

World War II Memories
James Harlan Dale
1944-1947

James H. Dale, was eighteen when he was drafted into the United States Army. He joined after Pearl Harbor was attacked (12/7/41) on May 1, 1944. He didn't graduate from high school because he was drafted along with two of his classmates (George Wiggins and Joe Lucas). They had just finished the 11th grade. Jim had just been to a Sunday afternoon movie in Story City when he heard about Pearl Harbor. Jim was nervous about going to the army, but proud to serve his country.

Jim's parents were sad when he got drafted. Jim had two brothers, David and Gene. David served in the army in Alaska when he was eighteen years old. He was in for two years as Army Quartermaster (supplies). Gene was only fourteen or fifteen during World War II so he was not in the service.

After being drafted, the three men went to Camp Dodge in Johnston, Iowa. Jim then went by train to Camp Roberts in California for Basic Training and Advanced Training for seventeen weeks. (1) Jim remembers that it rained a lot. Infantry training included how to clean and use a M1 rifle and other types of guns, how to dig fox holes and living outdoors. He went from Camp Roberts home for a furlough. He then went to Camp Rucker Alabama to join the 66th Division (2) and had more infantry training. He thinks he spent a couple months in Alabama. He made PFC (Private First Class). He remembers having to sew the stripe on his uniform by morning. The barracks had coal fire stoves. One of his duties was to keep the stoves burning through the night. One time he fell asleep and when he awoke he new he'd be in trouble...but he woke in time before anyone noticed! After his training was done in Alabama, the army trucked the soldiers from Camp Kelmer in New Jersey and then on to New York. On November 1, the whole division was put on a ship for a 14-day trip on the USAT George Washington (large converted ocean liner) (3) from New York to South Hampton, England for 30 days for more infantry training. Jim's commander was General Kramer.

The most memorable event that sticks out in his mind was this story. (4) After the thirty day training in England the Division went on ships to Cherbourg, France. In the afternoon of December 24, 1944, his Division went on two ships across the English Channel. Jim was on the first ship in the group. The second ship was called the Leopoldville. A torpedo hit the second ship on the starboard side. The ship stayed afloat for two hours before sinking. It was only five miles from shore. About 800 men were killed out of 2500 men that were on the ship. Jim's best friend, William Caruth from Dubuque, IA, was on this ship. They couldn't find his body. Jim was supposed to be on the Leopoldville but because of some mix up, he was put on the other ship. While on a tour of France in 1989, Jim went to the cemetery where the soldiers were buried and found his friend's name on a tomb.

On December 25, Jim dug his first fox hole near Cherbourg in a pine tree forest. He couldn't dig too deep because the ground was so rocky. Each soldier carried half a tent and five tent pins. They had to pair up with someone else to get a complete tent. They also carried a shovel, two blankets, sleeping bag and food. They carried about forty to fifty pounds. Jim carried toilet paper in his helmet!

Then they went by trucks to the West Coast of France to Lorient and St. Nazaire. These were German submarine headquarters. By this time in the war, a group of German soldiers (60,000) had been pushed back to the West Coast around these two towns. This area was about 112 miles long. The German's were stuck—no where else to go. The 66th Division was to keep them from moving back into other areas of France. The U.S. did not want them to get to the Battle of

the Bulge on the eastern side of France. The Division was short on soldiers because so many were killed or wounded on the Leopoldville ship but they kept their ground so the Germans could not move. The only thing that separated the Americans from the Germans were rows of hedgerows criss-crossed on the land. January 1, 1945, was the 66th Division's first day of combat. France was cold and wet. Fingers and feet were cold and numb. Many foxholes were dug to fit either one or two soldiers and some big enough to stand up in. There were old buildings/homes that was used for 'rest areas' for the soldiers to warm up in and rest. These were farther away from the front lines. They were put on the line for so many days then switched with others so they could go to the 'rest areas'. There were bunkers on the first line, which were built by the 94th Division. They were filled with hay or straw for warmth. Jim remembers sleeping there one night in his sleeping bag (which was not very warm) and a mouse ran across his face!

One time, Jim was in the field at an observation outpost with a group of the guys. They were goofing around behind a hedgerow and the Germans must have seen them because they started to fire their guns at them. The Americans sneaked back as fast as they could to the bunker. The Germans shot off the '88' full of shrapnel and one exploded by the doorway to the bunker and one of the soldiers was shot in the neck but not seriously wounded. After this incident, they weren't so eager to get that close to the Germans!

Although the Division was short on soldiers, they continued to fight hard. They constantly raided German Lines, destroying enemy front-line installations and killed Germans. During the winter the Germans continued to use the harbor because the Americans weren't close enough to bomb the area and couldn't see well because of the winter fog. When spring came they could see the freighters and destroyed them because they could see—the fog was gone—and because they had continually gotten closer to the water through their victories. Soon the Germans were unable to get supplies.

