

Thomas Johnson Sanford

World War II Recollections

My family moved to Rapidan in late 1940. I went back to high school at Mitchells in 1941 and finished in 1942. I might have avoided the draft if I had worked for Uncle Wallace. His farm was “essential to the war effort.” If I had known what so many of our combat troops went through, I might very well have tried to go that route rather than taking a chance on becoming a combat soldier. In any event, I began at Strayer Business College in Washington, D.C., in September 1943. I started as a full-time day student, working at night part-time. Pretty soon I switched to working full-time for the Interstate Commerce Commission and attending school part-time at night.

I was drafted on February 22, 1943. From home, I got on the bus in Charlottesville and went to Camp Lee near Petersburg. There I was given a test to establish my IQ, issued my uniforms, and given some shots. Jo and Ralph were living in Hopewell and visited me one evening. I can’t imagine how they located me.

Basic Training March 1943 - May 1943

I took a troop train to Chicago; it had a sleeping bunk that was fascinating to me. We went through Roanoke, Bluefield (probably), Cincinnati, and on to Chicago. I got to Fort Sheridan by way of the Lakeshore train. I was in the 397th Coast Artillery Battalion, Company D (I think), from March through May of 1943. Fort Sheridan, Illinois, is on Lake Michigan. We were in a 40-millimeter anti-aircraft training unit (draftees had to do infantry, air force, or some other training). This was “regular infantry basic training.” I probably could have chosen to go into the Navy, Marines, or Army at



At Fort Sheridan

Camp Lee and I chose the Army; I don't know why. While I was at Sheridan, I went to Chicago on a weekend pass. I had one furlough home.

Basic Training lasted three months. It involved endless close order drill (marching), long hikes with back packs, firing range practice, training films including brain-washing, obstacle courses, infiltration courses, listening to articles of war, standing guard, learning to assemble a rifle in the dark, going on training bivouacs, scrubbing barracks floors, and I suppose much more. The purpose, of course, was to quickly transform raw recruits into some semblance of soldiers. Although only basic, it did instill a great sense of pride.

I left there in June and went to the University of Illinois at Urbana, where I was transferred into the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program). Admission was based on the results of the IQ test and evidence of college-level ability. I was there about a week and then went on to the University of Wisconsin.

University of Wisconsin June 1943 - February 1944

I was there nine months, taking a basic engineering course (math, calculus, chemistry, physics, and history). The ASTP was phased out in February of 1944 at the time that my group finished, as far as I know. I think they set up these program at colleges to



University of Wisconsin Platoon

help keep the colleges afloat as well as provide training for recruits. Such programs also provided a place to hold soldiers until the material, weapons, and transport systems

could be assembled for the invasion. The Navy had a "V-12" program for educating officers. There was a V-12 group at UW also. John Thompson was in the V-12 at Hampden-Sydney College. There were also ASTP groups at UW studying languages.

It was cold there; snow stayed on the ground most of the winter, packed on the streets. It was an enjoyable experience and very educational. I was sick during Christmas of 1943 and spent Christmas in a hospital at Truax Field (a military hospital). I had strep throat, I think. There was no infirmary at UW, so they used Truax.

I lived in a fraternity house at the beginning with the rest of my platoon. We marched to class, singing marching songs. We carried our books in knapsacks.

I did a lot of training on the lake, swimming, etc. There was always a P.E. program, including calisthenics, etc. I went to all the home college football games (I had never been to one before). A guy who ended up being a Redskins manager played there. I moved to a dormitory for the last half of my time there.

While I was there, I took a test to see if my printing was legible enough for me to be admitted to the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). A security check was also done, with people in Rapidan being interviewed; I guess they were looking for security risks in

my background. I found out about it because people told Mama that "An FBI man was checking up on Tom." I had one furlough home a little before Christmas of 1943. I also had several weekend passes to Milwaukee. I went into the OSS at the end of February 1944, and was immediately shipped by train to Washington, DC.



With Buddy at UW



UW Fraternity House

OSS Base near Quantico March 1944

The base was in the woods, a location selected for isolation. It was used for training spies. We were oriented there for about three weeks and then were shipped to London. I did get home one weekend before shipping out.

