

300th Quarterly



300th Combat Engineers Then and Now Summer 2014

Reunion Coming Soon

The Reunion of the 300th Engineer Combat Battalion will be held in Tyler, Texas, Friday through Sunday, **October 3, 4, 5**. See the included flyer for details. All are welcome including children of all ages. At one reunion we had four generations of a single family and several times three generations of the same family. Make your reservations directly with the hotel no later than September 1.

Veterans Remain Friends 70 Years Later

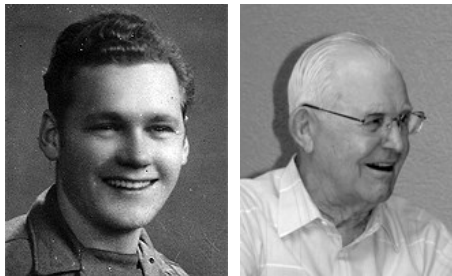
Tyler (Texas) Morning Telegraph

BY EMILY GUEVARA

07/09/14

Every day, without fail, Homer Garrett and Chuck Bice take a walk around the cottage and sit in rocking chairs on the porch. Garrett and Bice, both 90, have been friends for more than 30 years. But their connection began long before that, almost 70 years ago. Both men served in the 300th Combat Engineer Battalion during World War II. But they didn't really cross paths because they were in different companies. "He was in A Company, and of course I didn't like A Company," Bice said. "We were in C Company." Bice and Garrett, now live down the hall from each other at the Watkins-Logan Texas State Veterans Home in Tyler.

After basic training at Camp White near Medford, Oregon, the men shipped out to Europe and arrived in England in December 1943. They traveled on the Queen Mary, a luxury liner that was converted to a troop



Chuck Bice in WWII and Homer Garrett at a 300th Reunion

carrier during the war. The journey took

several days, Bice said. They stayed in England with their training concentrated in the area of bridge building. "We were the best bridge builders in the Army," Bice said.

In the waves of soldiers that descended on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, Garrett didn't make it to land. His ship, Landing Ship Tank 523, was blown up in the water. He had stayed on top of the ship and survived the explosion but was hospitalized for ten months, primarily in England. He had broken his pelvis in two places, cracked his right ankle, cracked two ribs, broken his jaw and teeth, according to an account on the WWII 300th Combat Engineers website. Bice had arrived in Normandy a week before Garrett. He said the Army had divided their battalion on purpose. Once in France, Bice and his comrades laid mines. Bice said the battalion was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division and 101st Airborne Division and 76th Infantry Division. Wherever they found a weak spot in the line, the soldiers went to that spot and laid a minefield in support of the troops.

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In the course of 18 days, working day and night, they built three bridges including pontoon, Bailey and timber fixed bridges. All the while, they dodged shells from the Nazis. Bice said the guns were camouflaged, so they couldn't see them, but they heard the gunfire. And when they heard it, they ran and hit the hole. By that time the shells would land.

Bice said, at the time, they had a new major who stood on the bridge they were building even when he heard gunfire. Bice said the officer told his soldiers, "I'll court martial the next man who runs to the fullest extent of the law." Well, the next time the men heard gunfire, they ran and hit the hole. Their major [Major John Tucker] stayed on the bridge and was killed instantly. The executive officer who stood next to him was severely injured, Bice said. From that point on, no one had to tell them when to run to the hole or not, he said. He said he didn't think much about fear while serving, but just did his job. "You didn't run from fear," he said. "But you run for safety. It wasn't that we were scared, but we weren't stupid enough to stand there."

From France, Bice and his fellow soldiers moved north to Belgium where they fought in the Battle of the Bulge. From there, they went to Germany. They stayed in Europe through the end of the war. On November 11, 1945 he was discharged at Camp Fannin. Garrett was discharged before that after returning to the U.S. on a hospital boat and recovering at hospitals in the states.

Garrett said when his wife was still living, they talked about visiting Europe, but once she died those plans ended. Bice said he would like to go if he could stay for a month, but he isn't planning a visit. When the men returned to civilian life, Bice worked as a market manager at supermarkets and in private

business. Garrett worked for Mobil Oil in different parts of the state.

Although the men were not in the same company in the Army, it was through battalion reunions that started almost 40 years ago that their friendship grew. The more they talked, the more they got along, and they became good friends. Garrett's wife died 14 years ago this November, and he has since had a mild stroke. Macular degeneration is causing Bice to lose his eyesight.

Although both have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, they decided the Watkins-Logan Texas State Veterans Home was a good place to be. Garrett moved into a cottage in August and Bice followed soon after in January. They live in the same cottage, each with their own room. All of the cottages have ten private rooms, each with its own bathroom. But residents share meals at a dining room style table and have a living room and front porch.

Bice said his children sometimes ask what's so special about their friendship. "They don't understand," he said. "When you train, eat, sleep, fight with guys, it's a closer bond in some ways than family." Garrett was a bit more humorous in his response. "He's a wart," he said of Bice. "My kids think more of him than anyone in the world."

