

NORM: Hanford Post presents Comrades Donald T. Prohaska and Maurice L. Nathanson, both young business men of Cedar Rapids, who served almost 5 years in the Army during World War II. I am going to have them tell their story now. Don, what was your rank at discharge?

DON: I was a 1st Lt. and Maurice was a Captain. You know, he and I enlisted together <sup>AS PRIVATES</sup> in the Iowa National Guard in Cedar Rapids December 27th, 1940. That was a unit of 82 men recruited from Linn and surrounding counties. We went on active duty February 10th 1941 in the old Armory on A Avenue. At that time we were the Anti-tank Battery, 1st Battalion, 185th Field Artillery Regiment of the 34th Division.

MAURICE: And the funny thing about it is that Don and I remained in that same outfit, through <sup>our</sup> training in the U. S. and 5 major campaigns in Europe; and there were ~~several~~ <sup>MANY</sup> other Cedar Rapids men who did the same.

NORM: Did your officers remain the same also ?

DON: No. We started with 3 mighty fine officers from Cedar Rapids. They were Capt. Carlton K. Smith, 1st Lt. Peter L. Topic and 2nd Lt. Fred A. Smith. All of them later became Lieutenant Colonels with service in other outfits in Europe.

MAURICE: You know, a lot of officers were appointed from our original group of enlisted men. Take 1st Sgt Cleo E. Darrow, for instance. He ~~was from Military Police Corps~~ <sup>SERVED</sup> all over the globe, finishing as a Major.

NORM: But getting back to the outfit itself; where did you go from Cedar Rapids ?

DON: First we went to Camp Claiborne, La. and, besides training, we practically helped to build that camp. In June, 1941, our name was changed to Battery G. But we didn't take our training very seriously until the news came over our radios that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Then the chips were down. We helped form one of the 1st Tank Destroyer Battalions in the U. S. and Btry G became Company A, 634th Tank Destroyer Battalion, with Carlton Smith as the Battalion Commander.

MAURICE: Don was the First Sgt of Company A, and a strict one, too. The Battalion trained for a while in Camp Claiborne and further in Camp Hood, Texas. Finally we were ready for the big test, so we sailed from New York on Dec.

29th, 1943. ~~Our boat was~~ <sup>IN</sup> the English ship, the Samaria, and we crossed the Atlantic in a huge convoy protected by Navy vessels. ~~XX~~ crossing in convoy. On Jan. 11, 1944 we weighed anchor in Liverpool harbor, and landed next day. A train took us south to Bognor Regis, a picturesque town of 15,000 in Sussex County.

NORM: I suppose you received further training in England, then.

DON: Yes, we did. We did quite a bit of firing on ranges there. I always will think, too, that those narrow English streets gave our TD drivers some great experience. Anyone who ever tried to maneuver a 30 ton Tank Destroyer vehicle through spaces where the sides of the buildings touched the vehicle on BOTH sides, will understand what I mean.

NORM: I believe our radio audience would like to know more about your TD vehicles and weapons.

DON: Our principal weapon was the self-propelled 3 inch gun, called the M 10. This vehicle had the appearance of a medium tank, without its turret. There were 36 of these M 10s in the Bn -- 12 each in Companies A, B & C. ~~The 12 were further divided into 3 platoons which each had 4 guns; this unit was commanded by a 1st Lt., aided by a Staff Sgt.~~

NORM: What was <sup>THE</sup> ~~your~~ mission, <sup>of TANK DEST</sup> Maurice?

MAURICE: As the name implies, we were to DESTROY TANKS. But I can honestly say that, in plain language, we were utilized to support the Infantry, by blasting enemy strong points in the path of the doughboy's advance.

NORM: When did you leave England?

DON: It was June 28th, from Portsmouth near Bournemouth where we had been stationed for several months. ~~Of course that made us~~

~~a little late for the Big Show - as we called D Day; but we landed~~  
 June 29th <sup>UTAH BEACH</sup> ~~On Normandy~~ and moved up to the front through the awful mess of dead animals, blasted, burned buildings and littered equipment.