We got on a troop ship in New York, a ways up the Hudson River. The ship was the Aquitania, sister ship to the Lusitania (a British ocean liner sunk by a German submarine in 1915). The Aquitania was a major ocean luxury liner converted to a troop ship, relatively high-speed; we crossed the Atlantic with no escort. There was no great danger then of German subs, but those ships had been used to avoid subs. Nevertheless, we did zigzag the whole way, not totally letting the guard down. There were a lot of seasick soldiers.

We were a contingent of about 30 among thousands, probably including combat soldiers and other former ASTPers. My official status was that I was in the US Army, detached to the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), under the control of a civilian agency. Some of my group had studied languages (Italian, for example) at UW. They needed people to do these jobs, so rather than hire civilians they used military personnel.

England March 1944 - December 1944

We landed at Glasgow, and were greeted by bagpipers marching up and down as we went down the gangplank, celebrating the arrival of the “Yanks.” The British had been in the war since 1939. We took an overnight train to London and spent two days at Eisenhower’s London headquarters. Then we shipped out to a radio station near Oxford; there was a village whose name I can’t recall. When I looked for it years later, I couldn’t find it. The train system was so much redone after WWII that a lot of things were blotted out and changed so it wasn’t like the same area.

We lived in a barracks and I learned to play bridge and pinochle, a fascinating game that I played incessantly until I got interested in bridge. I also played a lot of ping-pong. I visited London several times. I also had a two or three-day pass to Stratford-on-



With Buddies in England

Avon, where I attended two performances at Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (Midsummer Night's Dream and some other play). We had some movies on base. I also went to some dances with a unit of British women "soldiers" stationed nearby.

My job was to be a guard, sometimes at a gate, other times on night duty at a remote field of radio antennae. At that time, I had a British guard for a partner. It was a joint operation; these men had seen action in North Africa, were back as veterans, and it was something for them to do. One of them had a trained guard dog and constantly had a pot of tea on the stove. We were there through D-Day and the days of buzz bombs coming over London. The station was in radio contact with underground operatives on the continent. We were aware of different national groups who would come through our radio station and become acquainted with our operators so that they could become familiar with each other's techniques and recognize each other later on. These people were probably parachuted in at night to become part of the underground operation on the continent.

I think I went on guard duty at 6:00 a.m. on D-Day. I remember hearing Eisenhower's voice sometime that morning, it might have been on the PA system, talking about "our boys going ashore on Normandy." I can't begin to describe or understand how grossly I failed to comprehend what was happening: the magnitude, the horror, the suffering so many boys my age and younger were going through. We were fairly close to and yet all but totally failed to grasp what was taking place. I guess those of us not in combat simply felt our forces were invincible. I don't remember ever getting a picture of how things were actually going. That might have been on purpose. I might as well have



With Buddies Near Oxford

been in Rapidan when it came to understanding the situation. Steven Ambrose has spared none of the horrible details in his writing down the accounts of so many of the combat infantry soldiers. Everyone should take time to read some of them. Movies help but are not nearly as effective as actual quotes from those who were there.

Sometime after D-Day, I spent two or three days in a military hospital not far from our station. I re-injured my right foot that had been badly sprained at school in fifth or sixth grade. It was somewhat embarrassing, as most of the others had been injured in combat in France. Mainly I remember comments about how lucky they were to be there and how they dreaded the prospect of going back. The ones with serious injuries were envied by the others. They spoke of the horrible “scream” of an incoming German 88mm artillery shell. Lucky for me General Patton didn’t visit that hospital.

I met Richard twice in England, the first time in London and the second time in Leicester, sort of near where he was stationed. We did some sightseeing and went to dances at the USO. We also slept at the USO on cots.

I was there until December of 1944. Fairly early in December, we took a British troop ship from Liverpool, England, to Naples, Italy. By the end of December, the war had moved on into Europe, so apparently there was no more reason for operatives there to be communicating with people in England. Most likely the station was closed down and those of us who were doing guard duty were shipped out. My group was shipped to Italy, where the OSS had enough going on to need us there.

