

## Hilton T. Lytle

Born: Zenoria, Louisiana, Nov. 19, 1922

Interview: March 4, 2002

**ENLISTED**

~~Induction~~ Date: June, 1940. Discharged: August, 1945

U. S. Army: 13th Coast Artillery, 69th Infantry Division

American, European Theatre

Bronze Star w/Oak Leaf

Jena High School, Texas A & M, Gallaudet University

Married Nancy Clegg\* Aug. 9, 1946

No Children

Employed as Counselor

Retired

*Hilton lives in Monroe, LA (32 yrs.)*

*\*Deceased*



Lt. Hilton T. Lytle 1945

*"I joined the military due to the hardship of the great depression.  
In the Army, I would be one less person to have to clothe and feed at home."*

**H**ilton tells a story of being a guest of the Navy before joining the Infantry in a dash across Germany to meet the Russians at the Elbe River. Read on.....

I was born in the little town of Zenoria, LA in 1922, one of five children whose father was employed on the railroad. We moved to Jena, LA when I was small and graduated from Jena High School in late May, 1940. The Monday after graduation, I hitch-hiked to Alexandria, LA and enlisted in the Army. I was not yet 18 years of age but lied to get accepted. I joined the military due to the hardship of the great depression. In the Army, I would be one less person to have to clothe and feed at home.

I was sworn in on June 11, 1940 at Jackson, Mississippi and sent to Fort Barrancas, near Pensacola, Florida for basic training in artillery. After finishing basic I was assigned to the 13th Coast Artillery, then shipped to Panama in December. I was assigned to a battery of 14 inch disappearing guns mounted on the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal.

Our duty here was pretty routine, just kept ready for any kind of attempt or attack upon the canal. Later on, I was transferred to another battery of 14 inch railway guns which fired a 1600 pound projectile with a range of 32 miles. We did all kinds of canal protection exercises including maintaining observation points up and down the coast and on either side of the canal. One of my assignments, along with about thirty others was maintaining an observation post at Galeta Point. Our neighbors at Galeta Point were Chiriqui Indians who we got to know pretty

well and tried to help them as much as we could with medicine and other needs. Stayed at Galeta for several months. After three years in Panama, I was transferred back to the United States in a most round about manner.

In late 1943 the aircraft carrier USS Intrepid transited the Panama Canal east to west on her way to the Pacific. We went aboard on the Pacific end of the canal expecting to leave the ship somewhere on the west coast. We sailed to San Francisco but were still on board when the Intrepid left for Pearl Harbor, a group of about 200 Army guys aboard ship with more than three thousand sailors. We had no duties, just passengers along for the ride. That ride proved to be a lot more than just transportation to the United States! It would have been logical for us to get off in San Francisco or Pearl instead of being two hundred more mouths to feed aboard ship. Could be somebody had forgotten about us, so we stayed with the ship when she left Pearl in the middle of January, 1944 headed for the Marshall Islands and the invasion of Kwajalein. This campaign lasted until early February and gave me a ringside seat and a very real introduction to naval warfare. Seeing the Intrepid's planes return from their missions, often with heavy damage, trying to get safely aboard was a remarkable experience. Watching the ship's crew respond to any situation instilled a lot of respect for the way they performed. Occasionally a plane would nose over on deck with engine running and the propeller would take big chunks out of the deck and almost immediately sailors would be repairing it. Other planes would be so damaged they just pushed them over the side while some would have to put down in the sea. When they went in the water, a destroyer or some other craft would come to the rescue and bring the crew back to Intrepid.

With Kwajalein secured, Intrepid sailed further into the Pacific with some other carriers and launched an attack on the big Japanese naval base at Truk. This show started early on February 17, and was going well until that evening when an aircraft launched torpedo slammed into Intrepid tearing a big hole below the waterline and damaging her rudder. The ship stayed afloat and after a lot of effort by crew and officers was able to steer a course for Hawaii. Temporary repairs were made at Pearl Harbor, then Intrepid limped back to San Francisco. I'm finally back in the United States, almost! Because we had been stationed in Panama with possible contact with malaria, they quarantined us across the bay on Angel Island for fourteen days. It was not a happy two weeks with everybody anxious to get home. Makes you wonder why there was no concern about malaria infecting the sailors aboard Intrepid.

