

# Veteran Charles Earnest

## WWII Line Runner Takes Land Mine Blast But Finds Many Blessings After

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

**T**he date is Nov. 20, 1944, and Charles Earnest is helping run telephone line from a barn that'll serve as a regimental headquarters for the 26th Infantry Division.

The Allies are advancing deep into Europe, and the 26th is set up in Northeastern France, relatively close to the German border, to protect the right flank of part of Lt. Gen. George Patton's Third Army.

Earnest, a 20-year-old Signal Corps private, and the others in his company have the job of unspooling line from the back of large Army trucks and climbing trees or existing poles to hang it.

Wireless radios are in use, but the dependability of wired connections keeps telephones as the preferred method.

"We did not have any of these iPads or television," Earnest, now 93, remembered from his apartment in a Gainesville retirement community, his precision memory painting his life's chronology in an objective, teacher-like manner.

"We had a radio once in a while, not often. At the company

headquarters, they had a radio, but we didn't have one in the field. We had no communications with anybody except on that telephone line — if we could make it work."

As Earnest's squad is getting things set up in and around the barn, artillery shells begin to hit. They take cover, in the barn and in a few surrounding buildings, and once it's over,

***"I could've possibly joined the Army Air Corps or the Navy; I chose the Army."***

they return to work.

They roll out wire from their truck and hang it while another squad is doing the same a distance away, and when they meet in the middle, they'll tie the wires together.

As Earnest moves through the warzone, death and destruction are inevitable sights.

His squad spots two dead Germans in the road, so they

Army Pfc. Charles Earnest sits in his Gainesville retirement-community apartment holding his French Legion of Honor Medal, given by the country to American troops who fought for its liberation during World War II.





drive around the bodies, and when they pass through a small village, they see a knocked-out Sherman tank.

Eventually, the squad meets the other, and they tie their lines together.

“We were ready to move out,” Earnest recalled. “And I jumped on the truck to get something out of the truck, and I jumped off the truck. I landed in a pool of water. And that’s the last I remember until I woke up in the hospital three days later.”

For 50 years, Earnest thought the squads and their two trucks had taken artillery fire, but at a 1994 Army reunion, his first since leaving the service, he learned that his truck had hit a land mine — though he never did find out what happened to

the others.

The explosion scraped him up, but after a few months of recovery, he’d return to service and would eventually be propositioned with reenlistment. He declined, though, for he could feel important things awaiting him as a civilian — what would turn out to be a career in education and a grand family.

“I never made a great deal of money, but we always had enough,” said Earnest, one of roughly 600,000 U.S. World War II veterans estimated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to be living from the original 16 million who served during the war, and one of about 60,000 in Florida, the state with the most.

A Miami native and 1942 graduate of Miami Senior High



(Clockwise, from right) Earnest's French Legion of Honor Medal, him at the ceremony at which he was awarded the medal, other service decorations, and him in Scottish attire during his 1945 visit to Glasgow after a months-long hospital stay following a land mine hit.



School, Earnest had two semesters of pre-law at the University of Florida under his belt before being nabbed by the draft.

“I have a letter from the president, and he invited me ... to join the military,” he said. “And I could’ve possibly joined the Army Air Corps or the Navy; I chose the Army.”

Earnest was inducted at Camp Blanding in Starke and received basic training at Camp Croft near Spartanburg, South Carolina. At basic in the summer of ‘43, the beaming sun heightened the challenge of digging foxholes and marching 25 miles with a 9-pound rifle, 3-pound helmet, and 25- to 30-pound backpack.

He was then sent to the University of Connecticut for the Army’s newly created but short-lived Army Specialized Train-

ing Program, which used 227 colleges across the country — generally absent of men because of the war — to teach soldiers different skills, including in engineering, medicine and foreign language.

But Earnest lasted only one semester.

“The war was not going too well,” he said, “and I thought that I wasn’t ... in the Army to go to college. So I requested to go to a combat unit.”

