

Part 1 of 5: Preparing For War

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Foreword

What follows are excerpts from the book “Bill Sackenheim, A Success Story.” The book is a compilation, in interview form, of several discussions my wife and I had with Bill in the years of 2001 and 2002. While the book covers his life, these excerpts cover only the war years.

I am proud to say that Bill is my first cousin. He is a veteran of World War II when he served in the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment which was attached to the 82 Airborne Division. He jumped into and fought in Normandy and Holland and also fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He was a mortarman Staff Sergeant in the 2nd Battalion, “E” Company, 2nd Platoon. If you are a veteran from the 508th P.I.R. and knew Bill he would very much like to hear from you. His mailing address is:

Bill Sackenheim
932 Brough Ave.
Hamilton, Ohio 45015

So many men were involved with the actual fighting that no words can fully express the gratitude of a thankful nation or person to each individual. Be that as it may, for you veterans of our Armed Forces, and those men and women who fought in the factories and on the home front, please accept our gratitude for your devotion to those time honored words, “Duty, Honor, Country”. You are appreciated.

John & Marti Sackenheim
Okeana, Ohio
November 30, 2002

Preparing For War

John: What drove you to go into the service?

Bill: I was drafted. Conscription or whatever you call it. 1943. When I got drafted, it was cold. I went down to Arkansas, that’s where I started out from. . . (I went) down to Cincinnati first to get inducted. And I almost got in trouble down there. We walked on, like a bench, straddled it. Butt naked. And then this dandy little corporal there he was talking to the guy in front of me who was hard of hearing.

I said, “Look, let the kid alone you dumb bastard, he can’t hear you.”

He said, “We’ll take care of you, too.”

I said, “I bet you will.”

But that didn’t worry me a bit. After we did that, they sent us over to Ft. Thomas, Kentucky. This same damn corporal was there. I don’t know what his name was. . . The next day we got on busses at the Post Office in Hamilton to go Ft. Thomas, Kentucky.

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John: You started your basic training there?

Bill: No. I wasn't even sworn in yet. We got sworn in over at Ft. Thomas.

John: What did you do in Ft. Thomas?

Bill: We tried to get uniforms. I got into trouble right away. This damn corporal, same one. There were about twenty of us. The corporal told us, "Get those buckets full of water." This was in the winter. It was cold. March, I think. It was cold.

He said, "Get those buckets and fill them with water."

I looked at him and said, "You dumb son of a bitch, they'll freeze."

He said, "Just do what I say."

I said, "OK". We got the buckets out (*Edit. Note: Bill made a motion as though he was throwing the water on some surface*) and the water froze.

The guy said, "Clean it up."

I said, "Go to hell." That's what I told him, "Go to hell."

You know where I wound up? KP. We were down there for three days. We didn't even have a uniform. We got sworn in but we didn't have uniforms yet.

John: Where did you go after that?

Bill: Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Arkansas. It was a new camp. A damn mud hole. I didn't like it down there at all. When I first went down there, they put on the bulletin board, "Anybody wanted to go to Baker's School. Sign up." Yeah boy, I was ready to sign up now. Me and another guy were bakers. Eleven other guys who didn't know diddly about anything, they took those eleven guys and didn't take us. That pissed me off. So I went in to see the Company Commander in Arkansas.

I went in and saluted him like I was supposed to and he said, "What's the problem?"

I said, "I signed up for that Baker's School." The other guy didn't go up. He didn't give a shit. I said, "They took eleven guys who don't know anything about baking."

He said, "Well, I'll tell you what it is, soldier. They don't know anything about baking. You guys are set in your ways. We can't teach you the Army way."

I said, "Fine with me. Thank you, Captain. Adios." So I go out and do whatever I want to do.

But we had a Lieutenant who was wonderful. He was a little short guy. I forget his name. He was good. I respected him. I saluted him. I wanted to be good to the guy because he was so nice. I said, "Lieutenant, this place is a pain in the ass. I don't like this dump. I'm gonna get out of here." I was down there for a while, about a month. He didn't want me to go.

