

## **George Hilbert**

On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked Mr. Hilbert was riding around with his girlfriend at the Yonkers Reservoir. When they got back to his house they had some friends tell them of the Japanese attack. Mr. Hilbert felt “shock and awe” coupled with an increased sense of patriotism at the news of the attack.

At the time Mr. Hilbert was working a few different jobs, his primary job was working with the Red Cross to cut cloth used to make pajamas for the military. He could not enlist right away as he was taking care of his aunt. She had raised him after both his parents died when he was child. Because her husband, a New York City police officer had also died and left only a very small widow’s pension, Mr. Hilbert felt he needed to take care of her first. Despite this sense of responsibility and Mr. Hilbert’s attempted explanations the Army drafted him in December 1942.

He first went to Camp Upton on Long Island where he and other draftees were issued their uniforms and given various inoculation shots. All of this was accomplished to a chorus of teasing from those draftees that had been through the induction process the day before. The next day Mr. Hilbert’s group had their opportunity to tease the next group as they went through the same process!

They were then put onto a train and sent across country. Mr. Hilbert wasn’t sure what their destination was and when he asked a railwayman at one of their stops he was surprised to find he was in Pittsburgh. The train continued south to Camp McCain in Grenada, Mississippi. His experience in Camp McCain was “a bit of a culture shock” for New Yorker Hilbert. The camp was “dusty, dry and humid”, it “seemed like the end of the earth to me.” On top of adjusting to the new environment Mr. Hilbert also had to deal with the inefficiency of the newly expanding army. He lived out of his barracks bag for three months before he was assigned a footlocker. There was also a delay in issuing him the soldier’s basic tool: his rifle.

Upon arriving in Camp McCain Mr. Hilbert was assigned to the Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon of the Headquarters Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 346<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. This regiment was part of the 87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, nicknamed the Golden Acorn division. The platoon’s task was to supply the forward combat units of his battalion with ammunition and to perform minor engineering tasks such as building small bridges for infantry. During training Mr. Hilbert found out the platoon was also required to use to dynamite to simulate enemy artillery during training. As he said, “that was nerve wracking for a guy like me!”

In late 1943 the division was transferred to Tennessee for maneuvers. Later the division was sent to Ft. Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina for additional training.

This included running through an infiltration course in which the men would crawl along on their bellies while a machine gun fired over their heads. Mr. Hilbert was also taught to throw a hand grenade at Ft. Jackson. He was so tense before throwing it that he said “I probably would have crushed it if it wasn’t made of iron.” Despite his fears he successfully learned how to throw a grenade.

It was during this time that Mr. Hilbert was granted leave to go home and marry his sweetheart. She was the same girl he was with on Dec. 7, 1941 and she lived just across the street. The son of his wife’s cousin had to serve as his best man since all of his male friends and family were away in the military.

When the division had completed training in Ft. Jackson they moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and from there to New York City where they loaded in the ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth* for transport to England. Despite the fact that he was crammed into a stateroom with many other soldiers and had the mattress on the floor, Mr Hilbert thought the *Queen Elizabeth* was “quite a ship.” He remembers the ship steamed rapidly and zigzagged during the entire five day voyage to avoid submarines.

The division landed at Greenock, Scotland and from there took a train to the small town of Congleton. There Mr. Hilbert’s unit slept in a small abandoned factory. He found the local population to be very friendly. He got a day pass to visit Liverpool and there he saw his first evidence of the terrible effects of war in the remains of a block of buildings that had been destroyed in a German bombing raid.

After a short stay in Congleton the division loaded onto trains and headed to Southampton, England where they crossed the English Channel to Le Havre, France. There, as Mr. Hilbert says, they camped in the “muddiest field I’d ever seen.” From Le Havre the division deployed to Metz, France as part of General George Patton’s Third Army. They received their baptism of fire there and then moved onto Rheims, France. During this period of initial combat the weather was incredibly cold. The soldiers tried to keep warm but their clothing was not well suited for the conditions. As an example they had leather boots rather than rubberized ones that would have kept the cold and moisture out. Mr. Hilbert suffered due to this lack of proper footwear as at one point, as he went in his bare feet to relieve himself, he could not feel the cold ground through his even colder feet! In fact some men in the division lost toes to frost bite.

