



Bill Cavanaugh served as part of the 260th Infantry Regiment, 65th Infantry Division, in the Third Army. You will note a four-leaf clover on his picture on the cover. We believe he was assigned to the Fourth Army when that picture was taken - quite possibly in the coastal artillery and then transferred to the third.

You were first assigned to coastal artillery?

Yeah. I was stationed in Camp Hahn in California, assigned to antiaircraft artillery. At the time they thought the Japanese would attack our coasts by ship, so we were sent to protect the West Coast. We had 90mm guns on our coasts and we were trained to defend against an invasion. We would train out in the desert where no one else was around.

They broke us up as the war progressed; some of us went to the Aleutian Islands and the rest of us stayed somewhere in the States. One of the officers recommended that I go for officers training, and I said okay. I was scheduled to go to Texas, but instead they sent me for officers training in the transportation division in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I didn't anticipate things right I guess, mentally I didn't pay too much attention to it, so I signed up. When I got there, I didn't like it. It was tough and you had to be a leader and I just didn't like it. I stayed in officer training for a couple weeks before I transferred back to the platoon section and was sent to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. I was with the 65th Infantry Division training down in Mississippi. (Dad was transferred to the 3rd Army in Mississippi, but it appears he was in the fourth Army for artillery and officer training.)

We trained for a couple of months. Then I went overseas and landed in La Havre, France. We went over on a ship, a big ship, one of the biggest ships at the time, but when the waves got high the rudder and the propeller would come right out of the water and the old boy would shake, every time it would do that. On the way back we were on a troop carrier, which were ships that could be used both ways for landing craft and stuff like that. They had flat bottoms and weren't especially made for the ocean, so everybody was seasick.

How long of a journey was that?

It was probably a 10-to-12 day trip, and if you got sick once you stayed sick most of the time. I was very busy

working in the kitchen and I had a chance to get a hold of some citrus fruit, so I didn't get sick too bad going over. Part of our job was to empty the garbage, and they had a disposal hole right at the end of the ship. They would open it up and you would throw the garbage in your hand in the hole and it would be washed out to the sea. I have often thought since then that we were lucky — if we would have lost our balance we would have gone out into the ocean ourselves. But at that time, I guess we didn't think too much about that. We were exposed to submarine warfare. That was pretty scary. You knew the submarines were close because you could hear the explosions. It was a big convoy spread far so we didn't know if they were depth charges or torpedoes - but we knew submarines were there because of the explosions. You couldn't see them, but they were there. Anyhow when we came back on the ship, we played cards and some guys would spend all their money before they landed.



You were overseas for about a year, correct?

About a year.

You landed in France and then went into Germany?

We landed in La Havre, France and we had to cross into Germany right before the Siegfried Line. Did you ever hear about that? It's a big fortification that the French built after World War I with the intention that Germany would never again be able to fight their way into France. Well, they were dreaming, because at that time they didn't think about the number of airplanes that would be involved. In WWI airplanes were very scarce. But when our war come along, Hitler made heck with the tanks and airplanes — he overran the French in a couple of days. The wall was 8-foot thick with cement and 60 feet long, with 40'x 40' dimensions located at the top of a hill so they could shoot at someone coming up the hill.

When we got ready to go up the hill to the Siegfried Line, our Sergeant said to get ready to charge a hill that was secured by pill boxes (concrete forts with gun openings). We said we could never shoot these big pill boxes, they were as big as a room, and he said "don't make any difference, you're gonna go" so we did — the Sergeant said "you gotta do it." Luckily only one or two fellows from our platoon got hurt, but the other American company on the other side got banged up pretty good from the Germans in the pill boxes shooting at them. We moved up the hill as a group and after the firefight in which several people were killed or hurt,

resistance dropped off. At the time that our advancement started to take off, the German's in the pillboxes pulled back and started to run away. Germans were retreating and surrendering as fast as we could go. We were in the fire fight, but more of them were shooting at to the group to the left, our platoon wasn't hit so we were lucky.