John: Where did you go from there?

Bill: Ft. Mead, Maryland. What I liked down there, I liked the mortars. 60mm. I loved them. I loved the M-1's. Boy you're gonna hear a lot about those 60's. I'll tell you stories make your hair stand up on the top of your head. But I liked them. I liked the rifle. I liked

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the carbine. I had a Colt 45, too. But I got rid of it. . . I was doing everything with heavy weapons. Mortars. But these were 81's. I loved them. Oh man, I ate that up. I made PFC right away. Those mortars, the 60's? The 81's aren't much different. Only they're bigger. They weigh more too. One hundred and forty some pounds for the 81. The 60, hell, I carried the whole thing myself. The tube, base plate, and the bipod. And the sight, too.

John: What did you do on the mortar?

Bill: They would give me targets and I would have to estimate the yardage. Then I'd get on my sight and level my bubbles. And I get on them, too. They would put big old sheets out there about 300 yards. I put them old shells right in there. They weren't explosive shells. They were dummies. Oh yeah, I liked it. I was a crew member then.

John: PFC Sackenheim. How long were you in Ft. Mead?

Bill: I was up there until they started getting nasty with me. I'd run that 81. Man, I loved that. And the machine gun. But I liked the mortars the best. But I liked anything that would shoot. I didn't care what it was.

But anyhow, their baker got sick. Well, they have your records there of what you did in civilian life so they sent for me. They said they wanted me to go and bake. Nope. I didn't go in the bakery.

I said, "I couldn't make the school down there in Arkansas. What makes you think I'm gonna bake up here?"

They said, "Well, our baker's sick."

I said, "That's tough shit. I'm not baking."

Boy, did they make it rough on me. I was dragging that damn 81mm mortar around, that base plate, the tube, bipod and the sight. That thing weighed about 146 pounds altogether. I was dragging it all around by myself.

John: What about the shells?

Bill: No. We have ammo bearers for that. I was just handed the shells. These were just dummies when we fired them. The real ones though. Damn, was I good. They did make it rough on me. It lasted about a week, or two weeks. Then one morning my old First Sergeant came up after reveille, "If anybody is interested to go to the paratroops after this formation is dismissed come to the orderly room."

They dismissed us and I went to the orderly room. The First Sergeant, Cordova was his name, said, "What do you want, soldier?"

I said, "I want to know where that paper is. I want to sign it. I want to go into the paratroops. Whatever the hell they are."

John: You didn't know what they were.

Bill: No. I didn't have the slightest idea. . . It was just to get me the hell out of that sand up there. I didn't like the way they were treating me. . . It wasn't very long and I was heading for Ft. Benning, Georgia. It didn't take long. I was on a train. It was about three or four

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days after I signed up. They took me and we went in jeeps. I was the only one in that whole damn outfit who went into the paratroops. . . It was Summer (when I was in Ft. Benning). It was hotter than hell. A frying pan. Anyway. I got on the train and before we got down to Ft. Benning we had about forty guys.

And they asked me, "What are the paratroopers?"

I said, "How in the hell should I know? It got me out of Ft. Mead, Maryland."

We picked them up on the way. About 40 of them. We had some sergeants. And they were asking me.

I said, "We'll find out when we get there."

We did. We got to the depot there and there was a full bird Colonel waiting for us. He was tickled to death to see forty guys. He was glad to see us and everything and we stood at attention.

He said, "At ease, men." Well, I was tired of standing up. He says, "You're going to be a paratrooper." Whatever that was. I didn't care whatever that was it was fine with me. But when we got in the 2-1/2 ton truck to go to that camp from that depot, I thought, "Uh oh." I started looking and wondering what this paratrooper stuff was. I saw three towers, buddy seats, I saw those. I saw landing trainers. . . Buddy seats. Two guys go up 250 ft. and then they release you. That free tower, they take you up in your chute and they release it and you're supposed to tumble. Well, hell, I never could tumble. I had to do more damn push ups because I couldn't tumble. Anyhow, we got all settled and we were in a frying pan. It was what we called the frying pan, the tents. Damn, was it hot! First off we started running. I didn't mind that. Then we did calisthenics. I liked that. Well, let's see, how long was I down there before I made Buck Sergeant? I did everything. And then our first practice jump. We had A, B, C, and D stages. D stage is when you start to jump from a plane. We packed chutes. That was a stage. On the towers, mock up, going up in an airplane. Then shock harness, where all you got is the harness on and you got cables. Don't get your governors caught in there, man, cause you're hurting if you do. I never did, though. I loved that training. I loved it.

