

## **O.E Starnes**

O.E Starnes was a freshman at Davidson College when Pearl Harbor was attacked in December 7, 1941. He had graduated high school that May and gone to Davidson in September. He had intended to finish college but the fall of his sophomore year he became aware of a program in which college students could enlist and then finish out the academic year. He thought it might be better to enlist than to get drafted so he and some classmates went to the local armory in Davidson on December 7, 1942 to join the army.

By June of 1943 he had finished his sophomore year and was at the army induction center in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. He was then sent to a camp in Texas for basic training. He was trained as a gunner on a .30-calibre light machine gun. During his training he was transferred to the Army Specialized Training Program at Texas A&M University. This program was designed to give academically qualified soldiers the equivalent of a four year college education and the commission them as army officers. Starnes was with the program until it disbanded in early 1944. He was then assigned to the 103rd Infantry division at Camp Howze, Texas as a machine gunner.

The 103rd trained throughout the summer of 1944 for combat in Europe and in September were shipped to France. They sailed in a French ocean liner that had been converted to troop transport and carried approximately five thousand men. They sailed in a convoy of two or three other troopships and escorting warships. The division arrived at the port of Marseilles in southern France in October 1944. Starnes recalled the sight of the long lines of men disembarking from the ships and marching through “dark and silent town.” Not all was silent though, a German reconnaissance plane droned overhead and Allied searchlights tried to lock onto so that anti-aircraft guns might fire at it. They never succeeded and the plane flew off. Starnes and the rest of the division proceeded to fields outside of Marseilles and set up camp. The division was outside of Marseilles for approximately a week while they sorted out their equipment and got organized after the long ocean voyage. They next moved north to Alsace-Lorraine and into combat.

Starnes first combat experience came in the town of Selestat, France. He was part of a unit that was to move cross-country to the town and set up a roadblock to cut off a retreating road-bound German column. Starnes remembers coming down a hill towards the town when he and his machine gun crew came across a stream. It appeared to be shallow and narrow enough to jump across. Starnes found that neither was true when he landed up in water up to his waist. Germans in the town had begun firing on the advancing Americans and Starnes quickly pulled himself out of the stream and ran into the town. The Germans defending the town quickly fell back allowing the Americans to set up their weapons in anticipation of the arrival of the German column. No sooner had the Americans gotten ready than the first German vehicle appeared. It was a “big tank” and Starnes knew they were in trouble. As an infantry unit they had only light anti-tank weapons, they would be hard-pressed to stop a German armored unit.

As Starnes recalled “they just overwhelmed us”. The German tanks and armored vehicles drove into the town firing into the windows and doors of the buildings in which the Americans were positioned. The American troops dove into ditches and took cover in the buildings. “There was no way we could stop them” Starnes remembered. His unit took a few casualties in that battle.

They did get a measure of revenge on the Germans. There were many stragglers who were trying to catch the main German column that the Americans took prisoner after the battle.

Despite their defeat at Selestat, the 103rd continued their advance through Alsace-Lorraine. They did not have much contact with locals since most of their movement was cross-country and not along the roads. The cross-country movement also meant that it was hard for supply trucks to reach them and they were forced to get food from what locals they did find.

As the division continued advancing eastwards they entered Germany. Their first look at Germany was, like many other Allied soldiers, when they ran into the Siegfried Line. This was a line of concrete bunkers built by Germany before the war to protect against just such an invasion. Starnes and his men fired into the vision slits in one bunker to draw a response from the Germans inside. They got none and when they moved in to inspect if found that it was abandoned. As they moved deeper into Germany they were ordered to find accommodations in the houses of the local population. Starnes considered it “good politics” on the part of the German civilians to help out the hungry and cold American soldiers. They knew the war was over and it would be wise to be generous to the victors. In many cases they fled their houses. However Starnes remembers that a few days before Christmas he and a few other men were housed in a home with an elderly German brother and sister that did not flee. One night the Germans began singing Silent Night in German, pretty soon the Americans joined in singing in English. I was a “unique moment for the guys” says Starnes and a “nice Christmas memory.” Despite strict rules forbidding fraternization scenes like this weren’t uncommon and Starnes remembers many soldiers flirting with local German girls.

Starnes had one other particular memory about the advance. One day he asked his sergeant where they were and was told “we’re in the Black Forest.” Starnes remembered many childhood folk tales that took place in the Black Forest and was fascinated to be there.