Despite the cold weather and improper clothing the 87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division continued to fight to liberate Europe. After fighting in Rheims they took part in the Battle of the Bulge, fighting to relieve the U.S. forces surrounded in Bastogne, Belgium. After the Bulge the division then assaulted line of fortifications that defended Germany’s western border known as the Siegfried Line. This was successfully breached which

then led to the crossing of the Moselle River and capture Koblenz, Germany. They then crossed the Rhine River on a temporary Bailey bridge erected by engineers and dashed across Germany to Plauen in Czechoslovakia. They were here when Germany surrendered. During these later operations Mr. Hilbert noted that the German army tended not to fight as hard as it had in previous campaigns and his unit took many more prisoners, including a German general, than they had in earlier battles.

Mr. Hilbert had experiences quite a lot despite not being in a frontline unit. His job took him on overnight trips to ammunition depots miles behind the front lines and back to his unit supply dump immediately behind the fighting units. He recalled hearing sounds of combat on many occasions. In one instance he was faced with a perilous choice on a road behind the lines. He was in a truck hauling ammunition down a road when a local person told him there was a sniper up the road waiting. He hesitated for a moment because he didn't relish the idea of driving a truckload of ammunition through an ambush but in the end he knew his unit needed the supplies and told his driver to drive down the road. Luckily he was not shot at! The Germans were not the only source of danger. The heavily laden trucks could be dangerous to drive on the icy roads and on one occasion he found his truck slipping off the road and in danger of crashing. He "said his prayers" and fortunately the truck did not wreck.

During the Battle of the Bulge he witnessed more terrible results of war in the frozen bodies of soldiers from the 87<sup>th</sup> Division who had been killed in combat. He saw the bodies of friends and acquaintances and was moved to see that the Graves Registration units took great care in the handling the bodies of his fallen comrades.

His experiences weren't all so trying. He and his men learned to search for medical units when going back and forth on their supply runs. They knew that these units had the best food and wanted to get all the good meals they could! Also, unlike other supply units in the Army, he never had trouble keeping up with the rapidly advancing combat units. If the battalion he supported had moved during his supply run he found there was always someone in the old position to direct him to the new battalion position.

Gathering ammunition and supplies for his unit was not the only task of the Ammunition and Pioneer platoon, they were also tasked with collecting enemy weapons from the battlefield. In particular they collected the Luger and Walther pistols from the captured German officers. Despite the fact that he knew wife would be unhappy about it, Mr. Hilbert ended up talking home a Walther and a Luger as souvenirs. Everything was OK until the son of his wife's cousin, who had been his best man, succeeded in taking the Luger apart. His wife said "if a kid can do that, I

don't want that gun around!" Mr. Hilbert decided the best course of action was to take both guns to a local store and have them plugged so they could not fire!

After the surrender of Germany the division moved to Camp Lucky Strike in France for shipment home and then deployment to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan. After landing in Boston in July 1945 the men were given leave and ordered to report to Ft. Benning, Georgia for transfer to the Pacific. Fortunately the Japanese surrendered before they left for the Pacific.

Men were discharged from the service based on a formula that awarded points for longevity of service, combat time and wounds received. Mr. Hilbert had not accumulated enough points for immediate discharge and was sent to Ft. Dix, New Jersey, an army base near his home to serve enough time to earn his discharge. This he did in December 1945, getting discharged on the 24<sup>th</sup> in time to make it home and attend midnight mass with his wife. He came home, hung up his uniform "and never put it on again." He had served his country and was ready to get on with his life.

After the war Mr. Hilbert and his wife moved to Schenectady, New York where he drove a bakery truck. He then found employment with Railway Express where he worked for 17 years, first as a deliveryman and later as a salesman. Unfortunately Railway Express went bankrupt and he had to work as a delivery driver for other companies until bad vision forced his retirement in 1981. He is proud of his service in World War Two and regularly attends 87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division reunions.