

## **Peter Sweda's Wartime Experiences**

I knew Peter Sweda as a neighbor in Silver Spring, Maryland. I first met him around 1991 when he found my wallet while on a routine walk around the condominium buildings. We chatted briefly and soon determined that we had common outlooks and experiences, including war service – he in World War Two, I in Vietnam. Over the years we talked quite a bit about many things, including our war experiences. We might have spoken about them more thoroughly than with others.

Peter was born to Eastern European parents who came from what is now in the Ukraine. The surname was thought to have come from the descendant of a Swedish man, possibly a soldier. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sweden had the most powerful army in Europe and it invaded Russia on more than one occasion. One such invasion led to a catastrophic defeat for Sweden at Poltava (1709) in what is now the Ukraine. The Swedish king (Charles XII) escaped into the Ottoman Empire from which he made it back to Sweden, but many of his soldiers had to make their way home through Russia and Eastern Europe. Some couldn't reach home and settled in Eastern Europe. After Poltava, Sweden lost its taste for war and empire.

Peter was born in Cohoes, New York, and grew up in coal-mining town in Ohio and later back in Cohoes. During the Depression, he and his father worked as what he called "common laborers" on roads and in warehouses and wherever they could. If they came home with a dollar each at the end of the day, they considered themselves fortunate. In the late thirties, Peter applied to the National Youth Administration (NYA) and was accepted. The NYA was part of the New Deal, specifically the Works Progress Administration, and it taught young people basic job skills such as typing and office keeping and paid them a modest salary.

While in NYA, Peter was drafted. I'm not sure precisely when, but it was before Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941). A draft law had been passed in the fall of 1940, in part due to concerns over the German conquest of France the previous summer and the ongoing German air war known as the Battle of Britain. America was highly isolationist back then and the law was controversial. The law only required a conscript to serve for one year – insufficient time to acquire meaningful training and expertise – and the law was set to expire after only one year. The first draftees were inducted in October of 1940 and they looked forward to being released one year later, so they used to scrawl “OHIO” where they could – “Over the Hill In October.” Congress extended the draft law shortly before Pearl Harbor by a single vote.

Shortly after war broke out, Peter put in for Officer Candidate School (OCS) and was accepted. Not sure where his OCS took place. There's a photo of him at graduation, beaming proudly and sporting a Sam Browne belt. He was no longer a “common laborer”; he was a second lieutenant in the United States Army and involved in a great national effort. He showed me that belt once and I joked how the brass had lost its luster. He used some Brasso on it and gave it to me.

Upon graduation from OCS, he was assigned to a newly forming armor unit – the 3rd Armored Division. The division trained at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania (about a hundred miles northwest of Philadelphia) and in the Mojave desert in California, near what is now Ft Irwin. Montgomery's Eighth Army and a few US divisions were fighting Rommel's Afrika Korps in North Africa until early 1943, so the 3rd Armored trained extensively for desert warfare, though it was never deployed in such terrain. Well, the 7th Infantry Division trained for jungle warfare, then deployed to the Aleutians. Little wonder the word “Snafu” was coined during WW2.

The 3rd Armored deployed to England in the fall of 1943 as part of the build-up for the invasion of France the following year. Peter recalled hearing rumors of a catastrophic training accident that killed many GIs and only many years later did he learn of the Slapton Sands incident. US infantry units of the 4th Infantry Division were aboard ships preparing a practice beach assault when German E-Boats

(similar to American PT Boats) came across them and torpedoed several of the troop transports, killing 946 American troops. The story was hushed up during the war for two reasons. First, the British navy had bungled their mission of protecting the vulnerable troop ships. Second, the contours of the Slapton Sands beaches resembled those of an intended landing point in France and word of a landing exercise there might give away a landing point to German intelligence. Slapton Sands was topographically similar to Utah Beach in Normandy.

The invasion of course took place June 6, 1944. The 3rd Armored landed on Omaha Beach two or three weeks later, as a port had not been taken and beach landings from LSTs and the like continued. Peter's unit was mixed with parts of an experienced division for its first combat, which was not very far from the beachheads (about 10-15 miles) as the Germans had put up very stiff resistance since D-Day. Peter said that the experienced division was the 29th Infantry Division, but he described their unit patch as the "bucket of blood," which I believe was the 28th Infantry Division. A red patch might be more memorable than a number, so I think it was the 28th.



