

found out that our regiment was the only troops on the south side of this encirclement. Fortunately, the Germans didn't know it and neither did we – we'd have been scared to death. But anyway, while having them partially encircled, they managed to withdraw back into France and regroup. At Fougères we encountered our first fatality. A young private was clearing mines and he happened to set off a German anti-tank Teller mine. His dogtags were found in a tree and that's about all that was found of him.

McCranie: What was your first impression of landing in France and all the fighting that had gone on around there?

Douglass: The beaches were a littered mess. There were landing craft partially submerged, there was still a lot of the like railroad tracks that the Germans had drove in on the beach area to stop tanks and trucks and so on from coming ashore. The beaches were just a littered mess, that's the only way I can explain it. I was in a state of bewilderment, I guess you could say. Fortunately they kept us moving, and moving fast. So we managed to get off the beaches and into trucks and started on our way into France. While we were going across France, we existed primarily on K-rations.

McCranie: How'd you like eating those?

Douglass: Not too well. You know, they came in a box about the size of Crackerjacks. There was a small tin of either some kind of meat or occasionally it would be some sort of egg dish. Small rock-hard chocolate bar, two dog biscuits (as we called them) – two little crackers that were hard as rocks, a pack of lemonade mix, and a little box with four cigarettes in it. And that was our supplies through France. I remember on August 15, we were into Angiers and we stumbled onto the Cointreau distillery. We confiscated the contents of the warehouse. Cointreau is an orange-flavored liqueur, and when you mixed it with our lemon powder, it made a pretty powerful drink, even though it was in our aluminum mess cups. Just last week I was in a liquor

store here in Panama City and I saw a bottle of Cointreau on the shelf. It sells now for about \$40 a bottle. Word soon got out of our achievement and I don't know, somebody talked when they should have been listening and we were ordered to transport the entire shipment of liquor to the Third Army headquarters. Needless to say, a goodly amount never left our unit.

We zig-zagged back and forth through central France, sometimes backtracking and trying another route. On August 31, we arrived at Fontainebleau. It's about forty miles south of Paris, a beautiful town. This was the nearest to Paris that we ever got. Patton's Third Army and all units in his Third Army were forbidden to enter Paris for political reasons. They wanted Britain's Montgomery and our First Army and the Free French to liberate Paris, so Patton's outfit was told to stay away. Although France had built an elaborate defensive line along the German border ... what was it called? The Maginot Line?

McCranie: Yes, sir.

Douglass: The Germans just simply skirted one end of it and overran the entire country. They exerted very little damage to the country as I was told, but most of the damage inflicted on France was the result of our bombing raids meant to dislodge the Germans from their strongholds. In my personal opinion, the French showed little animosity toward the Germans because after all, they were neighbors. The Free French created minor problems for them prior to our arrival, but the Free French were very instrumental in helping save our downed aviators. They had an impressive underground system and they were able to route our flyers back to England. On occasion we saw signs of collaboration with the Germans, and a few French women had their heads shaved. I always felt it was mostly show, and if all the French men and women who collaborated or associated with the Germans in any way had had their heads shaved, it would have been a country of skinheads.

During our trips across France we encountered several chateaus, and occasionally we'd bivouac overnight in one of those chateaus. All of our unit was young people such as myself. We had a few "old-timers" that were twenty-five years old, but most of us were nineteen or

twenty. We'd get into these chateaus and go down in the basement and here'd be row after row after row of bottled wine. Of course, in those days Americans weren't into wine too much. We would get into that and get kind of happy, but what we didn't realize that below that cellar was a series of other cellars and the farther down you went, the better the quality of the wine. So we were ending up drinking the green stuff, you might say.

McCranie: Did you meet many of the French and what did you think of the French?

Douglass: We really never encountered too many. The people in Normandy were exceptionally nice. They did everything they could for us. They were (you might say) like the British – they were practically starving because the countryside had been just about obliterated and there was very little live animal life anywhere. You'd see the fields were full of dead cows and dead horses. You saw very few chickens. They just didn't have anything. But they were willing to share with us what they did have. Like they would bring us apples or fruit from their orchard. They were exceptionally nice people. The farther we got into France, they were always glad to see the Americans, but it seemed like it disintegrated the farther we got toward the German border.

Our stiffest resistance in France was in the vicinity of Commercy, Nancy, Metz, Pont-a-Moussan and Hagondange ... this was getting up fairly close to the German border. While we were in the vicinity of Pont-a-Mousson the second time ... the first time we got there the Germans ran us out, so we had to go back and run them back out.

McCranie: Was your engineer unit involved in the fighting or did you have infantry or armor with you?

Douglass: It was mostly the armor. We did some hand-to-hand combat with our rifles and so on, but most of it was done with the tanks. At the time we were around in that area that I just mentioned, it was when the Germans made their last big push through Belgium at Bastogne. Of

course, Patton's entire army was ordered to Bastogne post haste to support the besieged troops that were there. I'm here to tell you, it was an extremely mad dash in some of the worst winter in Europe's history, and how we survived the Germans there and more so, the weather, is still a mystery to me. Our sleeping bags were nothing more than a GI wool blanket with a little canvas cover around it, and it was so miserably cold there our combat boots would freeze solid at night. I think the only way we survived the weather at Bastogne was just our extreme physical condition.

McCranie: How did you end up in Bastogne?

Douglass: With Patton. We were down in the Pont-a-Moussan - Metz area and all of his units were ordered up there to help out with ... well, apparently all that was up there at the time was a few airborne units that were getting the daylight beat out of them. Their cooks and clerks and everyone had to man rifles and take up the fight man-to-man in there. It was said to have been the worst winter in German history, and it was ice and snow and slush and mud. I can recall trucks stopping on the road and then all of a sudden just slowly starting to slide sideways and slide right on off the road into a ditch.

