

Douglass: I never really did understand. We were there for about a week and we were ... we were kind of a rag-tag bunch of kids that didn't have any idea of what was going on. We were put to work scrubbing barracks. Of course we had our heads shaved. We played soldier. Then finally after a week we were placed on military buses and transported to Camp Ellis, Illinois, down about the mid-part of the state, for basic training. This camp was out in the middle of nowhere, a gigantic place. Hundreds of barracks. I recall all of them having big brick chimneys on the end. Our buses were stopped at the main gate and armed guards came on and looked us over, made a few snide remarks, and then upon leaving the gate we were pretty certain we were in the Army.

McCranie: What did they make you do first thing, once you got to that camp?

Douglass: Okay, we got in kind of late in the evening and were assigned to a barracks. At some time during that night they posted a list on the bulletin board with our assignments and we were assigned to ten-man squads of four squads making up a platoon. Our training company consisted of four platoons. Also at that time they introduced us to our training cadre of non-commissioned officers. The following morning we fell out for reveille, and following breakfast they marched us to a Quartermaster supply building. At that time they issued us our helmets, our packs, ammunition belts, mess gear, canteen, first aid kit, bayonets, and leggings. I don't know if you're familiar with that. We wore kind of a leather tied-up canvas legging over our pant legs. We were issued our rifle, a 30-caliber Garand M-1, and our new platoon sergeant, who was part of the training cadre, informed us that the rifle would be forever known as our "piece" and we were told to memorize the serial number of it immediately. And that started our six weeks of basic training.

McCranie: What did you think of your NCOs there?

Douglass: They were strictly business. I don't know if you watch some of these Jerry

Springer shows or something where these boot camp guys come in and berate young bad kids? They weren't nothing like that. They were fair, but they were very firm. They operated on the basis of firm, fair, and friendly.

McCranie: Did they keep you in line?

Douglass: You bet. Definitely

McCranie: Any surprises during your first few days in basic training?

Douglass: Not really. We of course learned the basics of close order drill and marching and they put us through the obstacle courses where they had a 30-gun machine gun firing right over you. We did endurance marches with full field packs and always doing constant, close-order drill. Had to go on the firing range to qualify as a rifleman. And as I said previously, I had amblyopia in my right eye so I'd always fired a rifle or shotgun left-handed. When it became my turn to be order up to the firing line, I placed the "piece," my rifle (which was called a piece from then on) in my left hand, and that was when I received my first royal military chewing out. The range director came up and said, "What are you doing with that piece in your left hand? Get it over in your right hand." I started to give him my excuse and then I found out very soon that there were no excuses in the military. So I qualified with the M-1 in my right hand, looking over the stock of the gun, aiming with my left eye. The M-1 packs a real wallop, and for the next few days I had a very sore jaw. During this training we were all trained in at least three different jobs. Inquiries resulted in the information that you may not be there to do your job and someone else may have to fall in and take over for you.

McCranie: What type of jobs did they train you for?

Douglass: I was trained for ... I was sent off for six weeks to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin,

because I was the only man in that unit who had taken typing in high school. I was sent off to clerical school for three weeks and then come back to my unit. I was a truck driver, so I became a truck driver in the service, a bulldozer operator, and they threw other job at me and that was in the electrical field. I remember in an open field they had about twenty old telephone poles planted, and we learned to climb poles and do wiring and so on. Those old poles had been climbed so many times with the spurs (and the military used tree spurs for climbing, which were about two inch long as opposed to linemen nowadays, they wear little short spurs), and those old poles were nothing but creosote slivers. And if your spur happened to slip out and you slid down the pole, you spent the next day or two picking creosote slivers out of your midriff. But never the less, on June 25, 1943, the 1301st Engineer General Service Regiment was activated and I was assigned to B Company. If you recall, I said all my records had been stamped "limited service." In true Army fashion, I was assigned to this general service regiment, and that's where I spent my entire World War II career.

McCranie: Talking about your training, any reason they would have given you that electrical training? Anything pre-qualify you for that?

Douglass: No, not really. We spent about nine months there and primarily we build pontoon bridges, Bailey bridges, fixed bridges. We'd build them and tear them down and build them and tear them down. We practiced clearing mine fields. We were trained to handle to handle all available explosives that they had available at that time. Of course, we repeatedly went back to the firing range to sharpen our firing skills. We were so proficient at building bridges, I think we could have done it in our sleep.

McCranie: You find the work interesting?

Douglass: Very interesting. You've probably heard the old expression that basic training made men from boys? That is a very true statement.

McCranie: Make any very good friends there during the basic training period?

Douglass: A few. Not too many. We were really too busy and worked so hard, when you got back to the barracks that night after you had your evening meal, back to barracks, everyone was ready for the bed. There wasn't too much free time at all to be active in personal friendships or anything of that nature.

McCranie: Could you describe a typical day of your basic training?

Douglass: We rolled out at 4:45 for reveille, to breakfast. Normally went on about a five-mile march with full field pack. Depending on what was on the schedule for that day, possibly loaded into trucks and went out fifteen - twenty miles to some small brook or river and we'd build a bridge. Build it, tear it down ... pontoon bridges were built with pontoons that were pumped up from a compressor truck. We would tear it down, let the air out of the pontoons, fold them back up and take them back to the supply headquarters.

McCranie: Did you have pretty good food while you were there in basic training?

Douglass: Oh, it was a constant gripe about the quality of the food, but it sustained all of us. We made out very well with it.

McCranie: Why did you gripe about it?

Douglass: It seemed like there wasn't much variety. You could just about know what you were going to be having for each meal the day previous.

