Voices of Connecticut Veterans: William Blair and Linking Up with the Russians

By: Jane Natoli

William M. Blair, a native of Waterbury, Connecticut, and a veteran of the United States Army, served in the European theater of operations during World War II from December, 1944 until the end of the war, and then served a year of occupation duty in Germany. Blair could not have had any idea when he reported for duty in March, 1943 that in a little more than two years – after being wounded twice in the same day, recovering in a field hospital and returning to his unit in the heart of Germany – he would cross the Elbe River under German fire to link up with the Russians coming from Berlin and help effectively end the war that raged around the world. These stories are among those that Blair described in an interview with me on May 24, 2007 for the Veterans History Project.1

Around the time Blair’s draft number came up, a number of people from Waterbury had been drafted into the Navy, probably because of the ongoing Battle of the Atlantic that tested American and German forces for almost the entire month of March, and caused a total loss of 120 Allied ships.2 Blair, however, was sent to the army and reported to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where all draftees from the Waterbury area were sent. Blair then shipped out to Fort Sheridan, located on the shore of Lake Michigan thirty miles north of Chicago, for Basic Training with the 777th anti-tank battalion. He focused mainly on anti-aircraft tactics.

A memorable incident in Blair’s early military career took place on Mother’s Day during Basic Training. Blair was on mess hall, or KP, duty when he asked a Sergeant for permission to attend mass in honor of his mother. He was told, “Private, you’re in the army. You’re on KP duty. You’re going to stay on KP duty for the rest of the day.” Blair had no other choice but to stay. During the next week, he told the chaplain what had happened, and within a couple of days headquarters sent down an order saying that any service personnel who wanted to attend a religious service would be allowed to go. From this experience, Blair felt that he “had some sort of an impact on what would happen to future draftees who wanted to go to a religious service and were denied the opportunity to do so.”

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From Fort Sheridan, Blair was selected to go into the Army Specialized Training Program at the University of Michigan where he received an accelerated three semesters of basic engineering until the program was shut down because of the growing need for replacement service members overseas. He was then sent to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and joined the 76th Infantry Division for another ninety days of Basic Training, which he described as "less than thrilling," but during which he attended Radio School to learn Morse code. Blair then applied for Officer Candidate School (OCS) because he felt "that since I was in the service, that I had a choice of either
being sent wherever the army felt they wanted to send me, or try to prepare myself to get as high a rank as I possibly could. And the avenue to do that was to go to Officer Candidate School.”

Accepted into OCS and sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, Blair was among sixty candidates for officer training; roughly, only forty percent of the men completed the three-month program. The other sixty percent washed out of OCS for a variety of reasons. For training, the candidates were divided into ten to twelve person squads and were given different daily assignments that challenged and tested their skills. The candidates took turns leading their squad on various missions that demonstrated the necessary qualities of an officer, such as proper map reading and leadership skills.

One of Blair’s first assignments at OCS was a night exercise in map reading. Dropped off at a road marker at about 10:00 pm and given a map leading to another destination approximately five miles away, Blair was given a compass, a flashlight and three to four hours to bring his squad from their current location to the destination point. “It became an interesting map reading path to follow,” Blair recalls. “And we got within probably a mile of our destination when we came upon a barbed wire entanglement, (and that of course was deliberately set up to impede our travels), and since I was the leader of the patrol at that point, I had to make a decision as to how I would get this group through the barbed wire entanglement. I took my rifle, put it on the barbed wire, and lay on top of my rifle. That depressed the barbed wire sufficiently so that all the members of my unit were able to stand on my back and walk across the barbed wire without being impeded in any fashion. I was counting them as they went across, maybe because I knew how many there were, and just before the last individual went across I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the officer who was the man who was in charge of our unit and who was grading our performance. And he said, ‘What’s your name, Private?’ And I said, Blair. He said, ‘Thank you.’

