

SOME MEMORIES OF WAR AFTER 45 YEARS

The 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion 1943-44

WRITTEN 1991-2 by Paul J. Eldredge

After more than 45 years, what memories remain of World War II experiences? More than I will ever write down. Many are still vivid, often recalled, those that have passed through my mind on many nights before I fell asleep. Many more are dim and subject to recall only if some related external stimulus triggers an otherwise forgotten incident.

Why write now? Possibly because older people are more concerned to preserve memories. Partly because Eleanor and Walter have expressed interest. Partly because John Durkovitz sent me an old message book logging some activities of Company D, Second Chemical Mortar Battalion.

This is not intended to be an organized narrative, just some memories that are random except that I'll try to include a cross section of the kinds of things I recall. Many service men are reticent about wartime experiences. Family and friends frequently assume this is because the memories are too horrible. That's only a part of it. Mostly I think it's because it seems impossible to convey to someone who was not a part of it what your experiences were really like. The context isn't there.

War is so many things - different individual incidents making up a very personal experience for each man or woman involved. The overriding characteristics of war are waste and suffering. There is waste of human life. Waste of all the talent and energy devoted to producing and using all the indiscriminate devices of destruction. Waste of property, equipment, natural resources. The suffering is indiscriminate - with those who die, with the broken and maimed, the dirty, hungry, homeless refugees, in all the useless grief and fear, the broken and separated families, demolished homes, devastated villages and cities. All this is evident in the combat zone, interspersed with days of boredom. There are days of waiting for reasons unknown and days of hurry for reasons unknown. There are moments of delicious gratitude for little things formerly taken for granted - some measure of safety, some good food, a bath, maybe even clean clothes, a letter. There is humor and comradeship, and a degree of sharing not common in normal life. Any individual's experience in war is a personal mixture of the horror, the suffering, the waste, the boredom, the adventure, the exposure to bad weather, the friendships and sharing and loyalties, the new appreciation of better days and simple things. I think most people find themselves unable to talk because others cannot understand the parts of all this as they fit into the whole.

I was on active duty from February, 1942 until January, 1946. From March, 1942, to August, 1944, I was a First Lieutenant in the Second Chemical Mortar

Battalion. Such mortar battalions were equipped with the 4.2" mortar originally designed to fire chemical warfare shells. The US Infantry had no mortar larger than the 81 millimeter - nothing to match the 120 mm mortar or the nebelwerfer rockets the Germans used. To fill the gap, chemical mortar units were attached to infantry units for supporting mortar fire, using a projectile weighing about 25 pounds and containing about 8 pounds of either high explosive (HE) or white phosphorus (WP), the latter for smoke screening and/or incendiary effect. Maximum 4.2 range was about 6000 yards, but usual ranges were 1000-4000 yards. Mortars were typically positioned 500- 1500 yards behind the infantry forward positions - a very important distance in a combat zone. The mortars were within easy range, and they were choice targets of enemy mortars and artillery when their positions were detected - not a bed of roses. Yet men in the mortar positions were not usually exposed to small arms fire, and casualty rates were much lower than with the infantry.

The Second Chemical Mortar Battalion, attached to the 45th Division, departed Norfolk, Virginia, on June 8, 1943, and landed on the Algerian coast east of Oran on June 25. "Landing" was by climbing down the side of your ship on a rope net into a landing craft which took us almost to shore before discharging us with full gear into water which hopefully was not more than chest deep, usually less, but sometimes deeper. This was a practice landing exercise called Operation Camberwell.

Where seas are sufficiently high to impart a roll to the ship, disembarking via a landing net into a small boat 20 to 30 feet below the ship's deck can be hazardous. As the ship rolls toward the boat the net swings well away from the ship's side with men clinging to it. Then comes the reverse roll and the net and clinging men slam hard against the side. Anybody losing his grip is likely to fall with full gear into the boat below, on top of those who have already made it aboard.

There followed a week long blur of sand, sun, sweat, fleas, and marches which passed for physical conditioning. Then motor convoys hauled us to the docks at Oran and it was back aboard the ships on July 5th.

After our convoy cleared Oran harbor, we were told that our destination was the southern coast of Sicily - a beach head assault. On July 9 there was rough weather. The ships received orders to launch paravanes, devices which, held in tow by cables, were designed to run parallel to the ship and sweep aside any mines in her path. I'm not sure exactly how these things were supposed to work, but in the rough seas something went awry with the launching from our ship, the Anne Arundel. A paravane bobbed up on the wrong side of the ship, with its cable passing under the ship's hull. This presented the serious threat of a cable fouling the propellers, and the captain went berserk on the public address system, screaming warnings and orders in a seemingly incoherent stream which I'm sure did not help the crew and which partly scared and partly amused the

astonished troops on board. Somehow the the crew handled the problem, but that unknown captain gave me a valuable never to be forgotten lesson in how a leader should not act in an emergency.

