

‘We Had A Great General!’

Yankton Resident And P&D Correspondent William Kerr Recalls His Days As Part Of The Occupation Force Late In WWII

BY WILLIAM KERR
For the Press & Dakotan

When I joined my outfit the 119th Infantry Regiment of the 30th Infantry Division (there are three regiments in a division) in early January 1945, I spent an afternoon with my squad just getting acquainted. The Regiment was in the division rest camp. The division rotated the three regiments while in combat: one on line, one in support, and one in reserve. As each went into reserve, they got three days in the rest camp (sleeping on cots instead of the ground) which included hot showers, automatic replacement of worn clothing (while they were showering), three hot meals per day, 24-hour-per-day ice cream machine and other edible goodies.

After getting all of our names straight, we began to share information about ourselves and of past experiences. They also began to inform me of some of the past activities of our general, Lt. Gen. Leland S. Hobbs, which painted an attractive picture of his leadership. For one thing, he often came up to the front in different parts of the division, even when we were fighting, to look at the situation and the terrain, and (when appropriate) talk with the guys.

Sometime that afternoon they also gave me my nickname — “Stretch”!

They also informed me of some unwritten operational guidelines of our division which had come down from the top. That surely means our general. Here they are in order of importance:

1. Never surrender. They said that had never come up, but I was told that in December a recon patrol of a half-dozen men from our company had been surrounded and captured. Our company then formed a larger recon patrol and found out — from German citizens yet — where their comrades were being held. (Our assistant squad leader spoke and read fluent German: I read and spoke French. Our second scout, “Mex,” could handle Spanish and a rifleman, “Russky,” spoke and read Russian and Polish! How about that? Only in America!) Then the entire company formed a combat patrol, called artillery for a rolling barrage into the town where their comrades were being held,

then followed the rolling barrage into the town and recaptured the imprisoned patrol. That is not exactly an example of “never surrender,” but rather, “never give up.” But it does say something about how the division operated. It was good news to me.

2. Never leave your billet (sleeping place) unarmed.

3. When on guard duty and you call for someone to “halt,” count “one thousand and one, one thousand and two” — then shoot if they have not halted.

4. We don’t live in tents; we live in buildings.

Months later, when the war ended in Europe, all of the combat outfits were rearranged to cover all of the smaller towns and hamlets until the military government people could all get over there and get situated. Our company was informed that the small town assigned to us was where the Hitler Youth organization had begun!

We arrived at our assigned town about 11 p.m. and went to the homes our advance quartering party had picked out for us all. They had told the people in them to take their valuables and a month’s supply of clothing and go stay with someone else for a while. We went to our assigned home and went to bed. Early the next morning, we were awakened by a bugler blowing reveille (time to get up). We looked out of a window and saw another company, whom we were obviously relieving, who were living in tents out in a field!

The next night, a young man tried to steal a five-gallon gas can from behind the building that included our kitchen. A guard saw him and called out “halt” counted and fired, killing the young man who had not stopped.

The next day, official “Occupation Regulations” for the German citizens came in along with a training schedule for the troops. Training for what, we all asked? We had all had basic training and now were combat veterans.

Well, the next day, a division staff member, sent by Gen. Hobbs, showed up to inform us that we didn’t have to follow the training schedule as long as we had one baseball game going on every day so we could tell anyone from Corps HQ or SHAEF HQ (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces) who showed up, to see how we were doing — or for inspection, that



COURTESY PHOTO

William Kerr is shown in fighting form in this photo taken in Europe in 1945. Note the children lurking near the fence in the background.

today was our day for sports. What a blast that was! Such hard work! (The schedule allowed us — our commanding officer that is — to switch activities between days of the week to better fit our occupation duties.) Every platoon (4) and company headquarters (C.O., Assistant C.O. First Sergeant, Sgt., company clerk, mess sergeant and cooks, and supply sergeant and assistants) had a team and we did play every week day and sometimes even on Saturday! We were in a small hamlet with no movie theater, no cafe or bistro. The only other form of recreation locally was a small lake where we could go swimming, and a lot of that went on, as well as baseball. What a lousy deal!

