

## *Life-Changing Experiences during WWII*

*By Peter J. Dahlberg*

December 7, 1941, changed our world forever. Until that day my life had been comparatively peaceful and quiet. We lived in the Red River Valley, just 50 miles from Canada, where I had the privilege of being raised on a farm, just across the road from the small town of Drayton,



North Dakota. Population, 500. I'll never forget that Sunday afternoon, coming home from church and seeing bold headlines, "Japan Attacks Pearl Harbor!" Although my oldest brother was already in military service it still seemed far removed. Little did I dream that in just a few short years I would be deeply involved in a conflict that affected so much of the world.

Except for gas rationing, shortage of sugar, rubber and a few other commodities, we managed to survive fairly well. I had just turned 16 years of age and was in my junior year of high school. For a time I considered joining the Navy Air Corps. It sounded exciting. For some reason I delayed until graduating from high school the spring of 1943. That fall I enrolled in a Bible College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, knowing full well that military draft might prove inevitable. Almost everyone I knew had been called into service, and I wanted to join them and see action.

Following one semester of college my draft board issued the call. On January 26, 1944, I was sworn into the U.S. Army at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and given a 21-day furlough. After being home about a week a rather unusual event took place. My Dad wanted to trim a long branch from a cottonwood tree. In so doing the branch struck the ground, rebounded, and hit him in mid-section, knocking him from the ladder to the rock-hard frozen ground. Both heels were broken, as well as one arm, leaving him bedfast and practically helpless. I was given emergency furlough for the next 4 months to help keep the farm going, the delay that may well have saved my life.

Finally, on June 1st I returned to Fort Snelling and was soon on board a troop train heading south. We had no idea where we were going, but after 3 days and nights of travel we arrived at Camp Blanding, Florida, ready to start infantry training. The heat of summer was almost unbearable at times, reaching 110-115 degrees, causing many heat-strokes. I lived in a small

hut-like barracks building with 7 other men, ranging in age from 18 to 38. We were trained in everything from hand grenades to machine guns. Much of our time was spent learning to use and care for our M1 rifles, which we learned to refer to as our "piece." They were to be considered as part of ourselves. To start with we were being trained in communications and had begun learning Morse Code, but the demand for riflemen became more urgent and we finished our basic training as riflemen. Our final test of endurance was a 25-mile march with full field pack. This we did at night to escape the heat of the day. In spite of weariness and sore feet we managed to go in to Starke for a week-end pass. We didn't do much, but at least we were out of the camp.

On occasional week-end passes we enjoyed visiting St. Augustine with its old-time atmosphere and beautiful beaches. Known as the oldest city in the United States, there were horse drawn carriages and buildings of Spanish architectural design. On one occasion we visited Ocala, Florida, with its magnificent silver springs. We rode in glass bottom boats and others with submarine-like features. Immense fish could be seen swimming deep down in the clear waters. Monkeys played in surrounding trees and Spanish moss hung from branches. Slightly in contrast to the barrenness of North Dakota, it proved to be an interesting new experience.

Seventeen weeks went by rather quickly, after which we were given a few days to go home and bid families farewell before going overseas. Upon return I reported to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. Our next stop was Ft. Meade, Maryland, not far from Washington, D.C. Bob Cromer, a good buddy from Chicago, and I visited the nation's capitol, and even took a tour of New York City. As we looked around for the Empire State Building, we asked someone on the street where it was. We found we were standing at its very base, so we joined a passing tour group and went up as far as was allowed. We also got to see China Town and many other sights. Before long we were on our way to Boston, Massachusetts. There we boarded a troop ship, December 12, 1944, heading for the European Theater of Operations. I'll never forget walking up the gangplank, wondering if I would ever return. Before leaving Bible College I had prayed earnestly one night, "Lord, let me see what war is like..." I added a postscript, "but please let me come home alive." Little did I know what I was asking for.

Sailing the North Atlantic in winter was a rather wild and stormy experience, as the ship rocked and rolled back and forth constantly. Most of the men were sea sick, and I don't recall having too good an appetite. Our food trays would slide back and forth as we tried to eat. After 8 days we finally landed in Liverpool, England, December 20, 1944. From there we boarded an English train with small passenger compartments, and made our way along the coastline to Southampton, where we became part of "Tent Village." It was almost Christmas time. On Christmas Day we were taken to an airfield to fly across the English Channel. The fog was so heavy that there was no way for planes to take off or land. We sat on our duffle bags through the whole day, eating our K-rations. When we got back to camp we found that

those who remained had enjoyed a special meal, only to get sick from contaminated food. So we didn't feel too bad about missing it.