When we were leaving Bastogne, we went to Malmédy, and we witnessed the Grave Registration people trying to identify the hundreds of Americans that had surrendered and the Germans had mowed them down. There were just any number of bodies still in the fields where they'd been mowed down. It had snowed – a heavy snow – and there were arms and legs sticking up. The bodies, of course, had been frozen stiff. That was a sickening sight, one of the most disgusting sights that I saw during my entire career.

McCranie: Did you realize the Germans had shot them after they surrendered at that point, or did you know what had happened to them?

Douglass: Yeah, this was about three days after it happened, and the word was out what had

transpired.

McCranie: Did that change your perception of the Germans?

Douglass: It certainly did. It certainly did. Following that we headed back to the area of Thionville and we entered the German homeland at Serrig on March 21. Little town, Serrig, it was about ten miles from the Luxembourg border. But while we were in the Metz area and prior to our going up to Bastogne, we had bridged the Moselle and the Saar and the Nied rivers with pontoon bridges to keep Patton's tanks moving. At that time most all the supplies were coming from the beaches in France and they had what they referred to as the Red Ball Express. It was a group of mostly black drivers on military 6 by 6 trucks, and they would haul them full of jerry cans of fuel and ammunition, food, clothing, whatever supplies were needed up there. Those guys rolled! I mean, they drove those old trucks as hard as they could drive them. And still Patton was surging ahead. He had run out of fuel with his tanks and finally the supply trucks would get up there and there'd be words exchanged between the tank crews and truck drivers, and before you'd know it they'd be in a fistfight. But they certainly did a job getting supplies up to us.

McCranie: Did your unit have problems obtaining supplies?

Douglass: No, we were pretty fortunate. I'll tell you, we ended up to be a regiment of scroungers. We could come with up with just about whatever we needed from the countryside. As such, if anybody happened to have a jeep and walked off and left it for a few minutes, the jeep would disappear [laughter]. In fact, when we left Europe, I think we left about sixty jeeps behind us that were not table of equipment that we could take with us. So we were real scroungers.

From Serrig we went to St. Wendel, then back to Saarbrücken.

McCranie: And during this time you're making all these movements, what type of operations

is your engineering unit doing?

Douglass: Still working minefields and ... minefields and bridges were primarily our two big things. Of course, with the German autobahn system, once we got into Germany it was a breeze – we really moved. From Saarbrücken we moved to Bad Kreuznach and bridged the Nahe River. We stayed mostly south of Frankfurt, we caught such cities as Wiesbaden, Mainz, Worms, Mannheim, Stuttgart, and then we went up toward Würzburg, Bamberg, and we finally ended up in a little town of Erlangen just north of Nuremberg, where the war trials were held. Germany – the devastation was horrendous. Our bomber crews had really did a job. Buildings that weren't completely destroyed all had some sort of damage, and of course our last big obstacle in Germany was the Rhine River. Once we crossed it, it was pretty clear sailing. But we built several pontoon bridges across the Rhine and at Oppenheim we built a permanent bridge. Apparently this exercise had been planned several months in advance and the powers to be in the military were already considering the revitalization of Germany. Barge traffic in Germany was a major function, very similar to our Mississippi. The Rhine River was an equivalent, I think, to our Mississippi with regard to barge traffic. So our job was to build a two-way fixed bridge with a ninety-foot navigational span, and it was really a major undertaking for 1,200 men. But like I said, our regiment had become very proficient in scavenging. Each company was given a specific part of the bridge construction. One company found a little operating sawmill, so they were charged with providing timbers and lumber. One company started on one bank and the other company started on the opposite bank And what I failed to mention – we had liberated a couple of slave labor camps on the eastern side of France, and those poor people were in rags, they were starved to death, they were nothing but skin and bones. They really had no place to go. So whenever we moved, they just grabbed onto anything they could grab on and they tagged along with us. And we tried our best to clothe them a little bit and keep them fed. When we started in on this bridge, they pitched in just like part of the troops and they were so eager to help, but sometimes they were more in the way than they helpful. One of the units had found a couple of old steam-powered pile drivers somewhere and they put them on barges and floated them

down to the bridge site. We scrounged up generators for lighting and welding. One of the difficult tasks was locating 90-foot I-beams to make the navigational span. But we'd already built a pontoon bridge upriver and the tank traffic was still go, so We had lots of support from every branch of the service. The Navy come in there with small boats. I was surprised to find the Navy in the middle of Germany. Artillery set up ack-ack batteries around the bridge site. Navy Seabees were shipped in to lend a hand.

McCranie: How did your unit get along with these other units?

Douglass: Great. Really ...

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Douglass: ... tempo and the frame of mind and the atmosphere of this bridge project can't be put into words. Everyone just pitched in like you would not believe and in a matter of twelve short days, that bridge was open. It was open for two-way tank traffic with a ninety-foot navigational span in the center of it. It was on April 12. Of course, that's the day President Roosevelt expired. So the bridge was immediately dedicated as the President Roosevelt Memorial Bridge.

V-E Day was May 8, 1945; found us in Erlangen, Germany, just a few miles north of Nuremberg. A point system had been devised to determine who would stay and who would go home, and if I recall correctly, if you'd accumulated thirty points, you were eligible to be rotated back to the States, to the United States, and be discharged. Now, I could be wrong on this, but if you had less than thirty points, then you'd remain in Europe as the Army of Occupation. Well, every man in our unit with the exception of replacements had in excess of sixty points, so we all knew that we'd soon be on our way home. We lazed around Erlangen for about three weeks getting cleaned up ... really, personal hygiene all through France had been minimal at best, and we did really get cleaned up for once in our life while at Erlangen. One of my friends and I went