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St. Johns High School

Home of the Redwings!

Jack Spalding

Interviewed by Jared Geller

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Jack Spalding was born on July 6, 1921 and was raised on a farm. He was born as a twin to Betty Geller (my grandmother, so that makes Mr. Spalding my great uncle). Before he was drafted into the service, a day after his twenty-first birthday, on July 7, 1942, he worked for Lansing Dairy as a swingman. In other words, he filled in jobs for the people that took days off work. He liked to drink Nehi soda (they didn't have much access to Coke around here). He first went on a 17-hour train trip to Fort Custer to be inducted and to receive their uniforms. Then they went to Camp Swift, Texas, and the trip took about 2-3 weeks on a train. Mr. Spalding and the other draftees were some of the first ones there at Camp Swift. There he received basic training in the infantry and learned to walk 25 miles a day with a pack. The packs included a blanket, a mess kit and some extra clothing. He mentioned that he was very fortunate to wear the same outfit of the 95th infantry for all of the 40 months he was in the war, while others filled in other positions where another was short. Then he went to Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio, Texas. The fort was 150 years old. There were many tent camps around there and he walked from tent camp to tent camp. Six people could fit in each tent. The tent camps were about a 20-25 mile walk from Fort Sam. One time Mr. Spalding got sick in one of the tent camps and stayed in the hospital over Christmas and New Years. Instead of the government having to buy new shoes for every soldier in the infantry, they collected the shoes and put new soles on them (which was cheaper). In one company in the infantry there are 3 platoons of riflemen, and in each platoon there are 3 squads of riflemen with 8 or 10 of them in each. In the weapons platoon (the 4th platoon) there were 3 mortars and 2 machine guns in each. Mr. Spalding got interested in the mortars early in the war. He said that if he hadn't have been involved in the mortars, which were defensive weapons, but instead into the riflemen (he saw many go down in his time in the war) he probably wouldn't be here.

He took a ship over to England at first in the war and stayed there on the front lines for a time. Then they went to France in October-November and by that time the majority of the war there had already ended. It was cold at that time, so they had to come up with their own ways of making heat without burning the tent down (they came up with some pretty crazy ideas). Then they went in a train up through France in a 40 or 8 boxcar. They could hold either 40 men or 8 horses (they were pretty small compared with ours). They would sit there for 2-3 hours in the hot cars because of the priority of

getting the supplies to the front line. They had to cross a pontoon bridge in order to get over to Germany. It was a bridge built across a river by the engineers of another division. When they came back over the bridge, he saw General Patton on the bridge. General Patton was talking to everyone, and seemed courageous because the Germans were still shooting at that bridge. His view of General Patton was a man who had no value for life. For example, his first battle in the war was the battle of ????? which hadn't been taken in over 700 years. He believed that they could have starved them out, but Patton ordered them in and they lost 45 people out of 200. What I thought was an interesting thing was that at night, it was so dark that they had to hold each other's hands to find their way and to get used to the brightness of the artillery, a mortar would shoot a flare and they would open their eyes for a few seconds. This proved to be very useful, except when there was no communication between companies. One time the mortar shot off an actual artillery shell towards the company and a few of the infantrymen lost their lives and a medic lost his legs (common sense, people). On the mortar, there were sights to set the range of the shot. One person would set up the mortar, and one would fire it (he set it up; he was squad leader). Later, when they found out that the war was still going on in the Pacific, they were sent home to get ready for the war over there. But by the time they were ready to go, they had dropped the A-bombs on Japan, so he ended up not going over there after all. Overall, Mr. Spalding thinks that being involved in the infantry was a good experience for him. He learned responsibility and many other good things that come to people later in life. He doesn't know what the modern-day Army is like, but he encouraged that people should consider trying it out for size.