MAURICE: As I recall it, Company A was the first unit of our Bn into action. The company was committed on the morning of July 11th, in support of the 83rd Div. below Carentan. That was the hedgerow country and our visibility was considerably limited. You see, instead of fences, those small farms were enclosed by thick hedges, and the Jerries were well dug in and they had plenty of armor with them. Leo Samek, Hank Grady and Tommy McDonnell were the Platoon Sgts of Company "A" at that time. By the end of the first day's fighting, we had destroyed one German tank and killed many enemy infantrymen.

NORM: Were you in the 1st Army at this time?

DON: Yes; in fact, <sup>THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE WAR</sup> we were attached to the 1st ~~Infantry~~ Division, ~~a justly famous fighting outfit.~~ Co "A" supported the 26th Infantry Regiment. We were in that big push which began July 25th near St. Lo and which carried us out of the hedgerow country and onto the road to Paris.

MAURICE: We all expected to see Paris, but we got a disappointment in that respect. ~~I guess the Big Brass figured that if we got into the city they would have a hard time getting us out.~~ Anyway, we went east around Paris and formed the spearhead of the 1st Army's drive into Belgium. It was around Mons that we really gave the Germans the works. We ran into an entire enemy Army retreating towards the Siegfried Line and we really shot them to pieces. For that action the Bn was awarded the Belgian fouragere, an honor which corresponds to the U. S. Presidential citation.

NORM: I understand that the first Tank Destroyers thru the Siegfried Line were those of the 634th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

DON: That is correct; it was near Aachen. Company A had the rough job of supporting the drive that captured that city which normally had a population of more than 100,000 people. The enemy there was stubborn and the fighting was from house to house. The infantrymen would edge forward until they struck a strongly defended point; then they would signal for fire from our guns which were just a few yards behind them. I recall Wayne Oldridge as the gunner on one of those crews; he used to take a delight in lighting up the night fighting by setting a row of houses on fire with his accurate shooting. We lost quite a few M10s in that battle because we couldn't get enough cover for our vehicles. It was in Aachen that Don Hepker was hit while fighting bravely from an M10. He was almost blinded, but I saw him just a few days ago and he has made a fine comeback and is now running a chicken farm near Palo. I know he will get along all right because he was a first rate soldier, ~~and he is tops as a man.~~

MAURICE: After ~~the battle~~ <sup>AACHEN</sup> Don has described, we moved into the awful mess which is well known as The Hurtgen Forest. That was a thick forest with lots of hills and the Germans made the best possible use of the terrain. It cost the ~~U.S.~~ Army a lot of purple hearts to clear that place. That is where John Fults was wounded; he was later awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in that battle. It was also at that time that one of Company A's officers was Killed. The Battalion Commander then chose 1st Sgt Prohaska to take the lieutenant's place. <sup>HE GAVE HIM A</sup> ~~Don did so well that he won a~~ battlefield promotion to 2nd Lt, ~~and~~ Hank Grady became the 1st Sgt, carrying on the tradition of a Linn County 1st Sgt in that outfit from the time it went into Federal Service until the end of the War.



NORMAN: When did your outfit get some relief and rest?

DON: I don't blame you for wondering about that. ~~It did seem~~  
~~that we were committed to front line action almost continuously,~~  
 WE DIDN'T GET MUCH.

On Dec. 5th we were pulled back to near Liege to give us a chance to rest, repair our weapons, and fill up our ranks with replacements. This "break" was out short on December 16th, 1944, when the Germans broke through the ~~U.S.~~ lines <sup>IN THE ARDENNES</sup> and ~~started the Battle~~  
~~of the Bulge.~~ We had to go to the rescue of some units at the

front and Company "A" led the Battalion into position. We were ordered to the north shoulder or edge of the Bulge and we had to hold that line intact to keep the enemy from gaining more roads.

