

ONE VETERAN'S HISTORY

By Richard Francis Fietz, Jr.

I was working in the shipping department of Wesco Waterpaints, Inc., in East Boston. As much of our production was of camouflage paint, I had felt that I was making my contribution to the war effort. But by the last quarter of 1942, many of my friends and relatives had enlisted in the military, and I was getting the feeling that it was time for me to go.

I made the rounds of the recruiting offices, and I was turned down at each for the same reason. An eye disability rendered me unacceptable. My last stop at Army recruiting brought me to a wise, old sergeant who had the answer to my problem: volunteer for the draft. I went to my local draft board where I asked to be drafted. It was no problem. In a matter of days I was on a quick trip to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. On November 5, 1942, I became private Fietz, 31229910.

After a series of tests, I was shipped to Camp Tyson, Tennessee. The ride south in the troop train was marred by the suicide of one of the recruits.

Basic training was a waste. Most of the men in my outfit, including myself, were classified for limited military service. The unit had to be nearly completely re-staffed. At that point I was desperate to be reclassified and somehow managed to get before a medical review board. I begged and pleaded to be reclassified for unlimited service, pointing to my markman's medal as proof of my fitness. I was overjoyed when they agreed, even though they had extracted a promise from me not to try to transfer to the Air Corps.

I was promoted to PFC and placed in charge of a squad of the new recruits. We went through basic training again and then balloon training. I was sent to communications school to learn how to set up and operate a telephone system and operate military radios.

Our balloons were a novelty on our base. They were low altitude balloons designed to be flown at a maximum of 2000 feet. There was a provision for flying two in tandem at 4000 feet. There were four companies on the base training with the new, low altitude balloons: the 101st, 102nd, 103rd, and 104th Anti-aircraft Barrage Balloon Batteries. Our battery, the 104th, consisted of four platoons with a total of 266 men.

One day we were issued blank ammunition for our rifles. We headed for a large field where we were given the script for an attack that was to be filmed. Our balloons were mounted on Jeeps. With the remainder of the men pretending to be infantrymen, we charged across the open field, firing our blank ammunition, while our balloons protected us from strafing by low flying enemy planes. I'm sure the people who saw those activities on Movietone News got as big a laugh as we did.

In April of 1943, we all got leave. I was overjoyed to get a visit home, even though I knew we were going overseas. My dad and I worked out a code that would enable me to tell him almost exactly where I was at all times. The censors never caught on.

We started north on troop trains the first week of June, arriving at Fort Hamilton, in Brooklyn, for a short stay and some additional training before boarding the Grace Lines S.S. Santa Paula. We left on June 10th, in a moderate sized convoy that was

destined to be part of a much larger convoy off the coast of Virginia. Zig zagging across the Atlantic; it took us 11 days to reach our destination—the port of Oran.

We spent six absolutely miserable weeks bivouacked on a fly-infested hillside 17 kilometers west of the city. Dysentery ran through the camp in a matter of days. Pup tents did little to protect us from the rain, which ran down the rocky surface and under the tents. Mini whirlwinds whipped dust into everything. The drinking water was so highly chlorinated it was nearly impossible to drink.

We boarded the Liberty ship, Samuel Huntington, for a quick trip to Palermo, Sicily. The Germans were pulling out as fast as they could go. Allied Forces occupied nearly the entire island by the time of our arrival. Air attacks against Palermo began almost immediately upon our arrival in the port and kept up until we went south to Licata eight days later.

Licata had been one of the original points of Allied attack. We set up a barrage on the beach in conjunction with a British decoy unit. The Germans were never fooled. They never attacked our dummy port. We moved our dog and pony show a little further north to Porto Empedocle, but they still wouldn't bite. We gave up and went on to Termini Immeresi, on August 31st.

We were housed in a tobacco factory, which wasn't too bad once one became accustomed to the smell of raw tobacco. The Italians surrendered during the week we were there.

