

3-2003

Hitchhiking to War

Billy M. Wall

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Wall, Billy M. (2003) "Hitchhiking to War," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol41/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

HITCHHIKING TO WAR

by *Billy M. Wall*

Millions of people have hitchhiked millions of places, but I hitchhiked to war and took my own army.

My "army" and I did our hitchhiking through the midst of the greatest mass movement of military personnel in all history – the invasion of continental Europe during World War II. The invasion was the most minutely organized and highly secret operation ever undertaken and it was both because of and in spite of this organization and secrecy that my fifty-two men and I had to hitchhike to war.

July 17, 1944, the 28th Infantry Division moved into marshalling areas of Southampton for shipment to the continent. Division headquarters was located at Camp Chiseldon, near Swindon, England, and our troops were scattered over the surrounding area. One of the last units to leave was Division headquarters, which moved out by truck on the morning of July 17. I was left behind with fifty-two men from the adjutant general and finance sections for final policing of the area.

Trucks were scheduled to pick up my group about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and rush us to Swindon where a train was to take us to the Southampton marshalling area. We were due to arrive there about the same time as the rest of the division, which was traveling by highway. Our trials started when the trucks failed to appear, stranding us in an empty army camp without transportation, equipment, personal gear, or communications.

We finally found telephones that had not been moved and got in touch with the quartermaster company which was supposed to send the trucks.

Getting someone at the trucking company on the phone was not much help because everything was so secret that we could not tell them who or where we were. Each movement of troops was by shipment number and we had not been given a separate number since we were supposed to arrive in Southampton about the same time as the rest of the unit.

By talking in riddles, we made the voice on the other end of the telephone understand who we were and they assured us that the trucks had been sent and should have arrived. Still, we had no trucks.

These distraught calls were repeated at intervals until late afternoon, when the trucks finally appeared. We had no idea what we would do when we reached Swindon because trains were running on schedules as tight as commuter train timings, and we were sure our train would be gone.

However – and this was to be our last contact with plans that materialized – our train was waiting. The transportation people at Swindon had held the train and frantically tried to find us, at what expense in re-scheduling and frayed nerves we could not imagine. But these people were the last we were to

meet who were prepared to receive us or would even admit we existed. When we stepped off the train in Southampton, as far as the Army was concerned we had ceased to exist until we rejoined our outfit in Normandy – or rather until the Division joined us.

Other units on our train were intact and had shipment numbers, so at Southampton they were whisked off to sealed camps to wait shipment across the Channel. We had no shipment number. I tried to identify my group to the transportation officer in charge by our normal code name but nothing meant anything to him except the shipment numbers on his clipboard – and we had no shipment number.

Each time a group left the assembly area I tried to talk to the officer and just as rapidly another train pulled in with a new load of troops. Just before dark, a lull came. Evidently the transportation people at Southampton had decided we would not be quiet or go away, as they seemed to hope, so they joined us in trying to solve our problem.

We explained we were from a Division Headquarters and that most of the troops going through that afternoon were from our Division. All identifying insignia had been taken off uniforms, but we recognized friends in the groups we had seen.

The transportation people admitted they had moved what they thought to be a Division Headquarters, judging by the high rank of officers and men involved. But they would not tell us where this unit had gone because of security regulations. Finally, they either became convinced of our sincerity or were just exhausted because they put us on trucks and RUSHED us to the gates of the proper compound.

We knew it was the proper compound because we could see men we knew inside. We thought our “do-it-yourself” troop movement had ended until we tried to enter the compound. The gates were locked, the guard would not let us in. Since we felt no desire to antagonize the guard, we asked for the officer in charge.

When the officer came, he carefully explained that we could not be a part of the group in his compound because the shipment had been checked in by actual head count before the gates were locked. He did not like the idea of unauthorized personnel trying to get into his compound and he scanned us suspiciously.

Although everyone else seemed convinced that we had ceased to exist, we felt very much alive because we were hungry. At this point Lieutenant Colonel Guy M. Williams, division finance officer, approached the gates from the inside and we managed to attract his attention. He told the officer in charge that we were part of the unit in the compound and belonged inside. The officer seemed persuaded, but he had his security regulations to worry about, so he left to consult higher authority.

Meanwhile, Colonel Williams contacted Colonel Charles H. Valentine, Division chief of staff. Another round of conferences followed, but we were

not asked to take part. By this time it was quite late and transportation had begun to search for its trucks, which we would not release. We held those trucks by sitting on them until someone decided to let us join our outfit.

That is, we thought we had joined our outfit when they let us inside the compound and fed us. But they continued to insist that their original head count was correct, that we were not a part of the unit, and that we would not be shipped with the unit. And they were right. When orders and space assignments were made the next day, we were as left out as the people who did not get on the Ark.

