

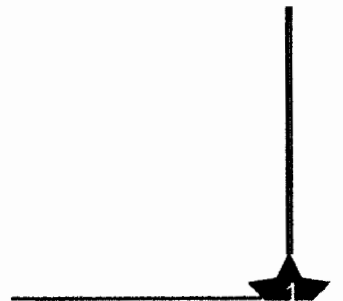
VETERANS PROJECT 2004

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by Charlie Stevens and Carol Grant-Stevens

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Veterans Project Coordinator
Hartford Union High School
805 Cedar Street
Hartford, WI 53027
(262) 673-8950



ALBERT REICHLER

Albrecht was in the First Special Service Force from February 1943 to October 1945.

What unit were you with?

I started with the Special Service Force called the First Special Service Force. It was Canadian and American Troops. They were in their own uniforms and they joined us and then we all had the same uniforms. So, they got paid from their government and we got paid from ours, so they had to figure out somehow how to do that and still keep it even. So, what they did is they promoted all the officers one rank up so that they got as much money as the American officers did when we started . . . it was in Helena, Montana . . .

When did you join this unit?

I didn't join this unit until it was over in Europe and then at that time I went through mountain fighting in Italy and Anzio Beach in Italy and fighting our way to Rome. We were the first ones into Rome and we trained for an invasion of southern France with rubber boats and Navy Destroyers. We were trained to do that and come in under the cover of darkness and we got wrong information from the Navy. They said it was low brush, it was high brush. We had to fight our way through with machetes, that's how high it was and then it was supposed to be an easy approach on the level, and it was a cliff! Like we had to climb up about six feet with all this equipment on your back to get out of the boat without drowning, you know, the rubber boat. Then it turned out there were a hundred Polish troops there, and they immediately surrendered. And all we had to do was knock off the

German officer that was waving a pistol at them. And they turned out that the reason we went there, invaded that before the main invasion of southern France was to knock off the Naval guns that were supposed to be on those islands and it turned out they were

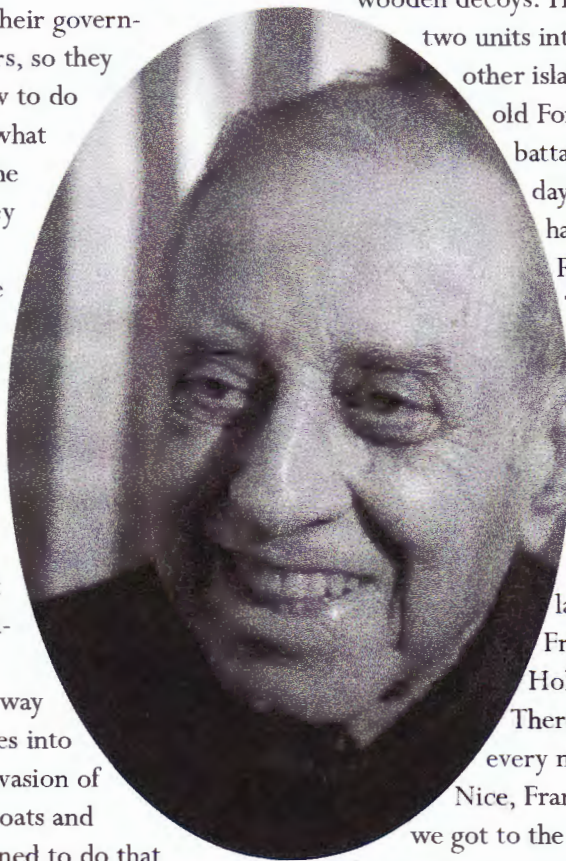
wooden decoys. There were no guns and we sent two units into that island and then the other island which was smaller had an old Fort on it we wanted to send one battalion in there and it took three days to take that one. They had to have a French battleship, the Richelieu I think it was called. To shell it they had to blow the doors down and they had the Air Force bombers dive-bombing it.

Where did you go next?

We proceeded into the mainland and what we called the French Riviera. That's the Hollywood of Europe you know. There were about ten women to every man in that area, in that town, Nice, France. And we proceeded until we got to the French-Italian border and that's where we stopped. They told us not to go any further. We patrolled and things like that. I had some close calls, if that's what you want me to tell you about.

Yes, tell me about it.

