

down to Nuremberg to the airfield down there and I had flown a little bit prior to going into service, so had he. We found an old German \_\_\_\_\_[??] observation aircraft. We flew it back down to Erlangen and landed in a pasture down there, and we gave airplane rides for a few days. But this was short lived, however, because on June 8, our regiment was ordered to fall in because our commanding officer wanted to make a speech to us. We thought, well, oh boy, this is it – we're going home. Colonel Francis X. Purcell, our regimental commander, climbed up into the back of a truck, made one of the shortest speeches in his career. I remember every word to this day, over sixty years later. And he said, "Men, the War Department has declared this regiment essential to the continuing war effort; we depart tomorrow morning at 0800 hours direct to the Asiatic Pacific theater to participate in the invasion of the Japanese homeland. Good luck, men. Carry on." I'll tell you, thoughts of going home were soon displaced with thoughts of imminent death. Every man in the unit thought that our death warrants had been signed, because we knew the invasion of the Japanese homeland ... we would have to fight every Jap – man, woman, and child, to the death. Because we'd heard of these kamikaze pilots and complete units in the islands in the Pacific committing Hari Kari and so on. It was a morale-breaker if there ever was one.

One thing I failed to mention – we had a medical detachment assigned to us – four men to each company. Those guys ... the only thing they lacked was a visible halo. They were tremendous. We had one big red-headed medic, he was about 6'4" and had to weigh every bit of 200 pounds, as gruff and rough and they come, and I don't think there was a female nurse anywhere in the country that was any more capable and more thoughtful than he was. I've seen that big dude pick up a man his size, cradle him in his arms like a baby and walk through a minefield bringing him back to where they could attend to him. Unfortunately, we had to leave our medics behind when we left Erlangen. That was another sad part of the whole operation. I apologize for breaking up there, but it was a sad situation.

That next morning at eight o'clock, we boarded 40&8s boxcars and we went by rail to St. Victoret staging area near Marseilles, France. Now, these 40&8 boxcars – rail cars – were old World War I vintage and that designation was from World War I, meaning there was room for forty men and eight horses. We got to the staging area near Marseilles on June 13, and six days

later, after being equipped with all new clothing and equipment, we boarded the SS *Sea Quail* – it was another liberty ship. We shipped out at 9 AM on the morning of July 19. We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on the 21st of July and we arrived at Colón, Panama, on August 1.

**McCranie:** How was the voyage across?

**Douglass:** Long and everyone still was had this thought in their mind of what was waiting for us in the Pacific. It was a very sobering trip. The weather was not bad, not bad at all. When we arrived in Colón, Panama, we were allowed an overnight. Prior to disembarking from the ship, they paid us in greenbacks. It was the first time since leaving Boston that we'd seen any American money. (We had been paid in Europe with Military Script). The only difference was that all of the money that we were paid off with had "Hawaii" stamped on the back of it in big black letters. It was Hawaiian dollars, but it was American money with "Hawaii" stamped on the back of it. When we got into town in Colón ... they had a center square and the square was circled by two-story buildings, but the bottom story was nothing but one continuous row of little green rooms with just one window and a door in them, and in each one of the doors was standing a "lady of the evening." Needless to say, they did a roaring business that night.

Back on board the *Sea Quail* the next morning, we passed through the Panama Canal, we traversed the Gatun Lake – the freshwater lake between the two oceans. They installed shower pipes up on the deck and of course, across the Atlantic all we had was saltwater for showers, so everyone had the opportunity to get a freshwater shower while we were in the canal system. Then we headed out across the Pacific. I spent most of the nights up in the bow of the ship because in the Pacific there was all kinds of little fluorescent bodies in the water and it was a beautiful sight to set up in the bow and watch those little fluorescent bodies floating around. This trip was uneventful as far as weather was concerned, but it was boring. The ship was overloaded to begin with, with bodies. On each side were concrete ballast, stood about four feet high and probably about four feet wide of concrete, which made nice tables for card playing. So

there were poker games galore going on constantly. Someone had the initiative to paint up a shelter half with a crap layout, so they had crap shooting. Gambling was rampant.