So in January 1944, Earnest and 13 others were shipped to Fort Campbell at the Kentucky-Tennessee border. There, a commander “asked us if we wanted to be a signal company” because they had some college, “and we all said yes.”

“Now we all had basic infantry training, and we were pretty



Items Earnest brought home from Europe. The currency isn't a Reichsmark, which Germany used at the time, but American-made money, given to U.S. troops and locals for wartime use in the country.



good at it," he remembered. "We didn't have any idea what a signal company was all about, but we did know what the infantry was and we didn't want it."

The primary task of the Army's Signal Corps is military communication, going from flags and torches at its inception in 1860 to today's elaborate information systems and networks that use radios, computers and satellites.

Going through maneuvers in the Nashville area in winter '44 and then taking additional training at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, Earnest had to endure more challenges: sleeping in tents and barns in the cold; learning how to climb poles to hang and fix lines, including at night; and figuring out how to drive double-clutch Army trucks.

Eventually, by the end of August, Earnest and the rest of the 39th Signal Company joined up with the full 26th Infantry Division in New York for deployment to the European Theater.

His convoy across the Atlantic had ships "as far north as you could see and as far south as you could see." Destroyers patrolled by sea and planes by air, but they weren't as crucial as in the earlier years of the war because German sea operations had been largely eliminated.

On Sept. 7, 1944, the 26th landed at Utah Beach, one of the five beaches in France's Normandy region invaded during D-

Day. The forces encountered no German opposition or many Allies, either, because the fighting had moved inland by then. But Earnest does remember seeing damaged and sunken ships along the beach.

The convoy's landing marked the first time during the war that Allied forces had touched France without first going to England.

Not pulled into the front lines right off, the 26th initially trained on the Cotentin Peninsula in Northwest France.

Earnest recalls marching through the rain with a small sergeant in his mid-30s who was visibly struggling. He took the man's rifle while another soldier carried his backpack, and they eventually rotated the items to other soldiers.

"We kept the sergeant going," he said.

The 26th was eventually mobilized and was sent across France, arriving in the Lorraine region in the eastern part of the country during the first week of October to guard the Third Army's flank.

Earnest said his company started to run new wire constantly because of the speed at which the Allies were advancing. Though done at the rear, the job still came with threats, mainly from plane strafing and artillery fire.

One German plane earned the name "bedtime Charlie,"

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*And that’s the last I remember until I woke up in the hospital three days later.”*

Earnest said, because it strafed nightly.

The land mine knocked Earnest out cold in November 1944, and he woke up three days later in a hospital near Nancy, France. He reached down to make sure he still had both legs, and he knew he had both eyes, though bandages covered one, as well as other portions of his body.

An orderly helped him up so he could use the bathroom for the first time in three days and wash up.

“I looked in the mirror, and I was a real mess,” he said. “I had bandages all over my head and my back. And I thanked the good Lord I was all there.”

Earnest eventually got a meal, too, but it came right back up — on a doctor. “I was so sorry. I still am.”

He transferred among hospitals in France, and at one, captured German soldiers served as his stretcher-bearer.

“They spoke English, alright, and I was brazen enough to say, ‘You’d better keep me on that stretcher. If you drop me, I’m going to get up and knock you down.’ I told the two guys that, [but] I could not have gotten up and hit anybody. I would’ve fallen over.”

Earnest eventually ended up in a hospital in England close to London, and with no permanent handicaps, he recovered in a few months and was officially released on April 1, 1945.

After receiving a week’s leave and touring Glasgow, Scotland, he headed back for the front, taking trains across mainland Europe with others who had been released from the hospital and eventually joining the 39th Signal Battalion (separate from his 39th Signal Company) in Marburg, Germany.

Perhaps ending up with the new 39th by clerical accident, Earnest phoned his company, which was now in Czechoslovakia, to see if he needed to rejoin. But he was told the trek wouldn’t be necessary.

