My Thoughts About The Greatest Generation

My name is Reed Banks, and I am a veteran of World War II. I proudly served my country in the United States Army from April 1942 to August 1945. I served in the European Theater of Operations with Company D of the 343rd Engineers. At various times, our unit was attached to Clark’s Fifth Army, Patch’s Seventh Army, and Patton’s Third Army. During my tour of duty, I traversed England, Italy, Sicily, France, Germany and North Africa on foot, sleeping on the ground each night. I was awarded the Bronze Star for my work building a bridge in Germany. This is my story:

The War Begins
When I graduated from Trenton High School in 1940, The Great Depression still had a grip on the country. The unemployment rate was 15% but, fortunately, I got a job at Armco Steel in Middletown, Ohio as labor reserve. Within a year, I took training on my own time to learn how to operate heavy cranes, which got me a permanent job at Armco. That training and my experience at Armco as a crane operator is, I think, why I was sent to Louisiana to an engineering outfit that was going to be sent overseas to build bridges to facilitate the movement of Allied troops.

On December 8, 1941, I was on my way home from working the 12 to 8 shift at Armco. As I was driving on Central Avenue in front of the Old Middletown Police Station and Central Pastry, I heard on my car radio that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. I guess, maybe, from my background coming out of Appalachia, I couldn’t understand why Japan had done that. But I decided to go down and enlist. The Army told me to go home and they’d call me when they were ready to begin processing volunteers. Soon after, I got the call and was enlisted as a Private in the US Army.

Before I left for Europe, I got engaged to a young lady. But I did not marry her then, or want to marry her then, because of the war. I didn’t think it would be fair to marry before going overseas because I didn’t know what the future held for me. After being gone two years, I got a “Dear John” letter. In essence, it said, “Reed, you’ve been gone too long.” As if I’d had any choice. This would have torn up many people, but it didn’t bother me so much because I didn’t know when (or if) I’d ever see the USA again. I was in Italy at the time and was in mud up to my eyeballs, but I held no ill will. I just put it out of my mind and let it go. In war, there are other things to think about.

I started out training for war in Louisiana in the swamp, earning $21 per month. We trained using tent pegs for guns. They had old cadre personnel from the Army to help form the unit. I thought to myself that they were the meanest guys on the face of the earth. Later, I learned these real mean guys were just little pussy cats.
Shipping Out
I boarded a boat for Europe in New York. It was the last ship out of Singapore, and was a British ship called The Orangi. It took us 15 days to cross the Atlantic because we had to zig zag all the way to avoid German submarines. We changed courses every seven minutes. We were one lone ship and three small sub chasers.

We landed in Scotland overnight, and then traveled by train down to Nettlebed, England. My unit, the 343rd Engineers, was the first contingent of American troops to land in Europe. When we got to England, the natives actually thought we were Australians at first. This was during the early part of the war, when the English were being bombarded by the German blitzkrieg. We didn't stay long in England. We boarded another troop ship and spent approximately another 15 days sailing to North Africa. As we went through the Strait of Gibraltar, some brave soul saw the lights of Morocco and jumped overboard. The Army wouldn't slow the ship down to retrieve him.

Operation Torch: The Campaign in North Africa
I think we were headed to Algeria first, but a troop ship was sunk close by Algeria and we lost all 1400 or 1500 men onboard. Our ship turned around and, all night long, the ship vibrated because we were operating at top speed as we ran to Oran. We landed in Oran, disembarked at night, ended up on a hillside somewhere outside of Oran. I woke up in the morning and I saw all these people with white robes; I didn't know what to think.

As part of The Greatest Generation, I slept on the ground in a pup tent for approximately 3 years. Rain, snow, mud didn't matter. This was our duty.

We had no shower facilities. We swam in the Mediterranean when we were close by. Our toilet situation was either slit trenches or the bushes. Since everyone was in the same boat, there wasn't much complaining.

In my tour of duty, I never saw one USO show. I only saw a couple of movies in Africa.

During my time in Africa, or Italy or Sicily, I came down with a case of malaria. The Germans had a pill that was supposed to prevent malaria. We got a hold of them, somehow, and we took them faithfully... and yet I still contracted malaria. I ran fevers of 106 degrees.

These wonderful pills gave all of us soldiers diarrhea. There was no way to clean yourself up. You just hoped to be close to a river or the Mediterranean.

