

Story of the 222nd Infantry Regiment Glee Club in 1945

Conducted by Sgt. John L. Baldwin, Jr.

Manager, Kenneth L. Zug

“SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT”

Vienna Concert House Great Hall

*Vienna, Austria on
Christmas Night, 1945*

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My father, Robert George Messinger (born May 18, 1923, died February 7, 2008), was a student at Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY, majoring in music, when he was drafted to serve his country on April 15, 1943. From Syracuse, NY where he had his physical, to Ft. Niagara, NY, to Miami Beach, to the University of Alabama and Mississippi State University, my father was trained in engineering. He was made a part of the Army Specialized Training Program. At Mississippi State, he studied Drafting, Math, Physics, Chemistry, History and English with 300 men. He was also the center of a football team, formed by the servicemen at Mississippi State, and he became the director of the marching band there. In April a year later, he went to Camp Claiborne in Louisiana where he became a member of a 40-man utility detachment – plumbers, carpenters, electricians, fire department, heavy equipment operators, and road graders. He was a truck driver and road grader operator. On September 1, 1944, he headed to Camp Myles Standish in Massachusetts and then he sailed to Liverpool, England. From there his unit went to southern England and by road to Omaha Beach in France, six months after the initial invasion. There they stayed in pup tents until their equipment arrived. It rained every day.

In late September, they went by truck to Maastrich, Holland -- 9th Army Headquarters -- where they spent several months repairing windows, improving highways, and putting out fires. They lived in a large barn where 40 cows had stayed. In the new year (1945), they went south to Liege, Belgium where they were stationed at a hospital that needed repair. As a result of the Battle of the Bulge, there became a need for more infantry men. Some of the men in my father's unit were chosen for basic training again, in the Paris area. After some four-plus weeks of training, they were ready to go to the front but within a week or two, the war in Europe ended. That made it necessary to get some troops ready for the South Pacific. My father went to an area just north of Marseille, France. There in a regimental motor pool, he served as a dispatcher. His main job was to process and prepare for the South Pacific.

After several months (August 1945), that conflict ended, so he was never deployed. For those who had enough points, they were sent home. For those who didn't, they were sent to other places in Europe.

My father was shipped to Vienna, Austria as part of the Occupation Forces. After a few days there, he heard about a mens glee club in the 42nd Division. Rather than standing guard duty endlessly, the glee club sounded good to him. He called their office and within a week, he became a member of the chorus of 60 men for about six months. They lived in three private homes in Vienna, rehearsed every morning, went sightseeing in the afternoon, and prepared and performed several nights a week for various affairs. Other nights they went to the opera and other events. The group was directed by Sgt. John Low Baldwin, Jr.. The Manager of the Glee Club was Kenneth L. Zug. They visited Wesang in Salzburg, Linz, Zell am See, Berchtesgaden and a number of other places.

Most notably, the glee club performed a concert on Christmas night, December 25, 1945, entitled "SILENT NIGHT HOLY NIGHT" (see poster), in the Vienna Concert House, Great Hall. The concert was presented in conjunction with the USFA Special Forces Unit. My father was one of two baritone soloists that night. The other soloists were: Ernest Sult, Tenor; Lewis Hubka, Bass; and Robert Wilcox, Baritone. Bernard Comsky was the Concert Pianist. (I HAVE PHOTOGRAPHS). About that experience, my father wrote, "Great experiences with a great conductor." He once wrote that they sang with the Vienna Boys Choir. The glee club performances continued through Christmas and then through January and February in 1946. In April of 1946, my father shipped home to New York and within a week, he was a civilian in his home town of Kingston, NY. In June, he returned to Ithaca College to complete his music degree (1948). After he graduated, he married my mother – Mary Lee Peterson Anderson, of Mansfield, Pennsylvania. She died at age 92 in 2014. (My father died in February of 2008.)

While my father was in Vienna, he lived as a tenant in the home of Frau Streicher at 189 Peter Jordan Strasse. Frau Streicher was a music teacher who rented an apartment to these military men. Years later, in 1973, I studied abroad – in London -- during college, and my parents joined me for a trip to Vienna. During that trip, we visited Frau Streicher, and she and I played duets on the piano. She gave me a book of piano music. I recall she had some relation to Mozart. My father was thrilled to see his daughter (age 20) and former landlady playing music together. I still own that book of music given to me that day. Frau Streicher was then 83.

John Baldwin (the glee club conductor) became the chair of the music department at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY. He was also the long-time (39 years) and very popular director of the University (mens) Glee Club of New York. At the time of his death on December 31, 1999, he was the Music Director at The Church of Saint John on the Mountain in Bernardsville, NJ. In 1992, Baldwin invited my father to be a guest performing member of the University Glee Club on a tour of Europe, and my mother and he accepted the offer. My parents lived in Mansfield, Pennsylvania and Dad prepared for the tour by practicing the music on his own. It was a thrill for him to be part of John's chorus. They toured, and Dad sang with the club in Berlin, Leipzig, Nuremberg, Munich, Salzburg, and Vienna – a truly fabulous experience allowing Dad to relive some of the experiences he had had as a private in the Army under the direction of Sgt John

Baldwin in 1945. Baldwin was truly a unique individual, gifted in music at an early age, and a highly accomplished organist. His obituary in The New York Times said, "Baldwin brought a certain level of playfulness and perfectionism in his conducting." He died a few hours before the new millennium began but some of his glee club singers called him that evening to wish him a Happy New Year from Paris, where midnight and the new year had already arrived.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/09/nyregion/john-low-baldwin-76-conductor-of-the-university-glee-club.html>

In 2012, I researched the soloists whose names appeared on the poster for the 1945 Christmas night concert. Happily, I located one Ernest Sult who was listed on the concert poster as the Tenor for the Silent Night, Holy Night concert on December 25, 1945. Mr. Sult was in his late 80's, living in a retirement community in Maryland.....still singing and performing. We talked. Unfortunately, he died in May of 2015. He does have a son Stephen Sult in Maryland. I was not able to locate the other two soloists although I wrote to a Lewis Hubka (attorney) to no avail.

Post script:

I have hand-written "diaries"/ journals that my father wrote during his time spent in the Army.

Further research has revealed to me that some glee club members, including Baldwin, took part in the liberating of the concentration camp at Dachau in April 1945. I don't believe my father was part of that, as I think I would have definitely heard that story.

I have always been fascinated with this story, wanting to share it with others, especially with someone such as Tom Brokaw (NBC News) who has done such a masterful job communicating about "the greatest generation." I am also interested in having Harry Smith learn of this story.

This December will be the 75th anniversary of this 1945 performance. Although many of the men who sang in the glee club are likely deceased, this story is still as important as ever. Of course, it's possible that some of the men are still living today. My father would be 97 if he were still alive. I know he would still be singing.