

**Now Hear This:
Eighty Five Points and You're Out!**

**By
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The War in Europe Ends ... for some

World War II in Europe ended with the German surrender on May 7, 1945. I heard the news hovering over and Army Signal Corps radio in Strasbourg, France where, with a few other American soldiers, I was quartered in what in my native Chicago would have been called *a classy two flat!* Armed Forces Radio was transmitting details of the cessation of hostilities and we were getting the word ...

The special unit to which I had been assigned was quartered on the *Avenue De La Liberte*, a street lined with beautiful homes and formerly called *The Rudolph Hess Strasse*. The Germans had vacated the area earlier and our quarters on the *Avenue De La Liberte* were not far from the Cathedral. The citizens were fluent in both languages, which I discovered upon arriving and inquiring of the natives as to the location of a Catholic Church where I might attend Mass. I knew the Mass would be said in Latin, the homily was delivered first in French and then in German. While the Mass itself was just like home, the sermon was beyond my understanding, since I knew but a few words in those tongues. It was that lack of knowledge of French that ultimately did prove somewhat of a handicap since at this point I was *Detacted* from the US Army and serving with the French First Army!

Special Assignment from the 562 Signal Aircraft Warning (SAW) Battalion

From June 1944 until the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, in December, 1944 I had been a member of the 562 Signal Aircraft Warning (SAW) Battalion. While the Bulge was in progress, our Company A was in Italy, where the Germans were also on the offensive in the Serchio Valley north of the Arno River. The German offensive in our sector caused much concern and we had orders to rig our RADAR equipment for demolition in the event of possible capture. As a result, Christmas Eve was not too peaceful. There were reports of German paratroopers being dropped near our sector just as I was to take my turn at guard duty at our RADAR site at Castel Vechhio on December 26. The Italian front was in peril until units of the British Army came up from the south and stemmed the tide. Shortly after things settled down a bit, we received orders to prepare to move from Italy to France, where a unit like ours - the 555 SAW Battalion had been overrun by Germans and annihilated in the Battle of the Bulge.

From the port at Livorno, Italy we were shipped on a Navy LST - a vessel not designed to carry troops - and after a rough voyage we landed in what seemed to be downtown Marseilles, France. We unloaded our vehicles and began a long, miserable convoy to

somewhere around Lyon. There, in a huge staging area, that may well have been selected for the fine quality of mud on which to pitch a tent, we remained for few days and it was there I received some startling news. It appeared that the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) was no longer a big threat. As a result, there was no need for the services of the 562 SAW. More startling was the news that, along with two other men from the 562 SAW, I was to be temporarily assigned to another unit – one that was to be attached to the French First Army!

Soon, we three were moved south and met up with members of a special unit. This unit consisted of a small group of Army Signal Corps telephone engineers and technicians, organized in the United States and sent to France to perform special tasks in the service of the French. A captain, an electrical engineer in civilian life and an employee of the Bell Telephone System prior to entering the Army for wartime service, led this special unit. Accompanying him, and second in command was a first lieutenant, and a few non-coms from the States who appeared to be fresh from the campus. Unlike most of us in the European Theater of Operations (ETO), these fellows had just been flown over from the U.S. in transport planes. In contrast to their quick, virtually overnight, trip from the U.S., the journey that had brought me to Europe months earlier had taken 17 days on a converted banana boat, the Fred E. Lykes, which had carried 3,000 soldiers, dodged German submarines, torpedo planes and battled rough seas in May of 1944. I was envious of those new fellows who had been on furloughs visiting their families just a few days before we met!

Our job was to try to preserve as much of the civilian telephone infrastructure possible. As the territory was taken back from the Germans, it was our assignment to make the phone lines available for the Allies and save the cost of stringing new lines and installing new equipment such as switchboards and repeaters to boost signal strength on long distance lines.

. Where the arrival of this special unit had made an impression on me, we soon discovered exactly how green and inexperienced they were at operating in an area where indeed *there was a war going on!* Within 24 hours of starting our first mission, we ran into communication problems. The unit sent from the States had also included a sergeant designated to act as interpreter, but two years of high school French did not serve him, or our team, well. Since I had some knowledge of Italian, the French would come to me to try to explain what they were up to – completely bypassing the interpreter. Consequently, the communications were not smooth! Eventually, the French Army assigned a young, very bi-lingual Air Force Captain to the task and I was off the hook.

Now, about our first assignment ... We formed up somewhere around Dijon. Our motorized equipment consisted of one Jeep, one two and a half ton truck (in Army jargon, a "deuce and a half"), a weapons carrier - essentially a stubby, low-slung yet powerful pick-up truck of sorts - and finally truck with a big box behind the cab rigged as a work bench area and equipped to carry supplies. Tools were kept in this last "shop truck" and this equipment was used to make whatever repairs and installations were needed to make the telephone lines functional. In some instances, the lines had been damaged or cut in the fighting, but in others, the retreating German had overtly scuttled the lines to prevent their use by the Allied Forces. (It was necessary to guard the vehicles at all times since theft was a problem and there was still some resistance to Allied control in Alsace.) .