I spent approximately a year in Africa, contending with the bugs and critters.
We traveled close to Tunis, turned around, and came back to Bizerte (in Algeria). During our preparation to go to Sicily, the Germans conducted a large air raid on Bizerte. I was down on the water front when the Germans started dropping flares. I put Jesse Owens to shame as I started up the hillside. About halfway up the hill, I encountered a big pit. I didn't know what it was, but I dove right into it for cover. It turned out to be a British anti-aircraft unit. I informed the guys in there they had to make room for one more, 'cause I'm not leaving this hole!

There was a big German bomber that came over us. They got him in their lights (4 or 6 motor job). I watched the 20 MM tracers going right into the fuselage. He made a big swan dive back toward the Mediterranean as the plane fell from the sky.

Someplace there in Africa, we were told there were poisonous black snakes. I know in my pup tent, a snake came crawling across my face. You could have no light on at night because you didn't want to give away your position to the enemy. I tore my pup tent down trying to get away from it. The desert is cold, so mice, snakes, etc. all came to the pup tents for warmth. That was my worst experience with animals.

After a time, we returned to the beach and boarded a little LCI. I think it only held 140 or so men (I'm no Navy guy). For the first time in all my journeys, they locked me in the hold along with all the other soldiers. But, being a little bit savvy, I got a top bunk. The seas were so rough going to Sicily; I thought the ship was going to sink backwards.

**Operation Husky: The Allied Invasion of Europe**

Operation Husky began with the allied invasion of Sicily, the area that Churchill called "the soft underbelly of Europe." We arrived in Palermo; I think it was maybe a day or so after the initial invasion. We were camped in some olive groves outside the city. Again, the Germans sent over a bunch of planes to bomb us. Shrapnel was flying through trees like hail on a tin roof. Again, some of those planes were so low, they were caught in the spotlight, I could actually see the plane.

We moved out of Palermo and headed toward Messino on the west side of Sicily. Somewhere along the way, I was guarding Italian prisoners when General Patton walked by within three feet of me. He didn't speak to me, but he also didn't slap me.

The Brits were on the east side of the island. Somewhere about halfway through our stay there, we were attached to a British outfit. 'The bloomin' bagpipes, the Scots played them all day and all night. Some members of the greatest generation, well, they took it upon themselves to raise the kilts of the Scots to see what was under there (they were drunk). The Scots didn't take kindly to that
and a big fight broke out. I wasn't a part of any of that, because I didn't care what was under that skirt.

After a period of time, I saw a lot of American soldiers piled up along the way.

They put us on a boat at Messino. I was assigned to a 20MM aircraft gun. Having never fired an aircraft gun, I didn't know what to do. Luckily, nobody came over to bomb us during that time. Do what you're told to do and if you don't know how, you figure it out. This is part of being The Greatest Generation.

I spent something like 38 months in the service. I only had one 3 day pass. I'd hear stories of USO shows and I would have loved to see one, but we were on call all the time. Also, we were on the front lines much of the time; the USO didn't come to where we were.

**Italy**

We landed at Salerno (south of Naples). From that point, we spent about a year in Italy. We built a bridge across the Volterno. We were at Cassino a long time. At the Venifro mountain, the Army issued a truck driver to me. My job was to go across the mountain 3 times per night. There were no guard rails, and I saw that a truck loaded with infantry had gone over the edge. I put up white string to mark the spot, hoping it would keep another truck from going over.

Italy was very hard. Rain, mosquitoes and mountains was all Italy was. We got approx. 18 miles south of Florence, we were pulled back to make D-Day in Southern France.

We were camped in a little olive grove and I was told the enemy landed 18 shells in that area. I was in a foxhole with an old board over me. I was quite comfortable all night.

Another one of my experiences in and around that area, we moved in 155 caliber artillery guns behind our position, which were the biggest guns in the area. Some time in the night they started boom, booming. Me, being part of the greatest generation, I thought my time had come.

Then we went on to Rome and we were there early on. In the north, I remember a little town called San Piedro. All that was left was just a shell because it had been bombed so many times.

The story was, another soldier of The Greatest Generation went to the outhouse in little bushes... but the bushes were not bushy enough... and a sniper shot him broadside in the butt. The story is that that totally destroyed his desire to take a crap anywhere.
I heard we went about 18 miles south of Florence. We came back to Naples to board the boat to go to France, where we made D-Day.