We were there for a week to 10 days and we lived in a cellar downstairs — right at the dividing line between (Sauerlautin) Germany) and France, I don't remember which side we stood. They would bring the supplies in from the back, where two alleys intersected. We had to run one at a time across a 20-foot alley carrying supplies, and pretty soon, bang, bang, somebody shot at us. Each time we had to go back and carry more supplies we tried to make sure that nobody was there, but you couldn't see them. There was a sniper sitting somewhere waiting to shoot at us.

We didn't know where he was. So, you picked up your supplies and ran and hoped he wouldn't hit you. We had a couple guys get hit, it was just a matter of whether your number came up or not. Once a soldier got shot crossing behind me. Shorty got hit, and nobody was running to rescue him until the staff sergeant led the way and got him. I think he died later.

We called it Burp Gun Alley. As a young kid, it didn't mean that much to you—not that it was a game—but you didn't feel that you were going to get shot. We were behind one of these houses in the cellar and somebody noticed that a section of the wall had been put in recently. We took the wall out and found a storage room that was 6' x 6'. They had put food in there for after the war—they figured when they came back after the War they would have something to eat. But we ate it. It was canned goods like peaches, vegetables, etc. (canned like Mom used to make). About four or five of us soldiers ate it, mostly fruits. A couple days later we were told to get ready to move out. That was more or less our home for two weeks.

Do you remember one of the scariest times? (Crossing the Rhine)

We were preparing to cross the Rhine River. We were traveling by truck and had stopped to rest because we had advanced too fast and our supplies couldn't keep up with us. But they had the Germans on the run, so the US kept pushing hard. We were in an open field, and for our own protection we had to dig fox holes to protect from enemy shells. We couldn't see the enemy, but we knew they were sitting nearby because of the mortar shell shots landing around us. At first, they were landing 3 football fields away, then they were landing maybe 4 or 5 yards away. The whistling shells came closer and closer until... boom. We were out in the open with no place to go. Supplies did come again shortly, so we moved out and crossed the Rhine.

In the area where we crossed the Rhine, they used to put our platoon on patrol on the river. I was put with another Sergeant from another outfit and I didn't know who he was at all, other than that he was somebody from the American Army. We were sent out as scouts to make sure everything was okay. Once we were walking down the road and I heard somebody coming because they were talking. I said to this other Sergeant, "we better challenge this guy that's coming our way." He said: "Hell no, I'm not going to challenge him."

Boom. Boom. And he shot him. I asked him why in the hell he did that. He said “you’re a rookie up here aren’t you? If you challenge somebody like that before you get a chance to say ‘keep your hands up’ they’ll shoot you. Actually, it’s either you or them, and you’re taking a chance by saying anything.”

Then when we got to Stuttgart we went south to Linz, Austria. When we were in Stuttgart, we were traveling most of the time, in the daytime with about 20 guys to a truck, because the war was moving pretty fast and the supplies were coming pretty fast after being held up for a while. We were getting gasoline and a lot of stuff every day, while Germany was losing more every day because of the bombing.

When we crossed the Danube to go into Linz it was near the end of the war and the Germans were doing all they could to stop us. They had a 90mm anti-aircraft gun that they were firing at us as we tried to cross. Captain said to hit the ground and dig holes. The firing stopped when we were out in the field—apparently word had come down that the Germans had surrendered, but our captain said don’t be too sure, don’t be cocky and get shot.

Castle on the German side of river.

When our outfit came up to the Danube River, we stayed in a castle right on the river that night. I don’t know exactly where it was, but there was still a bridge across the river, so it had to be southern Germany somewhere, because most of the other bridges were shot up by that time. Somebody took an elevator (they had elevators in the castle) down to the basement and found a bunch of wine stored down there. Everybody had a good time drinking wine, but the next day they were a little sad because they had headaches. Later that night we had to get in the platoon boat and cross the Danube River, loaded down with our guns and ammo. We’d be in one of these big flat platoon boats that held 8-10 guys, and most of those guys couldn’t swim but they could paddle. I don’t recall that we lost anybody going over there, but that was a swift river. You’d leave land on one side, and by the time you got to shore on the other side you would be a 300-500 ft downstream because the river was awful fast.

