

Individual History

@&TITLE = Lt. Col. Tom Riggs' Remarkable WWII Odyssey

@&AUTHOR = From the Providence Journal, December 30, 1985:

@&AUTHOR = By John Hanlon, special to the Journal-Bulletin

@&AUTHOR = Jul-Aug-Sep 1988

Tom Riggs fights a different battle now. Last September (1985) the 69 year-old Riggs underwent surgery for the removal of a cancerous lung. (another operation in 1987) He is recuperating these days with the aid of his wife, Virginia, in Providence. The post operative process goes well, and Tom looks ahead optimistically. He is a former Textron executive, now a management consultant, and a director of several companies, work that is largely on hold. The ailment and its treatment have taken a toll on Riggs' weight and vigor. Still the marks are there of a big, handsome man of commanding presence - such as the young Riggs out of West Virginia who, at 6'-3" and 225 pounds, was a captain and star tackle of the University of Illinois football team of 1940. The same year he played in the Blue Gray game, captaining the Blue team. Later the Washington Redskins could not understand his lack of response to written offers to play for them at \$250 a game.

He didn't answer because by then he was in the Army as a reserve second lieutenant. And before long, by competitive exam he won one of six appointments available as a Regular Army officer in the Corps of Engineers.

Then, Tom Riggs was thrust into the other big battle of his life.

It began in the "bitter woods" of the Ardennes in Belgium, where, at age 28, Lt. Col. Thomas J. Riggs Jr., was commander of the 81st Combat Engineer Battalion of the 106th Infantry Division. His 650 men and officers had been well trained and kept together as a unit back in the States, whereas the division's first crop of infantrymen had been drained off as fillers for outfits already fighting in Europe. In their place came the first of the 18-year-old draftees, plus others taken from specialists schools and made foot soldiers - not exactly willingly. Sparsely trained, they comprised essentially, the greenest of the green divisions when the 106th went on line in northeastern Belgium on 12 Dec., 1944. This was the time of General Eisenhower's "calculated risk" in defending the area. Normally, a division is assigned to a five mile front to defend. The 106th Division's front extended for some 27 miles. But no German action was anticipated.

"When we took over from the veteran 2nd Division," Riggs recalled recently, "they said it was a country club, a great place for a new outfit to break in." Four days later, at 5 a.m. on Dec 16th, heavy artillery shells slammed into the 106th Division around the town of St. Vith. Hitler had unleashed his last-ditch offensive. Tanks and infantry in huge numbers began breaking through all along the division's area, with the main thrust headed directly at St. Vith. To the east of St. Vith, closest to the attackers, was Tom Riggs.

On the second day, with battle confusion almost chaotic, Riggs was ordered to block the prime road into St. Vith with a hastily formed "Cox's Army," as he later called it. He had about 350 men, parts of his own outfit not already fighting, remnants of routed outfits, some of the division's cooks and band members and a tank destroyer platoon so new its three guns were not yet equipped with aiming sights. (The entire platoon, sent off by Riggs for its first action, simply disappeared.)

With this "army" Riggs directed operations that held back a superior force for five days. He personally led several counterattacks that steadied his positions; he stalked the line boldly so his troops could see that he was still there, encouraging scared soldiers to hold on.

As a division, the 106th fought doggedly before being overwhelmed. For five days they stalled the Germans around St. Vith, which was 25 miles closer to the enemy than Bastogne, the defense of which epitomized the American effort in the Bulge. But if it had not been for the 106th which lost 70 percent of its 12,000 some people killed, wounded and captured, there might not have been time to put together a Bastogne.

For all their greenness and ultimate fate, the 106th Division won even the admiration of British General Bernard Montgomery, not given to generally

praising American troops. In his best English manner, Monty said of the 106th after the battle, "By Jove, they stuck it out those chaps." Riggs' battalion, for its part, was awarded the Unit Citation, a medal not easily gained. The commendation told of the 81st's "extraordinary heroism, gallantry and determination... setting the battalion apart and above other units participating in the same engagement."

