



PROJECT BLACKY

A FRAGMENT OF HISTORY



**MARCH
2013**





PROJECT BLACKY

A Fragment of History

Life and War Experiences
of
Frank Walter “Blacky” Blackston

March, 2013

DEDICATION

In memory of the 469 soldiers
from the 8th Armored Division
who lost their lives during WW II



PROJECT BLACKY – A FRAGMENT OF HISTORY CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

THE EARLY YEARS

JOINING THE ARMY

MILITARY TRAINING

SHIPPING OUT

LeHAVRE TO HOLLAND

LIFE IN A SHERMAN TANK

THE BATTLE OF RHEINBERG

The Wesel Pocket and Rheinberg

Faulty Intelligence

Three Different Attack Routes; Three Immediate Problems

Company B

The Fate of Tank #1 - "The Lord Was With Us"

Blacky's Battle

Company Continues the Fight

Casualty Inspection - Painful and Indelible Memories

Official Damage Assessment

OSSENBERG

CROSSING THE RHEIN

THE HARZ MOUNTAINS

THE END OF THE WAR

CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND BEYOND

THOUGHTS ABOUT WAR

RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

LIFE TODAY

REFLECTIONS

COMPONENTS OF PROJECT BLACKY

FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY

- **Documents**

There are two documents: This account of Frank Blackston's life entitled "Project Blacky - A Fragment of History," and a 20 page detailed description of the Battle of Rheinberg called "Rheinberg."

- **Video: "Project Blacky"**

A 64 minute unedited video interview with Frank Blackston about his life and military service

- **Video: "Tank"**

A 50 minute unedited video interview with Frank about his life as a "tanker" in the 6 month campaign across Europe

- **Video: "Rheinberg"**

A 58 minute unedited video interview detailing the Battle of Rheinberg, in which most of the tanks in a Battalion were destroyed.

All three video sessions, as well as an earlier version of this booklet will be preserved in the Library of Congress as part of the "Veteran's History Project." The mission of the project is to "collect, preserve, and make accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war."

More details are at <http://www.loc.gov/vets/vets-home.html>

- **Video: "Project Blacky – A Fragment of History"**

The "Project Blacky" video described above was enriched with 11 minutes of additional footage and about 100 pictures overlaid on the original soundtrack. Some background music was also added. The Library of Congress does not accept such edits. The 75 minute video is available from Frank and his family.

Credits

The battle descriptions are a rearrangement of existing documents, memoirs, "After Action Reports," and notes. Most of the information is available on the comprehensive website of the 8th Armored Division. Credit belongs to those writers and web site organizers, especially since most of them contributed first hand accounts at <http://www.8th-armored.org/books/8books.htm>

INTRODUCTION

It was January of 1945, seven months after the Normandy invasion and five months before the German surrender. The 8th Armored Division was moving east from Le Havre to fight in the Allied counterattack following the Battle of the Bulge. It had been a long journey from its training camp in the swamps of Louisiana, the crossing of the Atlantic and preparations in Tidworth, England and LeHavre, France.

Sergeant Frank "Blacky" Blackston, 21, was part of that 8th Armored Division. He would see action in Europe as a driver and commander of a Sherman tank. His unit was the lead tank in Company B of the 36th Armored Battalion. During five months of unpredictable combat, the atrocities of war would leave lasting memories on his mind and soul as the Third and Ninth armies marched to victory across the Rhein and across Germany.

THE EARLY YEARS

Frank Walter Blackston was delivered by a midwife on February 14, 1923 in New Britain, Connecticut to Marie (Kacer) and Frank Michael Blackston. Frank was a farmer and foreman at the Stanley Works in New Britain.

In 1927, the family moved to a 44 acre farm in Plainville, Connecticut, where Frank spent a happy childhood along with brothers George and Howard and sisters Eleanor and Gladys. The farm was purchased the old fashioned way from a "Mr. Ostman," coworker at the Stanley works. The contract was a handshake. The down payment was the money Frank's father had in his pocket. The payments were whatever he could scrimp together, and in 1946, the balance was forgiven in appreciation of the military service of the three brothers.



Figure 1 - Home: the 44 acre farm in Plainville, Connecticut

Growing up, Frank attended school in the Plainville School and started working long hours at the local gas station at the age of 13. He graduated in 1941.

The farm was on Highway 10 and the house was built by “Mr. Anderson” with the father helping out on weekends. The house had a living room, 2 bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and pantry. A hand pump supplied the water. The house was set back more than 800 yards from the road. It felt very much like home and everyone had a job. Frank’s chores included milking the two cows as well as planting, cultivating and harvesting the vegetables and the 7 acres of broad leaf tobacco.

One distinguishing feature of Frank’s homestead was a 2 seat outhouse. It was about 30 yards from the house and would be moved every few months. Frank vividly remembers being caught smoking in the outhouse. The three brothers thought they had found a secure hiding place in which to smoke. Unfortunately, the smoke caused the father to think the outhouse was on fire and he raced to the scene. To teach

Project Blacky - A Fragment of History - 3 -

them a lesson, the father rolled a cigar for the boys from their tobacco field and offered it to them. All three brothers promptly got sick.



Figure 2 - Frank's father cutting tobacco



Figure 3 - Marie and Frank Blackston at peace on the farm

- 4 - Frank Walter “Blacky” Blackston



Figure 4 - Frank on the farm with “Betsy”

JOINING THE ARMY

After attempting to enlist in the Navy Air Corps, he received a draft notice and was inducted into the United States Army on March 11, 1943 in Hartford, Connecticut. After basic training in Fort Dix, Pfc Frank Blackston was assigned to the 8th Armored Division in Camp Polk, Louisiana.

