

Marvin Aldridge in World War II

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Introduction

During the lifetime of Marvin Aldridge a monumental struggle occurred for political control of Europe. It is called World War II. It is probably the most important event in a hundred years. It was about England and the United States preventing Germany from dominating Europe and projecting a totalitarian vision of government. Those soldiers who participated spent many years of their youth, risking their lives, to create the significant position the United States has in the world today. That has been good for everyone in the world. The winner of World War II was not predetermined. Had Germany won, our lives and the world would be very different.

Marvin Aldridge was a tank crewman in General George Patton's Third Army. Marvin participated in the last great battle, the Battle of the Bulge. Marvin's tank and crew had the distinction of being the first tank to reach the Rhine River. That river has been the traditional frontier of the German people for thousands of years. So, reaching the Rhine River was a significant symbolic victory that helped end the war a few weeks later.



PFC Marvin Aldridge, U. S. Army, 1944–1946

Personal Background

Marvin Aldridge was born on 21 January 1926 in the house that he owns and lives near today. He attended the public schools. He was attending Pleasant Grove High School during World War II. Soon after his 18th birthday in January 1944, he got a draft notice for military service. He was in the 11th grade which was then the last grade of high school. He knew that he might be called to duty any day. Marvin's mother was sick and, as always, his farming family needed as many hands as possible. So, Marvin quit high school and worked on the farm until he was called into the U. S. Army in May 1944. At that time, his older brothers were in the services. Whitted was in the Navy and Levi was in the Army. Marvin's family was large, but missing that many sons was a hardship.

Basic Training

Marvin first reported to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. He was sent immediately to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for Basic Training. There he learned military life, living in barracks, how to shoot an M1 rifle, KP (Kitchen Police), and probably a lot of "hurry up and wait" activities. Among the skills he learned was how to

disassemble and reassemble his M1 rifle blind folded. After about 3 months, Marvin graduated as a private soldier in the U.S. Army. During this time, he heard the news about the Allied D-Day invasion in France.

The rule at that time was that a soldier had to be at least 19 before he could be sent overseas. Marvin was still 18. So, he was sent first to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, where he was assigned odd jobs. An acquaintance was working in food preparation. Marvin saw the advantage of working at a place where he could eat well, so he arranged to get a similar job.

Advanced Tank Training

In the autumn of 1944, Marvin was sent back to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for advanced tank training. A tank crewman had to know many skills. Each tank had a commander, a cannon gunner, a driver, and radio operator. Each member of the crew had to know how to perform all positions. Driving a tank was similar to driving a car except for the steering where the driver controlled two sticks, one each for the left and right tracks. For example, to turn the tank right, the right stick was pulled to slow the right track. These tanks were called light tanks. Marvin was promoted to Private First Class.

Arrival in Europe

On Christmas Eve, 1944, in New Jersey, Marvin boarded the ship named "General J. R. Brooks" along with 5000 other men for the trip to Europe. These men were to replace soldiers who had been in Europe for many months. Marvin remembers the ship's name because, at that time, no one was allowed to mention such names in a letter even to family members. All letters were censored for secret information.

During this time, there were still some German submarines that could sink an Allied ship. So, Marvin's ship traveled in a large convoy protected by Navy warships. All 5000 men drilled the abandon-ship procedures.

After 7 days at sea, about New Year's Day 1945, Marvin's ship arrived at Cherbourg, France. He was told his convoy was the first to go directly to France rather than England.

Battle of the Bulge, December 1944 - March 1945

Beginning 16 December 1944, the German Army attacked the Allied positions across a 50-mile front. They pushed forward forming a new battle front. That battle became known as the Battle of the Bulge. More American troops were desperately needed to stop the German attack. So, the men from Marvin's ship were immediately put on trains traveling north across France, and Belgium. They then got into trucks and were taken near the town of Bastogne, Belgium. They had traveled 500 miles. It was wintertime, and weather conditions were bad. Marvin spent the first night in a woodshed. He could hear artillery fire all around. He was told how to distinguish enemy incoming fire from friendly outgoing fire by their distinctive sounds. That night, some volunteers were taken to the front line. Marvin never saw them again.

