

HORRY COUNTY HISTORY JOURNAL

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WWII Memories of Roland Shelley

By
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In 1943, at age 17, I graduated from Floyds High School, a country school located about 8 miles East of Nichols, S.C. on Hwy 917. World War II was at full blast at that time, and I wanted to join the navy. Since I needed parental consent to join before age 18, father went with me to the Conway Navy Recruiting Office to sign up. In doing a preliminary test they found that I was too color-blind for navy duty, and I was turned down. Since I couldn't get what I wanted, back to the farm I went, to await being drafted after becoming 18.

In October 1944, my draft call came, and I was assigned to the army and sent to Camp Wheeler Infantry Training Camp, just outside of Macon, Georgia. We were scheduled for 17 weeks of basic training; however, the American forces lost so many troops, killed or injured, in the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne, Belgium our training was cut back to 13 weeks so we could be sent overseas as quickly as possible, as replacements for those lost troops.

After ten days leave back home, we were sent to Fort Meade, Maryland for a few days, then by train to camp Lucky Strike in Boston, Mass. There we boarded a troop ship, the "Wakefield" and shipped out of Boston Harbor on March 1, 1945, to where we did not know, until after the ship got out to sea, and the ships secret orders were opened, and found we were bound for Europe, not Japan.

After nine days of almost constant sea-sickness, we arrived at Liverpool England, where we were marched directly off the ship, onto a train, for an all-night ride across England to Southampton, marched off the train directly onto a small Norwegian ship, and immediately sailed across the English Channel to Le Havre, France, and marched off the ship onto another train. Le Havre was my first sight of the total destruction of war, the whole town had been almost completely flattened by bombing and shelling, and there were several ships sunk in the harbor.

On the train from Le Havre we were taken to a "Replacement Depot" in Brussels, Belgium. That night we were told we would be given the opportunity, the next morning, to volunteer for the airborne, which would pay us about \$13.00 per month more, for hazardous duty. We had been getting \$21.00 per month, which was a 62% increase in pay. However, our volunteering consisted of the roll-call in the early morning, with the officer saying "everyone whose name was called take four steps forward:" As soon as we had done so he announced that "you are now in the 17th Airborne Division, pack your bags, we' 11 be pulling out in an hour." This was on the 20th of March 1945.

We boarded trucks and were dropped off at some airport near Paris, France, where the 17th Airborne Division was preparing for "Operation Varsity", an airborne drop about 6 miles across the Rhine River, and behind the German Front Lines. Upon arrival our group was being divided out to the various companies, Lonnie Strickland and I were assigned to company C of the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment. We grabbed

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our bags and started off together, when they called out my name and said "come back, we've got to have a man for regimental headquarters," I yelled back "to hell with regimental headquarters, let me go on and stay with my buddy, get somebody else for headquarters". They wouldn't allow that, so I was assigned to Regimental Headquarters Company of the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment, of the 17th Airborne Division. At that time I didn't know what a lucky break that was.

During the next three or four days we were briefed on gliders, airborne landings, our objective once we landed and etc. Another 18 year old, from Texas and I were assigned to be a bazooka team. We were taken out to a firing range and were each given one shot with the bazooka. I shot first and noticed that the bazooka tended to pull down upon firing, making my shot too low. I told my buddy to aim a little high, anyway he got a little closer to the old tank than I did, and from those two shots, he became the bazooka man, and I the bazooka anuno bearer. So our job was to protect regimental headquarters from possible tank attacks, once in combat. We never had the chance to fire at anything, tank or otherwise.

We were up real early on the morning of March 24th, something like 3: 00 AM. We were fed steak and eggs for breakfast, all we could eat. About daybreak we marched out to the gliders, there was hundreds of planes, with two gliders attached to each, with long nylon ropes, one about 100 to 150 feet longer than the other, so the gliders wouldn't smash together in the air. The planes towing the gliders, also carried the paratroopers; however, when the gliders were cut loose, the planes would have to circle and get to a higher altitude before the paratroopers jumped.

