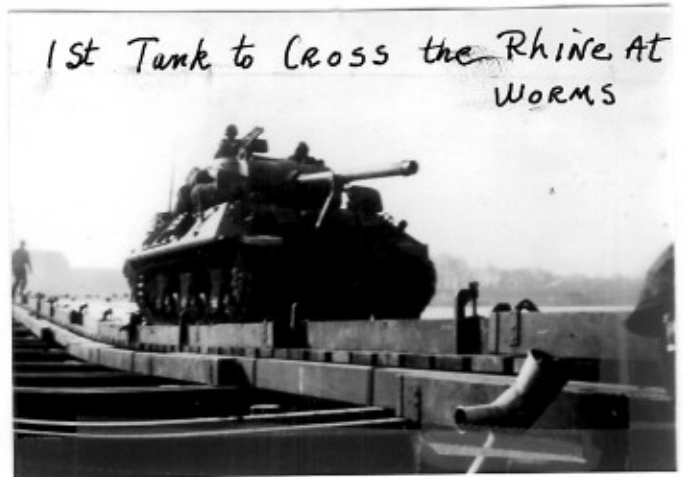




1943 -



German prisoners surrendering before we had the bridge completed
3/26/45



1st Tank to cross the Rhine at Worms



Roane River, France
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Mar. 26, 1945 (over)

- Myself
- Lee
- Rinelli

April 20, 2005

Dear Children and Grandchildren,

The enclosed information is all answers to questions pertaining to World War II and the regiment that I was a part of. This has all come about because Mrs Marion Chard from Alger, Michigan found out that I was in the 540th Combat Engineers during World War II. Her father was also in the 540th and she is researching everything she can to find out about where and what the 540th was involved in.

You will notice that she starts in at North Africa where we made our first invasion on November 8, 1942. Then on to Sicily on July 10, 1943 at Licata. Invasion #3 was on the mainland of Italy on September 14, 1943 at Salerno. Invasion #4 was on June 10, 1944 at Anzio—better known as the Anzio Beachhead. Our last invasion was on September 14, 1944 at St. Raphael, France on the southern coast of France.

After the last invasion, we moved north into Alsace Lorraine and up into the Battle of the Bulge. That was Christmas week of 1944. In April, we moved up to the mighty Rhine River and built a pontoon bridge across the Rhine that took us 10 hours and 20 minutes to complete so that tanks could get across the Rhine River at Worms.

Marion Chard asked all the questions pertaining to the above two paragraphs and I tried to answer them as well as my memory would return to me, and to answer them as accurately as possible.

As I looked at all the questions, it occurred to me that my children and grandchildren should have a copy of all this information. As more and more veterans of World War II are rapidly dying off every year, all their information will die with them unless we record it in this manner. I know that our grandchildren, and especially our great grandchildren, will appreciate reading about where and what their Grandpa Vander Wall did during the World War II era.

The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor when Jerry my brother was 18 and I was 19. We enlisted as soon as they would take us. Little did I ever imagine that when I left home on April 14, 1942 that I would never see home again until September of 1945. Was I happy to be home—with this pen, I could never express the joy of my heart as we entered New York harbor and saw the Statue of Liberty.

After I was discharged, I met your mother and grandmother either the end of 1945 or early 1946. We fell in love and were married on May 24, 1947. We built a new home on Krueger Street in Spring Lake before we were married. Billy was born April 21, 1949.

In 1950, at age 28, an Army buddy of mine, Keith Branstom, from Muskegon, Michigan, invited me to go to hear Billy Graham preach at Maranatha Bible Conference in Muskegon. I had never heard of a Billy Graham before and I had never been to Maranatha—but I went with him. For the first time in my life, I understood that God loved me and that He loved me so much that He gave His only begotten son to die on the cross for my sins. That night when I received Christ into my heart—July 4, 1950—my life did a 180° turn around. That's 55 years ago this coming 4th of July. I cannot express to God in this letter how grateful I am for His salvation. Grandma was saved in a Nazarene camp meeting near Kalamazoo, Michigan a few weeks later.

You might wonder why I am writing all this down and for what reasons. For some reason, I feel compelled to write this to you while your parents and grandparents yet live. Probably another reason is that I want our grandchildren to have access to this information to reveal to their understanding the heritage from whence they were born.