Once the quarantine was over, I got a 30 day furlough to come home and visit my folks around Christmas, 1943, before reporting to the 69th Infantry Division at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Since I had been in the Coast Artillery they assigned me to the Division Field Artillery, a 155mm howitzer battalion. This would have been a good situation, but with more firing experience than any of the officers already assigned to the 69th, there seemed to be a bit of resentment toward me and when I scored a direct hit on an old tank being used on the firing range, things didn't get any better. Around March, 1944, I transferred to Cannon Company of the 273rd Infantry Regiment. We did most of our training in DeSoto National Forest and before going overseas we traveled, on foot, all the way from Camp Shelby to the Gulf of Mexico somewhere near Biloxi. Toward the end of summer we shipped out by train for the east coast, winding up at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey prior to boarding a Liberty ship for Europe. Took us about 7 or 8 days to get to Southampton, England. We stayed in England for a few weeks, just about long enough to figure out pence, shillings, crowns and pounds, then boarded an English ship in early December and sailed to Le Havre, France.

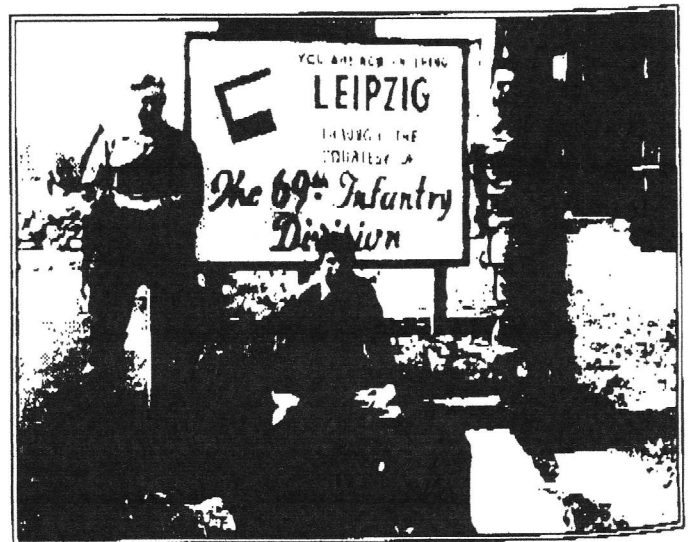
The ship didn't dock in Le Havre, we anchored some distance from shore and transferred to landing craft using rope ladders to go over the side. Shipboard cranes transferred our cannons and vehicles to the landing craft.

A device was inserted into the barrels of our cannon so they could be attached to the slings and one of them damaged the barrel. What it did affected the shells fired from that gun so they had a different whine on their way to the target. From then on, I could always tell when that gun had fired by the sound. On shore, after getting all our stuff loaded on the few trucks we had, we drove inland for some distance to the town of Soissons and stopped for the night.

About the same time as our arrival in France, the Germans launched the Ardennes offensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. During this period of hectic effort to stop the German onslaught we are moved up to help out and set up our guns in position to fire at any target of opportunity and held this position until the Germans lost momentum and the Americans went on the offensive. We really didn't do very much and I was more worried about my brother in Bastogne with the 101st Airborne.

During the first week of January, we went on line when we relieved the 28th Division. The 28th was one of the outfits that had taken the worst of the German attack and was in pretty bad shape. We saw people from the 5th and 29th Divisions along with some Free French units about that time. Weather was cold, snow everywhere, but we got our guns in place and spent another four or five days firing whenever called upon by whoever might need a little help. By now word had gotten around about the Malmedy massacre and that made everybody hate the Germans more than ever. With this fresh in our minds when we went on the attack January 19, there was great determination to do all the damage to the Germans we could. Over the next few weeks we crossed the Siegfried line, courtesy of the Army Engineers who had built earthworks above the dragon's teeth and across the anti-tank ditches. There was a bad problem with land mines and that problem was solved by equipping a tank or tractor with a rotating drum out in front with lengths of chain attached to flail the ground before them. When the chains hit a mine it would explode harmlessly some distance in front of the special equipped vehicle. One time we were dug in among heavy trees and the Germans would fire artillery and mortars at us causing tree bursts which scattered shrapnel all over the place. We had to build bunkers from logs and dirt for protection. Whenever we had to dig foxholes for protection we learned to add a little feature called a grenade sump. This was a deeper excavation big enough to kick a grenade into where the shrapnel distribution would be limited.

