We Were There

Collingtonians and WWII

PART 1

December 1941 - August 1945

Kay Swift, Editor

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Table of Contents

Pearl Harbor - December 7, 1941	Waldo Simons
Remembering Pearl Harbor - Dec.1941	Margaret Werts
The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal - Nov.1942	Bowdoin Craighill
Fighting in Alsace - Dec. 1944	Randal Walker
Wartime Cryptanalyst - 1944-45	Walter Sharp
Recording in France - 1944-45	Bob Willing
With the Red Cross in England - 1943-1945	Helen Eisenhart

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Pearl Harbor - December 7, 1941
By Waldo Simons
(as told to Harriet Simons)

Ensign Waldo Simons in 1943

Sunday morning was a beautiful day, warm and sunny, as Waldo, on watch from 4 to 8 A.M. on the bridge of the battleship SS PENNSYLVANIA, watched the sun rise in the east. Flagship of the fleet, the PENNSYLVANIA was not lined up with the seven other battleships in the channel between Ford Island and the mainland, but was in drydock for routine repairs across from the island on the mainland. The high sides of the drydock and the huge moving cranes alongside blocked most of the view. Behind her were two destroyers, the DOWNES and the CASSIN, and in front, docked in the water, were the mine-layers OGLALA and HELENA.

It was a sunny peaceful weekend. Many of the officers and sailors were enjoying an onshore weekend of parties and time with their families. At 8 a.m. as Waldo left the bridge to go below for breakfast, he heard planes coming in from the northeast, but there were two large airfields on Oahu and flight training exercises were common. It was only when Japanese planes flew low and dropped bombs on the seven battleships lined up off Ford Island that anyone realized what was happening. The terrible sounds of explosives and the sights of fires and billowing smoke brought everyone into action. On the PENNSYLVANIA's loud speaker came the urgent call: "To battle stations! This is not a drill!" Waldo, an ensign less than a year out of the Naval Academy, the ship's secretary and assistant signal officer, was ordered below to the radio room to call all the men on shore to return immediately.

Some time later when he returned on deck he saw chaos, smoke, fire and massive destruction in all directions. The drydock had been partially flooded to allow the gunners to see over the high sides. A 50-pound bomb had ripped a crater in a starboard casement, and firefighters and medical teams were

rushing to the scene where as many as 40 men were killed. There was the deafening clamor of explosions, planes roaring overhead, sirens screaming, men shouting, artillery blasting away. The two destroyers in dry dock behind the ship had been bombed and completely destroyed. Waldo on the foredeck saw the mine-layer OGLALA list on her side and sink into the water. The Japanese carnage had gone on for two hours.

After the raid the PENNSYLVANIA limped out of Pearl Harbor, past the massive devastation in the harbor and the sunken hulls of the ARIZONA and OKLAHOMA and returned to San Francisco for repairs. She was back in action in the Pacific by the spring of 1942. Throughout the rest of the war the PENNSYLVANIA moved from island to island, providing tactical support and artillery cover for American Marines and Army troops invading Japanese strongholds. There was a 17-day battle in heavy fog in the Aleutian Islands in May 1943 before the Japanese finally retreated from the islands of Attu and Kiska.

In July 1944 Waldo was relieved of sea duty and was reassigned to MIT to study for his Master's degree in Naval Architecture.

Remembering Pearl Harbor December 1941

By Margaret Werts

My husband was Executive Officer on the destroyer SELFRIDGE. On December 6, 1941, with a group of other combat ships, they returned to Pearl Harbor after some weeks of escorting supply ships to and from the Marshall Islands. The word got out that the ships were in and my best friend, Lee, and I lost no time in driving to Pearl Harbor to pick up Ray and Charlie. (There was a military alert in force, and only the married officers with families ashore were allowed to leave the ship.)