Please save this letter and all the enclosed information about the war and read it from time to time. This is going to be very interesting to our great grandchildren who are yet to be born and, in all probability, will never remember anything about us because at our age, we're starting to look forward to a new home in Glory.

So children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, take heed as to how you live your life. Will you live it for self-gratification or live it to honor Christ in your life and through your life. The choice is yours. God has given us a free will of choice. We are very grateful to Almighty God for our children and grandchildren. We have been blessed beyond measure.

Finally, remember my favorite Scripture verse—Colossians 2:6. “As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord—so walk ye in him.” Another verse is Acts 11:23. In verse 22 Barnabas is at Antioch. Then in verse 23, he was glad to see the grace of God manifested in the Christians in Antioch. Then He exhorts them that with “purpose of heart” that they should cleave unto the Lord. I love those words—purpose of heart, which encourages them not to fail and also be very determined to love and serve the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind.

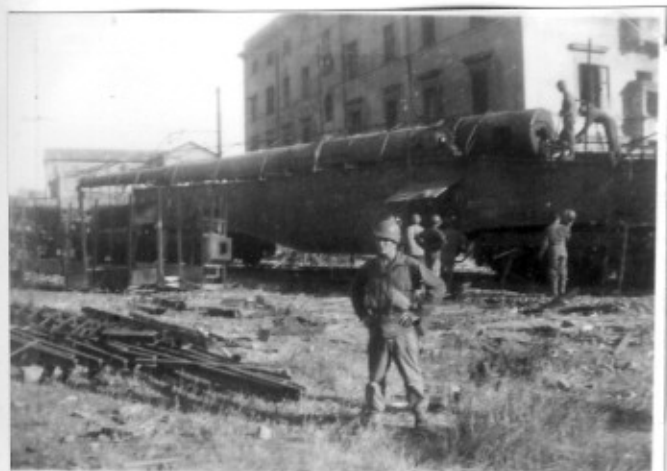
Remember please—“Purpose in your heart.”

Lovingly in Christ Jesus,

Grandma and Grandpa
Mother and Dad



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Maginot Line



our crane hit by 88 - I plus 2
Anzio

GENERAL INFO

1. Name, rank and serial number?
William Vander Wall, Jr. – S/Sgt. – 16084180
2. What battalion, company, etc. did you serve with?
2nd Bn. Company D – 540th Combat Engr.
3. Were you ever wounded? If so, please give details?
No
4. What medals, campaign ribbons, etc. were you given?
Soldiers Medal – Algeria French Moroccan, Sicilian, Rome Arno, Naples Foggia, Southern France, Rhineland Central Europe. European Theater Ribbon with one silver and two bronze battle stars.
5. Were you ever awarded the CIB?
No, we did not qualify.
6. Do you have any memories of other units that the 540th were “attached” to or were in direct support of?
Only the divisions that we made D-Day Landings with like the 3rd, 45th, 9th Div. In North Africa, etc.
7. Did you get any “leave” time, and if so where and for how long?
Just day passes to Casablanca, Oran, Palermo, Naples, Rome, Lyons, France, etc.
8. Did you lose any close friends during your tour of duty? How did it affect you?
Yes, Stanley Moore. He was a Methodist minister’s son who radiated his love for God and the Lord Jesus Christ.
9. Can you tell me what it was like to build a Bailey bridge, etc.
You needed a lot of good strong young men.
10. Did you carry any personal item(s) throughout your tour such as amulets, icons, rosaries, photos, letters, lighters, etc.?
I carried all the letters my two very young sisters wrote to me while overseas. I brought them home and just gave them back to them a few years ago. Very precious souvenirs.

11. Did you bring home any souvenirs (besides scars)?

Yes, I gathered a lot of postcards. I looted a Rosenthal pre-war vase, which is beautiful. I also brought home my mess cup that I had engraved on for years.

12. Did you get to meet anyone famous such as generals, mayors of towns, journalists, photographers, etc.?

The only famous person I saw at close range was Gen. George Patton—with his two pistols on, walking on the hurricane deck on the ship we went overseas on. This was between October 19, 1942 and November 8, 1942.

We saw Martha Ray in Africa; Joe Brown in Italy and also on the Anzio Beachhead—Gen. Mark Clark.