I believe Colonel Valentine was the first to sense the drama of our situation or to foresee its cumulative force. When he told me that we had been left out of the shipment order, he remarked, "Wall, if and when you arrive on the Continent, it will be through your own efforts."

The colonel then gave me some advice I only appreciated fully later. He said, "Since your personal gear is gone and since it might be weeks before you manage to get to us, I suggest that you see that you and your men have two blankets each when you leave here." That advice saved us from much cold misery in the next few days.

The next morning the unit shipped out before dawn. As proof that transportation did not acknowledge that we existed, the compound gates were left wide open and my men and I were free to come and go as we pleased. Security called for the compounds to be sealed when troops were in them, so since the gates were open, evidently we were no longer troops of the U.S. Army. However, they did feed us and offer us sympathy.

Late that night, transportation advised me that they had been given permission to ship us out the next day if they could find anything available to put us aboard. The next morning I was told we could proceed to the docks but we would have to go on foot because there were no trucks scheduled for us.

We were told there would be space available on an LST. I was handed a sheet from a scratch pad with the number "C-119" scrawled in pencil and underscored. The number was supposed to be the identification of the LST. I still have that scratch pad sheet.

We were in the forests outside Southampton and it was a long walk to the docks. Naturally, my men already had begun to speculate as to what would happen if we decided to stay in England or, if we were going to have to hitchhike, why not head back toward the good old USA.

The truth is that any one or all of these men could have "gone over the hill" and probably not located by the Army until the war was over. Our personnel records were on the Channel headed for Europe and I did not even have a roster of my men until I made one in Southampton just before we left the compound.

After pursuing such thoughts for awhile, the men decided we had better go on to Europe because they had favorite razors in their gear or pictures of girl friends they needed to rescue.

Discussing our plight as we trudged along, we finally reached the docks where, of course, there was no LST in sight. We separated and scoured the packed port, but there was no LST of any number. After we got back together, I pointed out to the men that they had seen everything in the harbor and suggested that they pick out the vessel on which they would like passage. With a good deal of kidding around, they settled on the largest vessel in port. This ship was an English passenger liner which was loading troops about midway down one of the docks.

We strolled out on the dock to reconnoiter loading procedures and found the gang plank well guarded and each man being checked aboard by name, rank, and serial number from rosters furnished by guards from an office in a dockside warehouse as each unit arrived. This loading procedure had us shut out. But my men still wanted passage on this particular ship, and since they were good men and we now felt about like the Children of Israel trekking to Canaan, I decided to try and get them aboard.

I left my men at a safe distance from the guards because they were eyeing us as if wondering why such a disorganized body of troops was milling around in all that military precision and order.

Entering the warehouse I found two officers in charge, one English and one American. I could see that the entire procedure was well organized and in orderly operation. When I approached the American and told him my story, I upset the routine. He was so amazed his feet even left the floor. The two talked the matter over, but dismissed me as a crackpot. I kept going back, and each time I seemed to gain a little ground. When I began to get the conversations on a semi-friendship basis, I felt as though I had the war about won. When the ship was loaded with more than 2,000 men they told me that there was no space left for assignment but that if we were so dedicated about going to war and were willing to scrounge for places on board, they were willing to let us try.

That was all we needed! I found a berth and took over, and the men located a recreation room where they used pool tables – and their “Valentine” blankets – for beds.

After two nights aboard ship we were off Omaha Beach and an LST came out to start shuttling us to shore. Our unit had had plenty of amphibious training so my men and I were the first aboard the LST. Packed like vertical sardines, we made the short run to the beach. On the beach we found that situation “SNAFU” still existed. We were the last of our unit to leave England but the first on the continent. In fact, a brigadier general who had headed the advanced detail which departed some days before the rest of the Division reached the beach about the same time. We had arrived on the continent in reverse order.

We remarked earlier that we hitchhiked both because of and in spite of the secrecy and the organization of this sea of movement. We were under orders, or our unit was, for the movement, but somewhere in this vast chain a tiny link slipped and secrecy was so great that this link could not be replaced. Thus the “machine” had us moving but its very efficiency and secrecy shut us

out and we had to move on our own.

So there we were – in the middle of the most thoroughly organized troop movement of all time and we had arrived through our own efforts. American ingenuity in the form of “hitchhiking” had beaten the machine.

And to think, after all the secrecy and detailed organization, we had simply walked down to the docks without orders or a single piece of official paper and talked ourselves into the midst of the greatest war of all time. My best estimate is that at least fifty percent of these men were battle casualties or prisoners of war before VE day.



Billy Wall in France in 1944. Photo courtesy of Billy Wall.