**28th Infantry Division and 29th Infantry Division patches. The first patch was nicknamed the "bucket of blood" and the blue and grey of the second patch signify the restored unity of the**

**North and South after the Civil War. That was appropriate as the 29th Infantry was the Maryland and Virginia national guards. It was badly mauled on Omaha Beach on D-Day.**

Peter was at this point a first lieutenant and commanded a platoon consisting of four Sherman tanks, which was part of G Company, 32nd Tank Battalion, Combat Command A, 3rd Armored Division. The names of tanks in G Company began with the letter "G" and Peter's was named "Gertie," but it might not have been the only one he had. During his first experience in combat, he was puzzled by an occasional loud cracking noise above him. The sound was distinct from the muzzle blasts of his Sherman and the other explosions around him amid the battle. After the engagement, he asked one of the more experienced soldiers what the cracking sounds were. He explained that they were German antitank rounds, the dreaded 88s, breaking the sound barrier just above his head.

We occasionally talked about the different sounds we'd heard in war: the thunderclap of artillery rounds exploding nearby, the ripping sound as rounds fly overhead or descend toward you, the dull thud of mortar rounds and how they thumped hard in your chest cavity, and shrapnel making eerie Doppler sounds as they shrieked above your head. You learn them all soon enough.

One of the SOPs on nearing a village was to put a round or two into the church bell tower as they made good observation posts for artillery spotters. The first time he did this was on a Sunday and he thought it would bring bad luck. Peter was slightly wounded by a small piece of shrapnel in Normandy, in his leg or arm, and went to an aid station not far behind the front. As he was coming back to his unit, he was alarmed to see that it was moving out without him. He was worried that his men would think he was dogging it in the rear. He ran hard and caught up with them.

The fighting over the next month proceeded very slowly and the allied lines were still not terribly far from the D-Day beaches. The 3rd Armored Division was chosen to lead, or "spearhead," Operation Cobra – the bold plan to break out of the confinements in Normandy. It was drawn up and executed by Generals



Bradley, Collins, and Hodges. General Patton is often credited for it and what followed, but he was still in the doghouse back in England at this time for inopportune statements about the Russian allies. Operation Cobra called for massing armor and infantry units and crashing through the German lines, encircling as much of the German Seventh Army as possible. The attack was to be preceded by a powerful and hopefully devastating “carpet bombing” of the German positions. (That might have been the first use of the term.) Hundreds of bombers were to pound the opposing positions which were then held by the Panzer Lehr Division. That was an elite Wehrmacht (non-SS) unit that had been the training unit for all German armor units, but with the high casualties from the years in Russia, the Panzer Lehr was then sent into the war itself where it established itself as a formidable unit.

The bombers flew in to pound the German positions near Saint-Lo and Peter saw some drop their payloads in the wrong places. He knew they were hitting American troops, though about a mile from his position. At that distance, Peter felt air pressure hitting his ears and the ground shaking beneath him. (I mentioned that I'd been a couple of miles from a B-52 strike and thought it was like an earthquake.) Once the bombings stopped, Peter and others hurried to the injured GIs and did what they could to get them to aid stations. General Lesley McNair, after whom Ft McNair in DC is named, was among the Americans killed by the bombers. He was stationed at the Pentagon and was at Saint-Lo as an observer.



**Photos of the Saint-Lo carpet bombing at the outset of Operation Cobra. It had less effect on the German positions than hoped – and it killed many GIs.**

The attack was postponed until the next day, and the bombers returned. I believe they dropped some bombs short that day too but the operation went on nonetheless. Peter's unit was ordered to drive forward relentlessly and destroy the German lines of communication. Despite the intense bombing which was supposed to pulverize the German forces, there was far more fighting than Peter and his unit had been led to believe. Furthermore, there were thick bushes called hedgerows, or *bocage*, in the region which were difficult to break through, even with a tank. Raking the base of the *bocage* with .50 caliber machine-gun fire was helpful in clearing an opening, but it was time consuming and gave away your

position to anyone for quite a distance. Later, a plow-like device called a Rhinoceros was attached to the front of tanks to break through the *bocage*, but I don't think Peter's unit had them.

Peter told me of the following incident without boastfulness or lingering remorse. He spoke calmly about the incident and remembered it in detail. Not long after the carpet bombing ended, he plunged his Sherman through some *bocage* and came upon a stunned German soldier holding a *Panzerfaust*, an antitank weapon. They stared at each other in astonishment for several seconds, neither knowing what to do, despite all their training and indoctrination. Peter drew his .45 from a shoulder harness and fired several rounds into the soldier. He wanted to see to the man but the orders were to drive forward without stopping. There was little doubt as to the man's fate anyway.



**German soldier with Panzerfaust**



**Peter's wartime pistol**

Between the bombings and engagements with the 3rd Armored, the Panzer Lehr Division was put entirely out of action. It was later reconstituted and put into action during the Battle of the Bulge, where it once again engaged the 3rd Armored. It was again mauled and put out of action. Oddly, "Lehr" means "teach." Peter was badly wounded near Stolberg a few weeks before the Battle of the Bulge started (December 16, 1944), and so did not take part in it.

