

# Manchester man fought Germans across Europe in WWII

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MANCHESTER, Ohio | Russell Pollitt, was born in 1926, in Manchester, three years before the depression began.

"My father had a horse and buggy when he first moved from a farm to town. He mostly worked for himself, so he could stay home with me while I was little, and my mother worked at the cigar factory."

Despite the hard times "I can't remember seeing anyone going hungry. Dad would go in the woods in the back of town and get squirrels for us to eat and we had a garden. We had no money to speak of, but we had plenty to eat it seemed...later Dad got into the truck business, so we did OK," he said.

Back then most men and boys 16 or older belonged to the Ohio Home Guard, a local militia that could be called by the state to fight. In the summer they would train and that would give them some pocket money, he said.

"So when this war came along, they were ready to go to war," Pollitt said.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Britain and the United States declared war on Japan on Dec. 8. Then on Dec. 11, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S., which began this country's military involvement into World War II.

"I can remember that day the boys left to go to war. They crossed on the ferry boat to get on the train in Kentucky. That was a dismal day. We lost a lot of people -- a lot of boys left that day at the beginning of the war," Pollitt said.

"I went on and finished high school. Then after I graduated I had to find something -- either go to work or to the service. A friend and I decided to volunteer to fight. It was 1944 and I was 18," he said.

"I tried every option that day, to try to get in, but my eyes were just too bad, they said. Then, I had to go looking for a job. So I went to Dayton and got a good job at Frigidaire and I was making pretty good money, I thought," he said.

"And then, here comes my greetings from the president, you know. My boss said 'you go ahead and take two days off and go up there and get examined. He said they won't pass you, you'll be back,'" he recalled

"So I went on up there to Columbus, to Fort Hayes," he said.

"The first thing they gave me was two pairs of glasses. That was the fall of 1944," he said.

On June 6, 1944, the U.S and its allies launched an attack on German forces in Normandy, France, now known as D-Day. By Aug. 25, Paris was liberated. Then, the Battle of the Bulge began when the German army launched its final defensive in Belgium and Germany. The American and British forces beat them slowly back. Pollitt entered the war during this battle.

They never took the time to train him before he left, because the military was so desperate for more soldiers at that time, he said.

"Germany was pushing us back to the English Channel... just about the time I was drafted. They shipped me for training at Camp Walters, Texas, but I only trained a few days. They were in a hurry, so they shipped us over," he said.

He said they hauled more than 30,000 soldiers on the Queen Mary when he rode it to England.

"The Queen Mary, which had been the biggest cruise line ship the British owned ... but it wasn't cruise line food they served us," he said.

"At that time the Germans had a lot of subs in the English Channel where the Queen Mary was suppose to dock so we went up to Scotland ... and put us on ferry boats, then a train to London and then we took some of those army boats where you see the end of it fall out ... that was what we crossed the English Channel on. At that point, we were following soldiers that had been there on D-day." he said.

"We jumped out of those boats and crawled up the banks ---that was near La Harve, France. There was a great big castle not far, that we stayed at. Then they loaded us up and we went north on a cattle train into Holland. We were there to join the 8th Armored Division, 58th Armored Infantry, Battalion Company C," he said.

"I remember getting on that train at night in Holland. I don't know what day it was, I just know we were on a train. We rode that way for a while, then the first thing I know, the Germans found out we were in that train and they started strafing us from planes. There were a lot hurt at the time...but it was dark. You could hear it ---the commotion, but you couldn't see it or know where it was coming from. That was bad," Pollitt said.

"Then we went further north, and we got off in Holland in a little community where the enemy was ... we could go up in the top of the homes there, take a few tiles off the roof and look at them through binoculars. We did that for five or six days I guess. We would shoot at one, once in a while, but you couldn't do much good because they were just too far away" he said.

"Then somebody decided we were going on attack, so that is when we really got into trouble. One morning about 6 o'clock we took off up that hill," he said.

"It was dark and when we started out, they (the Germans) shot things in the air that would light up the sky just like daylight, so they could see us," he said.

The hill that they had been looking at from the rooftops, was full of German soldiers entrenched and on the defensive, he said.

"They had a trench up there, and we had to get them out of there. I was, maybe about 20 feet from that trench when I got hit," he said.

Soldiers in his division were in squads of 12, and then divided again into three-man machine gun teams, Pollitt said.

"We normally rode in a half track, that was our home. Whatever we had to carry, if it wasn't in my pocket it was in this half track," he explained.