Riggs himself received the Silver Star and, additionally, an unusual compliment in a Saturday Evening Post article published about two years later detailing the story of the 106th Infantry Division.

"All combat troops are pretty skeptical of decorations," the Post story said in part, "knowing too well that too many acts of high valor go unrewarded because an officer did not happen to be around to file a report. But the 106th's soldiers to a man, are unanimous in agreeing that Lt. Col. Thomas Riggs... was the outstanding hero of the division."

On the sixth day of the battle, Germans with tanks were so close to Riggs' position, he said, that he could hear them talking at times. The weather was freezing cold and it was snowing.

"The only hope we had left," Riggs said, "was to break up into small groups, travel by night and try to infiltrate out of there."

At dawn on Dec. 21, with seven men, no maps, no food and little ammunition, Riggs' group headed out. He wore the standard wool uniform and only the liner of his trench coat. He removed his insignia of rank and discarded his helmet, the latter because of the noise made by rubbing against branches.

"The first day we stayed out of trouble," Riggs said, "But the second night, moving along a creek line someplace west of St. Vith, we ran into a platoon or so of Germans. They surrounded us and then mortared us."

A fragment grazed Riggs on the back of the head, enough to break the skin but not cause any lasting damage," he said. But the impact knocked him out. When he came to, several Germans were standing close to him. He was a prisoner of war.

@&HEADER SMALL = Prisoner of War

The Germans marched him to an assembly point where about 40 other Americans - none from his outfit - were under guard. Soon they were put on the road, marching toward a railhead, they were given to understand. So began Tom Riggs' odyssey.

The march continued for 12 days, covering 110 miles eastward to Stalag to a railhead in the direction of Berlin. (probably Stalag 12-A at Limburg - CUB ed's note.)

Their treatment as prisoners, Riggs said, was "fairly brutal."

"We'd stop near a village, and the guards would go in and forage for food for themselves," he said. "for us there was mainlyhardtack and snow. But the guards would come back with sandwiches for themselves. They'd eat them and throw the crusts to us. After a while, I'm sorry to say, there'd be some groveling for the remains. Part of it, I think, was done to get even with us. With all the bombings we, the Allies, were doing, it didn't leave the Germans with much to eat themselves. So I think they took delight in watching us grovel like a pack of dogs for the crusts."

"At that point, anything" that was happening to Riggs was made worse by the letdown at being taken prisoner.

"I guess that was the lowest I ever felt in my life" was the way he expressed it. "I had hardly eaten or slept during the fighting at St. Vith. Then, with the march, cold and being have starved, I guess I was down to about 170 pounds. I just felt beaten into the ground."

@&HEADER SMALL = Lost his outfit

Something else was eating away at him. He was a commanding officer who had been taken away from his outfit.

"I was absolutely embarrassed," Riggs said. "I felt I had lost a lot of guys. I felt I had not done the job I was given to do, and that hurt. I couldn't understand why we had no advance information of that attack coming, and little or none of the help we had asked for. At that point in time I had no knowledge of any purpose served in the loss of those guys with me. I think I was on the way to becoming a basket case, mentally. That lasted for a few years after the war, when I learned that what we had done at St. Vith helped."

At the railhead the prisoners were put in freight cars. A couple of days later they arrived at a prison camp - Stalag 4-B - outside of Berlin.

(Stalag 4-B is Northwest of Dresden approx. 35 miles, on the Elbe River, and approx. 75 miles South of Berlin, near the town of Muhlberg - CUB editor's note) Riggs was there for about 10 days, during which, he said, he "kind of just observed things." One conclusion he reached was that the Americans were not as "good" as the British at being prisoners of war. A lot of Americans, he said, seemed satisfied just to sit on the sidelines, as if at a football game, waiting for it to end.

"But the British were always doing something to bedevil the Germans," he said. "One time, for example, they got hold of a length of wire. They ran it down one post of a two-tiered bunk and covered it loosely with tape - on purpose, so the Germans would be sure to find it.

"Then they snaked the wire through the floor and, underneath, dug a hole about eight feet deep and put the wire in it. At the bottom they placed an envelope with a message inside it, filled the hole up and settled back to see what the Germans would do.

