



Florida State University

ARF News Special Feature

December 2023



Charlie in World War 2

by Charles Nam



The National WWII Museum in New Orleans recently emailed me an invitation to attend a panel discussion on the war. The panelists, none of whom were living during WWII, would tell me how the war was fought. They didn't need to tell me about the war. I was there.

After graduating from high school in 1943 at age 17 and anticipating being drafted when I reached age 18, I went to an Army recruiting station to see if I could volunteer. I was first told that you had to be 18 to join the Army. But the recruiter added that there was a new program that accepted 17-year-olds who passed a stiff test, then joined the reserve, and would be assigned



to a university to major in an academic area of interest to the military. I took the test and waited for the result. After a couple of weeks, I received a letter telling me I had passed the test and should report to Harvard University in the fall.

After one semester at Harvard, with the conflict in Europe being difficult, the new program was dropped and students who had reached their 18th birthday were designated for regular Army duty.

I was sent to join a field artillery battalion that was preparing for overseas duty. At New York Harbor, we boarded the original Queen Elizabeth, a luxury liner converted to a troop ship that housed 17,000 soldiers. The Queen made it to Scotland after a 5-day trip across the Atlantic while evading German submarines. Following a short spell in England and France, we joined the First Army in Belgium and reinforced Allied troops in a retaliation of the Battle of the Bulge. This was during a harsh winter. We were unprepared for it, having received only light clothing and a small pup tent for each of us. At night, we combined several pup tents to increase the warmth. It took a while until we got blankets and warmer clothing.

Our battalion moved quickly into German territory, pushing the German military out of a succession of cities culminating in a conquest of Remagen on the Rhine River and circling remaining German troops in the Ruhr Valley.

Our food was not deemed adequate. We were given D rations – a box with small cans of ham and cheese, crackers, and candy. Two truck drivers became cooks. To broaden our meals, they mashed potatoes from the fields in large pots and, to make it tasty, mixed in a heavy dose of alcohol.

What did I do as part of the battalion effort? I was a member of a surveying team which advanced ahead of the howitzer guns and set up ideal locations for the gun batteries. I was the youngest of our team of seven surveyors, still 18, and was given the least preferable jobs. My task was either to hold the reference pole or chain ground distances, both of which were the most dangerous because the enemy could spot my actions as easily as could my team colleagues. Although risks were high, I miraculously escaped without injury.

When the European campaign ended on May 8, 1945, my battalion was sent home for a brief rest before entering combat in the Pacific. During that home stay, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that forced Japan to surrender. My battalion was then terminated because most members were long-time soldiers and had sufficient qualifying points for discharge. Those of us who did not yet qualify for discharge were sent to Fourth Army headquarters in Texas where we remained until qualifying for discharge.

My military experience was rewarding for me in several respects. As a teenager, I matured greatly. I got to visit countries I had never been before. And I became associated with different types of people that broadened my perspective about life. In short, serving in the military made me a better person.