TRAINING AND DEPARTURE

1. Were you drafted or did you join on your own accord?

I joined on my own accord.

2. Where did you receive training?

In Tullahoma, Tennessee – three months infantry training then three months amphibious training in Camp Edwards, Massachusetts.

3. What was your specialty as an engineer? What special training did you receive?

Made landings in an assault boat on the beaches around the Cape Cod area. At 5:00 AM and dark, we didn't know how deep the water was when the ramp dropped and we would run off the assault boat.

4. Do you have any special memories of your training experience?

Yes, cold and very wet with all your gear on—rifle and all.

5. When did you leave for Europe and do you remember the name of the ship you sailed on?

We left the States (Newport News, VA) on October 19, 1942, on the S.S. Harraison.

6. When did you arrive and where?

Arrived November 8, 1942, Safi, North Africa, south of Casa Blanca. This is in French Morocco.

NORTH AFRICA

1. Did you take part in Operation Torch, the Invasion of North Africa? If so, what are your specific memories of landing on shore? What kind of resistance did you encounter, etc.? Were you sick-sea when you first landed?

Yes, I was really seasick, vomiting over the side of the assault boat and the Vichy French started to shell us on our way into the beach. A shell hit between our boat and the one on our left also heading for the beach.

I must back up and tell about our experience in trying to get in the assault boats off the mother ship. We had to climb down the rope ladder nets that hung down over the side of the mother ship. It was very difficult to drop into the assault boat because of the high tide surf. Some men missed the boat and fell into the water.

As I started over the side to go down the rope net into the assault boat, our 1st Sgt. Arnold Listrani said to me, *Vander Wall, you carry the American flag in for our Company.* That's all I needed was an extra 6' or 8' pole to carry down the net into the assault boat.

When we finally hit the sandy beach and we all ran off the assault boat, the Vichy French opened up out of a pill box with a machine gun to the men on the beach. We saw the bullets hitting the sand right in front of us. An infantryman on my left was hit. I realized then that they were firing at us because of the American flag. I stuck it in the ground and we remained pinned down on the beach until they brought in a light tank that destroyed the pill box.

2. If you were in North Africa, what things stick in your head? The weather, the food, traveling, the people?

The weather and the people. They bombed us the second morning at daybreak with an old C-47 (if my memory is serving me right) by shoving the bombs out of the cargo doors. We were all sleeping at the time.

3. What were your functions as an engineer while in North Africa? Repairing roads, working on the railroad, setting up prisoner of war camps, water supply, etc.

Our functions right after the invasion was unloading liberty ships with supplies—bombs, gas, ammo and food. Safi had good dock facilities with a couple of cranes that operated well to unload the ships.

4. Do you remember what other units that served with you in North Africa?

No, we landed with the 9th Division and that's the last time I remember seeing them.

5. What were your biggest problems you encountered while there?

I really can't remember. The Arabs were good at stealing. Remember, most of us had never even seen or met an Arab before—ever.

6. Do you have any pleasant memories/anecdotes from there?

I wish I had kept a journal of our seven months or so going across North Africa from Safi to Bizerte and Teunis. We stopped for a few days in Robot where we bivouacked in a Cork Forrest. Then we stayed outside of Oran and this is where we first witnessed a German air raid in broad daylight.

When we arrived at Teunis, it was unbearably hot but we were able to get a shower for a change.

SICILY

1. If you were involved in the invasion of Sicily, how and where did you train for this assault? What did you think of the new DUKWS?

I don't remember if we trained for Sicily. The "Dukw's" were a new novelty for the invasion and we had one for each platoon. They served us well in getting on land with men and supplies. I might add that this is the first time we also saw the L.S.T. which we took over from Africa to Sicily. Yes, if memory serves me right, I left a trail of my breakfast, dinner and suppers all the way to Sicily which was two or three days in a storm.

2. If you took part in the Invasion of North Africa, how did this compare?

To compare the two invasions, an invasion is an invasion—different country—people—and culture.

