

## War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: Not given

### The World War II Memories of John Pershing Haignere

I enlisted in the army when I was about 25 and they made me a sergeant. I was given an aptitude test and it showed that I should specialize in electronics, so they put me in a school to learn all about radios. When I finished, I taught the same material in a school in Tomah, Wisconsin, to the boys who were going to be running the homing devices and so forth.

When it got close to the time of the Invasion, I was sent to Wales to learn to repair microwaves. The British had invented them and were using them in the field when the Americans entered the war. They sent me to learn to repair them, and sent a warrant officer to teach others how to use them. Well, the officer failed the course, so I became the teacher.

At one point I was in Luxembourg to work on microwaves and they housed me in a convent with Catholic nuns. I was given a small room and ate in a big dining room all by myself. The nuns stayed away from me, and I only saw the elderly one who dropped my food on the table and disappeared. Once, though, I approached a door just after two young novices in wimples had passed through. Without looking at me, they ordered me to "Fermez la porte!" and when I answered "Oh, pardonez-moi." they ran off in giggles. (I had had a few years of high school French, which came in handy.)

When Paris was finally liberated, I took a train to London and then they flew us to Paris. I remember circling Orly Airport, and my side of the plane was down. All I could see from my window was bomb craters everywhere and I wondered, "Where are they going to put this plane down?!" But we made it safely, and I spent nine months in Paris operating the radio at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

I stayed at Hotel d'Iena on the Avenue d'Iena, which runs from the Arc de Triomphe down to Place du Trocadero (across from the Eiffel Tower). In the middle of the Place d'Iena there was a statue of a rearing horse with rider. I assumed it was some French hero, so I didn't go look at the bronze plaque for some time. Well, it turned out to be a statue of George Washington! The streets of Paris were empty except for military vehicles because there was no gasoline at all to be had. You did see French cars from time to time with a big contraption on the back which looked like a hot water tank. They were charcoal burners of some sort that powered the cars. Occasionally they would explode and spew burning coals everywhere! (What a contrast with the horrendous traffic jams I saw when I visited Paris in 2000.)

At first I wandered all over Paris getting acquainted with the city. I would walk or ride the Metro. It was striking how little there was to eat. You never saw shops with produce or meat; I don't know what the people ate. If you went in a cafe, they had nothing to sell you except 'ersatz' coffee. After awhile

exploring the city "got old," so I stayed in my room a lot. An old friend looked me up (I don't know how he found me) and couldn't believe that I was right in the middle of Paris, lying on my bed, reading a book!

Of course, if you wandered up to Montmartre, the bohemian part of the city, you'd be accosted by prostitutes, who were looking for American soldiers. Paris was reputed to have legalized prostitution, and it was said that there were 280,000 of them. They would approach you saying, "Bon zig-zig" (Good guy/bloke). It was sad and annoying, so I stayed down in my part of town mostly, where it wasn't really a problem.

I was in Paris for nine months, and we never got any news except what was in the army newspaper, 'Stars and Stripes,' that came once a month. One fellow had a five-tube radio that squeaked and squawked, but there were no commercial broadcasts and no music, and we certainly couldn't pick up the BBC from England. I don't ever recall even getting a letter from Mom and Dad.

Well, there were four of us assigned to duty manning the radio on top of the Eiffel Tower. We each had a twenty-four hour stint (noontime to noontime) and then three days off. In the summer there was an elevator that ran on water pressure, but in the winter they drained the turbine so it wouldn't freeze and we had to walk to the top. There were 1,776 stairs and by the next day your legs really ached. At the time the stairs weren't painted and were completely rusted. It was scary when the wind blew, and sometimes there were winds of up to fifty miles an hour and the tower would sway like an antenna. I would feel it go way over and then hang there for awhile before it came back to center. I would sometimes hold my breath for a moment, it was so frightening.

At night, the tower was completely blacked out so enemy planes couldn't see it, but I could hear our boys returning to Orly in their big, four engine bombers. They passed by so close I just prayed none of them would hit the tower. In the daytime I could look down on their wings and read the numbers off the top. Sometimes for fun, the pilots would fly their planes down across the Champ de Mars, under the pillars of the Eiffel Tower and then bank sharply up to avoid the Palais de Chaillot.

There was no bathroom on top of the tower; only a ten inch diameter drain pipe that went from the top to the bottom. The metal stairs wrapped around this pipe, so when you were climbing up or down, you kept one hand on the railing and the other arm around the pipe. In the wintertime it was freezing cold, but the effort of climbing all those stairs had you in a sweat before you were done, so you ended up carrying your sheepskin jacket.

We had a hot plate up there, a truck brought supplies once a week, and we'd make simple meals. Once I had a can of Spam, and I put a slice between two pieces of bread. It was so awful that I couldn't finish it, and I threw the can off the top of the Eiffel Tower. I've often wondered what happen to it; maybe it hit the roof of a building.