I had a guy, he was a Recon Sergeant, Kurtzhal, and he always picked me out. I didn't like it because I didn't like to take all those chances. Anyway, I was a mortar man and I was shooting at this target in this town. At a certain target they gave me, so he wanted



me to go along and see how my target looked - how I was doing. So we got halfway down this hill and all of a sudden these shells start coming in on us. The Germans saw us. So we were behind big boulders, you know, giant boulders as big as this room some of them were, and, they'd hit those boulders with the shells and before that we would pick out the next place to run to until we got up the mountain and got chased to the other side. And they shot at us four times like that and we ran to the next big boulder, you know. And how bad was it, well, I'll tell you. They took us down to the aide station and three days they kept us on our recovery, because we were shell-shocked. Then, coming out of Anzio when we broke out to cut off the Germans so they wouldn't escape by us and get to Rome. We had tanks on the Mussolini Canal, we were at one bank, the armor was on the other side, and all the tanks got knocked out, so all the German Infantry was on that other bank shooting at us from across the canal, so we had to retreat.

Did you lose any men?

I lost a whole squad, five guys. Machine gunner. And I was pulling myself across because they saw me and they kept shooting and cutting the grass down in front of me. That's close! I was just grabbing and pulling and I kept losing my pistol and my pistol belt because it was digging in the grass, and I couldn't crawl with it on. So I ended with practically nothing and two guys that were with me, one of them got hit and shot in the rear-end and up into the stomach and he stayed behind. Some shell cases that were laying there, bombs that were, they didn't have anything in them. They were storing them there, the Germans were, and there was another kid who was an ammunition carrier and he and I were the only two left who were trying to get out of there trying to not get our heads blown off. Anyway, our own mortars were shooting at us because they saw in the darkness something coming toward them. So friendly fire got the other guy and I came there in a nervous wreck in the middle of

the night with no weapon and nothing so the captain that was there chewed me out because I didn't have a weapon and I said, "Well, I got back here." Anyway, that was another close call.

Any other close calls?

I had a couple of those. The unit was in France because . . . I don't know if you know any history about World War II, Battle of the Bulge, where the paratroopers got our 101 Airborne. It was in southern France. They lost a lot of people so they robbed our unit because we were an Airborne unit. They took all our officers and NCOs and stuff like that so then the Canadians went to their country troops, too. So the unit was broken up and re-organized into the 474th infantry and we went up to the Cherbourg Peninsula where the invasion was, but they were past already, but there were still German soldiers out on the Jersey and Guernsey islands. They were constantly raiding the coast for supplies, foods, whatever. It was about a hundred miles of area that we had to cover, it was impossible! We had jeeps and things like that, but we couldn't move that fast, you know, by the time we got to notice, ten-fifteen minutes, they were there and got what they wanted and got out of there with it, fast boats, PT boats or something like that, they were. Then from there we went further through France and into the Belgian and those countries down in that lower area there are above France, I mean. They were demolished, all the buildings were blown down and there was one factory sitting. Guess what it was? It said a big sign on it - Ford. They never touched it! Wouldn't you say that's peculiar? They're protecting their interests, right? Don't bomb them! Then we crossed over where the Remagen Bridge was, and we followed General Patton because he was going a hundred miles a day, but he was going down the highway! He wasn't fighting anybody. So he left all these groups of soldiers in the woods and everything, Germans, and we had to flush them out. Anyway, then the war was over.

Where were you at this time?

Right about that time we were as far as we could go into Germany without running into the Russians and then we went back to France. We set up a camp there. We were waiting for our orders and the planes, we didn't have enough planes to go into Norway. You're probably thinking, what were we doing in Norway, right? The war was over, but they hadn't surrendered yet. The German commander didn't surrender yet

Then what did you do?

Then what we did was I was in charge of the detail because I had a German officer who spoke a little English and I spoke a little German so we had this group, sixty of them that made a line where we processed them. In other words, we took them in one phase that we took everything away their clothes and everything and even their watches and WACs their furs because they were Norwegian furs. Then we had

“The Germans used to call us the black devils because we used to patrol at night all the time.”

because they were afraid of the people. That was one of the stipulations, they wanted to keep their weapons so they could protect themselves against the Norwegian people or the underground or whatever. Well, we set up a camp up in the mountains, Camp Heistamon, it was called. At our regular camp the barracks were thirty miles south of Oslo in a town called Drammn. And um, I'm losing my mind here. Where was I? Oh yeah, this camp up in the mountains. We took in soldiers by groups and disarmed them. There were some big warehouses there where we put all the guns, piles of them! Rifles and weapons and all that in a big lot and we put the tanks and the trucks and whatever, and the men would get there and go through the system that we had, getting showered and deloused, throwing all of their clothes in a big hamper in our laundry room. And they would get all the way through and we had a problem when we got to the German WACs. Everybody was watching the WACs without their clothes, and the men were there (laughing to themselves), they didn't care.

