

Military Service of

John W. Van Laak

March 1943 - November 1945

I was drafted into the army March 17, 1943 (St. Patrick's Day), left Schenectady by train in the morning and arrived at the Reception Center at Camp Upton, Long Island that evening after a slow train ride.

My stay at Camp Upton lasted about 30 days which were filled with more or less useless tasks like washing the barracks windows every day "to keep us occupied". At the end of that time I embarked with a number of others on a Friday evening for an unknown destination. After taking all the backwoods rail lines through the South (I suppose to fool enemy spies) on Sunday morning we were told that our destination was Miami Beach for training with the army air force. We were happy to have been selected for a more or less fortunate assignment.

We were housed in various hotels taken over for use by the army. The one where I was staying was a second rate facility called the "Oceanic" located in downtown Miami Beach quite near the ocean. Because of the German submarine threat to off shore shipping all lights were forbidden outside of buildings. We took basic training there in the morning, including open air instruction and calisthenics and close-order drill in Flamingo Park. After lunch we usually went swimming in the ocean or attended other instruction sessions. Evenings we strolled around town until it got dark- there wasn't much else to do and, anyway we had to be in the sack by 10:00 P. M.

On July 4th we entrained for somewhere northward. I was glad to leave- it was getting pretty hot. After a three- day ride we arrived at Chanute Field, Rantoul, Illinois for weather school training.

In September, after we had completed our course as weather observers,

- our group was broken up and assigned to different air bases for operational experience. I ended up at Lockbourne air base at Columbus, Ohio. This was a training field for B-17 pilots, and for their crews.

Shortly after January 1, I was transferred to Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis for overseas training. Old J. B. as it was known had an unsavory reputation as a good place to leave as quickly as one could. It wasn't that bad, but it wasn't very inspiring either. I was glad to leave.

In March I arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey which was a staging area for overseas shipment. On March 17, again on St. Patrick's Day, I boarded an English transport en route to England.

We travelled to England in a fairly large convoy which was relatively uneventful, (the food was hardly fit to eat - I didn't eat much) except for the sinking of an oil tanker right off our stern by a German submarine.

After eight or nine days we arrived in Cardiff, Wales. Several days later we reached our pre-invasion base at Ibsley, Hants in England. This is only a few miles from Bournemouth, a famous resort area on the English Channel. Several times on Sunday I took the bus to Bournemouth - it was not much of a vacation spot then. During that period the lack of food in the British Isles was striking. A serving of meat in a restaurant would be about the size of a half dollar. Ice cream, milk and candy were entirely absent.

In England we were at a former RAF fighter field. We spent the time there mainly getting acquainted with our own weather group of about ten men and our supporting communications group of about the same size.

On the edge of our field was a large run-down manor house which served as headquarters for field offices and personnel. I would have liked to explore the old house but didn't get the opportunity.

Early on June 6th we were awakened by vast fleets of U.S. aircraft with distinctive markings overhead and we knew that the Invasion was on.

On or about June 27 we boarded ships near Bournemouth and after sailing all night landed at Utah Beach in France on June 28th, otherwise known by date as D+22. Our landing was uneventful since the beaches had been well secured by then.

We remained on the beachhead for about four or five weeks and got our mobile weather station in operation. We had sporadic air attacks by the Luftwaffe, but not too much else. We were attached to the 492, 493 and 494th squadrons of P-47 fighter planes, a part of the Ninth Air Force - the Invasion Air Force.

Our equipment consisted of two large trucks or vans, along with a jeep, one of which was a fully equipped weather station. The other was a communications or radio van which broadcast or received our weather data by code to or from other similar stations. When we stayed at one location for over a few days at a time our weather van was connected to others by teletype wires laid on the ground.

On the beachhead our air strip was a simple level area made in the fields by bulldozers.

Near the end of August we were on the move again and after several days of travel through recent battle areas with their levelled towns and scores of burned out tanks reached Paris, the third day after its liberation by the American army.

We stayed several weeks at Villa Coublay? a few miles from Paris. I did some sightseeing in Paris (riding in on a bike) and ate my lunch

with another chap one Sunday morning in the large open area just outside the cathedral of Notre Dame. We strolled along the Seine river and bought a few books (in French) at one of the many bookstalls located on the streets that parallel the river. That same Sunday morning we witnessed someone (probably an American) fly a Piper Cub under the lower arches of the Eifel Tower. Fortunately there were no low hanging wires strung between them. Whether he checked that out ahead of time we'll never know.

I looked at my map of Paris and walked to where the church of St. Clotilde, where the great composeer Cesar Franck was organist for so many years. Unfortunately the church wasn't open at the later hour that I arrived.

One night I was invited to an officers' party in an old chateau and enjoyed the whole evening playing a gorgeous Steinway concert grand in between the refreshments which the crowd insisted on pushing my way.

A few weeks later we were on the move again, this time to Cambrai, France where we spent a few nights. Then we were on the move again to St. Trond, Belgium.