So, we had one day on duty and three days off. As long as you showed up when you were on duty, no one cared what you did. The other three guys were corporals, so I was more or less in charge as I had the higher rank. We were considered a 'detached service;' that is, we were away from our organization.

One guy even moved in with his French girlfriend. General Eisenhower lived somewhere nearby, although we never saw him. American intelligence learned that the Germans had a plan to assassinate him. They figured the Germans would use uniforms from American prisoners of war and sneak into Paris incognito, so all non-essential military were embargoed from the streets. This happened while I was on duty, and when I came down that day I started walking home. I was picked up immediately and shoved into a paddy wagon and taken to the 'hoosegow.' Well, they questioned me for about an hour, trying to find out if I was an American. (Who was Babe Ruth? Who was Joe Dimaggio? etc.) Finally, they called a major in who told them to let me go. Later in the war, Pershing heard a German prisoner speaking English with a perfect, midwestern accent, so it wasn't so implausible to think that someone could pass for an American.

There was a huge black market in Paris at the time, which was probably how people found food to eat. Everyone wanted American cigarettes; they were worth 5¢ a pack in the PX and you were allowed seven packs a week. There are ten packs in a carton of cigarettes and on the black market you could sell a carton for \$20.00. I would have felt like a thief doing that, so I never sold them under the table. I didn't really have any money though, because I sent almost everything home to Margery. I kept about \$10.00 a week for spending money, but that didn't go far in Paris.

I met a very interesting woman who said she'd be my outlet for anything I'd want to sell. She owned a big night club near the Folies Bergere. She gave me her card; it said "Marquise de Blanchanval" on one side and on the back she wrote in French: "Treat my friend fairly." She said I wouldn't have any trouble in her club if I showed them this card. I guess she approached us because she knew we had cigarettes, but I never went to her club. I still have the card, though.

Finally, even cigarettes became impossible to find. Turns out that there was a subversive operation dubbed R.O.B. (short for Railroad Operations Battalions). When they finally caught the soldiers responsible, the officers were reassigned Stateside and the privates involved were sent to prison for twenty-five years!

All the bars were open; every place you went you could get wine. But you couldn't get even fried potatoes. In fact, there wasn't much to buy in wartime Paris. Sometimes, you could smell bread baking somewhere, and I always stopped to find out where I could buy it. The bakery was often a hole-in-the-wall in a narrow street with the houses coming right out to the sidewalk.

My cousins Olaf and Raymond had me in for dinner once in a while. They lived in Neuilly, but had chickens, eggs, and vegetables from their weekend homes in Etampes. They always had coffee and cognac after dinner. Once, after cigarettes had become scarce, I brought them some German cigars. I was surprised when Olaf asked me to offer Solange one, too. She smoked it and seemed to enjoy it as much as we did!

After the war, we were sent to Germany. We just put all our equipment on a truck, bolted it down and sent it off. It was pretty badly beat up when we retrieved it. There were D.P.'s (displaced persons) everywhere. The Russian soldiers didn't want to go home; they didn't like Stalin. The D.P.'s worked for us; we gave them a roof and food and they'd do whatever. The German soldiers were skin and bones,

100,000 men, dumped in our laps. They were treated like cattle because we had nowhere to put them; all the buildings had been blown up. We just encircled a square mile with barbed wire. It was vacant land with nothing there. The prisoners dug holes in the ground with their spoons and slept in them 'like rabbits. I felt sorry for them.

The prisoners would line up for a mile each day to get work duty so that they'd get fed. One day, I had two greasy looking pork chops on my plate and a prisoner was just begging for them with his eyes. I said, "Would you like this?"

He thanked me and said in perfect English, "I haven't had meat for over a year." This kid had an American accent, but I never asked him how he had come to be a German soldier.

The Hungarian prisoners were so skinny and weak that we didn't have to stand guard over them; they wouldn't have gone anywhere. As long as we fed them, they stayed nearby. It was unpleasant to stand there, looking down the barrel of a rifle at another man, so it was just as well that they didn't need to be watched. But when word spread that the end of our duty was near, all these unguarded prisoners disappeared in the night.

When my tour of duty was over, we traveled by cattle cars to Belgium, sleeping on our duffle bags. It took three to four days. In Antwerp, we got on a Liberty ship and left for the States. Not far out into the Atlantic, the path of our boat was converging with the path of another. Both of the captains were too hard-headed to give way, so we were hit by a big Dutch freighter. None of us had on our life jackets as we had been playing poker the whole time, so as the boat took on water, we scrambled to find them. The port authorities from England came out to decide who was at fault and then the boat made its way back to Antwerp.

Looking back on the whole experience, the most surprising thing was that I felt like I was going home when I went to Paris. I don't know if it was because Dad was French, or because my ancestors were buried there, but it felt completely comfortable and natural. Decades later I met another American veteran who had served in Paris and he had the same memory and feeling. He used to watch the sunrise every morning from the top of Montmartre, and he just felt like he wanted to live there.

*Transcribed by Pershing's niece Sylvia Rose, December 2002, Rochester, New York*