3. Did you land at Licata or Gela and what was this experience like? What kind of resistance did you encounter?

Yes, at Licata. I don't remember any resistance on the beach but by midday we were trying to get one or two L.S.T. inside the harbor. I'm standing on a seawall fairly close to the Lighthouse and coming right at us is a Messerschmitt plane—tree top high—not a shot being fired at him yet. He is below radar. I was horrified because if he would have pressed his machine gun button, I'm gone! I could have shot at him with my M-1 but I dove into a shell crater and said the first prayer I ever prayed in my life. "God, don't let me die." I didn't even have the courtesy to say please. The pilot dropped a torpedo bomb to hit the L.S.T. but he dropped it just seconds too quick and it hit the breakwater and then all hell broke loose. I'm in the shell hole that he flew over and banked to the right and I saw all the anti-aircraft guns shoot him down. They made hamburger out of him. This episode from start to finish was over within about two minutes.

4. What were your immediate duties upon landing and after?

Our immediate duties were always to establish the beachhead. It was our responsibility to get trucks, tanks, ammo, gas, and supplies off the beach so that another wave of mean, tanks, and etc. could land on the same beach. Four beaches were used—red, yellow, green, and blue.

5. Tell me about your journey northward to Palermo and the coast. What sticks out in your memories? The weather, the troops you served with, the obstacles you encountered? enemy resistance?

The weather was hot. The enemy resistance was mostly Italians and they realized their goose was cooked. They all surrendered before the Sicilian Campaign was over.

6. Were you directly involved in the building, destruction or repairs of any bridges?

Not in Sicily.

7. Were you involved in road repairs? Did you encounter any mines?

No.

8. What units did you serve with in Sicily?

The 3rd Division.

9. How did the terrain differ from North Africa? How did the weather differ?

Sicily is more mountainous. The weather was hotter in North Africa.

10. Were you used as infantry during this campaign? If so, please elaborate.

No, we were not needed. The whole campaign was only about five or six weeks at the most.

11. How, if any, did the Italian Army differ from the German Army?

Gutless. They're lovers, not fighters!

NAPLES/FOGGIA

1. Were you involved in the landing of Naples/Foggia?

Yes.

2. Where and how long did you train for this mission?

Can't recall any training.

3. If you were, how did this differ from your previous landings and training?

About the same as Sicily.

4. The port of Naples had undergone terrible destruction. How did things initially appear to you?

Either by our bombing or scuttling of ships in the harbor, it was a mess. There were one or two Italian submarines generating power to parts of the City of Naples. I saw them.

5. What was enemy resistance like upon landing and later in the campaign?

Enemy resistance was strong at the beaches of Salerno. The Germans expected the invasion at Salerno and they guessed right.

6. What was the role of the 540th and what were your specific duties during this period?

Again, we were assigned the job at the beach to get the supplies off the beach. If I remember correctly, it was a night and day job—24 hours a day. The dust from the beach to the roads to Naples was so deep that we pushed the dust off with bulldozers.

7. What is most memorable about this campaign?

I was a Squad Sgt. and many of us cut all of our hair off. Why, I don't know. I have pictures of this episode.

8. Because of the rampant destruction of Naples, the city was without adequate water supply. Did the 540th play any part in reestablishing this?

I don't know anything about the water supply. We worked at the docks, clearing the port to get troops and supplies into the docks instead of the beaches.

9. Were supply lines difficult to establish and maintain?

I don't know.

10. How far into Italy did you go?

We went from Naples up toward the Cassino front and built bridges under Bailey bridges and then took the Bailey bridge down. This was part of November and all of December. It rained and rained and everything turned to mud. We slept in our pup tents with our clothes on and even our shoes because they were also soaking wet. It was the only way to get dried out—it's called "body heat." 😊

It was miserable. I remember it was Christmas Day—no snow—just mud and more mud. One night our half of the completed bridge washed away and we had to start all over again. Our bulldozer was left in the creek bed overnight and when we went to resume work on the bridge, it was gone. The only part of the bulldozer that was visible was a few inches of the exhaust stack sticking out.

Right after Christmas, we moved back to Salerno to start a little brush up training to make the invasion of Anzio.

11. Were you able to talk to any of the native Italians? What were your impressions of the people? How were you treated?

After we left Naples, our civilian contacts were few and far between. We had permission to go to Naples a couple of times before we left for Anzio beachhead. Remember, the Italians were the ones that joined Hitler's ideology, thinking they could also whip the Americans. I didn't like them for that. They also are part of the cause whereby I missed my three and a half years away from home, family and the fun years from 19 to 23.

