

# From Elm Creek To Handorf



The Personal World War II Journey of  
Private First Class Chester E. Boyd  
May 1943 to December 1945

By David K. McDonnell

# I

## Introduction

I spent both weekends before Thanksgiving, 2005, cleaning my basement. I've lived in my house over 20 years and have accumulated a fair amount of stuff. Some of the stuff in the basement was, I swear, exactly where I had put it 20 years ago.

Hanging in the laundry room, tucked away behind the clothes chute, was my father-in-law's World War II Honorable Discharge papers. The documents were in an old frame, covered by broken glass. The frame itself was in several pieces, and I'm not sure what was holding it all together. There were two papers – the honorable discharge and the separation qualification record. I could only see the front of these documents, since the back of both were hidden by the back of the frame. The documents had yellowed and showed considerable wear.

I had of course seen all of this before. In fact, I was probably the person who hung the frame next to the dirty laundry. But over the years I didn't pay any attention to it.

But as I cleaned the basement this year, I knew I had to do something with these papers. And so I took the documents and protected them against further wear. I also threw away the frame. (In retrospect, I should have kept the frame, even though it was in pretty bad shape. These papers were likely framed by his mother after the war.)

I read the papers before I put them away. I was intrigued by what I read. The papers identified his unit – the 784<sup>th</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion. It also identified his dates of service – May 19, 1943 to December 27, 1945. And it identified his places of service – Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland and Central Europe. There were other notations on the documents, most of which didn't make any sense to me at the time. One noted the Belgian *Fourragère*, which I never had heard of before.

It was then that I decided to trace the personal army history of Private First Class Chester E. Boyd.

Unfortunately, I did not have a lot of information to go on – only his honorable discharge and separation qualification record. I did not have any of his letters from home, or any of his personal recollections.

Nevertheless, I thought that this would be a relatively simple venture. I was grossly mistaken. I was unable to find any single source which provided anywhere near the information I needed.

But each source of information, on the discharge papers and in the written records of the war, provided a clue for other sources of information. Ultimately, I looked at a countless number of World War II texts, histories and troop movement documentation produced by the U.S. Army, United States Army Air Force historical documents, personal recollections of war veterans, and even obituaries of recently deceased veterans.

When I thought I had the history as complete as I was going to get it, in such a short period of time, I collected the research and “finished” the writing of the story. After I had it written, edited, proofread, and ready to go, I made yet another discovery.

I found a stash of photographs taken by, or of, Chester during his years of service. There were a few other keepsakes in the stash as well. Finally, there was a short publication of the 784<sup>th</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion. All of this was tucked away for safekeeping. But, by being safely tucked away, it was also forgotten.

To my utter delight, nearly everything I found in the stash confirmed the elements of my prior research. I had made a few wrong turns, but the photographs and memorabilia steered me straight.

I think I was able to piece together most of the elements of his army service. In my race to finish this project by Christmas, I was forced to make a few assumptions and compromises. These are duly noted.

This is not, by any means, an historical treatise. I did not include any footnotes or citations to source material. I borrowed liberally from many sources. I know that this final product is not technical enough for those with prior knowledge of World War II, and too technical for those who do not. I chose to write this for a particular audience – the children and grandchildren of Chester Boyd.

I still have a number of questions about Private Boyd's service. Someday I might pick up this project again and see if, with more time, I can fill in more of the story. Better yet, perhaps another member of the family will use this as the start of more thorough research.

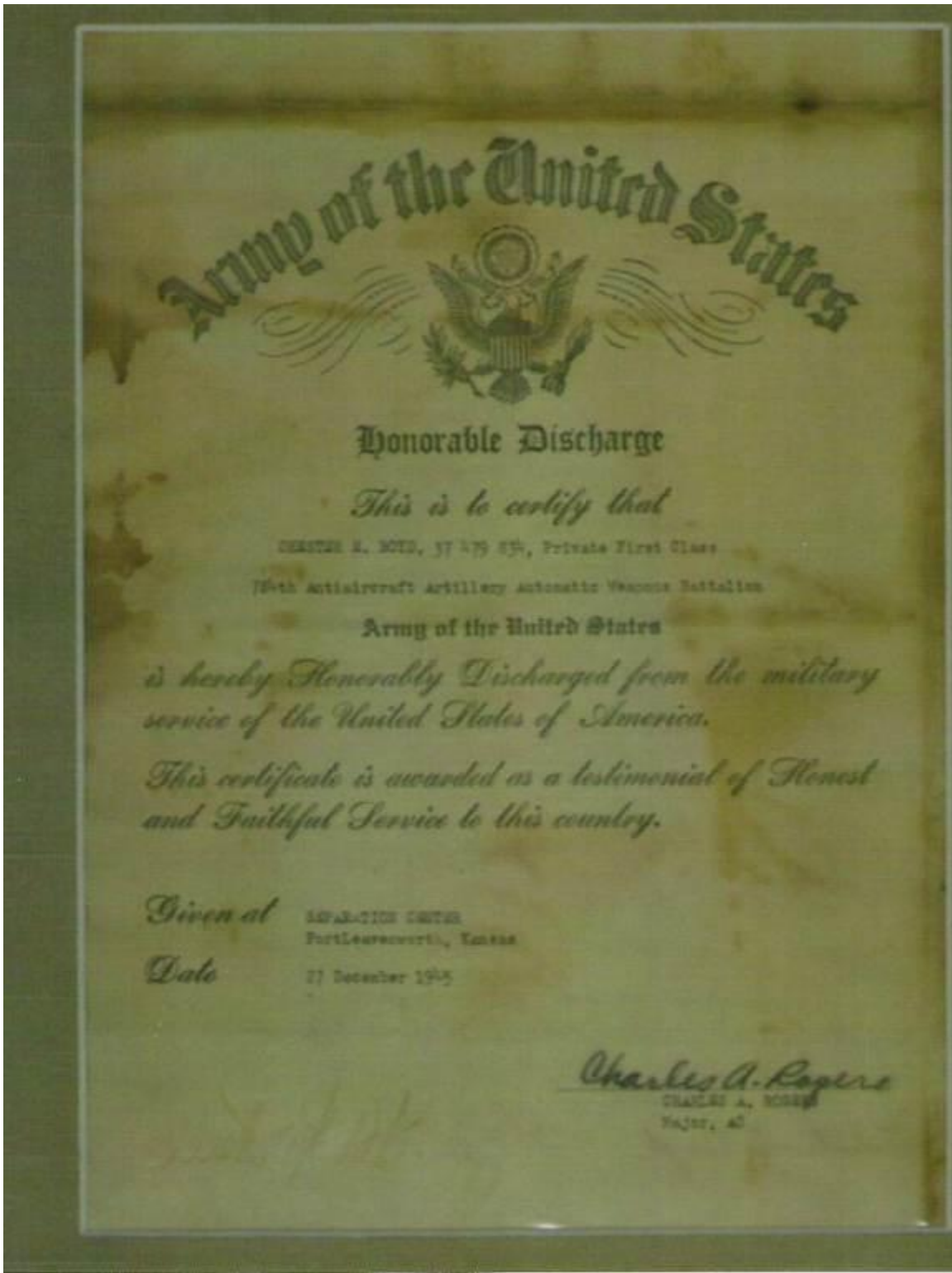
In the meantime, I think this history is reasonably close. And the tribute well deserved.

