

A

Interview with Al Wagner

WW2 Veteran

**Jeff Benson
WW2
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Al Wagner's story begins in the early 1940's. He was living in Brooklyn, New York, and unaware that within the next few years he would be in the United States Army and deep within German territory.

At the age of 19 Al completed high school. Following high school Al was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania and subsequently moved to begin college. His college years were short however and only lasted from 1941 to 1943. In 1943 Al and some friends decided to join the military like many others during the war.

Al's military service began in 1943 and the first thing he had to do was head to the induction camp to receive his shots. The induction camp he was sent to was called Camp Shanks and it was located in Long Island, New York. His stay was short at Camp Shanks and soon he was transferred to Ft Knox Military Training Camp in Louisville, Kentucky. In Kentucky Al would officially begin his training.

By now Al was 21 years old. It was mid 1943 and his training begun with 13 weeks of Army boot camp. After finishing boot camp Al took an additional specialty program for 6 weeks that would train him to become a radio operator. He would learn how to use the Signal Core Radio, or SCR for short. Operation of the SCR required 3 men and he would be part of a radio team. Al laughed when reminiscing because he said he was still able to do some Morse Code even today, almost 60 years later.

When he finished his training Al was prepared for deployment. He boarded a Victory ship named the Carolina and headed towards Western Europe. Al specifically remembers it as a tiresome and boring journey. Many of the soldiers in his group became

sea sick and one particular guy spent the whole 10 day journey in his bunk terribly ill. But finally they landed in England, regrouped, and made way to the town of Liverpool. The stay was short as well. Quickly they had moved to France and then to the city of Reims just shy of the France-Belgium boarder.

While in France Al joined up with the C Armored Regiment which was part of the 113th Squadron and all together a part of the 113th Mechanized Cavalry Group. The outfit was named The Red Horse Group. The joining was in a French town named Mortain and Al was a replacement for the 113th Squadron which had already been in Europe for weeks prior to his arrival. Al specifically recalled the date of his official joining of the 113th as June 28, 1944, only 22 days after the invasion of Normandy. He would remain with this Squadron until the very end around 1945.

As a SCR operator Al would travel in an armored car. The car was a six wheeler, or an M8, and was well armored. It had a gun turret, a 37 mm Cannon, a 30 Cal Machine Gun, and it was both fast and reliable. Al's seat was located on the inside of the M8 and it had a small peep hole. Al commented on how well hidden he was from the enemy.

Once he joining the 113th the whole outfit set out on a journey all the way through France. "The trip was easy," Al says, "There was no or very little fighting" that he could remember. Their mission, as an outfit, was as a scout group that would search for the enemy and Al's C Armored Troop would radio in for air or infantry support. They were rapidly heading towards Germany.

They reached Germany in October of 1944. After crossing the boarder and reaching the town of Aachen "the real fighting began", Al stated. The town was considered important to the Germans because the Charlemagne had been crown there.

The battle was fierce and the 113th lost many tanks and armored cars but Al was still doing okay.

After a short rest the group went on to Belgium. In route they were continually heading in a north eastern direction while liberating cities and towns such as Liege and Sittard. The goal was to reach Holland. But before reaching Holland Al's armored car had been hit and damaged by enemy fire. Al recalls that he "hadn't been wounded but he was still fighting." He was just shaken up but the tank driver was injured.

By the time they had reached the Roer River, around the boarder of Germany, there were little supplies left to move forward. They were short on artillery, food, gas, and many other necessities to continue pressing forward. The Normandy beach head and supply line, dubbed the ABC Highway or the Red Ball Express, was 400-500 miles away and all of their supplies would have to come from there. Al remembers General Patton requesting only gas and artillery to push forward, but the decision was made to wait for further supplies. Al recalls that "everyone had stopped; there just wasn't anymore stuff to move on." Because of a failed mission to take over the port of Antwerp, the Red Ball Express had to be it.

Al remembers it being a stalemate between the Germans and the US forces at this point. The decision was to dig in and wait out the winter while the supply lines gathered steam and reached them. So at the Roer River they began to set up camp. The ground was frozen already so Al remembers them using dynamite to make fox or cellar holes to stay in. Al had laughed but said that he never touched the dynamite but the smell of it he could still recall. He also said that one of the guys staying with him in the cellar had an idea to take out the headlight of a jeep and wire it to their cellar for light. Al laughed

again and recalled how well it worked but also laughed when remembering how many tank batteries they went through to keep it going. While dug in it was cold and the conditions were miserable, trench foot was bad, and showers were not really possible. They would spend time rubbing each others feet to combat the trench foot, write letters, and use their helmet to wash and shave out of.