Field Title	Value	Meaning
ARMY SERIAL NUMBER	31327817	31327817
NAME	BLACKSTON#FRANK#W#####	BLACKSTON#FRANK#W#####
RESIDENCE: STATE	11	CONNECTICUT
RESIDENCE: COUNTY	003	HARTFORD
PLACE OF ENLISTMENT	1143	HARTFORD CONNECTICUT
DATE OF ENLISTMENT DAY	11	11
DATE OF ENLISTMENT MONTH	03	03
DATE OF ENLISTMENT YEAR	43	43
GRADE: ALPHA DESIGNATION	PVT#	Private
GRADE: CODE	8	Private
BRANCH: ALPHA DESIGNATION	NO#	No branch assignment
BRANCH: CODE	42	Undefined Code
FIELD USE AS DESIRED	#	#
TERM OF ENLISTMENT	5	Enlistment for the duration of the War or other emergency, plus six months, subject to the discretion of the President or otherwise according to law

Figure 5 - Army Induction Record

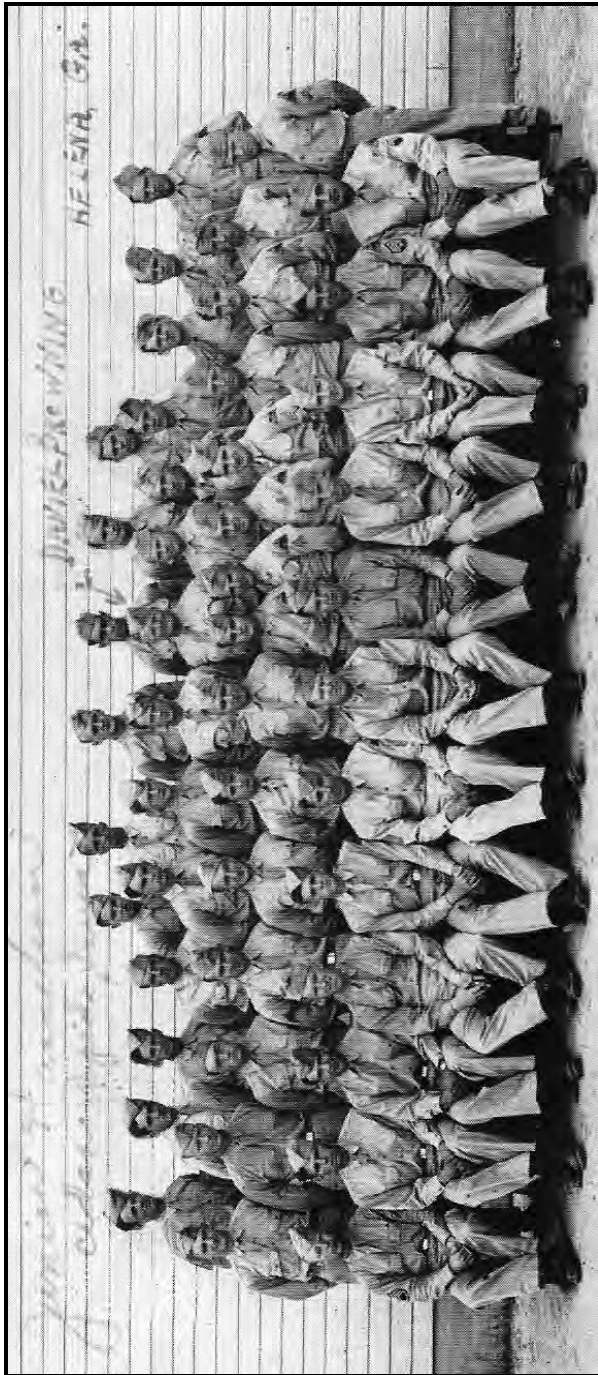


Figure 6 - 8th Armored Division, 36th Tank Battalion,
Company B; Camp Polk, Louisiana

MILITARY TRAINING

While Frank was stationed in Louisiana, the 8th Armored Division sent over 4,000 replacements to the 1st Armored Division after the Battle of Kasserine Pass in Tunisia. His division probably missed the Normandy invasion as a result, since replacement troops had to be trained. Franks was assigned to help with that training of the “younger” men. He himself was 20.

In late 1944, the 8th Armored Division moved out and headed north to Camp Kilmer in northern New Jersey to prepare to ship out.



Figure 7 – Patch of the 8th Armored Division
Blue: Infantry, Red: Artillery, Yellow: Cavalry

SHIPPING OUT

On Nov 7, 1944, Frank’s unit boarded the SS Marine Devil, a liberty ship designed to transport troops across the ocean. As soon as the twelve day voyage across the Atlantic began, Frank proceeded to “feed the fish.” He tried to sleep on deck in a spot where he wouldn’t get swept overboard in the rough seas, rather than in the darkened hull, where the men were officially housed. As for the food, the hallway to the kitchen was dubbed “puke alley.”

Project Blacky - A Fragment of History - 7 -

His seasickness disappeared as soon as he sighted the “White Cliffs of Dover” on his way to the port of Southampton, England. Frank observed that “it was a good thing I didn’t make the navy.”

They stayed in a camp in Tidworth, where the Division was issued new tanks and equipment. Morale was high and the men were “eager to see some action.”



