

A Private's Life

My Journey Through the Second World War

By Mr. Murray Mendelsohn as told to Dr. Christopher Hennen

June 6, 1944, began just like many other days at Camp Rucker, Alabama. It was sunny and hot—normal for Alabama—and after the usual morning chores, word came that there was to be a battalion meeting at the post movie theater—another normal occurrence. But there was one thing that set that morning apart—rumors were rampant that the long-awaited Allied invasion of France had begun to liberate Europe from Nazi occupation. We were an anxious group of Soldiers; we had finished our training and were anticipating orders for a trip overseas. The only question seemed to be which theater—European or Pacific?

Our 159th Engineer Combat Battalion commander, Major Michael F. McNamara, strode in and took center stage, his normal position. The major came right to the point: The invasion had started in Normandy earlier that morning, and he was only sorry that the 159th had missed out on the glorious event. But he assured us that there was a second wave coming, and we would be part of it.

After leaving the theater, we tried to go back to our daily routine. Now we knew our days at Camp Rucker were numbered. There was still talk about the direction in which the battalion would go, but the betting seemed to be on Europe because of the invasion. All furloughs were cancelled, meaning I would not get the one that had been promised me after completing my training at the Fort Belvoir, Virginia,

Engineer Replacement Training Center in April. After that training, many of us had been sent to the 159th, knowing that the outfit was preparing to go overseas and had to be numerically strengthened. At Camp Rucker, we were blended into the unit, a group that had been together for more than a year and seemed to be ready for its ultimate mission of being combat engineers.

Major McNamara was right—we were going to be part of the second wave in Normandy. In a matter of a few days, we were restricted to the base, and the packing process was well underway. Then the order came to move out. We were taken to the railroad and boarded a train for the ride to the port of embarkation. We had Pullman cars, so we knew it was going to be a long ride.

The train finally reached its destination at Camp Myles Standish, near Taunton, Massachusetts. We were taken to our last U.S. posting, assigned our slots in the barracks, and given passes to go into either the neighboring towns or to Boston. We decided to take advantage of our borrowed time while we could. Who knew when—or if—we'd have a chance to enjoy ourselves like that again.

Then came the announcement we had both expected and dreaded: We were restricted to the base, which could mean only one thing. On the night of June 26, we boarded our train,

which left us alongside a hulking, darkened ship that was moored to a South Boston pier. We picked up our duffel bags and boarded the ship—the *USS West Point*. It was a luxury liner that had been converted in 1940 as the flagship *SS America* of the United States Line fleet, sailing between New York and England and France. Now it was a U.S. Navy troop transport, painted battleship gray and with U.S. Sailors manning guns posted around the ship.



United States Navy photo

The *USS West Point*, a converted luxury liner that was completed in 1940 as the flagship *SS America* of the United States Line fleet, sailed between New York and England and France. Now it was a United States Navy troop transport, painted battleship gray and with U.S. Sailors manning guns posted around the ship. 1943

Once aboard, we kept trudging downward, finally reaching our bunks. We had some 10,000 Soldiers on board, mainly engineers and Medical Corps people, we were told. We were stacked three and four high but, as we had long-since learned, when it was time to call it a day, we went to sleep. When we awoke and finally got up on deck, we were already far out to sea. Standing near the stern, we could see that the ship was pursuing a zigzag course, and we were all alone on the Atlantic.

Finally, on the morning of July 4, 1944, after sailing for seven days, we could see seagulls and then land, which we were told was Scotland. Many of us had thought we would undergo further training, but that was not to be. Instead, every few days we packed up and headed farther south. By July 15, we had reached Falmouth, an old fishing port on the English Channel. We had large squad tents right near the water, where we could see many ships waiting to load up. It was only a matter of time before we would be heading to Normandy.

Our waiting came to an end on July 18, when the battalion boarded two waiting Liberty ships, the *Louis Kossuth* and the *Lou Gehrig*. While I felt more akin to the *Gehrig*, since the Yankee ballplayer had been a resident of my hometown—New Rochelle, New York—I was put on the *Kossuth*. When all the troops were on board, the ships left the harbor and lined up in a large convoy, escorted by naval warships. We had a Navy gun crew fore and aft, but otherwise the ship was manned by a Merchant Marine crew.