The next day, Marvin was taken to a school house used as a temporary headquarters. There he was assigned to Company C, 41st Tank Battalion, 11th Armored Division, Third Army. The Third Army was commanded by General George Patton. When he reported for duty, he remembers walking into a room of officers walking around maps spread on the floor. He was told, "Pull up a chair and join us." Marvin looked around the room. It was empty of chairs.



Insignia of 11th Armored Division

Soon he joined his tank crew. This time his tank was a heavily armored Sherman tank. His particular tank was especially designed to lead columns of other tanks. It had reinforced armor plating on the front and standoff armor on the sides to cause exploding shells to explode before hitting the main armor. It had a bulldozer blade to push away heavy obstructions. The nickname of his tank was “Flat Foot Floogie,” based on a popular song from the 1930s. His crewmates were experienced soldiers.

Marvin’s tank always traveled with the 20 tanks in Company C. Men lived in their tanks. They ate “10 and 1” meals from cans or K-rations. They had sleeping bags and could sleep in or under the tank. That winter was reported to be the coldest winter in a century. A tank’s engine ran much of the time, if for nothing else, to keep the radio operational. Almost every night, a fuel truck would arrive. At such times, no matches could be lit. The concern was not just to prevent a fire, but that such a fire would attract the attention of German warplanes that could strafe their positions.

Marvin remembers passing through the German Siegfried Line, a defensive line filled with land mines, tank traps, and cement block obstacles called “dragon teeth.”



Passageway through Siegfried Line of land mines, tank traps, and dragon teeth

Reaching Rhine River, Andenach, Germany, 9 March 1945

On 9 March 1945, the Third Army reached the Rhine River, the natural and traditional frontier of the German people. This counter attack effectively ended the Battle of the Bulge. Thousands of German soldiers who had started this battle in December 1944 were now trapped on the west side of the Rhine River. Those that survived surrendered.

Because Marvin's tank led the column of tanks, his tank crew had the distinction of being the first to reach the Rhine River. That day was 9 March 1945. A famous Army photograph captured that event. Marvin remembers one of his crewmates looking over a stone wall to verify they had reached the Rhine River.



First tank to reach the Rhine River, Andenach, Germany, 9 March 1945

PFC Marvin Aldridge is second from left.

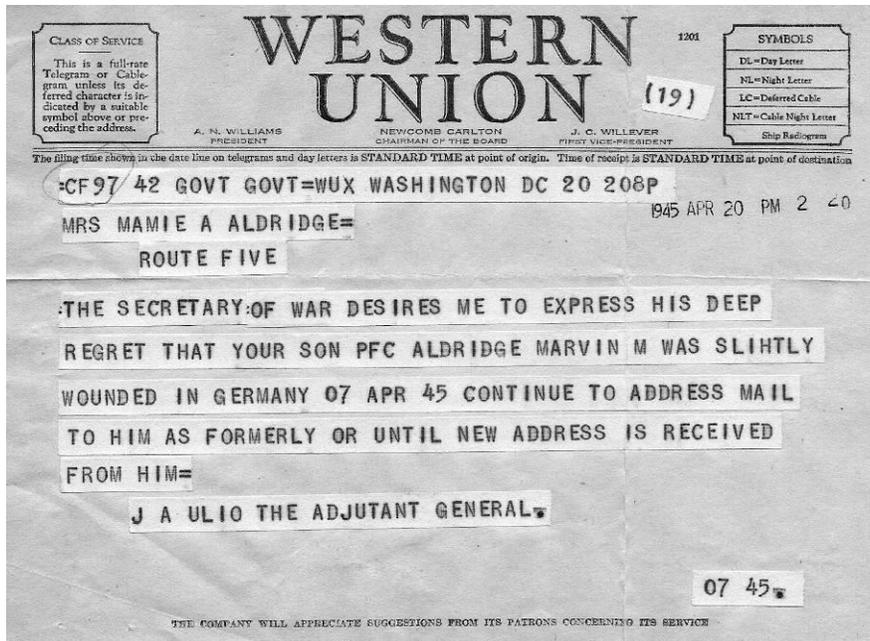
Crew in Company C, 41st Tank Battalion, 11th Armored Division, Third Army