Figure 8 - SS Marine Devil

LeHAVRE TO HOLLAND

In response to Hitler’s surprise attack on the Ardennes Forest that was to become known as the Battle of the Bulge, the 8th Armored Division was transported to LeHavre, France on LST crafts and assigned to General Patton’s 3rd Army.



Figure 9 - LST Landing Craft

The Division quickly moved 350 miles across France to assemble in the vicinity of Pont-a-Mousson, France. They arrived there on Jan 5, 1945 and assembled to organize against an expected counterattack from the Germans.

From Frank's perspective as the driver of tank #1, Company B, 36th Tank Battalion, the journey to that point was relatively uneventful. He recalls only "a little sniper fire and occasional mortar rounds."

However, the movement of the Division was awesome in scale. A Newsweek report described it under the headline “The Serpent Moves.”

“The men were going into a long-distance fight, to judge by the fabulous amount of supplies carried. More than 550,000 gallons of extra gasoline and 3,000 tons of ammunition were rolling up with them. Within a few hours after the great take-off, several hundred tanks, hundreds of 5 and 10 ton trucks, trailers, command cars, jeeps, cranes, and maintenance supply vehicles formed a thundering serpent more than 22 miles long.”

Frank remembers the bitter cold winter and heavy fog. The tank tracks would turn the snow into ice blocks which were forged onto the tank tracks, causing the tanks to slip and slide. They would normally travel 70 to 90 miles before a 10 minute rest and refuel stop.

He points out that as the driver, he was responsible for keeping the tank fueled. The gasoline was “delivered” by a fleet of trucks known as the “Red Ball Express.” He had to transport it from the fuel trucks to the tank and remembers lugging four 5 gallon cans at a time. The supply of fuel was always a critical consideration in the movement of tanks, since average fuel consumption was less than one mile per gallon.

He recalls that the trip to Pont-a-Mousson was relatively uneventful, but was marred by occasional sniper fire and mortar rounds when the men left their tanks.

The Division then moved up to Luxemburg and Holland, where Frank was “busted.” The company commander, Captain David B. Kelly had ordered a group picture taken right after all the men had showered. Frank and two others missed the trucks which provided transportation to the shower facilities and subsequently missed the picture. Immediately thereafter, they were missing their stripes.

LIFE IN A SHERMAN TANK

Frank spent the entire time in Europe with the same crew and they quickly appreciated that their lives literally depended on each other. The tank commander was 1st Lt Wesley S. Buller, so they dubbed their tank “Big Bang Buller.” Frank was the driver. The bow gunner was Pfc Daniel Browning, Jr., the gunner was Cpl Francis X. O. (Fox) Smyth, and the loader was Pfc Charles E. Reeder. The tank became their home for 6 months, much of the time under battle conditions. Some crews didn’t name their tanks, but just called them “moving foxholes.”



Figure 11 - Sherman M4A4 tank

Frank’s tank was #1 in the formation of 18 tanks in the company. They were Company B among four companies in the 36th Battalion.

Travel was bumpy and noisy. The column generally only traveled during the day for safety reasons. Non-combat

movement at night usually required someone on the ground to guide the driver. Frank remembers that the many tanks left the roads a “mess.” Visibility was acceptable during the day, but required goggles to avoid dust. Periscopes were used when “buttoned up.”

In terms of armor and protection, tanks are at the top of the food chain. Threats were planes, other tanks and ground based anti-tank weapons. The latter was to prove fatal to many. The machine gun bullets from planes did not penetrate the armor. Planes with large bombs, to which tanks were vulnerable, were rarely encountered. Heavy German tanks were also rarely encountered. When they were, air support was called and P-47 Thunderbolts, usually responded.

At rest stops, the men were busy with bathroom calls and loading fuel. The food was supplied by the chow wagons. They were part of the convoy. C and D rations were standard staple. The transmission case in the front of the tank sometimes served as a warming tray.

Five men sleeping in a tank was “tight,” so the crew often slept in houses, most of which were deserted as a result of the ongoing fighting. The houses also offered some welcome warmth, since the tank did not have a climate control system of any kind.

Overall, traveling in a Sherman was tolerable, but “far from comfortable.”

THE BATTLE OF RHEINBERG

On January 22, after the German attack failed to materialize, the Division was reassigned to the 9th army and moved north to Maastricht, Holland to prepare for the advance toward the Rhein.

After some fighting, the Division crossed the Roer River on February 27 and headed towards the Rhein.

The Battle of Rheinberg screams out in Frank's memory. He was unable to talk about it for over six decades. That battle was only one of the many battles he fought during his 68 days of "engagement with the enemy," but it was the bloodiest.

Of the 18 tanks in Company B, only 7 were still operable after the battle. At least 20 men lost their lives. At least as many were injured; some critically. For all, it would leave permanent emotional scars.

The Wesel Pocket and Rheinberg

Rheinberg was a key town in the "Wesel Pocket." The German main line of resistance (MLR) had been formed around Rheinberg to allow the withdrawal of as many German soldiers as possible across the bridge at Wesel to the temporary safety of the east side of the Rhein. Fighting was described as "intense" and "fanatical."