ANZIO AND ROME

1. Were you involved in the Anzio campaign?

Yes, from day one until we entered Rome.

2. Where and how long did you train for this mission?

Just a few weeks at Salerno.

3. Did you have any preconceived notions for this campaign, or did you think it would be like Naples or Sicily?

Never in an invasion can you compare one with another because it all depends how prepared the enemy is where and when you invade against the enemy.

4. What was the initial landing like? History says the initial landing was pretty standard, but later turned into a nightmare. What are your feelings on this?

The initial landing was easy. No resistance to speak of. Not knowing how the Germans would counter the invasion, history has recorded that we waited for the enemy to come to us—and to us they did D-Plus 1—at night we're sleeping on the beach and in the middle of the night they started shelling us. An 88 hit our crane and it burst into flames and burned up. It was a mad scramble to get away from the beach so we all ran forward and dug into a wooded area about a block away from the water's edge on the beach.

5. What was it like being limited to a beachhead for most of the campaign? I've heard some pretty amazing stories regarding how the men coped for weeks and months. What did you and your buddies do to keep your moral up?

For nearly five months we were confined to an area approximately one mile by two miles. In that part of Anzio we were subject to 58 German air sorties for the first three days. This is what the record books declare. They bombed by night also. We were well dug into two main bunkers with sandbags for some protection.

6. Several men like my father who were members of H&S Company and the motor pool, had to literally dig into the sand to bury their equipment in order to keep the machines shops, etc. running. What were your experiences like on the beachhead?

We had to get protection from not only the bombings but from all the anti-aircraft shells that were falling like rain. You would have to witness the sky being filled with tracer bullets but between every tracer bullet was an armor piercing bullet and a couple of ordinary 20 MG or 50 Cal. Shells that you cannot see. What goes up must eventually fall.

7. We've all heard the horror stories of Anzio Annie and the incessant shelling of the port. Please relate how this affected you and the members of your company, squad, etc.

Anzio Annie—fired from Rome 25 miles away. We could hear it when the Germans fired it because it sounded like thunder in the distance. There were two of them. They were mounted on railroad flatbeds. After going into Rome, we were assigned to clean up the port at Civitavecchia which is the port of Rome. Both Anzio Annie guns were sitting in the railroad yards. We used T.N.T., German Tiller mines and Italian dynamite to clear the port.

Back to Anzio—we were working in the railroad yards mixing tar and gravel to fill the roads from all the damage from shelling and bombings. One of Anzio Annie shells hit us between the railroad tracks but did not explode—it was a dud. The impact was so great that it knocked us all down and wounded two men in my squad. Had it exploded, it would have killed all ten of us.

Another episode happened almost in like manner but it exploded about 100 yards away. It killed Stanley Moore and wounded Ed Molleck from Muskegon, Michigan. That evening I gave him blood from my right arm into his left arm. We talked about him going home because he was severely wounded. He promised me that he would go visit my parents who lived in Spring Lake—ten miles away. That night he also died. When his body was returned to his family in Muskegon, I was a pallbearer for him.

8. What were your feelings on the day of the big breakout the first week of June?

We were really happy to go into Rome and see some civilians again—especially those of the female gender. Need I say more.

9. What was it like to reach Rome? Did the men of your unit have any time to celebrate?

Rome being a city of fame and history was very intriguing. I could have never imagined being in Rome in my lifetime—riding into Rome on the Apian Way. Yes, we had time to celebrate.

10. What were your memories of the Eternal City? What, if anything, left an indelible impression on you?

What I remember about Rome was being two sheets in the wind and getting a manicure. Can you believe that? Never in my life had I had a manicure.

11. What was mail delivery like during the campaign? How important was getting a letter or a package from home on your well being?

Mail delivery was great. My parents wrote often and so did I so that they wouldn't have to worry so much.

12. After the breakthrough to Rome, the 540th, as well as several other units, remained in Italy until the preparation for the Invasion of Southern France. What were the final days like in Italy? What was it like in the port cities such as Civitavecchia building piers?

After Civitavecchia we went north as far as Leghorn. I can't remember how long it took but before we knew it we were again convoying south to Salerno area and preparing for the Invasion of Southern France.