A couple days later several, of us from our squad decided to get a haircut. We went to the barber shop early and it was empty

when we arrived. The barber looked to be about 16 or 17 — not unusual because so many men had been taken for the Army. Someone said, “Why don’t you go first, Stretch?” I thought that was nice of them, so I put my B.A.R. against the wall and got into the chair. After he had been cutting for a while with a scissors and comb, he got out a razor and started stropping it to trim. As soon as he did, the others with me all cocked their weapons! Then it hit me — Hitler Youth? But there was no trouble. By then, he knew about the young man being killed and it may have influenced him, if needed. He did good work and we all got haircuts.

After a short time in the “occupation”

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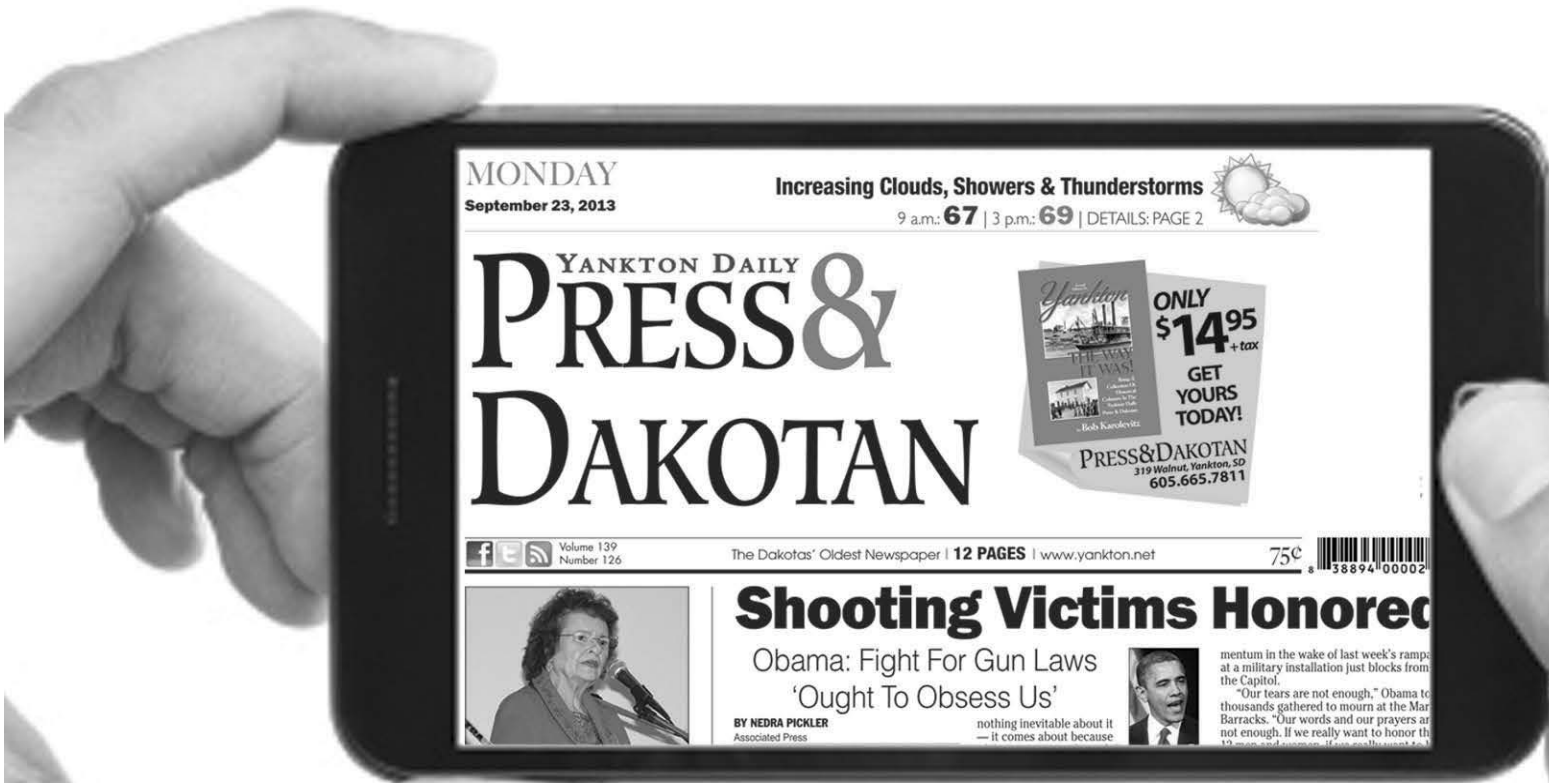
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