

## Dispatches | From Our Readers

# Memories Of A ‘Great Adventure’

BY VERNE HULL  
Yankton

I graduated from Mitchell senior high school in 1942 and guessed I would soon be drafted. But I had also been granted a scholarship to play basketball at Dakota Wesleyan, and the coach, Les Belding, organized a group of us to go to Vermillion on Sept. 3 and enlist in the ERC (Enlisted Reserve Corps) which would place us on inactive military service, thus allowing us to go to college and, of course, to play on his basketball team.

Dakota Wesleyan's basketball team dominated that season and was invited to the NIT (National Intercollegiate Tourney) national championship at Kansas City, Missouri. Unfortunately, we lost the first game to Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Shortly after we returned from Kansas City, we were notified that we had been called into active duty and that, on April 12, we should report to Fort Snelling in Minnesota. In a letter to all of us, M.D. Smith, Dean of the College, wrote, "You have our very best wishes as you start out on your great adventure."

Soon I found myself on a train headed for Fort Knox, Kentucky, and the ARTC (Armored Replacement Training Center).

After a grueling six weeks of close-order drills, scrubbing our barracks until after midnight only to be awakened again at 4:30 a.m., and learning how to make a bed upon which a tossed quarter would do a back-flip, I was interviewed by a gold-leafed major. After the interview, I was informed that I had been assigned as an instructor to a General Subjects team at the ARTC. Most of the others in my basic training platoon would be shipped out to various armored outfits around the United States.

### FORT KNOX EXPERIENCE

As it turned out, I was at Fort Knox for just a little more than a year before being shipped out to the ETO (European Theater of Operations).

It was a big ship, the *Ile de France*. Packed like sardines, about 15,000 of us troopers endured about a week of un-escorted zigzagging across the Atlantic Ocean before docking in northern Great Britain. From there, several troop trains slowly jerked and jolted us to the South of England where a small ship was waiting to ferry us across the English Channel to Omaha Beach.

As I labored up the steep bank lugging my duffel bag, I saw the concrete German bunkers and marveled at the bravery of those American soldiers who had neutralized them. At night, I dug my own personal latrine and covered my droppings like a domestic house cat would; I slept in a "shelter-half" with another soldier beside my "fox hole" as "Bed Check Charlie" (a German reconnaissance airplane) zoomed over head and anti-aircraft fire lit up the night sky.

By now it was really beginning to sink in that I was a "replacement" for some combat victim. That thought was almost too unsettling to dwell upon.

Eventually, a truck convoy carried us to a brick school building in Heerlen, Holland. As we hopped out of the back of the trucks, bright-eyed Dutch youngsters swarmed round us only too eager to help us carry our duffel bags into the school.

That night I heard the distant rumble of heavy artillery.

"What now?" I asked myself.

### COMBAT

In two days, a truck that had been dispatched from Company D, 1st Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment of the 2nd Armored Division (Hell on Wheels) picked a few of us up at the school and soon unloaded us at a stone house in Beggendorf, Germany, which was only a short distance from Heerlen.



Verne Hull, shown in a photo taken near Paris in 1945.

He was a big guy, but before I could even shake hands with him, a buck private in the room abruptly stepped forward and said, "I know you. You were a teacher at the ARTC." At first, I didn't know if his recognition of me was a good thing or a bad thing because I knew that I wanted no part in defusing mines or booby traps. Though I didn't know which of my classes the guy had been in, I was immediately impressed by his air of confidence. Was this the *esprit de corps* I had always read about that permeated great military outfits? I knew he certainly boosted my morale.

The big guy was First Lieutenant Robert E. Lee and he was my company commander. As he thoughtfully studied me, he said, "Somebody has to go in the bulldozer tank. I guess it will have to be you."

In short order, this is what I learned: The bulldozer tank not only had a 75 millimeter canon, but, as the name implies, it had a blade in front of it for doing various battlefield functions. Unfortunately, it was often the prime target of German gunners. As it turned out, our tank was an old Sherman tank with a driver, assistant driver (or bow gunner), tank commander, gunner and loader. I was to be the loader. Sergeant Welchel was our tank commander.

I was quickly informed that the Second Armored Division along with other Army units was preparing for an attack to reach the Roer rivers. The softening-up process had already begun with our artillery and P-47 Thunderbolt planes bombing the enemy lines.