On 28 March, Marvin's unit crossed the Rhine River near Oppenheim, Germany. There the river was about a quarter-mile across and much too deep to ford. So Army engineers built a floating pontoon bridge, a remarkable structure since it supported very heavy tanks. By coincidence, Marvin's cousin Nancy Maie Roney's husband Adrian Barger was one of these engineers.

Armored Advance across southern Germany, wounded

The 11th Armored Division was first directed towards Berlin. But soon they were redirected more to the east across southern Germany. They moved everyday. Marvin remembers seeing nice farmland and grape vineyards. Naturally, the German civilians were none to happy about a foreign army in their region. So, Americans did not interact much with the Germans.

On 7 April, near Fulda, Germany, Marvin's tank was traveling along a road draped with low hanging tree limbs. Marvin was riding on top in the turret. A tree limb caught the barrel of the 50-caliber machine gun and spun it around where its heavy stock slapped across his thighs. Marvin got a contusion, a sever bruise.



Telegram notice to Marvin's mother Mamie Aldridge.

Hospital in Cherbourg, Victory in Europe Day, 8 May 1945

Marvin was sent back to the hospital at Cherbourg, France. Because of his injury, he was awarded the Purple Heart. He was there when Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945. He watched a fireworks celebration on the beach. Aside from this one accident, Marvin was never sick or injured.

Now that the war was over, some servicemen could return home. Those with the most time got to return home first. A system of points was devised. Those with 80 points could return. Because Marvin had only arrived in January, he had only 45 points. So, from the hospital, he returned to his unit which was then in Austria.

Occupation of Germany and Austria

He continued his service while accumulating points. Soldiers like Marvin who had been combat soldiers were then on "special police duty," that is troops of occupation. Once Marvin was on guard duty at what had been a German concentration camp and he saw the gruesome life of the former inmates.

The 11th Armored Division disbanded in August 1945.



Insignia of 41st Tank Battalion

“Audax et Celer” is Latin for “Bold and Quick”

Crest added after war with Third Army Circle, German anti-tank “dragon teeth.”

Marvin continued to accumulate points. He did not drink or smoke. So he sold his ration of liquor and cigarettes. Nearby Russian soldiers would pay as much as \$100 for a carton of American cigarettes. Marvin used his extra money to tour England, Scotland, Ireland, Switzerland, and Italy, sometimes as part of his duty.



Marvin on his way to England at Red Cross Club, Camp Pall Mall, France,
29 September 1945. Army buddy John Simmons.

Return Home

By the Spring of 1946, Marvin had accumulated enough points to return home. He arrived in New York and got on a troop train to Fort Bragg. A train stop at Rocky Mount, North Carolina, was the first place Marvin stepped on real American soil. He kissed the dirt. The train continued on to Fort Bragg where Marvin was given his honorable discharge on 21 April 1946. For two years, he participated in a great world event. He then began a new life having just turned 20 years old.

Veteran Activities

Marvin follows the activities of veteran organizations and keeps books and publications about events that he participated in. A few years ago, he returned to France, Belgium, and Germany with his daughter Angela, son-in-law Jim Hinton, and Jim's father who is also a veteran. They revisited sites each had traveled though over 50 years earlier.

Conclusion

Millions of lives were affected by World War II. Many soldiers lost their lives or at least, put their lives at risk. Today, we need to remember the sacrifices of those soldiers. They created the political environment we live in. Stories of individual soldiers like Marvin help us understand what happened. His story is most interesting because his tank was the first American tank to reach the Rhine River, an important event that helped end the war.

Sources

This document was written by Marvin's cousin William Lee Anderson III using notes from an interview with Marvin and the following sources.

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