Happy reading!

*David McDonnell*

December 25, 2005

This is Chester Boyd's Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Army. The next page is the reverse side of the discharge.






This is his Separation Qualification Record. The next page is the reverse side of this record.

JEV

# Army of the United States



## SEPARATION QUALIFICATION RECORD

SAVE THIS FORM. IT WILL NOT BE REPLACED IF LOST

This record of job assignments and special training received in the Army is furnished to the soldier when he leaves the service. In its preparation, information is taken from available Army records and supplemented by personal interview. The information about civilian education and work experience is based on the individual's own statements. The veteran may present this document to former employers, prospective employers, representatives of schools or colleges, or use it in any other way that may prove beneficial to him.

1. LAST NAME - FIRST NAME - MIDDLE INITIAL			MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS		
BOVD	CHESTER	E	10 MONTHS	11. GRADE	12. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY
2. ARMY SERIAL NO. 37 479 834	1. GRADE Pfc	3. SOCIAL SECURITY NO. Unknown	4	Pvt	Coast Artillery Basic Training (521)
5. PERMANENT MAILING ADDRESS (STATE, CITY, COUNTY, ZIP) Box 284 Elm Creek Buffalo County, Nebraska			21	Pfc	Heavy Machine Gunner (605)
6. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE 19 May 1943	7. DATE OF SEPARATION 27 Dec 1945	8. DATE OF BIRTH 4 Dec 1924			
9. PLACE OF SEPARATION Separation Center Fort Leavenworth, Kansas					
SUMMARY OF MILITARY OCCUPATIONS					
13. TITLE - DESCRIPTION - RELATED CIVILIAN OCCUPATION					
MACHINE GUNNER, HEAVY:					
<p>Served in the European Theater of Operations as a machine gunner. Loaded, aimed, cleaned and maintained heavy machine guns. Provided automatic direct or indirect fire in support of units breaking through enemy defense, harassing enemy troops and positions and in defense against enemy aircraft, armored vehicle and enemy counter attacks. Was able to determine range estimation and speed of moving targets. Also able to fire on moving targets such as airplanes without sights through the use of tracers. Used hand weapons such as rifle, automatic rifle, carbine, pistol, bayonet, trench knife and hand grenades. Was also efficient in knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting.</p>					

GPO 1950 1396  
 1 281 1345 100  
 This form superse  
 GPO Form 100, 15 July 1941, with WPA 10-2-46 and

MILITARY EDUCATION

14. NAME OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—COURSE OR CURRICULUM—DURATION—DESCRIPTION

None

CIVILIAN EDUCATION

15. HIGHEST GRADE COMPLETED

1 year  
College

16. DEGREES OR DIPLOMAS

None

17. YEAR LEFT SCHOOL

1943

OTHER TRAINING OR SCHOOLING

20. COURSE—NAME AND ADDRESS OF SCHOOL—DATE

None

21. DURATION

18. NAME AND ADDRESS OF LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED

Kearney State Teachers College  
Kearney, Nebraska

19. MAJOR COURSES OF STUDY

Business Administration

CIVILIAN OCCUPATIONS

22. TITLE—NAME AND ADDRESS OF EMPLOYER—INCLUSIVE DATES—DESCRIPTION

STUDENT, COLLEGE:

Completed one year of college toward a business degree at the Kearney State Teacher's College, Kearney, Nebraska. Studied Algebra, Chemistry, English, History, and Physical Education. Was taking fundamental subjects at Kearney, however, and was planning on finishing at Nebraska University.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

23. REMARKS

None

24. SIGNATURE OF PERSON BEING SEPARATED

*Chester E. Boyd*

25. SIGNATURE OF SEPARATION CLASSIFICATION OFFICER

*Chester J. Dickinson*

26. NAME OF OFFICER (Typed or Stamped)

CHESTER J. DICKINSON  
Major, AGD



## II

### Induction and Basic Training

Chester Boyd was inducted into the United States Army on May 12, 1943, from his hometown of Elm Creek, Nebraska. “Inducted”, as opposed to “enlisted”, means that he was drafted. His active service began on May 19<sup>th</sup> at Ft. Crook, Omaha, Nebraska. He was 18 years old.

He had just completed one year of college at Kearney State Teacher’s College. (This is now known as University of Nebraska – Kearney. His separation qualification record noted his plan to finish college at “Nebraska University”, which is now University of Nebraska – Lincoln.)

The 784<sup>th</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion did its initial training at Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas. (Ft. Bliss is currently 1.1 million acres which overlaps Texas and New Mexico. Most of the military facilities are in Texas, but over 90% of the artillery training ranges are in New Mexico.)