**Operation Overlord – D-Day**
D-Day in Southern France is vivid in my memory. First, they put us on a big troop ship to travel from Naples to southern France. We sat very close to the Battleship Texas and, before morning, the Texas was firing its guns into the shore. I thought you could probably hear that around the world, it was so loud. The word was that my group was going to leave at daylight for shore.

I'll never forget going over the side of the boat using a rope ladder. It was quite an experience. It was rough water, rough waves, and a small boat for only 12 or 14 men. You had to go over the side of the ship on a rope ladder and catch the boat when the waves are up; you'd miss it if you tried to do it when the waves were down. We each had a full ammo belt and full field packs. I heard we carried 90 lbs on our backs. So, if you missed the boat and landed in the water, you'd just drown. There was no way anyone could save you. When the boat was loaded, it turned and headed straight for shore. When we hit the last sandbar, the gate was thrown down and we hit the deck running. My group ran off the beach, going around a hillside. You didn't walk close together; we walked apart so that if there was a problem, only one or two would get killed. We moved fast. A friend of mine from Company H (the Supply Company) told me after the war that by the time he and his crew got themselves organized and to the beach they were dumbfounded to find themselves alone with no idea as to where everybody went. We were already long gone.

We marched around the hillside and, after a mile, the line was stopped for ten minutes to rest. I was leaning back against the bank when two German soldiers appeared right in front of me! They had their hands up and wanted to surrender. I had them come up to me and I hollered up the line, "Two prisoners!" Someone from the front of the line came back and got them. I never saw them again, but they left me safely.

We went on around the hillside and soon we came to a very narrow paved road. We turned north and marched northward. The French came in droves, stood along the road, and offered all of us soldiers flowers and water. They were most pleased to see us. Shortly after that, evening fell and we bivouacked along the way with no problems.

Some things I saw somewhere in the mountains of Southern France: first, they'd pile the manure up around the house to keep it cool. And another thing, they'd age their cheese in that manure. As you might imagine, I quit eating cheese.

Another thing, going up to some little village, I saw a bunch of little girls in a room tromping the grapes with their feet. At that point, I also quit drinking wine.
During that time in France, I saw a B-17 that went down. Everyone on board had to parachute out. The last guy to jump didn’t make it; his parachute never opened.

Somewhere on our trip going north through France, in some mountains, we stopped for the night in a little grove of trees. We’d had a hard day and we were all happy to stop. We had no more got set up than a company of French soldiers, and their women, pulled in right beside us to camp. Our captain looked around and said, “We can’t have this. Pack up. The whole company is going to move out in thirty minutes.” We went about 10 or 12 miles up the road, then stopped again for the night. This time we stayed.

We went up through France to get ready to cross the Rhine. That’s where I got my Bronze Star. I was working on the pile driver (the rig I was on was all cable; there were no hydraulics). The rig had an extension boom on it. My job was to go to the very top of the boom and fasten and unfasten the hammer lock to let the weight come down through the boom to drive the piles. The rig was so high that it constantly swayed. I got used to the feel of the sway. One time, it seemed like it swayed too long and too far. I turned to look at the rig sitting on a 20 foot high bank. The rig was turning over into the river! I made a split second decision to jump backwards as far and as fast as I could, hoping that I wouldn’t land in the debris that was in the river. The river was full of debris where it had been bombed. I went all the way to the bottom of the river, and then I came up and got out all by myself. I was very lucky not to be hurt. General Patch, who was the Commander of the Seventh Army, awarded me the Bronze Star.

In South America there is a little lizard called the Jesus Christ lizard. He runs so fast he can run on top of the water. I mimicked that lizard because I ran so fast to get out of the water. There was nobody coming in after me, so I had to get myself out.

There was one bridge along the way, across maybe the Rhine, that Hitler give orders to be blown up. The general in charge only managed to partially blow it up, and I heard that Hitler gave orders that the general be executed for failing to complete his mission.

I also remember a different bridge that needed repair. I understand the Allies put a bunch of engineers out to repair the bridge. The bridge collapsed and all the engineers were lost in the river.