"Well, they spotted it a day or two later. They were really delighted with themselves, figuring they had found something to do with a radio.

"So, they cleared out the barracks, and they followed the wire to the ground underneath. They then dug out the hole and came to the envelope. Now they were really elated. They opened the envelope, thinking they were on something big, and read the message. Written in German was the one word. "S -."

Riggs said he was interrogated "pretty hard" at Stalag 4-B.

"They'd try to compromise me," he said. "by saying the others had given some kind of information and asked me to verify it. I said only what I was required to say: name and serial number. That infuriated them a few times, and I was hit across the back with a riding crop for my stubbornness. After 10 days, possibly as my punishment, I was sent off alone by truck to a camp in Poland. It was somewhere near Poznan which is roughly halfway between Berlin and Warsaw.

@&HEADER SMALL = Prisoner in Poland

There Riggs lived in a two-story barracks with outside facilities, with older Germans as guards. Food was sparse, mostly ersatz bread and soup. He said the treatment there was generally "not that bad."

Twice, in keeping with prisoner protocol, he proposed plans for his escape. Both were turned down by the senior officer among the captives. In one case, he was told, he must wait his turn; the other was such that it might cause trouble for those left behind.

"I still had enough drive left in me, though, that I absolutely wanted to get back and see what happened to my outfit," he said. "Also a rumor started that the Russians had taken Warsaw and that the Germans were going to march us out of Poland and back to Germany. I decided I wasn't going to have any of that." Just before dawn on his 28th day in the camp, Riggs left his barracks for the latrine. He noticed immediately that the usual guard was not in sight. Spontaneously, without prior planning, he decided that his chance to escape might be there.

"I walked straight to a deserted mess hall, a few buildings away, near the wire fence," he said. "I went inside. In a corner was a walk-in ice chest, seven or eight feet tall. I climbed on top of it and rolled back until I was snuggled up against a wall, and I lay there.

"In a while, I could hear the Germans taking a roll call. My name was the second one called. When there was no answer, I could hear all hell breaking loose. Then the search was on. Four or five times patrols came through the mess hall. One of them even had dogs with them, barking like hell. Each time, the guards opened the ice chest doors and looked in. But nobody checked on top." After a long, cold day, Riggs left his hideout when darkness fell. He clocked the routine of the German patrols passing outside the double barricade of barbed wire.

"I soon figured out how often they came by the place I would have to go," he said. "Then something said to me, 'This is the time to move,' and I went for it. I don't remember exactly how I did it, except that I didn't go over the wire, I just went through it' somehow. Only after I was out did I notice that I was terribly chewed up by it."

He was still wearing only his regular uniform, the coat liner and a scarf to cover his head. His only plan was to travel at night, checking road signs at major intersections that would point his way to Warsaw. His physical condition was scarcely up to the task.

"The first night I walked in the scrub beside the road," Riggs said. "By the second night I was so weak and tired and cold and frustrated that I said to hell with it and walked right out in the middle of the road. I was challenged twice by guttural voices. But I just put my head down and kept moving.. and got away with it.

"The third night I came to the outskirts of Poznan, and I knew it was too big for me to get through unnoticed. As I was sitting on a culvert in the shadows, I saw a small group coming toward me down the road. I faded through a fence and lay there. Suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder, and there was a guy challenging me. "I'm an American colonel," I said. With that this guy threw his arms around me and kissed me on both cheeks.

"It turned out that he was a teenager, a member of the Polish underground, and so were the people coming down the road. One of them spoke good English. They took me to a house in Poznan and filled me with potatoes and that great Polish sausage and warm milk, things I hadn't seen in two months. I ate and ate - and then upchucked."

@&HEADER SMALL = The Russians arrive

The underground moved Riggs from house to house for about a week. Then the Russians arrived, and Riggs' Polish friends put him in the hands of a Russian colonel commanding an armored unit fitted with mostly American made equipment.