Therefore, it was with the green captain and some experienced soldiers - who for the most part did not know each other - that our small convey headed for the French city of Colmar. Moving east, we soon ran out of daylight on a gloomy cold, damp day. The headlamps on the vehicles were of a type termed "cat eyes," and were designed to provide little light to not to be readily seen by the enemy. This, however, also meant that they were not very good for extensive driving over war-damaged roads on a snowy winter's night in a mountainous area of France. As we traveled over some hilly, wooded terrain I spotted a sign marked, *Basel 9KM*, and knew we were near the Swiss Border. That knowledge however was not helpful to us as we were lost ! The snow was piling up, the temperatures were dropping and the visibility was very poor. With the convoy stalled, the captain thought better of proceeding in the dark and ordered us to pull off the road until daylight. He told us not to sleep in vehicles, as they might serve as targets should German troops spot our position. Since we had not been issued the nice sleeping bags with the heavy wool lining, we had to improvise to survive in the snow and I donned all the heavy clothing available; a heavy woolen over coat, two wool blankets, the canvass shelter half from my back pack, and rolled myself in to flopp into a sizeable snow drift and sleep.

When dawn broke, we managed to free the vehicles eventually found Colmar and began to assess the situation and the town's central telephone office. Our orientation was disrupted when the Germans fired three test rounds from a *Big Bertha* railroad gun hidden in a cave across the Rhine. As a 320 mm artillery, it made an impression! We were told that they triangulated in the daylight, so their observers could see how effective they might be with the barrage they would unleash that night - and that is another story! Thus began my stint with the captain and his special unit. Full accounts of what happened during my assignment with the special unit would be too lengthy to include here but suffice it to say, for me, it was a *trip!*

Eighty Five Points and Out ... Maybe

Though the battles in Europe were over in May of 1945, they continued in the Pacific Theater. Plans were under way to allow those men and women who had borne the brunt of the burden of combat in the ETO to return home. A method was devised to make the system fair and equitable and I certainly agreed with it - even though I was not eligible for an early release. Service man and women were awarded points for each month of service, with additional points added for criteria such as time overseas, and the magic number was 85 points. I had accumulated but 69 for my Adjusted Service Rating Score (ASR). Naturally, the men in my unit who had been drafted in 1940, expecting to serve but one year, yet had found themselves participating in an invasion in North Africa in November of 1942, easily made the cut. My unit sent first to England and then, in order, to North Africa, Sicily and Italy with British forces. In the course of these actions they had suffered casualties and many hardships and, when I joined them at Ruvo Di Puglia in southeast Italy in June of 1944, they were not happy campers by any means.

Shortly after VE Day, my special unit assignment ended as we turned over the telephone equipment to the French soldiers in Strasbourg. I was reunited with 562 SAW at the former Y89 Luftwaffe Air field near Frankfort, Germany. It was at Y89 that I was notified of my

ASR score of 69 and that I was to be assigned to a unit being shipped to the Pacific Theater. My new outfit was an artillery unit and I was to be involved in the gun laying aspect, meaning the electronically controlled firing of heavy weapons. Fellow members of Company A, those 1940 draftees, laughed at the news of my transfer, most of them seeing justice being done as the “college boy” was to be sent off to fight the *Japs*. They made no bones about pointing out their good fortune in contrast to my tough luck.

Redeployment

Soon, I was on my way to a redeployment staging area near Rheims, France named *Lucky Strike* after the popular brand of American cigarettes. It was a long, nighttime trip with only brief stops for chow along the way over a distance of some 200 miles in my estimation. On arriving at the huge staging area, I was surprised to see the enormous, flat field on which there appeared to be thousands of soldiers milling about. For an instant, I thought that I saw a person that moved like Larry Wagner, a fellow I had not seen since June of 1944. I had met Larry in a dismal rail station on a dark night in Tampa, FL. in April 1944. It had been his assignment to accompany me, and two or three other “replacements” to Greensboro, NC, the first stop on our way to the war zone and ultimately the 562 SAW. After a moment, I just shrugged off the thought because it did not seem possible that Larry could be in the throng.