**McCranie:** Were you good at gambling?

**Douglass:** I gambled a lot, but I lost everything I had. On the 17th we crossed the International Date Line, and all ships require a ceremony when you do that, and we were told we were entering the domain of the Golden Dragon. Each member of the regiment was initiated into the silent mysteries of the Far East by the ships' crew. It was a little fun thing on a very trying trip. They had a little mimeograph machine where you ... an old stylus ... I don't know if you're familiar with the old reproduction system where you cut a stylus and put it on a mimeograph machine ...?

**McCranie:** Oh, yes.

**Douglass:** And they made us a little certificate (which I still have, incidently), and just four days after that we crossed the Equator. So another onboard ceremony was held; that changed us from "pollywogs" to "trusty shellbacks" and we were indoctrinated into the domain of Neptunus Rex. Oh, they had some fun. Kind of like a fraternity house initiation, pulling little jokes on fellows. But to make a long story short, on August 25, we arrived at Hollandia, New Guinea and we debarked on what we thought was gonna be jungle training, only to find out "hey, get back on, we're moving again." So the next day we re-boarded the *Sea Quail*, we crossed the Equator a second time en route to Tacloban, Leyte, in the Philippines. And while we were en route, we received word that President Harry Truman, bless his heart, had the intestinal fortitude to employ the Atomic bomb. Everyone on board was ecstatic. We just knew they was gonna turn the ship around and take us home. No such luck. Second bomb was dropped prior to our reaching Tacloban, and V-J Day was announced on what? September 2. We were still on board the *Sea Quail*, but we finally arrived on ...

**McCranie:** Did that improve your morale, once you realized it was V-J Day?

**Douglass:** Oh, yes, definitely. And we knew we were going home on the *Sea Quail*. But we finally arrived in Batangas, Luzon, on September 6 and we disembarked and set up camp at a town called Bwana [??]. Believe it or not, that's the last we saw of the *Sea Quail*. In a few days we went back to Batangas by truck, arrived back there on September 10, and then for the next thirteen days it was a grueling truck convoy to Manila. We finally arrived at the University of the Philippines in Manila on September 23 and by this time nearly the entire regiment was suffering from malaria. It was a pretty sad, sickly lot. I came down with malaria and I was so weak I could hardly lift my head up.

We soon became what I called the "lost outfit." For two months we did everything in our power to try to direct attention to our situation. Some of our officers had pulled rank and finagled a flight home. I don't know who was responsible for us, but we were finally told that a freighter was coming in and that if we'd go down to the dock and build bunks in it and prepare it for a troop ship, we could take it home. Well, still reeling from the effects of malaria, the whole gang turned out, and in one day's time we had the ship prepared for troop movement. We went back to the University of the Philippines where we'd been bivouacking, pack our bags, and we were told to be down there at seven o'clock the next morning. Well, when we got down there at seven o'clock the next morning, the ship was gone. Apparently they loaded up a bunch of low-point Air Force boys about two o'clock in the morning and shipped them out.

Well, to make a long story short, we finally got on a ship, the USS *President Polk*, on December 10. We arrived in San Francisco the day after Christmas, December 26. We took a ferry over to Camp Stoneman on the 23rd, boarded troop trains, and arrived back where I started at Camp Grant, Illinois, on January 5, 1946. It took three days of processing for us to be ready for discharge at Camp Grant, and suddenly they discovered that they did not have any Class A uniforms for processing us out. We were supposed to be discharged in a Class A uniform [chuckles]. We were made a proposition – we could either remain in the service for about a week until they got in the Class A uniforms, or we could accept a discharge in our khaki shirts

and pants and our Class A uniforms could be requested at a later date. Well, guess what? I was on my way home January 8, out of the Army and in khakis. For my participation in World War II, I received the good conduct medal, the Europe-African-Middle Eastern campaign medal with four bronze battle stars, and they were namely the northern France campaign, the Ardennes, the Rhineland, and Central Europe. Also received the Asiatic-Pacific campaign medal, Philippine liberation ribbon, the World War II victory medal, and I had made sharpshooter on the rifle range so I had the sharpshooter badge with the rifle bar, and three overseas ribbons. You were issued an overseas ribbon every time you completed a full six-month service. So we were issued three overseas ribbons, which indicated eighteen months overseas. I think actually we were over there about twenty.