It was a slow ride across the channel, and largely uneventful. We slept in two shifts, switching from bunks to deck. The only food was either C or K rations. There was a large kettle at the back of the ship where we could heat the cans and get water for Nescafe®.

We just sat there, passing the time of day and watching what was going on at Utah Beach. Finally, on the morning of July 22, a launch pulled up alongside, and Major McNamara climbed up the rope that was hanging down the side of the *Kossuth*. He called us all together at the ship's stern and told us we were about ready to get off the ship and start on our new adventure in Normandy. We were indeed the second wave, and he knew we would prove ourselves to be true members of the 159th. He knew there would be casualties, but he also knew we would earn commendations for what we were about to do. He continued in that vein, then he said he would see us onshore. He went over the side of the ship again and proceeded on to the *Gehrig*, undoubtedly to make the same speech.

It was a cloudy afternoon as we were told to get ready to go over the side to a waiting "rhino," a large flat barge. We had all our belongings and weapons on our backs. Finally, my turn came to clamber onto the rope netting and start my descent. I had visions of losing my grip and going for a swim in the English Channel, but I managed to get down and finally touch the deck of the rhino. Our trucks and other equipment also came over the side, and when we were loaded, the Sailors took off for the beach. The rhino went right up to the

shore, and we jumped off onto our destination—Utah Beach, Normandy. We were taken to our section of the beach and waited for the battalion to assemble. We would have to spend the night on the beach, but the weather was decent, so that would not present a problem.

Night fell and, of course, there was a complete blackout on the beach. We were told to expect some German reconnaissance planes and, as predicted, our intelligence was correct. They were greeted by our antiaircraft guns, and soon "Bedcheck Charlie" left the area to make his next nightly visit. In the morning, we got on our trucks and moved off the beach, which was full of other troops and supplies, all waiting to go inland. It was a massive job to have assembled everything, and now we were going off on our own for our first mission.

As the 159th rolled away from the beach, we had our first views of Normandy. Our first stop was St. Mere Eglise, a town at the heart of the American airborne operations on D-Day, and it looked largely destroyed. We were on narrow country roads, passing many farms behind the massive hedgerows on both sides of the road that marked the boundaries between the various farms. Finally, our group pulled into a farm area surrounded by the hedgerows. We unloaded and set up our camouflage netting to conceal our location. We were well used to our routine of loading and unloading our equipment on the back of our 2 1/2-ton truck. We were to get lots more practice.

We set up our tactical operations center under some trees alongside the hedgerow. As part of the Headquarters and Service Company of the 159th, we had plenty of work to catch up on. So we spent a busy afternoon sorting all our material and finding a place where we would spend the night. We had to be careful about exposing our location, because the Germans were not too far from our site in Barneville. At that time, the American position in Normandy, while secure, was not too deep. The 159th was given the mission of clearing mines and maintaining the roads. We were now part of XV Corps and 3d Army.

News soon reached us of the battalion's first casualties; two privates in Company B had been killed while clearing mines. Their first day of work marked their deaths. Such are the perils and uncertainties of war.

We were on the road, moving toward St. Lo, when an attack was launched to take the town, which marked the breakout from Normandy and the steady advance toward Paris and, in our case, toward Brest, the seaport at the western tip, right on the Atlantic Ocean. I can still see and hear the planes flying overhead, on their way to bomb the Germans. I had never seen so many planes before, and the noise was deafening when they loosed their bombs on the targets. Within a few days, we were in the vicinity of Avranches, which marked the spot where the 159th turned toward Brittany and the eventual target of Brest. It had been an important port for the American Army in World War I, and now it was decided we should take it again to relieve the pressure on the Normandy ports.