We were loaded and being pulled into the air by about 7 to 7: 30 AM. I was seated just behind the co-pilot with one foot on a case of bazooka anuno, the other on a case of white phosphorus grenades, in fact, the whole floor of the glider was covered with cases of ammo of various types. We had no parachutes, as the gliders flew too low for a chute to open if you bailed out. We had burned our gas mask in the trash burner heaters during the night, to stay worm, as we had been told we could not carry them with us. There were 13 of us plus the pilot and co-pilot. The pilot told us that this was his third flight into combat, that if he could find two trees close enough together to catch the wings of the glider, that he would try to land between them, so we could get out quickly.

The four hour flight was quite rough, the gliders being bounced around from the airflow from the tow plane, and the "air pockets" we kept hitting. I must have been the only one not air sick, guess I was too scared to get sick. The sick ones used their helmets to vomit in and would keep passing them, to the back where there was a hole about a foot square where it was poured out. The closer we came to the Rhine River, all the planes and gliders from all the airports were merging together, and as far as I could see in all directions , there was three layers of planes and gliders, each layer at different altitudes and flying at close range.

As we got in sight of the Rhine River the Germans were firing any and everything they had at us, I could hear the machine gun fire ripping the fabric of our glider, hitting the metal tubing, and burst of flack blowing the fabric from the tail area .The antiaircraft fire was real heavy. I looked out the tiny window and saw at least four gliders explode and catch fire, with men and equipment falling out, remember, we had no parachutes. At the Rhine River we were only 5 or 6 miles from our landing zone across the river, and our glider was cut loose from the plane within the next few minutes.

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The pilot circled , looking for a landing site, and chose a pasture with a dividing fence and headed straight down the fence, using the fence post as a slowing device , and after knocking down several post the glider came to a stop a few hundred feet from a wooded area, in which the Germans had set up several machine guns. Since I was up front, behind the co-pilot, I was about the last one out, and as soon as I hit the ground and lay down, one of the machine guns began raking the glider back and forth several times, I could see and hear the fabric being ripped by the machine-gun-fire We were pinned down for about 10 minutes before they changed their line of fire to other gliders coming in. We were then able to crawl and skip to a roadside gutter to get away from the machinegun fire. Probably from fright, I had lost all moisture in my mouth and my chewing gum had been sticking to my tongue since landing. Now in the gutter protected from the gunfire, we were able to calm down and get a drink of water from the canteen, and finally get the saliva flowing again.

We then proceeded up the dirt road to our objective, a castle-like farm residence with a 6 foot moat around it. This was to be used as our regimental headquarters. We were real lucky, another outfit had landed almost on top of it, and had already captured it. It was being used for a German division headquarters, was guarded by a tank, heavy artillery, and machine guns. The German general was caught by surprise, he was eating lunch when they went in. As they were taking him out, one of his aids asked him what about the maps, and the general was trying to get him to shut up, and one of the Americans spoke enough German to get the idea that the maps must be important, and insisted they get and show the maps. They were most important to us, as the maps showed the location of all their defenses, big guns, tanks, machinegun emplacements, etc.

We had landed about five miles behind the German lines (Rhine River) and just on the outskirts of Wesel. As we dug our fox hole, under a tree behind the moat along the road, we could keep hearing stray bullets (we thought) clipping twigs out of the tree above us. A little later we noticed one of our jeeps, with a 75 howitzer behind it, whirl around in the road in front of us and begin shelling a farm house about 3/4 mile away , we could see that it had an upstairs window, and they were trying to hit that window. What we thought were stray bullets, were actually coming from a German sniper in that window, anyway the twigs stopped falling, they were probably firing just over our heads trying to hit the headquarters we were guarding. In the open field in front of us we could see two dead German soldiers, and in the far end of the field we saw one of our men on a white horse racing across the field shooting his rifle. Many years later I saw a picture in some publication of that man on the white horse.

