

Henry Hoffstot Interview

Winchester Thurston School, April 2014, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Adapted by Mary Wagner

When I was drafted, I remember walking from the City-County Building to the Pennsylvania Railroad Station with about thirty other recently drafted people. We were sent to Fort Meade, outside Baltimore, to get our Army clothing and fitted with other items. After this we were directed to another train and when I asked where we were going, I was told, "Oh, you can't be told that." I got on the train with about 100 other soldiers and we were sent to Fort Chaffee, Oklahoma. It was a large government training center and I was put in the Armor Force, training on tanks, shooting guns. You would sit up in the tank and the gun was way below and you learned to maneuver it to make it go in different directions. I got to be a sharpshooter with that!

At Fort Chaffee, which was actually in a town called Fort Smith, we were all in wooden barracks. These were one story high and held about 30 people. This was where we had our Basic Training, learning to take guns apart, clean them, and put them back together again. I also worked in a captain's office for about a month. I had wanted to go to Officers' Training Camp, but by the time I was drafted, it had closed. So, I was put in Army Specialized Training Program, ASTP, and I was transferred to Lincoln, Nebraska. This was a place with about 100 students who had gone to different colleges. I had gone to Harvard and there were a couple of others who had gone to Harvard, in addition to other colleges being represented. Our purpose in going there was to learn the German language. They thought we could learn the German language in four months, but we couldn't do that very well. We tried to and we did learn some German. I was made head of our group for two or three months and I got to be pretty good at 'right turn', 'forward march', etc. I got to know everybody in our hundred person group. Several became good friends and I kept in touch with them.

In Lincoln, Nebraska we learned German from some people who spoke good German; oddly enough, they were from Russia. Katherine the Great, the Empress of Russia, sent a good number of Germans from Germany to Russia to improve the blood stock, in the area of the Valda River, which is now Kiev. However, the Germans didn't mingle with the Russians and they decided they wanted to come to the United States, choosing Lincoln, Nebraska as the place to go. We got to know them quite well and we used to go to church on Sunday and the service was in German and the hymnals were in German, but the copyright on the cover page was in Cyrillic, and of course, we couldn't read that. The hymnals were all printed in Russia for the German colony. It was an odd way to learn German, but at the end of four months, we had learned all the German they could teach us.

On a Monday we were told to pack up and on Tuesday or Wednesday, we were on a train and of course, they couldn't tell us where we were going! Our whole group of 100 soldiers

ended up going to Louisiana. We were attached to another division of the Army in the wilds of Louisiana! We lived in pup tents. I remember after the first two or three nights, two people were sleeping in their tent and a little pig came in, in the middle of the night and woke us up! That's what goes on in Louisiana!

We stayed for three or four weeks and then we were put on a train, and of course they couldn't tell us where we were going! We ended up going to Salina, Kansas and this was where General Eisenhower came from, his whole family had lived there. I remember being interested in seeing the house where he grew up and I went there once.

We were attached to the 44th Infantry Division and after three or four months in Kansas, we got on a train and they told us we were going somewhere. Some said we were going to fight in Europe. This would have been in early September after D-Day. We were put on a troop ship. There were 13,000 of us and I don't know if all 13,000 were on one ship, but there were more than 10,000 on one ship. The ship was large and there were beds which hung. This ship was part of a large group of ships going to Europe and there were a couple of destroyers, Navy ships, going with us. But our ship had a problem. On the second day out of Boston, our ship lost one of two propellers. Each of these ships had two propellers in the back and one just dropped off and that made us go half speed. This caused us to be separated from the convoy. There were about 25 ships going across with the Navy. The Navy decided that the best we could do was go by ourselves, which was kind of dumb because we went quite slowly and had to wear our life preservers all the time because if we got torpedoed by a German ship we would have exploded and (with the life preservers) had a chance of making it out.

Our ship was not that exciting. We went slowly across the ocean all by ourselves. We had depth charges. A depth charge is about the size of an ordinary barrel and it would be dropped from the stern of our ship every time they would spot a torpedo target, such as a submarine, which was chasing us. We would put the depth charges down and there would be a little explosion when we dropped it. This went on the whole way to Europe. We had a large supply of depth charges. We heard later from a German who had a submarine and who had seen our ship and he had used up all of his torpedoes, so he had no torpedo to get rid of us. This ship was reflective with the noise from the depth charge and he didn't get killed and he ended up going back to Germany and heard reports about it.