He spent four months in “Coast Artillery Basic Training” at Ft. Bliss. I suspect he was sent to Ft. Bliss from Ft. Crook almost immediately after he began active service. Under this timeline, he would have completed his basic training at Ft. Bliss in mid-late September, 1943. It was that point that he was promoted from “private” to “private first class” (or Pfc., for short). Chester remained at Ft. Bliss for another two months to begin specialist artillery training.

The next photo is in a cardboard frame. Stamped on the back of the frame is “Achilles Studio Modern Photography”, and the address shown is 105 ½ E. San Antonio, El Paso, Texas. This was obviously taken during basic training at Ft. Bliss.

Notice the absence of a Pfc.’s stripe on his arm. He does have the AA badge on his upper arm. The disk on his hat is the “Arms of the United States”, worn by all enlisted men. He would have received a chevron like this one, after completing basic training, as a “private first class”.





Chester's mother and father paid him a visit at Ft. Bliss, and these two photos are in his parents' family album. "Taken with Chester in El Paso, Texas" is written underneath the first photo.



\*\*\*

The officers of the 784<sup>th</sup> trained at Camp Davis, North Carolina in late, 1942. When they moved to Ft. Bliss in early 1943, non-commissioned officers joined the battalion. Beginning around April 1<sup>st</sup>, the “fillers” began to arrive, and the full scale training began.

Most of these “fillers” were from the Midwest. Their average age was 19 ½. None of them had any prior military experience.

I’m not sure why Chester was assigned to the artillery. During the war, the army didn’t give draftees much in the way of options – draftees were assigned to wherever the army wanted them. Since Chester was sent to Coast Artillery Basic Training, he would have been assigned to artillery within a few days of his induction. It is possible that he took an aptitude test of some sort which suggested that he would be good at artillery. Artillery service does take a fair amount of skill, and he might have been assigned to artillery because of his one year of college. Or, his assignment to artillery might have been entirely random.

His initial weeks of basic training would have been fairly typical for the army. He would have learned how to march and how to salute (and to whom), and given basic individual weapons instruction. The physical conditioning would have been intense. There were many marches, and runs, in the summer desert.

After the initial few months, the unit spent a fair amount of time in the New Mexico desert. Nearly all of their field exercises and training courses were in the desert, in an area dubbed “Camp Hueco”. Here is a present day map of Ft. Bliss. Camp Hueco is, I believe, simply the desert region north of the Texas line where the exercises and artillery training were taken.



In the training, the soldiers learned elementary level skills of antiaircraft artillery and automatic weapons. They also began to learn and understand how to set up a defense system.

For example, in one of their final drills in the New Mexico desert, the battalion was ordered to go to a specified area, marked off as an airfield. They were not given any field orders or maps or any instructions except one – go to the airfield and set up a viable defense. Learning how to successfully perform this exercise turned out to be one of the best lessons learned in their training.

The 784<sup>th</sup> left Ft. Bliss on November 17, 1943, for a long train ride to California, and more specialist artillery training.

### III

#### Antiaircraft Artillery Battalions, Weapons & Equipment

Before we can look at Chester's particular training and experiences, we first need a basic understanding of the antiaircraft weapons and of the organization of antiaircraft units.

The Coast Artillery was an old and somewhat archaic branch of the service by the beginning of the war. It was initially charged with the responsibility of guarding the U.S. coastline and naval bases with relatively fixed pieces of artillery. In the 1920s, the Coast Artillery added antiaircraft artillery, which were antiquated by the beginning of WWII.

The German *blitzkrieg* tactics, with its effective use of aircraft, in Europe in the first campaigns on the war caused the Army to reevaluate its antiaircraft capability. In 1942, the Army planned to organize 811 AAA battalions (the shorthand for "antiaircraft artillery battalions") with approximately 619,000 men.

However, the Army Air Corps had considerable success in shooting down German planes and the *Luftwaffe* became a less imposing force as the war progressed. As a result, the Army reduced its targeted number of AAA battalions in 1943 (to 475), and again in 1944. At its peak, there were a little over 600 AAA battalions.

In 1944, many of the AAA battalions were converted into field artillery units. Other AAA battalions were disbanded altogether, and its men used as replacements in infantry units. By the end of the war, there were 331 AAA battalions, with approximately 245,000 men, still in existence. The 784<sup>th</sup>, as you will see, was not one of the converted or disbanded units. If you do the math, each battalion had on average about 750 men.

There were two types of AAA battalions – AAA gun battalions and AAA automatic weapons battalions. The gun battalions had the larger, less mobile guns. You will notice the difference when you look at the pictures in the coming pages.

Generally, each AAA automatic weapons battalion had four firing batteries (lettered "A" to "D"), with two support batteries. Each firing battery generally had 16 guns. This equates to 64 guns per battalion.

The type of guns within the battalion depended upon whether it was a “mobile”, “SP”, or “semi-mobile” battalion. The heavy guns of a mobile battalion were towed by a truck, and one mobile AAA battalion was typically assigned to each infantry division. The heavier guns of an “SP” battalion were mounted on a half-track, and one SP AAA battalion was typically assigned to each armored division. (A half-track is an armored vehicle with front truck tires, and rear tank-like tracks. The initials “SP” meant self-propelled. The guns were “self-propelled” since they were mounted on a half-track and did not need to be towed.)

A semi-mobile AAA battalion used a different combination guns, with fewer towed or mounted guns. With this alignment, a semi-mobile battalion was designed for the defense of more static installations. A semi-mobile battalion could be assigned to either an infantry or armored division, or given other assignments such as support for an Army Air Corps unit. The 784<sup>th</sup> was a semi-mobile battalion.

A mobile battalion typically had eight towed 40mm guns, and an SP battalion typically had eight 37mm half-track mounted guns. Both types typically had eight quad .50 caliber towed or SP machine guns, and several single .50 caliber machine guns.

As a semi-mobile battalion, the 784<sup>th</sup> would have different array of the same weapons, although typically a semi-mobile battalion was not assigned a half-track.