"He was a burly man who couldn't read or write his own language," Riggs said. "but he could fight. First thing he said to me was, "Come on, Americanski, I'll have you in Berlin in a couple of weeks and you can meet your own people." Riggs fought and lived with the Russians for 10 days, an experience that left him with a warm feeling for Russian hospitality and a certain awe for their fighting style.

"At night the colonel would take over the biggest house in the village," Riggs said, "and there would be plenty of scrounged food to eat and a lot of vodka to drink. When he noticed I didn't have an insignia of rank, he had a mechanic make one out of a bottom of a mess kit." It is a perfect replica of an American lieutenant colonel's silver leaf, which Riggs still has as a cherished souvenir. As for fighting, Riggs recalled the time the Russians encountered a single German tank.

"Instead of firing at it," he said, " they put 20 soldiers on a stake-bodied truck and they went after it. They just swarmed all over it and literally beat it to death, It was scary, the lack of fear they showed but that's how they did it."

The Russian episode ended when the word came to have Allies such as Riggs returned to Warsaw. The Russian colonel took him part way and he completed the trip by train. At Warsaw he spent about 10 days putting his engineering training to work in helping rehabilitate a displaced persons camp. The odyssey resumed. From Warsaw, Riggs travelled some 750 miles on a Russian-manned, wood fueled train to Odessa on the Black Sea. There he talked his way onto a British tanker for the 500-mile lift to Istanbul, Turkey. The tanker captain passed him onto a British freighter bound to Port Said in Egypt, some 1,000 miles away and considerably off Riggs' course. It turned out well enough, though, because at Port Said, with the help of the Red Cross, he caught a ride on the troopship Mauritania, heading some 1,800 miles to Naples, Italy.

There for the first time in nearly three months, Riggs checked in with the American military. When he spoke of his desire to rejoin his 81st Engineers, the reply he received was crushing.

"They told me flatly that Army policy forbid me going back there," he said.

"Anyone in my situation, they said, was automatically sent home on a 60-day medical furlough. Something about the danger to escaped prisoners of war being captured again, or the possibility that they may have been compromised by the enemy.

"I didn't know exactly what that all meant," he said. "But I told them, "if you don't let me go back to my people, you are going to have a basket case on your hands."

"They relented, finally, because of the way I put it, I guess. Also by then - this was early in March - there were signs the war was beginning to wind down. They said I could go back."

@&HEADER SMALL = Back to the unit

He was flown to Marseilles, France, then to Paris for a few days of rest and a debriefing he found almost laughingly inept and shallow.

"My first night in Paris, though, something unbelievable happened to me. "I went to a bar frequented by Americans. I had just taken a seat when a man from my outfit - the last person I'd seen around St. Vith - came over and stuck his big nose in my face. "You big devil," he said, 'we've been looking for you or your remains ever since."

A day or two later, Riggs was driven to a place in Brittany" - no more than 350 miles west of his point of capture. There the 106th division, including his 81st Engineers, was refitting before taking over the containment of a German garrison holding out in the vicinity of St. Nazaire.

The reunion, when it came after so long a trail for Riggs, was simple in its way. Tom Riggs' words could only touch on its full impact, and his description of it was spoken in a quiet and almost distant voice.

"When I walked into the 81st's headquarters," he said, "everyone was astonished to see me. My place had been kept open, and a major, my second in command, came roaring out from behind the desk and we hugged. I was a little broken up, all right, and so were the others. Then we had a big party, with a lot of story telling. The party lasted all night long."

@&HEADER SMALL = Epilogue

Tom Riggs was assigned to the American Embassy in Mexico as a Military Attache, after the war. In 1947, he resigned his commission to enter private business. His 81st Engineers never did get back to the fighting, because the 106th was given a different assignment. Instead of taking up positions around St. Nazaire, the division was sent in late spring to the Ruhr Valley to round up and process German prisoners... nearly one million of them by the time the task was done. Ironically, Riggs' task was to supervise his Battalion in the construction of barbed-wire compounds to hold the German prisoners.