13. What if anything, did you know about the Invasion of Normandy? Many men felt that the Italian Campaign and the capture of Rome were lost in the almost simultaneous landings in Normandy on June 6. Do you have any comments on this?

My only comment about the Normandy was that we were all joyful because Hitler could not maintain three fronts—two in France and also the Russian front. It really meant that it would hasten the end of the war in Europe.

14. What was your honest assessment of the Fifth Army and of Mark Clark? Did you have any feelings then or now on how things could have been handled differently?

I think that the mistakes in Italy were done before Mark Clark took command of the 5th Army. We saw Gen. Mark Clark on several occasions at Anzio. We took a beating at Anzio only because we established a beachhead—and then with a wait and see attitude about the Germans—they retaliated in force.

INVASION OF SOUTHERN FRANCE/ARDENNES/ALSACE

1. How long and where did you train for the Invasion of Southern France?

Only guessing—about two weeks. Remember, we had already made four D-Day invasions so we really knew by now what had to be done and did it.

2. How was the trip from Italy to the coast of southern France the second week of August 1944?

The trip was like a cruise—nice weather—calm seas. We went between Corsica and Sardinia on an L.C.I.

3. The 540th hit the beaches with the 36th Infantry Division, what were your memories of the landing?

We landed at St. Raphael and moved inland to a railroad line going parallel to the beach. It was a beautiful day. An L.S.T. was on fire on the beach that was hit by a German air raid on the landing armada.

I can remember watching the German dive bombers diving on us and could see him let go of the bomb and watch it to see if it hit a ship or explode in the sea.

4. Initial plans were for many of the units to land at Green and Red Beaches, however, due to heavy fortifications of Red Beach, plans were altered. Do you have any recall of these events?

I know nothing about the altered plans of Green Beach instead of Red Beach. Remember, I'm just a sergeant-in charge of 20 men so no one consulted me about anything. 😊

5. Teller mines took their toll in the initial landing. Do you have any recall of these events?

The only recall of the Teller mines is that a bulldozer in the town of St. Raphael was pushing concrete road blocks to clear the street and one exploded. I think it was buried in the concrete.

6. What role did the 540th play in the securing of the beachhead and maintaining supply lines?

I really can't remember much other than the beachhead landing. About D-Day plus two—I was shaving and I heard two men yelling for attention. I looked behind me and here two German soldiers are waving a white flag. I grabbed my rifle and escorted them to the C.P. and turned them in. One was quite old and the other very young.

7. In the beginning of September many groups were released from beach control and placed under the direct support of the 7th Army. What are your memories of the drive north through France?

Yes, we did move north from the beachhead with the 7th Army. We were in Lyons, France on my birthday—September 5. We were occupational troops for a short period of time. We had fun for a few days. There was a dairy in town so I drank my fill of milk—the first milk that wasn't powdered that I had in about one and a half years. Yes—it was a no-no.

8. It was at this time that the 540th played a huge role in restoring bridges throughout this area including such cities as Lyon. What do you remember and how close to enemy lines was the 540th at this time?

On our way north after we left Lyons, the Germans were blowing bridges so we became Bailey bridge builders. It was the best bridge to span almost any length. I have many pictures to show what we did.

9. What other role did you and the 540th play at this juncture in time? Did you have any part in operating water points, restoring rail lines, etc.?

Rail lines, yes. We built Bailey bridges so strong that trains could ride on top of them.

10. In late September under secret memorandum, the entire 2nd bn was ordered to begin training for the Rhine River crossing. Did you take part in this training exercise with the 85th and 1553rd engineering units? If so, please tell me as much as you can.

Yes, we did train on a lake for the Rhine River crossing but I remember very little about it.

11. In mid-October the organization was visited by Lt. General Alexander Patch, 7th Army commander and other high-ranking officials including Colonel Marvin. Do you have any recollections of this?

No, I don't.

12. Along with other duties in October & November, the 540th played a vital role in repairing and re-establishment of hospitals. Do you have anything to contribute in regards to this?

Only that I think I remember the town. Mirecourt, France.

13. In early December of 1944, experiments with anti-mine barriers on the Moselle River were completed. Do you remember anything regarding this venture?

No, I don't.

14. The trek north through France was a long affair. What were your experiences with the enemy during this time frame?

I remember seeing the Rhine River at Straasburg but what we did I can't recall.