July 10, 1943 was D day. During the night there was a spectacular display by several battleships and lesser naval craft shelling targets ashore. There were great flashes from the 16 inch guns of the battleships. The sound came rolling across the water later. Surprisingly, the projectiles were visible as red dots moving through the night sky, more slowly than I would have expected. Then again there were visible flashes on impact. During the night troops of the first assault waves went over the side into landing craft, scheduled to hit the beaches at 0345, before dawn.

D Company of the Second Chemical Mortar Battalion was attached to the 180th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Division. The mortar platoons went onto the beach behind the infantry assault waves. As Executive Officer of D Company, I was in charge of the company rear echelon, and not scheduled to land until later in the day. So we spent most of the day aboard ship, knowing nothing of what might be going on ashore. At intervals German planes came over bombing either the beach or the ships off shore. I remember one nearby vessel being hit. There was a great column of black smoke, but in itself that was not as impressive as the incredible volume of AA and 50 caliber machine gun fire which seemed to fill the sky, but not to hit the planes.

The afternoon was well along, maybe 1500 of a bright warm day, when time came for D Company headquarters section to go over the side. Our landing craft encountered no enemy activity. The only real excitement was that the coxswain appeared intent on wrecking the boat by crashing into the clearly visible wreck of another boat, almost capsizing, and dumping us unnecessarily into water about chest deep.

On the beach engineers were organizing stacks of supplies. There was an aid station, with several rows of stretchers on the sand waiting for transport out to the ships. Ocasional rounds of incoming artillery hit the beach, but nothing close to us. We were waved inland across the beach, and I was on my own to find where we were and how to join our unit.

The 180th Infantry was scheduled to land between Gela and Vittoria, with its objective being a small airport near a village called Biscari. My D Company headquarters section was put ashore some two miles east of the planned spot. I had a map and knew the planned route, but I had no idea where the 180th Infantry or the D Company weapons platoons might actually be. Once we had cleared the beach the immediate country side was deserted. We moved on northward and soon came to a narrow unpaved road running east-west. There was no one in sight and no buildings. We followed the road west, uncertain whether we might encounter Germans or GIs. When we heard a motor vehicle

approaching we ducked into hiding off the road until a jeep hove into sight. We hailed the driver to a stop. I've forgotten where he thought he was going. The only useful information we gained was that the 180th CP was somewhere west.

It was near dusk and there was no good reason for proceeding into the unknown in the dark. I pulled my section off into some trees, posted sentinels, and we indulged in some K rations and slept the night away. That first day was not bad at all.

On the second day we located the 180th command post in a clump of trees to the west of a north-south road. I left my men about a half mile away and reported in. I saw and heard enough to conclude that the regiment was not well organized. Nobody in the CP seemed to know where their own battalions were or what they were doing, and certainly I got no information about the location of the 4.2 mortar platoons. I overheard some Colonel from the division staff exhorting the regimental commander, Col. Cookson, to establish control if the regiment was ever to be worth a damn as a fighting unit.

On the assumption that remaining in the CP was a better bet for making contact than wandering about the countryside, I sat down under a comfortable tree and waited. Sure enough, Captain Thompson showed up later in the morning.

It was as I approached the CP that morning that I first saw a wounded American close up. Two medics were carrying him on a stretcher. He had taken a bullet in the abdomen and was unconscious and waxy pale. I doubt he survived. Later that day I saw other American dead, and I remember passing a helmet in a pathway stencilled with the name of a captain I had met from the 180th Infantry. The helmet had a bullet hole through it. I saw my first dead German that evening of July 11, alongside the path we were following as we moved inland toward Biscari. He was lying on his back, mouth and eyes open, in one of the infinite number of contorted positions in which violent death leaves human beings. Whatever had hit him had laid his chest wide open - a mess of flesh and white bone. Thousands of others you may forget, but the first one you remember.

That same evening of July 11, about dark, we passed through the village of Biscari and I saw civilian casualties for the first time. The village had been shelled as part of the bombardment preceding the landing, and I'm sure the villagers had no warning prior to the shells coming in. When I went through, the village was a deserted wreck, but there were men, women, children lying in the street. I remember stepping around the body of an old woman with a brown seamed face attesting to some hard years, and asking myself what that old grandmother had understood about the war.

