

Colby native's war experience took him from Texas

By Phil Finley

This is the history of an American citizen who was a patriot soldier for 39 months.

A Colby Man Is Drafted

Dale Hawk graduated at Colby High School in 1939, lettering four years in football, four years in wrestling and three years in track.

Hawk's father owned the White Eagle, later Socony Vacuum Bulk Fuel Dealership and the son, helping the father, learned to drive trucks.

Ralph Herwig hired the young Hawk to help with his wholesale grocery business and when Herwig sold out to Dale Hawk, a very young man became a Colby business owner.

Hawk married Katherine "Katie" Larsen in 1942.

Shortly after came the letter "Greetings. Your friends, neighbors and countrymen have selected you to become a member of your country's military forces. Travel by commercial bus to Fort Carson, Colo., where you will be sworn in and given further instructions."

Katie Hawk, a new bride, said goodbye to her husband as he boarded the Greyhound bus on July 8, 1942.

Except for one short visit, she would not see this man for 39 months.

Fort Carson was a receiving station where soldiers were sworn in, issued clothing and footwear and vaccinated.

On the troop train, 60 to a car and seated on upright wooden seats, it was on to Camp Wallace, Texas, about 18 miles from Houston. Troops were housed in two-story barracks rapidly erected for the war buildup.

Basic training began.

The training day started at 5 a.m. with lights on and the call for everyone up.

Fifty men on each floor headed to the bathroom facilities – latrine – to patiently wait to shower, shave, use the facilities and return to

the cot (bed) area to uniform and leave when the call "fall out" came.

It was a constant move by command and march by foot, rifle on the shoulder day after day.

Heat and humidity made sweat ooze through the uniforms. The mosquitoes swarmed on the sweating backs and shoulders until the uniforms showed red from the biting insects.

It was never a long rest: 10 minutes an hour.

Then it was the live fire courses: rifles, mortars, grenade throwing. Gas attack drills were the final test. Live firing machine guns chained to fire 30 inches above the ground while group after group passed around obstacles in a low crawl, cradling their rifles.

Hawk joined D Battery of the 433 antiaircraft automatic weapons battalion.

Each of four batteries manned and fired eight guns. These were mobile, highly lethal crew-served guns providing horizontal land fire at enemy soldiers, but they were best at vertical movement to destroy enemy aircraft.

Hawk said at one point during basic they called for people who had truck driving skills.

It was off to the motor pool for him. When the experienced driver was told to downshift, he displayed a double clutch engine speedup and a smooth-as-silk down shift. The instructor thought he was showing off, and Hawk rode in the bed of the truck for an hour on the solid wooden seats.

After Texas, Hawk traveled to Fort Dix, N.Y., just outside the Manhattan and Staten Island harbors, where there were 18 inches of snow on the ground and it was 18 degrees above zero.

To Europe to Join the Fight

Up the gangway Hawk went, into a troop ship that held 19,000 soldiers.

One hundred ships carrying soldiers left the harbor and after four days, Hawk said

the ship he was on was alone and changing course constantly, zig-zagging to avoid German submarine U-boats waiting to destroy troop ships.

After sailing for 17 days in February 1943, the troops were offloaded at Casablanca in North Africa.

The soldiers bound for combat had an "A" pack and a "B" pack. The "A" pack was for personal essentials, day-to-day items they never parted with. The "B" pack had more comfort things like blankets, extra uniforms, combat boots, socks, towels, etc.

All the "B" bags were piled on the beach.

Then the call came to load the bags onto 2 1/2 ton CCKW GM 6x6 trucks. Hawk volunteered to load bags, and the volunteers climbed on the load and rode 12 miles to the assembly point while the rest of the battalion marched by foot those 12 miles.

The assembly area was a desert washout the troops called the Sand Pit. Two shelter halves together formed a tent for two troops.

The nearby French governments would bring Arab petty criminals to the Sand Pit. The criminals were blindfolded, tied to posts in the ground and executed by a firing squad.

It was another terror of war.

Hawk's battalion was to defend coastal cities from German fighter planes and bombers.

Hawk said the strategy was to saturate the skies in all directions and altitudes so the planes could not get through to the ships and unloading docks in the coastal cities.

An order came and Hawk and his fellow soldiers waterproofed their equipment, boarded ships and headed for the invasion of Sicily.

The landing at Necina, said Hawk, was deadly and the fighting was furious.

Hawk recalls driving a 2 1/2 ton truck off the beach into a landing craft using the lowered ramp.

The truck was loaded with empty fuel cans, which were then filled and returned to the beach when Hawk drove it down the ramp, all wheels pulling and full-engine throttle, through shelling and air attacks to refuel the invading war machines.

Hawk said he slept on a shelf in the transport going to and from the tanker ship.

Again he received orders to waterproof his equipment, load onto landing craft and travel to Anzio beachhead in Italy.

Hawk's unit was the third wave ashore at Anzio.

The battles for Salerno and Naples, Hawk recalls, were the bloodiest battles of the war before the Normandy invasion.

Hawk said for six months the perimeter of fighting he was in was five miles inland and only eight miles wide.

Finally, a Japanese-American unit broke out at Cercerno, fought past Leghorn, Italy, and had to pull back to Naples because of German artillery mounted on flatcars hidden in tunnels between firing actions. The Germans were consolidating and retreating over the Italian Alps toward Germany and France.

For Dale Hawk, now in invasions one after another at almost age 22, it was load and ship to Nice, France.

There, he was just 30 miles from the Battle of the Bulge when Patton broke out with the 3rd Armored Division all the way to Berlin and the German surrender.

"We couldn't keep going as fast as Patton," he said, "but we did the clean-up fighting."

A Veteran Returns

Hawk, now 92, has six campaign ribbons, two arrows for combat beach landings and his list of eligible citations goes on and on.

He came home from the war by troopship, but this time without German submarines. He sailed past the Statue of Liberty into New

The Colby Free Press would like to thank all those who have served or are serving in uniform. Your service for your country is an inspiration to millions of Americans.

Whether in a command center in Washington, D.C., or in the mountains of Afghanistan, active duty personnel are serving our country. Of the 1,372,522 active duty personnel, 172,996 are deployed worldwide in the service of our country, according to the December 2012 statistics from the Department of Defense.

In addition to active personnel there are 21.2 million veterans living in the United States. They represent service from World War II to Afghanistan and the peacetimes in between conflicts.

We want to encourage everyone to take a moment and thank these veterans for their service to our country.

We also would like to take a moment to commemorate those who have fallen in the service of our country. Their sacrifices have kept our country free.

The Colby Free Press Staff