After the 3 months of winter the 113th joined up with the 12th British Army Group. They were attached with them for a while but soon separated and joined up with the 9th Army under General Simpson. At this time there were several divisions together and the supply lines had finally reached them. "They went into Germany properly equipped" and the decision was made to head towards Cologne, Germany and cross the Rhine River.

When they had all reached the Rhine the pontoon crossing was a "spectacular event" and had been dubbed Operation Plunder, one of the most important battle operations of the war. Al had assumed after the crossing that they had fully captured Cologne, but it wasn't quite true because in Cologne the Rhine River divides the town into two parts. While feeling pretty comfortable with their position, Al and 3 of his fellow soldiers decided to take a joy ride in a jeep. Al wanted to see the Cologne Cathedral that was on the opposite side of the Rhine so they took off one day all alone. As they were driving alongside the river "all hell broke loose" and all Al remembers is the "pop pop sound of gun fire and the screaming sounds of incoming mortars and artillery." Of course unknowing to them the Germans had still had a good position on the opposite side of the Rhine and they were somewhat of a playful target being all alone.

Later after the war, Al and his wife returned to the city and visited the Cathedral where he was able to vividly point out the close call.

The stay in Cologne was short lived. "It turned into a race between the US and the Germans when moving through Germany. We (113th) would advance during the day and sleep at night and the Germans would travel at night and sleep throughout the day. We (113th) were one step ahead of them all the way." The race took them through German towns such as Hannover, Paperborn, Handalborne, and many others until finally just north of the Elbe River they stopped in a town named Magdeburg. At Magdeburg the request was made to continue into Berlin but Eisenhower refused and decided to let the Russians take it. This is where the war had stopped for Al.

While making his way through the small towns, Al and some of his fellow soldiers led the outfit to the outskirts of one approaching town. As they approached the town the people noticed them and immediately started putting out white flags above their windows and doors. At first it was okay but as quickly as the flags went up they started coming down. The people didn't realize the town was still full of German soldiers. Knowing they would have been well out numbered, Al said they "turned around and beat it out of there" because they were all alone and the outfit was a ways behind them. This was another close call that he won't ever forget.

After the war Al didn't have enough points to leave. He had successfully made it to the rank of Tech Sergeant, he had battle stars plus longevity, but it wasn't enough to get him back with his departing outfit. He had only been in the Army for 2 ½ years so they sent him back to Frankfurt, Germany where there was a deployment camp.

At Frankfurt he was put in charge of the USO entertainment and made a liaison between his old Regiment and the British. Although he had a chance to meet some big wigs like Bob Hope and Celestin Holmes, he would leave in his personal jeep as often as possible and visit his old buddies from the outfit. The time he spent at Frankfurt was “absolutely boring,” Al said, “the food stunk and it was miserable.” When he had the time to see his old outfit he had a good time. But unfortunately many of them were new replacements and few were left from his original group. Al subsequently lost contact with them after that.

In 1945 Al would finally get a chance to return to the states. His first stop was France. While in port at Marseille, France, the men were not allowed to go into the city because it was dangerous, but at the base, however, Al noticed something peculiar. He noticed that German prisoners were serving the food to the US soldiers. What was funny (at least almost 60 years later and probably not at the moment) was how well fed the German prisoners were compared to the arriving US forces awaiting departure. Unlike himself, Al mentioned that he had thinned out and had lost more than 20 pounds by now. However, Al recalled that the food stunk there too. But soon he was able to board a Victory ship and they sailed 13 days towards Newport News, Virginia. From Virginia it was too Fort Dix, New Jersey where he received his discharge papers. He was home.

Al wasted no time when he came home. He took advantage of the GI Bill and headed straight back to college in Pennsylvania. “We were determined,” Al replied, and within a little more than a year he had graduated with a degree in Economics in 1946. The “GI Bill was the biggest asset” to him because “while in the service the pay was nothing.” Later in 1953, Al moved to Tampa and was successful in the building up a

specialty steel manufacturing and distributing business in the Ybor district. Now, being retired since 1987, Al has been interested in further college education taking classes in History, Anthropology, Political Sciences, and Poetry. He hasn't forgotten his experiences with the 113th Cavalry and he is considering using the internet to try and track down some of his fellow soldiers who bravely fought by his side during the Western European Campaign of WW2.