



# My History

by Heinz A. Jaffe



Heinz A. Jaffe as a G.I. in 1943  
(photo: private)

## Early Years

I was born in Nuremberg, Germany, on February 22, 1923 at Endterstraße 12 into a middle-class Jewish family. My parents were Leo and Gertrude Jaffe. I was a twin but my brother was stillborn. I had an older brother, Walter, who was born on November 12, 1921 and died in 1989.

I went to the *Jüdische Volksschule* (Jewish elementary school) for five years and then to the *Jüdische Realschule* (Jewish middle school) in Fürth until I left Germany. I was Bar Mitzvah in the orthodox synagogue on Essenweinstraße in 1936.

Shortly after I was Bar Mitzvah in February of 1936, my parents informed my brother and myself that they were sending us to the USA to live with an uncle due to the conditions in

Germany. I cannot imagine the state of mind of my parents that led them to that decision, not knowing if they would ever see their children again.

My parents were fortunately able to join us by 1938, shortly before *Kristallnacht*. In fact, all of my family managed to come to the USA except my father's mother Bertha who died in Theresienstadt.

### **Emigration**

My brother and I arrived on July 31, 1936 in New York and lived in Newark, NJ with my uncle and his family. We had help from an American Jewish women's organization.

I graduated from high school in 1941. As I was financially unable to go to college, I started as an apprentice patternmaker while I went to engineering-school at night. Since I was a child, I always wanted to be an engineer. As a patternmaker I learned to make wooden patterns that were used to make sand molds for castings. It led to a lifelong appreciation of wood and also taught me to use my hands and to fix things.

### **The War Years**

I was drafted into the Army in April 1943. I was inducted at Fort Dix, NJ and then shipped to Fort Belvoir, VA for basic training in the Corps of Engineers. During the summer months I contracted scarlet fever and was hospitalized. I felt well after a few days, but my throat culture remained positive for six weeks. During that time I was quarantined in a room the size of a bathroom in a one-story barrack that was not air-conditioned! I am sure the temperature in my room hovered around 100 degrees for weeks.

During my stay at Fort Belvoir I also became a United States citizen. Since I was still a minor, the only way I could become a citizen was by being in the Armed Forces. I appeared before a judge in Washington, DC and was sworn in. It was a proud day in my life.

After I was released from the hospital, I completed my basic training and in the fall of 1943 was shipped to Camp Reynolds near Pittsburgh, PA. This was a replacement camp from which soldiers were assigned to their permanent units either in the United States or overseas. After a few weeks of waiting to be assigned I came down with a low-grade fever which I could not shake. I was not sick enough to be hospitalized, but not well enough to be on duty. I spent weeks either loafing around the barracks or playing pool in the day room. I got to be a pretty good pool player!

In March of 1944 I was sent to Camp Kilmer, NJ to be shipped to Europe as a replacement. On March 1-3, 1944 we embarked on the *Ile de France*. She was a luxury liner and the former

pride of France. She had been reworked as a troop ship and there was nothing luxurious about her! My *quarters* consisted of a canvas bunk with about two feet of space above and below me. We did not travel in a convoy because the ship was supposed to be fast enough to avoid the German U-Boats. At least that was what they told us! The crossing was uneventful and we arrived in England on March 21, 1944.

**THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

ORIGINAL  
TO BE GIVEN TO  
THE PERSON NATURALIZED

**CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION**

No. 6050667

Petition No. 16169M

Personal description of holder as of date of naturalization: Age 20 years, sex Male, color White, complexion Ruddy, color of eyes Brown, color of hair Brown, height 5 feet 8 inches, weight 130 pounds, visible distinctive marks Mole left cheek side of face near left ear, marital status Single, former nationality German.

I certify that the description above given is true, and that the photograph affixed hereto is a likeness of me.

*Heinz Alfred Jaffe*  
(Complete and true signature of holder)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA } S.S.  
District of Columbia }  
Do it known, that at a term of the District Court of the United States for the District of Columbia held pursuant to law at Washington on September 17, 1943, the Court having found that HEINZ ALFRED JAFFE then residing at Co. C 3rd Bn ERTC, Fort Belvoir, Va. intends to reside permanently in the United States (when so required by the Naturalization laws of the United States) that in all other respects complied with the applicable provisions of such naturalization laws, and was entitled to be admitted to citizenship, thereupon ordered that such person be and (s)he was admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

In testimony whereof the seal of the court is hereunto affixed this 17th day of September in the year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and Forty-three and of our Independence the one hundred and Sixty-eighth.