Any humorous stories.

A soldier washed his face with a well pump in Germany, but it turned out to be horse urine for the fields. He thought it was water. We only showered every 30 days or so in the beginning. Later as the Germans retreated, we stayed in abandoned hotels.

You got a purple heart, right?

Right.

Did you injure your foot?

When we came back to the United States everybody had to total up their shipment points; you got a purple

heart if you got wounded or hurt in some way. I didn't get wounded in that sense, I had been under fire, but I got hurt trying to avoid something coming down the road. It was a bumpy road and I was trying to get away and get to level ground. We were coming down one side of the road and somebody else was coming down the other side of the road, we didn't know who it was. I turned my ankle and they sent me to the hospital. I was there for 6 weeks. Things were sort of confused at that time during the war. I was with 3rd Army, 65th Infantry division, and they had us (the wounded) barricaded behind a screened off fence because they didn't want any association between the people and the troops, so I was barricaded behind this prison fence for about 5 or 6 weeks. Then I was sent back to my infantry division, who at that time were in Linz, Austria. We stayed there another 3 weeks or so. That was the playground for the Third Army.

Then we went south to where they had these big hotels that sat right against the base of a mountain where they had a golf range. We stayed there until we were shipped back to the States. As I accumulated points, I applied for some points for something, some points for something else and some points for the injury to the ankle. But it wasn't as serious as if you'd been shot in the ankle, which would have gotten you say maybe 4 points, but if you just hurt it you got 2 points. When you get 16 points, you got on a list of those ready to be shipped back to the states. And that's how I got the purple heart. I probably wouldn't have needed it except that it gave me points to get back, and everybody else was getting points the same way.

The object was to get home?

At that time yeah, because the war was over you see.

Did a lot of the soldiers try to take memorabilia back?

If you could get it back. Some of the guys even tried to get burp guns back. But then they put a stop to that. Anybody that had a chamber with bullets in it, they'd take it out of the gun and keep it. They'd let them have the gun but wouldn't give them the bullets. Because if some of those nuts get a few beers in them they'd shoot anybody.

You told me once that some of the soldiers were so mad at the Germans that they were shooting them unarmed? (Question)

A story told to Dad: Some GI's were advancing on a German town near the end of the war. I forget the village it was in, but we weren't too far from there either. It was near the end of the war when the American soldiers captured a lot of Germans. The Germans were being guarded by Americans and being moved forward. I only heard about it second hand. I don't know if the GI's were a little lax and they thought the German's were unarmed. They weren't cautious and they were attacked. The war was almost over—I think there were a couple of straggler tanks etc. and some machine guns. Apparently, they were coming up to get in a battle with somebody. The Germans surprised the Americans and about 400 or 500 GI's were killed. Two or three in the back row didn't get killed and told the story about the attack. I never saw the attack, but other people that did see it told us the story.

This German division took the Americans as prisoners of war because they captured them. They had them all lined up, standing in a field, then all of the sudden boom, boom, guns started firing. Probably what happened

was some nut on the side of the Germans, maybe a machine gunner in the tank, said "I'm gonna shoot these son of a B's," and when he started the rest of them started shooting too. There probably was only 10 or maybe less of the 400 Americans who escaped, that weren't shot. War is cruel.

And the concentration camps that you saw?

(Historical Note: 260th armored was credited with liberating the Mauthausen concentration camp in Linz, Austria - but the 260th infantry arrived shortly afterward and were the guys who physically spent time at the camp investigating etc. The armored moved on.)