@&TITLE = Colonel Riggs - CO 81st Eng. - Illini "MAN of the YEAR"

@&AUTHOR = a reprint from the Providence, Rhode Island<R> Journal Bulletin of November 29th, 1989.

@&AUTHOR = by Bill O'Connell

@&AUTHOR = Special to the Journal-Bulletin

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Providence's Tom Riggs knows what it is like to fight for his life. He has had to fight many times in his 73 years. Yet he sees himself as being "terribly lucky."

That view says a lot about what type of man Tom Riggs is. For it is not "terribly lucky" to have fought on the front line during one of World War II's fiercest battles. And it is not "terribly lucky" to have been a prisoner of war or to have faced cancer surgery twice in two years.

Tom Riggs has gone through all these things and survived. That could be deemed lucky. Still, if one word is needed to describe Tom Riggs, it would not be "lucky." It would be courageous."

For his heroic efforts during World War II's Battle of the Bulge, Riggs was recently recognized as Illinois University's "I" Man of the Year. The award goes annually to a former Illini athlete who has achieved honor or distinction in a chosen field or occupation. The award was presented at a banquet on November 10 and again before the Illinois football game against Michigan the following day, Veteran's Day.

On that Saturday, before a crowd of 73,000, Riggs marched out on the field he had played on over 49 years earlier. The flag was raised. The national anthem was played. Three fighter pilots made a fly-by in Riggs' honor. The latter was a surprise that brought a tear to the veteran's eye.

After the aerial tribute, a declaration describing Riggs' achievements was read. During the statement's delivery, the crowd was very quiet.

"Then suddenly, they let go with a tremendous shout that lasted a long time," Riggs said a few days later while sitting in the den of his East Side home. "I had forgotten what that (the crowd) had meant in my playing days."

Riggs was first cheered on an Illinois football field in 1938. That year he earned the first of his three varsity letters. In 1940, his final season, he was elected the team's captain. He also captained the Blue team that year in the annual Blue-Gray college All-Star game.

At 6'3" and 225 pounds, Riggs was considered a large tackle in his day. The 1940 edition of Football Illustrated, rated him as a Star of the West and called him "One of those rock-ribbed, natural tackles who knows what to do, and does it." As was the norm then, he played both offense and defense.

"I averaged 58 minutes a game for three years in the Big Ten," Riggs said. And he made the most of those minutes, playing well enough to draw an offer from the Washington Redskins in the fall of 1941. Riggs, however, could not accept their \$250-a-game bid because he was then in the Army. He had graduated from Illinois' College of Engineering in February of '41 as a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers Reserve and had been called to active duty that May. In December of 1944, at the age of 28, Riggs was a lieutenant colonel commanding the 81st Combat Engineers Battalion of the 106th Infantry Division on the Belgium border outside the town of St. Vith. The 106th was a young and inexperienced outfit that had been sent to a sector of the front designated as quiet. It did not remain quiet very long.

On December 16, less than a week after it had gone on line, the 106th was hit with an intense attack by the Germans. The next day Riggs, the 225-pound, rock-ribbed left tackle, was charged with blocking the main road into St. Vith. For five days Riggs led a defense that held off a superior force. He walked the line at least three times a day to show his young soldiers he was with them that someone was with them. He did not sleep. Finally on the sixth day, his outfit was forced to split up. The next night his group was surrounded by Germans. A mortar fragment grazed Riggs in the back of the head and knocked him unconscious. When he awoke, he was a prisoner of war.

Riggs marched to a German camp and was then transported to another German camp in Poland. From there, on the 28th day of his captivity, he escaped.

Early in the morning, Riggs left his barracks for the latrine. When he realized there was no guard in the area, he slipped into a deserted mess hall and hid on the top of a walk-in refrigerator. He listened during roll call, when the Germans realized he was not there. He listened as the Germans searched the mess hall with dogs. During the search, they looked in the refrigerator, but none looked on top.

"I held my breath and prayed," he said, "and it worked." That night he hid in the shadows and watched as the guards patrolled the wire fences surrounding the camp. As the night wore on, the intervals between passes grew longer. Finally he decided to make his move. He braced the wire up with chair legs he had taken from the mess hall, and escaped into the woods.

