

Tec 5 Walter "Monday" Poniedzialek

540th Engineer Combat Regiment

2nd Battalion - Headquarters & Service Company - 4th Platoon

Born March 30, 1917 - Date of death - September 12, 1967

Biography as written by his daughter, Marion J Chard



(The following is an article explaining how Marion's research began and progressed)

A Box of Chocolates

Most of you will be familiar with the popular quote from the movie Forrest Gump, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get." Well it also rang true for me.

I don't remember the first time that well-worn sepia-toned box with the raised gold filigree and the words, "Bunte – Chicago – Mi Choice Chocolates", appeared in my life, but it seems it was *always* a part of my world. The objects within held a strange and constant fascination for a young girl trying desperately to hold on to the fleeting war memories relayed by her dad to his loving family and friends. The rectangular box was never far from my side, and was kept in a nightstand, as I moved from house to house and city to city. Every now and then I would sit on the floor, carefully remove the tattered lid and lovingly lay each item before me. Maybe I was hoping a name would mysteriously appear on the back of a photo, giving me some clue as to who these young men were who stood next to my father, smiling back at me. Maybe it was a source of comfort and a way for me to try and hold on to a part of my life when my father passed away when I was only twelve. Maybe it was all those things and more. But the one thing I did not know and could not know was the important role that fraying box would play later in my life.

The cherished items included things that a million other GIs brought back from their tours of duty; tattered and faded black and white photos of foxhole friends, patches and pins that were proudly worn on Ike jackets, and currency from faraway countries that I could only begin to dream about. But now there was no longer anyone to tell the story of their experiences, but only a daughter's fading memories of tales told around the dining room table in Detroit.

Hard as I tried, I could only recall brief details from the stories that held me spellbound as a young child, but I do remember a certain sense of awe, fascination and trepidation as the German Luger came out from its secret hiding place, followed by the sound of steel as the German officer's sword was deftly removed from its scabbard. Slice! The fascination never left and was renewed each time this scene was repeated in our house by my dad. I sat wide-eyed and in perfect silence, as I eagerly awaited another tale from across the sea. I never forgot that bullets could do a lot of damage and make holes in men, THIS BIG! I never forgot the word ANZIO and talk about beachheads and sand and a hail of artillery. I will never forget the mood in the room and the impression it made on me. Never!

Even though my dad and I only had twelve years together, those years left an indelible impression on that innocent girl. We were close. "I was daddy's girl!" My father and I did a lot of things together and that included watching war movies and the TV show, Combat! My mother did not share our enthusiasm and frankly I think she thought we were both a bit nuts, for we would sit riveted on our sofa as the black and white images flowed across the screen. I will never forget that faraway stare that came across his face. He was instantly transformed and transported a few thousand miles away. His body would involuntarily jerk and maybe a foot would stomp or an arm would twitch, but he was no longer in the room with me. I never questioned him, but always wondered where he was and what he was thinking. I had no way to comprehend all the emotions that must have been running through his veins, but even at that age I began to understand, appreciate and respect all that he had been through.

It always took me back to that box and left me wanting to know more. I could no longer remember what Army unit he was with, or what many of the cherished souvenirs represented. It always left me with a longing and a wish that we had written things down. But how could I berate myself for I was only an elementary school child, and when you are that young you think your parents will live forever.

One winter day at my mother's house, I sifted through Christmas cards that adorned her room, and ran across a name I was not familiar with. Mom, I exclaimed, who is Ira Wheately? Oh, that's an old Army buddy of your dad's. Well that's all I needed to hear, and a few weeks later my husband and I arranged to meet at Ira's house. Most people would not understand my excitement, but my husband did, for he shared my interest in World War II history, and was delighted to accompany me on this visit.

What an interesting man Ira Wheatley was and what a fascinating life he had. He graciously filled us in on my dad's Army unit's tour of duty in the ETO, the European Theatre of Operations, and many times the conversation would return to Anzio. Dreaded Anzio! I began to see the same reaction in other men anytime that word was mentioned. It must have been hell. It was. Ira spoke of the intense and constant shelling that forced the men to bury their trucks in the sand, in order to keep the machine shops running. It brought back a flood of memories from my childhood. "I know these stories", I said to myself.

Ira also relayed a story of how my dad was injured by mortar fire while performing the duty of a motorcycle courier (a fact that I was later able to confirm after perusing thousands of pages of documents from the NARA, the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland...but more on that later).

