

Richard Hiller Interview

Company I, 318th Inf Reg

(Library of Congress: Veterans History Project; interviewed by Christine Dialectos, Stephen Wagner)
(MS Word Audio Transcript [NOT edited, just transcribed])

00:01:01 Speaker 1

Good evening and welcome to Tales of World War 2. I'm Christine dialectics and I want to thank you for joining.

00:01:06 Speaker 1

Us this evening.

00:01:07 Speaker 2

And I'm Steve Wagner, filling in for Sharon. Thanks for joining us. Our guest this evening is World War 2 veteran Richard Hiller. **** served with the 80th Infantry Division in Europe and was wounded in combat. ****, thanks for being here.

00:01:20 Speaker 2

Good to have.

00:01:21 Speaker 2

You.

00:01:21 Speaker 3

It's good seeing.

00:01:22 Speaker 1

Thank you for joining us. Thank you.

00:01:24 Speaker 2

All right, so let's get this show rolling. Your local man born in born and raised in Reading, PA, tell us a little bit about your childhood.

00:01:28 Speaker 3

Yes, I am.

00:01:33 Speaker 3

I was born in the northeast section of Reading and.

00:01:37 Speaker 3

All my life, until I we were married, went to school in Reading High School, graduated from there and worked for my father as an apprentice sheet metal apprentice. He used Tim Smith by trade.

00:01:55 Speaker 3

And he had his own business. And I worked there with him until I went into the service.

00:02:04 Speaker 2

Did you enjoy working with your father?

00:02:06 Speaker 3

Oh yes, you learned a lot from your father. I was.

00:02:12 Speaker 3

I worked long and cheap.

00:02:15 Speaker 2

I bet you were teenager, right? Yeah.

00:02:18 Speaker 3

Yes, I will. I started working with him on summers when I was 14 years old.

00:02:27 Speaker 2

Did you have siblings?

00:02:29 Speaker 3

Yes, I had.

00:02:33 Speaker 3

22 sisters and one brother. I was the last of the of the four, and the I come thirteen years on the behind my brother. So I'm really throw it up. I was the only child ever.

00:02:47 Speaker 2

You were the youngster.

00:02:50 Speaker 1

I have news for you. I was the last one in my family and I was 13 years.

00:02:54 Speaker 1

After my youngest brother too.

00:02:57 Speaker 2

If something in.

00:02:58 Speaker 1

Common something in common in mine.

00:02:59 Speaker 2

Yeah. So you said you graduated from reading high school. When was that?

00:03:02 Speaker 3

That was we were in the class in 1942.

00:03:06 Speaker 2

OK. So you were still in high school. And when Pearl Harbor responded, do you remember that?

00:03:10 Speaker 3

Oh, yes, yes I do. Especially it was on the Sunday morning or Sunday afternoon when I heard when we heard the news at home and the next day, which was a Monday. I was talking to my.

00:03:31 Speaker 3

Then future wife at.

00:03:36 Speaker 3

At her locker right before school started. So.

00:03:42 Speaker 3

I just thought of that tonight too.

00:03:43 Speaker 1

And you said your wife didn't remember that.

00:03:45 Speaker 3

No. When I bring it up, you'll probably say, oh, I don't remember.

00:03:46 Speaker 1

Isn't that what you said?

00:03:50 Speaker 1

Don't.

00:03:50 Speaker 2

That, but you do. So how do?

00:03:52 Speaker 2

You feel about Pearl Harbor, that whole thing.

00:03:55 Speaker 3

Well, you know you when you hear that.

00:04:00 Speaker 3

And you finally realize what they what they had done. You want to just re up, but I at that time I was still seven, yeah.

00:04:13 Speaker 3

Yeah. So you wanted to try. I wanted I wanted to, but my parents thought other than that, you stay around the house for what you did. Oh, yes.

00:04:23 Speaker 1

Stay around and graduate right?