We spent about five months at St. Trond at a large airfield just outside the town. St. Trond was then a small town or community of perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. We lived in tents all through the winter and stayed warm, despite the snow outside, with a G.I. pot-bellied stove which was very efficient. I suggested that we line the tent with boards to make it more rigid and keep it warmer. This we did but a colony of big rats moved into the space between the boards and the tent walls and stayed with us all winter. In the middle of the night they made quite a noise as they scampered about.

While we were at St. Trond the famous Battle of the Bulge took place. We were on a standing alert to pack up and move at a moment's notice if necessary. As it turned out, although the Germans came fairly close, we didn't have to move. On New Year's Day, 1945, we were strafed as part of a wide effort by the enemy to knock out American and allied airfields. Although some damage was done over the whole front, very little was sustained by our airfield. I can vividly remember seeing one enemy plane hit in the belly tank and set afire by our anti-aircraft fire right over my head. The pilot bailed out and was captured. Poor fellow- half the personnel of the field chased him. St. Trond was on buzz-bomb alley.

At night we could sometimes see three of these V-1 flying bombs on their way to destroy the vital Belgium port of Antwerp or wreak havoc on English cities. They sounded like outboard motores and could easily be spotted by the red exhaust from their crude rocket motores. It was quite a sight to see the anti-aircraft batteries located in a line some twenty miles away let go with their barrages in an effort to shoot the buzz-bombs down. Sometimes they succeeded and everyone would cheer.

While at St. Trond I became acquainted with a major who loved music. Several times a number of us boarded his jeep with him and went to Liege, about 20 miles away to the opera. Going and coming we watched the buzz-bombs on their course.

There is a large seminary in St. Trond which was founded by St. Trond for whom the town is named. I was introduced to the head of it, Pere Casteau, who invited me to play the organ whenever I wished. It was a fairly large 18th century tracker organ located in the chapel of

the seminary which I enjoyed very much. I got to know a young seminarian, Flor Berckenbosch. He was an organist and we still have some of the music that he sent us after the war.

In March we moved again driving down the Rhine valley for a distance, then over East through Wurzburg, and finally, to Kassel, Germany. We did go through a corner of Holland but I didn't get to see much of that country.

The devastation in the German cities that we went through was beyond belief - mile after mile of burned-out buildings and piles of rubble everywhere. We stayed at Kassel for several weeks in a half-destroyed fancy barracks building and then drove South to a little town called "Illesheim".

Illesheim was a very small town or village which was located by a very large modern airfield with a number of enormous hangars. It had evidently been built by the Germans as part of the Luftwaffe war effort. It appeared to have been some kind of maintenance or repair center since there were many marginal one story hovels which had been built nearby and which had been occupied by captured civilians or "slave laborers". We met some of these persons.

In the town was a small Lutheran church with a fine small pipe organ (built in Berlin). The chaplain of our group made arrangements for me to use the organ if I wished to, I remember going to the parsonage next door and asking the dour woman for the key. I assume she was the minister's wife and that he was away with the army. She gave it to me - it must have been eight or ten inches long. When I went in I couldn't get the organ to play. After jiggeling a few wires, however, it started right up and worked fine after that. One of the

metal front pipes was coming apart in one of the seams and wouldn't play right. I readily fixed it with some chewing gum - I wonder if the gum is still there-----.

On two Sunday evenings I gave an hour long organ recital, entirely from memory, to a pretty full church. The audience was made up of officers and men from the base with some displaced, recently freed persons from various countries awaiting deployment home. I remember those evenings with great pleasure.

Some of the displaced persons from the East, Russia, etc. did their best to avoid going home. Evidently things were not so hot there. I can also remember seeing some of the half-starved nationals. They looked more like walking skeletons than anything else. (Former slave workers who had been freed by our army).

We were at this base when the war in Europe ended in May, 1945.

Shortly after we left for Bad Kissingen, a famous "spa" noted for its health baths. While here I took a day trip with some others to Rothenburg, the old medieval town with its famous city hall and city wall. It was here that its Burgoⁿmaster in olden times drank a whole gallon of beer at one gulp in a wager to prevent the town from being destroyed by the beseiging forces. He saved the town. I sent a picture and goblet home which we have in our living room.

After a few weeks' stay in Bad Kissingen I went to Schweinfurt, Germany to start the trip back to the U.S. We flew in a C-47 (DC-3) to London. In the evening we took the subway downtown for a meal and some limited sightseeing.

While we were getting on the train to go to Scotland for the flight back to the U.S. we bought a newspaper and read of Japan's surrender while the train was still in the station.

It took 24 hours on the train to get to Prestwick, Scotland. There we boarded a C-54 (DC-4) for the trip back. We landed to refuel at Iceland (where I enjoyed the first glass of milk I'd had in eighteen months) and at Goose Bay, Labrador.

After a few more hours of flying we landed at Idlewild airport in New York, stopped a day or so at Camp Dix in New Jersey, and then on to Greensboro, North Carolina. In Greensboro we had a few weeks to wait until our discharges could be processed. During that period I took a trip to a tobacco auction nearby and toured a plant where Camel cigarettes were being manufactured (on English built machines).

I was given an honorable discharge (after declining with most others a plea to stay in the army) and arrived home in Schenectady after an all night and partial day train ride on Thanksgiving Day, 1945.

So endeth my military career.

John W. Van Lede
1945