After a grand day together, I hugged Ira and told him what a thrill it was to meet him. I could kick myself later on because even though we continued to exchange Christmas cards for years, we never again met in person, and many of things that he imparted to me on that day were forever lost because of my failure to put pen to paper. When he passed on in the 1990's, my only connection was severed, and I was almost back to square one in my quest to learn more about my dad's wartime experiences.

While still living in Detroit, I contacted the National Archives in St. Louis, but it took three successive tries before I finally received a letter at our new home in northern Michigan in autumn 2003. Sorry, they informed me, but your father's records burned in a huge fire in 1973. How could it end this way? I was so distraught it took me almost three weeks before I could show the letter from St. Louis to my husband. I then began to feel angry and that anger led me to one conclusion; I would not give up and this would not defeat me. I had the Internet didn't I?

So as the winter months bore down on our little town, I put forth an undying effort in front of my personal computer. I re-opened the box of my dad's wartime mementos for the umpteenth time and fed anything and everything into the Google search engine. The first few weeks were frustrating as I tried to figure out where to begin. How does one go about looking for a military unit when you don't even know what unit a person was with? How do you write a description for a unit designation shoulder patch? The quest was daunting considering how many Army units had fought in the ETO. I began narrowing it down with the 5th and 7th Army patches, but found it was a lot of ground to cover. My job was made all the more difficult because he had one shoulder patch with a Seahorse on it and another with a Red Bull. HELP!

With bound determination, I began to feel as though I was making progress. I found a site for the 34th Infantry Division, the great Red Bulls, but conflicting info from other sites sent my head into a tizzy. The Seahorse patch belonged to the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment, but the 36th Engineers were NOT part of the 34th Inf Div. So I sent a letter to the 34th, and then found the name of a John Fallon, 36th Combat Engineer Regiment. I began to scratch out diagrams on paper trying to come up with a divisional chart. Still something wasn't adding up.

A few weeks later I received a letter from Jerry Gorden, webmaster of the 34th Infantry, along with a unit history. In the interim I found another reference to "Seahorses" and the name of Rene Rousselle, a 540th Combat Engineer, and the contact for their unit. I sent a letter in late April 2004, along with photographic

scans of the pins and patches I had in my wartime collection. Oh dear, I was coming up with answers, but at this juncture I wasn't sure which direction it was leading me.

It was then I received a hand-written letter from Rene Rousselle the first week of May. I was overjoyed. Rene informed me my dad was assigned to the 540th Combat Engineer Regiment. John Fallon's email followed a few days later, and told of the 36th Combat Engineer's proud history, and invited me to call him. I will never forget the day we first spoke, for it was the 60th Anniversary of the Normandy D-Day landings.

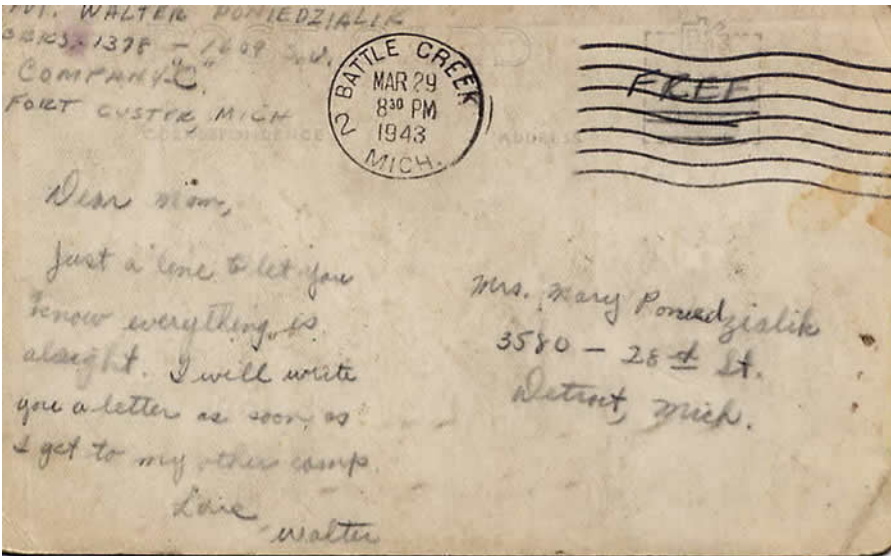
After conferring with John and Rene, we were able to ascertain dad was indeed part of the 540th, and Captain Fallon gave me the lowdown on both units and said they shared a very common history, and proceeded to explain their relationship to 5th and 7th Armies and 6th Corps. I was starting to grasp all this when John threw a ringer... neither unit belonged to a division. What? All along I assumed that each unit fell under a division, but I soon discovered that many engineer units were known in army lingo as "bastard" units; they were individualized engineer regiments or battalions and went where and when they were needed. Sometimes under an Army, sometimes under a Corps, and often times attached to other divisional units. The learning curve was getting steep, but I finally had some "teachers", and I was a very eager student.

