

The Big One

Memories

Billie Doyle

Harry Hastings is an ordinary man, who did some extraordinary things some 40 years ago. He's a WWII veteran and modest about his experiences. It was his wife, Elaine, who told me sometime ago that he was with Patton when the war ended, and he reluctantly let me talk with him.

Harry and Elaine Hursh were married when he was eighteen, but down to the draft board in Manistique he went to do his duty. He was told they didn't take married men. His "greetings" were already in the mail and from then on everything was down hill, or up hill depending on whose perspective you're using.

He received his basic training at Camp Kearns, Utah, a far piece for a callow youth who hadn't been too far from Manistique. From Camp Kearns, he went to Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver, Colorado, for training as a medical corpsman. And then back to Utah, Windover Field. Those salt flats



Three generations of Hastings served our country, starting with Bill Hastings, Harry's father.

were desolate and one day on the bulletin board there was a notice "if you wanted out of there, you could sign up with the infantry." He signed up and he was gone to Camp Butner, North Carolina right now. They were loading the boat and ready to go.

Now, the way he remembered the names so well is that Elaine had all those shiny satin pillow tops he had sent her. Each was emblazoned with the insignia and camp name. That pillow top business in those days would beat out blue jeans and tennis shoes now. It brought a rush of memories to me.

He showed me a book he has about the 89th Division. And there he traced the route from LeHavre, France to their first camp, Camp Lucky Strike, through Luxembourg to the Czechoslovakian border in a little town called Zwiskan. He said the Russians were there and by then the war was over with. I guess the Russians are still there.

Harry won (earned) Bronze Star with 2 oak leaf clusters, as well as Good Conduct Medal and Combat Medical Badge. I will quote from the official War Department letter for one of the stars: "Pvt. 1st Class Harry H. Hastings 36461027, while serving with the Army of the United States, distinguished himself by heroic achievement in connection with military operations against an armed enemy. At 0200, 26 March 1945, as Company "A," 333rd Infantry was preparing to make an assault crossing of the Rhine River in the vicinity of Oberwesel, Germany, two enlisted men entering the first assault were seriously wounded by enemy machine gun fire. Although the machine gun fire was so accurate that the boat had been rendered useless, Pvt. 1st Class Hastings, company aid man, with the assistance of a platoon sergeant, removed the two men from the boat and dressed their wounds. His bravery and unselfish devotion to duty saved the lives of two wounded comrades and reflected great credit upon him. His actions were in keeping with the best tradition of the armed forces of the United States."

Harry tells it this way: "They waited at the Rhine for 3 days before crossing. It took him two weeks to find his outfit. He couldn't swim a stroke, and his white helmet with the red cross was such a good target, he threw it away. One soldier was hit in the back on the boat. He kept his hand over the wound so he wouldn't bleed to death. He heard from him once after he was discharged." (I imagine it was a "Thank You" note).

The 89th Artillery book is a little more vivid, it reads like this:

On March 25, 1945, the 89th began firing on defensive positions across the Rhine River, in advance of the Infantry. It was estimated by Division G-2 that the Germans had a total of about 15,500 troops against the 89th.

The supply plan issued by General Patton 3rd army was that only ammunition, trucks and tanks would cross first, no food until the ground across was captured.

March 25 was Sunday, a day of prayer, on the rolling green fields and in the dark woods along the Rhine, men knelt with their chaplains in solemn prayer.

H-hour, the culmination of nearly three years of preparation was at hand. The 353rd and 354th moved to the forward, to exploit a bridgehead, for two motorized task forces to race in a southeast direction as far as Wiesbaden.

In total blackout, trucks carrying pontoons, treadways and assault boats crept bumper to bumper down the narrow twisting roads.



Harry Hastings, father of Noel.

As the jump-off approached every man was in place awaiting the signal. A tense knot of officers studied the terrain through binoculars from a castle outpost on the hill, behind St. Goar and checked their watches. It was 0130 March 26.

Along this part of the Rhine cliffs rise from the river three to four hundred feet high and were covered with vineyards. The Rhine itself averages about 250 yards in width at this point and was very swift. Even before the troops began to cross, the 353rd and the 354th infantry Reg. were receiving heavy small-arms, machine-gun and 20mm. in a fire from across the river.

At 0200 March 26 the first platoons of Companies E and F, 354th, crawled to the water edge and shoved off in their boats. Company E was to hit the high ground, on left side of St. Goarshausen, Company F was to land at the right and take the town itself. Only eleven men of Company E's 120 men got ashore, the boats were riddled with holes. The eleven men managed to wipe out two machine-gun nests and flushed out many snipers from the buildings. Three of Company F's four boats were sunk. The survivors flounder ashore, by this time the flames of the burning buildings lit the sky and the boats were a perfect target.

At one point, Harry just sadly shook his head and said "I saw things no young kid should see." He was the only medic attached to a tank company that liberated a concentration camp with Jews at Ohrdry, Germany, 10/April/1945. He said there were maybe 1,000 alive, if you could call it that, they were just "skin and bones." A few old men were left to guard the prisoners. There were mounds and mounds covering bodies. Again he shook his head and said "It was unbelievable."

He told about an Italian girl in this camp who thought he was a doctor. He said she had tried to escape and her legs were full of buck shot and infected. He had some morphine and sulfa drugs and took out a few of the pellets and the last he saw of her she was hiking home to Italy.

On Christmas Day, 1945, he came to New York to Boston and was discharged from Camp McCoy, Wisconsin.

That's one ordinary man who 40 years ago did some extraordinary things to help preserve our way of life. We salute every ordinary man who fought in the wars of our



Noel Hastings.

(Photos courtesy of Harry Hastings)

country, WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam on this November 11, 1985.

According to Clara (Frenette) Goudreau who admonished me not to say she remembered, but that her mother knew a family of Whites for whom Whitedale was named. 12 miles east out of Manistique at the crossroad where Dale Dufour lives (formerly Ansell Burrell's house which was converted from a school) and there was a church across the road which was converted into a home where Betty and Don Schnurer live-that area was known as Gulliver. Now Gulliver and Whitedale were so close that they just called Whitedale Gulliver. This was about 50 years ago.

And another little tidbit about that area. Clara said the Palmer school named for her grandfather, Lincoln Palmer, was moved from townline road and is now the Doyle Township hall. And something else I didn't know, right across from Lindsley Frenette's farm is a little lake named Palmer.

Thanks to each of you for your interest and pictures and comments. I love it. LATE BULLETIN--Mrs. Raoul Demers told me Gulliver was still Whitedale at least fifty years ago. She remembers because one time coming through Whitedale from Calspar her 4 year old daughter, Delores, asked the name of the town. They told her Whitedale. She looked at the depot which was brown and said, why didn't they call it Brown-dale? Mrs. Demers suggested I call Jean Rodgers. Good suggestion. Jean Rodgers told me she believed it was changed to Gulliver because the post office was always Gulliver but the depot or shipping point was Whitedale. This caused a lot of mix-up with freight, hence it was Gulliver.