00:04:27 Speaker 1

Well, you you were drafted then in May of 43, right and where were you sent to New Cumberland? I think you.

00:04:30 Speaker 3

Yes, I was.

00:04:33 Speaker 3

New Cumberland in right above Harrisburg. And from there we went to camp, shipped out Camp Shelby Ms.

00:04:33 Speaker 1

Sent.

00:04:38 Speaker 1

OK.

00:04:47 Speaker 1

You had mentioned that you wanted to get into the Army Air Corps.

00:04:51 Speaker 3

Yes, I did. I tried to get into the air core prior to being drafted.

00:04:59 Speaker 3

And.

00:05:00 Speaker 3

At first they closed the the enlistment to the Air, Air core and so I couldn't get in. But then right before I was before I entered the service, they opened the enlistment. So I ran down to the post office where they had the recruiting.

00:05:20 Speaker 3

Station and he said they'd only accept me if I had a replacement in my.

00:05:27 Speaker 3

Call for draft call so that left me out.

00:05:29 Speaker 1

Staff.

00:05:30 Speaker 1

Right.

00:05:32 Speaker 3

And when I.

00:05:34 Speaker 3

I trained in Camp Shelby and I was assistant squad leader there and worked my way up.

00:05:43 Speaker 3

But when the time came for transfer.

00:05:50 Speaker 3

I I put in for a transfer to the air color and and I I was examined and there I was. I found out I was color blind and I was washed out then.

00:06:03 Speaker 1

Really. Yeah.

00:06:05 Speaker 3

So I went back to the anti tank.

00:06:10 Speaker 3

And I was prior to that, I was assistant squad leader and when I come back to the the company area and told and informed them.

00:06:28 Speaker 3

But I was washed out. I was.

00:06:36 Speaker 3

The person that was my gunner was then my my Sergeant and I had all the details lined up for me and my name appeared quite frequently on the detail. Yeah.

00:06:50 Speaker 1

In the detailed list, you talked a little bit about KP duty in New Cumberland. You want to not a little bit.

00:06:56 Speaker 3

Learning.

00:07:01 Speaker 3

Come back and reported and told them the results.

00:07:08 Speaker 3

That evening I looked at the the list of details and my name appeared right on the list there, and it appeared quite frequently at thereafter.

00:07:19 Speaker 1

Frequency.

00:07:20 Speaker 2

So that was not a coincidence.

00:07:22 Speaker 1

No. Wasn't that a promotion of sorts of getting into KP or no, they are promote you to chef?

00:07:30 Speaker 3

Yes, well.

00:07:32 Speaker 2

By the way, for our viewers, why don't you briefly describe what KP duty is?

00:07:37 Speaker 3

Pardon.

00:07:38 Speaker 2

Explain what KP?

00:07:39 Speaker 2

Duty was in case somebody doesn't know.

00:07:42 Speaker 3

KP stands for kitchen. Police. You do anything and everything that appears in the kitchen without cooking.

00:07:53 Speaker 3

But all the menial details.

00:07:56 Speaker 2

I think the classic the classic view is is peeling potatoes.

00:08:00 Speaker 2

Is.

00:08:00 Speaker 3

That right? Yeah.

00:08:01 Speaker 3

I've done that, I've washed dishes, I've washed pots and pans. I was dining room order.

00:08:07 Speaker 3

Really. And that way you have to set all the tables, wash up the floors.

00:08:14 Speaker 1

In other words, all that needed to be done. You you did it. You did it. OK. I want to go a little bit further into this. You were talking like KP, but after this you and you were talking about going to Camp Shelby in.

00:08:16 Speaker 3

Yes, dirty work.

00:08:24 Speaker 1

Mississippi, now I.

00:08:26 Speaker 1

Want to get through this? You were part of the 69th Infantry Division, 272nd Regiment, anti tank.

00:08:34 Speaker 1

Company. OK. Do you want to, you know, tell us a little?

00:08:34 Speaker 3

Correct.