Then they started teaching us judo, dirty judo. We get in sawdust pits. So what happened? I broke a guy's arm. He got to go. Then I cracked a guy's hip. One of the staff sergeants, an instructor, said, "Hey soldier, come here. Get in the pit with him." Boy did I have a time with that guy. I threw him and he threw me, too. I was smart enough that when he threw me, I let go. I didn't try to resist him. I got my couple licks in. That was the end of that and then we started in the D stage. First jump. Boy, it was a beauty. We were up about 1200 feet. We looked out that window. Those little trucks down there about that big (*Edit. Note: Bill gestured very small*) with a red cross on the top of them. When I went out of that plane I blacked out. I was about the fifth or sixth guy. . . I came to quickly. It was nice. I was talking to everybody but when I hit, I hit like a ton of bricks. Boy, did I hit hard. You're supposed to tumble and roll. I still can't do it today. Wouldn't even try it today. The legs are gone. They had sergeants take me off to the side. Well, they put a chute out there and they had a big airplane propeller fan like, they would inflate that damn thing. Supposed to kip up, turn around. and collapse it. I never did that. I didn't have that kind of training when I was a kid. I could never get body position.

Even when I was jumping out of a plane, that damn chute, when it opened up, it had a turnbuckle on it and it would hit my helmet. I had a ding in the damn thing every time I jumped.

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John: How did you survive the paratroopers? You couldn't jump right. You couldn't land right.

Bill: I landed all right.

John: But you didn't tumble.

Bill: Well, no. That instructor would say, "Give me fifty push-ups for not tumbling." Horse shit, I didn't tumble.

I went out there one morning before we started training and that Sergeant came up to me and said, "You didn't shave this morning."

I said, "I did".

He said, "Give me twenty-five push-ups for not shaving."

I gave him 25.

"He said, "Did you cheat?"

I said, "Hell no."

He said, "Give me 25 more for not cheating."

I thought, "Damn, I can't win."

He said, now go back to your barracks and shave."

I shaved that morning. So I went in there and threw cold water on me, waited about 15 minutes and came back out.

He said, "Now you look better. Give me 50 push-ups for looking good."

You couldn't win. What was that teaching you? Discipline. They didn't play favorites. They did this to Generals and Colonels, too. And these guys were only Buck Sergeants.

John: How many jumps did you have to make?

Bill: Five. . . You weren't allowed to blouse your pants until after you got your wings.

Wherever you went, you double-timed. You don't walk. You don't stand around. Move it. Move it. Move it.

John: So your day started about what time?

Bill: You'd get up about 5:30 AM. Then you go eat breakfast. Then you get your ass out there and start training.

John: So what time did you knock off then?

Bill: Oh, about 5:30 PM. Well, you had to salute the flag and bring the flag down.

John: So you actually had training from 5:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the evening for training.

Bill: Yeah.

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John: After that you had some time to yourself.

Bill: Right. Do whatever you wanted to do. Write letters or go to a movie or whatever. They had good movies down there. It was neat. Didn't have any bars, though.

John: How long was that training?

Bill: Five weeks. A week on each stage.

John: And then what did you do? Make five jumps?

Bill: One each day. Yeah.

John: You made Buck Sergeant while you were there?

Bill: Yeah. PFC to Buck Sergeant. First jump, like I say, I blacked out. Second jump, hey, I was getting to like this damned thing. I still didn't tumble. I let that damn thing drag me. I'd stop and then I'd collapse it. Five jumps.