Two days after Christmas we boarded an LST landing vessel and crossed the English Channel to LaHarve, France. I was still carrying my guitar, which I had purchased from my cousin for \$5.00 just before going overseas. It was a little beat up, but had a pretty good sound. As we walked single-file toward our tents we met another column of men going the other direction. Seeing my guitar one man called out, "You'll never shoot anyone with that!" And he was right. It had given us some diversion and entertainment, but was soon too hard to carry any further. Later I discovered a mandolin in an attic of a German home, and played it briefly before having to go on. In one village we entered a church where there was an organ. I played and sang some old hymns, including "What a Friend we have in Jesus."

To proceed further into France we crawled into "40 et 8" boxcars, which were designed to carry forty men or eight horses. With no windows we left the large doors open so we could evacuate quickly if strafed by German planes. Some of the men tried to light a bonfire in the center of the boxcar, but this almost asphyxiated us, so it was quickly extinguished. We finally arrived at our destination, Rouen, France, where we were issued rifles and given opportunity to zero them in. While there we had the privilege of listening to a soldier who had just returned from the front-lines. His graphic description of bloody combat was so vivid that a big soldier standing just in front of me actually fainted. I'll confess that I felt a little faint myself, but managed to stay on my feet.

Army trucks arrived to take us up through Belgium and Holland and closer to the front. With our duffle bags we walked the final distance and became part of L Company, 309<sup>th</sup> Regiment, of the 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Just a short distance from the very front-lines we found refuge in log shelters built for about 8 or 10 men each. They were about a foot or so into the ground with log walls perhaps 3 feet high, covered with branches, making them fairly comfortable. One could crawl around and keep fairly warm with a small fireplace dug into one wall. Trying to encourage the fire one of the men poured gasoline on the fire, leaving a trail of fire which barred the doorway. It was quickly snuffed out, saving us from disaster.

During this time we would be called to stand guard at outposts overlooking the front. Deep snow and bitter cold made this a difficult assignment. After about a week or two I was given leave to visit a rest area in Holland. It was wonderful respite which I would never be granted again. One dark night, with total black-out, while walking around the building in which we stayed I failed to see an open stair well that had no guard rails. I found myself falling about 7 feet, but landed on my feet without injury. It was a startling experience, to say the least.

Upon returning to my outfit I was soon in one of the foxholes on the very front line. The Battle of the Bulge was raging, and we were assigned to watch and be prepared for any

further incursion. Some of the foxholes were comparatively comfortable, while others were terribly inadequate. Perhaps the longest day of my life was spent in a poorly built foxhole. Whoever dug it had wasted no energy. It was so cramped that two of us had to lay in the bottom of the hole, barely able to turn over, with no cover overhead. We could not stand or let our heads be seen above the hole or we would have been targeted. When night time finally came I begged to be sent back to my previous foxhole, and was granted my request. The deep snow and extreme cold was taking its toll among the men, leaving many with frost-bitten feet. Fortunately my mother sent heavy hand-knit woolen socks that helped immensely. Also, we were issued "snow-packs," waterproof boots with felt liners. They helped save the day!

The month of January came to a close. By now snow had melted and spring rains were coming on. We left our foxhole positions and moved forward into enemy territory. Somehow we made it through the Siegfried Line, with its pillboxes and dragon teeth. Had not the Germans begun to lose heart they might have defended the line more intensely. I will never forget seeing the first casualty, a young American soldier whose body lay sprawled across a barbed wire fence, a look of sheer agony on his face turned toward the sky. Among our first objectives was the Shwammanuel Dam, which the 78<sup>th</sup> captured by February 10th. On our way to the dam we stopped in a wooded area. My partner and I began digging a foxhole early that morning. We took turns digging. After a while he offered to replace me and I walked up the hill a short distance. Suddenly a shell exploded further downhill. I called to my partner, but there was no response. A piece of shrapnel had pierced his steel helmet and he was killed instantly. He was sitting in the exact spot I had just left. I've always felt that he took my place, and have often compared this to the old rugged cross where my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, died in my place, so that by faith in Him I could live forever.