00:08:37 Speaker 2

Bit about that. Anything interesting there?

00:08:41 Speaker 1

As interesting as.

00:08:41 Speaker 3

That that when.

00:08:46 Speaker 3

From when we arrived in Mississippi and were.

00:08:53 Speaker 3

Separated into our different countries, which companies which I was and in a tank comp that was our basic training and we were under basic training for about 3 months and then we went on to advanced training. But within the break.

00:09:07 Speaker 1

Three nights.

00:09:13 Speaker 3

There of three months.

00:09:15 Speaker 3

That was when I tried to transfer it to the air core.

00:09:20 Speaker 2

OK.

00:09:20 Speaker 1

And that didn't that that wasn't to be then.

00:09:23 Speaker 1

That you could you.

00:09:23 Speaker 3

That's correct.

00:09:24 Speaker 1

OK, but then you went to, you were shipped to Fort Meade.

00:09:27 Speaker 3

Oh well, that was in May when I joined the Anna Tank Company of 43.

00:09:37 Speaker 3

And I was served there through basic training into the to April of 44.

00:09:46 Speaker 3

And at that time we were shipped out as replacements to Fort Meade, where we were ready to be shipped overseas.

00:10:01 Speaker 3

To join the troops over in the forever. But from Fort Meade. Then we went to camp. Patrick Henry. We stayed there, but maybe.

00:10:10 Speaker 1

Patrick.

00:10:11 Speaker 1

Right.

00:10:15 Speaker 3

Weeks or three weeks and from there we went to Camp Kilmer until we shipped out.

00:10:22 Speaker 1

What were you doing on D-Day?

00:10:25 Speaker 3

On D-Day we were at Camp Kilmer and I can remember vividly that we were glued to the the radio in our barracks and listening to all the reports of the invasion.

00:10:46 Speaker 3

Into France and that night we shipped out to to Brooklyn, and we boarded the Athlone Castle for Europe.

00:10:46 Speaker 1

Into.

00:11:01 Speaker 3

At least we thought it was your appointment.

00:11:03 Speaker 1

Your Sharon has a note here. Steve, your mom. That that your father went to Europe on the same ship?

00:11:07 Speaker 3

MHM.

00:11:10 Speaker 2

That's right, my grandfather, he was in a completely different unit. He he shipped out on the same.

00:11:11 Speaker 3

Yes.

00:11:14 Speaker 3

Yep.

00:11:16 Speaker 3

Ship. Yes. Yes. On the afternoon. Castle, I I I was surprised when Sharon told me.

00:11:18 Speaker 2

Interest in.

00:11:18 Speaker 2

Incidents. That's right.

00:11:23 Speaker 3

About that, yeah.

00:11:24 Speaker 1

I'm sure there are a lot of coincidence in in the war.

00:11:26 Speaker 2

Probably.

00:11:27 Speaker 3

Yeah, but we didn't come in contact with them.

00:11:31 Speaker 1

Really it was it. A small ship or?

00:11:36 Speaker 3

Fairly Lordship, but nothing like the Queen Mary or.

00:11:36 Speaker 1

Large and large.

00:11:42 Speaker 1

So, oh, I'm sorry. No, no, I was just going to say, did you hit rough seas? Were were people getting sick?

00:11:43

Go.

00:11:48 Speaker 3

We did, but we also hit.

00:11:54 Speaker 3

Part When the the whole.

00:11:58 Speaker 3

Not just the crew, but all are. The troops were hit with dysentery, and you can imagine how the results were on a ship full of maybe about 5 or 6000 troops.

00:12:18 Speaker 2

Mount Pleasant. That's right. Yes. Yes. OK. And then you took the train down to Southampton. Yes, on the coast.

00:12:18 Speaker 3

Maybe something else?

00:12:21 Speaker 2

You ended up in Liverpool.

00:12:29 Speaker 2

And that's when you join.

00:12:31 Speaker 2

End the 80th Infantry Division.