Bulldozers level ballast on an abandoned railway roadbed as Soldiers from the 159th Engineer Combat Battalion construct a highway to move supplies to the front across the Our River in the 3d Army sector. February 13, 1945

The battalion was placed into Task Force A, and it was to be deployed primarily as infantry in the big push through Brittany. It was decided to leave the Personnel Section (which included me) behind for the time being in the big field we occupied. There were ten of us, including our commanding warrant officer. We were given plenty of C and K rations and little else, besides all our records. We said our farewells to our friends as they left, and we set to work organizing our own area. We were on the main highway leading from the beaches, and it had been designated a “Red Ball Express” highway. Only priority units could use the road, because getting supplies to the front was considered paramount. This gave us an observation point from which to see everything passing our front door, 24 hours a day. We had to establish our own security, and then we set out to keep up with our daily routine.

There were no other outfits located in our immediate vicinity; we were our own outpost. We were really on detached service, for want of a better term. One afternoon, rifle fire jolted us out of our routine. No one was hit, but we went on alert and checked out the few houses at the far side of our field. We never found the shooter, but it didn’t happen again. We knew Brittany was completely occupied by the Germans, and that meant plenty of combat for the 159th. My Personnel Section was itching to rejoin the rest of the battalion, but we had no communication with the outfit. Finally, after more than a week of waiting, a truck came to pick us up. That afternoon we arrived at headquarters, west of Morlaix.

The battalion was constantly on the move, as the American forces kept forcing the Germans back to their last line of defense, the city of Brest, which finally fell in late September. Within a few days, orders came through for VIII Corps,

of which we were a part, to move northeast to Belgium. VIII Corps had been expanded greatly during the Brest campaign and, during its course, it became the sole corps in the newly formed 9th Army. The 159th packed up and headed off on a long overland movement. We drove back through Brittany, where we were greeted with enthusiasm in each town. On the second afternoon of our trip, we passed to the west of Paris, and we could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance. That night we camped in a field in St. Quentin, and the next day we finally reached our destination—Bastogne, Belgium. We found our bivouac area and spent the next few days there, waiting for a permanent location to be selected. Bastogne was the headquarters of VIII Corps until the Battle of the Bulge occurred and German pressure around the city—coupled with successive U.S. withdrawals in the area—forced the Corps headquarters to relocate to the vicinity of Neufchateau, about 20 miles southwest of Bastogne. After a few days, we headed off to nearby Luxembourg. My company wound up in the small farming community of Useldange.

We were quartered in the local school, our first indoor location since our arrival on the continent and a big improvement over all those fields we had slept in. It looked as if we were going to stay put for a while at least. The battalion was assigned to do road and bridge repairs, for the most part—basic engineering work. The whole of Luxembourg had been secured, and there were several infantry divisions nearby that had come from Brittany. Battalion headquarters had been placed in a fine stone house next to the remains of an 11th century tower and wall. In a few days, my section moved into the chateau too.

The people in Luxembourg were very friendly and really felt indebted to the Americans for freeing them from the Nazis. This 2 1/2-month period before the onset of the Battle

of the Bulge proved to be the best duty the battalion had in its stay overseas. Luxembourg had become a quiet area that required normal engineering work and little combat. Gradually, the full-strength infantry divisions that had been in this Ardennes area were being shifted, most of them to the Huertgen Forest on the German-Belgian border. They were engaged in a vicious battle of attrition and suffered many casualties. As the original divisions involved were depleted, the fresh divisions from our area were sent to take their places. Our Personnel Section stayed put and did its usual day-to-day work.

Our area was supposed to be a quiet paradise for war-weary troops. The 9th Armored Division had just come over from the States, and one unit was quartered in Useldange. We heard that the 4th and 28th Infantry Divisions had also come into the area after being mauled in the Huertgen Forest. Without warning, on December 16, 1944, the Battle of the Bulge erupted. Confusion and panic reigned at first; orders came through to our battalion headquarters for the 159th to link up with the 4th Infantry Division in the Consdorf region of Luxembourg. On December 17, all the line companies, plus elements of Headquarters and Service Company, moved out to be deployed as infantry alongside the 4th Division.