He walked across me and we completed our destination. We ended up on a road at exactly the spot that we were supposed to reach, which was fortunate. That was one of the most memorable events I had at OCS because it gave me an opportunity not only to lead a patrol to a destination, but to use an innovative technique to get across a barbed wire entanglement. And I’m sure that that worked in my favor when his report of the exercise was turned in.”

Blair’s barbed wire entanglement tactics was not what ultimately saved him from being washed out of OCS – it was strength in numbers, camaraderie among his fellow candidates, and a little bit of luck. One night during his time at OCS, a Bob Hope show was scheduled at a local theater. A whole group of candidates went to the show, which meant they all missed bed check – a reason in itself to be washed out. That night, an entire half of the candidates could have been washed out because they were all at the movies, but nothing ever happened to the group.

Blair was among those who graduated from OCS in December, 1944. He was given a Second Lieutenant commission and a pass to go home on furlough. Upon
returning, Blair rejoined his unit in New Jersey and boarded the Queen Mary to go to overseas, which, along with the Queen Elizabeth, operated as a troop ship during the war. Traveling too fast for a destroyer escort, the converted passenger liner sped across the Atlantic Ocean zigzagging and constantly changing course to escape detection from u-boats. These tactics made the transatlantic journeys comparatively safe—both ships eluded German submarines from the time the first passenger liner crossed the Atlantic as a troop ship in August, 1942 until the end of the war.\footnote{Although they were named after queens, these passenger liners were by no means luxurious when converted into troop ships. Blair remembers that every inch of the ship was used: the pools had been drained for a mess hall and enlisted personnel slept in shifts outside on the decks.}

After landing in Scotland, Blair took a troop train to Liverpool, boarded a troop carrier to get across the English Channel into France, and rode a day and a half on box cars until he reached Heerlen, Belgium (where he could shower for the first time since leaving the United States). He joined the 84th Infantry Division and his initial assignment brought him into a position on the Roer River, where German troops were located about a mile away on the other side. Blair was close enough to see them through binoculars and to hear their vehicles. One day six or so Americans, Blair among them, were playing catch when suddenly a shell landed just outside their yard. Blair remembers the experience and the lesson he learned from it: “Well, based on my training, I remembered the first thing you do is hit the deck, so I immediately took a prone position. I looked up and I looked around: there were no other servicemen in the courtyard. They all went into the house, around the courtyard, into the cellar. They were all experienced combat people. . . . They knew that by experience if a shell comes in you get under cover first—you don’t just lay down where you are. So I learned in a hurry that if a shell is coming into your approximate position, get out of harm’s way as fast as you can because there was a lot more protection in the cellar then there was out in the open, where I was. Did I learn something from tactics [in Basic Training and OCS]? Yes. Was it always the right way? Not necessarily. I learned by experience.”

More experience was soon on its way. On December 16, 1944 at 5 o’clock in the morning, Hitler sent all of his available forces to the West Wall to strike into the Ardennes Forest. He knew that the American troops in this densely wooded area were made up of thinly spread out inexperienced soldiers and resting veterans. It was freezing, foggy, and snowy—just as Hitler had hoped to further slow down American forces. Hitler’s troops quickly broke through the American lines, forcing the troops back. Eisenhower, angered by the fact that 8,000 American troops had been captured, sent three armies to fight the German forces: British General Montgomery’s army from the north, American General Bradley from the south, and American General Patton’s army from the west.\footnote{The 84th Infantry Division, nicknamed the Railsplitters, was one of the units sent in as back up for the members of General Patton’s Third Army.}
Blair’s unit stayed in the Ardennes Forest for only a week; before the Railsplitters left the area, they were told to remove all of the 84th Infantry Division insignia from their uniforms and to paint over any indentifying information on their vehicles. The strategy called for the men to return to their positions on the Roer River under the cover of darkness so that the Germans would not know they were coming from the ongoing battle.