After a week to ten days, we ended up in Normandy where the beachheads were and we got off near Cherbourg. They were making docks there and I think we were the first to land on a dock. We were in Normandy for about a month. Our whole group of 100 explored different places and we ended up speaking French instead of German! The Germans were there and they were in hedgerows. A hedgerow was a hedge and it was quite bulky in Normandy and the Germans would be down in the hedge with their gun sticking out and you could barely see them. That went on for about three or four weeks and then we were put in jeeps and of course they couldn't tell us where we were going! They were very secretive.

We went to the town of Lunéville, in France, not far from the town of Nancy. It was a fairly large town and Lunéville had nothing in it especially interesting except a large Roman Catholic Church. It was a very nice building and the little town was all right. Three years ago I went to see that town with a friend from Belgium. We stopped with some friends of my Belgian friend. We stayed with two princesses, a princess from Belgium and a princess from France and they heard that I had been in the town of Lunéville which was not far from where they were living. They drove me down to see the town and they let me see the church. The church looked familiar, but nothing else in the town looked familiar. When I was stationed in Lunéville, we occupied someone's house and I was disappointed that there was nothing great to see there. We were stationed there with the Army and that was our headquarters and this was right below the area where the Battle of the Bulge was; we occupied 100 miles of an area south of the Battle of the Bulge. We stayed all winter, for two or three months and it was very cold. We had the snow and cold and no proper heat.

Then we were told we were going to Germany and we got on large trucks which carried a good number of soldiers. We crossed the Rhine River and were just above the town of Mannheim. Mannheim had been completely devastated, nothing left at all. Airplanes had come and dropped bombs and Mannheim was completely destroyed and I guess it had been a big town, but it wasn't when we were there.

We were in different towns, villages, in Germany where they directed us to go. We were in the Counter Intelligence Corps, the CIC, and we did our best to locate problem politicians, all Germans of course. Some spoke English and some didn't. Mostly we could speak to them in German and get along reasonably well with them. This went on for a considerable amount of time as we went through different towns and ended up in the town of Reutte, which is in the Austrian Tyrol. The Austrian Tyrol is a beautiful area. The mountains look like the Rocky Mountains of our country and they are about the same. And the Inn River goes through the town, near where we were, Reutte, then Imst and while we were in the town of Reutte, we were in somebody's house, we just occupied the house, we did that all through Germany, we needed a place to stay.

One morning a German man came and his name was Magnus von Braun, it's pronounced like Brown, but in German it's von Braun and von is sort of a modern title for people who are part of the lower nobility, but Magnus von Braun said his brother, who had a broken arm, was up in the mountain right behind where our house was and he had come down from there. He said that his brother wanted to surrender to the Americans and not to the French who were on the other side of the same mountain. We said he could surrender to us. We recognized his name because the brother was Wernher von Braun and we had known him through the Counter Intelligence Center. He had been in command of an area called Peenemünde, it was up on the northern German coast, and I don't know whether it was an island or a peninsula sticking up there, but it was the place from which the V1 and V2 missiles had been sent over the water to London. That caused a lot of damage in London. They would make a buzzing noise and you

could tell one was going to come down; it must have been very bad, really, in London at that time. Wernher von Braun was the guy who really was in command of the whole thing, as far as the Germans were concerned. He got scientists to work and they developed these missiles, the V1 and V2, and he had thousands and thousands of people who were picked up from different parts of places like Czechoslovakia and Poland and were sent to work often in the underground things for Peenemünde. He operated that whole thing. We said he could join us and when he did come down the mountain later in the day, after his brother had been there, he had a broken arm because he had been in an automobile accident before that.

In our division, we hadn't telephoned up to the next echelon. We had two major generals in our division and they said well, you just call corps so we had to call generals up in the corps and there were several divisions in the corps. The corps said they would have to call the Army, and we were the 7th Army, I think. Might have been the 3rd, but I think the 7th Army and General Patch was responsible for us. So we called and said 'Wernher von Braun and his brother were down at our place' and the general wanted us to send them up to wherever the headquarters were and they said 'no, we'll send somebody down for you.' So, about two days later, a truck came down from the Army headquarters. The driver and one other man who was with him, a photographer, and he took pictures of Wernher von Braun and he included me and they were Army pictures which were sent all over, my parents saw them. They were all over the country!