Joining the artillery unit was unceremonious and, in a day or two, we were loaded into rail coaches with full field packs and all our gear. You entered the coaches from the side of the car and there were two bench seats facing each other, allowing three on each side, six men in a box. Steel luggage racks were above the seats and it was not long before some fellows climbed up into them to attempt to sleep. With my field pack between me and the window, I faced the front of the car and attempted to rest my head on the top of the pack to get some sleep, but it was impossible to do anything but dose for a few minutes. The arrangements for food, however, were something I had not encountered during my touring with the U.S. Army. Along the rail bed, the Army had set up tent kitchens. Regardless of the hour, the train would come to a halt, we would scramble out with our mess kits at the ready, stand in the chow line, get our food and then find a place along the line of tables and - while standing - eat. Following the meal, we would dip our mess kits first in a galvanized, trashcan-type container of boiling soapy water, then in rinse water, and head back to the train to continue the process south. On one of feeding stations stops in the dead of the night, standing beneath one of the lights, much to my surprise was the long lost Larry J. Wagner! The odds of this reunion must have been astronomical, but it took place somewhere in France under the dim light of a single bulb. I was overjoyed to see Larry, who I had dubbed “Signor Carmelo,” and we stayed in touch as best we could on that trip.

On arriving in Marseilles, we were trucked to another huge staging area for a few days, where we learned of a secret weapon that had been dropped on Hiroshima on August 6! That announcement sent a shock wave of excitement through the camp. Of course, we had no knowledge of the important work being done by John Festa and his cohorts in the New Mexico desert. All we knew was that we were headed for the invasion of Japan, and we had heard predictions that one million Americans would die in the effort and that two million Japanese would give their lives in defense of their home islands. Rumors circulated as to the nature of

the new weapon, but it was difficult for me to begin to understand how splitting an atom could cause such destruction.

On August 9, as the announcement of the second bomb at Nagasaki came, we were told to prepare to ship out. There was more buzz in the camp - but no announcement as to any change in our status. On August 10, we were trucked to the docks in Marseilles and boarded the General Breckinridge, an Army transport capable of carrying 5,000 troops. We learned that it was making its maiden voyage the hard way shortly after we began to load. Serving each hold was a series of steel ladders, on which we descended into the bowels of the ship. These ladders were located on the sides of a big square opening and, as soon as the allotted numbers of men were at the bottom, hatch covers were placed over that opening. In that lower compartment, canvas bunks affixed around the perimeter with steel stanchions to allow three bunks to be staked one on top of another. The green Navy crewman assigned to construct the bunks, however, seemed not to have a clue as to how this giant erector set was to be assembled inside this monster ship. The first sergeant of the artillery unit, to which I now belonged, told the "Navy kid" to get lost and we completed the task ourselves in a timely manner and in good order. As luck would have it, Larry Wagner and I were assigned to the same hold.

After the ship was loaded, we were allowed on deck to enjoy some fresh air to observe the activities involved in getting the sleek, new ship under way. As the Breckenridge began to move, I immediately began to experience that queasy feeling I first encountered on the Fred E. Lykes, (affectionately known to its passengers as "It leaks") almost 18 months earlier. As the ship was pulling away, a man on the dock held up a copy of Army newspaper, *The Stars and Stripes*, and the headline in huge print read, **JAPS QUIT!** There was some response on board, but no word about what was to happen to us because of the great news. The ship moved out of the harbor and into the very serene Mediterranean on a very beautiful, warm, sunshiny day and soon seemed to be on a fast pace for the Pacific. Due to the ship's motion, I missed the first and only meal of that day. The next morning I was weak and hungry and the sea was as smooth as glass, so I decided to give eating a try. On entering the mess hall, I was surprised and pleased to see that, in contrast to that "banana boat" the Fred E. Lykes on which we made our voyage to Italy almost a year and a half previously, the feeding arrangements were much better. The tables were stainless steel, the kitchen was spotless, we used regular knives, forks and spoons and our food could be separated in those compartmentalized flat metal trays. There was no need to clean our utensils by dipping them in steaming cauldrons of gunk and no foul odors of diesel fuel wafting from the engine room, one of the more elegant features of the dining room feature on the Fred.E. We went through a chow line made up of gleaming steam tables, with appetizing looking food served by clean looking young fellows in snow-white outfits dishing out the food.

We sailed west and about the third day, while Larry and I were resting on hatch covers near the fantail, the announcement - one that I shall never forget - came. Due to background commotion, I did not hear the speaker's name, but I did catch his title! In the Navy, the practice of calling crew and passenger attention to an announcement or order begins with the proclamation: "Now hear this! Now hear this!" I heard that and the following announcement:

This is ____ ____, I am the Troop Commander on this vessel and it is my pleasure to announce that our destination has been changed from Okinawa to New York City!

What a moment! Now I understood the reason for the din in the background. As the words emanating I leapt to my feet, gave a shout, exchanged hugs and handshakes with the other guys on the fantail. (*High fives* had not been invented yet!). Larry, who had been married while on leave just before we met in April 1944, grinned now that the prospect of his delayed honeymoon was near. It was only a few days later that I heard a radio broadcast from New York City piped over the intercom and I knew we were approaching the USA. On that great August morning, I recognized the voice of Arlene Francis as she and her co-host discussed the newly *The Southerner*, starring new matinee idol, Zachary Scott.