CHARLES E. STEWART  
Clerk of the U. S. District Court.  
By *Wm. M. Shaw* Deputy Clerk.

**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**Heinz A. Jaffe's Certificate of Naturalization**  
(photo: private)

I had looked forward to getting to England because my family drank tea instead of coffee. This was common among German Jews, probably because of our Russian background. I looked forward to a good cup of tea, but was bitterly disappointed when I found out the British drink their tea with milk! I only like it with sugar and lemon.

We were lodged in a small English town whose name I have forgotten. About a week after I arrived I wound up in the hospital with double pneumonia. It was probably why I had that low-grade fever at Camp Reynolds earlier. I was still in the hospital on D-Day and remember the excitement that swept through the hospital when everyone realized the invasion of Europe had finally begun.

About the middle of June I left the hospital and was sent to Northern Ireland to join the outfit I would spend the rest of the war with. I was assigned to Company B, 12<sup>th</sup> Engineers Combat Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. After a short training period with my new outfit, we embarked on a Liberty Ship for the beaches of Normandy. The trip took about a week and the weather was beautiful. We spent most of our time sunbathing on deck. We arrived at the beach on either July 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>. We climbed down the side of the ship on nets into landing crafts that took us close to shore and we had to wade the rest of the way. This was similar to the situation on D-Day, except no one was shooting at us! We relieved the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne which had dropped behind the German lines the night of D-Day. They had taken tremendous casualties and were pretty shell-shocked. I watched them deliberately running over bodies of Germans with their Jeeps. War will do this to people.

While relieving the 82<sup>nd</sup>, I experienced my first artillery fire. I dove into the nearest hole and can still hear the laughter of the veterans as they told us it was *outgoing mail* not *incoming*. One of our batteries had opened fire from right behind us! It didn't take us long to learn the difference!

Below are listed some of the war stories that I experienced and will never forget.

### **Gas Attack**

One night I was on guard duty about half a mile from where we were camped out for the night. In the middle of the night my partner and I heard people yelling off in the distance. The yelling got louder and nearer and we finally heard the word: *GAS!* We had gasmasks, but they were safely stored in our trucks in the camp area. We briefly discussed what to do and then decided to abandon our post and run for our masks. The run was all uphill and I ran out of breath about halfway there and decided gas or no gas, I couldn't run any further. It turned out the Germans had fired some phosgene shells which set off a gas alarm throughout the beachhead. No one ever said anything to us about leaving our post, which of course is a court martial offense.

### **Roadblock #1**

The Allied Armies broke out of the beachhead and most headed east toward Paris and Germany. The 8<sup>th</sup> Division however headed west towards the Brittany Peninsula and the city of Brest. A major U-Boat base was located there and had to be neutralized to protect our ships in the Atlantic. One day at the outskirts of Brest we were called upon to remove a roadblock that was holding up the attack. It so happened that some of our troops had just *liberated* a wine

warehouse. There was lots of wine around and we had our share of it. As we approached the roadblock, the Germans opened up with sniper and machine gun fire to keep us from removing it. Feeling pretty heroic, a few of us at a time ran to the roadblock and removed portions of it until the fire got too heavy. None of us were hit and we eventually removed the roadblock. We were rewarded with a Bronze Star for our heroism. In retrospect: I have no doubt our heroism came out of a bottle!

### **Luxembourg**

In late November of 1944 we had long since left the Brest area and driven across France to the main front. On the way we drove through Paris shortly after it was liberated and our platoon leader deliberately got us *lost* so we could see more of the city. The inhabitants of Paris welcomed us with flowers and wine, but we were forbidden to leave our trucks and so had no *close encounters* with the people.

One day we were in a village in Luxembourg when the Germans unleashed an artillery barrage on us. One of our sergeants yelled at me to jump into a jeep and move it to the back of a building for better protection. When I told him I could not drive, he could not believe that an American soldier could not drive a car! However, I had grown up in a city and my family didn't own a car and I had not learned to drive one.