Anyway, so the nurses finally said, we are going to put a tarp up because you guys are watching these nude girls, come on! So there were seventeen of our nurses there, and they saw through us and I wouldn't say that I was watching them, maybe I was, I don't remember, I was only 19 years old then, or 20.

the laundry where we did clothes and we gave them clothes as close to the sizes that we could, and it wasn't the same rank or stuff like that because you didn't get the same clothes back and they were complaining. Why? The war's over..forget it, man. So the first train we sent back by rail, of course, and the Russians intercepted it and took it into the heart of the Russian country to use them as slave labor to rebuild there, so we wouldn't send anymore that way. We sent them all by boat from then on. We were the only American troops up there. We were under British command. The Russians were in the north and the rest of Norway was under British command. When we landed there in those C-47s, why, we got off the plane with weapons and so forth. We were marching and the Germans were marching. We both had arms! It was weird! You know, I mean anything could have happened, I suppose, but it didn't.

What was your most memorable moment?

Getting on the boat to go home! We got out in the middle of the Atlantic and we had a storm that was so severe, that we stood still for three days. We couldn't make any headway. All we could do was just keep the boat faced so it wouldn't roll over, you know, into the waves. Oh, was it a mess on that ship! Everyone was throwing up and, oh, it was a real mess. Every time

that thing hit down it went up over the waves and went down. It was a Liberty Ship. It cracked, you know. Boom! We were thinking, "When is this gonna crack in half?" These movies I brought, *The Devils Brigade*, this is a Hollywood produced film about the First Special Service, how it was formed and how the Canadian were so prim and proper marching into the camp, you know, and the Americans were slobs. It was terrible! *The Black Devils* tells different, tells you the truth, here. This is probably the best one for you to watch to get a story. It was from the History Channel. The Germans used to call us the black devils because we used to patrol at night all the time. We had stuff on our faces to keep our skin from shining up in the dark. I wore glasses at that time and they made me take them off because every time they shot a flare up, my glasses shined. We went through that town in France, Grasse, and the guys looked like they were bleeding, they had so much lipstick on them from girls kissing them. We'll anyway, we went through that town. It took us a while to get everyone back together again.

Was there a lot of physical and emotional stress?

When the Germans counter-attacked all these tanks were knocked out on the left bank and that is all that was there, tanks. We didn't have any infantry because that was our side, the infantry, so we were exposed when they knocked all the tanks out. They had a great big tank on top of the foot hill so we tried everything to knock it off and so finally they sent in an airplane it come in and knock it off. It was two inches of armor plating and six inches of concrete and another two inches of armor plating on the other side. When you knock it out its like creating a pillbox. Things are knocked off and everything else but it's still shooting at you. The one I told you about, I was crawling through the grass with my hands so my butt wouldn't be in the air, and they were shooting at me BANG, I was the only one who got outta there, you know there was five of us and then that machine gun and

then my gun jammed on me and how am I supposed to fix it? You know and they are shooting at me. So I tried pulling it on a couple of times to un-jam it and they kept shooting at me, so that was very stressful. Then the one with the hiding behind the rocks, and the artillery shooting and firing ammunition at two people. Then there was one more, you can hear the shells whispering through your ear and I heard shrapnel whistling and it came closer and closer, then something hit me in the back. I thought, "Oh no!" There was somebody with me and I said, is there blood coming out of my back, because it was HOT and he says no, but it's black and blue. It didn't break the skin or nothing and it could have just torn me apart you know. This real ragged metal from the shell and that was another close call. I tell my daughter all of these things and she says you're worse than a cat, you have more lives than a cat. Well, what else do you want to know? (Long pause and then picks up a book) See right there, right there is my name.

Was there any racism or drug use?

No, we got along good with the Canadians. I don't think there was. We got to be good buddies with everyone. In fact, most of my friends were Canadians, you couldn't tell the difference when they were there. We got replacements because we lost men, too, and we had to send over to the Eighth Army and they let us recruit. That was the British. The Canadians were working for the British and they HATE the British, oh man!! The food was terrible and everything! They were just so happy to join our unit. That's when it was still the Special Service Force.

Did you make any lasting friendships?

Yeah, I went to a couple of the conventions and a company commander was there, and also his wife, and a couple of sergeants, this Greek guy that I knew, the guy that sat through the counter-attack. Anyway, Alex turned out to be a good friend. He was from Detroit, he wasn't a Canadian. The other one was an

undertaker. Ironic, huh? That was in Canada. At the border I ran into, when I was going fishing one time, I ran into Red Hendel. He was an officer, an NCO Officer and he was with the border patrol – Canadians. So I got to see him. I said, “Hey, what are you doing here?” He said, “I work here.”

Do you have a message for the young people today?

WAR IS HELL!!



*Interviewed by Rachel Torres, Deanna Moran
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