The four of us had a festive few hours at the Royal Hawaiian, and during the conversation the men agreed that from what they could observe, the "Alert"

was not really all that alert. In any case, the boys were home, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

Margaret Werts in Honolulu

The next morning, at about eight o'clock, we awoke to the sound of many loud explosions. My husband commented that there must be some sort of gunnery practice going on that he didn't know about and he seemed quite puzzled. Just then, the phone rang. It was one of his shipmates, who announced "We're at war. I'll pick you up in 15 minutes." (We had no car with us at that time, having left ours at home on a recent trip to the mainland.) I made the inevitable pot of coffee, and we waited for Joe to arrive, not saying anything. When he came, and Charlie went off to war, I handed him an apple! (When I saw him for a few minutes, six weeks later when the ship came in to refuel, it was still bouncing around in the pocket of his jacket).

We all kept our ears to our radios, of course, and as far as I can remember, no specific accounts of damage were reported, but we realized that it was bad. The nationality of the planes was immediately established by the rising suns under their sides.

The only civilian fatality that I personally knew of was my Japanese cleaning woman, who lived in a Japanese section that suffered damage when the planes unloaded their bombs upon departing.

That first day, civilians were forbidden to use the streets and sidewalks. About noon, I looked out my bedroom window to see my best friend creeping across the lawn toward my apartment. She had dodged in and out of back yards and alleys to get there to see if I was all right. We then went to look in on a mutual friend and neighbor who had a new baby. All was well there. The friend with the baby said to me, "Margaret, I can't understand how you can look so cool and calm." I realized afterward that the reason was that I didn't have

enough sense or imagination to grasp the situation.

During the next few weeks bits of information drifted in to us about the extent of the damage from white-faced officers who would come home occasionally from their destroyed ships where they had been doing what they could to clean up the mess. No one was allowed to see the harbor, although we were permitted to use the commissary and the Officers' Club. Therefore, unlike my husband, I had no accurate idea of what had been done until Charlie and I sailed out of Pearl Harbor in February on our way back to the mainland for a new tour of duty. The passengers were all wordless as they looked at the twisted wreckage of the NEVADA, the remains of the sunken ARIZONA, and the keel of the capsized OKLAHOMA.

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal November 1942

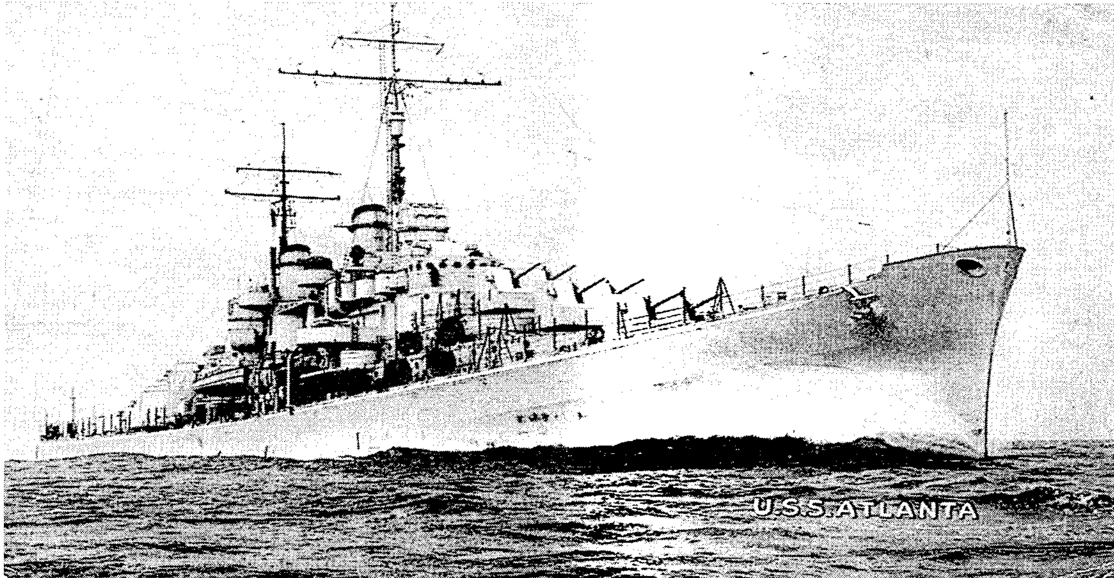
By G. Bowdoin Craighill, Jr. Commander, USNR