On Nov. 16, 1944, we launched our attack against the German lines. The six tanks of our platoon formed a V-formation with the bulldozer tank being held back a little and in the middle, the other five tanks protecting us like a queen bee. As our tank churned through the wet earth, we fired all of our guns simultaneously toward the enemy lines; even though it was a cool November day, I worked up a sweat loading and reloading our 75 with HE (high explosive) shells.

Along the way, scores of Germans stood up holding both their hands high in the air. From his tank commander's hatch, Welchel motioned

all of them to the rear where our own infantry had arrived on the scene. Out of my periscope, I saw a young German standing wretchedly in front of our tank as our gunner pointed the 75 at him. (At this stage of the war, Hitler was really scraping the barrel for cannon fodder.) As with the others, Welchel motioned the kid to the rear.

As our infantry moved into Loverich to mop up, we were told to move to the outskirts of Puffendorf, another small village. As the day passed, we extricated tanks caught in tank traps and manipulated the blade on our dozer to construct passageways over the German trenches. Toward nightfall, Sgt. Welchel instructed our driver to park us behind some dense underbrush in a draw. Other tanks were strung out helter skelter in the open. (As I had learned, Sgt. Welchel had already been awarded the Bronze Star for heroic action in northern France as his tank had wiped out a fleeing German column in the Falaise Gap. Because I had always feared that I would be a coward in combat, it reassured me to know that I was in a tank with a decorated combat veteran.)

My fears materialized when the Germans beat us to the punch and launched their own counter-attack with infantry and Panther and Tiger tanks just as dawn broke on an overcast day. Soon, the draw was aflame with burning American tanks.

To this day, I marvel at my own coolness under fire. First, we exposed ourselves and fired our 75 canon, 50- and 30-caliber machine guns at both the oncoming enemy infantry and the Goliath tanks of the Germans. But our contributions to the battle were mostly ineffective, and Welchel, wisely, seeing the mayhem happening to our side in the draw, had our tank backed into the concealing brush.

At this point, he turned to me for advice. Maybe someone had told him I had taught tank tactics at the ARTC.

I responded, "Because our shells are bouncing off the German tanks, I think it is best we lie in wait for one to show itself close at hand."

He nodded in agreement. Just then, our radio crackled ordering us to retreat to Puffendorf as our infantry had already pulled back there.

Soon, an officer positioned our tank on the outskirts of the village. As the action seemed to have died down, I breathed a sigh of relief and opened a K-ration carton for a bite to eat.

At that moment, I briefly blacked out, and when I regained consciousness inside of our burning tank, it felt like my guts were hanging out. Thank God they weren't, nor had my clothes yet caught on fire.

In the urge for self-preservation, I leaped upon the tank commander's seat and hurled myself outside of the turret just as an explosion of some kind blew me off the tank, additionally injuring my leg. As I attempted to gather my wits about me, I noticed a tracked TD (tank destroyer) approaching.

I shouted up at the commander, "Where are the medics?" With a concerned look, he pointed to a structure with a Red Cross banner hanging over a doorway. I sprinted toward it as best I could. I quickly entered a stairway that led down into a basement where medics awaited with shots of morphine. Soon they had placed me on a cot with other wounded soldiers as we waited for a ride to the rear and medical attention.

That ride came in the form of a halftrack that had brought ammunition to Puffendorf. As the enemy had nearly cut off Puffendorf, the ride to the rear was harrowing, to say the least, with the driver dodging enemy fire. But we finally made it safely to Beggendorf where a doctor gave me a thumbs-up appraisal and sent me on in an ambulance to a Station Hospital in Holland. By now, burn blisters had closed my eyesight. However, after emerging from surgery, I could see in a mirror that my entire head had been wrapped in gauze, making me look like a living mummy.

### ENGLAND AND RECUPERATION

After being transported to a hospital at Liege, Belgium, and being awarded a Purple Heart by an officer, I was taken to an airport to find a plane to take me and some other wounded soldiers to a burn hospital in England.

On Dec. 16, 1944, Hitler launched his big attack in the Ardennes, catching Eisenhower and all of the American brass by surprise. Our battle lines collapsed. There followed much scrambling to halt the German advance. In England, the newspapers were very critical of General Eisenhower, but they were somewhat assuaged by the appointment of their own "Monty" (General Bernard Law Montgomery) to command the northern part of the Battle of the Bulge. Monty in character was a prima donna, somewhat like his American rival, General Patton. In general, the Americans detested Monty.