The allied advance moved quickly but Starnes remembers getting mail often enough to not miss it. In fact he got a real treat from some relatives in Asheville who managed to send him two bottles of RC Cola in the mail. He had finished one and was halfway through the other when his buddies noticed what he had. He found it best to share the remainder rather than risk the wrath of his thirsty friends. Starnes still remembers, “Man, that was a good drink!” They also wrote back to friends and family back home though officers did censor their mail. Starnes wasn’t quite sure why since “we didn’t know any secrets.” He still has a letter he wrote home with a portion blacked out by an officer.

In early 1945 the hardships of the advance, with its constant movement and poor food situation caught up with Starnes. He became jaundiced and had to move to a hospital to recuperate. The cure was rest and good food and he quickly rejoined his unit. The Germans had launched the Ardennes Offensive in mid-December 1944 and the 103rd was placed in reserve throughout December and January 1945. They had a short tour on the frontline and then moved to the rear area for rest.

Unfortunately Starnes wasn’t able to avoid hardships even then. One night he had KP duty in the kitchen and after the mess closed he decided to make rice pudding with the leftovers. He enjoyed

his dessert but in the end ate so much that he vomited in the barn where his unit was bivouacked. The other men in his unit were not pleased with his culinary adventure.

While Starnes took many of his hardships in stride there were some men who had a tough time coping with the serious stress of combat. Starnes remembers one night when he and his assistant gunner shared a foxhole. They had dug a good hole and then pulled a log over it as additional cover. At one point in the evening the assistant gunner decided he needed to have a cigarette. Starnes warned him not to as the light would betray their otherwise secure position and attract German fire. The man was insistent that he would risk death to have a smoke so Starnes rigged a rain poncho over the foxhole to screen them from the Germans and the man had his cigarette. This may have been a sign that all was not right with his buddy but Starnes didn't take that much notice. The next day when the man left the foxhole and walked away Starnes presumed he was going to relieve himself. Soon after he heard a gunshot and later Starnes discovered that the man had shot himself in the hand with his .45 caliber pistol. No one knew for sure why the man did it but according to Starnes he'd "probably had his fill" and needed to get out to of combat.

In March 1945 the 103rd resumed serious offensive operations and in April they were part of an operation to create a junction between the 5th and 7th Armies. The 103rd was part of the 7th Army in France and were moving east and southeast through Austria to meet the 5th Army, moving up from Italy. The plan was for the armies to meet in the Brenner Pass between Italy and Austria. The 103rd first had to capture Innsbruck, Austria before they could meet their comrades coming up from Italy. Despite their dire situation many German soldiers were still fighting and the division did not find their advance to Innsbruck to be easy. In a small village north of Innsbruck Starnes unit was ambushed by Germans firing from a hill overlooking the road they were moving on. The Americans quickly took cover and returned the German fire. Starnes, who had been promoted to squad leader earlier, set his machine gun up in a bomb crater. As the gun ran low on ammunition he went to fetch some more cans of machine gun ammo. On the way back, as he crouched for cover in the doorway of a house he was shot in the head by a German sniper. Incredibly the bullet only creased his scalp. He was incoherent and bleeding but was alive. He was evacuated by jeep, with a grievously injured man, to a hospital where his scalp was sewed up. He remembers seeing himself in the mirror after being bandaged and being shocked at the appearance of his bloody uniform. He was only out of combat for four days but when he returned the Germans had surrendered.

The 103rd remained in Innsbruck as a garrison force and prepared for a transfer to the Pacific for the forthcoming invasion of Japan. Starnes was transferred from his infantry unit to a chemical warfare company. Despite the name the company was actually equipped with 4.2-inch heavy mortars and provided artillery support to infantry units. Fortunately Japan surrendered before the invasion and before the 103rd was transferred.

Starnes returned home hoping to bring the helmet he was wearing when shot with him, its back was horribly "blown out". Unfortunately the troop train that was taking Starnes across France suffered a fire in the baggage car and the helmet was lost. Starnes was disappointed as he thought "I would be a hero for sure" when he showed people at home the helmet. Regardless of this one final loss, Starnes was happy to return to North Carolina and resume his studies at Davidson. He would later go to law school and pursue a successful legal career.

Starnes believes his experience in the army was good. It matured him in a way that college never would have. He had never been away except for going to college and he felt he came back a better student than when he left. He is also proud to have “carried his part of the burden” in defeating the Axis. It was something that had to be done and he is glad to have served.