Toward the end of January, the 69th had the objective of capturing three towns, Mescheid, Rescheid, and Camburg, all on higher ground, something infantry commanders always hope for. During the fighting to capture these places, one of our forward observers, Lt. Carter, was hit by enemy fire and I was sent up to the OP (Observation Point) to relieve him. Let me say here, that directing artillery fire is a skill that comes naturally to some and must be learned by others, and I had always been good at it and by this time with a few years of experience, I was very good. The radio operator at the OP was a fellow named Mazurkowitz from New York. (A lot of 69th people were from that part of the country and often kidded me about my southern heritage.) I had no sooner gotten there when one of our infantry platoons got pinned down and



69th DIVISION welcoming committee Leipzig, 1945

needed help. Mazurkowits and I crawled forward trying to get a better look just at daylight and with a lot of fog shrouding any possible targets. Was a tough crawl for Mazurkowits carrying about 60 pounds of radio. When visibility improved enough we could see what appeared to be a small mountain covered with trees and snow. We determined this was where the Germans had some 88 mm rifles dug in. I called for one round to get my bearings and then radioed back to Fire for Effect! Within about four minutes 48 rounds of 105 ammo, some PD, some delayed fuse, slammed into the mountain and the whole thing came tumbling down. That silenced the enemy fire and our guys got out safely. We had just destroyed a bunker about as tall as a six story building. Stayed there for three or four days with the fighting pretty heavy before another observer relieved me. When I got back to my company, everybody was congratulating me for doing such a good job, but I didn't consider it anything more than what was expected. Nevertheless, it resulted in my getting a battlefield commission.

Sometimes, in spite of the danger and seriousness of combat, small incidents occur that inject a little humor and relieve the tension,....at least momentarily. During World War II, units communicated by telephone most of the time and this called for the signal people to string wire all over the place and distribute telephones to the companies on the front line. One time I watched a guy running wire across a field while carrying three or four of the old local battery phones when the Germans started dropping small mortar shells around him. Instead of running for his life, he stopped, threw up his hands and gave the Germans the middle finger. Whether it was courage or insanity, I don't know, but it sure was funny at the moment. Around the same time, another rotund and red headed character named Bobo, that was his real name, in spite of being scared and facing death at any time, jumped up on a pile of shell cases and started singing; "Oh my Darlin', Oh my Darlin', Oh my Darlin' Clementine." From then on, when anybody, sometimes everybody, wanted to break the tension you heard the strains of Bobo's theme song echoing through the ranks.

As we continued our advance into Germany, we participated in the capture of some bigger cities, Frankfurt being the biggest. I would spend most of my time up with the front line troops directing cannon fire whenever and wherever needed, Mazurkowits and his radio my constant companion. After a while, usually 8 or 10 days we would go back to Cannon Company for a rest. In March, with the Germany Army nearing collapse, we arrived back at the company to learn a small task force consisting of a tank company, an infantry company, our company, and some other artillery units was being formed to clean up any resistance left in small towns and villages along the American advance. Right away, the tankers sped on their way and we couldn't catch up. They would go through a town with white flags hanging from the windows without any trouble but when we arrived, there might be unexpected resistance from snipers, some of them using weapons hidden behind the white flags. We suffered several casualties and soon learned to be careful, no matter how many bed sheets were on display. We just let the tanks go their way, while we took care of business. As any infantryman can tell you, tanks draw enemy fire like honey draws flies and we were probably better off without them. We made it through that operation but suffered a good many casualties from whatever German diehard fighter might be hidden with a weapon. The tankers with their heavy armor were pretty much immune from this kind of harassment, but not the infantry, and as a forward observer, I was right up there in the forefront of the action.