Back in Useldange, the remainder of Headquarters and Service Company went on full alert. We had to take up the slack for the part of our unit that had moved up to Consdorf to join the 4th Division. We became responsible for the security of the area, which meant the addition of guard duty and other chores to our day-to-day assignments. The sudden, unexpected attack had really changed our thinking. One moment, we had been looking forward to the holiday season, and the next moment, war consumed our thoughts. The weather had turned nasty, and snow began to fall. That first night, I was assigned to guard a critical pumping station. We drove out to a back-road location nestled in a group of trees. I was told that a Luxembourger who was in charge of the station would come along during the night to do maintenance and see that all was in order. However, my mind imagined other, more frightening scenarios.

It was very cold; snow covered the ground, and the night was very dark. I walked around the area frequently, as much to keep warm as anything else. I heard a motorbike approaching as I was standing near the building. I could make out the silhouette of a tall man, dressed in a full-length leather coat, getting off the motorbike. I hailed him and asked for identification. He spoke some English and told me he was the man in charge of the pumping station. I breathed a sigh of relief, as I really did not want to tangle with a saboteur that night. He opened the station, and we went in. He checked the equipment, and we had a brief conversation in German. I told him I would be back several times during my tour of duty that night. I was happy I had an excuse to get in out of the cold a few times, and the shift passed a little more quickly by adding some conversation to the mix. I was happy when my replacement came along, and I took him in to meet the

technician. Then, it was back to Useldange for some much-needed sleep. The weather remained overcast with periods of snow and fog. It was definitely not a time for flying, so we couldn't expect any air support.

We all waited for any news about how our friends were doing up at the front, a short distance away. There was interchange between the different locations, but there was very little specific information. We heard that the German attack had caught us by surprise, and they had achieved some early success. The saying "fog of war" truly applied. We did get delivery of *Stars and Stripes*, a well-written daily GI newspaper, but the action was so intense and changing so rapidly that it was not an up-to-date account of the situation. Basically, we relied on our headquarters in Consdorf for news. As the days passed, we heard that the battalion was seeing quite a bit of action, and there had been many casualties. It was a confusing and frightening time.

One of the problems was the lack of knowledge as to how far the Germans had advanced in our area. Basically, we did not have any patrols out but relied on our drivers who were in the area. We decided to go to the three towns where the line companies were located and retrieve the things they had left behind when they rushed out to the front. The next morning, I was assigned to go to Bettborn, about 5 miles away, to get Company B's belongings. We took a couple of trucks and took off, not knowing who was there. Bettborn proved to be deserted, since the Luxembourgers had also evacuated. We went to the houses that we knew had been used by our colleagues and did a fast job of assembling everything—mainly duffel bags—and throwing them onto the trucks. Then we headed back to Useldange to unload what we had collected. We found out that all our locations were still in our sector, and they stayed that way throughout the battle. This was very fortunate, because other nearby towns, such as Ettelbruck, had been taken and largely destroyed.

The overcast skies finally broke on December 23, and we began to hear the sound of the American planes and see them overhead. This would make a great difference, and we all were encouraged. We were still getting fragmentary reports about the battalion, but nothing definitive. Our part of Headquarters and Service Company was ordered to move to Rollingergrund, a section on the northern edge of Luxembourg City, so we packed everything and prepared to move out. It was a sad occasion for us, as we had been there for two months and had developed many friendships and much mutual admiration between the Luxembourgers and ourselves. This was one of the frequent reminders that you couldn't become too sentimental at times like this, but still there was a lot of emotion when we finally pulled out. It was no longer unusual for us to simply pack up and go at a moment's notice. The Personnel Section was sent to a school, and we set up our operations there. We continued with our extended duties and hoped the rest of the battalion would join us soon. The next day, the 159th arrived, and it was a relief for all of us to be reunited.



We moved into several houses in Trois Vierges, Luxembourg, and went about our work. The Germans had occupied the town, but much of it wasn't as heavily damaged as this. There was quite a bit of water in the streets, but the billets were still dry. Then the Germans opened a dam and flooded the town, forcing us to relocate. February 2, 1945

Our compatriots told us about the heavy fighting they had faced in the Consdorf-Scheidgen area. There, a part of our Company C, collocated with Company B, held off elements of a Volks-Grenadier division on Hill 313, a strategic piece of terrain overlooking a vital road network. Company B caught the full force of the initial assault, supported by intense German artillery fire. Our combat engineers had no working radios and were greatly outnumbered. They had no protection for their flanks and no artillery or air support. Almost out of ammunition, they were forced to fall back to Scheidgen; but to our surprise and relief, the Germans made no move to pursue them. As we questioned our buddies, we learned that there had been considerable casualties—scores of deaths and many wounded, plus others who had sustained trench foot and had been evacuated.

