

## Taped Interview

Nashville 2009

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### Henry (Hank) Klages, Co A 410th

When WW II started I was attending Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, studying Civil Engineering. I signed up with the Army Reserve Program assuming I would be able to finish school. But in April of '43 the Army called up their Reserve Program and I went to Basic Training at Camp Robinson, Arkansas. After finishing Basic Training I took a test that qualified me to enter the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman Oklahoma. I was there until they eliminated ASTP and sent most of us to the 103d Infantry Division at Camp Howze, Texas. I trained with the 1st squad of the 3rd platoon of Co A, 410th Inf. until late summer of '44 when we took the train to New York City to Camp Shanks and embarked for Europe.

All the guys from the 1st Battalion I trained with at Camp Howze were on the ship going over to France. We sailed over on a regular troop ship, the USS General J. R. Brooke. I was seasick almost the entire trip over and people who were not seasick never looked better in their life! We landed in Marseilles after two weeks and had to go over the side of the ship onto the nets and into one of the DUKWs. We walked a long way to a staging area; I think we were the first group to arrive. We were not told that we were heading to Marseilles or what our destination would be after landing in France. Eventually, they put us on trucks and took us north to a city called St. Die. Around that area we got into some machine gun fire and where our company took our first casualties; several men we knew. Our squad leader was wounded and right away that made a change in the platoon leadership. The weather was not particularly cold at that point. We would try to sleep in houses when available or you would have to dig a foxhole. I carried a M1 rifle and was the assistant BAR (Browning automatic rifle) man to John Scholler who carried the BAR. This meant that I carried the

extra ammunition for the BAR in addition to my trenching tool, ammunition, raincoat, canteen and three boxes of K-Rations. In late Nov. or early Dec. in a heavy fight, the 3rd squad lost both squad leader and assistant leader. John and I were moved from the 1st squad to take over the 3rd squad. We more or less flipped a coin to see who would do what. I became the squad leader and John the assistant. Co. A suffered constant casualties throughout, but Jan. 1945 in Alsace Lorraine at Sessenheim and Schillersdorf were the heaviest.

The Germans broke through our lines and we were outnumbered; it was bad for the whole battalion. They ordered our First Battalion of the 410th to relieve and/or help the 79th Division where there was a breakthrough. That was where we experienced our worst fighting and also where on January 20, 1945, I was shot in the head by a German soldier. Our company was moving through the woods to Sessenheim in Alsace and we had a surprise encounter with equally surprised German soldiers. There was an exchange of fire at a distance of 25-30 feet and I was hit. Both sides

pulled back a little bit and I was still lying out there. So the medic, Doc Hoffman at that time, came over and picked me up and took me back to a safe area where I could be treated. He came over to me all by himself. He was later killed but he and the other medic in our company, Hyle Adams were especially known for going anywhere to get anybody who was wounded. Hyle was a very brave person. Fortunately, my helmet protected me but the bullet did graze my head although not seriously. The medics discovered the bullet lodged in my helmet liner. I was able to rejoin the company right after that. On Jan. 25 at Schillersdorf Co. A suffered the heaviest casualties of the war. According to Hyle Adams, Co A had 25% of its total casualties there. John Scholler was badly wounded and never returned to Co. A. On Jan. 26 four trucks were brought up to move Co. A and the whole company fit in one truck.

While we were in Germany I remember we were in a house and found eggs. Some soldiers were trying to cook them. A little old lady appeared and pushed us out of the way and cooked them for us! We were in

Innsbruck in Austria when we heard about the end of the war. That was probably the first part of May '45 because the war ended the fourteenth or fifteenth. When I heard about the bomb and Hiroshima I was glad; it meant we would not be going into a further conflict. The 103d was scheduled to go to Japan as I understand it, but most of the people I knew had sufficient points so that they were taken out of the 103d and sent to other divisions. I was sent to the 9th Division. I knew all the fellows that were in our platoon. I see the ones that go to the reunion and keep in touch with others. During the war, I wrote letters home and received letters from my parents. When the war was over I returned to my parent's home and continued my education at Northwestern University. I became a structural engineer and worked for an architectural firm for many years. The architectural firm I worked for specialize in hospital construction. I designed the structural part of the hospital.

I met my wife in 1947 shortly after I got home. We married in 1950 and raised a family; we have three grown children and 8 grandchildren...

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103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division  
CO. A, 410 Regiment

On January 20, 1945, Hank Klages was moving with his unit through the forest near Sessenheim, Alsace. The 103<sup>rd</sup> had just returned to the Alsace from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army area. Klages was a member of Company A, 410<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the famous Cactus Division – the insignia that depicts the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry that last trained at Camp Howze, Texas, before being shipped out to Marseilles. As they moved through the forest they unexpectedly confronted a group of German soldiers who were as equally surprised to see them. One of the Germans reached for the burp gun hanging around his neck and fired at Henry. It hit Klages' helmet, grazing his scalp, and he dropped into the grasses by a tree. Within seconds, the G.I. standing next to Hank raised his gun and killed the shooter. When the medics removed Henry's helmet, they found the silver bullet nestled safely inside.

Henry brought the helmet, the bullet and his Purple Heart home. He married Lina, and moved to the quiet suburb of Des Plaines, Illinois, where they raised their three children. The couple now has eight grandchildren. He rarely talked with his kids about the helmet that he had buried in his closet or even brought it to the Division's military reunions that the couple attends in various places across the country every year.

In an act of generosity so typical of this Greatest Generation, he invited the daughter of a fellow G.I., whom he and his wife had met at the latest reunion, to their home to give her one of the two copies of an out-of-print book he owns about the 103<sup>rd</sup>. It is entitled *Report After Action* and was written and published in 1945 in Innsbruck, Austria. When she probed him about his experiences during the war, he reluctantly mentioned the helmet. She quickly grabbed her

camera from her purse when he removed the helmet from the closet to show it to her.

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