The 3rd Armored drove south from the beachheads then swung east. Many of the German positions had been gutted but the German generals decided to counterattack, sending their Seventh Army west in order to cut off the American units, including Peter's. The counterattack was halted at Mortain by US troops. Had they failed, Peter and tens of thousands of other US troops would have been cut off and possibly forced to surrender.

The German Seventh Army, having failed to take Mortain, had to make a hasty retreat to avoid being cut off by the 3rd Armored Division, which, after racing east, cut north to link up with the British near Caen. The 3rd Armored reached its appointed destination but the British were late in reaching theirs. As they awaited the British, Peter's tanks fired countless artillery rounds onto the clogged roads in the Falaise-Argentan Gap until the British finally reached their appointed destination, trapping about fifty-thousand German troops. This almost certainly shortened the European war by a few months; it certainly triggered the German army's collapse in France. About a hundred thousand German troops, however, were able to escape and head back to the German border. The British delay caused many Americans, soldiers and civilians alike, to criticize Montgomery for being too cautious.

Peter received his second wound around this time. As with the first one, he was simply treated at an aid station and did not come off the line for more than a few hours. His company commander (Captain Anderson?) and one or two of the other lieutenants had been killed or wounded in the previous weeks. Peter was assigned command of G Company and was promoted captain.



After the battle, Peter went down into the roads in the Falaise-Argentan Gap, which had been pounded by allied artillery and airpower for several days. Thousands of dead soldiers and wrecked vehicles were strewn across the roads and adjacent fields. General Eisenhower witnessed the carnage shortly thereafter and likened it to General Grant's description of the slaughter at the Battle of Shiloh (1862). Years later, the images of the Iraqi troop columns that had been hit hard by US aircraft in the First Gulf War (1991) reminded Peter of what he saw that day in 1944. He felt sorry for them – Germans and Iraqis alike.



**German columns caught in the Falaise-Argentan Gap**



**Iraqi columns caught fleeing Kuwait City in 1991**

Around this time, Peter's unit liberated the French village of Calvados. It's known for the potent apple brandy made there, but this was unknown to Peter that day – at least early in the day. The villagers cheered enthusiastically as G Company drove through. It was a hot July day and the tanks had kicked up a lot of dust, so Peter eagerly took a large helping of the local brandy from a grateful villager and, thinking it was just apple cider, he quickly gulped down a goodly amount. He said he felt like he'd been "hit by a hammer." He slumped down inside the tank so suddenly that the crew thought he'd been shot. Fortunately, the Wehrmacht was not in the area that day. Or perhaps they were and had also imbibed too much Calvados – but I doubt it.

The German army was in complete disarray and they fled east to the defensive lines known as the Siegfried Line. Around this time, maybe a week or so before, Patton took command of some of the

American forces that had broken the German lines. Patton did not make the breakthrough or close the Gap. Patton never commanded the 3rd Armored Division; he commanded the Third Army and that has caused some confusion. The 3rd Armored Division remained in the First Army, under the command of Courtney Hodges and the VII Corps commander J Lawton Collins, often called “Lightning Joe” for his success on Guadalcanal in the Pacific. (He was the uncle of Michael Collins of Apollo 11 with Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.) Because of its breakthrough of the German positions at the outset of Operation Cobra, the 3rd Armored received the nickname “Spearhead.”



**Third Armored Division shoulder patch. Peter was a bit annoyed when in the late fifties the division became better known as Elvis Presley’s unit.**

Allied troops were now racing east toward the Low Countries and Germany and the American lines were anything but orderly. Peter was driving toward a crossroads in his Sherman when someone suddenly walked in front and motioned for him to stop so the other traffic could cross. Peter had to get the driver to

hit the brakes hard and they came close to striking him. On closer inspection, it was a three-star general and Peter was almost sure it was none other than George S Patton, who was putting on a show by directing traffic – something that any PFC could have done. When I tell that story to WW2 veterans many of them say, jokingly in most cases, that it was too bad Peter didn't run him over. I've asked about thirty-five WW2 veterans what they thought of Patton and all but three expressed disdain for him, mostly for his slapping two young soldiers with battle fatigue.

Peter did not care much for Patton either because of his aristocratic demeanor, publicity seeking, and the infamous slapping incidents. I've disliked Patton for the same reasons. His son, George S Patton, Jr, was the assistant post commander when I was stationed at Ft Knox (Kentucky) and he would drive around the post in a jeep, with a .45 strapped to his side – hardly necessary even in rural Kentucky. Showmanship might run in the family. His father wore sidearms on many public occasions and his famed pearl-handled pistols are on display at the Patton Museum on Ft Knox. General Omar Bradley once told Patton that the pistols made him look like a New Orleans pimp.