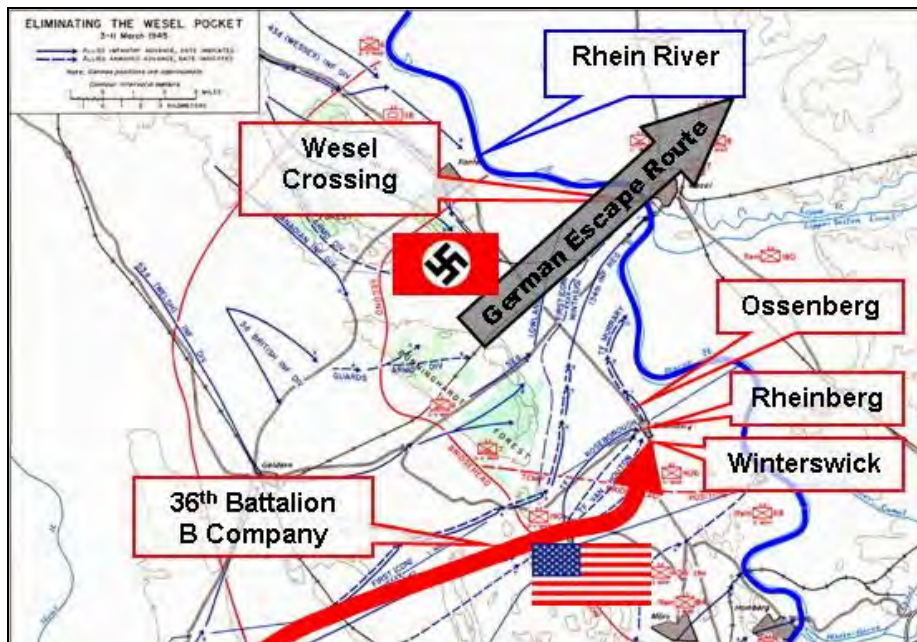


Figure 12 - The Wesel Pocket

In Rheinberg, the Germans had employed anti-tank guns en masse. The entire city was ringed with 88 mm guns supported

by 20 mm and 40 mm anti-tank guns. Along all routes and approaches to the town, the enemy had prepared positions with bazooka like weapons called Panzerfausts. The German soldiers were also heavily armed with hand guns and grenades.

Faulty Intelligence

Poor communications, lack of coordination with infantry units and very poor intelligence all contributed to this disastrous engagement.

The intelligence was very promising: Only minor opposition was expected. Available information indicated that Rheinberg was defended by approximately 300 disorganized and demoralized troops supported by a few self-propelled weapons and anti-tank guns.

At 0630 to 0800 on the day of the attack, Troop B, 88th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, was still scouting the area and concurred with prior intelligence reports that only light opposition was to be expected. No provision had been made for air support, since the air reconnaissance team had reported no appreciable enemy activity in the vicinity of Rheinberg on March 3.

The plan was based on a premise of negligible resistance. Said the commander of the heavy armor task force, Maj. John H. Van Houten: "We thought it was to be a road march."

Three Different Attack Routes; Three Immediate Problems

Organizationally, the men were assigned to their respective Battalions, Companies and Platoons. For battle purposes, however, "Combat Commands" and Task Forces" were used. These entities combined heavy and light armored units, infantry and support units into more flexible fighting configurations. The division had three Combat Commands: Combat Command A (CCA), Combat Command B (CCB) and a smaller reserve unit, Combat Command Reserve (CCR).

In this instance, Combat Command B under Col. Edward A. Kimball, was to take Rheinberg.

Colonel Kimball ordered his troops to be split into two task forces: a "light armor" task force, commanded by Lt Col Morgan G. Roseborough and an "armor heavy" task force, commanded by Major Van Houten.

Halfway to Rheinberg, Major Van Houten divided his force into three attacking elements. Company A, under the command of Captain Kemble "Cowboy" Tucker, was to drive up the main east-west highway into Rheinberg. Company D, led by Captain Arthur C. Erdman, was to move along secondary roads to join Captain Tucker just before Rheinberg. And Company B, under Captain David B. "Irish" Kelly was to attack Rheinberg from the south.

Composed mainly of light tanks, Captain Tucker's column on the Rheinberg highway soon lost four tanks to antitank guns, a Panzerfaust and a mine. Lead tanks in Battalions were prime targets.

Company D, the center column led by Captain Arthur C. "Ace" Erdman, never reached the highway as concealed German antitank guns knocked out twelve of fourteen of its medium tanks. Every officer of D Company was killed or severely wounded in the action that day.

Captain Kelly's Company B was ordered to traverse the village of Winterswick and attack Rheinberg from the south. The details of Company B's movements follow.



Capt. David B. Kelly

Figure 13 - Captain David B. Kelly

Company B

At about 1000 o'clock on March 5, 1945, B Co, 36th Tank Battalion, Captain David B. Kelly commanding, was ordered to proceed from its position, just west of Lintfort, through Lintfort east and thence northeast through Winterswick to attack Rheinberg.

