

From Meade County News

Leo Bachman saw duty in Europe and the Pacific as WWII came to a close



By Tom Kuhns

Leo Bachman served as a radio operator for an artillery unit in World War II. Bachman served in both theaters of operation during the last days of the war.

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Meade County native Leo Bachman served nearly three and a half years in the U. S. Army during World War II. Although he wasn't shipped overseas until the tail end of the war, he served in both the European and Pacific theaters of operation.

Leo grew up in Plains, the son of a farmer, and graduated from Plains High School in 1942. He was inducted into the U. S. Army shortly after graduation on January 26, 1943.

Bachman was sent to basic training in Texas and received further training in Oklahoma. After his initial training, he was assigned to the 86th Division, the Blackhawk Division, as a radio operator for an artillery unit.

For the next two years Leo's outfit trained for the war. From ground operations in Louisiana to amphibious training in California, Leo and his buddies prepared for the time when they might be called into action.

That call finally came in early 1945. The Blackhawks were called to help wrap up the war in Europe.

"We were in California for amphibious training, and what did the Army do? They shipped us to Boston for debarkation," Leo stated.

"Before we left the states we had to put all our stuff in cosmoline to keep it from rusting," he added. "That took us about two weeks and we had a heck of a blizzard while we were there."

Once the outfit was ready for travel, they boarded a ship headed for war-torn France.

"We had an old luxury liner built by the Germans back in World War One and I guess the United States confiscated it,"

Leo said. "It was a good ship but it was rough as all heck, the sea was."

The Division sailed for Le Harve, France. Once they arrived, Leo said they began to see the results of the war that had dragged on in Europe for nearly six years.

"The docks had all been blown up so we had to get off the ship by landing craft," he noted. The date was March 3, 1945.

Before striking out for Germany, Leo said his unit spent another two weeks removing the cosmoline from their equipment and putting it all back together.

With all their equipment ready, Leo said his Division headed across France and Belgium. The trip was relatively easy, he added.

"By the time we got to France, the United States had driven the Germans out," Leo explained. "It was pretty easy going, we were riding in trucks."

On March 27th, 1945, Leo crossed the Rhine River into Germany. As the unit entered enemy territory they had little contact with hostile forces, but could see how the war had affected the German Army.

"When we crossed the Rhine we pretty well had the Germans on the go," he said. "All the equipment they had, you could see was pulled by horses."

"We could see dead horses laying all over."

Once the Division arrived in Germany, they took a southeasterly route towards Bavaria and Austria to act as a buffer to any organized Nazi threat coming from the south.

That threat never materialized.

While the 86th did not come in contact with enemy forces, they still had to deal with the German population on a daily basis.

Leo served as a translator on those occasions. "I speak a little German and we had to ask these people to vacate their homes so we could have a place to stay," he stated.

Bachman said he remembered a particular event on Easter Sunday 1945 when he shared a distaste for the war with a local German citizen.

"There was one lady who said 'it doesn't seem like Easter Sunday', I told her 'no, it doesn't seem like Easter Sunday to me either'."

As the unit moved towards Austria, Leo said he had his one brush with combat while traveling on an otherwise peaceful road.

"The closest I came to combat is when we were moving at night in a convoy and a plane strafed us," he explained.

"I think that was about the only plane the Germans had by then. We called him 'bed check Charlie' because he came around every night around 7:30 or 8:00."

In spite of the relative ease with which the Division moved through Germany, Leo said it was not without peril. "We lost one person, as far as I know, that hit a landmine in a vehicle."

The 86th Division was in Austria the day the war ended in Europe. It was then that Leo had his first real contact with the enemy.

"A German outfit came in and surrendered to us," Leo said. "They had had enough."

Once the war was over, Army commanders wasted no time in getting Leo's unit out of Europe. The trip back to France was quicker than their trip into Germany.

"The general let us stop over in Paris, so we spent the night there," Leo said. When they reached the coast of France, the 86th boarded another ship and headed home.

“When we got back to the states we had a thirty day leave,” Leo added. “I think it was for the entire Division.”

Once back from leave, the whole outfit was shipped to California for possible orders to the ongoing war in the Pacific. Those orders finally came in September of 1945, the war was over, but duty still called.

“McArthur had requested a combat division so we went over,” Leo stated. “We were on the ship 25 days and they didn’t know where to unload us. Finally we unloaded at Manilla in the Philippines.”

The 86th remained in the Philippines for about three weeks.

As in Europe, Bachman said he could see the ravages of World War II in the Pacific. “Manilla was all shot up,” he stated, “it was a sad place to be.”

Leo said that as quickly as they were dispatched to the Philippines, they were called back home.

During his years in the Army, Bachman was promoted to the rank of sergeant-technician 4th grade.

He was finally discharged from the service on March 8, 1946 at Fort Logan, Colorado. He returned home to help his father farm. He has been a farmer his entire life.

In 1961 Leo met and married his wife, Faith. Next month the couple will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

Although Leo Bachman said he feels fortunate to have missed combat during World War II, he said that he still feels proud to have served when his nation called.