

# Third Time's the Charm

By Robert Carr • Interview By Betty Mulcahy

*I was originally in the National Guard in the 1930s and was mobilized in 1940. We used to drill once a month.*

I went in there when I was 16 years old, and I was 18 when I started in World War II in the Army. They called it “federalizing.”

We’d already had a lot of the basics in the National Guard training. We didn’t have any boot camps.

After several bases in the United States, they loaded us on ships in Staten Island, New York, in April 1943, and we went from there to Casablanca, North Africa.

The war was still going on in North Africa at that time, so they selected two noncommissioned officers out of each company and sent us up to the front— Kasarrine Pass—just before the war (in Africa) was over. I was attached to the 34th Division as an observer for about two weeks until the war was over in Africa.

Then we went back to the Cork Forest out of Rabat to do some training. The second day of September 1943, they loaded us aboard ships, and we sailed for Italy. While we were getting ready for the beachhead out in the Mediterranean, Italy surrendered.

So, our destination was the beachhead in Salerno. That was a bloody battle. I was in the first wave on that invasion. That’s where you get off a ship onto small landing crafts that hold 32 people and they have a ramp that falls down in front. Supposedly, they run up on a beach. You’re in real shallow water or maybe no water at all, depending on how the coastline is. But, in our case, we got out in about waist-deep in water.



Italy had surrendered while we were on the ships. And, of course, the beach hadn't been softened any with artillery or bombs or anything like that. And the Germans were waiting for us when we came in those assault boats. They killed most of us right there on the beach. There wasn't anybody who got out of the boats on either side of me.

That was the only place where I saw the water tinged pink from blood because so many people had been killed.

We started inland from there. Our objective at that time was a little town called Alta Villa. That was our first combat as a unit. I'd been an observer in combat. I was in the Texas 36th Division. That was a famous division back in those days.

We got out of there, and the Germans counterattacked. They didn't think we could hold the beachhead, so they'd started evacuating the rear echelons back onto the ships. We were up on a pretty high mountain. We could see the beach from it. Word came back to fix bayonets. It's a long swim to Texas! At that time we were 80 percent Texan.

We finally were able to hold the beachhead. We'd gone up as a unit to right outside Naples, Italy. We didn't have anybody left, hardly. The company had 204 men when it was full, but there were about 50 of us left. We were pulled offline just south of Naples, Italy. That was September 9 when we made the invasion of Salerno, and we didn't go back to the line anymore until December when we went back to the battle of San Pietro.

I got wounded there on the 10th day of December 1943. The guy who shot me I'd already shot with a .45. I thought he was dead, and I walked by and kicked him on the boot, and he raised up with a Tommy gun and put two bullets in my left shoulder. The old boy behind me told me he shot him eight more times before he got him down. I'd already shot him a half dozen times or more anyway.

They put me in a body cast from my waist up to my arms, and they sent me back to Naples and put me on a hospital ship across the Mediterranean, back to North Africa to the Seventh General Hospital. That's where I stayed for almost two months.

When they sent me back to the front, the Battle of Montecassino was taking place near San Pietro. When we first went up there on a mountain, they wouldn't let us fire artillery at the monastery, and they wouldn't let the Air Corps bomb it. The Germans had an observation, and they could see the whole country. We laid there for days on end and went out on patrol at night after being shelled all day.

We were so high up, and every night the Grave Restoration Unit would bring up a mule train to supply us ammunition and rations and carry the dead and the

wounded back down the mountain.

Then I got hit again. A bullet went right between my staff sergeant stripes on my helmet and went around my helmet and came out the back, leaving a hole in the back of my helmet. It threw a lot of shrapnel in the right side of my head where that bullet went through my helmet. They thought I was dead.

So when they came up at night to bring the ammunition, they roped me onto one of those mules. I don't know how long I'd been unconscious, but they roped me on a mule and started down the mountain. When I came to, I was hurting so bad the way they had me tied, I hollered. The old boy who was leading the mule looked back, and it scared him, and he threw the reins to the mule down and ran off down the hill. The lieutenant came back in a few minutes and cut me loose. I rode the mule the rest of the way down the mountain sitting up. I only stayed in the hospital about a month that time.

When I came back from the hospital, other divisions had made Anzio beachhead, but they were having a lot of trouble on the beachhead and having a hard time holding it. The Germans were fixing to kick a bunch of people off Anzio, so they jumped the 36th Division. That was the only place I ever saw a truce called to pick up the dead. I don't know how many Americans were killed. The Germans carried our dead back 100 yards and piled them up. We had dead scattered all the way to the riverbank. The company got shot down to three men that time.