I was first through the barracks, second in the platoon. We went in one end and walked straight through and then out the other end. I think it was one of the first concentration camps built by the Nazis. We went through barracks near Linz. Our sergeant asked: "do you want to be part of history?" We were some of the first GI's to go into the barracks at this camp. I was up front in a platoon of 30 and we started walking through the barracks. The door to the barracks was like a sliding door on the railroad car, it opened by sliding it to one side. When we opened the door and started through, man, the smell of dead bodies was terrible. You started to run and hold your breath, trying not to take another deep breath unless you absolutely needed to. You rushed through as fast as you could. They were about 100 ft long and you couldn't wait to get through to the other end. We were the first American group to go into gas houses also.

They had the prisoners take their clothes off and would put them in railroad cars and close the doors. They were sealed in and all of their exists were shut off. They had slightly slanted railroad tracks bringing these railroad cars with people jammed into take them into the gas chamber. These big doors opened up and they drove the cars in. They forced some people to walk into the chamber, and then gassed all of them. They would then back out of the barn like door like it was regular freight train depot, drive the car to a ditch, and they just kept throwing dead bodies in the ditch. There was probably 300-400 ft of track and several tracks. The ditches were about 80-100ft long and about half as wide. They would have 300-500 people in it, it was a deep ditch, about 20 feet deep loaded with naked bodies. Then they would cover them with dirt from a bulldozer, and it started all over again - like a machine. It made you sick, and the odor sinks right into you. The odor was horrific. I will always remember that, the stink was so bad.

Captain was furious at the German citizens. They lived less than 200 yards from the camps and yet claimed they knew nothing of them. They were afraid to be shot by the GI's. He said to them, "You can't tell me you damn liar that you can't smell this - you better tell me the truth, or I'll shoot you anyway." Capt. was tough on them but I don't blame him. They still insisted they didn't smell anything, but Capt. didn't believe them and he told them they were full of crap. On one side of town less than a mile from the camp, you could smell the stink. I think they were afraid for their lives.

We stayed one block from the river when we were in Linz. The river flowed gradually and turned to the right. We had a day or two retreat to a temporary recreation area for the GI's, in the beautiful German Hotel Sonnenbichl for two to three weeks. From there went up into the forest in Southern Germany and made camp for a couple of weeks.

We were staying in Linz at the SoHo Hotel right after the war was over. There were woods behind the hotel so we would take our guns and go hunting for food. I went hunting with a German guy who lived near the hotel. We went to a house and sat down and had a drink, then we went hunting. He made deer calls but we didn't get anything. A guy did shoot a deer a couple of miles behind the hotel. The deer were small though, about the size of a great dane. They would take them back to camp, and Steve Ottaman was the cook - he could fix them up pretty good. It was good eating. Several of us would continue to go hunting at a time with limited success.

German's didn't want to surrender to the Russians and were surrendering to the Americans. We found a motorcycle in the house that we stayed at one night in the garage. I took a ride on it down to the end of the street. This was the day the war was over, so we didn't want to stay out too long. In that same building is where I got my P38 - in the bedroom dresser drawer. The house was vacated before we got there. We came into the city and people were afraid of Americans. They were afraid that we were going to shoot them up and stuff so they scattered and got out of there as quickly as they could. We only stayed a couple of nights. At one place we stopped one lady was crying to me that all her chairs were broken, and that it would take a lifetime to replace them. Some of the GI's used the butts of their guns to break the chairs. She said it was because they were mean. I told her we were not being mean, but that it was more a rebuttal against the enemy who had killed their buddies. They were in the territory of the enemy, so they wanted to make a point. We all told her "You started the war, not us."



Outside of Linz we met up with the Russians. I traded my wristwatch to a Russian soldier for \$100 bucks; it was probably worth 30-40 dollars in the states. I don't know what I did with the money, but I remember sending Tom and Jim \$100 bucks a piece as a gift.



Bill Cavanaugh posing with Russian Soldiers after the war was over.

When the war was over, even though it was pretty hard, did you feel that you did a good service for your country? I know it's not something you ever want to do, but did you feel it was the right thing?