It was pitch black, just turned Friday, November 13, 1942, off the coast of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. Thirteen U.S. warships (cruisers and destroyers) and fourteen Japanese ships (including two battleships) were steaming at full speed on collision courses. Each force had been tracking the other. The USS ATLANTA, an antiaircraft cruiser (about 700 crew and 40 officers), was ready to open fire. We had been at general quarters (battle stations) for several days and nights, eating sandwiches. All hands had been ordered to shower and shift into clean clothes. This was no drill!

G. Bowdoin Craighill, Jr.

The ATLANTA was commissioned December 20, 1941. She was a new design, a beautiful ship, which a young naval architect named George Dankers helped design in the Navy Department's Bureau of Ships. The ship was built by the Federal Shipyards in

Kearney, New Jersey. The ATLANTA had eight twin turrets (sixteen 5-inch 38 caliber guns). She could fire a broadside of 14, a larger broadside than a battleship or an aircraft carrier. The 1.1-inch machine gun was designed,



The "Mighty A"

primarily, for defense against aircraft, as was the twenty-millimeter gun. My post was at Sky Aft, not at the bridge where most of the officers were killed.

Our forces had entered the battle zone in a single column moving northerly; the enemy had entered in three groups from the north, coming down the "slot" between the islands. The Japanese mission was to carry out heavy bombardment of the marines' position on the island.

Suddenly, the Japanese battleship HIEI and the destroyer AKASUKI flooded the ATLANTA with their searchlights' blue-white glow. Japanese star shells lit up the sky. The transition was instantaneous, from dead silence and utter darkness to the full eerie brilliance and thunder of this night battle. It was terrifying and unexpected - although we had drilled almost daily for this moment.

Admiral Callaghan, aboard the USS SAN FRANCISCO, after some confusion and delay, had called out "Commence Firing" to all ships. The ATLANTA (5-inch guns) and the HIEI (14-inch guns) opened fire at the same time (an unfair match!). My roommate, Edward Corboy, had control of the after gun mounts. His first salvo was short but his direction was correct. He spotted

out another 400 yards and started to hit the HIEI.

After my initial bewilderment, I tried by telephone to communicate with my 1.1-inch gun crews. As I was trying to take practical steps to deal with the situation, other thoughts, contradictory, kept rising: anger at the enemy and reluctant admiration at its skill in seamanship.

During the night, as ships changed course and changed targets, the USS SAN FRANCISCO hit us with 19 rounds of "friendly fire." The disabled ATLANTA had drifted into the Japanese line of fire. Friend and foe had become intermixed.

The ATLANTA was hit by a Japanese torpedo! I felt the sharp blow as the ship shuddered, moved sideways and then settled down, slowly sinking.

We fought stubborn fires until almost daybreak. Corboy and I organized bucket brigades near the ammunition storage (memories of using a bucket brigade at a boy's camp in Vermont). Later "handy billy" pumps were located. His and my Silver Star citations verify this episode, using standard acclamatory language: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity aboard, etc." and referred to our fire fighting in that dangerous area.

New fires resulted from numerous enemy shells. The dead were simply piled up. Body parts were thrown overboard. Operations were performed on makeshift tables. An estimate of forty-nine hits had blasted armament and control stations and set blazes in the superstucture. Everywhere topside the glow of flames outlined bodies and fragments of bodies among blackened gun mounts and buckled decks. The deck was aslant, slippery with blood and oil. A seaman standing next to me was hit by shrapnel, and killed instantly. About a month earlier my battle station had been changed. The officer replacing me had been decapitated. Casualties were: 19 out of 45 officers dead; 153 enlisted men were dead or missing. Survivors numbered about 525. Many were wounded.

It became apparent that the ship could not be saved. Captain Jenkins was authorized by Admiral Halsey to make the decision to scuttle the ATLANTA.