00:12:34 Speaker 3

Not quite, no no. From Southampton we boarded a a yacht and we were taken or taken over to Omaha Beach.

00:12:51 Speaker 3

And we landed there.

00:12:53 Speaker 3

I'll say 2, 1/2, two and a.

00:12:57 Speaker 3

Half weeks after D-Day.

00:12:58 Speaker 1

And continue.

00:13:00 Speaker 3

And the yacht came in so far, and then one of the landing craft.

00:13:08 Speaker 3

Come alongside and we boarded that and they took us in into the beach so we wouldn't get our feet wet.

00:13:15 Speaker 2

And you were officially in Europe. Yes, we were. We're going to take a quick station break. Stay tuned.

00:13:20 Speaker 2

We'll be right back.

00:13:23 Speaker 4

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00:13:44 Speaker 4

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00:13:59 Speaker 2

Welcome back. This is tales of World War 2. We're speaking with World War 2 veteran Richard Hiller. Now, when we left, you would just landed at Omaha Beach.

00:14:09 Speaker 3

That is correct. That was, I would say that.

00:14:12 Speaker 3

Was about 10:00.

00:14:14 Speaker 3

Maybe 9/30 10:00 at night. So stark.

00:14:19 Speaker 3

Yeah. Dusk. Well at at that time, they were on a double daylight saving, but nevertheless, we got off this landing craft and they marched this.

00:14:21

OK.

00:14:25 Speaker 4

Oh, that's right, yeah.

00:14:35 Speaker 3

Up a hill.

00:14:37 Speaker 3

And we said they told us to wait on this.

00:14:40 Speaker 3

Press. So we sat there and sort of talked about everything and and what we saw. It was fairly. The beach was fairly cleaned up then this was about two weeks or more after tea day. At any rate comes 11:00.

00:14:53

MHM.

00:14:59 Speaker 3

11:00 the I I remember reading in the Stars and Stripes bed check. Charlie always comes down and opens up things.

00:15:11 Speaker 3

Bed check. Charlie was a German.

00:15:16 Speaker 3

Pilot that comes down streets to the beach and we.

00:15:22 Speaker 3

We saw all this all, all hell broke loose with all these tracers flying around and this friend of mine, Nolan Gann, who is from Reno, Arkansas, he was my good buddy.

00:15:38 Speaker 3

He said ****, look at this. This is better than the 4th of July.

00:15:45 Speaker 1

Was anybody ever injured during those strafing runs?

00:15:48 Speaker 3

Oh, I imagine we're we didn't. We didn't see anything like that. They tried to damn this.

00:15:49 Speaker 1

Yeah, I mean, probably hasn't seen anything.

00:15:55 Speaker 1

I I guess you know, but you were. You were too shifty for them, right?

00:15:59 Speaker 2

So I guess in a way that was the.

00:16:00 Speaker 2

First time you saw a combat.

00:16:02 Speaker 3

Yes, yes, yes from.

00:16:03 Speaker 2

From a distance now the first time you personally experienced combat jumping ahead a bit, that was in in a forest in.

00:16:10 Speaker 2

France is that.

00:16:10 Speaker 2

Correct. You tell us a little bit about that.

00:16:10 Speaker 3

That that is correct.

00:16:14 Speaker 3

We had just joined the company I.

00:16:19 Speaker 3

And they were. They were in the midst of closing the fullest gap.

00:16:26 Speaker 3

So these said, us or US recruits in and the next morning we will send out on the on the patrol. It was just our our.

00:16:44 Speaker 3

Our squad was leaving and we walked right into an ambush and that was when all hell broke loose and our.

00:16:58 Speaker 3

Our first scout, which was marked Martinez, he's still alive. He'll be 90 years old. This, at any rate, he was the first scout and he threw about 3 or 4 grenades in front of us to break, break everything up and.

00:17:18 Speaker 3

So.

00:17:21 Speaker 3

Prayerful of rounds were just landing near me.