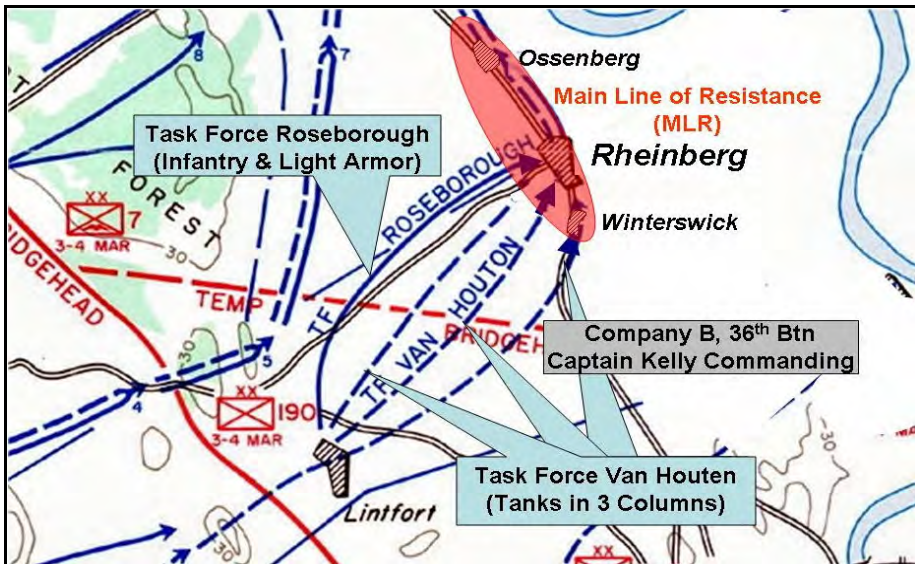


Figure 14 - Details of attack orders for Company B

While passing through Winterswick, machine gun and small arms fire was received from houses on both sides, (east and west) of the road.

B Company tanks lacked infantry support, so Captain Kelly requested Major Van Houten to send infantry support to help dislodge the enemy bazooka and Panzer Faust teams. They were dug in five or ten yards apart on both sides of the road and were inflicting heavy damage on B Company tanks.

Company B was the only company which reached Rheinberg that day. Some tanks succeeded in penetrating the town, but the tanks were stopped and some of the crew members were captured.

The Fate of Tank #1 - "The Lord Was With Us"

2nd Lt Wesley S. Buller was Frank's commanding officer of tank #1 and Platoon Leader of the 1st platoon in Company B. After hearing Major Van Houten's radio message on his 508 (tank radio) to proceed as quickly as possible to Rheinberg, he immediately complied.



Figure 15 - 2nd Lt Wesley S. Buller

Lt Buller's tank passed the railroad track which crosses the road at Winterswick. Immediately thereafter, the crew saw what appeared to be a disabled German gun on tracks. As they passed, they fired a shot into the tracks for good measure.



11. German SP assault gun (Sturmgeschütz) at Winterswick showing track damaged by fire from Lt. Buller's tank.

Figure 16 - German gun immobilized by tank #1

As tank #1 approached the northern edge of the village, it was hit by a German Panzerfaust fired from a ditch to the right.

Frank remembers feeling a tremendous shock. The impact welded the turret to the body of the tank and damaged the gyro stabilizer for the cannon. The oil from the stabilizer sprayed the entire crew. Frank thought the men were bleeding before he realized it was only oil.

Everyone was ordered to dismount immediately. According to other records, “Lt Wesley S. Buller, the tank commander, crawled out on the rear deck and blazed away with a 50 caliber machine gun to cover his crew's escape. He also sprayed houses concealing machine gun nests.”

Years later, Lt Buller recalls in a 1994 letter to the surviving soldiers in his company: “All-in-all, I am really fortunate to be alive. When the German Panzerfaust hit the turret ring of our tank outside of Rheinberg and welded it to the body so we could no longer traverse the gun, the Lord was with us and we walked away.”

Blacky's Battle

As “Blacky” attempted to evacuate from his tank, he quickly discovered that he could not open his hatch. The hit from the Panzerfaust had welded the turret to the body of the tank in such a way that the cannon barrel obstructed his escape hatch. To avoid repeat shellings, Frank immediately drove the tank about 100 yards behind a house and started to dismount through the bow gunner's escape hatch. It was then that he saw his gunner, Cpl Smyth using a tree for cover. Frank felt he could continue the fight by using the tank's tracks to aim the cannon and urged gunner Smyth to get back into the tank. After a brief hesitation, “Smitty” climbed on board.

Since Frank's periscope was lined up with the cannon, he was able to survey the battle field and aim the cannon with the tank. The turret would still not traverse, but they discovered it could be raised and lowered. In close cooperation with Smyth, they found that using the tank's steering to aim the cannon could achieve the desired result. They were indeed back in the fight.

The two men did the work of an entire crew. Smyth was doing the work of both the loader and gunner while Frank filled in for the bow gunner while sharing the command responsibility with Smyth.

They cleared the area around them, blowing holes in houses which housed snipers, taking out armored enemy vehicles and two 88 mm anti tank guns, protecting crew members who had lost their tanks and providing cover fire for the remaining tanks.



9. 88 MM ATgun at Winterswick.

Figure 17 - 88mm gun in Winterswick

Lt Buller, meanwhile, was giving orders to the rest of the tanks under his command and by his own account, killed several of the enemy as they were heading towards him.

After the battle, Smyth left the tank first while Frank stayed behind. A ground observer happened to be nearby to hear the story of their actions from Smyth. As Frank climbed out of the tank later on, he was hit in the chest by sniper fire and was awarded his first purple heart. He was to receive a second Purple Heart a day later.

Meanwhile, Smyth’s discussion with the combat observer resulted in a Bronze Star being awarded to Smyth several weeks later. Immediately after the awards ceremony, Smyth found Frank to tell him “you deserve this more than I do” as he handed him the Bronze Star. Frank still has the Bronze Star, even though he was not officially recorded as its recipient.

Company B Continues the Fight

The fire from the disabled tanks just above Winterswick, including tank #1, made it possible for the other tanks to continue their penetration.