**George S Patton**

**(Note Patton's imperious body language compared to that of Collins and Bradley.)**



**J Lawton Collins**



**Omar Bradley**

The race across France, what Peter called “the run,” covered approximately three hundred fifty miles in just two months – remarkable after being bottled up in Normandy. Had there been enough fuel for the tanks and supply trucks and planes, American forces might have been able to take fuller advantage of the enemy’s disarray and drive well into Germany, perhaps ending the war by the end of 1944.

In August of 1944, Maurice Rose became the commanding general of the division, replacing the previous commander Leroy Watson who Ike thought had been too incautious near Mortain. General Rose was killed in action late in the war, near Paderborn, when his jeep came across an errant German

tank behind American lines. Peter respected, even admired, General Rose and after the war he helped with an effort to get a medical center built and named after him.



**General Maurice Rose and the Rose Medical Center in Denver, Colorado**

An armor company was more complex than infantry units. It had sixteen tanks, each with a crew of four or five, but owing to the rapid mobility of tank units, it had to have indigenous mess and maintenance units (tanks are mechanical nightmares) – all of which Peter administered while driving across France and Belgium and into Germany. Upon becoming the company commander, Peter led less from his tank than from a jeep. He always referred to it as a “peep” and that indeed is what many GIs called the renowned vehicles, though it is scarcely remembered today. The peep was much smaller and faster than a large, rumbling tank, and it allowed him to get around without being seen or heard so easily.

A few times during “the run,” Peter’s battalion would outrace other units and become surrounded by German troops. In those few cases, they had to turn around and fight their way back to reestablish lines of communication or await troops in the rear to catch up. It certainly sounds disconcerting, to say the least, but Peter said that it was simply part of mobile warfare and that far more German troops were surrounded in that campaign.

One morning, G Company and the other companies in the battalion were gearing up to begin driving east again when suddenly shells came in on them. Peter heard the source in the distance and saw a Tiger tank about 500 yards away in partial defilade. How long it was there and why it was there, no one knew. Peter hopped into his Sherman and began directing fire at it. A Tiger, however, was all but invulnerable to the relatively weak Sherman guns, at least head on, and Peter could see his rounds simply glancing off the redoubtable panzer and flying up into the air or off to the side.

Peter got on the radio and was able to get a P-47 Thunderbolt to swoop in and bomb the Tiger. Peter saw the panzer crew climb out of the damaged tank and make good their escape. Remember, the orders were to drive on and not to worry about pockets of resistance. I suggested that the Tiger had had mechanical problems and decided to fire into the American troops who happened to arrive in front of them for as long as it could. Peter thought that might have been the case but we’ll never know for sure.





**Panzerkampfwagen Tiger and M4 Sherman. Note the Sherman's high profile compared to the German Tiger. Also note how much larger the Tiger's gun was compared to the Sherman's: 88mm versus 76mm. More importantly, the Tiger's gun had a faster muzzle velocity: 930 meters per second versus 792. (The power of the round is to some extent its Mass x Velocity squared.) The extra treads on the front of both tanks' hulls and on the sides of the Sherman were intended to cause an incoming round to detonate before striking the tank itself.**

Somewhere in France, Peter was able to climb inside a Tiger and even fire a few rounds with the vaunted 88mm gun. The optics, he recalled, were quite sharp and the gun was amazingly accurate. The muzzle velocity of the Sherman was much slower than the German 88. Firing long distances (say, over six hundred meters) involved estimating the effect of any wind and the arc of the round as it traveled long distances. Before firing an antitank round, he'd fire one of the tank's machine guns to gauge the effect of the wind on the red tracer rounds. That wasn't necessary with the German 88. The muzzle

velocity was such that the wind had less effect and the trajectory was relatively flat until it traveled quite far – a tremendous advantage in battle.

Given a choice, US armor would not take on German tanks head on. It was a mismatch. Tank-versus-tank tactics called for taking advantage of the US's numerical superiority and outflanking enemy tanks, especially Tigers. If you could get behind a Tiger, you had a chance to destroy it as the armor back there was relatively thin, which is the case with almost all tanks. If outmaneuvered by superior numbers, the German tanks normally opted to retreat.

SS units were discernibly more tenacious than regular Wehrmacht units. This might have been due to their ideological dispositions and superior equipment. Peter once showed me a small Nazi flag and said, "This is from an SS panzer I had the good fortune of knocking out." I'm not sure where that took place but I don't think it was in or near Normandy.

Command was of course quite burdensome. The casualties were high. I told Peter of a statistic I came across indicating that the "kill ratios" on the western front were 3:2. That is, three Americans were killed for every two Germans. He said that the statistic sounded about right to him. The ratio reflects the greater experience of German troops and the advantages of being on the defensive. Peter had the duty to write letters to the families of men in his unit who had been killed, but we never discussed this.