One source stated that a “typical” semi-mobile AAA battalion had 37 officers, 2 warrant officers, and 774 enlisted men. For weapons, the battalion had 32 40mm AA guns, 32 multiple carriage .50 caliber machine guns (generally, the “quads”), 5 .50 caliber machine guns, 41 .45 caliber machine guns, 658 .30 caliber rifles, 91 .30 caliber carbines, 3 .45 caliber pistols, and 32 rocket launchers.

If you understand the weapons of the era, this will make sense to you. If this is new to you, the pictures coming up will show these weapon types.

For transport, the semi-mobile AAA battalion would typically have two ½ ton trucks, seven ¾ ton trucks, and twelve ¼ ton trucks.

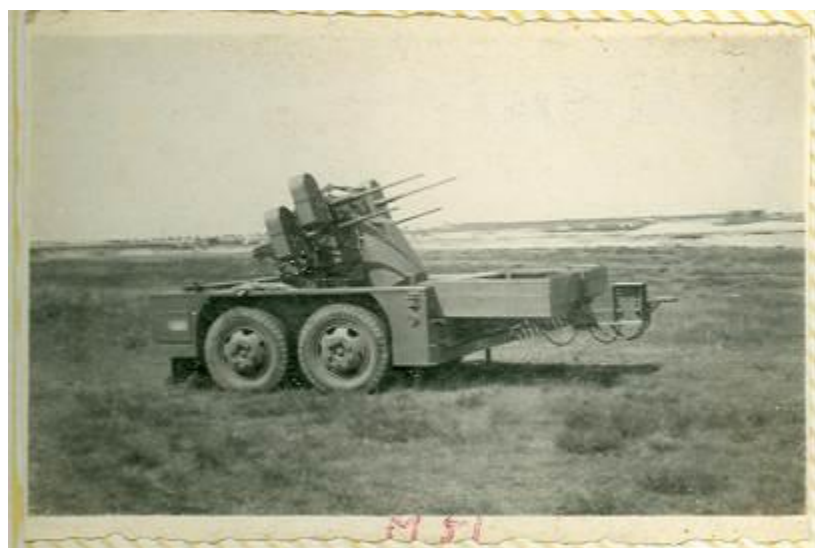
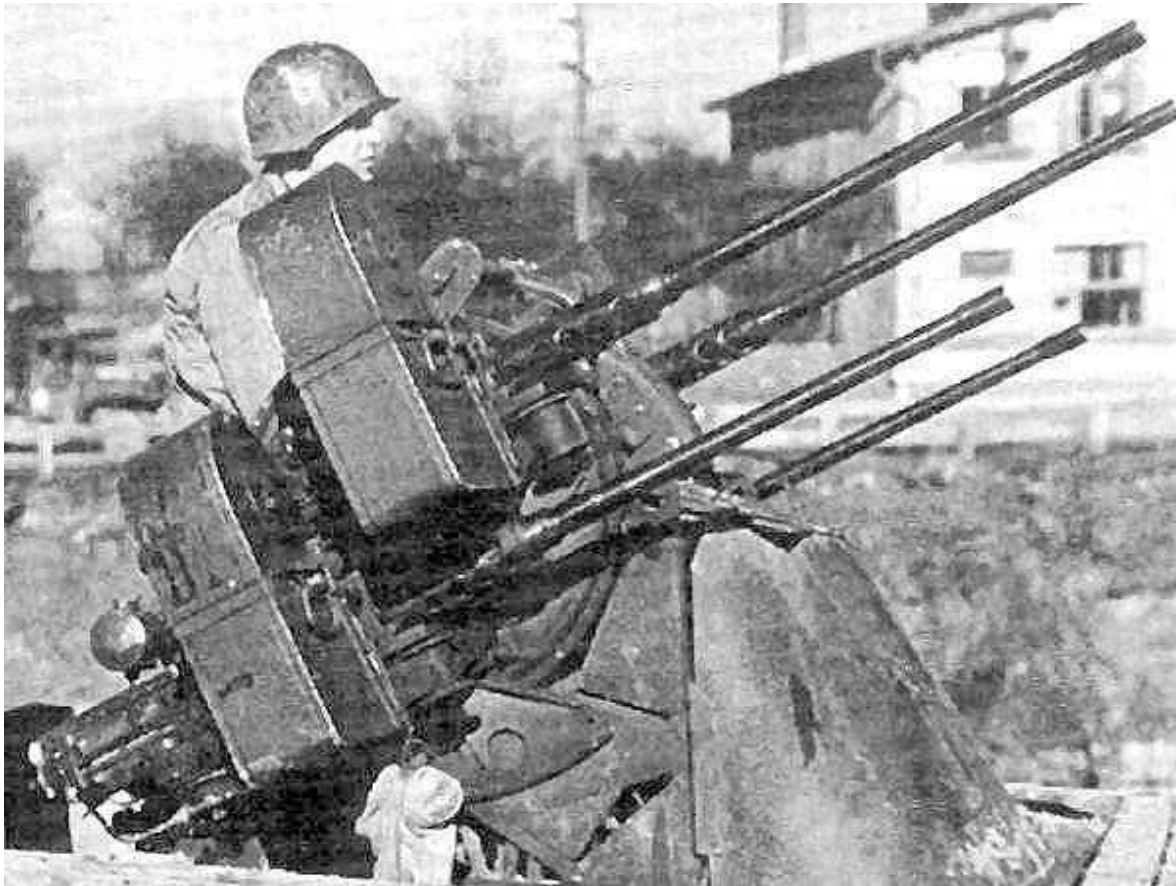
There are photos of these weapons and vehicles on the next several pages.

These are current day photos of the .50 caliber machine gun, although the gun hasn't changed much in design since World War II. The gun, with the tripod mount, weighs about 128 pounds. It will fire approximately 550 rounds per minute. Caliber, by the way, refers to the interior diameter of the barrel in inches. This .50 caliber machine gun had a ½ inch interior barrel.