[some conversation not transcribed]

A couple of points that I failed to make – I had absconded a German Volkswagen, the equivalent to our Jeep, and I was going into Metz one day and I happened to look over to my right and here come a group of aircraft, low, like 100 feet or less. The nearer they got, I saw the swastikas on them, and man, I bailed out of my Volkswagen and into the ditch and looked up, and I could see the pilots. They were so low I could see the pilot looking down at me. There was probably about twenty of them all told, and they were making a big drive on some installation there at Metz. Of course, I thought every one of them was after me personally. One of them apparently got hit by anti-aircraft fire and it came over, I'd say less than 100 feet high – it was smoking. It crashed into a field about four football fields from me. After they left I went over there, and of course a bunch of Frenchmen had climbed all over the aircraft. The pilot was dead. One of the Frenchmen had taken his sidearm from the pilot. I relieved the Frenchman of that. It was a little .380 Biretta pistol, and I brought that home with me; that was my only war souvenir. The gruesome part of it was the pilot's blood was all on the inside of the holster.

The longer I talk, the more things pop up in my mind. I forget where we were in Germany, but they had just encountered one of Hitler's concentration camps, had overran it I think about three days prior to our finding out about it. Our company's 1st sergeant and two platoon sergeants got into a Jeep and went to this camp. If I remember correctly, I think it was Dachau. They were gone most of the day, and they came back and everyone was asking, "Well,

what did you see? What was it like?" And those men, their lives were completely changed. They never mentioned the camp, they never told us anything about what they saw. And now, from viewing the History Channel, I can understand why. But it completely changed their lives; from then on until we discharged, they weren't the same people.

**McCranie:** How did they change?

**Douglass:** They just ... their complete demeanor. You didn't hear much laughing or joking out of them like you used to. Apparently the sight was so shocking it actually had some sort of mental ... I don't know how to say it. Like they'd ... I can't explain it. They were not the same people that came back that went up there. So the only thing they did say ... some of the other people in the unit said that they'd like to go up and see it. They said, "Don't go." That was all they said, "Don't go."

**McCranie:** Did you run into many German civilians?

**Douglass:** Quite a few. They were pleasant. I felt some sorry for some of these old German people; the war had passed them by and their little house was ... made it intact, their little flowers out front and everything was so pretty. Then while we were building that bridge at Oppenheim, they needed those ninety-foot-long I-beams ... they came through little towns ... streets would wind through the towns ... they'd precede these big old monstrous trucks carrying these I-beams with a bulldozer and would straighten out all the sharp curves in the road, and here some of those pretty little homes were the victim of the bulldozers. So the war had passed them by and they thought everything was fine, and then here come these engineers and knock their house down.

**McCranie:** Did the civilians seem resentful of you, or they seem happy to see you or how would you characterize them at that?

**Douglass:** Most of the Germans that we encountered were civil. Very little action or reaction toward us. I went back to Germany about three years ago, and I went to Bad Kreuznach where we had built a bridge, and I couldn't recognize any of the country. It's if I never had been there. I never recognized a single thing while I was there. And I traveled a good bit in Germany to the same towns that we had been in in World War II, and I could not recognize anything that I had seen in World War II.

**McCranie:** It's all been developed or ...?

**Douglass:** It's all been rebuilt, and it's just fantastic. And Germany is the most beautiful country you could ever want to visit.

**McCranie:** Did you run into many German prisoners of war?

**Douglass:** Not really. If they were, they never let you know that they were. You mean on my recent visit?

**McCranie:** No, I mean ....

**Douglass:** During the war?

**McCranie:** During the war, yes, sir.

**Douglass:** We would see whole companies or regiments that had given up marching back with a few GIs accompanying them. They were pretty beaten up outfits. They knew they were losing, they couldn't see any reason for continuing the war, supplies had become a problem for them, food had become a problem for them. They just gave the impression that, "Hey, we're glad it's over -- for us," you know.



**McCranie:** Did you ever come under German fire?

**Douglass:** In Metz we did, yes.

**McCranie:** Artillery fire or ...?

**Douglass:** No, rifle fire – hand gun.

**McCranie:** And what happened there?

**Douglass:** The Germans had a fairly strong toehold in Metz on the Moselle River. And we kind of stumbled up onto them, not knowing that they were there. It was a case of shoot and get out, which we did. We fell back, got a little bit organized, and then went back in with other fire support and we ran them on out of there. But that was the only place where we actually encountered what you might call hand-to-hand combat. It wasn't any bayonet business, but it was near enough to where there was rifles and handguns fired back and forth to one another.