That night (July 11) I was assigned as liason officer to go with one of the battalions of the 180th Infantry on a night march intended to capture Biscari airport the next morning. At the time I thought this was a senseless assignment,

which it was. As liaison officer, what could I do? I knew no details of the infantry plan, or how we could help them with mortars, since I had no radio or any other means of communication with my own unit. Indeed, I had no information about where the mortar platoons might be moving during the night. What followed was a silent hike through the wee hours of a black night. Somebody ahead knew where he was going, because shortly before dawn we arrived at the edge of the airport on its southwest side. The signal then was to wait, which meant for most of us to lie down promptly to get some sleep. When I woke up it was clear daylight, some guys were yelling, and there was shooting. What immediately got my attention was a truck barreling across the open field toward us, with a 20 mm gun spraying bullets which were kicking up dirt in what seemed a straight line towards me. I rolled over into a shallow ditch. As I came to a stop, a 20 mm bullet tumbled out of the dirt at the side of my head. The truck went careening on eastward along the southern edge of the airfield, the gun mounted on the truck bed behind the cab still firing. Two gunners were strapped into position on the gun carriage, but they could not possibly have been aiming effectively. I reached to pick up the spent 20 mm bullet and burned my finger. It felt red hot, but after a minute or two I dropped it into my musette bag. I still have it as my only such souvenir. There was no more firing and we moved on across the airfield toward the southeast, where a road entered the area. Other elements of the 180th had advanced up this road during the night. The German truck had gone down the road and encountered the advancing troops. Some GI with a bazooka had let go with a rocket after the truck passed. When I went by a short time later in search of my unit, the truck was still smoking, and the two gunners were still strapped in place - what was left of them. Both were thoroughly charred and horrible. I saw no other display of German resistance at the airport and I have often wondered why that lone truck launched its momentarily spectacular but ineffective display. Those Germans gave me a close brush with death, but I don't know what else they accomplished.

A few days later as D Company was moving behind the infantry on foot we came upon two German soldiers dead alongside two 120 mm mortars. It looked as though WP shells had killed them, because they were completely charred and blackened except where bone or teeth showed white. This showed me first hand for the first time what white phosphorus can do. It was also the only time I ever saw these big German mortars..

The first man killed in D Company was Sergeant Broccoleri. He was hit by German 88 mm artillery in one of our mortar positions in a shallow ravine where a culvert ran under a roadway. Broccoleri had been married, as I remember it, just a few months before we were sent overseas. I remember that Captain Thompson sent Broccoleri's wife a letter and some personal effects.

We moved rapidly across Sicily with the 45th Division. I don't remember staying two nights in the same place during the first three weeks. We moved northward on foot to a location within sight of Caltagirone. Then our motor equipment

arrived and by motor convoy we moved back through Gela to the vicinity of Caltanissetta. From there came several days of long marches along roadways powdery with fine dust that caked on sweaty skin and clothing. Then again by motor transport we went through Palermo and started eastward along the north coastal road. Some days this was by short motor hauls, a lot of it was walking.

At odd times during field maneuvers in the states (Captain) Lowell Thompson and I began playing cribbage. This carried over into Sicily and Italy. Army life in the field consisted of irregular, unpredictable cycles of "Hurry up and wait". The waits were often periods when there was little else to do, so we played cribbage on a roadside or under a tree, waiting for the signal to go again. Frequently we were sitting on our helmets. The WW II steel helmet with its removable liner must have been an accident. It would never have been designed to be so useful. We frequently slept with our helmets on as a cushion against rocks or mud in a foxhole. Placed bottom up on the ground, a helmet made a fairly good short term seat, especially on wet ground. It was an indispensable wash bowl for shaving or washing socks. It would not stop a bullet or a shell fragment of any size, but it was protection against a lot of miscellaneous knocks on the head. And then it was always a help to curse having to wear the thing in the first place. I remember Ray Dale's story when he was caught atop a hill in Sicily by German artillery fire. He took a small shrapnel wound in his leg. He loved to tell how he got away by crawling (all 6' 5" of him) into his helmet and rolling down the hill with nothing but his feet sticking out.

There was only one east /west road along the north coast of Sicily between Palermo and Messina. The German retreat was a skillful but jerky series of rearguard actions. As they withdrew from a position there would be a big push along a roadway that seemed ankle deep in powdery dust. When the infantry came up against the next prepared position, our mortar platoons would look for gun positions (GP's), set up mortars and ammo, get forward observers up with the infantry with radio or phone communications, and wait for infantry requests for mortar support. Sometimes they wanted smoke screens, sometimes high explosive, sometimes both. If the Germans took off again the whole procedure might be a dry run and it was full speed ahead once more. I still remember Bill Mauldin's cartoon in which Willie says to Joe, "Hell, if they run we try to catch'em. If we catch'em we try to make them run".

Choice of a gun position was a critical decision. If it was within view of German observers hidden on the high ground the result was artillery and mortar fire, and the Germans always had the range. Even when direct observation was not a problem, the choice of a position merited consideration. The Germans had been there. They knew very well where the obvious choices were, and these were very likely to get plastered on general principles, especially if the Germans were receiving mortar fire from us. The Germans used their 88 mm anti-tank gun extensively as field artillery in Sicily, and it was accurate.

In Sicily there were problems with malaria. The mosquitoes weren't as numerous nor did their bites sting much as compared to Louisiana. Even so, they were carriers of malaria and a surprising number of men fell victim to it. We were issued atabrine, with orders to take it daily. But it was bitter to the taste and tended to turn your eyeballs yellow, so many men ignored it. I doubt it did much good anyway.