Our balloon crews were loading on to British LST's, when a call came in to H.Q. that one crew was short a man. The soldier was AWOL, and a replacement was needed PDQ. I volunteered to replace him. Since my services as a telephone lineman weren't going to be needed until we got to Italy, I was the most expendable of the group at HQ. Just before I arrived at the port a German torpedo bomber had successfully attacked the flotilla, striking one of the loaded LST's. Casualties were light, but we had one less LST in our flotilla.

We assaulted the northernmost beach at Salerno. We sailed up and down the Mediterranean for a month, ferrying Colonial forces from Palermo, Termini Immeresi, Bizerta and Tripoli.

Our last trip ended in the Port of Salerno, itself. Our four-man crew off-loaded our equipment from LST 415 onto the beach where it was to be picked up by our HQ staff. We walked out to the end of the breakwater where we were to set up a balloon site. We were there for only a few minutes when we heard a huge explosion. It wasn't long before we learned that our entire HQ crew, including our Lieutenant, had hit a German anti-tank mine with our weapons carrier. The explosion and fire from burning hydrogen gas caused one death and severe burn injuries to two others.

The death of technician 5th class, Frank J. Eurmnt, 31226173, our company clerk, hit me real hard. He was the only other soldier from Massachusetts in the 104th. He was buried at Nettuno, Italy.

First Lieutenant, Charles A. Chalker, was severely burned. However, he returned to our unit after a period of hospitalization.

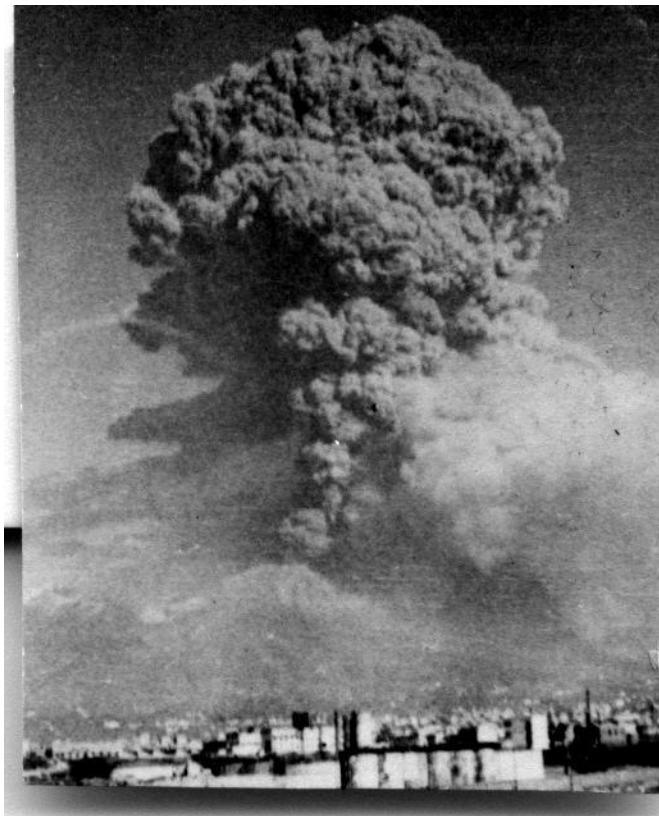
Jim Stone, our mail clerk, was severely burned. He had lost his sight. I never learned whether he ever regained it.

Ironically, the men on that weapons carrier were the only men in our outfit who did not make the invasion. And they were our only casualties of the war.

After a month on the end of that breakwater, we moved north to the Naples area. We set up at Bagnoli for a short time before erecting an enormous barrage over the Port of Naples. I kept busy running telephone lines between all the balloon sites and HQ at 17 Via Emmanuele Gianturco, a flourmill. We had comfortable quarters in the offices of the mill. I took my regular turn manning the switchboard.

I had lots of leisure time. Except for the constant flow of men and material past our front door, one would hardly have known we were in a war zone.