About twenty feet from our fox hole were two dead horses that had been machine-gunned and they had reddish foam coming out their noses, sides and mouth. We had to put up with that for three or four days, and felt lucky that it was cool weather. When the ground forces broke through to us we were then able to begin picking up the dead. I was asked if I would volunteer for "grave registration detail". I declined saying that I had rather be in the front lines than do that. A boy in my platoon, from North Carolina volunteered. He would come back to our area each night, smelling like dead, burned flesh, and almost drunk. He said that he had to get drunk to do the job, and that no matter how much he showered he couldn't escape the odor.

After about a week, as the ground forces caught up with us, we were almost constantly on the move, looking for a command post for regimental headquarters. Our outfit was shifted around to any area that

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was in trouble, to help fill in. Once being assigned to a British artillery outfit. They would fire those guns real good until Tea Time, and everything stopped for tea.

We seemed to be lost most of the time, one night we pulled up to this dairy barn which had a big hay stack burning, we started to settle down, and the officers had sent back for the chow truck to bring us a hot supper. All of a sudden the officers decided we were behind the German lines, and had to move to another location, but somebody had to wait for the chow trucks, to bring them along. The sergeant looked straight at me and asked for two volunteers to stay with him, I didn't want to but I couldn't say no, as he had been real good to me. It didn't take the chow truck very long to get there, but it seemed like hours. We then caught up with the others and got our hot supper. The next morning we had one man missing and didn't know what had happened to him. Two days later he caught back up with us. He said he had gone to sleep on some hay inside the dairy barn, and was left there when we pulled out. He woke up during the night, alone, and started walking and ran into another American outfit. They thought he was a German in one of our uniforms and were about to kill him before he could convince them he was an American.

Another time we moved up into a small town, after dark in the rain. Our officers didn't know if the town had been taken or not. My buddy and I were ordered to WALK guard duty up and down the streets, this was in a downtown area but many of the people lived in and above their stores. We were also told that if we saw a door or window open to throw a hand grenade in first and ask questions later. It was so pitch dark, we couldn't see each other walking guard, so we touched elbows, one walking backwards and one walking forwards, and kept reversing. What made it so bad was that this was the first time, and only time, we ever WALKED guard duty in combat. Most other times we were in a fox hole, or behind a brick wall. We didn't have any problems that night, other than our fear.

Another day I was ordered to ride "Shot-Gun" on the back of the captain's jeep, which had a 50 caliber machine gun mounted on the back. We were to go through a large forest to another small town to find a command post. Before we left I told the captain that he should get someone else, as I had never fired a 50 Caliber machine gun, and didn't even know how to load it. He must have thought I was teasing, or lying, and said "get your butt up here and let's go", so I crawled up behind the machine-gun. We took off through the forest, and hadn't gone very far before we drew sniper fire, I think I was the first one to jump off into the roadside ditch. The captain said what the hell you doing down here, get up there with that machine-gun. I reminded him that I didn't know how to shoot the machine gun, before we left, and I don't know how now. He didn't get mad at me. We had this to happen two or three times in those woods. All that was ever hit was the jeep, or dirt around it.

The above was on the same trip and same day that my captain was accidentally killed. The town we reached, after going through the forest, had just been taken by a tank outfit, and as we pulled up in the narrow streets, there were three officers standing talking to each other. My captain got out and walked over to them. The jeep driver and I stayed with the jeep, just across the narrow street talking, with our backs turned away from the officers. All at once I heard a shot, looked around and saw the captain falling, with his hand up to his heart, saying "Get the Medics", those were his last words, he died right there. One of the officers had taken, or found a small .25 caliber automatic pistol, and was passing it around the group to show it. It happened to be loaded and had a "Hair-spring-trigger". The Officer holding it just happened to touch the trigger causing it to fire. Many times in later years I wished I could remember the

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Captain's name and hometown in N.C. I would have tried to contact some of his family, just to let them know what happened to him.

