

EARL PAMPEYAN

Earl Pampeyan, SIR #358, once upon a time known as Sgt. Pampeyan of the 538th Ordnance Co., Heavy Maintenance (Tank)

I was drafted into the US Army on April 5, 1943 at age 18. Owing to my brief after-school and summer work experience, I was classified as an Automotive Mechanic and assigned to the 538th Ordnance, HM (Tank) Company, headquartered in Fort Knox, KY.



Upon completion of Basic Training, the 538th was sequestered in a Special Training Area where we were trained to understand and maintain a “secret” device that “would change the course of WW II.” From Fort Knox the 538th went to western AZ for 6 months of Desert Training, in support of several Armored Divisions, before shipping over to Wales where we prepared mechanized equipment for the invasion of Europe. From the time of completion of Special Training until our arrival in Great Britain we were not allowed to go on Pass alone lest we “leak” sensitive information about the “secret weapon.” (Initially we could go off the base only in groups of 15, but over time the numbers were gradually reduced until we were allowed to go on Pass with a buddy.)



SS Queen Elizabeth as a Troop Ship

The 538th left the U.S. on March 31, 1944. We crossed the Atlantic on the SS Queen Elizabeth, accompanied by the famous heavyweight Joe Louis and 5,000 other GI's, then spent the following 21 months in the ETO. Following D Day and our landing on Utah Beach, the 538th stayed close to the action through northern France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland, and Germany until cessation of

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European hostilities, ending up in Stendal, on the west side of the Elbe River (60 miles from Berlin). En route we saw V1 and V2 “rockets” pass overhead and saw the damage they caused near our encampments.



Gardelegen Death Camp

We had Luftwaffe pilots “eyeball” us at close range and saw trenches filled with emaciated bodies at the Gardelegen “death camp.”

We saw our planes shot down, and at times had to scavenge parts from armored vehicles. Some of the vehicles were “coated” with the crew’s remains. In general, the civilian populace in Germany was subdued and friendly and, to my knowledge, no threat to us.

Our company, at various times, was attached to the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 9th Armies, and various Armored Divisions (including the “Hell on Wheels” 2nd Armored under Patton). We were credited for being part of the campaigns and battles of Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland, and Central Europe. We were shifted around so frequently that I’ve lost track of commands but I do remember Generals Bradley, Patton, and Clark. (As an aside, I maintained Clark’s Opel Staff Car while occupying Austria.) During a visit to Berchtesgaden, I saw General Eisenhower personally remove the “Officers Only” sign from the elevator leading to the “Eagle’s Nest,” a gesture that put him in very good standing with all the GI’s.



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The 538th had the capability to retrieve, transport and repair everything from wristwatches to heavy artillery and tanks. We moved around frequently except during the winter of 1944 during Battle of the Bulge, when we were based for three months in the small Dutch town of Simpelveld (near Aachen). We seldom stayed in any one place for more than a week. My specialties were the repair and maintenance of 500-HP Ford V-8 and GM “twin 6-71” engines used in Medium Tanks and Tank Destroyers. I had been trained to work on the 400-HP 9-cyl Continental air-cooled radial and the (impossible) 30-cylinder Chrysler engines. I don’t recall seeing any of them in Europe – Oh well, that’s the Army for you. We were frequently called upon to prepare vehicles for assaults and major river crossings—ahead of the infantry—armed only with our assigned weapons and toolboxes!

On the lighter side, I once volunteered to drive a truckload of GI’s to Liege on a one-day Pass, and that was easy duty -- going in. Coming back in the wee hours of the morning, in blackout trim, was a different story. The worst part of that duty was trying to round up my truckload of GI’s from the bars and brothels! On another pass to Liege, my buddy and I were approached by a nice looking woman who asked us to accompany her to her apartment for lunch. Not wanting to impose on her, we said no. She finally figured out that we thought that she was trying to “proposition” us. With the help of my High School French, we finally understood the she was so grateful for U.S. troops, for freeing her people from the Germans, that she wanted to show her appreciation. So we went with her and enjoyed a good meal consisting of the first fresh eggs we had had for several months.

The 538th lost 3 men during the hostilities: one was backed over by a heavy truck—accidentally; one was killed when a stray aerial 20mm, HE shell, impacted on his work bench and eviscerated him; another soldier accidentally shot himself in the head when he jumped out of a truck before engaging the “safety” on his Thompson .45 submachine gun.

Following cessation of hostilities, the 538th was sent to Austria to “occupy” and train Displaced Persons, mostly Eastern Europeans, to do our jobs. Subsequently I was transferred to an Artillery Company in the 84th (Woodcutter) Division encamped near Salzburg, before moving south through France to Marseilles and shipping out on a Victory ship.



WW II Victory Ship

We docked in Hampton Roads, VA on December 25, 1945; some of us were then flown to Fort McArthur, CA, and I became a civilian on January 6, 1946.

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Footnote:

The Secret Weapon was a carbon arc light mounted in a specially modified turret on old M-3 Medium Tanks. Inside the turret behind the arc mechanism was a parabolic-elliptical mirror that focused the arc light through a narrow vertical slit into a wide horizontal beam. The slit in the turret contained a mechanical shutter, whose speed could be controlled, and yellow and blue filters that also could be controlled. The idea behind this British contraption was that in nighttime assaults these tanks would advance upon enemy positions, with arc lights flashing at varying speeds and in various colors, and blind or confuse the enemy while Allied troops advanced under cover of darkness. The combination of flashing white, blue and yellow arc lights would confuse the enemy trying to determine the distance to the lights' source. To my knowledge, this device was never used as intended in battle, but I was later told that one or more of these M-3 tanks had been seen illuminating a Rhine River bridge sometime after the river had been crossed and the bridge secured.