John: Were you injured on any of those jumps besides bruises?

Bill: The fourth jump I sprained my ankle. But what I did, I didn't take that boot off. I left that boot on. My fifth jump, fine. It got well. Then we got our wings and had our big party.

John: You would have been sidelined for a while and had go with a different group, wouldn't you?

Bill: Yeah. So, I did everything they did. I toughed it out. I didn't let them know anything. Because they would have washed me out. . . Then we made another jump, a night one. I landed in that damn Chattahoochee River. If I had known what was in that river they'd have never got me in that airplane.

John: Alligators?

Bill: Gators. Snakes. Hell, I was tickled to death to get out of Benning. After Benning, I went to Camp Mackall, North Carolina. I was with the 508th Parachute Regiment. All of us were up there. And then the 82nd came in from Ft. Bragg. They were down there in 1942. They started them. We joined the 82nd in Mackall. We were a bastard regiment attached to the 82nd. Boy, we were attached, too. We were glued to them. All the while they were in Europe. . . I was in what they called blue shipment. Replacements from a Replacement Depot. We could have gone anywhere.

John: How long were you in camp Mackall?

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Bill: I'm not sure. It was around Christmas. But we weren't there very long. Then went to Camp Shanks, New York, POE, Port of Embarkation. We were going out. And they said to us, "Unblouse your boots and don't wear anything to indicate that you are a paratrooper." We were supposed to do this stuff so they wouldn't know who we were but, hell, they knew who we were.

John: But people on the street didn't, though.

Bill: Yes, they did. We went to Barney Ross's. They gave us drinks. Jack Dempsey's. They'd give us drinks.

John: Where was Camp Shanks?

Bill: It was pretty close to the Statue of Liberty. Over in that area somewhere. First we were in a barracks up there. We had to clean that. That thing was full of lice or whatever they were. . . We weren't up there very long. Maybe about a week.

John: Then what? They put you on a boat?

Bill: Yeah. A damn washtub would have been just as good. The USS Parker. It was a Liberty ship. And I came home on that thing, too. But I didn't get sick going over. It was 1:30 in the morning. It had side doors on it or something. We went up a ramp. The only people there were Salvation Army women. They gave us a ditty bag. Stuff to shave with and all that. I thanked them. Bye girls. On that ship we went. We went past the Statue of Liberty. We didn't see it, though. It was 2:30 in the morning. It was so foggy you couldn't see anything. A couple of years ago we went up to New York and I saw the Statue for Liberty for the first time.

John: So this is the fall of 1943.

Bill: Yeah. We went over with the biggest convoy. We'd take our binoculars. About two or three hundred yards to our left was an aircraft carrier. He had airplanes on him. Looked like P-38's. And he was going like this. (*Edit. Note: Bill was indicating that it was level and smooth.*) And we were watching him float. I got in good with the Navy. They had gun tubs. They took care of firing the weapons they had up there. Or whatever kind of guns they had up there.

Anyhow, I talked with this Navy guy and he said, "Say old buddy. You want to get sick?"

I said, "No."

He said, "Eat."

When we got on ship they gave us a little ticket that you used to go eat. We had so many guys sick, I had a stack of them that high. I was always eating. I loved talking with the sailors. That Atlantic is rough.

I was up in that gun tub with that fellow and I said, "Man, this damn thing is rough."

He said, "Buddy, this is calm. Wait until you get out further."

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He was right. I don't know how far down I was in that hole. The first night out it didn't bother me. I was tired. The second night out on the Atlantic we got out pretty far. And that back end would go up and when it went down that wave would hit the side and you should have seen the size of that wave. The side of the ship come down there. I wasn't gonna stay down in that hole. I got up to the deck. I ain't that good of a swimmer. So that's the way it was all the way across the Atlantic.

John: How long was that?