Once out, Riggs headed for Warsaw. The third night he saw a group coming down the road. As he hid, a man tapped him on the shoulder and challenged him. It turned out that he and the others were members of the Polish underground.

"That's how much luck you can have in life," Riggs said.

The underground placed him with the Russians. He fought with them for 10 days before returning to the American military in Naples, Italy. There he was told he was going home. Riggs, however, pleaded with his commanders to let him rejoin his battalion. Eventually they relented, and Riggs was returned to his outfit. It was then that he learned that 50 percent of his men had been either killed, wounded or captured.

Two years later, the Saturday Evening Post published an article detailing the 106th's gallant stand and the great importance of it slowing down the Germans. In the same article, Riggs received a special compliment: "... the 106th's soldiers, to a man, are unanimous in agreeing that Lt. Col. Thomas Riggs of Huntington, West Virginia was the outstanding hero of the division." For his

bravery, Riggs was decorated with the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. He also received the Croix de Guerre from both Belgium and France.

"The one I value above all else," he said, "is the Distinguished Unit Citation." It is not surprising that the award Riggs holds most dear is the one that honors his unit as a whole. When Riggs talks of his successes, he speaks of teamwork, enthusiasm, goals and leadership.

It is also not surprising that one of Riggs' favorite stories involves a complete team effort on the football field. It's a story he told the current, edition of the Illini football team when he spoke to the squad at the request of the head coach John Mackovic the day before the Michigan game.

The year was 1939 and the 0-3-1 Fighting Illini were pitted against the undefeated Michigan Wolverines. The Illini had been given 30 new plays and had been revved up by the coaching staff. The preparations paid off as Illinois beat the superior Michigan club 16-7.

"We were tied for 60 full minutes," Riggs said as he retold the story the following week.

A leader throughout his life, Riggs has faced some tough foes. His latest have been against a particularly vicious enemy cancer. Twice since 1985 he has undergone surgery. Both times the surgery was successful. Through it all, he has been supported by a very special team his family.

When he awoke from his first operation, the removal of his right lung, Riggs saw his six children and wife Ginnie at the foot of his bed. His youngest son, Rory, tossed him a football and a T-shirt that read "Property of Team Riggs."

"He just wanted me to know that we were all together in this," Riggs said.

Tom Riggs says he has been lucky. Maybe so. But it is the people who have played, fought, worked and lived with him who have been the luckiest.

@&COLUMN BREAK =

@&TITLE = Colonel C.C. Cavender, 423d C.O.

@&AUTHOR = from the Sun City News, June 30, 1988<R>by Frank Hammond, Staff Writer

@&AUTHOR = Oct-Nov-Dec 1988

Old Soldiers never die," goes the old barracks room ballad, "they just fade away." And some fade away slowly.

For example, there is the Sun Citian Col. Charles C. Cavender, who together with his wife, Lois, only recently returned from the United States Military Academy at West Point where he attended the 65th anniversary reunion of his 1932 graduating class. Of the 294 cadets who graduated with the class, 14 were present for the reunion and 45 are still alive.

Born Oct. 2, 1897 in Grapevine, Texas, Cavender retired from the U.S. Army at Fort MacArthur, Calif. Sept. 30, 1953 after 36 years of active duty spanning three wars. When asked if his initial interest in attending West Point was because he came from a military family, Cavender shook his head and laughing wryly, said "My grandfather was a sergeant in the Confederate Army, but I don't think that influenced me. What did influence him was in his words, "a wave of patriotism" that swept over the campus of Texas A&M in November of 1917 when he was a second year student there and the United States had entered World War I. He had taken competitive exams for West Point and Annapolis and had been promised a principal appointment for June, 1918, by his district's congressman. But war fever was raging and Texas A&M students, according to Col Cavender "were leaving in droves for service in the armed forces." He added, "I enlisted as a volunteer for the duration of the war."

