

Sicily

By Pete Clark

Vernie was drafted into the army during the summer of 1942 and was sent to Fort Riley, Kansas for basic training. After his graduation from basic training, an officer told Vernie he was going to be in the cavalry. The officer told him he had a choice between horse cavalry or mechanized cavalry. Vernie's reply was, "I have been on a horse three times in my life and I was bucked off all three times. You decide." He was assigned to drive a jeep for The First Recon Troop of the First Infantry Division, The Big Red One. After further training, the Recon Troop was sent to Scotland for more training and to await the first American move against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

After a few weeks in Scotland, Vernie and his buddies were given passes to go to a nearby village. They went straight to the local pub. Some called out for beer, others asked for whiskey. The owner, behind the bar, stood with his hands on his hips and glared at them. He told them to get out. He would not serve any @#% Yanks. Vernie told me that since they were in his country to fight his war, the soldiers grabbed the man behind the bar, pulled him across it. They took him out and dumped him onto the street. The men went back into the pub, locked the door and drank all night, on the house. When he finished this story, Vernie informed me that anyone above the rank of Buck Private was a brown nose. Every time he was promoted to PFC, he would get busted and lose the stripe.

Vernie said he wrecked four jeeps while he was in combat zones. One of the crashes was just before the beginning of the fight at Kasserine Pass in Tunisia. He had broken his glasses when the jeep flipped over, so he was sent to the rear to wait until new spectacles arrived. Vernie had been lucky. The First Division's poorly led, inexperienced troops suffered horrendous casualties. The leadership was changed, and replacements came into the ranks. The Big Red One began coalescing into its former self.

After North Africa came Sicily, where Vernie was wounded while scouting a hillside with two other troops. A German machinegun opened fire on them, killing the other men. The Germans used Vernie for bait. It was three hours before the Medics could get him off that hill.

I believe Vernie wanted me to think of him as the army's greatest Goldbrick, but I did not buy into that. Vernie's wife let me look at his DD214. The form revealed a Purple Heart and two Bronze Stars. Of the two hundred men of the First Recon Troop who left Fort Riley in 1942, seven came home. Their job had been to draw enemy fire.