

## BACKGROUND

Bill Brown entered service in Utica, NY on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1942 at age 20. He served in Battery A, 399<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. He likely served as a driver of an "M7 Priest" self-propelled armored howitzer (105mm). The 399<sup>th</sup> activated at Ft. Knox, KY on 1 April 1942 and gathered at Camp Polk, Louisiana on 5 March 1943 for initial training. A full album of all the training at Camp Polk can be seen here: <https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipNMjNFT5xkTa1Rlb4xPy6zQVRdLuF0gsbfpgm8GouCFxVYYkUvBxnIQOoYdbkDx8Q?key=MnN1bjZ6SEloTTF6cFpiWGx2QWlxekhRMFFDMkxB>

The 399<sup>th</sup> had 5 batteries: Headquarters battery, Service battery, and 3 Firing batteries (named A, B, and C). Each firing battery had six M7 self-propelled guns. Bill was a crewman on one of them.

Below: An M7 crew from Battery A  
Bill likely knew these men



S/Sgt Crescencio Escudero, 399-A, and 'Axis Buster' crew

Below: Picture of an M7 self-propelled gun



399-A in England, 1944 - left half

399-A in England, 1944 - right half

Panora Ltd., London, W.C.1.

Above: Photo of Bill's Battery – A/399. Bill is likely in this photo- (first row second man from left?)

Source: [http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/399a\\_pics.htm](http://www.8th-armored.org/pics/399a_pics.htm)



Bill was a "Selectee" meaning he was drafted. Therefore, he likely received the following letter.

A MESSAGE TO SELECTEES

1. You have received your notice to report for training. In a few days, you will go to your local board office and proceed for induction into the United States Army. As you go, bear in mind that you have been selected for the type of service it is believed you can perform best for the common defense. Upon you rests the faith of your relatives and your neighbors, whose chosen representative you are. Go into your new life cheerfully, soberly, alertly.
2. If you have had previous military service, be sure to bring your discharge papers with you. Previous service may entitle you to additional pay.
3. If you are employed, remind your employer there is a possibility that you may be rejected at the induction station. Ask him to hold your job for you until you are certain of induction. If accepted, notify him at once by mail. If you sell your car or business before you leave, sell it on a contingent basis so that if you are not accepted by the army, you can reclaim it when you return home. If you are not employed, register with the United States Employment Service before you leave. It will help you to get a job when this national task of yours is completed.
4. Travel light. If you wish, take a small bag with a change of underclothing, handkerchiefs, socks, and necessary toilet articles. These are not necessary, as essential equipment will be issued by the army, but they may come in handy should there be a few days delay in your induction.
5. When you report to the reception center for active duty, your outer civilian clothing must be returned to your home, as you will not be permitted to wear it. War Department instructions provide for the return at Government expense of a set limit of four pounds, gross weight, of outer civilian clothing. This limit does not include suit cases or other hand baggage containers.
6. Leave your automobile or motorcycle at home. If you are accepted, your commanding officer will tell you whether you may have it at the post, and if so, you may have an opportunity to get it.
7. It takes time for the Army to assign you to your permanent military unit. Keep in touch with your friends and family but ask them not to write to you until you have a definite and complete address to which mail will be delivered. As soon as you are inducted into the Army, your nearest relative will be advised as to your whereabouts, so don't worry about being out of touch with your family in the event of an emergency. They will know where to call.
8. At the reception center, the Army will classify you. Before you go to the classifier, think back over all the jobs you have had, how long you worked at them, and exactly what you did in them. Give all information asked for honestly and completely.
9. Go to the Army with an open mind. Keep your ears and eyes open. Obey orders in the best way you know how and you will succeed. Your country needs your help; otherwise, you would not have been called. Consider that you have been selected for service and give the best service that you can.

R. Hitchcock  
Colonel, A.C.D.  
State Director, Selective Service System

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This was in a photo album posted by Bill's unit association, so I believe he likely received this letter.

[http://www.8th-armored.org/books/399th-misc/399a\\_m20.htm](http://www.8th-armored.org/books/399th-misc/399a_m20.htm)

## UNIT COMBAT HISTORY

\*See map on the last page for reference

After training at Camp Polk, the 399th shipped from New York City to England on 7 November 1944. The crossing was inherently dangerous – the German U-Boat campaign was in full force hunting for troop ships in the Atlantic. For protection, ships convoyed across in groups and the unit history mentions that Bill's ship was in the lead of the convoy. On the 5<sup>th</sup> day, the convoy detected an undersea craft and dropped several depth charges. They finally arrived safely at Plymouth, England on 18 November 1944 and encamped at Ludgershall (Tidworth Barracks). They embarked across the Channel from Weymouth on 4 January and arrived at Le Havre, France on the 5<sup>th</sup>. The port at Le Havre was full so they continued up the Siene River and debarked at Rouen. (Bill's first letter from France is dated 5 January – he wrote a letter the day he landed!). They quickly moved into their first billet near Sevis, and the next day began a trek overland through much ice and snow to Raucourt, France.