A superior officer once ordered him to approach an enemy position in a certain way. Peter protested that there were almost certainly German 88s in position, but he was overruled and a tank was sent forward. As Peter thought, an 88 destroyed the tank, killing the crew. The Sherman had inadequate armor shielding and to make matters worse, it had a high profile which made them easier to see in the distance and easier to destroy. The high profile was perhaps due to the use of a large radial engine in the front. Furthermore, the Shermans tended to develop fuel leaks upon being hit. Crews called them "Ronsons"

and quoted the famed cigarette lighter's slogan, "Guaranteed to light every time." Dark humor in wartime. The only advantage the US had in tanks was their greater numbers.

When a tank turret is hit by an antitank round, molten metal, shrapnel, and jagged pieces of the inner turret shoot into the inside, killing the crew and detonating the ammunition stored in the back. Those on the radio net hear a metallic click as the doomed tank's communication gear burns up. The turret will burn for many hours, with flames shooting out of the cupola like a giant flare. The remains of those inside are only charred lumps, with the extremities and even the metal dog tags consumed by fire, as Peter witnessed on several occasions.

The side armor on a Sherman was quite thin. Peter once came across a damaged Sherman that an 88mm round had gone in one side and out the other, without detonating. Another time, he helped the injured crew members out of a damaged tank from a sister unit and was surprised to see that one of them was his cousin.

Peter was haunted by his inability to always control his soldiers' treatment of German prisoners. Many soldiers despised their enemy, especially after suffering the loss of a friend, and preferred to shoot them rather than take them to a battalion POW pen. If he had them court martialed, it would weaken the unit, make it less effective, and cause more casualties. It would detract from the unit's mission which was, in essence, to kill Germans. He and I were wary of news reports about the magnanimity and decency of GIs in combat.

Another matter that haunted him was the use of new soldiers in the unit. In order to retain the largest number of experienced soldiers, it was best to use new ones in certain dangerous situations. If the new guys survived, they gained valuable experience. If not, the more skilled soldiers survived another day. Either way, the unit's effectiveness was preserved as much as possible.

I say “haunted” but Peter was not deeply troubled by the war, at least not when I knew him. He spoke calmly and clearly about even horrific events. He considered the war as an event that defined him and helped him out of his Depression-era life. He became a respected officer and later a proud member of the burgeoning American middle class, both of which he saw as serving his country. I admired him as much for his postwar adjustments as for his wartime accomplishments. He looked upon his war service as something that he and millions of other Americans had to do and he never thought he’d done anything remarkable, not even at Stolberg.

Peter and other officers had the responsibility of reading and censoring all the mail sent by soldiers in G Company. He disliked this as intrusive, but duty was duty. After the war, at reunions, one his “boys” would introduce him to his girlfriend or wife and Peter was embarrassed that he knew so many private details about them.

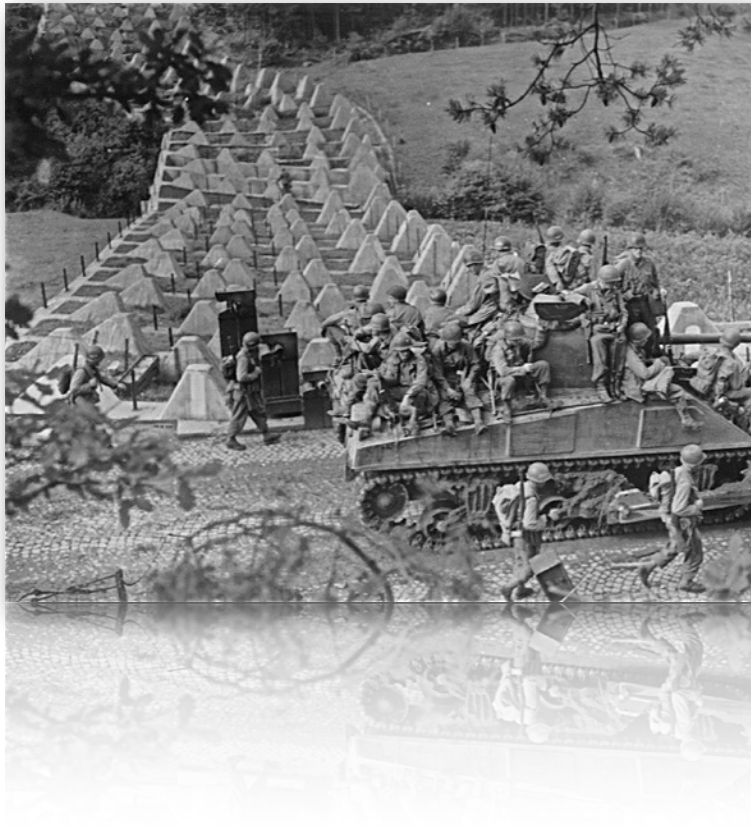
When asked what German weapon was the most feared, he instantly said their mortars. I had come across that question asked of US combat troops and the mortar came in at the top. The 88 tank rounds were deadly but you could discern where they were coming from and respond with your own weapons. That was more difficult with mortar rounds as they make less noise on being fired and have a high trajectory. Mortars are also quite accurate though their shrapnel cannot penetrate a Sherman’s armor. He was once speaking from the turret to an NCO on the ground when they both heard the whistle of an incoming round. Peter ducked inside the tank and heard the round hit just outside. Upon sticking his head up again, he saw the sergeant had been knocked several yards away by the blast but was not hit by shrapnel. He was cursing grumpily. Miraculous.