As we reconstituted, it was evident that the men were visibly exhausted by their ordeal and wanted sleep above all. Finally, on Christmas Day, the 159th pulled out of Luxembourg City and moved back to the Belgian-French border at Charleville-Messincourt. The cooks did a commendable job putting together a Christmas meal that we ate in the courtyard of the chateau where we were quartered. Of course, there was a great

deal of conversation about what had just happened. Everyone was very upbeat, though still mourning the loss of so many friends. As it began to get dark, an American Cadillac sedan, painted OD, pulled up. When I saw the two stars on the bumper plaque, I knew we had an important visitor. It turned out to be Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, commander of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), World War I Medal of Honor recipient, and (later) father of the CIA. It was not safe to be out on strange roads once night fell, and he was traveling without a convoy, so it made sense for him to join us and have a good dinner. At that time, the leading edge of the battlefield was still very fluid, and great caution had to be exercised at all times. We had all heard about English-speaking German soldiers wearing American uniforms who had been circulating behind our lines. Many of them were caught and executed as spies, but we were still uneasy and on guard. Memorizing the challenge and password took on greater importance.

The 159th stayed in the area for several days, regrouping and waiting for our next assignment. Right after the new year, we started to push back into Belgium. The battles and tremendously heavy traffic had taken their toll on the roads. Many of them had almost disappeared, and heavy maintenance and rebuilding had to start at once so the Allies could continue the advance. We were headed back to the Bastogne area, which the 101st Airborne Division had defended so valiantly. Maintenance became a 24-hour-a-day job, and the 159th did many innovative things to expedite the work. For example, we took over sawmills and cut many logs and operated a rock quarry to get materials. We were shorthanded because of the losses we had suffered, but everyone pitched in to accomplish the job. By January 17, the battalion reached Bastogne and started to help clear roads there. We stayed in most locations for a few days and, as the American Army retook the Bulge territory, we kept moving eastward toward Germany. This was to be our pattern of operations during that time. Some of our wounded GIs returned as they recovered during hospital stays. Many had left the hospitals and found their way back on their own, so great was their desire to rejoin their comrades.

On January 31, Headquarters and Service Company pulled into Trois Vierges, a small town almost on the German border at the northern tip of Luxembourg. Although the Germans had occupied it, the town was not too heavily damaged. We moved into several houses and went about our work. Many of the inhabitants returned upon our arrival, and we tried to make them as comfortable as possible. The Germans, however, were not about to leave the matter there. There was quite a bit of water in the streets, but the billets were still dry. Then the Germans opened a dam and the water came flooding into Trois Vierges, forcing us into a hasty relocation.

We moved to Steffeshausen, Belgium, and using this area as our base of operations, began the engineering work needed throughout the area. The main job was restoring the roads, which were still in a terrible state. Frankly, those roads hadn't been designed to withstand the heavy traffic of an army at war. The 159th was working on a 24-hour schedule to accomplish its task, and even the clerks had to help out in cutting down and hauling trees for corduroy roads. One work detail had a visit from General George S. Patton while he was on an inspection tour. The battalion was completely immersed in backbreaking engineering tasks, and working under extremely difficult conditions. The weather was still bad with frequent snow, which caused many weather-related casualties.

In addition to *Stars and Stripes*, we also got *Yank*, a magazine all about Army life, as well as paperback editions of books and overseas editions of various magazines, such as *Life*. It was a pleasure reading *Life*, because it contained only pictures and print stories, but no advertising. Of course, we lived under blackout conditions at all times, but we had generators, so we had lights when there was no local lighting. Our battalion was also lucky, because one of its missions was to provide fresh water for the outfits in our area. We even rigged up a portable shower we could use when we were in one spot for several days.