Throughout the move from Winterswick to Rheinberg, the men who had their tanks shot out from under them dismounted and fought on foot. In many cases they remained in stopped tanks and continued firing. Some fired from the decks of the tanks with their 50 caliber or 30 caliber machine guns or their small arms.



Figure 18 - One of the many tanks destroyed in Rheinberg

The Company Commander, Captain Kelly, led the remaining tanks to the center of Rheinberg and later regrouped for another assault on the town.



14. Church and square in Rheinberg around which Capt. Kelly rode in his tank in the first penetration of the town.

Figure 19 - Rheinberg town square and St. Peter's Church

Frank recalls that he was preparing to leave Rheinberg after the battle subsided and had to dismount his tank to inspect a bridge leading out of Rheinberg. As he stood in the open, he encountered a German soldier who started to raise his rifle. Frank, as a tank driver not trained to “pull the trigger” as a matter of course, fired his “grease gun” at the German, but missed him as the gun recoiled from the multiple bullets. Frank still remembers the coat tails of the German soldier’s uniform and the canteen flapping in the air as he ran away. He also still wonders to this day what went through their respective minds as the brief encounter unfolded.

Among many acts of heroism, Frank also recalls a random act of kindness: When one of the tanks was hit and the crew instantly killed, Sgt Theodore Beck was thrown out of his tank,

but his leg was severed below his knee. A day after the battle ended, they found him sitting on the side of the road. He had been treated by the Germans so he could live.

A particular story of respect among soldiers emerged in a conversation almost seven decades later between Frank and the sons of the deceased Captain Kelly at a meeting on April 11, 2013. The sons noted that on every March 5, the anniversary of the Rheinberg Battle, their father would quietly withdraw and solemnly sip a glass of cognac. A few years before his death in 1997, he shared the story that led to his ritual.

After Captain Kelly led his men in the bloody battle at Rheinberg which earned him the Silver Star, he was wounded and was met by a German soldier as he fell to the ground. Instead of shooting him, the soldier gave him a sip of cognac from a flask. So each March 5, as long as he was alive, Captain Kelly sipped the cognac as he reflected on the German soldier who allowed him to live.

Frank witnessed several additional examples of utmost respect shown to injured or captured Americans by the elite German troops who fought fiercely in defending Rheinberg and the crossing of the Rhein at Wesel.

Casualty Inspection – Painful and Indelible Memories

Frank was in a party with Capt Kelly to identify the dead after the battle. The damage was shocking and left an indelible impression on his young mind which would haunt him for over six decades. Of the 90 tank crew members from his company engaged in that battle, at least 20 lost their lives. Many of Frank’s buddies were cremated inside their tanks after being hit by a German “88” or Panzerfaust. Others were seriously wounded.

Frank remembers seeing piles of ash on the metal seats. Those same piles of ash were his buddies a few hours earlier.



Figure 20 – Grim recovery duty in Rheinberg

In a manuscript by Walter W. Perna, Troop C, 88th Recon Battalion, the carnage at Rheinberg is described this way:

“We later learned that in making the assault on Rheinberg, which was not thought to be heavily defended, the Combat Command ran into a firestorm of resistance which resulted in heavy casualties, including the loss of a tank battalion and many G.I.s killed or wounded. As far as my platoon was concerned, we entered the Rheinberg combat area the next day and as we proceeded down the road, we suddenly came

across four or five tanks which were stopped and with their 75mm cannons still pointing, eastward in a firing position. But the tanks were silent and had apparently been knocked out by German artillery the night before.

Approaching the first tank, I glanced at the vehicle's identification number and I was stunned. My God, those are our tanks, I thought. Adding to the horror of the scene was the sight of a blackened tanker hanging halfway out of the tank's turret with outstretched arms. Quite obviously, he had not been able to crawl out of the tank before the flames had engulfed him. Lying on the ground next to the tank in a pool of blood was another tanker whose life had also been violently ended.

Moving on further down the road, we came across some foxholes, ...each of which contained a dead German soldier. It was quite evident that the Germans had fought ferociously to prevent our Division from capturing Rheinberg.”

The battle for Rheinberg would wind down over the next several days and the remnants of the 8th left town on or about March 10, 1945.



Figure 21 - Unidentified soldiers of the 8th in Rheinberg



Freeman Barber, C-36, and crew of tank C-17, Rheinberg, Germany, March, 1945

Figure 22 - Tanks leaving Rheinberg. Note steeple of St. Peter's Church of Rheinberg in background

Official Damage Assessment

The fight for Rheinberg had all but annihilated the 8th Division's armor. Of the 54 tanks, 39 were lost or damaged. Some of the tanks were later repaired and saw additional action. Frank's tank was one of those.

The German defenders of the area had allowed the tanks of Task Force Van Houten to move into their midst and held their fire until the tanks were very close. About half of the tank losses were from close range Panzerfaust fire by German soldiers dug in along the road.

The intelligence proved to be a monumental failure. In the official After Action Reports, the intelligence failure was labeled as “off base.”

In a solemn letter to his old buddies several years after the war, Lt Wesley Buller, the commander of Frank’s tank #1, writes this: “no vital facts were given to cause me to be aware of enemy presence until we were hit by the Panzerfaust.” T/4 Kenneth E. Hummel, driver of tank #17, in his 2011 video memoirs, was more direct. He squarely blames the intelligence failure on the “stupidity of the brass.”