As company commander he was responsible for recommending his men for medals. He put off most such requests saying that soldiers were expected to do those things and that medals were for truly extraordinary acts. After he was badly wounded near Stolberg and was convalescing in a hospital in

England, he was charged with evaluating recommendations for medals and he saw that the standards were considerably looser than his own. He felt bad about it.

The 3rd Armored reached and broke through the Siegfried Line in the early fall. The 3rd Armored was the first allied unit to penetrate German territory. Peter's unit did not have to fight across the heavily fortified positions; another unit in his division had done that by the time he reached it. The rows of concrete obstacles known as "dragon's teeth," which were impassable for tanks, had been covered with dirt by engineer units and Peter's tanks simply drove over them. By this time, his company had taken about 75% casualties (killed, wounded, captured) since landing on Omaha Beach three months earlier. Casualties were especially high for commanders of tanks, who went into battle with their heads out of the turret, not inside as movies suggest. This made them highly susceptible to head wounds from shrapnel and concussive blast.





**Dragon's Teeth on the Siegfried Line, then and now. Most of them are still there as there are several rows of them extending over a hundred miles and they are very difficult to remove.**

After crossing the Siegfried Line, the 3rd Armored fought its way through Aachen, which was the first sizable German city to fall to the allies. Charlemagne (Karl der Grosse) is entombed there and the city was a symbol of German pride. I'm not sure Peter's unit took part in the fighting in Aachen but I think he once mentioned that there was an officer from the Army Air Forces with his unit near there. He helped direct air support for a few weeks and was happy to get back to the relative comfort of his airfield. Peter mentioned that he was often able to get air support on the radio, as he did for that lurking Tiger in

France. He said the P-47 Thunderbolt pilots would come in closer to the ground than the P-51 Mustang pilots would. He wasn't sure why that was.

Peter and I spoke to two men at the 2007 divisional reunion who had recollections of the battle of Cologne, though Peter I believe was convalescing in England during that engagement. One man showed me a picture of him in the city, posing with his rifle, grinning, helmet at jaunty angle – a typical GI photo. I asked if the picture had been taken after the fighting was over. He laughed and said, “No, the krauts were a block or two away and I went forward a few minutes later!” The other man showed me a bullet scar near his collar bone – a souvenir of running across a bridge in Cologne. One of them became a minister after the war.

In November of 1944, the lines stabilized for a while and Peter's unit stayed put near Stolberg, just east of Aachen. He set up his command post inside a house but would not allow anyone to sleep on a bed or couch, tempting though that must have been after so much fighting and privation. “It was somebody's home,” he explained. Everyone slept on the floor, including Peter.

During that period of relative calm, the unit was intermittently harassed by a German sniper in a hilly woods. It was annoying, I'm not sure anyone was hit, but one day a soldier named Alberti decided he'd had enough. He went running up the hill firing an M-2 “grease gun” and screaming curse words at the top of his lungs. The sniper relented for a day or two, though he did return. Alberti survived that exploit but was killed in action not long after.

While at Stolberg in late November, an artillery observer out between the German and American lines was hit, perhaps by the aforementioned sniper. He was bleeding badly and unable to crawl back to the lines. If Peter had sent a Sherman out to rescue the man, it would surely have been destroyed by an 88, killing the crew. He had the authority to *order* someone out to get him and he certainly had the moral authority to *ask* someone to do it, but he chose not to. Peter and another soldier hopped into the “peep”

and raced out a hundred yards or so and hoisted the wounded man into the rear seat. They started back and German mortar rounds started raining down on them, causing deafening thumps and flinging dirt all about. As they neared the relative protection of the lines, a round hit very near, upending the jeep and throwing everyone to the ground. Peter and the others were able to get back to the lines and then to an aid station, where the wounded artillery observer received medical attention.