McCranie: Anything particular that stands out in your mind about your period of basic training?

Douglass: Only the fact that when I went into the service, I was about 5'8" and weighed about 130 pounds. I grew in the service. I came out of the service 5'10½ " and about 150 pounds. But in basic ... I thought I was in pretty good shape, but when I finished with basic training, I was in very good shape. I could lift things that I had no idea that I could even attempt to try to lift prior to that. Just felt good about the whole situation. Physically you really felt good.

McCranie: After your period of basic training, where did they send you?

Douglass: After we completed basic training, we were all itching to get out and join the fight, and we shipped out to our point of embarkation on March 8, 1944. We arrived at Camp Miles Standish, just outside of Boston, on March 13. The Boston harbor was a beehive of activity. Our boarding was delayed for three days, and the explanation given was that our ship hadn't been able to get allocated dock space, and that when we did board, we'd be going in a convoy across the north Atlantic and we would have Navy escorts with us on the way because the German U-boats had been creating havoc with our convoys. The reason I know these dates ... I kept a little log throughout my entire career. I managed to get ahold of a French map when we hit France and I kept track of our movements in Europe and dates, so these dates are all pretty accurate. We finally boarded and sailed on March 23 on the SS *E B Alexander*, which was a liberty ship. We were in a convoy of thirty-two ships and we had four Navy destroyers escorting us. At about 2:30 in the morning on March 26, there was a terrific explosion that rocked the ship. Water came streaming down the hatch into the holds where the men were all bunked up. Somebody shouted "torpedo!" and mass panic ensued. No more water came in and we didn't sink, so order was restored. In going up on the deck at daylight, we discovered the entire port side of the ship caved in and the entire railing was gone, and apparently a helmsman on a neighboring ship in the convoy had dozed off that night and he broadsided us. But it kind of put the fear of God in everyone at the time.

We arrived in Liverpool, England, on April 5. We immediately received dock space; the

shipping was just a tremendous function. Even though this harbor was as busy as Boston, we managed to get right in. Part of the unit went by rail and another part of the regiment went by truck to Swindon, England. We arrived that afternoon and we were ordered to immediately pitch us a tent city for the entire regiment. During our stay in Swindon, it was miserable. I had no knowledge of what to expect when we got into England, but it was cold, it was rainy, high humidity, and it seemed like everything would mildew overnight. They instructed us to build a fence around the perimeter of the tent city, and that created quite a disruption with all the members because where were we gonna go? Didn't know anything about England, didn't know any place to go. But come to find out the reason we built the fence was to keep the small English children out. England was in terrible shape. These little children were starving and they would come around to our mess area and beg for scraps out of the mess kits that were being emptied into the garbage cans. They were really in a deplorable condition.

On the 28th of April, we broke camp there, boarded trucks again in what turned out to be a two-day trip to Tidworth Park. I had never seen so much military activity in all my life. Little did we know that we were just weeks away from the invasion of France at that time. While we were at Tidworth, we were assigned to General Patton's Third Army. We assembled all of our rolling equipment, checked and rechecked everything for a trip to Europe. We left Tidworth for the Winchester staging area on August 2, and from there to Southampton on August 4. While we were at Southampton, the unit was broken up into several parts for transportation across the English Channel. Apparently we used everything would float, from British fishing ships to Landing Craft Infantry and Landing Craft Tanks. We spent two days in the English Channel, and as most people know, the English Channel is probably one of the roughest bodies of water that there is. The reason we spent two days out there is because there was just so much stuff going into France that ... they had moved docks into the beach area, and they were just so loaded up with vessels going in with supplies and so on that you just had to set back out in the Channel and wait your turn. We were crammed into boats which ... it was only supposed to have been an eight-hour trip and we ended up being on them for two days. The English are great on boiled food. It was boiled potatoes with (I think) mutton in it, probably boiled. Most of it went over the railing.

McCranie: Did you get seasick?

Douglass: No. Several were seasick as could be. Fortunately, I wasn't one of them. But I had so many people sick around me that it very nearly got to me. We finally got in and had an opportunity to unload, and our division unloaded and was split between Omaha and Utah beaches. The day we landed was on August 6; that was exactly sixty days after the invasion. Of course, Patton had been held back because he's strictly an armor man and they needed to make some kind of an advancement so he could get off the beach when he brought his armor in. Even though sixty days had lapsed, the push into France had been pretty rough and slow going, and they really hadn't made a whole lot of headway. You've probably heard of the hedgerows that existed in Normandy?

McCranie: Oh, yes.

Douglass: They created a real problem for the troops. The northern Illinois boys such as myself were familiar with hedgerows because they were used up in our part of the country in lieu of wire fences. The farmers in northern Illinois, after the hedgerows had grown up seven or eight years, they would cut them back and make fence posts out of it. It was a tremendous wood for making fence posts; they'd last forever. But the ones in Normandy had never been cut back, and they were nearly impregnable. They had about two-inch thorns on them and actually they were so thick that there was places a rabbit couldn't even get through. The French country roads were very narrow, just hardly wide enough for a truck. After they finally got through some of these hedgerows and got a little room for advancement, Patton's tanks came in and started their move. From then on it was build bridges, blow up hedgerows, anything to keep ... our primary duty was to keep his tanks moving. After embarking, we immediately went to Ste. Mere Eglise and then on to Bricquebec on August 7, St. James on August 9, Fougères on the 10th. While we were at Fougères, we later found out that a division of German soldiers numbering about 100,000 were encircled in the Feleaise [sp?] Gap. American troops had them partially surrounded, and we later