Take no chance of the enemy getting any secret material. The BOBOLINK, a navy tugboat, towed the ATLANTA away from the Japanese beachhead to 3 miles from Lunga Point to the south. Marine Higgins boats disembarked the crew. The battered ATLANTA sank at 8:00 P.M., the Captain being the last to leave.

I spent a relatively quiet two years aboard the light cruiser USS MOBILE (CL63) in the south Pacific. My last duty was Assistant Professor of Naval Science and Tactics, teaching NROTC at Notre Dame University.

The war ended. In brief, the US suffered greater losses in both personnel and ships. But the enemy was stopped, both on land and in control of the sea. There were future battles but the tide had turned. Only MIDWAY (an air battle) in June of 1942 was more significant than Guadalcanal. And the ATLANTA was there!

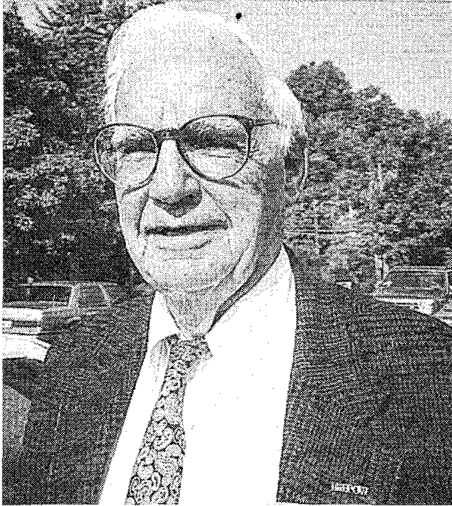
NOTE: Craighill was a "90-day wonder" in the Navy's V7 Program, studying as a reserve Midshipman at Abbott Hall, Chicago. After passing the three months' cram course on all aspects of seamanship, the Navy ordered him to teach navigation to the next class. He received his commission as an Ensign in June 1941. He reported to the ATLANTA as the Assistant Navigator.

Fighting in Alsace December 1944

By Randal Walker

I was a rifleman in the 62nd Battalion of the 14th Armored Division. We left the New York port of embarkation and arrived in Marseille, France, on October 1944. On the way over I talked to one of the other privates about combat in France. I was shocked to hear him say that if he were surrounded he would raise his hands and surrender. Strangely enough he received the Distinguished Service Cross, the highest award for gallantry in action in our battalion. I was idealistic, feeling that this was where we should be. When we got to France our Assistant Squad Leader, a sergeant, expressed regrets that

we were there and said that he knew that if any one of us could get out of being in combat, we would do so. I told him that we were all where we should be and doing what we should be doing. He ridiculed my words and we had a strong argument.


Randal Walker today

We were in Marseille about a month gathering equipment and getting ready. Then we were loaded into boxcars with our half-tracks (armored vehicles) on flatcars and were taken up to the front in Alsace-Lorraine. As soon as we arrived each squad rode in its own half-track. We finally reached a little town in Alsace, Gertwiller, where all the residents welcomed us. Shortly afterwards we rode on the backs of tanks that were in our column, going deeper into Gertwiller and, adjacent to the village, to Barr, a town that had been and still was occupied by the Germans. As we went in we threw hand grenades into the courtyards. Near the far end of the town we pulled in and stopped for awhile, but meantime we had discovered an enemy soldier in one of the courtyards. After we captured him a runner came from Company Headquarters and said we could not keep any prisoners; we would have to shoot him. The runner started out the door ready to carry out the shooting and I volunteered to help him. I said "We should spread the guilt around." So that is what I did. In later years I had bad feelings about my doing the shooting. Even though I believe it was then necessary, it haunted me.

We moved to the outside of the town, dug in, and I began to feel fatalistic about my chances for survival. "I won't get out of this alive," I thought, but I still felt that this was where I should be, and I did not wish to be anywhere else. We were on duty for four hours and then had a five-hour break. This continued until mid-morning and then all breaks were canceled. Suddenly I was aware of frozen puddles and realized how cold it was but I had my adrenalin to keep me warm. My thought, as I lay in my slit trench, was: "The Germans will attack in force and I will fire the bullets I have in my gun and throw my hand grenades

and then...?" I was saying to myself, "This is it. There will be no tomorrow."

