

When Ernest Kunkel was drafted into the Army in 1942, he was one of 10 million men who would be drafted by the time World War II ended in 1945.

As a member of the Greatest Generation, Kunkel's story is similar to so many others who served during World War II yet different in some ways.

At 91-years-old, Kunkel remembers what a chaplain told him and many other servicemen after they arrived at Camp Patrick Henry in Newport News, Va. – simply, "... That some of you boys aren't coming back." He also recounts two Italian teenagers who traveled with the 91st Division, singing in Italian each night while helping the American soldiers keep guard duty before commanding officers told the soldiers the boys had to go home.

After being put into the artillery as a truck driver at Leavenworth, Kan., Kunkel said he was sent to Camp White in Medford, Ore. to join the 91st Division – a military division that had not been active since World War I.

"They put me in artillery and I'm real thankful because those poor infantry men climbing those mountains in Italy, you didn't have a chance. In time you're going to get it," Kunkel said. "Everybody wanted the air corps, but I didn't know what I was getting into. When I talked to those air corps people – would you want to fly over Germany every day with that flack coming at you? You're going to get it in time. Everybody wanted in air corps but there weren't any openings."

The 91st Division was put on troop ships following more training at Camp Patrick Henry, destined for Oran, Algeria in North Africa. Kunkel noted that the division started taking amphibious training upon arrival, but the training was quickly halted as the division was put back on boats and sent to Naples, Italy.

"The Army didn't tell you anything and we couldn't figure out what was happening. We went through the Strait of Gibraltar, got back on a boat, and landed in Naples, Italy. We stayed there about a week, got all our equipment, our trucks, our 105 Howitzer which would shoot about 12 to 14 miles," Kunkel said. "We got into the convoy – they had pulled the 45th Division, they were in Rome. They [the Army] decided they were going to Normandy where we thought we were going."

"They [the 45th Division] had fought Rommel in North Africa. Anyway, we took their place in Rome in 1944 and that's where we went into combat – in Rome," he continued.

Kunkel only saw four months of combat in Italy in 1944 before he would spend the next 14 months being shuffled from hospital to hospital before finally returning to Salisbury – as an amputee.

"It was raining a little bit. I went in the tent where the other truck drivers were and a German 88 came and landed in the back of a truck. Man, we heard it go off and we knew there'd be another one," Kunkel recounted. "We all laid down and I just happened to lay the right way – I got all my wounds in the legs, mostly; I had a lung injury. It came and landed right in the back of this truck."

"I had my mess kit in my hand, going to the kitchen tent, but I stopped in this tent which was a mistake. The second shell came right in the tent and killed two of my buddies right there next to me, Lawrence Jurgens and Vonum," he continued. "Only two survived – Archie Nelson, our maintenance man, and Kunkel."

Shortly after the air strike, an ambulance happened to be coming down the road, something Kunkel said he learned about years later at reunions in Branson from fellow servicemen. But that ambulance had direct orders to not stop, leaving Kunkel's captain to 'pull rank' on the next ambulance which came through.

"We had a guy named Mann, he had a Southern drawl, and Captain Cotton asked him to run down there and stop this ambulance coming. The ambulance driver said 'Well I've got my orders' and he wouldn't stop, drove right on," Kunkel said. "He said there was another ambulance coming down the road so the captain ran down there and he said he pulled rank on him [the second ambulance driver]. Then I remember carrying us in a cave somewhere, but Joe Palmieri, our medic, came in and gave me a big shot of morphine."

"I was trying to get up, I didn't even know my leg was blown off. Truly, I didn't know. I was trying to get up and DeMastery was on top of me, trying to hold me down," Kunkel continued.

The next thing he said he remembers is waking up in the 33rd Evac tent, among rows of cots as Captain Cotton and a doctor stood on the grass next to his cot. After two or three more days at the 33rd Evac tent, he was moved to an Army hospital in Leghorn, Italy for the next 10 days.