These are photos of World War II quad .50 caliber machine guns. The quad is essentially the same machine gun as shown on the prior page, except that there are four of them – and aim one and you aim them all. They were sometimes mounted on a four wheel trailer, like shown in the second photo.



This is a photo of a quad 40mm anti-aircraft machine gun. This particular gun is mounted on board the USS Hornet in 1945. The AAA battalions in Europe used the same 40mm gun, but as a single gun, and not as a quad. Obviously the quad is significantly less mobile and not well suited for land warfare. You can see eight crew men at work on this quad gun (in the lower left hand corner, you can see the arms of one man and the head and hands of another, helping to load the guns.)

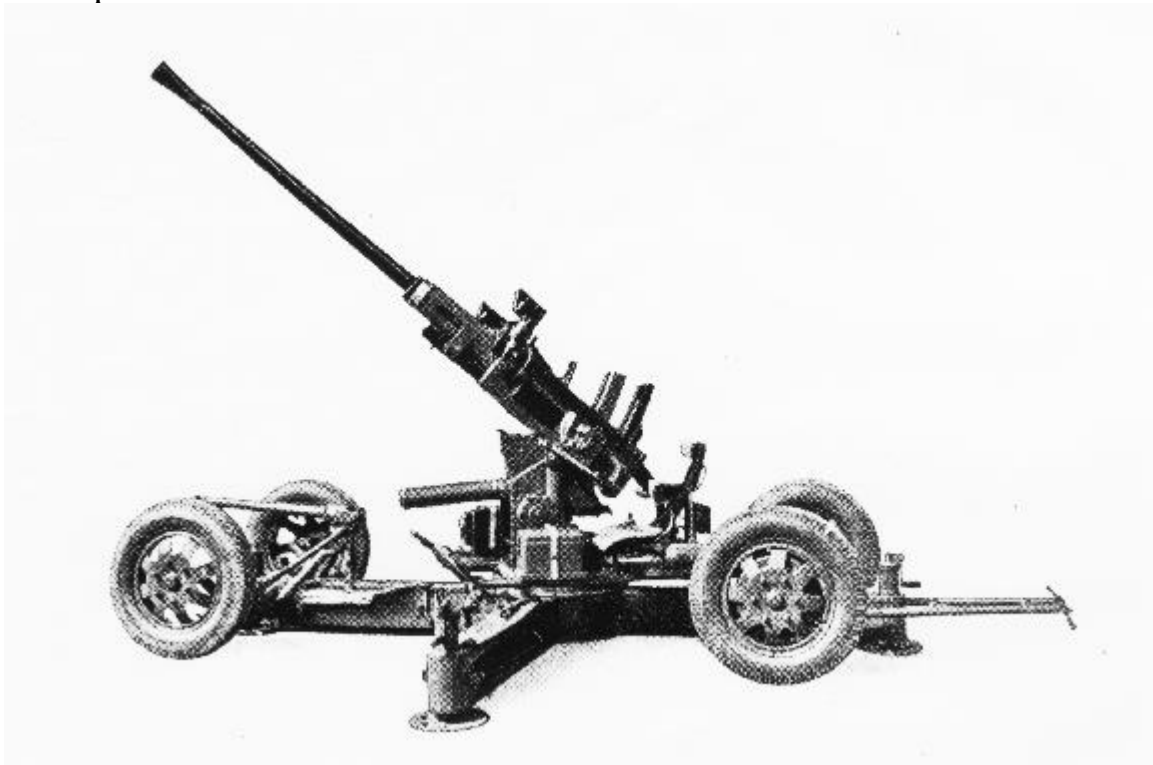


This gun was designed by the Swedish firm Bofor, and the guns were frequently called “Bofors”. A Bofor is fired by foot pedals. On the original model, one pedal is at the pointers seat and another is at the sight operators seat. When set to automatic, the gun keeps firing as long as either of the two firing pedals are depressed, and as long as ammunition is fed into the loading mechanism. In this photo, the operator on the right has his foot on the seat, and not on the foot pedals (and he is obviously not firing the Bofor).

This is another photo of the 40mm antiaircraft machine gun. This particular Bofor is manned by four British soldiers.



This is a profile of a towed version of the Bofor 40 mm.



This photo shows the gunner's seat of an Australian Bofor. This particular gun is now in a museum in Sydney.



The 40mm gun was originally designed by Bofor for the Royal Swedish Navy in the 1920s. In the 1930s, it was adapted for use as an anti-aircraft gun. In the early 1930s, the German company Frederick Krupp AG acquired one-third of Bofor, and sent some of its best engineers, metallurgists, and production experts to Sweden to assist in the development of Bofor's weapons. Krupp was then a 400 year old steel and armaments manufacture in Essen, Germany. (After the war, several Krupp directors, including Alfred Krupp, were convicted at the Nuremburg trials for crimes against humanity, for the company's use of forced labor in weapons production.) Bofor and the Krupp personnel worked together in the development of other weapons, but Bofor kept Krupp in the dark in the development of the 40mm anti-aircraft gun.

This is a photo of a Polish-made towed Bofor, taken in 1939 after being strafed by German planes. Note the dead horse in the photo, which was likely used to pull a supply wagon. Note also the foot pedals for firing the gun.



Bofors received orders for 1,500 40mm guns in the few years before WWII. As a small company, it could not fill all of the orders. In fact, it could only build about one gun per day. To fill the orders, it licensed manufacturing to other companies throughout the world (including, as shown in this photo, Poland). During the war, Bofors were made by both sides.

This is the slightly smaller 37mm Bofor gun. AAA automatic weapons battalions used 37mm Bofors mounted on half-tracks. The pictured Bofor is the towed version of the same gun. The towed 37mm was used as an anti-tank, as opposed to anti-aircraft, weapon.



This is a photo of a towed anti-aircraft gun, taken at a coastal defense in Algeria. It appears to be 37mm Bofor, which ordinarily were mounted on half-tracks. It also appears to be used here as an anti-aircraft weapon.