Next morning we pulled a little closer to the town and dug in there. Then the Germans began their attack. A bullet hit the front of my helmet, denting it, but I could feel the dent and realized the bullet had not gone through. Looking around, I saw that the soldier in the trench next to me had got up to run and was hit by a bullet. So I crawled out of my hole and, thinking about my dented helmet, I knew the scariest moment of my whole life.

I crawled back to the rear. Many machine gun bullets were streaming overhead. "The bullets are up there and I am down here -- not to worry," I said to myself, meaning that I was not to panic. Then I crawled to our platoon's machine gun which had been left by the two gunners who had been handling it. Two belts of bullets were still there. I fired these remaining bullets. Another gunner nearby thanked me. Then I crawled back to the soldier who had been wounded. He was lying there but there was a fence between him and me. After trying to pull down the fence while on my belly, I realized it was not going to work. So then I tried a different tactic and pulled the fence up from the bottom. This worked, so I pulled him through, dragged him down to the street, and carried him into a courtyard where about ten of the troops from our platoon were holed up, half of them wounded. We moved the wounded inside the building and then down to a cellar.

The sergeant in charge of the machine gun asked me to go back to Company headquarters. "Tell them where we are," he said. I ran past a burned-out tank with a man lying in it, then past a man lying on a stretcher. I came around a corner and ran smack into a German squad. They immediately took me prisoner.

I thus became a prisoner of war and was taken to a large POW camp, Stalag VIIA at Moosburg, Germany. This camp was 30 miles northeast of Munich. We got one meal per day and were taken into Munich every other day to shovel rubble out of buildings and streets. I lost 30 pounds. After five months I was finally liberated by my own 14th Armored Division.

Wartime Cryptanalyst -- 1944-45

By Walter Sharp

As military service goes, mine was quite acceptable. My good fortune became more evident as years passed and as I realized what others had endured. A group of about 100 men and officers of the US Army Signal Corps worked at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, England. There, at the central point for exploitation of German codes and ciphers, we were integrated into the British workforce. The Britons used both military and civilians; a high proportion were women, since men were off to war.

Walter Sharp at Bletchley

Our American contingent had arrived at various times, and I was in one of the last groups, arriving in February 1944. Most of us had had rudimentary training in cryptology, but little practical experience. A few had already been exposed to higher level work at Arlington Hall in Virginia. At Bletchley we were plunged into the effort to recover and process information hidden in the complex German cipher Enigma. Polish mathematicians initially made theoretical penetration of the system, and the British had developed highly successful practical ways of exploiting information disguised by it.

Before we arrived the British had used their skill against Enigma to tip the balance in their favor in the air battle over Britain, and to stop the havoc being wrought to Allied shipping in the North Atlantic by submarine warfare. As the Americans arrived in late 1943 the emphasis was increasingly on the German forces facing us across the channel, and these remained as principal targets during the invasion and throughout the rest of the war.

The attack on Enigma messages fell into roughly six stages: First, capturing and identifying the traffic of particular German army and air force entities. Changes of radio frequencies and call signs made this task difficult, but the

discipline called Traffic Analysis helped to guide radio stations to intercept messages and to identify the networks passing them.

Second, the messages were tested to see if certain stereotyped phrases might underlie the intercepted text; if so, relationships might be established between cipher text and underlying plain text.

Third, possible arrangements of the rotors in the Enigma machine were tried by running all possible settings of the rotors against these relationships. This work was carried out by mechanical and electrical machines called "bombes," which were set up and run by both British and American uniformed personnel.

Fourth, the settings discovered by these bombes were tested to see if they really did work. This is the function at which I worked.

Fifth, once the key elements were known, all messages of that key for the day could be decrypted. On a lucky day Bletchley might be reading the messages as quickly as the intended recipients, thus making timely information available.

Sixth, information was extracted from the plain text German messages and forwarded to selected intelligence staff members of military commands.