But the morning after the men returned, a small German airplane flew over the Roer River and dropped leaflets for the soldiers. Blair says, “I was able to get a hold of one of the leaflets and on the cover of it was a picture of the Railsplitter Division insignia, the 84th Infantry Division insignia, and it said ‘Welcome back, Railsplitters.’” This move from the Germans impressed Blair: “They knew exactly who was going where and they proved it by dropping these leaflets to let us know that we weren’t fighting a bunch of dumbbells. . . . And we were consequently aware that we were against a pretty intelligent and formidable foe.” Blair, at the time, had no way of realizing that he had just taken part in a huge, history-making battle deep in the woods of Belgium: Hitler’s final counteroffensive and what Winston Churchill would later call “the greatest American battle of the war.” It took over a month for American forces to regain the ground that had been lost so quickly from the German’s sneak attack, but the allies finally succeeded in effectively squeezing the Germans out of the forest. Hitler admitted defeat in late January, withdrawing his troops and relocating them to the Eastern front in preparation for an impending attack from Russian forces. By January 28, 1944, over a million men had been involved in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge; approximately 76,800 American soldiers were killed, wounded or missing, and the Germans lost approximately 120,000 soldiers, over 500 tanks and 1,600 planes. Blair’s unit was lucky to have played only a small role. “We were not in the Bastogne area,” Blair recalls, “but we were in the Battle of the Bulge area where we could provide meaningful support to the front-line troops.”

In February, 1944, after the Battle of the Bulge, the Railsplitters crossed the Roer River on the western edge of Germany and began marching toward the Rhine River, reaching the city of Dülken in early March. The rifle companies rode on tanks through the streets, avoiding most of the snipers hiding in the buildings, but the heavy weapons platoon, carrying the heavy mortars and machine guns, had to walk behind the tanks and were ready targets for snipers’ pot shots. Blair, the leader of a heavy weapons platoon, was on the street.

It was not, however, a sniper that wounded Blair. Rather, one day in the late morning, he was hit in the leg by German artillery, but was able to keep moving. Later that same afternoon, while walking down the middle of a cobble-stone street, the whole unit came under attack by a German mortar barrage. Blair remembers it clearly: “As soon as we heard the shells coming in, we dispersed on either side of the road into houses along the street. And as I stepped on the porch of a house, a shell hit the roof directly over my head, and I’ve always felt that I was fortunate because the bulk of the shrapnel dispersed outward from the shell itself, and a minor portion of
the shrapnel penetrated not only the roof, but my leg as well. I was blown into a staircase [with the] result of a concussion."

After stopping at headquarters and at a farm house that was turned into a field hospital where doctors could remove the shrapnel from his leg, Blair was turned away from the overcrowded general hospital in German. He was then transported by troop train to a general hospital in Paris, France. As Blair was lifted off the train he noticed, to his unease, that on both ends of his stretcher were German prisoners of war who worked at the hospital.

During his time in Paris, Blair helped other patients who could not get out of bed, until the high number of incoming wounded soldiers caused Blair to be relocated to a field hospital in Le Mans, France, where he stayed until his full recovery. He found out later how lucky he was to get wounded when he did; the day after he left the area, a German machine gun nest opened fire on his unit and several men were killed and a number were wounded. "Had I had not been wounded the day before, I think there was a good likelihood I would have bit the dust the next day," Blair commented, adding that he has always been a fatalist who believed "Whatever's going to happen is going to happen. I have no control over it. ... If you let fear envelope your actions, you're not going to be an effective leader."

This proved to be a good philosophy for Blair. Once his leg had healed, he traveled for a week and a half through the replacement depots set up throughout Europe, returned to the 84th Infantry Division, now on the West Bank of the Elbe River, and received a new assignment as the head of a rifle company. Blair found his unit halted at the bank because a growlingly cautious General Eisenhower had decided that the Elbe River would be his farthest objective and ordered the American troops to stop at the Elbe instead of continuing east toward Berlin. Churchill believed the American target should have been Berlin, but Eisenhower and President Roosevelt feared an accidental clash with Russian forces. Moreover, the areas of occupation in Germany had already been agreed upon by the Allies, and any advance beyond the Elbe would have to be relinquished to the Russians. For these reasons Eisenhower stopped American troops at the river, which became the dividing line between the Russians coming west from Berlin and the Americans moving east. German forces were caught in the middle.