A medic told Peter that he wanted to take a look at his wound. Peter insisted that he hadn't been injured but the medic showed him the jagged rips and bloodstains on his field jacket. Sure enough, the last mortar round had lacerated his back quite badly. Peter was evacuated to the rear and eventually to a hospital in England. I asked him if he knew what became of the artillery observer he'd saved. He replied that he did not know his fate and that he never even knew his name. "He was just a GI who needed help." Peter received his third Purple Heart and a Bronze Star with "V" for Valor for that day.

Many years later, Peter, Martha, and Stephanie went to Stolberg and he was able to locate the depressions in the ground from the mortar rounds, including the one that got him. I told that story to a veteran of the Okinawa campaign in the Pacific and he smiled. He'd gone back to the Japanese island in 1960 and found a depression where he dug a foxhole in 1945.

Peter convalesced in England where he met and fell in love with Martha Pomerantz, whom he'd later marry. By chance, there were two people he knew at the hospital, either cousins or guys from Cohoes, New York. (He showed me a photo of the three that had been clipped from a Cohoes newspaper.) In March of 1945, he was fit for duty again and eager to take command of another Sherman company. The army had a rather impersonal and thoughtless personnel system back then which made no effort to reassign recovered soldiers to their former units. That would have been good for morale and unit cohesion but the army then thought of GIs as interchangeable parts. Peter wrote his former commanding officer, possibly Colonel Doyle Hickey, and asked to get a command in his old battalion or regiment. The

former CO agreed to it as junior officers were killed or wounded in large numbers, and Peter was set to rejoin his old unit, though not necessarily Company G.



**Peter in England, early 1945**

Just then, his mother died and he was granted leave to return to Cohoes for the services. By early April, the German army was collapsing altogether and Peter's orders were changed to Ft Knox, where he was to train armor crews for the invasion of Japan. There was expected to be a major battle using considerable amounts of armor on the Kanto Plain between the proposed beachheads and Tokyo. But the invasion wasn't necessary. Peter regretted he was unable to return to the 3rd Armored and felt his wounds had prevented him from serving more fully in the war. I assured him that he'd seen far more combat in a single month than anyone in Vietnam had in a whole year.

Peter left active duty in May of 1946, not long after Stephanie was born at Ft Knox. He was recalled to duty with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, but he was not sent to Korea. He served in an intelligence unit in Germany.

One of his duties was interrogating suspicious people crossing into West Germany from the East, which was fairly easy to do in the years before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. One fellow was especially suspicious and Peter detained him in a makeshift detention center in the basement. It was hardly a secure place to hold a determined person and the next morning, the detainee had broken down a door and was gone. He left a note saying that he apologized for his sudden departure but he didn't find the accommodations to his liking. He assured Peter that if he ever fell into his custody in the East, the accommodations would be much more secure.

Peter used to ask German men of roughly his age if they'd been in the military during the war. It was just a matter of curiosity and perhaps something they could discuss dispassionately. Not one of them admitted to serving on the Western Front; they all claimed to have been fighting the Russians in the East. About seventy percent of German troops did in fact serve on the Eastern Front, it's nonetheless statistically probable that many of the German men did serve against American troops but were reluctant to discuss it, for obvious reasons. My father, who served in the Pacific, used to ask the same question of

German men his age. One replied, “Yes . . . but regular Wehrmacht of course.” He was making it clear that he had not served in the SS.

After his recall to active duty, Peter decided to stay in the service, but events turned against him. He received a less than positive Officer Efficiency Report (OER), which precluded further promotion. Peter was puzzled by this as he had an excellent war record and had performed later duties well. A friend in personnel showed him a report written by a superior officer that said Peter had been “overly solicitous to enlisted personnel.” Peter immediately knew what had brought this on. One evening, he held a get-together for the guys in the intelligence unit. It was all quite informal; I’m not sure if attendees were in uniform. Peter poured tea into the cups of many of those there, including some enlisted men – an affront to the aristocratic principles lurking in the military. (See the above portrait of Patton.) Peter recalled that the superior officer who wrote the poisonous report looked at him disapprovingly. With further promotion closed off, his active duty career was limited and soon ended.

Peter was the gentlest and most accepting of people but I think that incident always irked him. He told me that an officer in the war did not command his troops simply because he had a bar or two on his shoulder. He commanded because he had the trust and affection of his men. Not so with the conniving martinet who wrote the OER. We both recognized a rather pernicious outlook of many military officers which was based on a sense of natural superiority and a putative mastery of violence. We were alternately amused and annoyed by the inordinate number of medals that today’s generals heap upon themselves, despite having little if any direct combat experience. We didn’t like what the military had become nor how it had been used in the last decade or so.

