

## **Barney Gray**

Barney Gray achieved the rank of Corporal when he was discharged from the Army after WW II on 29 October 1945.

Mr. Gray also served in the Army in Korea attaining the rank of Sergeant and that was the rank he held until he retired in 1964.

Mr. Gray enlisted in the U.S. Army 15 August 1942. His parents were separated so he and his two younger brothers were living alone in one room with a mattress on the floor. They would scavenge behind stores for food and for things to sell. "Those were the hard times" said Mr. Gray. He sneaked downtown and boarded the bus to enlist with his buddies. He didn't have his application papers or anything, he just got on the Greyhound Bus and wound up in Camp Forest, TN. "I don't remember whether it was my birthday or not but I got my clothing issue at Camp Forest and then was sent on to Ft. Benning, GA".

He enlisted in the Army to follow his buddies and because his two younger brothers were old enough to get along on their own. He got his boot camp experience at Ft. Benning, GA as part of a black unit. He had a big black sergeant who told the recruits to forget their moms and daddies at home because I'm your daddy now. "He marched us up to the supply room where we got our jeans, the Army was issuing blue jeans back then". Mr. Gray said his boot camp experience was miserable. He was issued 14 ½ size boots for his size 8 feet. "I looked like an elephant walking around in those boots. But I took all my training in those boots. I had blisters everywhere. That didn't make no difference to him. You dug marsh, you dug foxholes, picked up cigarette butts, whatever. And believe it or not, he put me in for a promotion before I even finished training."

The sergeant said "I got a present for you when you come back from your 14 day leave. Tell all your people goodbye". When I came back I'd been assigned to a Combat Engineering Unit, the 1697th Battalion.

From Ft. Benning he was shipped to a black camp at Camp Shane (?) NY and from there to the European theatre. He landed at Rouen, France on the beach which was one of the three Normandy beach invasion points along with Lahar and Normandy. "And then they had another beach where all the troops come in." He started out as a part of an engineering combat unit, the 16974 Combat Engineering Battalion that went in ahead of the troops and built quanset huts, infantry foot bridges and pontoon bridges for tanks. All the time they were building bullets were flying around. "I knew we were in the Army now - we're going to fight, just joking with one another but then all the whites went one way and all the blacks went another way. They had the camps broken down into two - one was "Twenty Grand" and the other was "Lucky Strike". Back then they named the camps after cigarettes during the war". The engineering units were there building on the beaches right before the infantry landed. One of his first assignments was "This big old white sergeant came out there and put two of us on each big pile of coal and told us to guard them because the French were stealing it and that was our job until they moved on up to the front. There were two black combat units he talked about - the "Bucket of Blood" unit from Camp Livingston, LA and a unit with the buffalo insignia on their shoulder. Those were the only

two black infantry units in the invasion. Two black generals commanded those units under a white general.

Mr. Gray moved from Rouen to London and then on into Germany and ended up in a little town near Frankfurt. He stayed in that town most of the time he was there. He was a Squad Leader there and his squad's job was to go out and pick up the dead bodies and sort them out between U.S., British and German. He said "I didn't like doing this - if I saw someone alive or dead I'd kinda tied the two together - I'd seen them before - that's what hurt the most - I'd pick up somebody I knew before - I couldn't handle it. You often couldn't be sure who you were picking up. The only way to be certain was to review unit pictures and see who wasn't present anymore - then you knew they had been killed and he probably had picked them up.

Mr. Gray was involved in several campaigns and said he enjoyed it until he was assigned to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in Germany. Being in the Airborne scared him to death. He didn't get much training to be airborne. They climbed 500 ft. and 750 ft. towers. They had to climb ladders to the top of the towers and stand up just like you were in an airplane except with open parachutes and then the sergeant at the top of these towers pushed a button and you went flying out there on this rope to get accustomed to jumping out of an airplane. "I learnt quite a bit that way, but then of course when I did get up in an airplane I could've wet my pants". Mr. Gray jumped many times onto the beaches in France. He wanted out of the Airborne because he didn't like the way they were, doing it - some people still doing it the old segregation way putting the black forward and the white back but he toughed it out anyway. They had a lot of law problems in Europe among the troops - there was quite a bit of segregation. He had a lot of good white buddies and they'd integrate even though it wasn't legal at that point. When a crime was committed, a black was always blamed first. He had a lot of casualties in his unit and lost a lot of friends.

Mr. Gray was in a small town in Germany called Buchbaden when the war ended. He was doing rifle and tank training in -30 degrees weather. That's also where he met Elvis Presley who was in the 3rd Army Division - Elvis was shaking everyone's hands. At that point Elvis was known for "You Ain't Nuthin' But A Hounddog" song.

