Asa Duncan proved to be one surprise after another. A little leery of calling someone I didn’t know, he put my mind to rest immediately when first speaking to him on the phone.

Until recently Asa was never interviewed about his World War II experiences. This made us both rookies. He never acquired a higher rank than Private 1st Class (P.F.C.) and served in the 140th Ordnance Heavy Maintenance Company Field Army. Prior to his enlistment he worked as a brick mason in San Antonio. He enlisted in January 1943 at the age of nineteen. He served for three years until April 1946. Asa was drafted despite his wishes to enlist. Enlistment followed and its process was "just paper work, that’s all." He felt the draft was necessary and fair. He stated that serving taught a person discipline and things he or she can use throughout his or her life. Asa commented that when the whole world is at war, it makes one grow up fast.

When he left home, "I walked out the door and never looked back." I inquired if he was stationed to served with any of his friends from home and he said, "no"; however, the friendships he made during the service have lasted a lifetime.

The first time Asa heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor he was in Victoria, Texas, working on an airbase. It was a shock, but he didn’t think anyone really understood its implications. "Being a country boy, we just didn’t know what all that really meant until later on."

Asa trained as a recruit in Arkansas and Louisiana, specializing in instruments, small arms (pistols, rifles, machine guns, etc.) and truck driving. He was also a part-time cook. Asa was given basic training in first aid, signaling, radio, and use of any special equipment. He did not apply for Ranger, Paratrooper, or other voluntary training, nor did he enter an officer’s training program. Asa commented that he was glad to have received the training he did, because it served him well overseas. "It still comes in handy today."

During his stateside service, Asa was stationed at the following camps: Livingston, Claiborne, Robinson, and Chaffe (none of which exist today). He was shown the film series "Why We Fight," and said the scenes "weren’t very pretty to see" and could’ve made someone with a weak stomach nauseated. When questioned about why he fought, he simply stated, "I didn’t fight; we worked on equipment."

The weapons he saw and worked on in the service were the best at the time. He thought they were very reliable and highly superior to those of other countries. The equipment, clothing, and rations were okay.

Asa felt the leadership was very good. "They led us around the world and brought us home." He felt the leaders were the officers and top noncoms. Contact with his officers was an everyday occurrence.

He had been expecting to go overseas; therefore he had no real reaction to learning of his soon-to-be destination. He left from Camp Killman, New Jersey, enroute to Europe. It was only when the ship was in the English Channel that they found out they were destined for LaHavre, France, on the S.S. Wiegler. There were no difficulties in getting ready to move. "We were prepared at all times."

Commenting on his travel experiences, he said the troop trains were very crowded. They traveled for "days at a time."

The Army didn’t supply information concerning the countries they would be serving in. They only told them where they were going. His first impression of Europe was that it was like another world. Asa got along well with the civilians saying, "We couldn’t speak their language, but we could talk in sign language." Some of the civilians even like the Americans. He said there was "plenty" of fraternizing with local women.

Talk of forms of recreation brought a smile to his face. Only while they were stationed stateside could they get passes to town. In Europe, there were limited places they could go. He once went to Belgium for the weekend. Much of the time they would stay in camp and watch U.S.O. shows, which was Asa’s favorite pastime. Reading material was scarce. He remembered one particular time when the company got its hands on a cartoon sheet, and everyone was trying to read it.

The medical care they received was very good, and the general health of his unit was above par. Soldiers many times caught the flu and were sent to medical units. Due to a leaky gas mask, Asa contracted emphysema and was also sent to the medical unit.
I asked if many soldiers faked illnesses to get out of fighting, but Asa didn’t think many did. He said disciplinary camps were set up to deal with soldiers that went AWOL. After they went through that ordeal, they were ready to get back to the front lines.

Drinking was quite a problem in his unit. Alcoholic beverages were obtained through the Black Market in Europe. “If you had the money, you could get pretty much anything you wanted.” To illustrate this, he said a carton of cigarettes bought through the Black Market was $250 and a bar of soap would cost $125. Asa said drugs were unknown during World War II and evidently didn’t become a problem until the Korean War. Gambling, however, was “a way of life.” Dice, cards, and even the flip of a coin was used. Since such high priority seemed to be put on cigarettes, I asked if they bet their cigarettes, but Asa said he never did; however, he did bet for beer.

Popular songs of the day were “It Had To Be You,” “Beer Barrel Polka,” “Slow Boat to China,” and “Mares Eat Oats.” He didn’t sing “Ninety Nine Bottle of Beer On the Wall,” to my disappointment. The slang phrase he could recall was that everyone was called “Joe”; therefore everyone was “G.I. Joe.”

The most obvious form of racial discrimination was the segregation of blacks and whites in the military. Asa never served with a black man, but he said there were a lot of them in the service. Equality in work was enforced, but not integrated.

Asa was so happy on VE day that he was dazed. On VJ day, there was a celebration on the ship, but since they couldn’t drink, they made up for it on shore. He had no knowledge of the Atomic Bomb before it was dropped. After his unit had gotten word that it had been used, he was “amazed that one bomb could do that much damage.” He thinks it is a horrible thing now.

Asa’s company helped keep law and order during the establishment of Civil Affairs governments in liberated friendly countries. They helped provide whatever the town needed. He said there wasn’t much left to keep law and order of, though. He’s not sure where the food came from, but they did manage to keep the people fed.

The morale and discipline of Asa’s unit after the end of hostilities was ‘good’ and all were looking forward to going home. They kept busy by cleaning up equipment. He didn’t feel the point system was fair. He was never sure how the government came up with scoring for points.

Asa received the Asiatic and Pacific Award, the ETO, the Marksman Badge, Good Conduct Award, and the Liberation of the Philippines Award. Unsure as to how the government determined who should receive awards, he believes the battle stars should have been awarded to those who actually were on the frontline, but because he was in a “combat zone” he received one.

His homecoming was a happy one. When he landed in Los Angeles, California, horns were blowing, and confetti was falling through the air. Soldiers were running from one side of the ship to the other to see what was happening on shore, causing the ship to rock.

Asa remained in the service until April 1946, when he was discharged at Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas, but decided to go back in “to make a career of it.” He only stayed nine months, however, and was discharged because of emphysema. Once discharged, he went home and looked for a job. He didn’t have the slightest idea what to expect when he got home. He just wanted to pick up where he left off. He was hired by Humble Oil Company, but found it difficult to adjust to civilian life. After his marriage, readjustment became a little easier, but it still took him several years to get back to normal.

Asa did not graduate from high school before the war, nor did he continue his education after the war. He said that the G.I. Bill was the government’s way of helping veterans get their education, houses, and land.

Asa belongs to the Disabled American Veterans in which he is a service officer and a chaplain.

He feels most comfortable talking about his wartime experiences with his fellow comrades because they are empathetic and have gone through the same experience. “Some people would never believe the stories we tell or things we’ve seen.”

World War II taught him, “When you were called to defend your country, you go. You’ve got a job to do and you go. If it ain’t worth fightin’ for it ain’t worth havin’.” He isn’t sure about the prospect for world stability, but just stated he prayed for peace and that he didn’t want to go through war again. Asa’s expectations about America’s place and influence in the world were not really expectations, because he knew America was on top. He believes that in the ensuing decades since the war, “this old world just keeps on turning.”