### **Minefield**

Shortly after the Battle of the Bulge our platoon was called upon one evening to go to the front and try to get wounded soldiers out of a minefield they had entered during that day's attack. We got there after darkness had set in and could do nothing until daylight arrived. It was not possible to clear antipersonnel mines in the dark. All through the night we heard the soldiers calling for help and it was apparent that some didn't make it through the night. Listening to their cries for help all night and being unable to do anything was a terrible experience. The next morning we went in and cleared paths to all the soldiers that survived and helped to get them out.

### **The Enemy**

One night we were up front with the infantry and it was bitterly cold. I spent the night in a foxhole with nothing but my uniform and my topcoat. Waking up after a restless night, I had great difficulty straightening my legs because they seemed to be frozen. Fortunately, I managed to get the circulation going and they were alright.

Shortly after daylight we saw two German soldiers leave their foxhole and run toward their line several hundred yards away. Some of our guys opened fire upon them, but didn't hit them and they disappeared over a hill. These were the only German soldiers other than those wounded, dead, or captured that I saw during nine month of combat! I also never fired my gun during all that time.

### **Roadblock #2**

This next incident happened in January 1945 somewhere in Germany west of the Rhine River. We were called up to the frontlines and asked to remove a roadblock. It consisted of one of our tanks that had been hit and was blocking a road needed for next day's tank attack. Our plan was to use some dynamite and blast it off the road. We were told that the road was clear and there were no Germans around. The road was bordered by open fields except that a wooded area started on one side right about where the disabled tank was. We started down the road in broad daylight toward the tank. Just as we approached it a German machinegun opened up on us from the corner of the woods.

Fortunately it missed all of us and we dove into the ditches on each side of the road. My first thought was I hoped the ditches weren't mined. My next concern was whether the machinegun could traverse along the ditch. We were lucky and safely made it back to our starting place. We were then told to try again after it got dark. We were also told that the machinegun nest would be eliminated. Based on what had happened earlier, I am not sure that was very reassuring to us!

After dark we started down the road again. I remember carrying a case of dynamite on my shoulder, but no rifle. I felt kind of naked! We got to the tank and my assignment together with another soldier was to go about fifty yards beyond the tank to remove some barbed wire that the Germans had stretched across the road. We carefully checked the wire for booby traps and started removing the wire when a loud explosion went off behind us. I first thought it was a mortar shell, but quickly realized that I had not heard any shell coming in. We worked our way back to the tank and found that the guys placing the dynamite had set off a booby trap. Several members of our squad were wounded, including our platoon commander, Lt. Cohen. We managed to get all our wounded back to our lines and then went back down and blasted the tank off the road and removed the barbed wire. The Germans never bothered us that night, but it was a horrific experience nevertheless.

The next morning the tank attack started and almost immediately bogged down. I remember walking back to our trucks along the road lined with tanks with the rest of my squad and curs-

ing at the men on the tanks for not going forward. I guess the experience of the night before left us less than understanding of their problems.

I, together with several others of my squad, received a Bronze Star for our efforts. This one I can say I deserved! I never learned if our wounded comrades survived or not. In war, information is hard to come by.

### **My Last Battle**

In mid-February I found myself in the small town appropriately named *Krauthausen*. The town was divided by a river with all bridges across it destroyed. We were on the west bank of the river and the Germans on the east bank. The town was about 60 miles west of Aix les Baines. The weather was cold and wet, but no snow.

An attack was planned and a night patrol was ordered to cross the river at night to learn something about the German positions. The river crossing was to be made by a small assault boat manned by three engineers and carrying a squad of infantry. This was the standard method for this type of operation.

I was not selected for this operation. The river current was very strong and the boat was swept downstream and never made it across. Fortunately, all occupants made it safely back to our side. The next night the operation was attempted again with the same result. The following night it was my turn to go.

I went with two of my buddies to the assembly area and met with a squad of infantry commanded by a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant. This time someone decided a small assault boat wouldn't do and they brought up an amphibious vehicle known as a *Duck*. It was operated by two African-American soldiers who had no idea that they were at the front and what they were being asked to do. One must remember the Army was not integrated in those days.