The ship was an English troop ship; there were about 30 Americans and the rest were English. The OSS was trying to get things done without having to have all their own facilities, so they just asked the English to help. We went through the Straits of Gibraltar early one morning. We were at Malta Harbor on Christmas morning. The natives came out in their gondolas and arranged to throw up a rope with a bucket on it. We’d put money in it and they’d send up oranges in exchange; it was the first time I’d had oranges in a year. The morning announcement was “Wakey, wakey, cooks to the galley! Rise and shine!” The food was horrible for us Americans: porridge for breakfast and boiled fish for other meals.

Italy December 1944 - May 1945



Villa Near Caserta

at Allied Forces Headquarters at Caserta, where this communication station was operating. British General Alexander had his headquarters at Caserta; he was in charge of Allied operations there. My job was logging messages in and out of the communications room. We communicated there with other major places like London, Paris, Bern, Buda-

It took a day or so to get to Naples where we went ashore. From there we went by truck to Caserta, where I was stationed. We lived in a house within a villa. I don't know if the villa was taken over or offered. The job was



In Italy



In Naples

pest, Bucharest, and Washington; they all had radio/teletypes, too. Somewhere along the line we had to also be communicating with the partisans. I don't think we sent messages directly to them – probably through Rome or somewhere. We had these clicking, clacking teletypes going all the time. It was supposed to be scrambled and secure. It's often said that we cracked the German codes and knew what they were going to do, but it must have been terribly embar-

rassing to our country to know nothing about the buildup prior to the Battle of the Bulge. We had pushed the Germans at least north of Florence, but not completely out of Italy. One of the OSS efforts was to make contact with and try to arrange for the surrender of German forces under General Kesselring. A lot of our traffic was about the partisans in northern Italy who were underground forces fighting on behalf of the Allies, trying to get the Germans out of Italy. I think it was the partisans who ultimately captured Mussolini and strung him up by his heels in some town up there.

I had a week of R&R on the Isle of Capri, where we stayed in a villa owned by the Williams shaving cream company; the owner of the company had made it available to the OSS for this purpose. We did a good bit of sightseeing, both battle sites as well as historical sites. I went to Naples at least twice and saw two operas including Carmen and La Boheme; it shows you how quickly they got their lives back to normal after the Germans were kicked out. I also took a trip to the home of an Italian family with a boy from New York who knew people there; we went to his uncle's home or something, just for a day trip. That was interesting; he spoke Italian and had been in the language class at UW, so he had had a chance to practice. His name was Putigiano, I think.

I also went to Rome. I was given the job of driving an officer from Caserta to Rome. He sat in the back and I sat in the front as his chauffeur, in a sedan car. I was there for about a week, and we went to St. Peters. I was in Rome more than once; I must have gone on a pass bus also, because I remember going to Rome with a Catholic I bud-died around with. We went into St. Peters and before I knew it he was kissing the toe of the statue of St. Peter. I had never been around a Catholic before; we had some Catholic families in Orange, but I think they went to Gordonsville to church. I saw other sites including the coliseum, the catacombs, all the tourist sites. I also went to Pompeii and saw Mt. Vesuvius. We were there until soon after V-E Day (May 8, 1945).

China

June 1945 - October 1945

Most of the men I was with in England went home from Italy. Around the first of June, 1945, those of us who were sent to China were flown to Cairo by the British air transport, this being my first airplane ride. We spent a week or two there waiting for a

flight to be arranged to India. We flew over Israel and into Karachi in India. Then we flew up into north central India and spent three weeks at an airfield there that was the Indian terminus of the China/India air route. It was hot; we sat around in the tent in our undershorts all day since we had no uniform shorts.

Then we flew to China in a C-46, over the hump (the Himalayas). They said if you had to bail out, find a river and go downstream. We had to wear parachutes just in case. They didn't consider these flights to be very safe due to the altitude. It was no simple task for planes of those days to fly over those mountains. I'm sure the weather was unpredictable; it was probably a four-hour flight. Otherwise, going into China you'd have been exposed to the air power of Japan. We had a lot of action in that part of the Asian continent (Burma, etc). The Burma Road went from Burma to China; I think that became the road by which the Chinese Nationalist Forces were supplied by the Allies to keep them in the war against Japan.