00:17:27 Speaker 3

Near me and around me, but I was in between. I I was in. I was in touch, but the one for the the on my left. His his canteen was shot. His backpack was shot up and the one on the right his his.

00:17:48 Speaker 3

Rifle, but that was shot away and here I was sitting right in the middle. That was my back to that baptism of fire.

00:17:58 Speaker 2

How did you feel about that?

00:18:01 Speaker 3

You really want.

00:18:01 Speaker 3

To.

00:18:03 Speaker 3

I have words for that.

00:18:05 Speaker 2

I'm sure you do. Not pleasant.

00:18:07 Speaker 2

No, no, absolutely and understandable. I was scared, period.

00:18:07 Speaker 1

Not pleasant. That's just my fire, right? Yeah, well, rightly so, rightly so. Now, is this your Recon patrol where you had no guns or knife?

00:18:14 Speaker 2

Absolutely, yeah.

00:18:18 Speaker 3

No, no, that's, that's entirely different. Oh, yes. So yes.

00:18:21 Speaker 1

OK, that's a different time, yeah.

00:18:24 Speaker 3

That that occurred. Ohh several, but three. I'll say 3 or 4 weeks afterwards. Yeah, yeah.

00:18:35 Speaker 1

After that after that.

00:18:37 Speaker 1

Well, what were you doing in the meantime?

00:18:39 Speaker 3

Well, right after that. After that baptism of fire, they we withdrew and then they sent us on.

00:18:51 Speaker 3

I'll say another Aaron.

00:18:54 Speaker 3

Everyone, we're going through slightly.

00:18:56

To put it.

00:18:58 Speaker 3

Through the through the force and we held up on the side of the side of a hill within the forest and.

00:19:10 Speaker 3

We saw a tank bottle and that was being raged and how a small village was was captured in and shot up.

00:19:25 Speaker 3

And from there.

00:19:27 Speaker 3

We come out of the forest, loaded on on trucks and formed what you call a task force. So we we didn't know where we were, we just they just gave us a tour of France.

00:19:46 Speaker 1

And.

00:19:47 Speaker 1

Well.

00:19:47 Speaker 3

Into the north to northeast and the platoon Sergeant told us that the.

00:19:59 Speaker 3

One of the officers told him we were the farthest troops N into Belgium at that time.

00:20:05 Speaker 1

OK.

00:20:06 Speaker 3

And right after that.

00:20:08 Speaker 3

We joined General Patton when he was forming the 3rd Army.

00:20:13 Speaker 1

I was just gonna ask that, you know, we we hadn't talked about him yet. That's when you hooked.

00:20:17 Speaker 1

Up with with General Patton, right, right.

00:20:18

Yes.

00:20:20 Speaker 1

Well, now when did you get into?

00:20:21 Speaker 1

The.

00:20:22 Speaker 1

Her gun, gun. Forest. When did that come? You weren't in there. OK. Your friend *****, right?

00:20:24 Speaker 3

I was. I was not in there. No, that, that, that was that was well.

00:20:34 Speaker 3

That was after I was hit. I wasn't. In fact, that was within the panel of the porch.

00:20:48 Speaker 2

OK, OK. So that's a little out of order, but yeah, it's worth mentioning. Absolutely. But you you did have this friend *****. Yes, I think he was with you for quite some time. I'm going to skip ahead a little bit for time, but I believe at one point you guys were in a mansion.

00:20:59 Speaker 3

Yes.

00:21:04 Speaker 3

Together, that's right at that time.

00:21:09 Speaker 3

Our platoon was a single vote and they wanted 2 patrols form 1 patrol number one was to go into Normandy. That was our future objective.

00:21:27 Speaker 2

Right.

00:21:27 Speaker 3

To obtain a prisoner and the other patrol #2 which I was in, and ***** was in, we were in a distracting patrol.

00:21:40 Speaker 3

Now we had a a man in our company that was born and raised in this area. Now this area was in Alsace Lorraine.