One night on the north coast of Sicily I bedded down under an olive tree, and got into trouble because I carefully arranged a mosquito net over my blanket. I was awakened to a dim awareness of something crawling along the side of my face. I brushed at it with one hand and it seemed that lightning struck. I sat upright in a hurry, in black darkness, with no idea what had zapped me on the left jaw. In the dim light of a blackout flashlight I scanned the blanket and the inside of the mosquito net. I saw a small beetle like bug and smashed it even as I realized that it could not possibly pack the wallop I had just experienced. Then on the inside of the net I spied the villain. It was a centipede, 3 to 3 1/2" long, still angrily lashing its stinger end back and forth. My jaw was swollen for a day or so without any permanent damage, but an incoming artillery round could not have jolted me awake any more suddenly.

One night in late July during our move along the north coast of Sicily we stopped to sleep in a typical olive orchard. I awoke in the black of night to hear a man yelling in fear and pain, and there was the sound of a jeep motor. A soldier from another unit had driven into the area. All driving during night hours was done without lights except for the blackout lights which might permit drivers to see other vehicles, but they gave no real illumination. Normal procedure in a dark bivouac area required someone to walk ahead of any moving vehicle, but our visitor simply drove in blind to park under a tree. Without seeing the sleeping men on the ground, he drove a front wheel directly over the midriff of Sergeant Taylor, a communications man from battalion headquarters on temporary duty with D Company. The yelling I heard was Sgt Taylor communicating his reaction from under the jeep. The startled driver immediately shoved the jeep into reverse, thereby rolling his front wheel over Sgt. Taylor a second time. This proved that a man can yell louder in anger and pain than he can in fear and pain.. Without too much enthusiasm the men nearby restrained Taylor from killing the driver. Surprisingly, Taylor sustained no real damage. He complained of some soreness the next day but he stayed with us.

In WW II the GIs who had access to them related to the jeep like a cowboy to his horse. It was source of convenience and mobility, it gave some a feeling of personal power and adventure, and it caused frequent accidents. With proper handling of its four wheel drive, six forward speeds, and rugged body it could do an incredible job of negotiating rough terrain. Its short wheel base made it very maneuverable at reasonable speeds, but very dangerous at excessive speed. I saw many occasions when a driver would swerve off a road on one side, then

over correct by yanking the steering wheel, only to end up off the other side of the road, often flipped over.

The Germans normally blew bridges as they retreated. After our foot soldiers passed through it was depressingly frequent to have a jeep with several men come down a dark road too fast and plunge through the gap in the bridge. Sometimes this happened before the roads could be blocked. Sometimes the jeep simply plowed through a sawhorse type barricade in the dark.

I was lucky in my own jeep accident. This was another dark night on a mountain road near Frasso, Italy, in March, 1944. With four of us in the jeep, I was driving (carefully enough, I thought) along the dusty winding road. Then we came to a hairpin turn where a rivulet of water trickling down the mountain made the road a slippery mess for the short distance where the water flowed across. The jeep lost traction and I lost control. The jeep went off the road, flipped into perhaps a ten or twelve foot drop to hit upside down, and flipped again to come to rest upright with all four of us still in place and unhurt except for a few bruises. What saved us was the fifty caliber machine gun mounted on a steel tripod in the middle of the jeep. When it landed upside down, the gun and its mount took the shock and prevented our being crushed. How we had all stayed in place I'll never know.

We learned to live simply in the field. Except for the things carried in the pack which you might have to carry on your back, each man's spare clothing and any personal belongings were in barracks bags (duffel bags) which we never saw except during periods when the unit was relieved from the line to a rest bivouac. Other than washing socks in a helmet, laundry simply wasn't done. When we got back to a rear area, we could exchange clothing for clean reissue. There was no laundry system whereby your clothing was cleaned and returned to you. Overall, the American army in WW II was no doubt better supplied than any in history. We might miss a meal here or there, but normally there were plenty of K rations, small wax sealed boxes containing a meal. There was a small tin of meat or cheese, a few crackers, a small bar of either preserved fruit or chocolate, a packet of four cigarettes, and a powdered drink, either coffee, lemonade, or bouillion. Monotonous it was and designed to make you dream of home cooking, but it was nourishing enough for survival. and the supply was plentiful. Each company had a mess sergeant, several cooks, and a truck with field kitchen equipment, but it was used only when we were in rear area bivouacs. Then food was hot and plentiful, however short it might be of gourmet seasoning or appearance. In rear areas the Italian children seemed to swarm out of nowhere at chow time with empty pails or salvaged tin cans to beg for the soldiers' leftovers. The civilian adults might not be permitted in camp, but the Italians were hungry and they learned quickly that the GIs would not hurt the children. The kids usually looked half starved, were in rags, and always knew how to look pitiful. Many of them developed real expertise in begging, scrounging, or stealing. But they were still kids and they were in need.