They sent our division up there, and we broke out of Anzio and went all the way to about 150 miles north of Rome to a town called Crescentino. Then they pulled us off the line and sent us back to Salerno, and we started taking amphibious training to make the France invasion.

We made the France invasion in southern France on the 15th day of August 1944. During that time, we were having trouble keeping forward observers for the artillery. There's supposed to be a lieutenant and a radioman and another man.

When one member of a team was missing, we couldn't call up artillery because we didn't have anybody to direct artillery. So they took two sergeants out of each company (I was one of them) and sent us to a school down there where they taught us how to be forward observers so we would have somebody to fire artillery when we needed it. I've fired lots of artillery.

We were shot down pretty bad. We'd lost all of our officers. It wasn't the first time. I was a tech sergeant. When we didn't have any officers, a sergeant would act as commanding officer (C.O.). I'd been taking out a good many combat patrols, and we had what they called a sound power phone. They told me they wanted me to report to Battalion CP (command post).

I got back there and reported to C.O., and he said he didn't want to see me. It

was General Dahlquist who wanted to see me back at headquarters.

Well, that scared me because I thought, “Man, if Division is going to want to put me on patrol, it’s going to be a bad one.”

I had to get a Jeep to go back there, and I walked in, saluted and said, “Sergeant Carr reporting, Sir.”

General Dahlquist said, “Congratulations!”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. So he reached over and picked up a big, brown manila envelope that had a ball of wax on it about as big as his fist. He started undoing the string on it, and he pulled out a set of lieutenant bars.

I had known of a scarce few people getting battlefield commissions, but all I could think of was that they would transfer me out of I Company, the company I’d been with all the years. So I declined it. He said, “If you want to stay in that company, you’re now our acting company commander.”

He pinned the bars on me.

As I went out of the house back to my Jeep, an antitank sergeant drove up in front of the house, wondering what had happened to me. Of course, when he saw those bars, he saluted. I turned around and saluted in the same direction he did. I thought the general had walked out of the house.

Going back to the front, I got to wondering how I was going to tell the half dozen original boys left (the rest were gone) that I was an officer. So I got the bars down in my old windbreaker where they couldn’t see them, and I crawled back in my hole and didn’t say a thing about it.

A little while later, the phone rang again, and the sergeant picked it up. Somebody wanted to speak to Lieutenant Carr. He said, “Well, Sir, we don’t have a Lt. Carr. We have a Sgt. Carr.”

Whoever it was said, “Well, you’ve got a Lt. Carr now!”

The next time we got off the front, those boys about beat me to death in the snow.

Then I got hit again. It was the winter of 1944 in France on the Moselle River. I got a bunch of hand grenade fragments in my arm. They sent me back to a convalescent hospital up toward Normandy. The doctor came in and said, “Well, Lieutenant, I guess you’ll be glad to be going home.”

I said, “Going home? I ain’t hit hard!” I wasn’t hit very hard either.

But they said there was a War Department order that came out sometime in 1942 that said that all soldiers who had been wounded in action three times and hospitalized had to sign a request to go back to the front. He told me about it; I didn’t know it existed.

I said, “Well, have you got that request?”

He said, “Surely, you’re not crazy enough to go back.”

I said, “I don’t call it being crazy. Let me have one of them and I’ll sign it.”

So he brought me one, and I signed it and the next day they transferred me over to the psychiatric ward!

The last time I got hit was right on the edge of Germany. A sniper got me. My feet froze because I was lying in a snow bank, and I didn't want to go back to the aid station because we didn't have many men left. My feet froze when I got stiff and I couldn't get down and rub my feet anymore. So the next morning, they came and carried me out on a stretcher. Whenever they attacked across the front and cut us off from the Germans, they could come up with litter bearers. They picked me up in the litter and carried me back. I was the last officer on the line, and I wouldn't leave on account of I just wanted to stay, I guess.

They sent me back to the hospital then, and they shipped me to England to get me out of there. They gave me a kind of a replacement company over there. At that time, it took 80 points to get out. You got points by awards and decorations and time you spent overseas. I had 196 points. They declared me essential and kept me in England until October 1945 before I got to come home. I was processing low-point people with 30 or 40 points. At that time, the war was going on in the South Pacific.

When I got home, even with all the points I had, they wouldn't discharge me. I had to stay in the reserves until 1962. I got two silver stars and two bronze stars, too. The silver stars are the third highest medal. I also got four purple hearts.