

Bob Roberts

Bob Roberts was driving to Waxahachie, Texas to visit friends when he heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor on the radio. He knew then “that he would be called up” but that knowledge didn’t bother him as he felt the Axis and Hitler in particular needed to be stopped. At the time Roberts and his five brothers were working for his dad as cowboys. He was a well-known cattleman in their home county. Because of their work they were known colloquially as “ropers”. They had a tough job and were made tough by it. Roberts rode four or five miles to school each day on horseback and when not in school he and his brothers worked from dawn until dusk. As he put it he could “whip any two men” he was in such good physical shape.

He decided to volunteer for the naval pilot training in early 1942. He tested for three weeks and thought he was doing well. On his final physical the flight surgeon found out he was color-blind and washed him out. Roberts “was really mad”, he couldn’t understand why colorblindness would matter until the surgeon explained that aircraft carriers used colored lights to indicate landing directions to pilots. If he couldn’t distinguish the different lights he could crash the plane. As a way of making up for his disappointment a naval officer at the base explained that the Army Air Force was looking for pilots for its glider program. The officer told him that gliders carried soldiers into combat behind enemy lines and that once on the ground it was up to the pilots to fight their way out. Roberts didn’t particularly like that idea and told the officer “where he could put that offer”.

In August 1942 Roberts was drafted into the Army. He reported to Ft. Ord, California for basic training. For him training was not all that difficult. He had grown up working a hard job and it had toughened him. At times he remembers “I thought we were playing.” Other men weren’t as tough and he remembers some having so bad a time that they broke down crying.

After basic training he was sent to Yuma, Arizona for desert training with troops under the command of General George Patton. They were training for service in the North African invasion. Part of their desert training involved a march to Searchlight, Nevada with one canteen per man. He recalls that it was hard training “almost combat duty” and that Patton was a “hard general”. However he respected Patton for getting them prepared for combat. Patton knew that he “couldn’t let the enemy slow-up” which meant that his men had to continue fighting them all the time. He trained his men hard to make sure they could that when it was necessary.

After completing desert training Roberts was transferred to Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi to 99th Infantry Division that was just beginning to train. This unit was short of men with Robert’s MOS or Military Occupational Specialty and so he was transferred to it. He was not happy about the transfer as it meant he had to go through the same training he had just gone through in Arizona. There were some differences; in Arizona he had crawled through sand and underneath barbed wire with machine guns firing over his head. In Mississippi he crawled through mud and underneath barbed wire while machine guns fired overhead!

Once the 99th was done training they were sent to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and from there they sailed to Europe where they were landed in the fall of 1944. By November 1944 they were in action. In December they became involved in repulsing the German Ardennes offensive, better known as the Battle of the Bulge. Roberts remembers the Tiger tanks leading the German attack. These were impressive weapons. Roberts remarked that had Hitler ordered them to attack the Allies as they landed on D-Day “our losses would’ve been terrible.” Now the Tiger tanks were not being held in reserve but were attacking. The 99th was asked with holding a defensive line to stop the German attack. Roberts and his fellow soldiers dug tank traps to halt the German tanks and force them to expose their vulnerable undersides. The U.S. soldiers would then fire into the lightly armored bellies and destroy the tank. As Roberts said “any tank that stood still was a target.” Another anti-tank tactic that Roberts discussed was the use of jeeps to carry men armed with bazookas. These jeeps were faster and more mobile than the Tiger tanks and could get shots at their vulnerable side armor. In particular he remembers that jeeps would hide in ravines and drive out to stalk the Tiger tanks when they drove by. These tactics worked sometimes, other times the German tankers would spot the traps or ambushes and maneuver around them. They would then drive straight at the Americans, firing and sounding sirens designed to panic the American troops. On one occasion a German tank got around a tank trap and came straight at Roberts in his foxhole. “It was a close call” but Roberts’ fellow soldiers, who had initially panicked, returned to drive the tank off. Ultimately, Roberts partially lost his hearing but he had survived.

After the battle, in early 1945, the 99th continued to drive into Germany with the rest of the Allied armies. Roberts remembered that by that time the German army was beaten and many units would scatter when they encountered Americans. Many individual German soldiers simply threw down their weapons and began walking home. It was about this time that the 99th was transferred to General Patton’s 3rd Army. Roberts stayed with the 99th for a short as they assumed occupation duties in Germany.

He was shortly transferred to another infantry unit in the Pacific and found himself in the Philippines fighting the Japanese. They were in Bagio, a mountainous area covered in dense jungle. Roberts knew the Japanese didn’t surrender, that “death meant nothing to them” and had resigned himself to a long fight in the Pacific. The fighting was, in fact, tough. The American soldiers were forced to blast and burn Japanese soldiers out of their mountain positions. At times have to resort to using flamethrowers against Japanese in caves. Fortunately it was not as long as Roberts had anticipated. In the end the dropping of the atomic bombs led to an early Japanese surrender. Ironically neither side believed the initial news of the atomic bomb attacks. Roberts couldn’t believe that the U.S. possessed a weapon “as terrible as that” and for a short the American and Japanese soldiers continued fighting. As he put it “our war was still going on”, there was no celebration for the Americans. In the end Japanese soldiers in the mountains wouldn’t surrender until high-ranking Japanese officers broadcast appeals to them by loudspeaker, letting them know the Japanese had surrendered.

After the fighting ended Roberts, like lost soldiers, was anxious to get home. Unfortunately he discovered a shortage of transport ships to take them home. The soldiers grew impatient waiting for to have the passage home arranged. They humorously threatened the politicians in power with the “no boats, no votes” slogan! Soon enough Roberts found himself in Ft. Bliss, Texas

where he was discharged from the Army. He was married soon after being discharged and had a son and a daughter with his wife.

After the war Roberts tried to take advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend college. He took some college courses but found that the financial aid he received was not enough to pay for school and allow him to live. He knew that he needed a college degree but he was forced to look for a job. He had few different jobs before ending up in the public relations department of Mary Kay cosmetics. It was a good job and while he recognized that it required a college education, he “bluffed my way pretty good” and made a career at Mary Kay.

Roberts main lesson he took from his military experience was that war is expensive in lives and material. For that reason it should be spread among many countries fighting as allies. It is too costly for a country to go to war alone.