Another unusual thing happened to me while standing guard in front of a cow barn in this little town that we arrived in about dark. I had earlier found an unusual German flash light. It was the shape and size of a goose egg, with a small handle protruding out one side, and on one end was the light bulb and lens. When squeezed in the palm of the hand it generated its own electricity for the light. While standing guard that night, before I realized it I had that flash light out in my hand and squeezed it - put it back in my pocket real quick, and all of a sudden I heard this shell coming in, it hit about 75 yards away. I thought to myself that I knew that no one had seen that flash. I decided I would prove that to myself so I deliberately got it out again and gave two small flashes and listened carefully, and so here comes another shell sounding closer. I turned and ran back into the barn, and at about the same time the shell exploded I fell across a cow that was bedded down for the night. The cow jumped up and ran towards the front, with me draped across her back, until I fell off. The shell had come closer this time throwing dirt on me. I didn't play with the light any more.

The next morning they found a German spotter in a church steeple next to where I had been standing guard, and he had seen the light and directed the shelling. When captured he had a swastika tattoo under his arm, was behind the front lines, out of uniform, and directing German artillery, this was grounds for execution. He was taken behind a building by our sergeant, I heard two shots, and the sergeant came back by himself as we were leaving the town. I never asked any questions as I really didn't want to know.

In another town we had taken over this residence for headquarters, the family had been given 20 minutes to vacate, and as soon as they left I went upstairs and picked me out a bedroom for the night. Up on the mantle was a case with a man's pocket watch that looked real old, I took it out and was holding it in my hand looking at it when I heard a whimper behind me. I looked around and there stood an old lady, looking at me and at the watch, and crying. I knew that the watch was what she had come back for, that it was probably her husband's, or father's. I held out my hand toward her and gave her the watch. I couldn't understand her words but she seemed to be surprised, and most thankful that I did. She left smiling and nodding her head at me. Later that night in a big box at the top of the stairs, which looked to be a box in which they threw old newspapers and magazines, I was looking to see what was in it, and down deep found a cured ham about twenty pounds in size, we ate good that night. When we entered Germany we were told we could eat anything we found, as we would have to feed them after the war.

In another small town we entered after dark, and in a rain storm, I was told to dig a foxhole in a church yard along a row of hedges. At about two feet deep I began to dig up bones, so decided to dig it shallow, and long enough to lay down in. Since I didn't want to get in with the bones I decided to stay on top of the ground. About midnight something exploded behind the hedge only a few feet away, and I dived in the bones, water and mud. I didn't know that one of our 75 howitzers was set up a few feet away, and had begun firing. I thought it to be an incoming shell.

Another sight that I will always remember, is the wholesale surrendering of the German armies we had trapped in the Rhine-Ruhr pocket just before the war ended. From a small village, high on a hill, we could see thousands of Germans, in companies, regiments, and whole divisions marching in formation towards us, from several directions, to surrender. It looked as if the columns would never end.

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About a week or ten days before the war ended we pulled back into Mulheim Germany for a rest period, and were there when the Germans surrendered. At this time our mail stopped being censored, and Mama was able to write me with [my brother] Carlisle's address, and write him giving my address. We found that we were only about five miles apart, he was in a paratroop regiment, and we got to see each other a few times. I celebrated my 19th birthday here, on May 10, 1945. President Roosevelt had died about a month earlier, I think on April 12, 1945.

After a few weeks we were transferred, by train, to Luneville, France for a short stay. Things were a little better here. In Germany we had been under the "Non-Fraternization" law, in other words we were not allowed to talk with any German, under penalty of being court-martialed. Shortly the 17th Airborne Division was disbanded and I was transferred to the 82nd Airborne Division. It was in a camp in Le Havre, France ready to board a ship back to America. The idea being to bring us younger glider infantrymen back to the states for more training, which meant "Jump School" to become paratroopers before sending us on to help fight the Japanese. The paratroopers, including Carlisle, were being loaded on a ship in Marseilles, France to go directly to Japan.