Since the Civil War Americans have not known what life can be when war disrupts all domestic supply and dislocates a large share of the populace. Many of the Italians were homeless and hungry, often trudging along a roadside carrying makeshift bundles of their remaining possessions. They wanted food of any sort. Cigarettes and soap were probably next on the begging list. The kids always asked for chocolate.

As the Germans pulled back they took anything they wanted and destroyed anything they considered too useful to leave behind. Essentially all vehicles and fuel were gone. Cattle the Germans couldn't use they simply shot and left lying in the fields. Many of the farms had huge wooden wine casks. Often the Germans shot holes in them and let the wine drain out on the ground.

When Italy surrendered, the Italian Army simply dissolved, and there were stragglers everywhere. Many of them were unable to get through the lines to their homes in the north and they were living as best they could. Quite a few of them were successful in latching on to rear echelon American army units, doing KP or any other camp chores the GIs disliked in return for meals.

A soldier may at unpredictable times be threatened with injury or death, but the most persistent enemy to his comfort is weather. He's subject to it 24 hours a day. Hot weather means the sun's heat, sweaty clothes maybe caked with dust, plus insects and assorted itches. Rain means mud, wet clothes, maybe wet bedding. Cold wet weather means misery. If you are in it 24 hours a day, with no roof, no fire, then you, your clothes, your boots, your blanket, everything is likely to be sodden, cold, muddy, and miserable. You've got to be tired to be able to sleep in a muddy hole in rocky ground on a night when the weather is a sleeting rain. From July 10, 1943, when we landed in Sicily until August 15, 1944 when I left the 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion, I slept inside a building no more than 15 nights, and perhaps 30 nights with a folding cot in a pyramidal tent. There was a night aboard an LST between Palermo, Sicily, and Paestum beach near Salerno. The rest of it was on the ground. Except in the winter, this was really no great hardship in the mild Italian climate. But cold rainy winter days and nights I'll never forget.

The blood and death are indelibly burned into your memories. I had never seen a person die, nor had I ever seen a corpse, except a few neatly arranged in caskets at funerals. There is no dignity about the corpses in a war. They may be lying anywhere, dirty, often bloated, disfigured, or dismembered, in grotesque positions with grotesque expressions, open mouths, staring eyes. In Italy the advancing Americans usually picked up their dead promptly, but even so this might mean several days in many situations. The retreating Germans frequently had to leave their dead behind, and the Americans understandably might be a bit slower about picking them up. Two or three days in warm sunshine and they were swollen and discolored, greenish or purplish or blackened. Sometimes we advanced along a road where American planes had trapped a German convoy.

The Air Force technique was to block the road by disabling the lead and tail vehicles, then strafe and bomb everything caught between. Most vehicles burned. Viewed two days later, the human remains scattered about were not pretty to see. The smell was worse. I remember coming to a road junction where an Italian farmer, his wife, and two children had been riding one of their typical two wheeled carts drawn by the usual under sized donkey. They had rolled over a Teller mine. All were dead, and somehow the poor donkey looked as bad as the people. On November 11, 1943, moving into a new GP near Mount Rotundo, one of our first platoon's jeeps hit a mine in the dark of night. Sgt Harner, Gray, and another man were dead. Several others in the squad were wounded. Near San Pietro in December there were literally stacks of American bodies beside the road, brought down the mountainside on pack mules. All were encased in mattress covers, but the blood had soaked through many of the cloth bags. One chilly morning shortly after day break I was walking alone along a pathway when I came upon an American boy lying there in the morning quiet, with frost on his clothing. One foot was gone. I'm sure he had other wounds, but they were not visible. He was an exception in that his expression was peaceful. He never knew he had been hit. I stood there a moment, wondering about his family, then moved on.

Walking among some olive trees near San Pietro in December, 1943, I looked down just in time to see that my next step would have placed my foot on top of a mine. The three pronged trigger was barely protruding above the ground. If I had looked ahead rather than down at that particular step, that step would have been my last. I had no way to deactivate the mine. I tied a handkerchief to a stick as a marker, poked it into the ground, and left it.

Our mortar units didn't lose large numbers of men at the same time. Mostly it was a matter of separate incidents with a few rounds of mortar or artillery fire. Near Cassino in February, 1944, I can still see a man on his back, both legs blown off at the knees, the stumps waving in the air while he screamed. Explosives do strange things. Four men were sitting together, roughly in a square, when a mortar shell landed in their midst. One man died instantly. Another had three toes cut away by a fragment, the other two were dazed but untouched. We found a wallet to substitute in the personal effects of the dead man. A piece of shrapnel had gone completely through his wallet, leaving blood and small pieces of flesh in it. We didn't want that sent home to his family. Another mortar position was at a small railroad station near Frascati, and two rounds came in, one about twenty feet from where I dropped. Sergeant Pugh from Atlanta, Georgia, had just received some of his favorite chewing tobacco in the mail that morning. I don't know if he had used any of it or not. When the shell detonated he began screaming "Medic" for the first aid man. When I reached him he was holding one arm up, but the forearm was dangling by a mere shred of flesh. He looked at it and said to me "That son of a bitch won't ever be any more good". It wasn't. He had other wounds from the same shell. We got him to the field aid station, but he

was dead the next day. I have a picture of Pugh firing a mortar, taken just a few minutes before he was hit.