Bofors were air-cooled guns and came with two barrels. The barrel was capable of about 1000 rounds before becoming overheated and spoiled. The normal procedure, then, was to change it for the other barrel after 100 or 200 rounds. The exchange required five men and could be done in less than a minute. The barrel could be pulled directly out of the gun casing, and thrown directly into cold water to cool it off.

Here is a diagram of a Bofor from a training manual, written in Swedish.

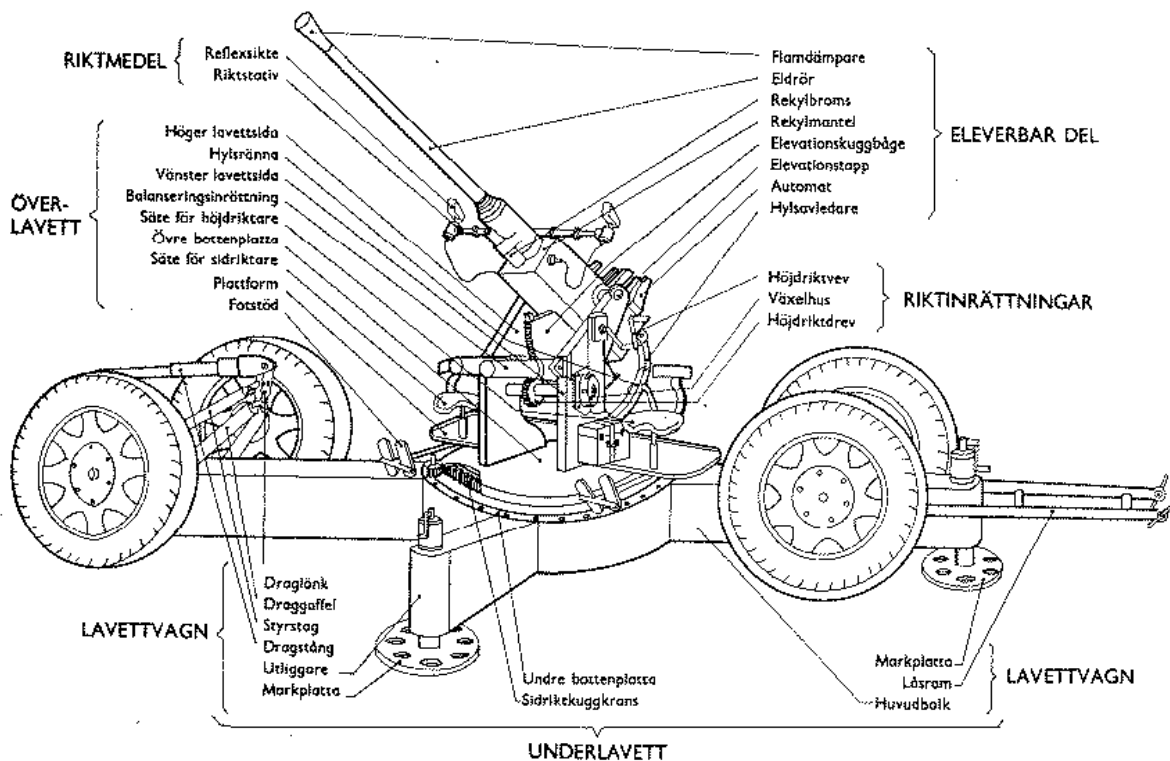


Bild 1. Schematisk bild av 40 mm tvakan m/36.

Here are is an AAA weapons crew in training on a 40mm Bofor.



For target practice in training, the anti-aircraft gunners sometimes shot at targets pulled by airplanes.



Anti-aircraft gunners also practiced by shooting at launched rockets like this one.





These are World War II era half-tracks, with a mounted quad .50 caliber machine guns.



This is a camouflaged half-track with a mounted anti-aircraft gun.



The rocket launchers provided to AAA battalions were slightly larger than the bazookas available to many infantry units. The bazooka was 2.36" and shot a 3.4 pound rocket up to 400 yards. It served as a very effective anti-tank weapon during most of the war. Thicker tank armor in the last year or so of the war made the bazooka less effective.

This photo was taken during the Korean war. The soldier on the left is holding a 3.5" bazooka, developed late in World War II and used in the Korean War. The soldier on the right is holding a 2.36" bazooka commonly used in World War II.

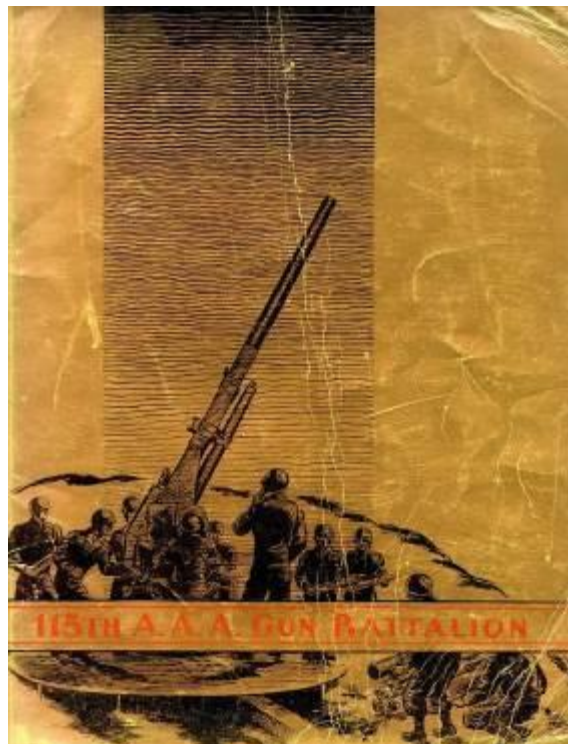


These are 40mm rocket launchers mounted on a tank.



I was unable to find a photograph of a 2.76” rocket launcher of the type used by the AAA battalions.

This is the cover page of the unit history of the 115<sup>th</sup> AAA gun battalion. It features a 90mm antiaircraft gun, and a ten man crew. Notice the size difference between the 90mm gun and the 40mm and 37mm Bofors on the prior pages.