Much of the action has long since faded from memory, but I remember walking many miles over hills and wooded terrain, much like the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was actually very beautiful country, but scarred by shell-fire and bombs which laid entire cities to waste. There were a few times when we rode in army trucks or on the outside of tanks to protect them from bazooka attacks. Early training stood us in good stead during lengthy marches. We were probably more like machines than human beings. Yet we experienced hunger and weariness, and felt deeply the loss of close buddies who had become like blood brothers. Often the food kitchens failed to compete with our pace, so we would scrounge through cellars and homes for black bread, tasteless canned goods, or just about anything to satisfy hunger. I remember milking a goat and drinking the milk which produced a bad case of diarrhea that lasted for weeks.

Weakened by diarrhea, yet pushing relentlessly on, we came under intense shelling one day. My partner and I ducked into a shallow foxhole in a ditch for protection. I laid my rifle on the ground next to the hole. Unbeknown to us the tank just ahead began backing up to get away from the shell bursts. In doing so it ran right over my rifle, totally crushing it. We could so

easily have been crushed as well. I have never felt quite as helpless as at the moment when I picked up my "piece" that was utterly useless. Hearing about my predicament someone offered me a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) which I refused because of its weight. Another soldier was wounded so I obtained his rifle, and we proceeded on. I discovered later that it probably had not been zeroed in.

As time went by and we suffered more and more casualties, I moved up from being assistant to the BAR man to becoming 1<sup>st</sup> scout. This meant being among the very first to go forward. It was a lonely feeling to be point man, walking into enemy territory with the expectation of being blown away at any moment. However, there were certain benefits involved. Capturing a small village we had to run across an open field before reaching it. As 1<sup>st</sup> scout I escaped the hail of machine gun fire that raked the hillside just a few feet behind me. Upon entering that village we began scouring homes to flush out enemy soldiers. In one home we found a young German sailor, dressed in a white uniform, his dead body sprawled across the living room table. Shrapnel had shattered a large window and taken his life. Upon searching the basement I found a dozen or so women, children, and older men. Most of them were weeping fearfully, no doubt wondering what they might suffer at our hands. They had little reason to fear, as we tried to treat civilians kindly.

I will always remember one particular home. We had entered the village and planned to spend the night there. We would occupy homes and the people would leave to find refuge elsewhere. In this home were three individuals, a man and his wife together with their daughter who appeared to be about 12 years old. He was one of the tallest men I have ever seen. As they prepared to leave they moved about calmly and deliberately, almost as if no one was around, although the house bustled with soldiers. They prepared a simple meal and sat down at the kitchen table. Before eating they quietly bowed their heads and the tall man prayed. I'm quite certain he must have been a pastor. After eating they quickly gathered a few belongings and walked out into the darkness. Our plans to stay were soon disrupted as we were ordered to move on into the night.

Nighttime was no doubt the most fearful of all. As we stumbled along in darkness we could not help but wonder what the next step would bring. One of my buddies lost his glasses, so he was almost totally blind at night. He would take hold of my ammunition belt, hang on and follow close behind. Tracer bullets blazed across the sky and shell bursts were often spectacular. Some men could not rest night or day. I found that I could fall asleep and rest under even the most stressful conditions. I learned to pray, more earnestly than ever before in my life. I've often called it a "Crash-Course in Prayer." One night upon taking a larger city we were searching for enemy soldiers. Lieutenant Musselman, one of the bravest, came upon a human form in the darkness. Not knowing his identity he spoke to him, upon which the German soldier opened fire with his burp gun, nearly cutting the Lieutenant in two. He died on the spot.

Another night we were walking single file in a long column. We paused momentarily, when suddenly a rifle shot rang out. The entire line of men jerked back a few feet, something like a chain reaction. We discovered later that one of our men had accidentally shot himself in his foot. We were never sure if it was pure accident, because many were looking for what we called a "million-dollar wound," which would allow them to be removed from action. One man went so far as to run out with outstretched arms, hoping a shell fragment might hit him in the right place, but he failed to succeed in his effort.