Oh yeah, sure. You know you could be an objector, a 4f is what they call them, if you didn't want to go and fight, but there weren't too many 4f's in the group I was in. Maybe they didn't want to go, but they may have been forced to go anyhow.

This wasn't one of those wars where you questioned if it was right, you knew you were doing something for the better of the world.

No, if the Germans had beaten the Americans, we'd be living a totally different life – possibly as work labor somewhere.

You were a sergeant in charge of a squad right?

Yeah. A guy named Smith from Massachusetts didn't want to be sergeant and turned it down.

How many were in your squad?

12 in squad, 48 in a platoon, and so many platoons in a regiment, they just kept getting bigger.

On the trip to New Mexico you said something happened?

We were driving on the way to New Mexico, and we pulled in to get some gas at a station in Iowa. A guy came out who was in my troop... that was a surprise. Nowadays if that would happen the guy would probably say "Hey come on home for supper." But we just said Hello and got back in the car after we talked, and that was that.

Definitely was a different time, huh?

Yeah, oh yeah.

When did you almost move to New Mexico? When you came back from the Army?

Yeah, Tom had graduated and was a civilian. He got married and moved out there and he was working for one of the banks out there. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Tom wanted us to come out there. I was a little hesitant about it. I don't know why. I guess I was a little scared more than anything else. I knew Ohio, and Dad was in Ohio, and I knew he wouldn't move so we stayed here.

Still here?

Kids came along...and stopped the move.

Any thoughts on war?

I always thought war would be different. I thought war would be more spread out than it was. You would be in your truck and there would be 30-40 guys were walking down the street. You fought the guys in that town and then got back on the truck and move on to the next town. Someone could be 10 blocks away they might not even know there was a war going on. There was not a whole lot of shooting after the war was over. One group called another, and they passed the word.

Some stuff that was hard to fathom?

Unknown division of German 4th Army made up of kids (16 to 8 years old). Americans didn't want to shoot these kids, but they were shooting, so we shot back. Generations of children were lost. A whole age division was eliminated.

Other memories?

One time we were out at night on a search walking down a single highway, and you could hear an airplane coming from behind us. Somebody yelled 'run, duck'. A Taylor Cub airplane was no more than 200 ft above us. And we all jumped into a ditch and he started shooting. He shot down the middle of the highway and missed everyone, luckily he didn't hit our group. The plane probably had a small 12 or 14 shot gun or small machine gun. Capt. yelled to put our cigarettes out (nobody had been smoking) so the gunner might have seen a reflection or was just taking a wild chance. He didn't know who was down there, and we could have shot back if he came back, so he made one pass and didn't come back. (This was In Germany going from one area to another - leading to Metz.) We were afraid he was going to bomb us. Not too sure he wanted to shoot at us - but he shot anyway.

When you went back in the 70's , did it look completely different or did you remember any of the places.

Oh no. The only place I remember is Regensburg.

And I never did have any really close friends in the service - one or two. Most of the time we came from different areas, like guys that I went to training camp with were from different regions like Italians or Irish, and they would stay together for companionship with their own nationality.

You were all thrown together.

Yeah. And you came from different occupations. You may have been in the private section before the war, you could have been shining shoes, like mother Margaret would say that is as good of a job as any, or washing dishes, or working right next to a banker.

What about coming back?

In France we came back on small railroads cars. Germany is great for railroad tracks, that was their main mode of transportation. We came back in what they call a 40 and 8: 40 men or 8 horses, either one or the other was on the train, we didn't have them both together. One of the Captains from Austria came back with us, and he got a fifth of scotch somewhere, and we had a good time finishing the 5th of Scotch driving through the country of France, although of course at that time even if you were in a train you didn't see too much. They shipped us back to a place where you could gather together supplies and stuff, and everybody carried their own goods when they got on the ship to go back to the United States. At that time all but GI'S moved from Germany or France to the United States by ship rather than airplanes, as they didn't have any airplanes.