In his book “In Tornado’s Wake,” Capt. Charles Leach, Co. A, 7th AIB summarized it this way: ‘The final tally of the battle for Rheinberg shows not only the determination of the men of the 8th Division to accomplish their mission, but also the fanatic defense put up by the Germans in an attempt to hold open the “Wesel escape route.”

Frank reflected how proud he was of his company. In spite of human instincts to flee in the face of disaster, no one in his company did. Every soldier continued fighting, whether from their tank or on foot. Of the four officers in the Company, two lost their lives. The two who survived received a number of decorations. All of them believed in leading from the front.



Figure 23 – Last of the tanks from the 36th Tank Battalion leaving Rheinberg about March 10, 1945

OSSENBERG

Frank's tank was repaired and the remains of his company proceeded through Ossenber, the next town on the defense system. One of the tracks on the tank was damaged by a bazooka or Panzerfaust, so he could "only go in a circle." He was awarded a second purple heart in the battle at Ossenber, when a piece of shrapnel hit him in the leg with such force that it knocked him down.

Track damage and personal injury notwithstanding, Frank described that battle as very light compared to Rheinber.

CROSSING THE RHEIN

As the 8th Division crossed the Rhein at Wesel on March 26, Frank came eye to eye with General Patton. He saluted the men and Frank felt as if Patton was “proud of what he had done, and what his men had done for him.” Next to surviving the Rheinberg battle, it was one of the highlights of Frank’s military career. The Division then moved into Germany to help form the northern arm of the Ruhr encirclement. They then headed east towards the Harz Mountains.



Figure 24 – Frank’s image of General Patton while crossing the Rhein



Figure 25 - The Harz Mountains and the end of the war

THE HARZ MOUNTAINS

The 8th traveled towards Wolfenbuttel and turned south to Blankenberg at the foot of the Harz Mountains. They took the city on April 20. The missions were primarily mop up operations and to stay out of the way of sporadic of sniper fire. From the company annals: "Just before V-E Day came the order: 'Occupy and Govern.' Dispersed in the Harz Mountains, the 8th now had time to take stock and recall the hard-working, unheralded units that had helped make the division's record a proud one."

The company spent much of the time in a small village which Frank remembers fondly. It was surrounded by apple orchards. With his farming background, Frank clearly remembers being careful not to disturb the trees with his tank.

The village did not have many inhabitants, but the citizens were hospitable and the soldiers shared some meals with them. Many of the soldiers gave the Germans coffee and candy bars. Even though the soldiers had orders "not to fraternize" with the German women, he still remembers that "It was a pleasure to be in that town"

While stationed in that village, Frank remembers the landing of a Messerschmitt fighter plane. The pilot had stowed a passenger in the fuselage. With hand signals and limited English, he explained that he just wanted to return to his village, since the war was practically over. Rather than taking them prisoner to deliver them to the Russians, Frank's detail told the pilot to shed his uniform and disappear into the village.

THE END OF THE WAR

V-E Day, on 8 May 1945, brought the war in Europe to an official end. To the men of the Thundering Herd it was a joyous day, yet one for reflection and remembrance. Here a long trek that had begun more than a year before in the Louisiana bayous. 469 members of the Division had given

their all for their country. 1,757 had sustained wounds, although many of those soldiers returned to duty.

Frank does not recall the context, but remembers a large number of Germans swimming across a freezing river offering to be taken prisoner by the Americans. Some froze to death in the crossing. Unfortunately, the Americans had orders to turn them over to the Russians. The details and circumstances escaped Frank.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND BEYOND

They were then sent to Langenstein, Germany, where Frank remembers emaciated prisoners they were assigned to protect and process. Related to that mission, the 8th Armored Division was later recognized as a liberating unit by the US Army's Center of Military History and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Next, the 8th Armored Division was stationed in Czechoslovakia near Pilsen, where the American and the Russian lines met. After some friendly interaction, the Russian established a 200 yard "No man's zone" between them. Frank saw it as the beginning of the cold war.

That mission was followed by some welcome R&R in Davos, Switzerland, of which Frank has fond memories.



Figure 26 - Frank in post War Europe with Cpl Joseph P. Maher

Frank muses that he drove or commanded 4 different tanks during the roughly 6 months he spent fighting across Europe. The last one was a Pershing tank. Frank described it as “a good tank with a very good gun.”



MY LAST TANK PERSHING 90mm GUN FORD ENGINE 1945

Figure 27 - Pershing Tank with 90 mm gun

The tank also had more armor and a Ford engine. This was a great improvement over the louder aircraft radial engine in the Sherman M4A4 tank.

In August of 1945, Frank was ordered to turn in his tank to a depot near Munich. He remembers a large open field that was used as a tank storage area.



Figure 28 – Tank depot near Munich

Most importantly, his entire crew of five had survived and ultimately returned home.



Figure 29 - Crew of Tank #1: All accounted for

He was then assigned to the 83rd Infantry Division as a “Wire Chief” to restore telephone dial service in Linz, Austria. He remembers hunting deer and rabbit with some of his buddies and sharing some of the game with civilians.

The 8th Division was slowly dissolved and Frank was honorably discharged on February 12 of 1946.

