

ETO RADAR MECHANIC

Robert H. Ross

In the spring of 1941, I went to Detroit, Michigan, to work and stayed there until December of that year when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I quit work then, knowing that I would be drafted soon, so I came home and was indeed drafted in May of 1942. I dreaded going as everyone else did, but we had it to do.

There were thirty to fifty of us that left from Murray the 26th of May, 1942. We went to Evansville, Indiana, for examinations, and most of us passed. So, at 5:00 p.m. on the 26th of May, we were sworn into the United States Armed Forces. We then boarded a train from Evansville to Ft. Benjamin Harrison in Indiana. For the next two or three days, we were outfitted, had our shots, and were given orders for our next stop. There were two of us from Calloway County who went from Ft. Benjamin Harrison to Camp Crowder, Missouri; myself and Roy Leslie. We stayed there for two or three weeks for basic training and training on the rifle range. We were tested, and I was assigned to the Signal Corps.

From Camp Crowder I went to Camp Murphy in Florida which was about thirty miles from West Palm Beach. It was awfully hot there with bugs and fleas everywhere. While there, I was in radar training school. The whole time I was there (eight months) was spent studying. They taught everything in basic electricity from DC batteries to AC in radio and radar. When I finished, my MOS was "radar mechanic." I left Camp Murphy in March of 1943 for San Antonio, Texas, and was in the 909th Signal Corps Company.

In San Antonio we were on alert, ready to go overseas anytime, for two or three months. Finally in July of 1943 we left San Antonio and went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, for a few days. From there, we boarded the Queen Mary and sailed for Scotland. We were on the water for four days and arrived in Scotland the last of July or first of August. After a few days there, we went to Stanstead, England, which was about thirty miles out of London. For several days we were acclimated to where we were going and what we would be doing and were trained in British radar equipment. Radar was new to us Americans but not to the British. In the US we studied equipment that would have taken three trucks to carry and a dozen men to manhandle, but in England they had a radar unit you could put on one truck with an antenna that would do the same thing. I always thought going to the army meant going somewhere and carrying a gun but with the radar crew it was different.

Our crew consisted of five enlisted men, one officer, and one diesel mechanic, because we had our own power supply to furnish electricity. Along with us, we carried our work benches, testing equipment, radar parts; all together three or four trucks. There were two different crews of us, and we were detached from our outfits from July of 1943 to July of 1944. After the invasion of France, we were assigned in France to the 9th Air Force which provided air cover for the 3rd Army. We followed the Air Force and 3rd Army on through Normandy to Rennes, France, repairing radar that checked incoming air traffic, long range and short range. The British didn't have enough air cover to protect themselves from Germany, and France had given up, so the Germans were set to blast England off the map. Our job was to repair the radar that kept the ground troops informed of enemy air strikes coming over. We stayed in the area of the front, on the move, all the time we were in France.

This article was adapted by daughters Nancy Schroader and Rose Elder from a video tape interview.

In the early part of 1944, I found out my brother, Keith Ross, was in England. On a visit in Colchester, I dropped him a letter in a mailbox (which wasn't supposed to be done), and when he saw the postmark, he wrote me then that we were close. One weekend some of my parent company were out on the town, and Keith saw the braids on their caps and knew they were the same as mine, and knew then we were close enough for a visit. We tried several times to get together and finally did one weekend in the spring of 1944. He was in the antiaircraft and artillery. His company's job was to knock out planes with the antiaircraft guns and to knock out tanks and such on the ground. They would hide in fox holes, and when the tanks came over their job was to throw a Molotov cocktail into the tank and blow it up. He was killed February 28, 1945, but I didn't find out about it until April in a letter from home. He was twenty-one years old. The Army returned Keith's body home by train on January 25, 1949. He was buried on January 26, 1949, in the Palestine Cemetery in Calloway County.

After the Americans had run the Germans out of France, we went to the German border at Verdun in December of 1944. On Christmas Eve, the 101st was stranded in Bastogne, Belgium, so on Christmas Day of 1944 there was trouble all day. The Americans captured a strong line of the front leaving just a few soldiers behind to keep guard, and Hitler took this chance to make one last move. He captured and killed a lot of those American soldiers. It was said the Germans put them in a field and shot them down like animals. The German soldiers then put on the Americans' uniforms so you couldn't tell who was who. A lot of identification and pass words had to be used to distinguish between the real Americans and the Germans in American uniforms. It was a bad time. The weather was bad, terrain was almost impassible with the snow and ice. The men were issued white uniforms instead of their camouflage because of the whiteness. It was one of the coldest times I had ever seen. It was deathly cold especially to the men sleeping on the outside. Finally the Germans were stopped, and my unit stayed in Germany.

In May of 1945, three of us were sent to England to study another new piece of radar equipment. On the boat going over, we got the official word that the war was over. For the next several days there was celebration day and night.

We took it easy the rest of the summer. Then, the army had a point system that included time in the States, time overseas, and time in occupation; therefore, some of us were able to stay in Germany rather than go to the Pacific where the fighting was still going on. Then in August of 1945, the fighting was finished there too. Some of the men who fought in the Pacific got to go home sooner than those of us who had been in the war for the longer time.

The last of July 1945, I had a furlough and went back to England for a vacation. When I got ready to come back, I caught a ride with a mail carrier. We hit a slick spot on the road, hit a tree and wrecked. My leg was broken, and I spent the next fifteen months in the hospital. That was the end of World War II for me. I was in the hospital until October 31, 1946. On November 1, 1945, I boarded a hospital ship to the States. It took us two weeks to get to New York. Then I went on to Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis, and stayed there until December when I went home for thirty days. One place on my leg would not heal, so on February 13, 1946, I had a bone graft to the right leg that was successful. At this time, I was still in the army but had enough leave to go home on November 1, 1946 and on January 1, 1947, I was discharged. I was in the Army four years, seven months, and six days; two years, three months, 15 days in the States, and two years, three months, and twenty-one days overseas.