He continued to serve in the army reserves and reached the rank of lieutenant colonel. He served in a civil affairs unit along with Lev Dobriansky (who was one of my economics professors at Georgetown and is the father of Neoconservative thinker Paula Dobriansky) and with Strom Thurmond as well. Despite political differences, he thought them both good officers.

Peter and I discussed the news quite a bit over the years. Even in his early nineties, he remained well informed on events of the day. We shared a concern with the public's almost reflexive support for military actions around the world and with their credulity of the "experts" who guided foreign policy and military matters. We were especially upset if not disgusted by the 2003 war with Iraq, which we both thought would lead to a protracted insurgency and substantial US casualties. Neither of us was pacifistic by any means; we simply wanted a more thoughtful and restrained use of our troops around the world. For all his gentleness, Peter thought that war was part of the human condition and would always be with us. Little of the history in his long life argued to the contrary.

In May 2004, Peter and I attended the dedication of the World War Two Memorial on the Mall, not far from the Lincoln Memorial. It was a far bigger event than we'd imagined. George W Bush spoke, as did two or three former presidents, Tom Brokaw whose *Greatest Generation* book was still quite popular then, and Tom Hanks who had played Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). We both thought that Brokaw and Hanks gave the best speeches. Peter admired Hanks's performance as the "average joe" company commander in *Saving Private Ryan* and was annoyed when he did not win the Oscar for it. I asked three WW2 veterans what they thought about the memorial. Peter and the veteran of Okinawa mentioned earlier thought that the Mall was getting cluttered and that the memorial should be built elsewhere. The third thought there were enough WW2 memorials already.

Toward the close of the dedication ceremony, a speaker asked the WW2 veterans to stand for a moment of silent tribute. Peter was rather frail by that time but he stood, holding on to his walker. He had a humble look on his face for the few minutes of the tribute. I got the impression he was thinking about his "boys" who hadn't come back.

Peter remained interested in the 3rd Armored Division. He read the unit's newsletter avidly and wrote letters of condolences to the families of men in his unit whose passing was noted. He attended many of

the annual reunions, the last of which was in 2007 in a Northern Virginia hi-rise hotel overlooking Arlington National Cemetery. I had the privilege of attending with him and Stephanie. We joked about introducing me to the others as the unit drummer boy. We thought it funny, but I don't think too many other people did. I asked beforehand if there would be a lot of backslapping and tall tales and he replied that there was a good deal of that in the fifties and sixties but it had long since given way to a more subdued event of simply seeing old friends and noting their declining numbers.

A few guys there, after feigning amusement at the drummer boy intro, asked if I was a veteran. When I mentioned that I'd been in the army in Vietnam, their smiles became genuine and warm. We were not a mystical band of brothers – I sensed we all disliked the romantic flourishes heaped on something as ugly as war – just some guys who had experienced similar things in their youths, a quarter century apart. We mused over the naive ideas of war we once had and the hard education that lay ahead, and we recalled the odd sensations and sounds when under fire. Peter remarked that this reunion would likely be his last. It was.

After his stroke in 2007 and as he went into his nineties, he was unable to follow the news as well as he had, but he did look through the newspaper on a daily basis. He managed to get out most every day with the help of assistants. He accepted his limitations, enjoyed life day to day, and loved learning of new things. He marveled as I showed him the Internet on my laptop. I also showed him a 4gb thumb drive and told him it could hold about four thousand books. "Amazing!" he said smiling widely.





**Peter with Paula, one of his wonderful helpers**



**Peter and I exploring the web**

I used to try to exercise his memory by asking him his service number (he always rattled it off instantly) or things like the German word for “river” or the Russian word for “bread” or the French word for “street.” His recollection of foreign words was surprisingly good. I once asked him if he remembered Calvados and I saw a flash of memory come across his face, but it was faint and fleeting. He asked what Calvados was and I said it was a village he liberated in France, where he was given a strong local drink. He laughed and said, “It hit me like a hammer!”



Enjoying a glass of Calvados, ca 2007

The most remarkable thing he ever told me was said in passing. In the many years after the war, while traveling on business or pleasure, he would make a point of meeting with families of soldiers from G Company who'd been killed in the war – “my boys” as he called them. He would meet with family members and tell them, as best he could, where and how their loved ones died. I've told that to a few people, not many. Non-veterans think it's touching – and it certainly is. When I tell it to war veterans, however, they are stunned. They look at me and wonder if they'd heard me right as they try to see themselves in such a situation, but cannot. They then think, as I did on first hearing Peter's mention of this, how noble he was and how painful those gatherings must have been, perhaps especially for him. Greater courage and decency neither they nor I could ever imagine, let alone exhibit.

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**Peter at Brookside Gardens, 2007, with Benita, one of his helpers. He's wearing his 3rd Armored Division cap.**