15. On the evening of December 18, your unit was placed on alert in case the Germans tried to re-cross the Rhine and on the 19th, the organization was attached to VI Corps. During this period, treadway and Bailey bridge training was begun, while work continued on road repair, bridge construction, mine removal, etc. What are your recollections of late December?

We moved up close to the Maginot line and the early part of December we laid mines and strung a lot of barbed wire. Bivouacked in the town of Bust. We moved into the homes and slept in a feather tick bed for a few nights. Sergeant Medwid and I shared the bed. We pulled stakes and moved forward to the town of Wingen. Wingen had been fought for once and it was our job to dig in a secondary defense of machine gun emplacements, etc. They were removing the dead out of the woods. The weather was cold—snow on the ground and miserable because we did not have proper boots or clothing. There was a glass factory there and we all looted some glass mementos.

The Germans put a push on Wingen so we retreated and fell back to Bust again. This time three of us stayed in a different home. I could write of very pleasant times with the older women of the house who treated us with dignity. Lois and I have returned to visit Bust and Wingen several years ago. Of course, we were young in 1943—and they were old—so all the people were dead. We did enjoy going into the house where we slept.

16. By noon on January 1, 1945, reports reached HQ that the entire 1st bn had been surrounded by enemy patrols and tanks and were to act as front line infantry. Were you part of this action and what can you tell me about this?

On December 24, we moved up near the front where they were firing 81 mm mortars. I was the platoon sergeant of the 3rd platoon—Co A-2833. We were in an area where there were some German army barracks. By 5:00 pm, Sergeant Listrani came to me and said I had 30 minutes to get the platoon on our trucks, halftrack, and etc. because we were moving out. This is Christmas Eve. I didn't know we were retreating and how far we retreated I don't know.

They dropped Sgt. Medwid and myself off with the halftrack—the 57 mm gun at a crossroad. They gave me orders to protect the crossroad with the halftrack and the 57 mm gun. With ten men and myself, we were ordered to prepare to blow the roads. Also prepare the trees to drop across the road. It's pitch dark—Christmas Eve—nearly zero weather. We knew nothing of the German breakthrough. To prepare the roads we had an explosive called a Bee Hive which stood on three short rods—about 6" off the ground. It had a cone shaped steel warhead that when the charge was detonated, the steel warhead would penetrate down into the road quite a distance. Then we would pack the hole with T.N.T., fuse it and it's all ready to blow the road.

December 24, 1944, was the coldest, longest night that we spent in the entire war. We had no officer with us and we knew not whether the Germans were behind us or in front of us. When daylight came, we discovered an old chicken coop over an embankment. We tore it down, built a fire and got thawed out. There are many things I remember about the War but I cannot remember our company coming to pick us up on Christmas Day.

17. Of course this period is better known as the Ardennes/Alsace Campaign or the Battle of the Bulge. Can you tell me about the ensuing battle, your perceptions of the winter German offensive?

I know the 1st bn encountered the German offensive but none of my men or myself saw anything—in fact, we didn't even know the Battle of the Bulge was happening.

18. No one who lived through this period ever forgets the horrible conditions of that particular winter. What has stayed in your mind after all these years? Did you suffer from anything such as trench foot, etc.?

Christmas night was the worst part of the whole winter for us because we didn't have warm clothing or winter boots.

THE MOVE TOWARD GERMANY AND THE RHINE RIVER CROSSING

1. By early Feb 45, the regiment had completed three defensive sectors; the Maginot, Haguenau and Vosges. Do you remember anything from this period including the placement of some 280,000 yards of barbed and concrete wire, the laying of thousands of anti-tank mines, road blocks, the digging of machine gun placements, etc.?

I do not remember much of what we did from Christmas until we built the bridge across the Rhine at Worms.

2. In mid February, the 540th went under reorganization and the 1st Battalion became the 2832nd, while the 2nd became the 2833rd. What do you remember about the reorganization of your unit?

I do not know anything about the change from the 540th to the 2833rd Combat Engr. Battalion.

3. The 2832nd began operation of a rock quarry north of Lutzelbourg, along with widening of a class 70-bridge, and construction of a rifle range for VI Corps. Were you part of this operation?