One night proved to be a very fearful experience. Advancing into enemy territory we had just reached a stopping place at the foot of a hill. Having lost my partner I joined two other soldiers and we formed a threesome. It was nearing nightfall so we began digging a foxhole that would be large enough for all three of us. The soil was rather easy digging and we soon had a hole that would accommodate us quite nicely. About the time we were ready to settle in for the night we were given orders to move forward to the top of a nearby hill. Upon reaching our objective we again started digging a foxhole. Here the digging was far more difficult, with a lot of stones in the hard-packed soil. We had dug about two feet down when suddenly artillery shells began coming in. All three of us dived for the foxhole, lying prostrate side by side in the shallow hole. Shells kept coming, and even with our eyes closed we saw flashes of fire. We could hear the shells as they were fired and the terrible scream as they came closer, then exploding far too close for comfort. My partners and I began praying in earnest. When the shelling paused we crawled out of the hole and held a hasty consultation. We decided to go back down the hill to our former foxhole. As we picked up our gear that lay outside the hole, Bill found that a piece of shrapnel had pierced the stock of his rifle. As I picked up my cartridge belt water ran out of a hole in my canteen. We made our way back to our previous position and crawled into our foxhole. Almost immediately the shelling continued again, zeroed in to the area where we had been. Next morning we began moving forward. As we passed our position on the hilltop where we had been the night before we saw that our foxhole had taken a direct hit. Had we stayed there we would have been blown to bits. Our prayers had been answered and we were still alive.



Crossing the Rhine was no doubt the most dramatic event of all. We marched all night to get to Remagen where the Ludendorff Bridge was still intact. It had been captured a day or so before we reached it, and troops and tanks were pouring across the bridge. As we looked down on the Rhine from the top of a hill we saw a German dive bomber break through the clouds and drop a bomb intended to blow up the bridge. The bomb missed its mark and fell harmlessly into the river. Before crossing the bridge we would wait for shelling to pause, then run across as fast as we could.

The day after crossing the bridge we were assigned to capture a hill that was heavily fortified. We captured a few German soldiers who warned us of the danger ahead. When we reached our objective we were told to spread out across the hill and dig in. The hill was covered with a dense fog. My squad leader, Sgt. Luther Rainey motioned for me to join him in a shell hole that would give some cover and make digging easier. We had just taken off our gear and started digging when the fog suddenly lifted. It seemed as though all hell broke loose, as machine gun and rifle fire swept across the open hill. Most of our men had no cover or protection whatever. I ducked low in the shell hole and began firing back. Suddenly a bullet glanced off my helmet and went careening off into space. It left a two inch crease on the right side of my helmet. An inch or two more toward the center and it would have been curtains for me. I realized that God had miraculously spared my life. There's a verse in the Bible that says, "*He (God) covered my head in the day of battle.*" I wish I had saved the helmet and brought it home as a reminder of that harrowing experience.

Just as suddenly as the fog had lifted it settled down again. Everything was quiet except for the agonizing cries of our men in the throes of dying. My squad leader said, "Let's get out of here or we'll be killed." He leaped for a nearby hedgerow and I followed. We had gone just a short distance when a mortar shell exploded immediately in front of us. We were both knocked to the ground by the concussion. I picked myself up and felt like I had been hit all over. I was sure this was it, but the wounds proved only superficial with a trickle of blood running down my face. My squad leader lay prostrate on the ground, with a huge gaping hole in his skull. I knew there was no chance for survival, but I took off his first aid bandage and placed it over the wound. My hands were covered with the blood that flowed. I watched him as he breathed his last. I've often thought of a young wife and two small children back in Louisiana who would never have the joy of welcoming him back home.

Somewhat in a daze I wandered back to where we had been and met a tank observer who asked where the enemy was located. I pointed out the direction about 100 yards away. He conveyed the message to the tank. They lobbed a few shells into the area, and in a few minutes a long column of German soldiers with their hands upraised came streaming out of the woods. The battle was over, but at a great cost of human life. Later that day our men who had died were carried off the field and laid side by side like cordwood on the cold wet ground. We lost about one-half of our platoon that day. I've heard it said, "War is hell," and I came to believe it. The price for freedom has never been cheap. The road to peace is always stained with blood.

One day we were advancing in single file when the soldier immediately in front of me turned around, his eyes wide open with fear. He said, "Let's get out of here; we'll never make it through alive!" He was ready to turn and run and wanted me to join him. I was no great hero, but had presence of mind to say, "God has seen us through so far, and He will help us all the way." It was just enough to give him courage to turn around and keep moving forward. A few

days later he was given credit for knocking out a German machine gun nest and was awarded a Bronze Star medal for his action. He stayed with us all the rest of the way. To say that I was never afraid would be a lie, but faith in God gave courage and strength that was needed to keep pressing on. I never met a man who didn't admit that he had prayed when the going got rough. It has been said, "There are no atheists in foxholes," and I surely believe it is true.