In summary I've had the honor and privilege of meeting hundreds of WWII veterans and their families, and through their encouragement, moral support, friendship and love, have taken on the task of producing a documentary. I've also been able to create a website dedicated to my father and the VI Corps engineers (the 36th, 39th, 540th and the 1108th).

So through dogged determination (I inherited my dad's engineer genes!), the kindness of countless individuals and a now unquestioning belief in divine intervention, I find myself at an unbelievable juncture. And that takes us back to that tiny box that once held an array of unanswered questions; life is like that box of chocolates, you never *do know* what you're going to get!

Marion J Chard
revised November 18, 2014

My father, **Walter (Monday) Poniedzialek**, was born on March 30, 1917 in Detroit, Michigan, and was a proud member of the 540th Combat Engineer Regiment. He started his army stint at Fort Custer near Battle Creek, Michigan. I gathered this information from a postcard dated March 1943 that was sent from the Fort (Camp) Custer to his mother Mary.



Activation

The unit was activated at Camp Edwards Massachusetts on 11 September, 1942. The unit began with three battalions, but the third was disbanded and transferred to join the 36th Engineer Combat Regiment, bringing their numbers to three full battalions. The 540th remained as a two battalion unit throughout the war.

His unit served in the following campaigns:

1. North Africa (with Arrowhead) 11-8-42 to 11-11-42
 2. Sicily (with Arrowhead) 7-9-43 to 8-17-43
 3. Naples/Salerno (with Arrowhead) 9-9-43 to 1-21-44
 4. Anzio (with Arrowhead) 1-22-44 to 5-24-44
 5. Rome/Arno 5-24-44 to 8-15-44
 6. Southern France (with Arrowhead) 8-15-44 to 9-14-44
 7. Rhineland 9-15-44 to 3-21-45
 8. Ardennes/Alsace (Battle of the Bulge) 12-15-44 to 1-25-45
 9. Central Europe/Rhineland 3-22-45 to 5-11-45
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Re-designation

In February 1945, the 540th Engineer Combat Regiment was re-organized as the 540th Engineer Combat Group. Thus the following occurred:

- 1st Battalion (Co.'s A, B and C) became the 2832nd Bn
 - 2nd Battalion (Co.'s D, E and F) became the 2833rd Bn
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Outstanding Performance



A Presidential Unit Citation was awarded to the 540th. They received the citation for their outstanding performance in Sicily in August 1943. This occurred when a platoon from 2nd Bn was attached to Lt Col Lyle A Bernard's (30th Inf Regiment, 3rd Division) Task Force.

The 540th also received a Unit Meritorious Service Award for their actions during the Naples/Foggia Campaign, the Invasion of Italy.



Brief Unit History

The 540th Engineer Shore Regiment was activated at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts on September 11, 1942, and consisted of Regimental Headquarters, Headquarters and Service Company (H&S), 3 battalions and a Medical Detachment. The entire regiment minus 3rd Bn was then transported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. 3rd Bn was later deactivated on October 3, under War Department orders.

To further the realistic aspects of amphibious warfare, the 1st and 2nd Bns moved to Camp Bradford, Virginia and worked beside the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment. In mid-October they embarked from Newport, New Jersey, followed by a short but intensive training maneuver in Chesapeake Bay along with landing exercises on the Solomon Islands (south of Newfoundland). On October 25, the 540th Engineer Shore Regiment was re-designated the 540th Engineer Combat Regiment and were already under steam as part of a huge convoy masked in secrecy.

They landed at Safi, a small port about 150 miles south of Casablanca and thus began their long precipitous tour of duty. The American flag brought ashore by Sgt Bill Vander Wall, Co D, still remaining amongst his possessions today, survived the intense fire of the Vichy French. The initial battle and the capture of the Kasbah lasted three days and gave the unit their first taste of battle.