Then one day, the sergeant who gruffly awoke us in the morning barely whispered, "I've got bad news for you Americans. Roosevelt is dead." You could hear a pin drop. Franklin Roosevelt, with his four terms as president, was the only president most of us had ever known. I can tell you, there was none of the usual goofing around that morning.

After several months, my wounds had finally healed, but Hitler was still warring, even as his "thousand-year Reich" was collapsing. The officer who assigned me back to a permanent outfit looked closely at me. I made no comment and he asked no questions. I sighed with relief when he assigned me to a supply outfit at Charlerois, Belgium.

### THE GERMAN POWS AND ME

V-E Day (Victory in Europe) was May 8 1945. V-J Day (Victory over Japan) was Aug. 15, 1945. Those momentous occasions found me working in the huge supply depot at Charlerois, Belgium. I would be there for nearly a year. When I arrived, I wondered what I was getting into, but I felt it had to be better than combat.

My first glance, from a hill overlooking the depot, revealed a vast railroad siding with hundreds upon hundreds of pyramid-shaped objects.

Each of the pyramids was covered with a tarp and they stood on both sides of multiple railroad tracks; and as I was soon to learn, food cartons had been stacked under those pyramids by German POWs, who daily unloaded freight trains from Antwerp and loaded freight trains for destinations all over the ETO.

As it turned out, I wasn't much of a railroad man. Bills of lading seemed to confuse me. My section chief tried me at a number of jobs, all of which I miserably failed, even to posting pins on a bulletin board signifying incoming trains from outgoing trains. But in time, there proved to be one job that I was particularly good at — security.

One day while at headquarters, an English-speaking POW, asked me: "Do you know what they call you down in the depot?"

"No," I replied.

"Der Rote Bomber" (The Red Bomber), he said.

In those days, in my early 20s, with bright red hair and a fair amount of speed, I had become the most successful of the free-roaming security guards in the depot. The funny thing about it, though, was that most of the prisoners still seemed to like me.

Once, just as I was leaving the depot, two young, athletic appearing POWs emerged from the food stacks. In perfect English, they asked me to race them. Looking around, I saw no other GIs, so I pointed to a telephone pole up ahead and sprinted away, catching them by surprise. But as they were about to pass me, I drew up and shouted, "I win." As a couple of GIs were now coming down the hill toward us, the POWs faded back into the stacks, swearing at, I'm sure, the perfidious "Rote Bomber."

### MY ARMY DISCHARGE AND HOME

After V-J Day ended World War II, the rush was on to get out of the Army. In an effort to create a fair plan for demobilization, the Army created a point system. Perhaps that point system was responsible for having me attached to the 91st General Hospital at Liege, Belgium, as it was a unit soon scheduled to leave for the States. Nevertheless, I lingered in Liege for several weeks before being shipped out on a train to "Camp Lucky Strike" near Le Havre, France.

But an amazing event occurred as our train slowed down to pass through Charleroi and the large food depot there. Spotting familiar scenes, I stuck my head out of the window of my railroad coach. Lo and behold, a group of German POWs recognized me. They waved, pointed, and shouted in unison, "Der Rote Bomber." I waved back. Other GIs in the railroad coach glanced at me as if I were some kind of a pariah, a traitor perhaps, maybe even a Nazi. I didn't personally know any of these guys, so I just chuckled to myself and looked away.

When the 91st General Hospital lingered for weeks at "Camp Lucky Strike" waiting for a ship to take us home, the clean-cut kid decided it was time to join the crowd and take up smoking. Maybe it was the suggestion of the name of the camp that did it, but I would be cursed with that dangerous habit for 10 years, from 1945 until 1955.

It took me nearly three years in the Army to get to the separation center at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. As I was being given my honorable discharge papers on Feb. 6, 1946, some officer insisted on calling me up on to a stage to be awarded with my third Purple Heart.

A few days later, as I rode a train back to Mitchell, South Dakota, one thing stuck in my mind. I sure as hell wasn't the same green kid who had first entrained for Fort Knox, Kentucky, on April 12, 1943; and I congratulated myself on how worldly-wise I had become. But as has happened to me again and again over the span of my 91 years, you never know as much about life at any given moment as you might think you know!

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For Us All

To all who have served and are  
serving our country,  
THANK YOU!

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