**McCranie:** The Germans put up a pretty good fight for you?

**Douglass:** Oh, yes. Germans were good soldiers. No one can ever deny them that. They were ... along the beaches, the Germans that we encountered in western Europe, western France, were tremendous soldiers. Well trained, disciplined. The farther we got toward the French-German border, the less disciplined, the less trained, and the younger soldiers we encountered. As we entered Germany a lot of them we encountered I don't think could even shave yet. It had really gotten down to the bottom for personnel.

**McCranie:** Since you were in the Third Army, did you ever see or hear Patton talk?



**Douglass:** Oh, yes, several times. In fact, the French were great for having these stovepipe hats that would collapse, and I had gotten one of those stovepipe hats and had it on my head in the back of a truck as we were going down the road, and his Jeep came flying by and he shut down the whole line, come back and called me down off the truck and blasted me like you would not believe. Patton was an egotistical so and so with his pearl-handled pistols and his shellacked helmet. He didn't care how dirty, how unshaven you were, but if you had button on your fatigues, it had better be buttoned. I heard him make a speech in England before we shipped to Europe, some of the filthiest language that ever came out of a human's mouth. There were all types of people listening including nurses, WACs, but he didn't care. He said what we were gonna do to the ... I don't know if I can repeat this or not ... if you want to delete it from the tape later, it's okay. "When we get done with these Germans, we're going over and kick the hell out of them purple-pissing Japanese!" That was the words ... I remember those were the words he used regarding the Japanese. And we went from one egotistical's domain to the Pacific to another one – MacArthur's. MacArthur had in his mind ... I think he had a financial interest in the Philippines and it was his intention to have this engineer regiment rebuilt the University of the Philippines, but we had other ideas. He got very little cooperation out of our unit. And he was one with the sunglasses and the swagger stick and the corncob pipe. I'd hate to see those two in the same theater of operation.

**McCranie:** What was your personal opinion of MacArthur and Patton?

**Douglass:** My opinion of Patton was that he was an overbearing, egotistical so and so. He got the job done, there's no two ways about that. But the expression was ... he was referred to as "blood and guts Patton." Our blood, his guts. MacArthur, with his "I shall return" bit to the Philippines and he wades off of an LCI with cameras flashing in all directions so he'd go down in history as holding good on his promise ... Harry S. Truman kind of took care of him also.

[non-specific conversation not transcribed]

Patton ... it was a shame the way that he got his, but .... When I was visiting this ... a couple of

years ago, I was down in the Bavarian area, and I stayed at the Hotel General Patton. He's got a hotel named after him down there in a resort area. And got a self-portrait of himself on the wall of the dining room – it's about twenty-five feet high and at least ten feet wide – with his pearled six-shooters. I walked out on the front of the hotel out of the lobby out front to smoke a cigarette. There was some elderly German out there and boy, he was grumbling and giving me the business in German – I didn't know what he was saying. Some other American soldier walked out and he said, "What's the matter with that guy?" I said, "Well, I think he's a poor loser." But that's about my story.

**McCranie:** How did your health stay when you were going through France? How well off were you?

**Douglass:** Healthwise?

**McCranie:** Yes, sir.

**Douglass:** I stayed in remarkable shape. As I said, that was the coldest winter in German history, but the training we went through in the States was so thorough that it even had an effect on your mind. You knew you was in good shape. You knew you were capable of handling any situation that came your way. I don't recall ever even having a head cold in Germany or in Europe.

**McCranie:** And you said you got malaria in the Philippines – did they not give you Quinine when you landed?

**Douglass:** We took Atabrine, and every man looked like a Chinaman. It turned you yellow. But it was an after the fact situation, and that malaria really knocks the stew out of you. You have absolutely no energy. As soon as we arrived at the Philippines, there was talk of us going

home. I'd gone to sick call to get a new supply of the Atabrine, and one of the medics told me, he said, "I don't believe you're gonna be able to go onboard a ship." I said, "Fellow, you line it up and watch how I crawl up that ramp." So he said, "Well, okay, we'll keep you on duty."