"[It was] a hospital with long corridors and lots of beds. They [then] put me on the John J. Meany hospital ship – the hospital ship was named for the first doctor killed in the European theater. He was a graduate of St. Louis University," Kunkel said. "They took me to Naples, Italy and put me in a Catholic hospital. They had the top floor rented and they put me with lung patients. They flew most amputees home but they wouldn't let me fly because of that lung injury. I was a bed patient, I was in bed for three and a half months, I had so many broken bones."

Kunkel returned stateside after a three-week trip on the Algonquin hospital ship that arrived in Charleston, S.C. It was when he arrived in Charleston that he came across an old commander who had also been injured.

"I ran into Captain Alexander who had been our battery commander a short period. He had both legs broken; I'd heard he'd been wounded. I visited with him for a little while then when I left down there, he wrote me one letter but I never heard anymore from him," Kunkel said. "I stayed down there in Charleston probably two, three weeks then they put me on a hospital train to Brigham City, Utah, Bushnell Army Hospital. I was there until I was discharged in 1946."

He noted his twin brother Clarence, who had served in the Navy in World War II, stopped on his way home from the war to visit him in Utah. Another brother, Alvin, also served in the war but was killed in an explosion on-board the USS South Dakota and was buried at sea.

"I was there so long I hated to leave, truly. I knew it was going to be tough out there. A guy with his leg off and there wasn't much here in Salisbury," Kunkel said. "I really kind of hated to leave that hospital because I'd met all these guys and they were all my friends. Most of them were all amputees [also.]"

Though he didn't want to leave friends in Utah to return to Salisbury, Kunkel was able, in recent years, to once again reconnect with people he met in the war.

“It’s been about two, three years ago and one of my buddies called me. He’d kept up with our ward nurse; her name was Ms. Quin. He gave me her phone number and I called her immediately. I said, ‘Is this Ms. Quinine? [we called her Ms. Quinine]’ and she said ‘Oh, you’ve been talking to Charlie or somebody,’” Kunkel said. “She lived in north Los Angeles, didn’t have any children, but she said she and her husband had an apartment there. She recognized me real quick.”

“We never could find our medic [from the 91st Division]. He was from New York – Joe Palmieri – we wanted him to come to the reunion. One day I discussed it with Mrs. Boeger and Howard, her brother, has a brother who came from New York all the time to visit the Boeger family. She told him about it,” he said. “He went home and store a whole page of Palmieri’s out of the telephone book. I wrote a form letter and mailed about 12 of them and hit a nephew of Joe Palmieri. I called that nephew and he gave me Joe’s phone number. I called old Joe up and said, ‘Do you remember Kunkel?’ He said, ‘Oh, I remember you real well.’ He came to two reunions and then he died of prostate cancer. His wife wrote and said, ‘You found him and now we’ve lost him.’”

After rejoining civilian life, Kunkel served as the circuit clerk and ex-officio recorder of deeds for Chariton County for 16 years. In addition to reunions every other year for 25 years in Branson, Kunkel was one of several Missouri veterans on the second Missouri Honor Flight in 2009. Additionally, he received the Purple Heart among other medals for his service in World War II.

“I got the Purple Heart which didn’t mean much. I guess it does really, to some people. I know I got wounded but all of my buddies had it just as tough as I had it,” Kunkel said. “It’s nice, but it really didn’t mean a whole lot to me.”

“People tell me that [being a part of the Greatest Generation] all the time, but I don’t know if it means a whole lot to me. I think of my buddies all the time. I think of old Lawrence Jurgens. I stopped to see his folks in Nebraska one time, I had an old school bus that we traveled in in the ‘60s,” he continued. “I told them exactly what happened, that he never knew what hit him.”

When it comes to Veterans Day, Kunkel said people should appreciate those who served and understand that those who served didn’t care about each other’s religion or political leanings.

“They should appreciate what tough times they had and what they’ve done for them. Some people think it’s a vacation – it’s a long ways from a vacation,” he said. “We all got real close together and we didn’t care what church they went to or whether they voted Democratic or Republican. They were all our buddies, our friends.”