For the next several months they functioned as the shore parties for their respective combat teams, laid beach roads for vehicles, unloaded supplies, vehicles and personnel from transports, built POW camps, and helped establish a firm beachhead. In addition to weapons and hand tools, they carried mine detectors, Bangalore torpedoes and flamethrowers. HQ and H&S Company operated the Regimental Motor Pool, and maintained military & captured vehicles and civilian requisitioned cars. They also set up and operated Quartermaster, Engineer, Ordnance and miscellaneous warehouses, all the while training for their next campaign.

Operation Husky commenced on the hostile shores of Sicily, with Regimental HQ, H&S Co, Medical Detachment and the 1st Bn landing at Gela, and 2nd Bn landing at Licata. From the beaches until they reached the northern cities, they functioned as shore engineers, unloading transports and Liberty Ships, operating the newly introduced DUKWS from ship to shore, establishing dumps and performing a multitude of tasks assigned to them. They were responsible for keeping the supply lines open for the 2nd Armored Division, 1st, 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions and the 82nd Airborne Division.

At Brolo, 2nd Bn supported the infantry on 2 missions, which helped in the advance on Messina and the consequent clearing of the enemy from the entire island. This landing met stiff resistance, resulting in the loss

of 2 engineers with 3 wounded. Shortly after both of these amphibious landings, enemy resistance collapsed, and Messina fell to the Allies on August 17 1943, ending the Sicilian campaign.

The Italian campaign was initiated under heavy artillery fire, bombing and strafing attacks, as the landing party prepared the way for the 45th Infantry Division on the beaches of Salerno. It was here on September 12 that F Co, 2nd Bn, participated in a special mission with the now famous Darby's Rangers. Operating the small port and beaches, they unloaded vast quantities of supplies and equipment, and aided in establishing a firm foothold. Under the exerted pressure by the Allied Forces Naples fell, but the city and port were left in shambles. Presented with one of the biggest challenges the 540th encountered during the ETO, the men showed their true grit, cleared the harbor and restored shipping within an amazing 24-hour period.

From September until December 1944, the engineers cleared substantial landmine fields, repaired aqueducts, erected Bailey bridges, maintained roadways, all under the increasingly inclement conditions of the encroaching Italian winter.

In January 1944, the 540th were attached to the 3rd Infantry Div and preparations began for Operation Shingle, the assault on Anzio. With the addition of a number of specialized units, dump operation personnel, Ordnance, Engineer, Signal Corps and Navy personnel, the landing party in its entirety was grouped and trained, bringing the total strength of the 540th Engineer Beach party to approximately 4,200 men.

The D-Day landing went smoothly and all elements were unloaded by 0800 hours, January 24 (D+2), due in no part to the element of surprise. The beaches were found to be free of mines, with the exception of the extremities of Red and Green Beaches. On January 24, Yellow Beach was opened by Company F 2nd Bn, which subsequently turned operation of the beach over to a British Beach Party.

By February 6 the intensity of the enemy action became so severe that VI Corps moved its HQ underground. Tec-5 Walter Poniedzialek, H&S Co remembered how they had to bury their trucks to keep the machine shops running while under constant harassment from the enemy's huge guns. During one of many raids on the beach area, a bomb landed near the Co E officers' bivouac, killing 1st Lt Walter Wagner, and 2nd Lts Robert Nichols and Frank Williams.

The 540th was accorded particular honors when Col Marvin met up with British General Sir Harold Alexander on February 14. General Mark Clark sent a congratulatory message to the regiment on this occasion and then again for their vital role in making Anzio the "4th largest port in the world" on March 28.

After months of appalling conditions and determined resistance from the Germans, a joyous day was experienced at 0731 hours on May 25, 1944 when the forces pressing forward from the south at Cassino, met the forces on the Anzio beachhead.

One day prior to the Normandy landings, the 5th Army proudly marched into Rome and the responsibility of clearing mines and booby traps, disease prevention, rounding up German defenders and the clearing and reconstruction of the harbors of Civitavecchia and Piombino, fell into the lap of the engineers throughout the ensuing summer months.

August's Mediterranean seas welcomed the 7th Army as they sailed from Naples to their new destination, the coast of southern France. As part of Operation Anvil the 540th were to land with the 36th Infantry Div near Frejus and St Raphael. Although casualties were light, the unit suffered the loss of Robert Stoecher, an enlisted man and 11 wounded. Co F sustained the biggest number of casualties when a dozer encountered Teller mines on D-Day + 3, resulting in 2 KIA's, 2 fatally injured and 27 wounded.