**McCranie:** When you saw the massacre of the US soldiers there during the Ardennes, you said that your opinion of the Germans changed. How did it change?

**Douglass:** Oh, that was at Malmédy, where they shot down all the prisoners?

**McCranie:** Yes, sir.

**Douglass:** I had thought all along through the campaign that they were professional soldiers, well disciplined, well trained. When I saw that situation at Malmédy, they became more animals to me than they did soldiers. I lost complete respect for them. Even though they were an enemy, they did have my respect because of their status. But after that they became nothing more than animals.

**McCranie:** And with the slave labor camps that you liberated in France, what type of people were there at those camps?

**Douglass:** Mostly Polish. I'd say the bulk of them were Polish. But they were so thin, so emacipated [sic] that I don't see how they even managed to walk. But they were so thankful ... I guess the poor souls had no place to go or no way to go anywhere, so most of them just hung out with us, you might say ... called it hanging out. And any time we moved, they just would ... if there was an empty spot on a truck, they would climb on; nobody objected to it. Everyone felt so sorry for them that ... we'd have an extra fatigue jacket or something and give to them.

**McCranie:** They worked for you after you liberated them? They help you with your work?

**Douglass:** They would do anything that they could. They would do things that they weren't even asked to do. If they saw something that needed to be done, they did it. They were delightful people and [we] felt so sorry for them. I suppose if the military had their way, they would have loaded them all on trucks and hauled them off somewhere. But we were off so much by ourselves most of the time that we had very little contact with what you might say any high brass that could have made those decisions.

There was one episode I recall ... a B-17 getting shot down. A young kid bailed out ... the tail gunner bailed out and he landed near our unit. He stayed with us ... he thought he was the only one that got out, so he was a pretty depressed young fellow. He thought his whole crew was dead. His name was Irvin Crone. He was from some place in California. He and I became pretty close friends. He was with our unit for nearly a month. Of course, he had a nice big flying jacket with a fur collar on it. Finally word got out to someone that he was in the unit, so they made arrangements to get him shipped back to England. When he left he gave me his Air Force jacket, and I have that jacket to this day. But he didn't want to leave our unit. He got treated like a king. The regimental commander right on down, every officer, every non-commissioned officer was doing everything in their power to make his stay with us as comfortable as could be. Of course, he thought all his crew members had been killed, you know, and he didn't want to go back to England. He just wanted to stay with us. But they said no, you got to go back to your own unit. (I received a letter long after his return in which he stated his whole crew had bailed out and were safely back in Britain).

**McCranie:** You make a number of good friends in your unit in France and in the Pacific.

**Douglass:** Yeah, several good friends. However, I've only met one of them since World War II. Only one. I've got rosters of my company and rosters of the Headquarters Supply Company, and our regiment was made up of people from the east coast to the west coast and the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. I think we had every state covered. We had ... I remember one of the older fellows from New Jersey, East Orange, New Jersey. He talked funny,

like the "poiple boid setting on the coib." And everyone made fun of the way he talked. Different funny little anecdotes like that pop up in my memory every now and then. We did do a good bit of liquor consumption in Europe. Calvados, Cointreau, wine, you name it. Whenever we had the opportunity, we'd grab on to a bottle or two.

**McCranie:** That got you in trouble, I'll bet.

**Douglass:** Occasionally. Not too often. It kind of helped displace some of the bad memories.

**McCranie:** How big a unit did you say your engineer regiment was again?

**Douglass:** The regiment had six companies, A through F? A, B, C, D, E, F, yeah. Each one of those were about 165 men, and then a Headquarters Supply Company that was about 200 men. It was a big unit, and when you put ... roughly 1,200 people. When you put all of them onto a liberty ship, it was full. And those holds, there was no air conditioning, no nothing on ship in those days. They had a big old air vent that ... your forward motion would force air down into the holds. You bunked up four bunks deep. You had just room enough to squeeze into a bunk. I spent most of my time up on the deck. Take my sleeping back up on the deck and sleep up there. But in the Pacific, maybe three or four times a night you'd be up there sleeping and here'd come a rain shower. So you run for cover and then it'd pass over and the deck would dry off, you just nicely get bedded down again and here'd come another rain shower.

[conversation about D-Day Museum not transcribed]

End transcription