About their service to their country, the men remain proud. "It's great," Bice said. "We had a purpose and a plan, and the plan was to defeat the enemy not just play with them. ... It was a great experience." Garrett said it's hard to find words. "It's nearly indescribable. I think it's the greatest country in the world," he said as tears formed in his eyes. "And that flag that flies, it's my flag."

Capt. John Wild, Jr wrote his story in 1994



We were contacted recently by John A. Wild III and Valerie Wild Killion, the son and daughter of 300th member Capt. John A. Wild Jr. telling us that his father had written down his WWII recollections in 1994 before he passed. The

many pages of stories have been broken up and added to the web site in the appropriate chapters. We urge you to check out the web site for these stories. Thank you to John A. Wild III for sharing this with us for the web site where it will be shared with many more. Two of Capt. Wild's stories follow.

An incident then occurred which almost cost me my life. We had orders to run in an obstacle course from which no one was excused. It consisted of throwing dud hand grenades, firing a .45 sidearm, and crawling under barbed wire while live machine gun fire made it advisable to keep your head down. This brought us to the banks of the Rogue River where we were expected to sling an M1 rifle across his back, wade across as far as we could and swim the rest, climb out, don a gas mask and run about a hundred yards. No one ever bothered to find out if we could swim, fully clothed and carrying a full pack. Well, I got through all right until I waded out into that damned river. The water was only about knee deep until the last thirty or so feet, when one reached the deep channel and encountered a rather swift current. I still don't think I would have been in trouble except that the rifle strap slipped down over my chest, effectively pinning my arms at the elbow to my sides.

Fortunately, when I came up, I found two enlisted men in a skiff, patrolling the area for unlikely warriors like me. One held out what must have been the smallest and yet what seemed to me the largest twig in the world - remember the saying about a drowning man clutching at a straw - which I seized and was drawn to shore. I dutifully donned my gas mask and ran the final hundred yards.

Then we went on maneuvers in the desert as it was called; we lived in wall tents as the battalion prepared roads through the sand and mesquite. We depended on the Deschutes River for water. I shared a tent with Major Jeff Jeffries, a very intelligent officer who was the executive officer of the battalion. One night, I came in after playing poker with Major Crandall and some of the other officers. I laid down on my cot and was disconcerted to hear and feel a vibrating sound under my blanket. It was quite chilly on the desert at night. I had never heard the sound that a rattlesnake makes but the thought leapt into my mind that this might be it. I kept quite still and called to Jeff, who was already abed. He got up, drew his .45 and instructed me to throw back my covers. A furry little kitten scurried out! I felt like a fool but I had never heard a rattlesnake rattle.



"Yer lucky. Yer learnin' a trade."

Normandy Documentary

Nova (Public Broadcasting) in collaboration with French television has produced a 2-hour documentary related to the Normandy Invasion 70 years ago. From PBS sources: "Nova has exclusive access to a unique collaboration between military historians, archeologists, and specialty divers to carry out the first complete survey of the seabed bordering the legendary beachheads. Dive teams, submersibles, and underwater robots will discover and identify key examples of the Allied craft that fell victim to German shellfire, mines and torpedoes."

The PBS producers of *D-Day Sunken Secrets* used the 300th web site for research related to the sinking of LST 523 when many of the 300th were killed or seriously injured. Jan Teeling, a journalist from New York City, contacted us several times during production to confirm facts and details of the sinking. A Navy Seaman, Bill Allen, who survived the sinking of LST 523, was flown to Normandy with his family to go below the waters off Normandy to revisit his experiences in 1944. The program was aired in June and is now available on a DVD from PBS from shopPBS.com or call 1.800.531.4727. As an historic documentary

300th Quarterly is a newsletter for and about the 300th Combat Engineers in WWII and their families and friends.

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it is well researched and produced, accurately depicted, historically valid and, most of all, respectful of the Allied losses suffered in June of 1944. Bill Allen describes his experience.

We were headed to Utah Beach when we hit a submerged German mine. The explosion pulverized everything. I was in shock like everyone else but clearly recall trying to decide whether I wanted to jump into the water. It was miracle after miracle. In the life raft was one of my prayer partners manning the oars. I remember him shouting to me not to jump but let him attempt to steer the raft closer to the hull of the ship. But the ship was sinking fast under my feet. I recall him shouting out that I couldn't swim in the turbulent seas. Miraculously, he was able to guide the rescue raft close enough and I backed up a few steps and ran and jumped as far as I could. I could not jump high or far enough to land in the raft but I got close enough to wrap one arm over the raft's edge and held on. I was pulled aboard by another sailor. It was Jack Hamlin who saved my life by steering that life raft close enough to take me on board. One man died there in the raft. That night we boarded a Liberty Ship and headed back to England. Miraculously, all four of the guys in our little prayer group were among the survivors.

Remember the Tyler, Texas Reunion is October 3-5. Make your reservations by September 1. See you there.