The next big town we encountered was Kassel where the fight involved aerial support with lots of smoke and fire among the ruin already inflicted by heavy air raids. Past Kassel, we continued to advance deeper into Germany, kind of traumatic experience, sometimes we walked, sometimes we rode. When enemy resistance was encountered, we dug in, did whatever it took to dispose of it and kept on going. The 69th Division captured Leipzig

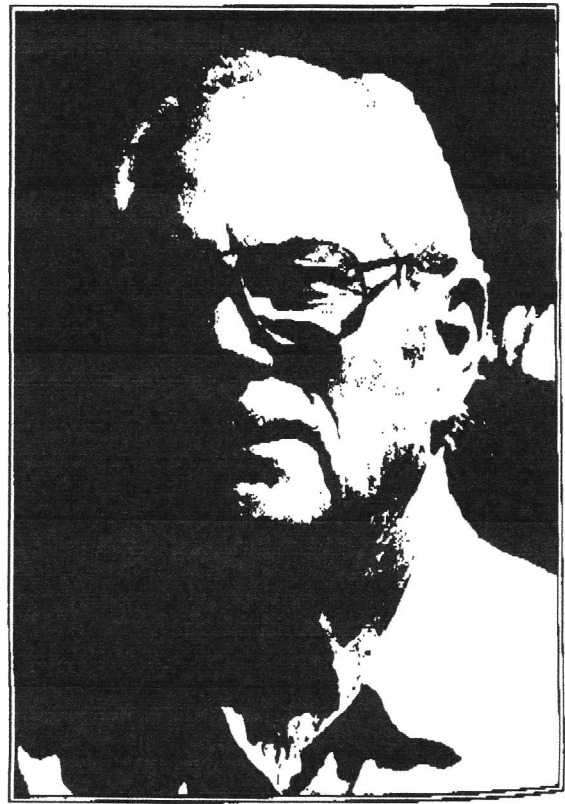
where the heaviest resistance came from a huge monument there commemorating the defeat of Napoleon in 1813. In the course of action we were firing our cannons almost point blank into the monument with other artillery supporting from the rear. After the battle we promptly put up a big sign announcing to anyone and everyone "You are now entering LEIPZIG, courtesy of the 69th INFANTRY DIVISION. Along the way we discovered and liberated one of the concentration camps and found the most horrible conditions you can imagine. Emaciated inmates, many near the point of death, a truly pitiful sight. Our medics and other Army personnel were soon busy trying to help these people as best they could. Now, in the middle of April, the war in Europe nearly over, we reached the Elbe River and stopped to regroup. Ten days later, on April 25, the Russian Army showed up across the Elbe and the 69th Division had the honor of being the first American outfit to meet them. Less than two weeks later the German surrender would be signed.

The Russians we encountered were a motley crew, by our standards. They had some vehicles, some of them were riding camels, many of them had their women with them, and little in the way of discipline. For no reason at all, they might point their rifle in the air and start shooting, or if a building still had an unbroken window, they would shoot it out. One incident sticks in my mind: One of their vehicles had a problem and a fellow was underneath trying to get it going when another Russian ran over his protruding legs. Then, a Russian officer who witnessed it took his piston and promptly shot the driver for running over his comrade. It was unbelievable to me.

All in all, they were a pretty rough bunch, more animal than human. The German people were terrified of them and thousands came into our sector of the occupation hoping to avoid any contact. My concept of the Russians at that time was pretty bad.

I had enough points to come home pretty soon and left Europe by way of Camp Lucky Strike. Got home and took a job in the oil fields where I soon realized I needed to get an education and enrolled at LSU on the GI Bill. Also got married and applied to LSU for veteran's housing where I encountered a bit of Louisiana politics. My housing application was assigned number 65. Three or four weeks later I went to check on it and found our number was now in the 80's. I said "What the Hell is going on?" and hear this reply: Well, some football players have come in and they were given the housing you were supposed to get. That's when I transferred to Texas A&M.

When the Korean War started, I was called back to active duty and was on my way to Korea when I was intercepted in Tokyo and assigned to training artillerymen.



Hilton T. Lytle March 4, 2002

got out in FEB 52  
 WHEN ASKED IF I WANTED  
 TO STAY IN THE RESERVE  
 MY REPLY WAS "NO" NOT "NO" BUT  
 HOW NO!! (170)

LOUISIANA

OCT 3-48 - JUN 52  
 11/21/52 - 2/15/53