00:21:50 Speaker 1

OK.

00:21:51 Speaker 2

On the border.

00:21:53 Speaker 3

Yes, and.

00:21:56 Speaker 3

He.

00:21:59 Speaker 3

Had friends in there.

00:22:01 Speaker 3

And he guides us into the into nominee.

00:22:08 Speaker 3

Where we were to take up a position and fire our weapons and do all distracting things in order to keep the important #1 the patrol ready for their their objective.

00:22:28 Speaker 1

The objection?

00:22:29 Speaker 3

Yes, but they they they didn't get any any prisoner. But within this we were in a a beautiful home.

00:22:40 Speaker 3

One of the affluent homes in Mamani and.

00:22:48 Speaker 3

***** had a grenade launcher, which he could put the grenade on. The muzzle of the his rifle, and with blank caps.

00:23:02 Speaker 3

Heat fire that his rifle and launch a grenade and it go into the into the town and then burst or explode it. Well, one of these in, in doing this slipped out of his hand into this.

00:23:21 Speaker 3

1.

00:23:23 Speaker 3

And all what he did was yell grenade. He went to hell out and the whole way away from me. And I was in there. I hit the floor, my head hit a a metal bed frame and.

00:23:40 Speaker 3

Well, I was fortunate that I was not hit because I was in the.

00:23:46 Speaker 3

Yeah, but I was no more than. I mean, I'll say 8 feet away from the the detonation. So you were tremendously lucky. And that was very close. Good Lord was absolutely with me. My card didn't come up.

00:23:58 Speaker 1

He was with you, good Lord was with you, right?

00:24:02 Speaker 2

Now, since we're just about out of time, let's Fast forward a bit. Can you quick tell us about what happened when you were actually wounded?

00:24:14 Speaker 3

The night before it rained, and I mean, it rained. We were near the Seal River. What we looked at during the day was like a Creek. But that night it overflowed its banks.

00:24:32 Speaker 3

The the armor that we were supposed to have, they they couldn't get any bridges made for them to go across and they tried to put their traction wasn't there because of the mud. So we had to forward the.

00:24:51 Speaker 3

The river and we went through a place called when the side of a village called roofs and on the other side was a.

00:25:07 Speaker 3

A cemetery. So we had to go through that and we were hit with the machine gun and other.

00:25:23 Speaker 3

Mortar shells and the first Scouts were out, which I was the first scout and they told us there was a sniper in the church tower and I passed the word back and.

00:25:24 Speaker 1

What a shame.

00:25:42 Speaker 3

The next thing you know, he opened up and I got hit and.

00:25:48 Speaker 3

I was laying there for about an hour, but I had immediate medical attention, but I still had to waiting for the litter bearers when the litter bearers arrived, they started bracketing mortar shells in and they said to me they were looking for another.

00:26:07 Speaker 3

Individual from the other company.

00:26:12 Speaker 3

And when they they start bracket the immune they put, they all said let's get the hell out of here. Loading the on the litter and off I went.

00:26:20 Speaker 1

Where you went?

00:26:20 Speaker 2

So they they got that sniper with mortars.

00:26:24 Speaker 3

I had no I'm. I'm sure they did.

00:26:28 Speaker 1

You probably did. Yeah, probably did, right.

00:26:31 Speaker 2

Well, we're pretty much out of time. Unfortunately, ****, thank you very much for speaking with us tonight.

00:26:36 Speaker 1

You're welcome. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for your service.

00:26:38 Speaker 2

And.

00:26:38 Speaker 2

You for.

00:26:41 Speaker 2

OK, don't forget to tune in to tales of World War 2 on the third Tuesday of each month right here on NBC TV.

00:26:47 Speaker 2

Next month, on July 20th, our guest will be David Duran. Richard Beale. This is tales of World War 2.

00:26:53 Speaker 2

Thank you and good night.

00:26:55 Speaker 1

Thank you and goodnight.