Bill: Oh hell, I don't know. It seemed like forever. You could see those destroyers, the light destroyers and then the heavy ones. The light ones started circling us. Man, they were way out. And the big ones were way out beyond them. They were watching for submarines. We lucked out. We didn't hit any. But, boy did we see a bunch of ships. I never saw so damn many ships. I used to see little boats in the river down here but I never seen any of these things. But that aircraft carrier, I'd loved to have been on that one. It was going so smoothly. We pulled in to Belfast, Ireland. It was a nice little town. Everybody was little. The houses were little. I was real happy. It was wonderful. I hate snakes. And that's the only place I felt safe. There aren't any snakes in Ireland. St. Patrick ran those damn things out. There aren't any snakes in Ireland. And I felt good about that. So we trained over there. We went out and had our fun with the girls and all that stuff. That all went with it. And the way I get it now, the Germans had an Irish Free State, not part of Ireland. They had a headquarters over there. One time when the Germans came over to bomb us, they bombed the Irish Free State instead which was pretty far from where we were. Within twenty-four hours we were on a ship headed out of there for Scotland. Me and old Aaron (L. T. "Red" Aaron) when we come in to that port, one of those tugs that guide you in was on one side of us. Me, Aaron, and Bob O'Conner, all Buck Sergeants, and my buddy up in New York, Fred Infanger, I think he was from Queens, we were standing at the rail looking at the ship and all of a sudden some big black thing came up and we started running. Where we going? It was a British submarine. It shot up there. We'd never seen a submarine. We were running but where the hell we gonna run too? There was water over on the other side of our ship, too. So we pulled in to Scotland and there were guys there blowing into a bag of air, playing them, "Woo-woo-woo". I'd never heard that before. Bagpipes. It was something new. They thought we didn't like it, but I liked it. It was pretty good. Then from there we went to Wollaton Park in Nottingham, England, home of Robin Hood. And I thought that was a bunch of garbage what they said about Robin Hood. And up on the hill there was a big castle. We were down in that park. It was our camp, the 508th. Wollaton park, a beautiful park. I made Staff Sergeant there, but I didn't want to go any further. Our Captain, Sgt. Thomas, our first sergeant, Aaron and them guys said, "You're a crazy son of a bitch." We'd go out and run and I'd sing old crazy songs to them. Ornerly songs. They'd say, "You're crazy." But they loved me. They liked me.

John: What did you do in England?

Bill: We trained. We practiced jumps. We jumped on a bombing range over there. They used to practice for the airplanes. One night we were jumping a night jump. We were up about six or seven hundred feet. I jumped and it was so dark you couldn't see your hand in

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front of you. I started coming down and I saw the outline of trees and I couldn't slip to get away from them. I hit the trees about waist high and fell about thirty feet. Cracked a rib. I called the medic over and said, "I did something here." He felt around here and said, "Yeah. Ninth rib." Wherever that is. Cracked the thing. I told him I fell thirty feet out of the tree up there. I took off my shirt and that damn white tape. He said, "Take a deep breath and hold it." He wrapped that damn thing around me. I could hardly breathe. They restricted me to the camp for four days. We were in tents over there. I sat there for five minutes on that cot I was on and I couldn't breathe. So I ripped the damn stuff off, hair, hide, and all. Then I babied that baby. I trained but I babied it. I did great. It wasn't too long ago I had trouble with it again. Matter of fact I cracked this one here. But I also messed up this nerve here a little bit. But it's alright.

We had the best damn Lieutenant. Robert M. Mathias. He was a First Lieutenant. He was our Lieutenant. He was Catholic and he made sure that when we were in Wollaton Park we went to church on Sunday. He would come to the camp and get us. That man wouldn't say, "Durn." He was our Platoon Leader. I loved that man. I loved him from the go. He was an old sweetheart. Bob Mathias, boy he was rugged. He was a good man. I was talking to him, I always called him Bob, I didn't call him Lieutenant, I called him Bob. I said, "Bob, I'm gonna tell you something. You gonna be the biggest damned hero in this damn war or you're gonna be the first dead." He just laughed. But he was the first dead. He was a good, good man. We went through two or three different Company Commanders.