After the Battle of the Bulge, forward progress became very slow. The Germans had retreated behind their Siegfried Line, and our commanders in this area were content to wait for the right moment before launching any major operations. We knew we would have to get across both the Moselle and Rhine Rivers, both formidable tasks. In the meantime, we prepared the roads and bridges so we had good movement in our own area.

Finally, the time came to advance into Germany proper from our area along the Belgian–Luxembourg border. Company A crossed into Germany on February 23, and the other companies followed by early March. We were in what amounted to a backwater section of the country; it was not heavily populated, and what few towns were there had been virtually destroyed in the fighting and bombing. Our immediate objective was to proceed to the Koblenz area so we could prepare to cross the rivers. On March 15, we were in Mulheim, preparing to take the 87th Infantry Division across the Moselle and to erect a pontoon bridge for permanent access. As with all the bridges we built, we placed a sign at the entrance of the bridge notifying all concerned that they were crossing courtesy of the 159th Engineer Combat Battalion. The only thing we didn't do, unfortunately, was charge a toll.

The next objective was the crossing and bridging of the mighty Rhine—the largest natural barrier we had to overcome. We were in Boppard, on the west bank of the river, on March 26. The mission, again, was to take the 87th Infantry Division across in assault boats, then erect a pontoon bridge. The battalion accomplished its mission, this time under heavy

fire, and the American Army was then on the west bank of the Rhine in another sector. Now the Army was ready to really roll eastward across Germany.

Once across the Rhine, we found German resistance becoming more sporadic. The 159th was attached to various infantry divisions, and we followed closely as they continued their relentless push. We did stay in Boppard for several days, seeing to it that the new bridge was properly maintained, and by April 1 we were in Kamp. This was to be one of many one- and two-night stands during the march eastward. We would attend to whatever maintenance needed to be done and assist in rounding up the great numbers of German soldiers who were surrendering. On April 12, we were in the small town of Friedwald when we got word that President Franklin Roosevelt had died. We were in a state of disbelief, because most of us had known no other president. He had been a figure larger than life, and we wondered about his successor, Harry S. Truman.

The battalion was assigned to do military government work as we pushed through Thuringia. Most of the small towns were relatively intact, since no battles had taken place there; the larger cities had been the targets. I recall the town of Konigsee, a small resort area with several hotels. The German civilians who had been fleeing our advance seemed to collect



Operations had more or less come to a halt in our area. We had been in Apolda, Germany, for several days, when I met a commercial photographer who saw me taking pictures in a park across from the building in which we were living. Since I spoke German, we had a conversation, and he told me that he had a photo studio. He offered to take a photo of me and my fellow GIs. May 1, 1945

there because of the available facilities. We worked with the *bürgermeister* (mayor), telling him what the rules were to be. The Germans were resigned to their fate by this time and, while they were sullen, they did not cause trouble. They obeyed our orders, turning in all their weapons at the town hall. We saw large numbers of displaced persons or refugees wandering the roads. They were real victims of the Germans, and it was heartbreaking to watch them trudging along, with all their belongings on their backs or in rickety carts. I suspected that to them it made no difference whether their circumstances were the result of totalitarianism or liberty. War is ugly, cruel, and indiscriminate, regardless of the motives.

By April 21, we had reached Weimar. The center of the city had sustained some damage, but the area seemed to have survived quite well. It was here that we came upon Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The sights there were beyond comprehension. Some of the former prisoners were still there in their striped outfits. Everyone seemed to be on the verge of death. Wasted bodies were all over the place, many of them stacked on carts. It was a sight that sickened all the American Soldiers. How could human beings inflict such brutality on these people? It was a question we all asked one another. Regrettably, the horrific scene was repeated in many locations throughout Europe.

It was now May 8—Victory in Europe (VE) Day. When we reached Verviers, the Belgians were celebrating the end of the war in Europe. The next morning, a few of us boarded a train for our long-awaited rest and recuperation (R&R) trip to Paris. It was a very slow ride, because the roadbeds were still not fully ready for heavy-duty traffic. We pulled into the Gare du Nord (north station) in early afternoon and were lined up and assigned to our hotels. I was sent to the Elysee Hotel, a small walk-up building across the Rue de l'Elysee from the presidential home, the Elysee Palace. To top it off, the American embassy was around the corner. It was a great location, but the wonder was how this hotel got there. Who could complain, considering the circumstances?