The 399<sup>th</sup> arrived at Raucourt on 14 January and stayed there for several weeks awaiting orders. During practice maneuvers, an M7 from Bill's battery ran over a landmine that detonated and struck a crewman in the arm. This could have been the episode Bill described of his buddy who lost an arm, and was perhaps when he was wounded himself.

In Mid-January, Combat Command "A" (a sub unit of the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division) was rushed east in heavy snow to stop the German drive toward Strasbourg (Operation Nordwind). This was a last-ditch effort by the Germans to turn the tide of the Battle of the Bulge and was the last major German offensive of the war. If Bill spoke about fighting in the Bulge, he was likely assigned to Combat Command "A" and participated in this action. Elements of the 399<sup>th</sup> supported the 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during this battle, and helped seize the towns of Nennig, Berg, and Sinz (along the Siegfried Line).

On 2 February the 399<sup>th</sup> began moving into Holland and arrived at Groot Welsden on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. On the 8<sup>th</sup> they crossed into Germany at Tuddern and Battery A stopped nearby at Selsten for the night. They were shelled by the Germans on their first night there.

On 15 February, still in their previous positions, the Battalion reported hearing the nearby impact of "Buzz Bombs" (V-1 flying bombs). On 21 February, the Battalion moved to Monfort, Netherlands and from 23-26 February provided artillery support for the XIII Corps' attack into Melick (Operation Grenade). This action pushed the Germans back from the Roer River to the banks of the Rhine.

On 28 February the 399<sup>th</sup> crossed the Roer River at Hilfarth and began advancing toward the Rhine. Destroyed bridges and enemy fire slowed their progress at various points. On 5 March the Battalion arrived at Lintfort, Germany (along the Rhine) and provided fire support for a major Division attack into Rheinberg. The multi-day assault on Rheinberg involved fierce house-to-house fighting against the German 130<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. The U.S. lost 199 men and 41 tanks taking the town. The 399<sup>th</sup> itself came under fire several times and sustained 9 casualties. Resistance in the town finally ceased on the 11<sup>th</sup> and the Battalion went to a rest area for refit.



On 22 March the 399<sup>th</sup> moved near Baerl, Germany to establish firing positions in preparation for crossing the Rhine. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, they provided a heavy barrage consisting of over 1,000 rounds to support the crossing spearheaded by the 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. After providing fire support for several days, the 399<sup>th</sup> crossed the Rhine into Voerde on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Other Allied crossings of the Rhine farther south quickly pushed inland and began to encircle the remaining German defenders which became known as the "Ruhr Pocket."



Bill crossed the Rhine on this bridge

The 399<sup>th</sup> was quickly thrown into supporting Ruhr Pocket operations from 28 March - 11 April. The Germans resisted fiercely and the fighting was hard; the 399<sup>th</sup> came under fire multiple times. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the 399<sup>th</sup> supported an attack on the town of Werl and at one point moved so far forward that they began receiving fire on three sides. By the 11<sup>th</sup>, however, most German units had capitulated.



The 399<sup>th</sup> in the Ruhr Pocket

On 12 April the Battalion moved to Wolfenbuttle and later Langenstein and provided more fire support for infantry advances. The Battalion received some effective counterbattery fire from the Germans here. According to the Battalion history, "we could very plainly see the Jerries digging in. It was quite a sight to see your own enemy digging in front of you waiting for your infantry to attack." A few days later, the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division liberated the Halberstadt-Zwieberge Concentration Camp (near Langenstein). The unit fired their last round in combat on 21 April, 1945. Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945.

Soon after that the unit then went to Benterode, Germany. According to unit history, "It was a beautiful location and wonderful resting area. Plenty of fishing, swimming, accommodations, movies every night, U.S.O. shows, something we never had on the front lines, Red Cross coffee trucks, sports, and of course a little of that thing we call work."

The 399<sup>th</sup> then relocated and arrived in Svihov, Czechoslovakia (near Pilsen) for occupation duty "midst cheers and kisses of pretty maidens" on 6 June 1945. From there, men began rotating home. In one of Bill's pictures is a blue and white shoulder patch of the XXIII Corps. This unit governed Western Germany after the war. There is a town called Bad Bruckenau in that area that he appears to address one of his last letters from.



8th Armored Division's 399th Field Artillery Bn. with heavy vehicles.

The 399<sup>th</sup> entering Pilsen, Czechoslovakia