About May 6, 1944, the Germans from the St. Nazaire pocket surrendered near the small town of Bouvron, France. Germans from the Lorient pocket soon surrounded, too. The 66th Division was there and Jim watched the process. There was a formality to the surrender. The German officers handed over their weapons, etc. This ended the Nazi resistance in France, the first combat assignment of the 66th Black Panther Division.

Eventually the Division ended up in Marseille, France on the Mediterranean Sea. Here they processed thousands of soldiers who were being shipped to the war in the Pacific or to the United States. They set up two huge staging areas—Arles and St. Victoret. The land was big, flat, arid, sandy desert. They had to build a 'tent' city that was capable of holding 100,000 soldiers—water pipes, gas lines, roads, etc. Each tent held about fifty men. After this was established, they were assigned to issuing food and equipment, clerical and guard duties, maintenance of the city, communications and normal division functions. In France, Jim drove jeeps and tanks.

When the word came that Japan had surrendered on the USS Missouri), there was lots of celebration! Jim was in southern France.

When the war was over, the number of 'points' they earned sent soldiers home. Jim didn't have enough 'points' to go home so he was transferred to the 42nd Rainbow Division (5) that went to Brooke, Austria. A deal came down that if they would reenlist for another eighteen months, they could go home for 90 days so Jim decided to do this. He was home for Christmas in 1945.

After his 90-day furlough, he went to Germany—Army of Occupation. The Division was to make sure things stayed peaceful. They were military police in a Constabulary Unit. Jim drove jeeps and armored cars. They lived in a bombed out German training camp for 18 months. He was made Corporal—two stripes on his uniform.

They ate anything and everything that was available. They ate C-rations, K-rations, and ten in one rations. The C-rations were instant coffee, scrambled eggs, tuna, cigarettes, and biscuits for

breakfast. The K-rations were hash browns, instant coffee and fruit drinks. They ate Spam in some rations. Some of the food looked like cat food in the cans. The ten in one rations were the food that ten people ate and it was in one container. The food was in containers like Cracker Jacks. You had those for all meals. If you happened to be near mess tents you would eat there. They had many kinds of food, except ice cream, because they didn't have any place to put it. During the service he saved up all the cigarettes and sold them to others or traded some for a watch and camera.

They had dress and fatigue uniforms and two sets of wool uniforms. They had to wear a uniform all the time. They wore them during their serving time and when they were on leave. The soldiers were taken out of the field to shower and to get clean uniforms and then they were taken back to the fields. They didn't wear flags on their uniforms like they show in movies today. During basic training they wore their patches, leggings (heavy canvas that went over the lower legs and top of boots), and ankle boots. Later the boots and leggings were combined. They didn't have combat boots during basic training but received them during training in Alabama. His boots were a little big, but they were comfortable. When they went overseas they had to take all patches off the uniforms so that no one knew what division, etc. they were in if they would have been captured.

Jim got several awards: basic training, 66th Black Panther Division during WWII, 42nd Rainbow Division—Army of Occupation after the war, European, six bars (Overseas ½), collar insignias, constabulary organization, combat infantry badge, good conduct, "Ruptured Duck" pin received when discharged, dog tags, and ribbons from different places he'd been.

Miscellaneous thoughts:

- He did what he was told by the commanders without knowing why.
- There wasn't such a thing as a convenience store. Drug stores were open till 9:00 p.m. and then not open on weekends.
- To make it easier to understand: Division – Regiments – Battalions – Companies (200 soldiers or so) – Squads (maybe eight soldiers)
- Jim was 175 pounds when he entered and when he was discharged.
- He did not hear about the atomic bomb until much later.
- He had to leave his dog, Puddles, when he went into the service.
- He never flew planes, but after the war he took classes and was close to getting his pilot's license.
- When he was in France, it snowed most of the time because it was during the winter.

Jim was discharged in April of 1947. He served three years in active duty and twelve years in the reserves. During the artillery reserves, he had weekly meetings in Story City. Several soldiers from the surrounding area attended these meetings. Different officers would come to the meetings and provide the training. They used 155 MM Howitzers (cannons). Once a year they had to attend a 2-week extended training at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. They would fire the cannons continuously. Jim thinks this is what caused his hearing loss. They practiced firing at old equipment and see how close they would come to it and then make the needed adjustments. Jim enjoyed this training. His reserve unit was never called up for active duty.

Jim doesn't talk about the war much, except sometimes with his buddies at morning coffee or when his family asks questions. He was very happy to be home after the war. He doesn't ever regret serving our country.

Attachments:

- (1) Information on Camp Roberts
- (2) Information on the 66th Infantry Division
- (3) Information on the USAT George Washington
- (4) Information on the SS Leopoldville
- (5) Information on the 42nd Infantry Division