Home at last ...

Within two or three days, we steamed into New York Harbor at what must have been the morning rush hour. The water surrounding Manhattan Island seemed busy with ships of all kinds. Ferry boats, loaded with commuters from New Jersey or Staten Island headed to or from "The Island." Those on board who were natives of New York and the surrounding areas were literally jumping with joy at the sight of Manhattan. I was impressed at the sight of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, through which many of my own European relatives had passed. The sight of the New York and New Jersey Fire Department boats, spraying huge streams of water, was something to behold. Passing vessels sounded load blasts on their horns in salute to the Breckenridge and its cargo of joyful humanity. We docked at Pier 98, next to a huge ocean liner, and on the pier floor below an Army band was belting out all kinds of snappy marches. We had to move too quickly to see the name of the organization providing the tunes - but they sounded great to me!

Debarkation was well ordered, with much checking and double-checking, and it took some time to unload all 5,000 men and their gear. On reaching the dock, down the rather steep gangplank with full field pack my barracks bag, I was handed a ½ pint of cold milk by a member of the Red Cross! To the reader, it may seem like a rather mundane happening, but to me it was like a dream come true. We had not had fresh milk since leaving Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia, some 18 months prior! It was difficult to enjoy as we had to keep moving across, first to the pier and a ferry boat waiting to take us across the Hudson River, and then on an elevated commuter rail station. The full field pack and the stuffed barracks bag did not make the stair climb on a very hot day an easy task. We next boarded a troop train bound for Camp Kilmer, located somewhere around New Brunswick. (Keep in mind that in the Army during that period, troop movements were secret and we did not know where we were bound.) Though arriving well after the normal dinner "chow time", we, as was the custom, were treated to a steak dinner with all the trimmings including many fresh vegetables and fruit items, fresh milk and ice cream. After living on C or K Rations or Spam, powdered milk and dehydrated potatoes for months, quite naturally, we gorged on the fresh food. By midnight, the latrines were full of men experiencing major league digestive upset.

The next day was Sunday and Larry and I received 24 hour passes to visit New York City and we took full advantage of that fine day, seeing many sights including seeing a

demonstration of television at the NBC Studios in Rockefeller Center. That was my first look at the revolutionary electronic device! In a day or two, aboard what I recall as the longest troop train I ever saw, we chugged west toward Chicago, passing through Pittsburgh the first night and into Chicago on the second. The travel through Chicago, on a hot August night, was bittersweet - for I could have easily jumped off the train when it passed within a few miles of where my parents and sister lived. A short time later, the train passed through the far south side, where my maternal grandparents once owned a very substantial Victorian-style. While many of the sights and sounds were familiar - clanging of bells on the streetcars, noise from El trains - there was also the familiar odor of the ubiquitous ragweed. That noxious plant was in its full glory and it grew in every vacant lot in the city, "prairies" to native Chicagoans. Late in the night, we arrived at Camp Grant, Rockford, IL.

Within a day or two, Larry and I were off to Chicago on 30-day furloughs, the first I had in the U.S. Larry's family and his new bride, awaiting a joyful reunion after about 18 months of enforced separation, resided in the city. Our furloughs were later extended but then we received orders to report to Camp Grant by midnight, Sunday Nov. 4. In the busy, huge, Northwestern rail station, Larry kissed his bride Pat goodbye and I, accompanied to the station by my future wife whom I had met while on furlough, followed his example. Soon we were off on another train trip to Camp Grant, but it was the last of our travel together. Within a day or two, Larry was discharged and on his way home. I was less fortunate. On arrival at Camp Grant, I was told that my records were lost! Apparently, it took week to locate my papers and on Sunday, Nov. 11 - at 11 minutes after 11:00 a.m. - I walked across a stage in some sort of an assembly hall, saluted an officer, and he handed me my separation documents. By late Sunday evening, I had a place to stay in my sister's home until I returned to Kalamazoo and Western Michigan College in January 1946. During that long period of leave, it was not possible to collect my \$66 per month Army pay (less deductions), so I returned to work in the huge U.S. Steel plant on the Lake Michigan lakefront. I had held a part time job in 1942 during summer break from college and had no difficulty getting the job, since labor was in short supply. However, I was required to wear my uniform on leave and so I wore my army fatigues when working. In late January 1946, I was very happy to return to Kalamazoo and enroll for the second semester of my sophomore year - just where I left off in January 1943!

Fortunes of war?

In an ironic twist of fate, those men of the 562 Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion who had served since 1940, and were so quick to razz me about my departure to the Pacific in August 1945, did not leave Europe until late in December 1945. They made the North Atlantic crossing in what has been described as one of the worst storms in marine history and they were not discharged until late January 1946! Fortunes of war, perhaps?