"But our team was on foot ... when a 90 mm mortar blew up about 15 feet in front of us. It killed both of those boys, so I was the only one living out of the three. So I heard, from the people who picked them up ... they didn't get hit with any shrapnel. I was the only one that got hit with the shrapnel. I am the only one that lived out of the three," he said.

"I wiped my face off because I couldn't see and there was blood on my hand. So I knew I was hurt and I knew it was in the head but I didn't know how bad," Pollitt said.

"My squad leader said, "you just stay right here and somebody will pick you up." Well, I lay down there by what they call a beet ridge. In the wintertime, they buried the beets, to keep them from freezing. Then they dig those beets out to feed the cattle. So there is a little trench around them. I got down in one of those trenches. It's wasn't very deep, but it saved my life," he said.

"Then our troops went through, and they were suppose to get all those fellows (the Germans in the trench on the hill). But they didn't get two, and each one of those fellows had a machine gun. And every time I would pop my head up, they would start shooting at me," Pollitt said.

"So I lay there for a while and here come another little fellow. It wasn't quite daylight and you couldn't see too good, and you don't want to hurt nobody if you don't know who they are. You sure don't want to shoot until you know. This little feller came crawling toward me. I had the advantage because I was already turned around and facing him and I had my gun all ready in front of me," he said.

"So I guess, he came out with the intentions of stealing watches off the dead. Of course, I don't know what he came out of there for and we didn't have no conversation. But anyway when he saw me, he saw I was alive, but he didn't know whether I was American or German and I didn't know whether he was American or German" Pollitt said.

"But when he got within, oh, about six to eight feet, he turned his head around sideways. At that time the German made a helmet that went down this way, and down that way. Our helmets didn't do that, they went around the other way. So that told me he was the enemy. And I don't know what he detected about me, but just before I shot him he detected who I was too and he was trying to get his gun up to shoot me but I beat him," he said.

"Sometimes, I don't like to say that, but that is the way it happened," he said.

Later, medics picked up Pollitt and he was moved back off the front through a series of camp hospitals. The first one was in a basement of a house where the only medicine was whiskey, he explained.

"It looked like a bar in there and they tried to get you drunk. But I was 18 years old and not used to drinking whiskey, so boy, I was a mess. For some that might have helped but it wasn't very good for me," he said.

"They kept moving me back, and I don't know what the reason was, for all those moves but that was the way they did it, until we reached Paris. And that was a nice hospital," he said.

"Finally, I had a ticket to go back to the states, but they tore my ticket up, when they (the Germans) got to whipping us pretty bad again, and they needed men real quick," he said.

"So they gave me a clean pair of pants and a shirt and ask me what organization I wanted to go to. The one I was with when I got hurt or did I want to go to a new one. So I finished the war back in my old company," he said.

"There were no good choices, but that was the way it was," Pollitt said.

"We fought through Holland crossed the Rhine, and several smaller rivers, we would call creeks here, and then into Germany. We fought across the countryside. And along the way, we met a lot of fine people. I think the Germans are mostly a very fine people," he said.

"I remember meeting one old lady, her husband had been a doctor in World War II and he was dead by then. She baked me a cake on my birthday, her name was Bodman," he said.

"It was always interesting that they knew more about what we did, then we did. Knew where we were going before we did. That last night at a miller's farm, they took our guns and hid them in the hay because they didn't want us to go. It was awfully nice of them, but at the time we had to go looking for our guns," he recalled with a laugh.

"And during that time of crossing Europe, we pretty much had to hunt for our own grub. The cooks gave up cooking and got a gun and fought just like we did. They didn't have nothing to cook anyway. See the Germans had come through first and ate whatever they could find. Then we came through, but there was really nothing left to eat. And those local people didn't have anything," he said.

Then the war ended, he said.

"Since I was always moving I hadn't even got any mail. Never got a letter from home until my birthday. I remember, I was sitting on a hill reading my mail on my birthday on May 9 and I heard the war was over," he said.

"But I couldn't go home yet because I didn't have enough points. They had a point system based on the time you had been there and so on. Yet I had been shot, and then crossed Holland into Germany in just a few months. It seems I wasn't there too long but I went a long way when I was there," he said.

"So they didn't let me out yet. But if I volunteered to go to Japan, they guaranteed me 30 days at home for furlough. Well, I never thought I would get to see home again anyway so I said I would take a crack at that. Then they sent me back to England. From there I would be sent home for my 30-day furlough. Once I arrived in England, the war ended in Japan. And I thought, boy I am in trouble now, they will never let me go home, but they did," he said.

He was discharged in 1946, he said.

Pollitt said he used to go to his reunions sometimes, and communicate with some of the men in his squadron.

"Now most of us our gone, so we stopped having reunions," he said.