Eager to get overseas, young Cavender volunteered for the assignment to a field signal battalion of the 5th Division and was sent to France. While he was in the Battle of the Argonne, he was selected to compete for appointment to West Point. The War Department had been allotted 90 appointments, and one man from each regiment in the American Expeditionary Forces approximately 200 were to compete for them. Private 1st Class Charles C. Cavender was one of the 18 who made a passing grade and received orders from General John J. Pershing's headquarters to proceed to the Commanding General, Port of Embarkation, "by whom they will be sent to report to Commandant of the West Point Military Academy." Cavender noted that General Pershing gave the graduation address for his class at West Point.

It was at West Point that Cadet Cavender made the acquaintance of a fellow classmate, now a fellow Sun Citian, Col. Warren G. Robinson, and started a friendship that has lasted 70 years.

Between his graduation from West Point in 1932 and the entrance of the United States into World War II, Cavender served in a variety of assignments in various units at a variety of posts in the United States, and the Territory of Hawaii and Panama.

"I was stationed in Panama at Fort Davis on the Atlantic side in 1930-31 where the average rainfall is 160 inches," the colonel recalled. "I was at Fort Shafter in Hawaii from 1939-41 but was back in the states before Pearl Harbor." At the time of the Japanese attack on 7 December, 1941, Cavender was on duty in Washington, D.C. He became regimental commander of the 423rd Infantry Regiment of the 106th Division which was activated March 15, 1943 at Camp Jackson, S.C. After Tennessee maneuvers in February, 1944, the division was shipped to England.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1944, it loaded on boats for the continent where it became part of the First Army. "No turkey for us," the colonel quipped.

During the crucial Battle of the Bulge, Cavender's regiment was cut off and surrounded. The colonel and a number of his men were captured Dec. 19, 1944. He was liberated on April 5 by units of Gen. George S. Patton's Army. During this engagement which involved a saturation bombing attack by American planes, Col. Cavender was wounded. He recalls the experience with "On V-E Day I was having surgery in a hospital in England."

Among Cavender's awards and decorations, which include the Combat Infantry Badge, Bronze Star medal, Purple Heart, both WWI and WWII Victory medals and campaign medals with battle stars, is the Legion of Merit.

The citation reads in part: "Colonel Charles C. Cavender ... for exceptionally outstanding service as regimental commander ... from 16 December to 19 December 1944. Col. Cavender had charge of a defense sector which was surrounded by the Germans. When the enemy launched a counterattack he directed his regiment in a delaying action long enough for the First Army to reorganize, and as a result the enemy failed in its counterattack attempt. Colonel Cavender's services reflect the highest credit upon him and the armed forces of the United States." From China, Cavender entered occupation duty in Japan where he served, in his words, as "Deckhand" (Chief of Staff) to two different commanding generals of the 24th Division. They were Major General Anthony McAuliffe, famous for his response of "Nuts!" to the Germans demanding his surrender at Bastogne, and Major General William Dean, who was captured by the enemy early in the Korean War and remained a prisoner for three years.

Cavender returned to the United States in 1950 where he was post commander at Fort MacArthur until his retirement in 1953.

After residing in various communities in Orange County and briefly in Santa Barbara, Col. Cavender and his wife of 59 years, Carolyn, now deceased, moved to Sun City in 1972.

He married his present wife, Lois, whom he characterizes as my "right arm," in 1985. He credits her with getting him back to West Point for the 65th reunion of his graduating class, saying, "I never would have made it without her."

At the reunion although it had been raining the day and night before and part of the day of the parade there were rumors that it had been canceled the sun broke through and the skies cleared while the 4,000 young men and women cadets passed in review to honor the old soldiers on the reviewing line.

On his recent 90th birthday, Cavender received from West Point a handsomely bound booklet showing through pictures and brief narratives his career as a cadet. Inscribed on the black leather binding is this message

"Graduates of West Point Salute Charles C. Cavender, USMA 1923."

(Editor's note The men of the 423rd Regiment and the 106th Infantry Division Association, its Officers and Board of Directors also salute you. <R> We hope you enjoyed your 91st on 2 October, 1988. We are all looking forward to seeing you at Sacramento in 1990.