Trees could be dangerous. If an incoming artillery round struck high up in a tree, fragments from above came down over a wide area and the usual foxhole gave no protection. South of Venafro, Italy, one day in October, 1943, I was talking to Captain (later Colonel) J.R.Chapman when several 88's came into the trees. A small fragment hit McNay, our first aid man, in the back of the neck, and we found him gasping, apparently paralyzed, and dying. He was a fine young man but there was nothing we could do. It looked like an insignificant scratch, less than an inch long. It brought home to me that our necks contain a lot of vital parts.

There were problems in Italy with defective assembly of our own mortar ammunition. The fuze on the nose of each shell had a striker pin designed to detonate the explosive charge on impact. The stem of the striker pin was notched and two spring loaded steel balls pressed into the notch to make the fuze inoperative until rotation in flight moved the steel balls aside. In the assembly plants in the states there were cases where the springs or the retaining balls were left out. This could not be detected in advance except by complete disassembly of the fuze - not a practical thing to do in the field. When such a defective shell dropped into the mortar barrel and the propellant charge fired to start the shell on its way, the striker pin was free to move and set off the explosive charge - 8 pounds of TNT. This would blow the mortar barrel into fragments. Several men in mortar battalions were killed firing their mortars. I witnessed one case in a near by gun position of C Company. In D Company we had only one incident, with a miraculous outcome. McNulty in D Company dropped a shell into his mortar during interditory night time fire on a road junction target. The shell exploded in the mortar barrel while McNulty was still leaning down to duck his head below the muzzle blast. The detonation blew all but the bottom stub of the mortar barrel to smithereens. But unbelievably McNulty was untouched. When his squad leader and another man helped him over to me, he was dazed and barely coherent. His ears were bleeding and I suspect both eardrums were ruptured. We sent him back to the aid station and I never heard any more. It seemed callous then and now, but there was essentially no way to follow up on the fate of people sent to the hospital unless they wrote back.

I suppose most people start out with their reason telling them they could be killed or wounded, but they take refuge in a feeling that "It won't happen to me". It doesn't take much exposure to dispel that feeling. Most men could control the fear and do whatever they had to do. Some couldn't. Dixon came to talk with me in Sicily - I saw the light of reason fade from his eyes. Tears came and he simply sat there sobbing with a blank stare. We sent him back to the rear and I never heard of him again. There was a Sergeant Shelesky whom we all regarded as a good non-com. One day in Italy, near Eboli, a few rounds of artillery landed nearby, but not close enough to be of likely damage. We had all survived some

much closer. The sergeant reacted by grabbing a small sapling and holding onto it with a look of blind, wild terror. He was incoherent when we sent him to the rear - and never heard from him again.

I don't know how many memories I might be able to write down about what the army called "casualties", German, Italian, and American, but in our mortar units we all saw enough to be thankful every day that we had the good fortune not to be in the Infantry.

Sometimes the Germans would booby trap a dead body. Sometimes if a body was in the middle of a road they would place mines on either side to catch vehicles which swerved around the body. One day I was riding in a 3/4 ton Dodge weapons carrier driven by a soft spoken farmer from South Carolina named Shillings. We came to a German soldier lying on a narrow dirt roadway. Shillings didn't hesitate. I heard him say "To hell with him. I didn't tell him to get out there", and the wheels rolled over the German. Callous? Maybe, but with bodies lying about so often, you realize that the body is pretty meaningless after the person is gone. Those people lying about didn't care where or whether they were buried.

For a few days a part of our D Company headquarters section was on the side of a hill about three miles east of Cassino, across a flat valley. The section had several trucks including a general supply truck and three ammunition trucks loaded with mortar shells. The German observers located in the mountains north and east of Cassino must have picked up some careless movement in and out of the position. In any event, it came under artillery fire shortly after dark one evening. From my position with a mortar platoon just north of Cassino I knew it was happening because I knew the position and I could see the flash of the exploding shells. Suddenly there was a really big explosion and fire that lit up the area. I knew what that meant, too. One of the ammo trucks had been hit, and I wondered if half the section had been wiped out. On the next day I was able to go back and found that no one had been hurt. The ammo truck which had been totally destroyed had been about 200 feet or more away from the others. It was not until I attended a battalion reunion years later in the 1980's that I learned how the truck had been located where it was.. First Sergeant John Durkovitz told me it was parked alongside two other trucks when the shelling started and the ammo truck was set afire. Durkovitz saw the danger, jumped into the blazing truck, and drove it out into an open space. He then jumped out and ran for cover. He'd barely made it when the truck exploded.. I had been with the section when they pulled into this site. The company clerk, Cpl. Lee Sanchez, and Supply Sergeant Pennucci were well along with digging a foxhole to sleep in. It was at the foot of an earthen bank, but it faced the wrong way to provide defilade protection from the direction I knew any enemy artillery fire would come. So I pointed this out to them and suggested they relocate. They did so, but I could sense the lack of enthusiasm for digging another hole in that rocky ground at the whim of a passing officer. When I returned to the site after the shelling described above,

Lee Sanchez approached my jeep and wanted to show me something. A shell had landed smack in the middle of the hole they had abandoned.