Signal Corpsmen ran lines over mostly short distances in the heat of 1944, so the infrastructure allowing him to now phone all the way to another country as the war wound down amazed him.

Earnest remained in Marburg through Germany’s surrender on May 7. He recalls troops shooting off their guns that night, but he couldn’t join in.

“I had no weapons,” he said. “I just had my clothes on my back and a razor blade and a toothbrush and a little bitty musette bag to put my things in. I just prayed to the Heavenly Father, thanked the good Lord, that the war was over.”

Earnest would eventually be sent to join two divisions in Central France that were to ship out to the Pacific and invade mainland Japan, but Japan’s surrender following the atomic bomb drops came first.

He was set to leave France in December 1945, but before then, he had one last piece of business to tend to: having a hemorrhoid operation. “I figured, man, now’s the time to get it before I get home — for free.”

Still a private, the lowest Army rank, Earnest got a visit from a lieutenant while recovering from the operation, and they figured out they had attended the same high school. That was good enough to get a bump to private first class.

“We enjoyed visiting with each other, and he said, ‘Why don’t you reenlist? You’re recovered now. And I can make you a corporal if you reenlist.’”



Earnest remembered. “And I said, ‘Well, thank you very much, lieutenant, but I think I ought to go home.’”

After being discharged at Camp Blanding in late December, he arrived at his parents’ doorstep by taxi at 6 a.m. on Jan. 1 — just in time to go to watch the Miami Hurricanes defeat Holy Cross 13-6 later that day in the Orange Bowl.

Earnest returned to UF that semester for pre-law, but he eventually decided against following in his lawyer father’s footsteps and switched to education, graduating with his bachelor’s and master’s from UF and starting his career at Hialeah Junior High in Miami in 1950.

That year, he ran into a classmate from high school, Jeanne Lola Koesy.

“I went downtown ... just to walk through the stores and look at all the pretty girls that worked in the stores,” he recalled. “And there, one day, I saw the most beautiful of them all.”

Jeanne remembers the day clearly.

A vendor for the store “invited me to come up to his apartment, and I thought, ‘Oh my God, he’s old enough to be my father,’” she said. “So I turned around there, and Charlie was standing. ... I went up to him and smiled. I think he was taken back a little bit, you know, but I was getting out of a situation.”

The two went to dinner (Red Lobster) and a University of Miami football game later that week, and they’ve been together ever since, heading a family that now includes five children, nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Among Earnest’s subjects were history, geography and political science, and among his junior high students was Bob Graham, who’d go on to serve as Florida’s governor and a senator. “He was a very bright young man.”

“I had some very good students,” he added. “Some of them were smarter than I was, really. I wouldn’t tell them that, but I

*“And there, one day, I saw the most beautiful of them all.”*

would now. They were brilliant students.”

Earnest would go on to also teach at Hialeah High before getting a call in 1957 from a classmate from UF about a job at Pensacola Junior College. And there Earnest stayed for three decades, first as an assistant registrar, then as director of admissions, then as a teacher in the adult high school program for his final four working years.

These last years as a teacher would be perhaps his most trying because of his students’ profusion of deficiencies, which stemmed from learning disorders, illiteracy and other hardships.

“I had to teach the alphabet sometimes. I had to teach them penmanship sometimes,” he said. “I had to teach the most simple things you can imagine sometimes. ... It was basic education, and some of them did pretty well and some of them didn’t.”

About two years after retiring in 1988, the Earnests chose the closest city (Gainesville) in which one of their children lived and moved there.

In retirement, Earnest has opened up more about the war than he ever had before, his wife said.

“He never talked about the war from the time when we met until the time he retired,” Jeanne Earnest said. “The miracle, I think, to me, is that all four of my brothers and Charlie came home from their service because there was so many people” who didn’t.

And for that and everything else, Charles Earnest said he’s thankful.

“The good Lord and the Heavenly Father have provided for us so well,” he said, “I can hardly believe it.” ■

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