In October, I received a camera from my mother, as a birthday present. From then on, I documented most of our unit's activities. Among my most interesting photographs are these two of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, in March 1943





In August, we pulled down our barrage and moved to a building a few doors away from the Porge Reale, the local jail. We went up the coast a few times and practiced landing activities with units of several infantry divisions. There wasn't any doubt about what was coming next. The only question was WHERE? The bets were on Yugoslavia and the south of France.

As in the invasion of Italy, we spread our balloons out over an entire flotilla of LST's. This time they were all U. S. Navy LST's. We sat in the harbor at Naples for eight days, until Winston Churchill, himself, gave us the "go" signal, sailing up and down the rows of ships with the ever present cigar in one hand and the other, flashing the familiar "V" for VICTORY.

The wait in the harbor at Naples was part of General Eisenhower's grand strategy. (At least I like to think so.) The German forces defending against the enormous assault in the north of France were desperate. They could bring re-enforcements up from the south and leave the south nearly defenseless. Or they could continue to get smashed by the Allies in the north. They chose to re-enforce. Bad choice. The forces from the south never arrived. They were chopped to pieces as they moved north through the Rhone Valley. But their movement was our signal to start north. Once we were out of port we didn't have any doubt about where we were going.

We made a daylight landing on beaches all along the Riviera. Our group covered the landing of the 3rd Infantry division below La Croix Valmer. It wasn't much of a beach, and there wasn't much in the way of defense by the Germans.

I never described how the balloons work, but I will digress at this point. That way the reader may fully appreciate the next part of this narrative. The balloon is tethered to a winch by a 16 gauge piano wire. A short distance above the winch is an inertia link and a canister with a bomb and a parachute. When a plane strikes the wire the link fires a cartridge which separates the canister from the lower wire and deploys a parachute. The parachute is dragged towards the plane until a ring on the canister hits the plane and detonates the bomb in the canister. Very simple. Very effective.

Lt. Wilfred Boucher not only hit a balloon cable with his artillery-spotting plane without detonating the bomb, he was responsible for the dangling bomb hitting a group of

German soldiers. I photographed the lieutenant next to his plane on the beach. I only learned his identity a few years ago. He had an extra gas tank for this mission, but it failed, and he was forced to land in the water. The navy put him up on the beach just before I arrived. His plane was traveling slowly enough that the cable merely spun him, instead of digging into the wing.

He got another plane. He was shot down by the Germans and spent the remainder of the war as a POW.



Lt. Wilfred Boucher on D-Day at La Croix Valmer, France

We moved around the point to the Baie de Cavalaire on D-Day plus one. It was an excellent beach. We set up a barrage as soon as the combat engineers cleared all of the numerous mines and booby traps. The emphasis at this point was to get as many French troops into the fray as possible. This is a photograph of French Army nurses on D-Day plus 3.



Our headquarters was located in a beautiful villa a short distance from the beach. The pity is that we were only there for three weeks before moving on to Marseille.

I revisited La Croix Valmer and Baie de Cavalaire a few years ago. It was unrecognizable. The Riviera has experienced a building boom similar to that in south Florida.



The photograph above shows my daughter, Vice Consul, Patricia Fietz, of the U.S. State Department, placing a wreath on the monument at La Croix Valmer honoring the 3rd Infantry Division, on the 55th anniversary of the invasion.

The 104th flew a barrage over the port of Marseille for four months. At the end of December 1944, the 104th went out of existence. Its soldiers were assigned to numerous other units. I was fortunate enough to join a newly formed Combat Engineer battalion.

The 1175th Combat Engineer Group was activated from the now surplus 106th AAA Group. The 370th Combat Engineer Battalion was part of the new group.

We trained near what is now the Marseille airport. Our camp alongside the Marseille-Rhone Canal consisted of eight-man pyramidal tents, heated by 55-gallon drums with gasoline drip tubes.

We learned all of the basic engineering skills before heading north through the Rhine Valley in early March. That included bridge building, laying minefields, removing mines and booby traps, the use of explosives, etc.