A few days after crossing the Rhine River we were moving forward under stiff opposition. Reaching a heavily forested area we came under intense shelling. Tree bursts made it difficult to find any cover whatever. One of our tanks took a direct hit resulting in flames shooting up through the turret. My good buddy, Bob Cromer, with whom I had taken basic training in Florida, was hit in the leg by shrapnel. That was the last I saw him until years later. He spent time in a hospital in England recovering from his wounds, thus becoming interested in the medical profession. He later became a successful medical doctor, recently celebrating 50 years of service in the same community. Shelling was so intense that the decision was made not to send tanks ahead of infantry. We formed a skirmish line with some space between each man and made a mad dash across the open field toward our objective. About halfway across a German 88 artillery shell struck midway in our line and every one to my right fell to the ground. Our squad leader took a direct hit and was killed instantly. We kept going and made it across the field to the hill that was our objective. After flushing out foxholes we came across one of our GI's whose leg hung by a thread. A tourniquet had been placed around his leg, but he was pale from loss of blood. With none of our medics available a German medic was found who came and severed the little that was left, amputating the lower part of his leg. No doubt he was carried to the rear for further treatment.

Entering the final stages of the war we found hundreds of German soldiers quite willing to surrender. One officer came up and surrendered, handing me his pistol, binoculars, and wristwatch. He seemed happy just to be alive. Later, after being called back from the front we were given the duty of guarding a POW encampment. We did this for just a short period of time, for which I was grateful. I couldn't help but feel for these bedraggled men as they huddled around bonfires behind barbed wire enclosures. They had fought hard for a losing cause, all because of a madman's dreams of greatness. Before long the war was finally over; the final objective had been reached and we had won the war. Adolph Hitler was dead, but the beautiful land of Germany lay devastated, together with those countries that had been overrun. Countless lives, both military and civilians, had been snuffed out in the process.

We now became the Army of Occupation, and settled in a small German village. It was a rather quiet but somewhat interesting life to observe the life-style of the villagers. We lived in homes that also housed cattle. One could step from the kitchen into the barn, or in some houses the barn was in the basement. Everything was kept spotlessly clean and neat. Women seemed to bear the brunt of doing most of the work. Horses and farm machinery were scarce and at times a horse and cow were hitched together to pull loads. The cows didn't seem too

excited about it and lagged behind. During the war there were dead animals everywhere. How the people rallied to rebuild their homes and cities has always amazed me. Revisiting Europe in 1983 it was difficult to see any traces of damages caused by the war.

After six months of occupation I had the opportunity to go back home. I was chosen to be one of four men from the Division to be given a 30-day furlough. This in itself was a miracle, as I knew nothing about the program. I was called into the company headquarters where our 1st Sargeant asked me, "How would you like to go home?"

I leaped at the opportunity. Next day we headed for LeHavre, France and boarded a troop ship. It was so crowded that every bunk was taken, so I slept on a ping pong table for the seven day return trip to Boston. It was a little uncomfortable, but I didn't mind a bit; we were heading in the right direction. My furlough was extended to 45 days, and the rest of my time in military service would be in the United States, where I would be discharged on April 26, 1946.

Home again! It was hard to believe. As I walked down the gangplank in Boston I felt like kneeling down and kissing the ground. It was so good to be back, and in one piece. For over two years I totally forgot what I had asked for. Now I was reminded of my long forgotten prayer, but it had been answered, precisely. I had seen what war was like, and I was still alive, with no serious injury whatever. God is so good! Little did I know at that time what opportunities would open to minister to other veterans through the years in the VA Medical Center and SD State Veterans Home in Hot Springs, South Dakota, where I served as a Chaplain for 30 years. I could readily identify with those who had served our country in the military, especially combat veterans. God knows how to prepare us for life's journey. I'm so glad He knew the path I should take and that He was with me every step of the way. I couldn't ask for more. Overall I can say, they proved to be truly life-changing experiences! I could never be the same. God had surely spared my life and I will be forever grateful.

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