This is another photo of a 90mm anti-aircraft gun.



Here are three photos of the .45 caliber submachine guns issued to some members of an AAA automatic weapons battalion (semi-mobile). This weapon was often referred to as the Tommy Gun.





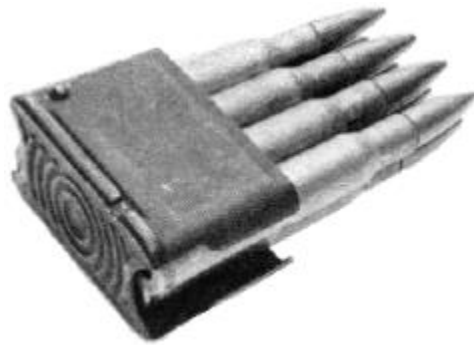
Here are photos of the M1 .30 caliber rifle, issued to all enlisted men of a AAA automatic weapons battalion.



Springfield M1 Garand Cal. .30-06 Rifle



This is the 8 round clip used in the M1.



The trucks typically assigned to an AAA AW semi-mobile unit consisted of seven  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton trucks, two  $\frac{1}{2}$  ton trucks, and twelve  $\frac{1}{4}$  ton trucks. This is a photo of an era  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton truck. This truck was often referred to as a “weapons carrier”.



This is a photo of an era ¼ ton truck. As you will note, what the army called a “¼ ton truck”, everyone else in the world called a “jeep”.



I was unable to find a good photograph of a ½ ton truck, but obviously it is half-way between the two trucks shown above. A ½ ton truck is more like a modern pick-up truck. It was generally disfavored, since it was too small to haul the heavy artillery.

And now, with this basic understanding of AAA weapons and AAA battalions, we can move on to more specifics about Private Boyd and the 784<sup>th</sup>.

## IV

### Heavy Machine Gun Training

Upon receipt of orders to leave Ft. Bliss, the 784<sup>th</sup> packed, crated, and numbered everything in the battalion. This was good practice for things to come.

After a long train ride, the battalion reached Santa Maria, California. During the next 90 days or so, the 784<sup>th</sup> received additional training at two general and four specific locations – Santa Maria and Estrella Army Air Field in California's central coastal region and Camp Haan and Camp Irwin in the Mojave Desert.

Santa Maria (in Santa Barbara County) and Paso Robles (San Luis Obispo County) are in perhaps the most scenic region of California. I doubt, though, that AAA trainees had much free time for sight seeing.

Some of the personal histories referred to "Camp Santa Maria", but my research did not uncover any wartime army facility near there. Soon after their arrival in late November, the 784<sup>th</sup> moved to Estrella Army Air Field.

Estrella was created by the navy in 1942 to be a training field for marine pilots. The navy had a change in plans, and turned the airfield over to the army. The airfield constructed there had two 4,700' runways laid out in a "V", with housing, administration and storage facilities, and hangars. At its peak in December, 1943, Estrella had over 1,500 personnel stationed there. The army used Estrella primarily as a night-flying school. The army inactivated the airfield in 1944, and today, it is the City of Paso Robles municipal airport.

In one exercise before Christmas 1943, the 784<sup>th</sup> participated in a combined ground-air training program at Estrella. The battalion set up a defense of the airfield. They were then "attacked" by a battalion of infantry. Several generals, and many umpires, were in attendance, but no winner was declared.

The 784<sup>th</sup> remained at Estrella, living in tents, through Christmas. Sometime around New Year's Day, the battalion moved back to Santa Maria and, soon, to Camp Haan.

While in California, at either Santa Maria or Estrella Army Air Field, Chester Boyd celebrated his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.



Camp Haan, by this time, was a highly organized artillery training center. It was located east of Riverside, California. The 784<sup>th</sup> was there to take full advantage of the training at, in turned out, its last major stop before being shipped overseas.

I found a marvelously detailed account of life at Camp Haan, written by Bob Gallagher, an inductee in the 815<sup>th</sup> AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion. This inductee did his basic training at Camp Haan as well, so some of his experiences there were similar to experiences the 784<sup>th</sup> had already at Ft. Bliss.

I couldn't find any WWII era photographs of Ft. Bliss, but these next three photos at Camp Haan may be comparable. The captions are provided by Private Gallagher, and are self-explanatory.



**19. Six-man huts with street in between, latrine in center in background.**



18. Aerial view of Camp Haan. Six-man huts in center, left of huts are latrines, and to right are mess halls and supply / day room buildings (SWP)

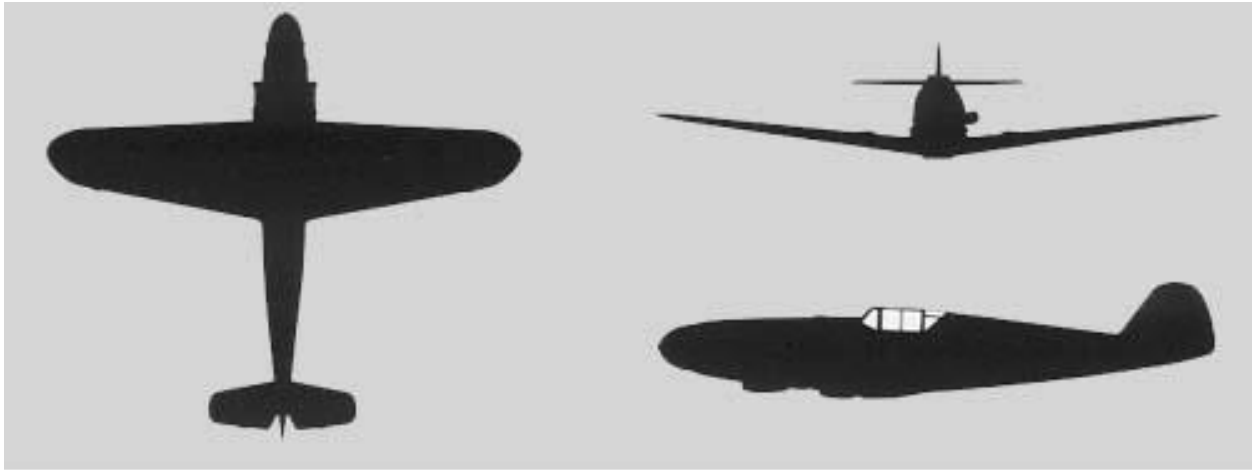


**20. Mess Hall Building with Jeep in front.**

Private Gallagher described the daily routine at Haan – wake up call at 0600, chow calls, mail calls, fall out, fall in, calisthenics, obstacle courses, instructional films, America propaganda (the Hollywood “Why We Fight” films), sex hygiene films, long hikes, short hikes, and inspections. There was further training on the M-1, guard duty, KP duty, training on the use of gas masks, etc.