Our jumping off spot was the Hagenau Forest. Massive aerial strikes followed by an enormous and prolonged artillery barrage signaled our intention to cross into the Fatherland. We entered the Mannheim-Ludwigshafen area after crossing the Rhine and received an immediate assignment to patrol the river for floating mines. The Germans held the east bank of the Rhine upstream and were expected to try to destroy our bridges with floating mines. The threat only lasted a few days. We were relieved to go on to filling potholes.

We moved southeast behind the rapidly moving infantry. We were to open the autobahn in the Ulm area. First, we cleared an overpass that the retreating Germans had dropped onto the main highway. Next, we carved a roadway into the side of a mountain to by-pass a blown bridge (see photo). We used jackhammers to drill 20-foot deep holes in the hillside. We filled them with explosives, wiring them in such a way that we could blow the whole hillside at once. I understand that there wasn't an intact roof left on any of the homes at the base of the mountain after the detonation.



By-pass at Drackenstein

We then went on to Heilbronn, where four rail bridges had been dropped into the Neckar River. We were spurred on by the plea that General Patton needed this rail bridge to get gasoline for his tanks. The Neckar River in April is cold. I know this first hand



Replacing a rail bridge at Heilbronn, Germany

My big contribution to Patton's cause was to place 50 lbs. of explosives under one end of the bridge so we could get it out of the way. The end I was blasting was ten feet under water. The case of explosives was buoyant. It was all I could do to take it down to the proper depth. We had pre-wired it with the detonator sticking out of the top of the case. As I fought the buoyancy to lodge it under the bridge beam, it kept bobbing up against the beam. I had visions of me going 100 or more feet in the air due to a premature explosion. Naturally, everything turned out okay, or I wouldn't be writing this memoir. It only took a single blast to free up the old span. We built a crib in the middle of the river from the 12" x 12" timbers shown in the photo above. We filled it with stone and built a support for the new rail bridge.

After that, we spent days walking rail lines with mine detectors to be certain the first train over them wouldn't be blown to Kingdom Come. Each time we came to an intact bridge we would find that the Germans had carefully concealed one of our 500-pound bombs in such a way that the next train over the bridge would be the last.

My squad of twelve men then lucked out.



Our squad at French Army barracks in Remiremont, France

The non-fraternization policy meant that hard-working soldiers were going to need rest camps outside of Germany. We were assigned to build such a camp in the Vosges Mountains of France, in the town of Remiremont. We were there for several weeks, returning to Germany in late June



Rest camp at Remiremont, France

I won a drawing for a 3-day pass to a VI Corps rest center in Nancy, France. After checking in at the rest center, I thumbed a ride to Paris. Returning two days later, I found that I hadn't even been missed. I caught up with my unit in Heidenheim, Germany, a really beautiful town, which claims as its most famous citizen, "The Desert Fox", General Erwin Rommel.

In late July, I went on a seven-day furlough to London, England. With seven days travel time each way. I had ample opportunity to spend several days in Paris going and coming. The last day I was in Paris was memorable. It was August 14th, 1945. The day World War II ended with the unconditional surrender of Japan

Just before midnight I boarded a train for Germany. I caught up with my unit in Unterkochen.

For the next two weeks, I worked to try to put some of Germany's infrastructure back together. I wasn't very pleasant to be around. I never stopped griping. My feeling was that Germans should be doing the work. But then I got lucky again. It turned out that I had been serving with a bunch of Johnny-come-latelys. My ASR score put me second in line to an old married man with eight kids for rotation home.

I had a beautiful trip back through France to one of the cigaret camps on the channel coast. We zipped across the channel to Southampton and then on to barracks at Tidworth. The stay at Tidworth afforded us the opportunity to see Stonehenge, Salisbury Cathedral and loads of other nearby tourist attractions.

The first week of October had us back at Southampton, boarding the Queen Elizabeth for a 100 hour crossing of the Atlantic. The sight of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor was emotionally wrenching after more than 2 ½ years in North Africa and Europe. I was destined to be a civilian again two weeks later.

I was awarded the good conduct medal, six battle stars and a bronze arrowhead.