Going back to the time Lonnie Strickland and I got separated: To begin with, Lonnie grew up about four miles from me, we were in High School at the same time, he two grades ahead of me. Lonnie had gone to Pearl Harbor as a civilian after high school for 18 months to help repair the damages done by the Japanese. He had just come back to the states, and was drafted at the same time I was, in fact there was only one number difference in our service numbers. We both trained in Camp Wheeler, Ga. but in different companies, came home together on a 10 day leave and left together to go overseas. We bunked side by side going overseas, on the Wakefield, a troop ship. He kept me from starving on the trip, by bringing to my bunk, cokes, salted peanuts, and Baby Ruths. I could eat that, lie back down and not get sick. But each time I got up I would get seasick. There were so many sick and vomiting that the whole ship smelled like vomit.

Unbeknownst to me, Lonnie had been injured on Easter Sunday and had been sent back to England to a hospital. The first I knew of this was the day I was assigned to the Div. Headquarters Company of the 82nd Airborne Div. Lonnie had gotten out of the hospital, and also transferred to the same company as I. So we came back to the states bunking side by side, just as we had going over. I had the same seasickness coming back and Lonnie brought the cokes, peanuts, and Baby Ruths to me again. We spent the remainder of our army days together, in the 82nd Division Headquarters Motor pool at Fort Bragg, N.C. We would have been discharged the same day, but Lonnie was out on a trip the day I was discharged. He was discharged one week later

Back to Le Havre, France - we shipped out on August 15, 1945, and were three or four days out from port when the Japanese surrendered. After another eight days of seasickness we came into New York Harbor, where I saw the Statue of Liberty for the first time. The date was August 23, 1945, five months and 23 days after leaving the states on March 1, 1945.

The ship Carlisle was on was diverted back to the states, since Japan had surrendered, and he came into New York Harbor the day after I did. He was discharged shortly, as he had been in the army longer than I.

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In September 1946, after my discharge on July 20th, I entered Brevard Junior College in Brevard, NC under the G. I. Bill of Rights, which paid for my tuition, books, and a paid me a small amount each month. I graduated from Brevard in the spring of 1948, came home and worked on the farm, and on August 22, 1948, married my childhood sweetheart, Agnes Small. Her family had bought and moved to the adjoining farm when Agnes was in the first grade, and I in the second. Agnes and I went to Pine Grove Grammar School, which was only a few hundred yards from our houses. We walked to school, most of the time together. I have told the story many times, that Agnes followed me home from school in the second grade, and I haven't gotten rid of her since. Another story was that "due to gas rationing in WWII" I couldn't get any further away from home to do any courting.

[Later, after moving to Clemson, S.C.] We moved into an upstairs room, across from the Clemson Post Office, and I entered school in September. Agnes got a job as nurse in the school infirmary. She later got a job in the Pickens County Hospital, and moved to Pickens. We didn't have a car, so I rode back and forth to Clemson with 4 other boys from Pickens. I graduated in the spring of 1950, majoring in Vocational Agriculture. We moved to Conway in June and my first job was at Wampee High School, teaching "On-Farm-Veterans Training" another program under the G.I. Bill. I was there two years.

I then got a job in the Horry County Auditor's Office, as head of the tax equalization program, and was there about two years.

The next two years I worked with Bob Lewis Insurance agency.

I accepted a contract with the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation effective January 1, 1958 and opened an office at 1013 Third Ave. in December, 1957. Kept my office at that location until August 1st, 1991 (33 yrs.). Moved into a room in the Dorman Building at 604 Main Street August 1, 1991 and retired as of December 31, 2000.

I wrote this, thinking that it might be of some interest in future years, to my grandchildren and theirs.