

Frederick Warren Mitchell

Summarized by: Erika Gosser

Born on June 6, 1918, Fred Mitchell served in the United States Army in World War II from 1941 to 1946.

Mitchell was drafted into the Army in Cleveland Ohio in 1941. From Cleveland, he traveled by the Pennsylvania Railroad to Columbus, Ohio. His service, which involved working as a radar specialist on Army convoys, took him from Casablanca to Svax, Tunisia, to Naples, Italy. From the time he arrived in Casablanca to his service in Naples, Mitchell served in seven campaigns.

Mitchell describes in detail (and with great humor) some of the pitfalls he experienced as a new Army soldier. Mitchell was one of the unlucky few to receive Army clothing that was from World War I. It was literally taken “out of mothballs,” he recalls. His uniform was hopelessly outdated, with pants like riding breeches, leggings, and shoes that were issued after a quick glance – no try-ons allowed. He couldn’t walk in his shoes, and his leggings actually unrolled themselves whenever he walked. “Nobody told me how to use rolled leggings!” he laughs.

While wearing the ridiculous (yet government-issued) outfit, Mitchell was pulled out of a line of a hundred men and was taken to Fort Monmouth, NJ, to serve in the Signal Corps. He attributes this selection to his background as an employee of Western Electric.

After Mitchell arrived at Fort Monmouth, Mitchell had to immediately march in front of the commanding officer while wearing his “vintage” outfit. During the march, the commandant stopped the whole battalion and asked Mitchell, “Where did *you* come from?”

“I’m issued, sir,” he replied.

Mitchell was immediately dismissed in front of the entire crowd. “It was then I decided to go AWOL,” Mitchell recalls. He immediately to the supply officer and said, “You either give me some real clothes, or I go AWOL, and then go to Washington and plaster your name all over the papers.”

He was promptly issued a proper, up-to-date uniform.

A member of the 562nd Signal Battalion, Mitchell recalls flying into Naples and setting up radar equipment to protect Naples Harbor. As a trained radar man, Mitchell’s job was vital. With his team, he rehabilitated Italian radio structure and kept communication lines open. In Italy, he and his team took over phone exchanges and used overhead wiring for telephones.

This work in a war-torn city was dangerous and ripe with difficulty. The Germans took beautiful hotels along the water and would just gut them. He saw women and children drinking water out of fireplugs and valves left open on the street. It was common to see two or three families living in one little apartment house together. Fights were common, due to the cramped conditions.

If the Germans were seen on radar, the Americans and British would “smoke” the city of Naples, covering the city in thick, white fog. Even though the Germans couldn’t see the city, they’d drop bombs regardless, hitting apartment housing below. Mitchell and his crew also had trouble due to the concrete poles and bad weather, which would knock out the lines below. The work was long, and Mitchell reports often working two to three days without any sleep.

Living in a Naples Harbor gave Mitchell insight into the destruction of a city during wartime. Mitchell remembers how the “Germans took beautiful hotels along the water and would just gut them. They’d leave nothing behind.” He saw women and children drinking water out of fireplugs and valves left open on the street. “It was common to see two or three families living in one little apartment house together,” he recalls. Fights were common, due to the cramped conditions.

The city of Naples was in a time of extreme strife and transition. Mitchell remembers seeing an Italian flag with an American star on it. On closer inspection, he noticed that the American star had been stamped over a swastika that had appeared on the original flag.

Although Mitchell didn’t get a lot of time off due to the important nature of his work, he remembers going to Capri on a five-day leave. Vesuvius was erupting, sending ten inches of ash onto the ground. The entire time he was there, he stayed in a motel due to the ash.

Mitchell’s convoy experience took him through North Africa, from Casablanca to Svax, Tunisia: an unfamiliar and eerie landscape he describes as “nothing but desert and sand.” Using out-of-service B-25s to travel, Mitchell recalls feeling as though he were “in the middle of nowhere,” and suddenly being surrounded by people of Arab descent, who would approach the convoy and ask for candy and cigarettes.

While in Tunisia, Mitchell didn’t see any heavy fighting, although he did see “a big tank graveyard of beaten up, blown up German tanks.” Although he was issued a machine gun, he got tired of carrying it and traded it for a .45 instead.

After the war, Mitchell married the girlfriend he’d had before he left for his tour of duty. They were together for 50 years.

Following his overseas experience, Mitchell stayed in the service as a captain for the reserves. He moved to Berkeley, CA and worked at Pacific Teleco at an underground communication center for the Army. However, due to his status as a commissioned signal officer assigned mostly to the Air Corps, there was little place for advancement. Mitchell received a Bronze Star for his exceptional radar work after his release.