There were lots of near misses when shells burst nearby and fragments whizzed past. In Sicily an 88 fragment went through the canteen on my belt. I didn't know it until I felt the water leaking out. Crossing a road junction in Italy in a jeep, a shell fragment ricocheted off my helmet. Near Cassino mortar shells came into our position on a hillside. I dropped beside a stone terrace perhaps 20 inches high and a shell exploded on top of the terrace, the point of impact no more than three feet from me. All the debris passed over me, but the musette pack beside me was shredded. My ears were not normal for several hours. I think I developed a certain fatalism about getting killed, but the specter of returning to my wife disfigured or maimed was another matter entirely. I could never bring myself to pray that my life be spared any more than anyone else's, but I could say "Lord, if my time comes, please don't leave me a burden to my family".

During the first two weeks of February, 1944, Captain Thompson was hospitalized with "yellow jaundice" as hepatitis was commonly called. I was then acting as company commander while D Company was attached to a regiment of the 34th Division to the north of the besieged town of Cassino. For a good part of this time the weather was miserably wet and cold, and several times the Germans zeroed in on us with mortar and nebelwerfer rocket fire. We fired a lot of 4.2 ammo at the request of the infantry, and once received credit for breaking up a local German counterattack. On the night of February 14 we were relieved and pulled back to a temporary position in the flatland perhaps a mile east of Cassino. On the next morning, February 15, we were in perfect position to observe the bombing of the Abbey of Monte Cassino. It was an awesome sight. We saw and heard the first wave of B-17 bombers approaching, but we didn't know their target. Then the Abbey erupted in flashes of explosions and was engulfed in smoke and dust. The planes kept coming in wave after wave and the entire top of the mountain was like a volcano. I'm sure all action by ground troops on either side must have been suspended as everybody watched spellbound. I remember my own mixed emotions. For weeks we had stared up at that majestic building atop its inaccessible mountain. We had heard of the claims and counter claims whether the Germans were occupying the abbey and using it as an observation post to direct artillery fire. Most of us realized there were plenty of other sites for observation posts outside the abbey and on other surrounding mountains. It was also obvious that the abbey was excellently well situated for the purpose and nothing in our experience would lead us to doubt that the Germans would use it. So I watched with mostly a feeling of sadness that such destruction should be necessary, and a feeling of awe at the terrible concentration of hell let loose on that mountain top. Artillery fire and localized tactical bombing had become familiar experiences, but we had never seen anything like this. That afternoon our unit continued its move to a rear bivouac

area to prepare for the spring assault along the west coast of Italy to relieve Anzio and take Rome. It was my last day in the Cassino area.

The attack which broke through the German lines in western Italy, starting the advance which relieved the Anzio beach head, bypassed Cassino, and opened the road to Rome, was launched on May 11, 1944. Our D Company mortar platoons were in positions just north of Minturno in support of the 88th Division. The attack was carefully planned and we had all mortars lined up on assigned targets in advance. It was a quiet night until 2300 hours (11:00 PM), when every mortar and artillery weapon for miles around opened fire. The night sky was filled with the sounds of projectiles whistling overhead, guns booming near and far, and the sound of explosions and the flashes that lit the enemy lines to the north. It was a fearful display - by far the most massive artillery barrage I witnessed. No one was surprised when the word came that the initial infantry assault was making good progress. We had received no return fire during the barrage.

Three days later we began our part in the advance toward Rome. The Germans were falling back so rapidly that our infantry had little need of supporting mortar fire. I don't recall firing a single mission between Minturno and Rome. I remember a road junction just north of Minturno. I was in a jeep, checking out the route our convoy was to take. There were several dead Germans lying about, one in the middle of the road. When MP's signaled us to wait while a column of tanks went through, my jeep driver and I watched as the tanks went directly over the German. When they had passed, no sign of him remained in the road, but later in the day when we passed that same spot again there was the familiar, distinctive smell of dead flesh. I thought to myself that another spot in Italy would forever have a bit of Germany in it. C'est la guerre.