Those of us closer to the end of the assembly line knew the most about the content of the messages. Although I worked on hundreds of messages, I personally saw only one complete message in the year that I worked on this system. Under the widely accepted principle of "need to know," individuals did not necessarily know the final outcome of their efforts. We knew that the work we did was vital to Allied success, but most of us learned about events in the war from the newspapers and the BBC, not from our work.

On the whole, we were well satisfied with our assignment. The work was challenging and important, the natives spoke a language similar to our own, we ate mostly food from the U.S., we had lots of invitations to dances since males were scarce, and we were not shot at or bombed.

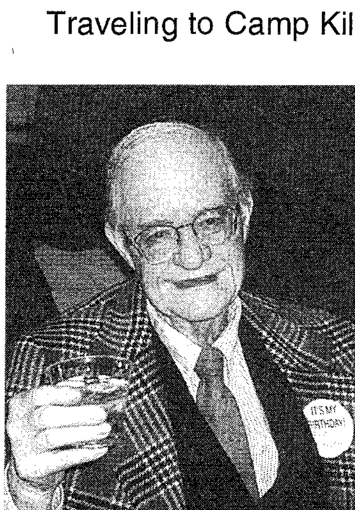
We were sworn not to talk about our activities, even after the war was over. By the time the wall of secrecy came down, we had forgotten the details of most of the "secrets" we knew. Now that books are being written about our arcane activities, we discover that some enthusiasts know more about our wartime efforts and their contribution to victory than we knew then, or do know even now.

Recording in France - 1944-45

By Bob Willing

I was drafted into the Army for training at Camp Lee, Virginia, in January 1943. After basic training I was assigned to the 29th Machine Records Unit (Mobile) which was activated on July 10, 1943 at the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation with an authorized strength of three officers and 39 enlisted men. Detailed to the office staff, I kept a diary of events that occurred to the unit during World War II. Here are a few excerpts:

Traveling to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey (after extensive training), the personnel of the 29th Machine Records Unit departed by train and ferry to the dock where the MAURETANIA, disguised beneath a coat of battle gray, was awaiting us. It was late in the afternoon of January 7, 1944, my 31st birthday. On the brisk wintry morning of January 8 the MAURETANIA cast aside her mooring and headed towards the sea. At last we were on our way!


Bob Willing today

As the voyage neared its end many of us hoped to sight land upon entering the Irish Sea, but such was not the case. The fog was so heavy when we reached Liverpool Harbor late in the afternoon of January 17, 1944 that all we could see were odd-looking little harbor tugs which frequently passed by.

It was a foggy, danp morning on January 19 when our unit finally debarked at 6:30 a.m. We were transported by train and truck to Camp G, located on the outskirts of Bishop's Cleeve, a tiny village about four miles from Cheltenham. The estate upon which the camp was situated dated back several centuries. It was owned by a relative of the Royal Family and loaned to the Army for the duration.

The foremost question in everyone's mind was the assignment of the 29th Machine Records Unit. It turned out to be the servicing of all replacements in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). We were attached to Headquarters, Replacement System, ETOUSA, APO 871. On April 5 Captain Fred 0. Criswell, Commanding Officer of the 29th MRU, proposed a major reorganization of the unit to Major Garrison of the Replacement System because he felt that after the invasion of Europe it might be necessary to split the 29th MRU into a forward and rear echelon. The forward echelon would follow the invasion troops with other replacement units, thus preventing any gap in the proper accounting of replacements being processed through the forward Replacement System units. The strength of the 29th MRU was increased from 39 to 54 enlisted men and an additional machine trailer was acquired. By June 1944 the unit had three machine trailers, one administrative trailer, and one supply trailer.

