

## **Robert Lee Sechler**

Lee was living in Asheville, NC, and had a low draft number so he decided to volunteer. He was inducted into the army at Fort Knox, Kentucky, in the Armored Engineers. His rank was classified as Private.

He received general military training plus engineering training. It was necessary to have army engineers in order to keep the army moving across enemy territory and in battle. When he was at Fort Knox, Lee was 26 years old. He was placed in the Battalion Engineers, Armored Division.

From Fort Knox, Lee left and went to Fort Belvedere, Virginia to Officers Training School. When asked how this training was, Lee replied, "Politely saying, 'It was heck!'" They had classes in regular sessions, two hours every night and field training during the day.

In the field training they learned all manner of engineering techniques: Building temporary bridges, crossing rivers, how to use explosives in a number of situations, how to repair roads. Lee was at Fort Belvedere for three months.

During that time he had been home three times on leave and during one of these times, he got married. This was on December 24, 1941. His wife was from Greenville, South Carolina and she went back home to stay with her parents until Lee had finished Officers Training school.

When his officers training was finished, Lee joined the 95th Infantry Division, 320 Engineers Battalion. The date was June 10, 1941. At this time his wife joined him at Camp Swift. This was a new division. The enlisted men in this division had not yet had basic training. Lee at this time held the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. Six months later he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. Lee was at Camp Swift from June until November, 1942. His commanding officer at Camp Swift was Morton Conway who was the commanding officer of the entire division.

Lee was moved to Fort Houston, San Antonio where for the first year he was assistant S-2 Intelligence. He was trained in intelligence gathering. He was trained in map making and study, and the general assembling of intelligence and checking information on opposing forces. The date was June, 1943.

In moving the troops from place to place during this time, it was done by truck and jeep convoy. The entire division was moved by truck convoy.

Lee was sent with his group on maneuvers in Louisiana. He was part of one of two opposing groups training in rough territory. There were two combat units opposing each other. They were involved in seeking out, capturing prisoners and generally setting up war conditions for training in actual combat. He was on maneuvers for three months where he slept on the ground, lived in general field conditions. The food was generally good, served in mess with hot meals most of the time. They slept on the ground in tents.

Lee's wife was not with him at this time, she had gone back to Greenville, SC to be with her family.

After maneuvers Lee was sent to Camp Poke, Louisiana for 30 days. He remembers that he had Christmas leave of that year there and also that he did have emergency leave due to his wife's father's death. He had ten days in Greenville with his wife's family. Lee was made Platoon Leader

He then traveled by troop train to Camp Coxcomb, California. This took about three days on the train. This camp was in the desert. They slept in two man tents or on the ground. At that time they had no fresh food, only field rations. Here he received further training in explosives.

He had no idea to which theater, European or Pacific, that he would eventually be sent. He stayed in this location approximately six months.

Lee was then sent to Camp Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania. The division was split up with replacements coming in and there they had mountain training using live ammunition. The slogan was: "Be sure you don't hit me. They had more training in engineering and torpedoes. They were taught how to maneuver up and down mountains. They were in the mountains about two weeks, roughly from February to June. (Lee gives a much more detailed description on the tape.)

Then they were sent to Camp Miles Standish, Boston, by troop train. Camp Miles Standish was the holding center for overseas. While they were there they had week end passes and could go into Boston

A major event took place at this time, a baby boy was born to the Sechlers on June 5, 1944. He would be seven weeks old before Lee had an opportunity to see his son.

Through information coming down through the ranks they were told what day they would move to Boston to board troop train and eventually the ship, West Point (military name ) The name of the ship had been the " American," which at the time that it was a civilian ship was the largest ship under the United States flag.

Lee guesses there were anywhere from 5000 to 6000 soldiers on board from a division of 13000 men. The division went overseas in two ships.

They were nine days on board, headed for England. They landed at Liverpool. They was approximately two months after D-Day.

In England they went to Winchester. There the living was good. They were billeted in a large English Manor House. The men below officer rank were in Quonset huts on the grounds. In all, there about three platoons. They were here for about 4 to 5 weeks. Then they moved to the port of embarkation.

They boarded a liberty ship for France and landed somewhere on Normandy Beach. The whole division moved inland to St. Lo which had been completely demolished by the fighting. They were billeted at St. Lo for about four to five weeks. It was near here that General Patton had run out of gasoline and the trucks of the Red Ball Express, (Lee gives a rather detailed description of the Red Ball Express at this point) were in full operation supplying the 3rd Army with supplies

of all kinds. Patton had taken Paris but it took about a month to build up supplies for the 3rd Army to move further toward Berlin. This was about three months before the Battle of the Bulge.

Lee and his group moved up to active combat in October and caught up with the division on the Paris side of the Moselle River. They fought their way across the River and then fought in fierce battle conditions to take Metz, the oldest and strongest hold of the Germans. The 95<sup>th</sup> Division participated in the taking of Metz. This was just before Thanksgiving, 1944. Lee went through Metz on Thanksgiving Day.

(Here Lee gives a description of moving on with the 3rd Army, how the engineers [interviewer note: combat engineering group] were traveling, and of a battle to cross one of the rivers where he was wounded.)

He was sent to a Paris hospital along with three Court Marshal Officers who heard minor cases of infractions and decided punishment on cases. He in effect was judge on these cases. He stayed there for two months.

When the Battle of the Bulge began Lee was on a hospital ship headed for England. Later he was sent back to Paris. During that time he saw quite a bit of Paris. For about two weeks during this time he served as a Judge Advocate.

Officially, sometime around May 7th or 8th the word came by grapevine that the war was going to end. They celebrated the night before armistice was announced.

He came back to the states by plane landing at Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York. He was put in a hospital transport and sent to Kennedy General, Memphis, Tennessee. He had leave and so went home for 45 days. It was now July of 1945.

Lee was moved to Camp Butler, Durham, NC still under hospital care. He received his separation papers January 4 or 5 of 1946.

He went on to complete his education under the GI Bill and went to work as an engineer with the Dave Steel Company in Asheville, NC. He worked for this company until he retired in 1985.

Lee says that being in the army and in the war exposed him to a lot of things that helped him in later life.

His advice to those currently serving their country: Stay off drugs!

A word from the interviewer: Those seeking information on this interview are encouraged to listen to the tape that Robert Lee Sechler made for the Veterans of World War II Project. The tape actually has a lot more detailed information, particularly the last half that is not included in this summary. It was difficult for the interviewer to keep the details of the actual time spent in combat situations and the later hospital period in sequence. It was difficult for the interviewer to keep the sequences straight in this summary.