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FRIDAY SURPRISE

Holocaust memorial brings back more memories of World War II

Several recent events brought renewed focus to a period of my life that in one way had been almost forgotten, but in another way was still very vivid, indeed.

The first was the unexpected, but certainly very welcome, outpouring of calls and letters from dozens of former GIs who wanted to share their World War II stories after my column of several weeks ago recounted some of my more memorable days in an Army uniform during that period.

Then the recent opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., was more than just a passing news story. Once again, the unforgettable mental pictures of seeing firsthand what this new museum is all about flashed through my mind.

So, for the past week, I have searched my memory and my files, in an effort to come up with a few more details of that once-in-a-lifetime military experience.

One of my Portland army friends, interested in finding out more about the convoy that took us from Boston to Le Havre, France, in mid-winter of 1944-45, thought that it would be fascinating to get a copy of any documents in the Pentagon files that related to our troop movements. Although some of the technical language was not very illuminating, there was a rather interesting report

sent by the Convoy Commodore (Capt. O.L. Wolfard, USN) to the Commander of the Tenth Fleet Convoy and Routing Office in Washington, D.C.

The ship that our Division (the Eighty-ninth Infantry) was assigned to for the North Atlantic passage was the *S.S. Uruguay*, a converted passenger liner. It turns out that we were one of the thirty-six ships that sailed in this convoy, a fact that we had no way of knowing at the time.

What we did know was that the weather was pretty awful. The report from the Commodore indicates that it was so rough that one of the ships (*USAT Lakehurst*), with 350 troops aboard, had a cargo of locomotives break loose. The report indicates that the ship was ordered to leave the convoy because it was impossible to secure the equipment safely.

It was also necessary to change the course of the convoy to permit several other ships to secure their cargo. This accounts for some of the changes in direction we only heard about through the grapevine; the other was the change from the original landing target (England) to the French port. German submarines in the area also caused tactical re-routing.

The rough weather resulted in the almost universal seasickness of the troops, stacked five deep in no-ventilation bunk areas. It was a scene that had

to be witnessed firsthand to be properly described.

Three and a half months after landing in France, our Division came to a halt just short of the Czechoslovakian border in Saxony. At the Moselle River, we opened a route for the Eleventh Armored Division to slash enemy remnants still west of the Rhine River. In just fifty-seven days of action, Major General Thomas D. Finley's Eighty-ninth Division troops advanced 350 miles and captured 43,512 prisoners.

There were several dates that will not soon be forgotten. One was March 26, 1945, when at three points along the West Bank of the Rhine, our Division pushed off in assault boats at Wellmich, at Oberwesel and at St. Goar. I was in the latter crossing. At the time, frankly, I didn't know where we were or what we were doing. Later I learned that the mission was to secure and hold a bridgehead at any cost.

Another memorable date was April 6, 1945. A village (Eisenach, Germany) that had been converted into a German strongpoint when the Fourth Armored Division bypassed it to take Gotha, was given the worst artillery blasting by our outfit of any town since the Rhine crossing. It was a town where Martin Luther was supposed to have thrown the inkpot at the devil.

We learned later that this drubbing was deliberately administered when surrender negotiations were broken off in mid-conversation upon direct orders from Adolph Hitler. About 35 percent of the town was demolished; the Vorburg Castle, where Martin Luther translated the Bible, was splattered by shrapnel and bullets. The Germans had used it as an observation post.

★ But the most memorable incident of all took place that same month when

our division liberated a large concentration camp at Ohrdruf, where several hours previous to the arrival of the American forces, SS guards had shot all the prisoners who were too weak to move.

About thirty German officer candidates were herded into a closed corner of a large classroom. Most of them spoke good English as well as several other languages. There were American uniforms hanging on the walls, obviously to be used for spy purposes as they tried to infiltrate our ranks.

★ A search disclosed nearly 3,000 bodies burned and buried in pits north of the camp. A group of German citizens, by order of Army authorities, were made to witness these horrors: including the whipping block, the gallows, and the crematorium.

I will never forget the sight of half-dead prisoners staggering around the Ohrdruf compound. Or the sight of hundreds of bodies, stacked like railroad ties, lying in the ditches. Or the pervasive smell of lime...and death.

It is almost too much to believe that there are still some people who think that all of this did not happen. Hopefully, the horror story of the extermination of 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews that is now so graphically portrayed in our nation's capital will cause future generations to pause and remember.