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Celebration of Freedom

# STORIES OF HONOR

Stories of risk, sacrifice, duty and honor.

Larry Pankratz turns 100 this month. He's lived a long life; part of which was served in World War II in Company C of the Army National Guard, 32nd Infantry Division. Comprised of units from Wisconsin and Michigan, the 32nd has roots in the Iron Brigade during the American Civil War. Later during tough combat in France in World War I, it was referred to by the French nickname Les Terribles, because of its resilience in advancing over terrain others could not.

Pankratz began with the guard in October, 1939 and began weekly drills in the small community of Marshfield. "I don't really know why I joined; I think somebody talked me into it," Pankratz said. He and the other guys in his unit were paid \$1 each week to drill. "I signed some papers, I swore a little and made a pledge," Pankratz said.

In 1940, the 32nd was activated and sent to Camp Livingston in Louisiana for training. According to the book, *Combat Engineer! A History of the 107th Engineer Battalion*, by Frederick Stonehouse, the division first embarked on a six-day motor march to Camp Beaugard in October, 1940. A few months later the 32nd relocated to the new Camp Livingston, about 16 miles outside of Alexandria, Louisiana, where Pankratz and his division spent the next 16 months. In the summer of 1941, the division moved back to Camp Beaugard along with the 37th Division from Ohio, along with the 34th and 38th divisions for the Louisiana Maneuvers, to show military officials the readiness of the regiment. Later the regiment expanded again to include the Seventh Corps of the Second Army; together with the Fourth, Fifth and Eighth Corps of the

Third Army, it was the largest maneuver of its

kind in the Army's history involving about 100,000 men.

"We did a little of everything and learned nothing," Pankratz said.

The goal of the unit's training in Louisiana was to prepare them for the jungle warfare they would likely encounter.

At the time, National Guardsmen were not required to serve active duty beyond the U.S. However, in August, 1941, Congress approved an indefinite extension of service for the Guard, draftees and Reserve officers.

"I had a year in; I was up for discharge," Pankratz said. "But they were only discharging those with dependents and if you were over 27 years old. I was 24. Then Roosevelt signed the declaration of war, and we knew no one was getting out for the duration of the war – plus six months."

The Divisions were split up, with the 32nd and a few others given three months before being sent to the front in Europe. The 32nd was notified it would be going to the South Pacific instead of Europe: Japan was rapidly advancing in the South Pacific, presumably with the goal of occupying Australia and cutting off American supplies.

Pankratz said it took 23 days for the 10 ships – three of which were ocean liners – to get to Australia. "We slept in the bottom of the ship, four bunks high," he said. "It was a long trip. We really only came up for meals and we had boiled eggs every morning."

The ships landed in Port Adelaide, southern Australia, on May 14, 1942, having traveled about 9,000 miles in just over three weeks. Pankratz was part of the first American division in World War II to be moved in a single convoy from the U.S. to the front lines.

While in Australia, the unit was spread among different territories. Pankratz's group went to Brisbane, which he described as "wild." "We had a mess hall but the rest of our camp was all tents. A lot of times we would see kangaroos of all sizes come by. It was really nice to see."

That time was short-lived. Pankratz and his unit flew from Australia to New Guinea; they were the first division ever to be airlifted into combat. "We were the first fellows to land in an airport there," Pankratz said. "When we landed, we could see long elephant tusks on either side (of the runway)." Pankratz recalls other details of his time served, such as encountering a chaplain sent there to preach to the natives about Christianity.

They hiked from September through the end of March until they finally got to where they wanted to go.

At one point, hungry, dehydrated and exhausted, Pankratz found a coconut. "I carried it for three days until I ate it," Pankratz said. "Everyone was hungry. We had one can of rations for three days." According to the Eustice Keogh book, *The South West Pacific, 1941-45*, the Japanese fought up the northern side of the Owen Stanley Mountains and eventually after weeks of fighting, descended the southern slopes to Ioribaiwa Ridge, within 32 kilometers (20 mi) of Port Moresby. The Allied air forces relentlessly attacked the Japanese supply lines over the Owen Stanley Mountains that connected the Japanese forces to Buna, Sanananda and Gona. The weakened Japanese forces, attacked from the air and on the front and flanks by Australian forces, were finally stopped. Pankratz and his men were involved in a landslide while going up a mountain – presumably the Owen Stanley Mountains – where they took on a heavy rockfall.

"I heard one of the guys ahead of me shout, 'Look out below!' and I saw rocks coming down toward me," Pankratz said. "I looked around and there was no way I could go either way (right or left). So I got behind a nearby tree. I remember thinking if the tree goes, I'll go with it. But it stood."

After the rockslide, members of Pankratz's troop had to chop through the brush to get to him, and a guy who hadn't been as lucky as Pankratz who had been injured in the event.

The troop had a team of four natives helping them carry supplies; two of them left with the injured soldier to take him to get help. "They had bones in their noses," Pankratz recalled.

The first time Pankratz and his group met Japanese forces they had been on a morning patrol at Port Moresby.

"I was pinned down one time in a hollow place with tall grass all around me," Pankratz said. "Every time I lifted my head I got shot at." He would spend about eight hours in that hole. The next day three guys from his group finally got up and walked past Pankratz; to his knowledge, they never got back. Later, while walking through a coconut grove, Pankratz was shot in the arm and became a walking patient. "But I got back," he said. "The bullet went through my left arm but it missed the bone."

When he got back to the aid station, Pankratz could see it taking fire from enemy planes overhead. "They were shooting through the camp at the hospital," Pankratz said. "There was a doctor operating on a fellow in a tent next to me. I got into a foxhole; the doctor never stopped working."

Some time later, Pankratz said one of the other soldiers at the aid station woke him up to tell him about a barge headed back to Port Moresby, New Guinea.

"I got on the barge at midnight and it took off at 9 a.m.," Pankratz said. "When we got to the port, there were airplanes coming in full of troops. I got on one and rode it back to Australia."

Later, Pankratz learned the airplane he rode in was General (Douglas) MacArthur's plane. "There were five or six of us going back in it," Pankratz said. "(MacArthur) wasn't in it at the time, though."

Pankratz stayed in an Australian hospital until after Christmas; he went back to the U.S. with about a half-dozen guys from Marshfield.

The 32nd Division had more continuous days of active service/combat than any other division in World War II.



Marshfield resident Lawrence Pankratz fought in World War II in the South Pacific with Company C of the Army National Guard, 32nd Infantry Division



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