That was the first battalion. The 2nd battalion was not involved with 1st battalion operations at all.

4. On March 1, the 540th was released from VI Corps and once again reverted to 7th Army control. From March 1 through March 15, both battalions began drawing and servicing river crossing equipment, etc., and also began training with the 3rd Infantry Div. Do you recall this?

Yes, I do remember preparations to build the bridge across the Rhine and training with the 85th Pontoon battalion. After training us how to assemble the upstream and downstream rafts, all the 85th did was deliver the pontoons to the river's edge and from there on we built the bridge that took ten plus hours.

5. On March 26, the 540th began ferrying troops to the 3rd Inf. Div. Across the Rhine. The 2832nd and 2833rd also took part in heavy pontoon raft construction and also began construction of a heavy pontoon bridge in conjunction with the 85th Heavy Pontoon Bn at Worms. Please tell me everything you remember about those days and the crossing of the mighty Rhine.

I remember being out in the middle of the Rhine with my whole platoon and before we had a tank across, here comes German soldiers with a white flag to surrender. I had my camera in my gas mask case. I took the picture of them surrendering and also a picture a short time later of the first tank that crossed over the Rhine at Worms, Germany.

6. From H-Hour until the end of D+4, 39 men were wounded. What can you tell me about the occurring casualties?

Nothing. We had no casualties in our company that I was aware of. It was a long 10+ hours but it all went well and I'm sure according to plan.

7. On April 4, Col George Marvin was relieved of command of the 540th and Colonel Manning took over. Do you remember this at all?

I remember nothing about the command exchange between the two colonels. To a non-commissioned G.I., it meant nothing.

8. Throughout the month of April your unit maintained approaches to the heavy pontoon bridge at Mannheim, conducted road reconnaissance, continued constructed class 40 & 70 bridges, etc. Can you supply any details of this month in Germany?

Our battalion and our company was getting involved in building a fixed bridge across the Rhine after the war was over. After we crossed the Rhine, our company A-2833rd went to Heidelberg. How long we were there and what we did, I don't remember. This was about the time that President F.D. Roosevelt died. From there, we went to Landsberg, Germany. This is where—with forced slave labor, Poles, Czechs, and Jews, were forced to work in a massive underground aircraft factory.

The compound where these slaves lived was sickening to see. We witnessed dead bodies lying in the streets with their clothes still on and the rats had eaten away most of the flesh. I took pictures of them.

9. What were German defenses like in April and May? What did you encounter?

We encountered no German defenses because the war was over soon after we crossed the Rhine River.

10. What did you think about the German cities, countryside and the German people?

The Bavarian part of Germany is really picturesque and the German people were nice to us. They had to be—we were the victors.

11. What do you remember about the surrender of Germany?

The only thing I remember about the surrender is when it was announced over the radio. That news was our ticket to go home. I cannot express with this pen how happy I was because at this point in time over three years had gone by without seeing my parents, my three sisters, and my brother. It took me another three months to get back to Michigan from Germany.

12. Tell me how you spent your last months after the cessation of hostilities. What were the responsibilities of your unit? How far into Germany did you go?

Just before the war ended, we had some of the non-coms—such as our 1st Sergeant Arnold Listrani—were given “battlefield” commissions. S/Sgt. Herbert Sherman became the 1st sergeant then. They made me the supply sergeant. After being in the line for three years, I hated the job and I tried to give it back but they (the C.O.) would not let me out of the responsibility. I had some training in supply before we went overseas so I was stuck with the job. It didn't last too long anyway and I was on my way home. Oh what a happy day it was to board a train towards Southern France.

13. When did you get to return home? What were your feelings? Do you remember the ship you sailed on and what were your first memories of returning to the states?

It must have been about a month or so before most of us left the company to go home. I think you needed at least 72 points to quality. If I remember right, I had 85.

My first memories coming home was arriving in New York and seeing the Statue of Liberty. I doubt very much if there was a dry eye on the ship.

When we landed, we were given a free three-minute phone call and when I heard my parents on the phone and they heard my voice, we cried for the free three minutes. The operator told us our three minutes were up so my father contained himself and told the operator to charge the call to their phone.

To this day, I contend that the war was harder on my parents than it was on me.

Bill Vander Wall, Co. D . 540th Combat Engr. Regiment