MAURICE: Don, I do think you oughta mention another fact: we had to hold that line because we didn't have any room to retreat. There was a forest and a lake at our backs and it was pretty cold for swimming.

DON: You aren't fooling. Anyway, the Germans threw crack Panzer units at us on December 20th and 21st, and it was only because of the bravery and skill of the U. S. soldiers that we were able to hold. I recall one M10 of Company A getting 8 German tanks in that scrap. Some of our men who did great work at that time were Don Van Dyke of North English and Don Brunko and Clarence Bell from here.

NORM: Then, you fellows attacked into the Siegfried Line didn't you?

MAURICE: Yes, we fought through it for the second time. Some of our men who deserve <sup>SPECIAL</sup> commendation for that fighting in the snow and cold are Leo Samek <sup>JIM</sup> Bob Jordan and Clarence Reding; also Don here commanded his platoon with outstanding courage.

DON: It was at this time that John Reding, our Supply Sgt, was wounded and evacuated to the hospital. Grant Collins stepped in and took his place. Then the Battalion moved north across the

Roer River, fought across the Roer plains and into the old university town of Bonn. Of course no one had time to attend classes or to look for seeds.

NORM: That was too bad. Did you men then cross the Rhine River on the Remagen Bridge?

MAURICE: Yes; we followed the 9th Armored Division across and moved north and east. Don can tell you more about that.

DON: Our first mission after crossing was to capture an air port near the Rhine. The Germans resisted stubbornly and they used ~~screening machines~~ <sup>ROCKETS</sup> by the carload. We got considerable help at that time from artificial moonlight. It was arranged by U. S. anti-aircraft searchlights located on high ground on the west banks of the Rhine. These lights, aimed close to the earth, permitted us to see at night in the dark, wooded territory through which we had to fight.

MAURICE: After expanding our bridgehead on the east banks of the Rhine we made the enemy think that we would attack north across the Sieg River. Instead, we blocked like a football team and the famous 3rd Armored Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Rose drove eastward, suddenly turned north, and formed the huge Ruhr pocket. ~~We called it the Rose pocket because the General was killed in that battle.~~ We were just a few miles behind the armored division, mopping up as we advanced.

DON: From there we fought toward the east into the Harz Mountains. They made tough going for us. There were crack SS troops holding excellent strong-points. The terrain was rugged, <sup>+</sup> mountainous ~~stuff~~ and the roads were narrow. Finally we cleared that territory and since it was April, we thought we would sit tight and rest awhile.



NORM: Did you?

MAURICE: No, the battalion then moved south into the Sudetanland and became part of Patton's Third Army. We were there, in actual contact with the enemy, when the order came through that VE Day had arrived. Boy, what a relief that was!

NORM: So, just a year ago today you were near Pilsen, Czechoslovakia.

DON: That's right. And when we totaled up our figures, we found that in our battalion, 69 men had been killed in action and that 190 had been wounded and hospitalized.

MAURICE: But we had killed hundreds of the enemy, captured more than 3000 prisoners of war, destroyed 55 tanks, 12 self-propelled guns, 18 armored cars, 76 general purpose vehicles, 25 anti-tank guns, 49 pill boxes, 80 machine gun nests, and reduced 189 strong points. In rendering this essential support to the 1st U. S. Infantry Division, our men had won more than 75 silver stars, 200 bronze stars, and approximately 400 purple heart awards.

NORM: Well, that is quite a record, and I feel certain that the citizens of Linn County are proud of their men who composed Company A, 634th Tank Destroyer Battalion. On behalf of the Legion, I thank you two men for telling us your story. Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes another program sponsored by Hanford Post No. 5 of the American Legion. We'll be on the air over this same station on \_\_\_\_\_ with another veteran's interview. Good morning and thanks for listening.