The 84th Infantry Division, as part of the Ninth Army, was among those waiting for the Russians to reach the eastern bank of the Elbe. A few days after Blair arrived, he was summoned by the colonel in charge of the unit, who said to him, "Blair, since you have been away vacationing for the last three or four weeks [while] our unit has been marching through Germany, I think that it would be appropriate for you to get together a volunteer patrol because we hope that somewhere along the line we might be called upon to cross the Elbe River to try to link up with the Russians." So Blair canvassed the rifle companies, recruited eight volunteers for the patrol, including a cook fluent in Russian, and waited for further orders.

On May 2, 1945, the Division Headquarters' best intelligence provided reason to believe that there was a tank task force of Russians moving toward the river, and thus
it was time for Blair’s patrol to move out. They paddled across the river in a long boat, and came under small arms fire, (identified as pistols and rifles based on the bubbles the bullets made in the water), but made it to the other side without casualties. Blair recalls in amazing detail what happened next:

“At that point I took the cook who could speak Russian, a radioman and myself, and the three of us started to advance through a field toward the town of Balov. Balov was a small community, which we could see from our side of the Elbe River. I left the rest of the patrol spread out on the banks of the Elbe in case we should run into trouble. They would be able to provide us with protective fire or they would be in the position to get back to the American side if necessary. It was an extremely foggy morning, and as we were advancing through the field, the town of Balov was probably 300 yards away, and through the fog, through the mist, we could hear mechanical sounds of mechanical equipment. Shortly thereafter, we could see, overlooking a bank, a barrel of a gun traversing the area back and forth. We didn’t know if it was a piece of German artillery that was tracking our area or not.

“We continued to advance, and shortly I could see three people come down across the bank and start moving in our direction. I used my binoculars and I said to the radio man and to the cook, our interpreter, ‘they are not wearing German uniforms.’ And as we came really close to them I realized they had to be Russian. As we got within hailing distance to each other, I put my right hand out and I struck my breast like a Me Tarzan approach and said ‘Me American,’ and the fellow grabbed my hand and smiled, and said, ‘Goddamn, am I glad to see you.’ [That was] one of the most amazing things that I ever had happen. He was a graduate of CCNY, City College of New York, and of the Sorbonne in Paris. He was an intelligence officer assigned by the Russians to join the tank task force coming toward the Elbe from the Russian side to affect a link up with the Americans.

“We went into a restaurant and tables were set up and our entire patrol sat around this assembly of tables with a Russian between each American. There the leader of the tank task force proposed a toast to then President Roosevelt, and I in turn proposed a toast to Stalin. . . . I had with me a 45 pistol with our division insignia on the grip which I presented to the Russian leader, whom I met in the patrol. The Russian commander in turn gave me his 45 pistol which obviously, by a look at the pistol, had been used to a considerable degree over a considerable period of time. That pistol I have in my possession today.”

After celebrating Blair and his patrol returned to the American side of the Elbe, bringing a number of Russians with them. To the Russians and the Americans, linking up meant that the German Army had been squeezed out, that the end of the war was coming and that no more lives would be lost to the Germans. Blair’s patrol, the first group from the Ninth Army to link up in the northern part of the Elbe River, located directly east of Berlin, was one of several American patrols from various divisions organized to meet the Russians. The first link up had occurred a few days earlier on April 25, 1945, when members of the American First Army and the Russian
58th Guards Division met in the town of Torgau, Germany, about 75 miles south of Berlin. The Russians had displayed a banner that read: “OUR GREETINGS TO THE BRAVE TROOPS OF THE AMERICAN FIRST ARMY.”