The maintenance of roads, rails and bridges, along with the construction of bridges and culverts, were a major concern throughout autumn and the early winter months of 1944 as the regiment rolled northward. Training also began for the Rhine River crossing.

On December 18th, the unit was put on alert status should the Germans attempt to cross the Rhine and retake Strasbourg. Meanwhile a comprehensive survey was made of existing fortifications including the Maginot Line, augmented by mine removal, road clearance and continuing construction of bridges.

The year ended on a dreadful note when a jeep carrying Captain Thomas Hudson, Co E and his driver Tec 5 Charles Bay, were killed near Langensoultzbach in a strafing incident.

Reports reached HQ on New Year's Day that enemy patrols and tanks surrounded the entire 1st Bn, who were acting as infantry. As the month progressed 2nd Bn was also called to action as infantry in support the 45th Inf Div. Meanwhile work persisted to strengthen defenses and as of January 31, final reconnaissance in the Vosges and Hagenau sectors were completed.

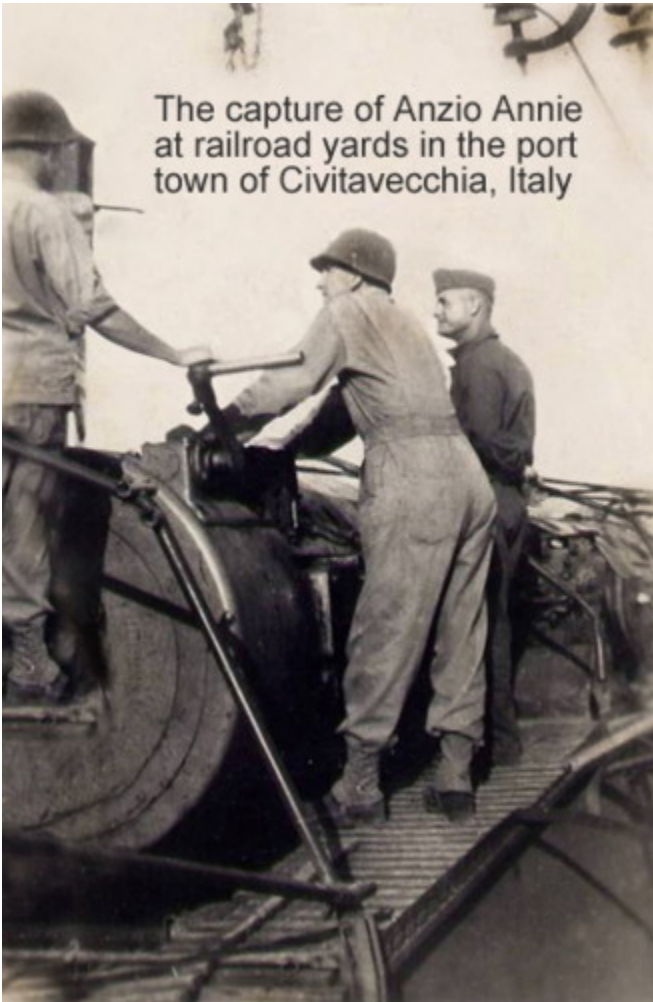
February saw the re-organization of the unit as they became the 540th Engineer Combat Group, with 1st and 2nd Bns becoming the 2832nd and 2833rd, respectively. The group continued road maintenance, bridge building, advanced infantry training and simulated assault crossing and ferrying exercises until late March when they were attached to the 3rd Inf Div at Grunstadt.

Troop ferrying began across the mighty Rhine on March 26, while construction of a heavy pontoon bridge measuring 1020 feet was completed in a record 9 hours and 12 minutes at Worms. The organization sustained a loss of 39 men; Captains Frederick Woods and Bernard Cohen were wounded.

On April 4, Col Marvin was relieved of command and was transferred to HQ 5th Army. Lt Col Manning assumed command, and the regiment moved to Heidelberg. As April turned to May, the 540th continued to construct class 40 and 70 Bailey bridges, destroy enemy ammunition dumps, guard their own dumps, build POW enclosures, clear road blocks and mines and improve the road net for Evacuation Hospitals. From the time the 540th crossed the Rhine until the surrender of German forces, the organization traveled a distance of 251 miles, constructed 12 fixed bridges and maintained roads in an assigned area of 6,369 square miles.