Mr. Gray didn't keep in touch with his family much since his parents were separated. He did sort of keep contact with his daddy but his mom couldn't write. Every once in a while he'd get a letter from her that he would try to figure out what she was saying - she'd mention money some times.

For entertainment he went with his buddies to the pubs in England. There was one run by a French East Indian that was underground. The British treated the black soldiers better than most - the Germans were the worst. They began to treat you all right once they got to know you. In Germany they would call the black soldiers "Swastika" which means black in German. He didn't know why they were calling him that until someone explained it to him.

He recalled a story involving a homosexual who kept giving him money when he needed it. Then one time the homosexual saw him with a girl. Shortly thereafter his unit flew from England to Germany for a combat drop and when they were on the ground he heard the command to commence fire. He fired his rifle but it was empty so there he was engaged with the enemy and

without ammunition. When they got back to base someone told him that the homosexual had taken his ammunition out of his rifle because he wanted him killed.

After the war, Mr. Gray went back to Kingsport, TN to get his old job back as a projectionist in a theatre but he couldn't get it back due to the racial situation. He said "I got along better in the Army than I did outside because everything was still segregated. So I kept re-enlisting, I wasn't married. The only job I really loved was the projectionist and when I found out I couldn't have that job I re-enlisted." "I just kept re-enlisting until I retired from the Army December, 1, 1964 when I was in Ft. Knox, KY.

Mr. Gray still keeps in touch with three buddies in the Asheville area, a Captain who was a Chaplin, a Sargent and one other he couldn't remember.

His lessons from his experience is to keep your body healthy and treat everyone - young and old alike -with respect. "The only way you get respect is to treat others with respect".

As far as the current war with Iraq, he doesn't like it and thinks President Bush is pulling the U.S. troops out too soon. He said "Just because I haven't stolen any chickens for a couple months doesn't mean I won't ever steal them again". We're always going to have conflict. We should try everything to calm things down. You know you don't really ever win a war, you just end up with some kind of agreement which can be broken overnight.

A primary focus of the comments from Mr. Gray dealt with the segregation issue both in the military and in civilian life. He was in an all black unit until Eisenhower integrated the troops. He thought it was wonderful to have the troops integrated. However when he returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the Army he thought segregation was over in this country as well. He found out through several harsh encounters that such was not the case. When he first enlisted he got in "White" line at Camp Shane, NY and was told "Get yourself over there black boy" and he said "Yes sir" and moved over to the other line. He wasn't allowed to talk with the white soldiers or officers while segregated in his black unit. Mr. Gray recounted that when something happened in a European town such as a girl was raped or killed, they'd go to black units most of the time and there would be a lineup at the camp. The lady and the local police would review the lineup and pick out a black soldier who they said did it. He saw lots of black soldiers get stabbed in the back with these lineups. He never was singled out but he stood in many lineups.

He recalled how the black troops were often put in the front of the combat and the white troops in the back. That was true for his airborne experience as well so when Eisenhower integrated the troops he thought it was great. Mr. Gray liked it when General Eisenhower integrated the troops - they all got their "Ike" jackets. One day new troops were shipped in to join his unit and they were white. So he would see some white soldier that he'd seen earlier in his service and now they were right next to him sharing a barracks. It was wonderful. There were so many whites that got along with the blacks the integration of the troops just happened. It seemed like it was natural. He said "One day you couldn't talk to this white person and the next day you could including officers and non-commissioned personnel". He developed several white buddies during his experience. Combat medals were awarded to black soldiers eventually he said.

As Mr. Gray was being discharged back in the States he was sent to Ft. Smith in Little Rock, Arkansas and again he assumed that segregation was over. So he went to the bus station and stood in line to get his ticket - still in full uniform and with his medals and decorations - but he stood in the "White only" line for a ticket. He was shoved over to the black line and told "Your place is over there, nigger". Then when he got on the bus to go back to his home in Gates City, Virginia he sat in the seat behind the bus driver. The driver got out of his seat, turned around, leaned on the rail behind the driver's seat and said "If you ever park your black ass behind me again I'll kick the living daylight's out of you. Back there is where you belong". There was a sign all the way across the back of the bus "Colored Only". He also got dirty looks from the other white passengers.

So the segregation theme kept recurring throughout the interview.

### **Medals and Awards**

Good Conduct Medal

Distinguished Unit Citation with Two Oak Leaf Clusters

European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Two Bronze Service Stars

World War II Victory Medal