One night during the advance toward Rome I was in an orchard with D Company motor section, mostly 2 1/2 ton trucks, when we came under a night bombing attack. Only a couple of bombs fell in our immediate area, and they caused no damage. An engineer unit immediately adjacent to us took the brunt of it. Still, it was an eerie feeling. There were several planes. They came over quite low on a clear dark night, dropping flares that lit the area like daylight. From the ground, feeling very exposed, we could see nothing but dark sky, although we could hear the planes as they came gliding in on their bomb run. The whistling sound of each falling bomb sounded as though it were coming down on your belt buckle, and the nearby blast of a 500 lb bomb is not forgettable.

Wartime experiences had their effect on all my subsequent years. I have carried a lasting distrust of authoritarian types who make decisions affecting other people too quickly, too rigidly. I have never afterwards enjoyed cold weather, and I never fail to appreciate a warm, dry bed on a cold rainy night. I learned that many conveniences of life also clutter our lives, that making do without them often makes life simpler, with more freedom. More importantly, I learned that when things go wrong or misfortune strikes, lamentations, recriminations, fault

finding are all non productive. Accept what is, and try to concentrate calmly on "Where do we go from here?" Also, on many, many occasions when a situation seemed bad, maybe a time to feel a little sorry for one's self, I've been able to think back and say, "This isn't so bad - I've seen a lot worse than this - Let's go!".

I cannot imagine a person having seen a war without being convinced there should never be another. Yet I believe veterans more than others tend to favor an adequate national defense. Hitler was evil, but he went to war only after he had reason to think he could win. Japan's militarists staged Pearl Harbor only after the USA convinced them over a period of years that we had neither the will nor the military strength to contest their conquest of Asia. We watched them invade Korea and China and did nothing except sell them the oil and scrap iron they needed. They saw us militarily unprepared, too indifferent, too divided, too naively idealistic to resist them. For over a decade America and Europe watched Hitler rebuild Germany's war machine and nationalistic spirit without doing anything except to strengthen his contempt for their weakness. The people and the Congress of the United States were pacifist and isolationist until Pearl Harbor - too late for anything but a World War.

In my ROTC class in Georgia Tech in 1936-1937 I remember Lt. Colonel Henley talking about the threat of the Germans and the Japanese, and his closing remark. "We've probably let them go too far already, and unless we prepare very quickly, you boys are going to be in a war." Many times in Italy I looked around me and wondered if all that destruction and death could have been prevented if in 1935 we and other nations had been willing and ready to stop Hitler then.

No one knows now whether nuclear bombs will ultimately mean the destruction of life on earth or the end of war from fear of the consequences. But one thing has not changed. If evil men are allowed to amass power, they will use it if they think they can win. We have the same old choices: 1) check them early, 2) endure whatever is imposed, 3) war.

Recounting these memories has brought on some introspection. After more than 45 years I feel I can look back on my military service with reasonable satisfaction that I did my assigned job well. In the army all officers were rated periodically by their superiors using the following scale, as well as I remember it: 500= Superior, 400= Excellent, 300= Very Satisfactory, 200= Good, 100=Satisfactory, 0= Unsatisfactory. My score averaged over 47 months was 497, or "Superior" for 97% of the time. So my superiors thought well of me, but I was never really interested in a post-war military career, so of more importance to me then and now is whether men placed under my leadership felt I was capable, reasonable and fair. No recounting of war experiences would be in proper perspective without recognizing how relationships with those men colored the experiences at the time. Without direct verbal expression men show respect or lack of it in countless little ways - the way they accept and carry out instructions, the openness and honesty with which they report information, good or bad, the way

they bring their problems, and their acceptance of the answers they get. All these mirror the level of their trust (or their fear or contempt, however carefully veiled). Sure, there were a few "goof offs" and neer-do-wells, and I'm sure they thought I was tough. I had occasion to demote a sergeant, and there were a couple of court martial cases, but the well intentioned subordinate has little defense against the slacker if the superior does not enforce standards fairly and firmly. So today old memories are warmer because when I told one NCO in August 1944 in Italy that I had orders returning me to the US, his response was "Holy Christ, our good lieutenant is leaving us". In 1982 when I attended a battalion reunion (in Hershey, Pennsylvania) and saw (First Sergeant) John Durkovitz for the first time since 1944, we talked a long time and I remember he looked me in the eye and said, "Of all the people I might have seen here, you are the one I most wanted to see". I felt the same way. "Durk" was not and is not a demonstrative type. He was offered a field promotion to 2nd Lieutenant in Italy, but declined.

As I scan what is written here, my mind is flooded by other memories not mentioned, and I wonder what impressions I have conveyed to readers. One essential I know I have failed to describe is the soldier's esoteric, ever present, ever profane humor, which as much as anything else kept him going, covering his fears, easing his hardships, linking him to his fellows.

And there is something else. The flag and the country it represents have a different significance rooted in the experience of war. Not long ago I sat with two young people at a public event where the colors were presented and the Star Spangled Banner was played. As we all stood I realized they could have no concept of the meaning and the memories that ceremony holds for me.

Paul Eldredge

1991-1992