Soldiers at Camp Haan spent a considerable amount of time on aircraft identification. The hope, obviously, was that AAA gunners could tell the difference – quickly - between enemy and allied planes. Trainees used movies, flash cards (like the one shown below), and models. Since the trainees had yet to be assigned to either the European or Pacific theaters of operation, they had to

study the planes at both – including American, British, Canadian, Russian, Japanese, Italian, and German.



#### 24. Flash Card - German Messerschmitt ME 109

Army food was high on starch, and most soldiers put on weight. But the exercise was so intense that the men were in better shape than at any other time in their lives.

Pay day was the first of each month - \$50 cash for Pfc.s like Chester.

The PX was open daily, and was especially crowded after paydays. The PX did not sell wine or hard liquor or, for that matter, the most popular brands of beer. It did sell 3.2 beer, without enough alcohol to cause any serious damage. For many of the soldiers, as young as 18 and 19, this was their first experience in drinking.

Camp Irwin is a subpost of Camp Haan, but is located northeast of Barstow in the High Mojave Desert – about midway between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. The camp is surrounded by desert hills and mountains, and no tall vegetation. Whatever vegetation there was in 1943 and 1944 would not have lasted very long – the land was established as the Mojave Anti-Aircraft Gunnery Range. Private Boyd, and the other AAA trainees, spent many hours at this firing range.

There were no barracks at Irwin at the time. Soldiers bivouacked in open areas, and were thoroughly introduced to pup tent living.

Here is a map of California, showing Private Boyd's temporary homes.



Santa Maria

Camp Haan

\*\*\*

During his AAA training in California, Private Boyd would have learned how to use all of the weapons shown in the prior chapter (except, perhaps, the huge 90mm antiaircraft gun).

His Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) was as a 605 heavy machine gunner. There were two other army machine gun specialties – 604 light machine gunner and 606 antiaircraft machine gunner. I could not find a good explanation of the differences between the three specialties. I believe that 604 light machine gunners were trained in the use of the light weight machine guns, capable of being carried at the platoon level by a single soldier. There were some relatively stationary antiaircraft weapons in use in AAA “gun” battalions (as opposed to AAA “automatic weapons” battalions, like the 784<sup>th</sup>). These gun battalions used 90mm antiaircraft guns (nearly over twice the size of the Bofors). The 606 antiaircraft machine gunner specialty may have been reserved for these larger guns.

If so, then Chester’s 605 heavy machine gunner specialty would have meant specialist training on the 40mm or 37mm Bofors, and on the .50 caliber machine guns. As you will see when this story gets to Europe, Chester’s duty was on the quad .50 caliber machine gun. The gunnery training included loading, aiming, cleaning, and maintaining the heavy machine guns. He also learned how to estimate range and speed of moving targets. And, he spent many, many hours at desert firing ranges.

Chester also received “rifle sharpshooter” classification while in training. This would have been with the M-1 .30 caliber rifle.

Private Boyd’s separation qualification record noted that he “*was able to determine range estimation and speed of moving targets. Also able to fire on moving targets such as airplanes without sights through the use of tracers. Used hand weapons as rifle, automatic rifle, carbine, pistol, bayonet, trench knife and hand grenades. Was also efficient in knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting.*”

\*\*\*

The cover photo, shown again on the next page, was, I suspect, taken in California. Chester has his Pfc.’s private stripe in this photo, so this was taken after the coastal artillery basic training at Ft. Bliss. But he is not wearing (so had not yet earned) any of the specialty skill badges, so the photo could not have been taken after his California artillery training. It is also a different photographer than he used for his

first “official” photo in El Paso. For these reasons, I’m guessing that this was taken after El Paso, and during (but before completion) of training in California.



It's hard to make out here, but the pin on his right lapel should be a disk with the letters "U.S." The pin on his left lapel is the branch insignia. This photo is not the best view of the badge, but it should be the coast artillery badge, which looks like this.



\*\*\*

Chester Boyd spent a little more than 10 months in training at Ft. Bliss and at various sites in California, combining his basic training with his specialist training. This wasn't a lot of time, but his separation qualification record seemed to suggest that, at age 19, he was ready to go to war.

In early March, the 784<sup>th</sup> received orders to embark to Boston. That answered the question of whether the battalion was going to Europe or the Pacific.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, the 784<sup>th</sup> departed Camp Haan. For some reason, they departed in two trains. The trains stayed together until Denver, but then took entirely separate, and convoluted, routes. One of the trains went from Denver to Boston by way of Canada. Why, I don't know. But the two trains arrived at Camp Myles Standish, near Boston, Massachusetts, about the same time on March 14<sup>th</sup>.

To the surprise of the 784<sup>th</sup>, the army unit at Camp Myles Standish took care of everything – from unpacking the equipment from the trains to repacking everything aboard ship. This was all very nice, but it didn't leave much for the 784<sup>th</sup> to do. The officers and men were given passes to Boston, and everyone spent at least a few days there.



Here, then, is Chester's travels while in the U.S. Army, in straight lines, from the date of his induction, May 12, 1943, through the date of his departure for Europe, April 6, 1944.

