



IN FRONT OF THE SIGN sat the 7th Infantry Division in Korea (above). Maj. Delbert L. Townsend is the fifth from the left. 1st Lt. Townsend (below) was suited and ready for a parachute jump at Fort Bragg, N.C., during training.

Army Veteran reflects on World War II years

By COL. DEL TOWNSEND
U.S. Army, retired
ColDelTownsend@aol.com

It is an honor to be recognized as veterans of World War II in our twilight years, yet it is often difficult to admit that we are nearing the end of our road.

After some 66-odd years, our memory may start to fade and the many details of our wartime activities may be lost forever. I hate to admit this, but my memory is about like my hair — short. Each of us in our own way can reflect back on our World War II experiences and recall many events that we will carry to our graves.

Many of those were sad occasions that bring tears to our eyes as we relive them. Some, however, were hilarious and often bring tears of joy as we reminisce with our comrades of many years ago. If I may, I would like to relate one such incident that I will never forget. Following the completion of Tennessee maneuvers, the 17th Airborne Division moved into Camp Forrest, Tenn. This incident involves my 24-hour tour as officer of the guard.

I joined Company A, 1st Battalion, 194th Glider Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division at Camp Mackall, N.C., in May 1943. I was a brand new second lieutenant fresh out of Officer Candidate School.

The basic troops were draftees just 18. They arrived at Hoffman, N.C., on troop trains in civilian clothes. We issued them uniforms, gave them a GI haircut and started our basic training. We completed our basic, small-unit and glider training, then moved on for the Tennessee maneuvers. At the completion of the maneuvers, we returned to Camp Forrest, Tenn. The Division Parachute School was on schedule and the preparation for our overseas movement continued.

While stationed there at Camp Forrest, troopers of the 17th were often assigned stockade duty as part of the interior guard. The Post Stockade housed about 100 hard-core prisoners. Several of the inmates were under the death sentence and many were doing life sentences. Believe me, this assignment for a 24-hour tour in command of this crew would make you sit up and take notice.

The officers assigned to the 17th might get one tour of duty with a rare



Young Townsend

chance of two. For the officers, there was the officer of the day which required a captain. The officer of the guard required a Lieutenant, first or second.

I was promoted to 1st lieutenant on Dec. 21, 1943, so I was qualified for the assignment. The entire interior guard unit for one tour of duty consisted of the officer of the day, the officer of the guard, the sergeant of the guard and some 100 guards divided into three groups. The officers and the sergeant were on duty 24 hours while the guards were on for two hours and off for four. The guard mount (the changing of the guard and the normal inspections) came off without a hitch. Guarding the stockade and the other posts for the night was not a problem.

The first major problem occurred about 8 a.m. on the interior of the stockade. The officer of the day instructed me, as officer of the guard, to make a roll call of the prisoners. With all of my guards in position I instructed the sergeant of the guard to blow the whistle for the prisoners to fall in.

With all the prisoners in formation, I called the first name from the roster provided by the officer of the day. Much to my surprise, about seven prisoners answered, "Here sir." I reprimanded the prisoners and called the first name again. Needless to say, I got the same response. With the officer of the day standing there with his hands on his hips, I had to do something.

With my guards in place, I gave the command "right face, forward march, double time march." We went around the interior of the Stockade about 10 times. My guards were nearly exhausted carrying their weapons. I put the prisoners in

place and attempted to call the roll again. Again, the same result.

When I called the first name, possibly 10 prisoners answered "Here sir." This time, I put the Guards stationary and I took the Prisoners on their run. This time I took them around the compound about 12 times. When I brought the prisoners back for my third attempt to call the roll, the same thing happened.

I was really concerned by then and not sure what I should do. I put them back in formation and double timed about eight times around the compound with the guards stationary. This time, when I brought them into the formation area, I really read them the riot act. I regret to say that I used some bad words. Then the real surprise.

I jerked out my 45-caliber pistol and told the prisoners exactly what we were going to do. I said I wanted all of the prisoners to get on the ground, belly on the ground, and remain there until the sergeant of the guard called their name — last name, first name and middle initial.

When your name is called, I said, get up and run to your barracks. Once your name is called, if more than one prisoner gets up and starts to run for the barracks, only one of you will make it because I will use my weapon. With all of these bad guys on the ground I was surprised how well this procedure worked. There were no close calls that I am aware of, however, there were some repercussions.

Shortly after the roll call incident, about a dozen prisoners reported for sick call and about the same number wanted to file a complaint with the inspector general for the treatment they had received.

The officer of the day complimented me on the manner in which I had handled this very touchy matter. That was my one and only tour of duty as the officer of the guard.

I have often asked myself, "What would you have done if more than one prisoner had jumped up and made a run for the barracks after a name was called?"

Thank God I didn't have to answer that question!

Col. Del Townsend
Cos. A & B, 194th GIR
17th Airborne Division Association
President 2004-2008



IN JANUARY 1950, Capt. Delbert Townsend was a recruiting officer for the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C.