

RAY CONKLIN'S STORY

I am Raymond G. Conklin.

I live in Madison, Wi. I am married and have 2 children. Yes I am retired! I was aschool custodian for 20 years and worked in a paint factory for 20 years. I met my wife in school...she is Beverly J. Conklin. I entered the service Jan. 11, 1943.. Camp Grant, Ill. Yes we went to basic fight off.. to Camp Wilber (or Willmer?), in Macon, Georgia. What unit? To just regular, 13 week basic, infantry training. I saw a picture of a dropping paratrooper, with full chute out, and it caught my eye. I thought how great that would be right there. So I volunteered right there. All during basic training, they kept calling the fellows that had signed up, to the HQ. and asking if they really wanted to drop names off and forget about going airborne! I said "NO, I went through.. enough of this so far.."So then I connected to the 82nd. during the battle of the bulge. I had gone overseas after chute school and joined the 509. We were replacements for the 509.Later, first, ah. Let's see. We must have started jump school in June of '43. Then after that they sent me to demolition school. It was at Fort Benning. And then off to Mackall with the 508 for two months. Pulled a large group out of there as replacements to be prepped up to move to ports of embarkation in order to go overseas, to Oran, North Africa. A 21 day boat ride. We stayed right there at Oujda, the airborne camp, till November. Then we were sent to Naples to join the 509 parachute battalion. And that is where I met B. J. Bjelland. I was inthe demo-platoon and B. J. was in the, he was the platoon Sgt. He was a marvelous platoon Sgt. and he really took care of us fellows.Our top-dogs were then some platoon leaders, usually 1st. or 2nd. Lieutenants. Lt. Shaw, "1st. John", and a Lt. Moel or some such. Hard to recall. Our first mission was at Anzio, Italy. 3 moths on the beachhead and at the end of March we were pulled off the front lines at last and put into pup tents. There I was taken sick with the yellow jaundice. When I finally got out of there, there was quite a few fellows discharged at the time. When they came to my name, the Doc said, "well you can see me in a few minutes, and when you get through here you are going back to Naples!" Was I ever tickled to get off that damned beachhead. (Ed note: the 'beach' part was way behind the troops. The front lines were well inland and under the direct artillery fire from the German 88s and larger, up on the surrounding hills. It was virtual suicide to get out of your holes!! There was no 'beach' about the front.) We were on totally flat land along the valley and constantly under observation. I went to Naples. There was a small town just out of the... well when they dumped me out of the hospital there was. I got out of there April 10th, Easter Sunday. It was sure a thrill going up the main streetgoing back to camp.The people were all lined up going, trying to get into church on that Sunday. These were the civilians. This was near the hospital in this little town. But I was going along, back to camp. It was morning, and we were far enough from the coast that some kind of regular life was possible. They were dressed as best they could to go to church. After Anzio we regrouped, practiced, trained for awhile and then we got ready for the invasion of Southern France.

I stayed with the 509 till it was deactivated during the Battle of the Bulge. Yes! Up in the Battle of the Bulge! We were, in the Bulge, near the 82nd. I never can recall the names of all the places. No, it was St. Something. Possibly at the north point with the 505 at ST. Jacques. It didn't matter where you were in the Bulge, it was all the same Hell. I

was then still with the 509th, to go back to the story, back to Italy. In Italy, we were attached to the 5th Army. But up in the Bulge we were attached to the 7th Army or was it the 67th Division? But we were an Airborne unit in one piece. First, in March the 509th was deactivated and the rest of us were transferred into the 82nd and I went to the 505th Rgt. In the demo-platoon, Rgt HQ CO. I stayed with them, the 82nd, after the war was over. I had 83 points and they were getting ready to go to Berlin. Those who had points between 75 and 84, they pulled them out. Wouldn't take them into Berlin. From the 82nd I went to the 101st, 17th etc., as 'repple-depple' carrying units. But I had jumped into the 'Champaign Campaign' in Southern France. The 509th had been assigned to take a bridge down there and hold it. The demo-platoon mined it ready to blow, just in case the Germans would break through and they needed the bridge. I can't recall the name of the river. We were in Southern France until November, then we moved north. We were in, I think, 'Suippes' or 'Rheims', just outside of 'Rheims', till December 17th, when we were pulled to the Bulge.

Right, I went to jump school at Fort Benning. I recall my first jump. I was more worried about the airplane ride! I was more concerned about the plane staying in the air. I had never been in a plane before. (Ed note: Many of the troopers took their very first plane ride in the jump school, having never been off the ground before. Remember, these were the kids of the deep Depression and most had never even seen a plane, much less ridden in one.) I was more worried about that plane than the actual jump itself. But we were prepared for that jump! All our training had been aimed and structured for that!

I checked out of the service on December 4th 1945. We had hit the states on December 2nd. Six months later, at Fort Sheridan, Ill., WE all got the Bronze Star, unit citations and the usual Purple Heart. (Ed note: That was usual all right! Too usual! It is too bad these men are so modest. You cannot imagine the things this man experienced from his almost casual recitation of his experiences.

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