It was a sunny afternoon, and the weather remained good for our three-day stay. But like all good things, our trip came to an end much too soon, and we were back on the train to Verviers. We stayed in the same Belgian army barracks we had used on the way to Paris. We were thankful that this time things were much quieter. The next morning we were back on our truck for the long ride back to eastern Germany. The trip had many detours, because many of the bridges on the autobahns had been destroyed. We thought we were heading back to Erfurt and then Apolda, but we were told that the battalion was no longer there but was now living in tents near Werda and the Czechoslovakian border. What a comedown! It was a rather rude shock after our trip to Paris.

We went back to doing military government work, and in our trips around the area, we still saw the long lines of refugees and German soldiers walking along. When we talked to the German civilians, we were all struck by the fact that they all claimed not to have been Nazis. We just never met Nazis. It

made us wonder who was doing all that shooting at us if no one was a Nazi.

We soon found out that our battalion had been assigned to Antwerp, Belgium, to erect a troop redeployment center. With the war in Europe over, much of the Army had to be sent to the Asiatic–Pacific Theater to help end the war there. It sounded like a good assignment and, while some units were being marked for disbanding, it would keep us all together. On May 31, the battalion loaded up and moved out for the two-day overland journey to Antwerp. We stayed on the autobahns for the most part, but there were detours because of destroyed bridges. We frequently saw hordes of displaced people and German soldiers moving along. We also saw large barbed-wire enclosures holding German soldiers who had become prisoners of war (POWs).

Outside of Cologne, I could see the twin towers of its famous church. We came through Heerlen, the Netherlands, and soon we were in eastern Belgium. Late that afternoon, we arrived in Antwerp. We were directed to a large open area near the Scheldt River. The next day the battalion began to erect a large tent city that would accommodate thousands of troops. This was to be a tremendous task, and we even had the assistance of many German POWs who had been put to work. The tent city, named *Camp Tophat*, was located within the city of Antwerp but in a section called the *other side*, meaning that it was on the opposite side of the river from the developed old city. There was a tunnel that connected the two sections, and we always needed transportation to get into the main part of the city, the second-largest city in Belgium. The port along the Scheldt was one of the largest in Europe. The city had been a target of Hitler's V-1 and V-2 revenge weapons. You could see sporadic damage throughout the city where the bombs and rockets had landed, but the damage didn't compare to what we had seen in Germany.

Our Personnel Section kept busy with all the paperwork that had to be done. The Army announced a point system so that those who had been in the Army longest would have an opportunity to be discharged. We had some high-point men, but the majority—including me—were not qualified for quick release. At that time, we considered ourselves fortunate to have accumulated five battle stars, each worth five points, for the campaigns we had been through. The possibility of being sent to the Pacific loomed large in our minds but, in the meantime, we did our everyday work and took advantage of the fact that we were in a lively city with much to offer. It was a simple matter for the men to get into the city, as there were no real restrictions on passes—you just waited for one of the trucks headed that way. Getting back was equally easy.

I found that we were permitted to visit the capital city of Brussels, which was only a half-hour train ride away. I made several trips there, always with my camera at the ready. Brussels had been declared an "open city," so it came through the war intact. The only obvious exception was the missing dome on the gigantic Palace of Justice. Brussels is a flat city,

so the Germans had installed their radar in the dome of the building. When they retreated, they put thermite bombs in the dome and exploded them. The metal dome melted into the building and caused great damage to the central part of the edifice.

One of our main topics of everyday conversation was our possible destination after Antwerp. We received word that the 159th was scheduled to be disbanded at some point. We did lose some high-point men, but we no longer received replacements. We did our daily work, finishing Camp Tophat and awaiting its occupants. We followed the events unfolding in the Pacific, sure that most of us would end up there to finally bring closure to the war. Then, on August 6, we heard about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, followed three days later by the bomb on Nagasaki, and it looked like this would end the war. We were surprised the Japanese didn't surrender at once, but it was not in their makeup to do so. Finally, on August 15, Victory Over Japan (VJ) Day was proclaimed. The war had come to a successful conclusion. Many plans were going to be changed, mine included.

