was slow, tough going. The Colonel demanded to see the officer in charge. He returned, jumped into the jeep and said, "Let's go." I asked, "Where to?" He answered, "South, just like we've been going." We crept to what we both thought was the lead tank and pulled in behind it. Just above Zirl he became very impatient with the pace and ordered me to pass and continue toward Innsbruck at full speed. I did. Two Americans in a lone jeep racing along a deserted roadway in enemy territory! We would be the first jeep to enter Innsbruck.

As we entered Innsbruck we were met by thousands of people lining the road. Some were German soldiers with burp guns over their shoulders. We moved slowly forward as the crowd became thicker and the German soldiers more numerous. Some of the people threw flowers at us. I wondered what else they or the German soldiers might throw. Grenades?

We penetrated to the town square. The Colonel stood and intensely searched the crowd. Then it happened! A man bolted through the crowd directly toward us. I knew it would happen! Here he came! This was it! He leaped the last six feet and landed in the back of our jeep. He crouched as low as he could in the jeep and said, "Let's get the hell outa here!" Instead of foe he was friend. We turned around and headed back the way we had come. Somewhere up the road near Zirl we met a more heavily armed friendly group and stopped. The man got out of the jeep, thanked us and joined a more secure reception party.

I later learned that this man was an OSS Captain who had parachuted into Innsbruck, organized a resistance and had been largely instrumental in declaring Innsbruck an "open city". He had radioed out that things were getting hot and that he couldn't hold out much longer.

The Colonel had successfully extracted his man and I had been a part of it.