The regiment had one of the longest continuous service records in WWII, and received a Unit Meritorious Service Award as well as a Presidential Citation. 78 were KIA or died of wounds. 232 WIA. 301 men received Purple Hearts, and over 200 other individual decorations were given, including 2 Distinguished Service Crosses, 35 Silver Stars, 16 Legions of Merit and 57 Bronze Stars.

His 5th and 7th Army patches



I was able to ascertain the following information from my father's discharge documents:

- ✓ Date of induction: March 19, 1943
- ✓ Date of entry into active service: March 26, 1943
- ✓ Place of entry: Detroit, Michigan
- ✓ Military occupational specialty: Automotive mechanic
- ✓ Battles and campaigns: Naples/Foggia, Anzio, Rome/Arno, Southern France, Central Europe
- ✓ Decorations and citations: EAME Theater ribbon with 5 bronze stars/bronze arrowhead, World War II Victory Medal and Good Conduct ribbon.
- ✓ Date of departure: April 21, 1943 - destination NATO - date of arrival - September 2, 1943
- ✓ Date of departure: September 19, 1943 - destination ETO - date of arrival - September 21, 1943
- ✓ Date of departure: November 3, 1945 - destination USA - date of arrival - November 14, 1945
- ✓ Total length of service:
 - Continental - 4 months and 28 days
 - Foreign - 2 years, 2 months and 24 days



This was obtained from the unit's history, at the National Archives in Maryland:

- ✓ Monthly Journal entry - May 24th, 1944 - T/5 Poniedzialek from duty to 15th Evacuation Hospital, which was in the line of duty.



My dad and Buddy



My dad,
the grease monkey!





Heidelberg, Germany 1945



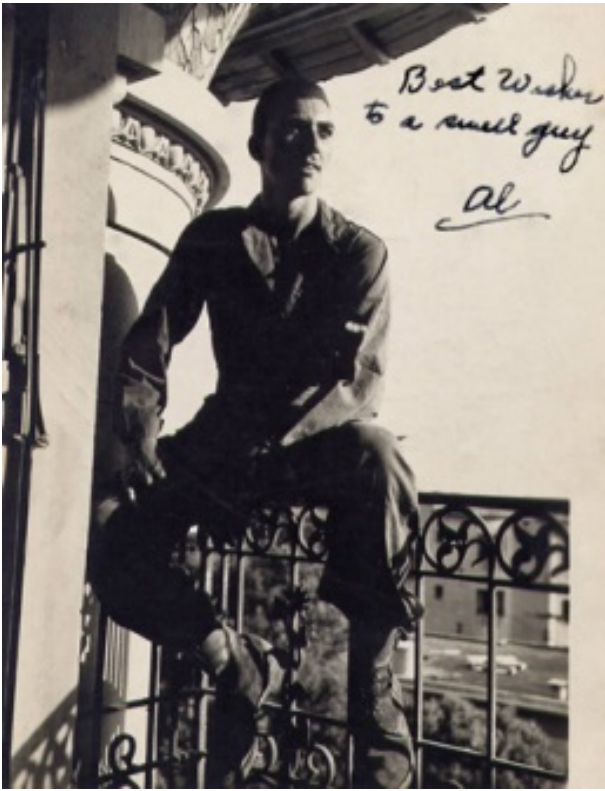
My father is on right





Heidelberg, Germany - 1945







H & S Company 2833rd Engineer Combat Battalion
First Platoon



H & S Company 2833rd Engineer Combat Battalion
Second Platoon



H & S Company 2833rd Engineer Combat Battalion
Third Platoon

My father is top row, top left



H & S Company 2833rd Engineer Combat Battalion
Fourth Platoon

Hank and my father





Please note: all images throughout this bio, were from my father's private collection

The following was supplied to me by Willie Joy, son of Ernest Joy
Photo taken in occupied Germany, 1945



Note: As you may have noticed, my dad's name was written as:

Walter "Monday" Poniedzialek

As you can imagine, the Polish last name was and is, difficult to pronounce, therefore many of his buddies referred to him as Monday, the direct Polish to English translation - much easier to call from across the battlefield. Ha-ha!

For further information on the 540th and other WWII engineer units, please visit my websites at:

www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com

www.nobridgetoofar.com