When the historic D-Day, June 6, 1944, arrived, all ears were glued to the radio to confirm that General Dwight Eisenhower had launched the invasion of Normandy early in the morning. The forward echelon of our unit steamed out of Southhampton Harbor on the ROGER GRISWOLD on July 21 and, after four days of waiting in an endless line of ships bound for the same destination, it landed on the beach in Normandy. Many of us remember seeing and hearing the fireworks the night of July 25 from our ship. Those who debarked with the command car that afternoon slept not far from the beach and told of the noise and hell that broke loose that memorable night. But July 27, 1944 at La Hatainnerie will be especially remembered by the 29th MRU, for we were not too far from the front and it seemed to us that the guns boomed a little louder that night and that the Americans were punching the Germans just a little harder. When the Americans broke through the German line and pushed

onward into Brittany, Jerry called less and less in the evenings and dropped fewer and fewer calling cards.

A mobile unit learns to leave on a moment's notice. Late in the afternoon of August 12 we were told to fill up our foxholes as we were headed further inland the next morning. We will not soon forget the ride to Canisy that sunny day. Everywhere you looked you saw signs of war - farmhouses that had been shelled, fields that had been struck by bombs, trees that had been split in two. But battle-scarred St. Lô stood out above everything else...like a lonely graveyard, a symbol of the horror of modern warfare. It was war at its grimmest. The battle of St. Lô will live long in the pages of history, for the struggle that raged around this town may be said to be a turning point in the war. Once the town was in Allied hands, the Germans were put on the run, and the Americans spearheaded out in all directions of France leaving the limited Normandy area far behind.

On the night of August 23 word came over the radio that Paris had been liberated. To reach Paris, they say, is the goal of every American soldier overseas. Little did we think when we landed on the shores of France that this dream would be realized. But there we were - headed for the heart of Paris. After a trip of about 127 miles from Le Mans the advanced echelon of 14 enlisted men and officers reached Paris on September 5, joined by the remaining rear echelon of 17 enlisted men and officers from England on September 7, 1944. Everywhere the Parisians greeted us. They smiled, waved, chatted or swarmed around the truck wherever it stopped. They were happy the Boche were gone, and they wanted to show their gratitude to the Americans for the liberation of their city. We saw much of downtown Paris before we finally reached our destination, Le Jardin des Tuileries, where we were to place our trailers. From foxhole to hotel is quite a jump. We were quartered in the Hotel Céramic on the Avenue Wagram, one block below the Arc de Triomphe.

NOTE: After the war in Europe ended, Bob transferred to the American Forces Network and produced an hour-long daily radio show, "Beaucoup de Music," from the Paris Studio, featuring a band and a Hot Club Corner with guitarist Django Reinhardt and other performers, for six months before returning to the United States in January 1946.

With the Red Cross in England 1943 - 1945
By Helen Eisenhart

Helen Eisenhart

In the summer of 1943, tired of proof-reading six days a week for the Department of State, I applied for an overseas assignment with the Red Cross. After a few weeks of training I left for Scotland aboard the QUEEN MARY, which was jammed with GIs.

Having safely zigzagged across the Atlantic, we disembarked in Scotland in late November 1943. I boarded a train to London and was assigned quarters in a rowhouse. London was, of course, completely blacked out and for six weeks we underwent sporadic buzzbombing.

Then I went to my permanent post in East Anglia, 60 miles northeast of London, where an estate was being converted to an American hospital with the addition of Nissen huts and other smaller huts. Most of the nurses were quartered in the mansion but the Red Cross contingent of which I was secretary shared a small hut with three nurses.
Each hut contained six beds, space for a trunk, some hooks on the wall and a peat stove in the middle. Toilets, showers and sinks were in another hut half a block up the road! But the mess hall was right across from us and in a futile attempt to keep warm, I gained close to 30 pounds in no time at all.

The larger Nissen huts which served as hospital wards were mostly empty except for occasional patients from a nearby British airfield. But after D-Day trainloads of wounded soldiers began arriving during the night. We met all the trains, handing out cigarettes, candy, gum etc. The soldiers seemed happy, relieved to be off the battlefields and in a place they would be cared for.

After VE day, and before we could be shipped out to the Pacific, Japan capitulated and we went home, arriving in October 1945.

NOTE: For more about Helen's experiences see the Collingtonian for June 1994.