I was sent to Bailey school, then had training on demolition (which is not on my discharge, but I have papers to show it). Demolition is training on how to blow things up. We came to a bridge with swift water and they told me to go blow the railroad rails apart because we needed to build a bridge across there. I was in charge of this project. One of the fellows in our squad approached me and said he wanted to come with me, because “They’ll let you go in after you’re done.”
Actually, both he and his buddy wanted to come along. I was always agreeable to working with the other guys, so I said okay. We went over to look and I sent them back to get dynamite and fuses. We had a guide line to follow with boats to pull. The water was swift. The two of them decided not to use guide lines; they decided to just come across on their own. When I realized what they planned, I yelled at them and told them, “No!” They called back, “We can make it.” I told them no again that the water was too swift; use the guide lines! They refused. Sadly, one of them made it, and the other one drowned. (The man who drowned was the one who’d originally asked if he could come along with us). He was pulled to the center of the river and no one could get to him because of the currents. I was a little younger than some of the guys I was in charge of. When you’re a little younger, some of the fellas don’t take kindly to being told what to do by you. That’s what happened here.

Germany
Germany was inaccessible to Allied troops because all the bridges leading into it had been destroyed... that it, it was inaccessible until the Dunbar Bridge was built. I was involved with building the Dunbar Bridge and several bailey bridges along the way. I don’t know all their names; it all gets confusing and sometimes we didn’t know the name of the town we were in. But I remember the Dunbar vividly. We got a Presidential Unit citation from Roosevelt for building that one. We built the Dunbar Bridge in 9 1/2 days and a staggering million vehicles crossed that bridge by war’s end. It was the only bridge that crossed the Rhine. I’ve always been proud that the 343rd had the opportunity to make such a major contribution to the war effort.

We went across the Rhine, and came to a building that had some liquor. Anytime we could raid German booze, it was a good day. So, we set up camp and drank for awhile. After a bit, I decided I’d had enough, and that I’d better get back to camp. I took off down the road, there were soldiers singing Mary Had a Little Lamb. So I took off down the road by my lonesome, singing Mary Had a Little Lamb. All of a sudden, two guys came out, rammed rifles in my back and screamed, “Password!” I didn’t know the password. Well, we had quite a discussion! I might have made some disparaging comments about their ancestry along the way. Finally, the sentries called for the Officer of the Day. The Officer of the Day (I never knew his name), he asked me what unit I was from. He was actually very nice to me and was in no way a smart alec. I told him and he said he knew our unit was in the area. He told me he’d give me the password, go this way and down. But he said, “If you travel down this road much farther, you’ll probably never come back.” So, I turned around went the other way, back toward my unit.

The Journey Home
Somewhere in Mannheim in August, I was told to come to the office. I was told to bring my gun, gas mask, and helmet with me. When I reach the office, they said, “You’re going home, Reed.” I was actually one of the first to be discharged
because I had 116 points from participating in so many campaigns. During my time in the Army, I was involved in eight campaigns, as well as the D-Day invasion in Southern France.

I flew from Germany to Casablanca on a B-17. The B-17 I traveled in had been in battle and had holes in it where shrapnel had hit it. They put me on a flying fortress, with 2 parachutes and a Mae West (to keep me from drowning). We ran into a terrific storm somewhere over the Mediterranean headed to Casablanca. They were of the opinion that our plane might go down. I was the one sitting closest to the door. Although I had never jumped out of a plane before, I wouldn't have hesitated for a second. I sure didn't want to go down with the plane.

From Casablanca, I traveled to Miami on a C-54. Along the way, I stopped at the Azores and at Bermuda and finally back to the USA, landing in Miami, Florida. From there, I took a train to Indian Town Gap, PA then caught a bus to Dayton, Ohio. Finally, for the last leg of my journey home, I took a bus from Dayton to my hometown of Middletown, Ohio. This is the part of the story that is really bothersome. No one came to meet me or greet me. As I was walking down the street to the next bus stop, I came up on an old black gentleman. I was wearing my uniform so he knew I was a soldier. He stepped off the sidewalk to let me pass. I told him, "You don't have to do that. Don't step aside for anybody. Come right on." My homecoming was in August 1945.

Before I enlisted in the army, I had a Silver Streak Pontiac. During the war, my parents sold it. They said they'd needed the money from the car, as well as from the allotment from my army pay I'd sent home regularly throughout the duration of the war. That was the only time it was ever mentioned. At that point, I had no girl, no car, and no money. I was sick in body and head. Then one chance in a million, I met this young lady by accident and married her a few months later. We will celebrate our 64th wedding anniversary day after tomorrow.

To all who read this, God Bless.

Reed Banks
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