THOUGHTS ABOUT WAR

Frank’s thoughts about war come to him quickly:

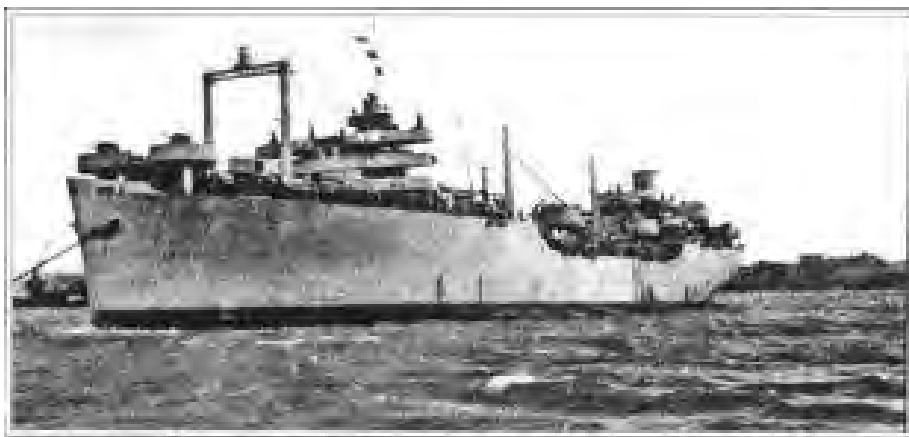
- War is hell - You’re always scared and either cold, hot, tired, or hungry
- There is razor’s edge excitement and invigoration
- You are forced to learn many new things quickly
- The men you fight and live with will always be like brothers

The memories live on. A good summary is offered by the booklet “Tornado! The Story of the 8th Armored Division,” published by the “Stars & Stripes” in 1945: “The 8th also could remember the long, tortuous trek from the Louisiana swamps through foggy England and blustery, freezing France; the din and confusion of battle; wide autobahns, blown bridges, rivers, pillboxes and narrow streets of Germany; streams of refugees and grateful, liberated prisoners. They remembered, too, their buddies, killed and wounded.”

As Frank reflects on the German autobahn, he recalls that some stretches of the wide roadways were sometimes used as landing strips by the Luftwaffe.

RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

At this time, Frank was offered training to become a Second Lt. After seriously considering the offer, he turned it down in favor of a civilian job and being with his friends and family. He returned on the Liberty Ship named the “Marine Wolf.”



The A.S.A.T. Marine Wolf in port in 1944

Figure 30 - ASAT Marine Wolf

After getting reacquainted with America, Frank married Barbara Louise Dahlberg on May 7, 1949.



Figure 31 – Mr. & Mrs. Blackston and parents on May 7, 1949

Frank Walter “Blacky” Blackston

He first worked for Coca Cola in New Britain, Ct. and then started as a salesman for Stanley Tools in 1950 and became Eastern Regional Sales Manager in 1976. He stayed with Stanley until his retirement in March of 1990. In addition to his 40 years of service, Stanley Tools credited him with his three years of military service for retirement purposes.

Barbara and Frank raised three children, now all married: Susan (Major), Nancy (Leonard) and Carol (Corey). As of 2013, there are 8 grandchildren. Frank muses “They’re the reason I’m alive.”



Figure 32 - The Blackston bunch (all 16 of them)

LIFE TODAY

Today, Frank and Barbara live in Dunwoody, GA, but spend a large part of the summer on Lake Delavan, Wisconsin, where his daughter Susan and son in law John Major have painstakingly restored a beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright home.

The Blackstons spend most of the winter in an oceanfront community in Jensen Beach on the southeast coast of Florida. There, they enjoy the sunshine and frequent dinner outings with their friends. Frank, in particular, enjoys the Tuesday morning coffees when “he and his friends attempt to solve all the world’s problems.”



Figure 33 - Tuesday coffee: Solving the world's problems



Figure 34 - Frank at 90

REFLECTIONS

Frank and Barbara sometimes wonder what is happening to the few remaining members of the 8th Armored Division. Frank is the only member of his tank crew still alive and the division reunions have stopped after dwindling from four thousand to two hundred attendees.

Frank's army contacts have also dwindled and communications now consist of occasional Christmas cards and sporadic email exchanges with a few survivors.



Figure 35 - Memories

He gave three years of his life to the Army, but will carry the memories forever. Perhaps that's how he evolved his core reflection on life:

“Life will always be bittersweet

There will be days where you wish you never got up

But hopefully there will be many more days you wish would never end”

Over the years, Frank has also formulated pieces of philosophy and guidelines to live by. He especially thinks about his 8 grandchildren in this regard. He calls them the “Super Eight.” There are 4 girls (Rebecca, Kristin, Barbara and Megyn) and 4 boys (Lee, William, John and Michael).

Given the uncertainties of life, he feels that making proper choices is imperative: “Other than the gift of life itself, your greatest gift is choice. You make 100s of choices each day. You own each one and those choices become you.”

Associated with that, he adds “Always be responsible for your actions.”

He offers these additional thoughts to have a good day (and a good life):

“Knowledge is power and attitude is everything.” It is engraved on a plaque in the dining room in the summer home in Wisconsin.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.” That’s how we derive the power to shape our lives.

“Wake up with a plan.”

“Know history: The further you look back, the further forward you can see”. If you know history, you cut down on your mistakes.

“The person you are most responsible for is the one looking back at you in the mirror”

His views about work and money:

“There is nothing more invigorating than a job you enjoy doing. Money isn’t everything. His definition of success: Being in a place you want to be doing the things you enjoy doing with the person or people you enjoy being with.”

“Don’t spend more than you earn and always try to save 10%”.

Frank loves people. Those around him quickly learn to love him as well and feel fortunate to have him in their community.

He doesn't view himself as a hero and says he served his country willingly to defend our liberty and freedom. He earnestly encourages everyone to do the same.