Our first sergeant was Sergeant Thomas. I liked him. I had a platoon, too, the 2nd Platoon, "E" Company. They were my guys and I would take them out to run. At this point we were not attached to the 82nd yet. The 508th was just a regiment. They could have sent us any place. . . The 508th was in Nottingham but we didn't know where in the hell they were.

John: Bill, you must have been in Nottingham for several months.

Bill: Only a couple of months. It wasn't long. We got there long enough to know some girls. . . We made jumps. Practice jumps. In winter. Practiced with mortars with dummy shells, no live ones. But on the range they would use machine guns and that. Rifles. I did that, too. I liked them.

John: What did you know about what was going on in the war?

Bill: I didn't.

John: Did you guys hear anything?

Bill: No. We didn't care. We were having a good time. Going to town. Get the girls out. I used to love to watch those big bombers, the Lancaster and the Sterling of the English, and the Spitfires. We had good fighters. The English Air Force had good fighters. You know, the Navy and the Air Force saved England's butt. When we got out of England, England came up out of the ocean about five hundred feet. I never saw so many bombs, airplanes, arms, troops, and supplies.

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John: You know Bill, that says a lot about the people who stayed behind to make those things.

Bill: We had many good people in the U.S.A. backing our armies over there and in other countries, too. Thank God for our America and it's people. I love them all. When we dedicated the monument at Veteran's Park, I spoke. I told them, "We had a great Army but we had great people behind us." That was the main thing. The people behind us made our country so great. I thanked the people for backing us. If it hadn't been for them we wouldn't have got to do what we did.

John: When you stop and think that, at the outset of the war, Japan and Germany had almost ten million men under arms and we had only six hundred thousand. You don't put another fifteen million under arms without having the arms and somebody has to make them. And you can't take the fifteen million and have them make the arms because they have to be trained how to use them. So somebody else had to make them.

Bill: You know when they sent those buzz bombs over London? We went down to London from up there at Wollaton Park. We had a pass. We were down there by Big Ben. Have you ever been by Big Ben? When it chimes the ground shakes. When it rings those bells. Oh, man! We were standing down there and the people were like a bunch of bees. All of a sudden it got quiet.

One of those Bobbies came by and yelled, "Hoy yank. Head for the shelter."

I said, "Head for what? What's happening?"

He said, "They'll be here. They'll be here."

I said, "What's going to be here?"

He said, "You'll see. You'll see."

Me and Aaron and Infanger were standing there like damn dummies. Here come those buzz bombs. They looked like an airplane. There was fire coming out the back of it. We watched it. All of a sudden that fire went out and hit in Bristol. That's where it hit. You could hear it and that's pretty far from London. I said, "Now we know what that buzz bomb is." That was the first time I'd ever seen one. Lord, they sent them on England. I don't think the America people could stand anything like that. But those Spitfires, they were so good with those airplanes. Those guys could get alongside of that bomb and turn it. They would slip it one way and take it any which way they wanted to take it. They could turn it back the way it came. They were good. That's what saved England, the Air Force and the Navy. I read a lot of stories about the Spitfires, Lancasters, and Sterlings. A lot of those came back and the pilots were dead. Even the fighters. The planes came back and the pilots were dead. They also had those big old dirigibles all over the coast over there.

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John: Were you a Platoon Leader?

Bill: Yeah. I was a Platoon Sergeant. One of them.

John: One of them?

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Bill: Yeah, we had two or three of them. Aaron was one, too. You had four squads in a platoon. There was a Mortar Squad, two Rifle Squads, and Machine Gun Squad. The machine guns were up in front of us, close to the Rifle Squads. Then the Mortar Squads were back a little.

We trained and trained over there. We used to listen to that Axis Sally on the radio. Boy, she hit it on the nose that our next jump would be in Europe somewhere. She said our next jump would be our last one. Then at midnight, we were at the airport. During the day, we were in the hangers. They had the airplanes out of there.

John: This was the 4th of June, 1944?

Bill: Yeah.

Continued – See Part 2: Normandy - Operation Overlord