On August 19, orders were issued for my transfer to the 2d Military Government Regiment, headquartered in Bad Homburg, Germany. I was really shocked, as I had completely forgotten about my application for transfer to military government. Who would think the Army would find a lowly PFC and order his individual movement? But it happened, and at this late stage of the game, I was not too happy. My biggest worry was that members of military government would be declared essential and would not be able to go home on schedule. But there was nothing to be done except to make the move, and on August 26, I boarded a train that would travel through Brussels and Paris and take me back to Germany and my new assignment.

Although my job was interesting, and I had an opportunity to travel in and around the area, I anxiously waited for my turn to go home. My point score was nearing the right total for a trip back to the United States and, at the end of October, orders transferring me to the homeward-bound 29th Infantry Division came through. When I reached division headquarters, I was sent to the 111th Field Artillery Battalion located in Nordenham, across the river from Bremerhaven on the northern coast of Germany.

Finally, word came through that we would be sailing at 1800 hours on January 1, 1946—a wonderful way to start the new year. We had only a short ride to board our C2 freighter *Bienville*, which was larger than the Liberty and Victory ships, but had the same type of accommodations. The ship had four-tier bunks, and I was on the bottom. We all went up on deck to watch the departure from the dock, then we sailed down the Weser River to the English Channel. The trip was supposed to take 10 days to our destination of New York. After days of storms, the weather finally turned nice, but then most of the ship's engines broke down. The *Bienville* barely moved along, and the trip stretched to 15 days.

There were the usual conversations about going home and what that meant. Many dreams were coming to the fore, along with doses of nostalgia. It was a happy time, after all these men had gone through, to reach this point. Finally, the *Bienville* limped into New York Harbor and made its way to a pier in Staten Island. It was early in the morning of January 15, and it didn't take long to get our belongings together and get off the ship. We were transported to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, a large camp that only handled troops coming back or going out through the Port of New York.

At Camp Kilmer, we went through a series of medical examinations and interviews, and before long, I was on my way to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to undergo the final processing for my discharge. We turned in our extra uniforms and equipment and packed our duffel bags for the last time with whatever was left. Finally, we were given our discharge papers and final pay.

I took a bus to the train station in Trenton, New Jersey, and waited for the train to New York. It was quite a treat to look out the window and see the American landscape again after 19 months overseas. When we reached Pennsylvania Station, a group of us took a cab to Grand Central Station. Now I was in familiar territory, and I proceeded to the New Haven Railroad train to New Rochelle. I knew my mother and father would be waiting for me in the store on Main Street. Because I had the duffel bag, I decided to take a cab from the station instead of walking, as I had always done. In the midafternoon of January 19, 1946, I finally finished my long journey home. It was an exciting and emotional moment when I opened the front door to the store and raced in to greet my mother and father. From Soldier to civilian, I started to put behind me my time as a combat engineer and an eyewitness to the horrors of war. 

Mr. Mendelsohn grew up in New Rochelle, New York. His Army experience included basic training at the Fort Belvoir Engineer Replacement Training Center and then assignment to the 159th Engineer Combat Battalion, which was preparing to go overseas. In July 1944, the battalion landed in Normandy and went from there to the German-Czechoslovakian border in May 1945. After discharge from the Army, he returned to the family's retail business, where he remained and expanded the business. He took part in many civic and business activities through the years. Now retired and living in Greensboro, North Carolina, he is one of the few survivors of the 159th Engineer Combat Battalion's Headquarters and Service Company that saw action in the Battle of the Bulge.

Dr. Hennen served on active duty as a military policeman and military intelligence officer, retiring in 1997. Since that time, he has been the headmaster at New York Military Academy in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York.

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Note: Mr. Mendelsohn was interviewed by Max Hastings for his book *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany*, which was published in 2004.