We were briefed and started toward the river in the Duck. It was pitch black and raining. As we left the main road the Duck got stuck in the mud! I remember thinking, *great, we don't have to go*. However, someone had the foresight to bring an assault boat along and we were going to attempt the river crossing in a way it had failed two nights in a row.

The standard way to approach the river was for the squad leader to lead the way followed by one of the engineers carrying some of the paddles. The infantry men would carry the boat and the other two engineers would bring up the rear with the rest of the paddles. The lieutenant started toward the river and I followed at about twenty yards as the lead engineer. I could not see the lieutenant ahead of me in the dark, but caught up with him near the river. He had encountered some barbed wire and was attempting to remove it. I asked him to let me do it be-

cause I was trained to do this, specifically to watch for booby traps. However, he told me he would do it and I turned around to stop the rest of the patrol from getting too close. Just as I turned away he set off a mine!

I was hit and fell to the ground. I did not feel any great pain, but had difficulty breathing. I heard the rest of the patrol drop the boat and hit the ground. I realized that the lieutenant must have been hit also.

Everything was quiet for a while, but I knew my buddies would come looking for me. I remember taking off my helmet and tried to make myself as comfortable as possible, but I still had difficulty breathing. Eventually my buddies reached the lieutenant and me and started carrying us back to the road. They got hold of a jeep and we went off to the nearest aid station. I remember the lieutenant lying next to me on the jeep, but I never knew how badly he was hurt or if he survived. I never even knew his name!

### **The Road Back**

Upon arriving at the field hospital, I was operated immediately. I had never lost consciousness. I later learned the extent of my injuries. My right lung was punctured and collapsed. Several ribs were broken. My intestines and other organs were perforated, I had a deep flesh wound in my thigh and the fingers on my right hand were injured. I am sure if I hadn't carried the paddles on my right shoulder and turned away just before the explosion, I might have had serious head injuries.

Luck was with me that night. The surgeon on duty, I believe his name was Major Satan (?), was a chest specialist from Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. I remember as they cut my clothes off that the nurses were kidding me because my feet were so dirty. The fact that I hadn't taken off my shoes and socks for days and slept in a coal cellar for protection from shelling probably had something to do with that!

I am pretty sure that the mine the lieutenant set off was one of ours. First of all we were on our side of the river and the barbed wire was probably placed by us. Also, I saw an X-ray of my chest taken before any of the shrapnel had been removed and a piece in my lung looked like the corner of an American personnel mine.

I spent about a week in the field hospital. During that time a Red Cross worker wrote a letter for me to my parents as my hand was bandaged and I was unable to write. I had never told my parents that I was in combat and always wrote as if I was still in England! The only one who knew the truth was my brother, who was serving in the Pacific Theater. That letter arrived home before the official notification from the War Department arrived! I am sure it saved my

parents from the shock of receiving a telegram from the War Department. When it did arrive they already knew its content.

I was transferred by ambulance from the field hospital to a hospital in Liege, Belgium. Two weeks after that I again was transferred by ambulance to Paris. Unfortunately, I was in no condition to enjoy that great city! After one week I was flown to England to a military hospital that specialized in treating chest injuries. That was my first airplane flight! It was a C-46, the military version of the DC-3. It was outfitted to carry stretchers and had nurses aboard. I still remember that the landing was as smooth as any I experienced since. The pilot must have been specially trained to land a plane full of wounded soldiers!

My greatest wish is that our children, grandchildren, and future generations do not have to go through what we went through. Unfortunately, I am afraid that mankind has not advanced enough to make this come true!

### **After the War**

I returned to civilian life and graduated as a mechanical engineer from Newark College of Engineering in 1949. I spend most of my career in the aerospace industry until I retired in 1991. I was chief engineer in one company and vice president of engineering in another.

I married my wife, Betty Wand, in 1945 and she passed away in 2013 at the age of 86. We have two children, Linda and Peter. Linda is a cardiologist and Peter is an engineer. They both have two children.

We have lived in many places: northern New Jersey, Long Island, Charlotte, N.C. and New Orleans. In 2005 we lost our home in New Orleans to hurricane *Katrina* and moved to a retirement community in Florida, close to my daughter's home in Orlando. My wife suffered from Alzheimer's and last year we moved into an assisted living facility where I presently reside.

November 2013

*Heinz A. Jaffe*

Edited by Gerhard Jochem

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