I was talking to him and he spoke reasonably good English, but he did come over to our country after the war and he was the one who got us to the moon. He was put in charge of all the American rocketry and he did a very good job of getting us to the moon. I was talking to a friend when I was recently in Florida, and she has a house in Canada, but she had run into Wernher von Braun somewhere years ago and she had taken a fancy to him and she invited him to her place and I think he spent several days in Canada, in a place called Beaumaris. It was just a coincidence she mentioned that to me and she didn't know that I had any connection with von Braun. I told her that I had and told her my experience.

I was a private in the Army most of the time and then I was made a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army headquarters under General Eisenhower. He had the power to make anybody an officer if he wanted to, and for some reason I was made an officer. Some of the other friends from Lincoln, Nebraska, from that group, were made officers too. It was sure nice to be an officer for a while.

The next thing I knew, I was in charge of something called the 970th Counter Intelligence Unit and we operated in the city of Frankfurt in Germany. My office was in something called the IG Farben Building and the IG Farben, in English, was a large chemical company, a little bit like Eastman Kodak. My office had a big table and chair and I was in command of the detachments. As I was then a 2nd Lieutenant and I had two majors and several captains and several 1st Lieutenants, all of whom outranked me, but I could send them anywhere in Europe. I sent a fairly large group to Holland, but that's the way the counter intelligence thing worked.

After about three months living in the town of Frankfurt, I got to know a Belgian friend there. She was very nice and I got to know her quite well and she was the one who introduced me to the two princesses that we stayed with for a couple of days in France a few years ago. We were driving up from the French Riviera, back up to Belgium. My Belgian friend used to come over here regularly. My wife and I went to visit her and had our wedding trip over in Belgium. We had a great time with her family. One of my Belgian friends had a husband who was the son of a Belgian princess, from the Delinge family. We knew them for a period of about 30 - 40 years. My wife and I used to go back and forth. They used to visit us in Pittsburgh. They used to go to a little farm with us in Ohio.

I lived very luxuriously in the town of Frankfurt. There was a castle called Kronberg Castle outside the town of Frankfurt and it was built by Queen Victoria in 1850 for one of her daughters who had married a prince. Kronberg Castle was very luxurious. My Belgian friend and I used to go out and go horseback riding from 4 o'clock until maybe 5 o'clock on these beautiful Polish horses that General Patton brought in from Poland. He put a lot of them out at Kronberg and Eisenhower used to go riding there. We had meals there and again in the dining room, we had the princess', Queen Victoria's, china, glassware, silver and linen, all in perfect form and we had a string orchestra off in a corner. That was really very nice; we got along very happily there. I think my Belgian friend and I had never lived as luxuriously as we did in Kronberg Castle. That was just the place that the Army had taken over and we went out there whenever we could.

After about three months of living in Frankfurt and running the Counter Intelligence Center there, it came time for us to return home. It was a little over four years that I was in the Army. We had gotten on a slow boat, it was something called the Liberty Ship and the Liberty Ships were made in California, and they were made, I think, one per week. They were made very quickly and they were made to go fairly slowly and economically and I remember thinking that I could have swum just as fast as the boat was going! We came back and I arrived in New Jersey and my parents drove over and met me which was very nice of them. That was the end of my Army career.

It felt very nice to come home. I had gone to law school so I went to a refresher course and then I went to another refresher course for law school in New York City and then joined a law firm. At the time that I decided to become a lawyer, you had to have a preceptor in Pennsylvania, if you were going to go to law school. So my father arranged for his lawyer in Pittsburgh to be my preceptor. After these refresher courses, when I got back from the Army, then I joined the preceptor's office, which was then called Reed, Schaw, McClay, a fairly large firm in Pittsburgh. I joined that law firm and I've been with it a little over 70 years. Nobody's ever heard of such a thing, anybody working seventy years in one law firm, but I had a connection that long and I still have my office in that law firm, which is very nice.