It was not very long after these meetings that it became apparent to everyone that the war’s end was near. Blair remembers, “There were a tremendous number of Germans who were anxious to surrender. . . . The morning after the link up, one of our people came downstairs and said, ‘Lieutenant, you got to come up and see this.’ And when I went up stairs and looked around, we were completely surrounded by Germans—all of who had pistols, rifles, etc. Our personnel rolled a farm wagon out of the barn; the Germans all put their pistols, their binoculars, their rifles on the wagon. They wanted to leave all of their armament with the Americans and surrender to the Americans. Their goal—don’t surrender to the Russians. The Russians and Germans had been at war for an extended period of time. . . . The Russians experienced tremendous losses to the Germans, much more so than the Americans did. So they above all did not want to be a prisoner of war to the Russians. They were delighted to be a prisoner of war to the Americans.”

Later that same day, a company of German SS personnel crossed the river to surrender to the Americans. Blair met them and through an interpreter told the officer in charge that he would accept his weapons in surrender, but when the officer looked at the insignia on Blair’s uniform, he shook his head saying, “No, not to a Lieutenant.” Blair called Regimental Headquarters and a senior officer came to accept the surrender of the status-conscious Germans.

Three weeks after Blair’s link up, the Russians held an award ceremony. The Russian General presented Blair’s entire voluntary patrol with medals or certificates, but Blair, as the leader of the group, received the prestigious Order of “The Red Star.” Translated, it reads:

CERTIFICATE For combat service in the war of the United Nations against German aggressors, and for having shown gallantry and bravery, by order of the 61st Army, 26 May 1945, No. 509/N, the Rifle Platoon Commander of Company “G”, 333d Infantry Regiment, 84th Infantry Division, United States Army, Second Lieutenant WILLIAM M. BLAIR jr, is awarded the Order of “THE RED STAR” Order No. 1357894. Commander of the 61st Army, Hero of the Soviet Union, Guards Colonel – General, Below.

The war in Europe officially ended on May 8, 1945, six days after Blair’s link up with the Russians, which relieved tension for the American soldiers— but not for long. After celebrating VE day, the men immediately began preparing to transfer to the Asian theater of operations. Blair was designated the Japanese Training Officer and, based on a manual he received, had to conduct training sessions on Japanese tactics and customs. He taught only one or two sessions before news arrived of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945). Japan surrendered and VJ day was celebrated on August 15, 1945.
Удостоверение

За боевые заслуги на фронте совместной борьбы армий Объединенных Наций с немецкими захватчиками и проявленные при этом доблесть и мужество приказом войскам 61 армии от 26 мая 1945 года № 509/Н командир отряда роты "К", 335 полка, 86 гвардии армии СС, младший лейтенант Вильям М. Блейр.

НАГРАЖДЕН:
Орденом "Красной Звезды".
орден № 1357694.

Командующий войсками 61 армии
Герой Советского Союза
гвардии генерал-полковник

(БЕЛОВ).

(William Blair's certificate for the Order of the Red Star. Original in possession of Mr. Blair.)

Blair remained in Germany for a year of occupation duty after the war ended. He was discharged in the early spring of 1946 at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, the same place he originally reported to duty, and took a train to New Haven, where he saw his parents for the first time in over a year and a half.
Now home in Waterbury, Blair went to work, first as an interviewer for the Soldiers, Sailors and Marines Fund, and then as an office manager for the Trail Mobile Company. When the local branch closed, he returned to the bank where he had worked before the war and secured temporary employment as a substitute bank teller. That summer job turned into a permanent one and Blair worked for the bank until his retirement in 1986, serving ultimately as an officer of the bank.

William Blair believes that his military service has benefited him throughout his life. He says it provided him with the experience to manage, lead, and motivate people, skills that were readily carried over into business. He also notes that his service affected the way he thinks about the world around him: "I know the horror of war. I saw so much of the killing side during my short experience in action that made me appreciate life and made me appreciate the job our service personnel today are faced with doing overseas." Blair, who still lives in Waterbury after all these years, remains supportive of the veterans' organizations American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Disabled American Veterans.

NOTES


2 Donald Sommerville, World War II: Day by Day (Greenwich: Dorsett Press, 1989), 172.


8 Snyder, Louis L. Snyder's Historical Guide to World War II, 708.