We flew to Kunming, which was spoken of as the "China end of the Burma Road." Then there was a two-hour flight to Chi-kiang, which was where I was stationed. It was a small, obscure town. In the town, the Chinese would sell things along the streets that we didn't want to eat. We stayed in a Catholic convent. We played volleyball in the courtyard. There was no room for baseball or anything. We also played ping-pong. There were probably 150 of us there. I was not in a unit anymore, just one of the detached personnel.

I don't remember how we got news of the bombing of Hiroshima. It was another case of not understanding in any way what it meant. I guess we began to get the picture after the second bomb dropped and the Japanese surrendered. Maybe it was just me, but I don't think I was alone in my failure to get the big picture at this and other times during the war. Mama listened to Dr. Douglas Freeman every day and she knew far more than I or anyone else knew about the progress of the war.

The job there was to be a cryptographic clerk; the officers would write out a message on a form and we would encode it so that someone else could key it in on a teletype or send it by Morse code to people in the field or on other bases. Some of the traffic there was with operatives who said at the end of the game that they were going to remain in China as sources of intelligence. I guess they weren't planning to maintain a large military presence there, but they wanted to maintain an intelligence presence. Around Octo-

ber 1, 1945, I left China (V-J Day was September 2), going through Kunming and back across the hump to Calcutta, to a tent camp outside the city.

India October 1945 - November 1945

We spent about six weeks in Calcutta, waiting for a troop ship to take us home. We made two or three trips into Calcutta for sightseeing. I was impressed with the loaded railroad cars with people hanging off them going to and from Calcutta. We traveled by army truck – “6-bys” they called them, trucks with 6 wheels on each side, I guess.

We got on a troop ship around November 15 and it was a 27-day trip back to the Pacific coast of the U.S. It was a large ship but not as big as the Aquitania. We stopped for several hours in the Singapore harbor but were not allowed off the ship; it may have been a re-fueling stop. We went through the North China Sea, in sight of Mt. Fujiyama. Following the great circle route, we crossed the International Date Line and then went north of the Aleutians, over very rough seas. There were a couple of days when it was too rough to go out on deck because the ship was rolling too much. The ship came up through the Puget Sound to Tacoma, Washington, I think, escorted by a boat with a band and waving girls.

After we disembarked, we immediately boarded a troop train and went back across the country along a northern route, through Rapidan and on to Washington, D.C. We went on to Fort Meade in Maryland, where I got my \$300 mustering-out pay and was sent home. I was discharged on December 16, 1945. Supposedly there was some de-briefing where we were told to forget about the things we knew. I don't remember much about it. You had to deal with such things as what to do with your GI-life insurance during the de-briefing. I was very stupid and let half of it go.

I was there a couple of days; one night I went into Washington to see Nancy at the Jordan's house. Two of the guys, one Putigiano and one from Mill Valley, CA, were sent home also and I gave them Nancy's name and address. I wasn't trying to be a match-maker, but they did look her up. I don't think she was impressed with my friends.

Home December 1945

I took a train back to Orange. I had to buy the ticket. I think I got back to Orange on December 16, 1945. Ben met me in Orange. He was in high school, and I was a soldier coming home; we were both smoking, driving down the road from Orange to Rapidan.

Daddy died on January 6, 1946. I didn't know Daddy would die so soon. Richard was en route from England when Daddy died. He got word just as he got off the troop ship, but he didn't make it home for the funeral. Walker wasn't home for the funeral either. He was home a couple of weeks afterward for a furlough. Sam was there for the funeral but he was still in the Navy.



Goldenrod Farm

After Daddy died, Mama still owed over \$5000 on the farm. Aunt Lelia had kept a \$5000 life insurance policy on Daddy paid; Mama was able to collect \$5000 from that. Between Richard, Sam, Walker, and myself contributing \$500 each, we managed to pay off the mortgage on Goldenrod Farm. Some years later, Mama paid us back, after she got her inheritance from Aunt Sibby.

I stayed on at Goldenrod as Ben's "helper" until going back to Strayer College in September 1946. During that nine months I think Richard was also there. He got a job with the Soil Conservation Service in Culpeper. With his help I built a septic tank at the farm. We also finished "shucking the corn," in the field that is. I remember sitting down on a sunny winter day in the field shucking corn. It was a good time to reflect on the past three years, come to terms with Daddy's death, and decide to go back to Strayer under the G.I. Bill.