Irving M. Abramson

U.S. Army—World War II
Europe
397th Infantry, ERC — Co. L
100th Division
Private First Class

Irving M. Abramson

Veterans
History
Project
Transcript

Interview conducted
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This Veterans History Project interview is being conducted on Wednesday, March the 12th, here at the Niles Public Library in the year 2008. And Mr. Abramson and I are sitting here in the auditorium of the Niles Public Library. My name is Neil O’Shea and I’m a member of the reference staff here. And I’m speaking with Irving M. Abramson. Mr. Abramson was born on January the 10th, 1926, and he now lives in Skokie, Illinois. Mr. Abramson has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. He also has prepared for this interview by bringing some typed-out recollections of some aspects of his time in the service in World War II in the U.S. Army in Europe. So here is his memoir of service.

Mr. Abramson, when did you enter the Service?

In August of 1943, I enlisted at the age of seventeen.

Had you completed high school at that time or--

I had completed high school and had started college. I was going to Illinois Institute of Technology at that time.

Were you on a science, or technical, or an engineering--

I was an engineering student. Mechanical engineering was my major.

And you chose to enlist rather than wait to be drafted, is that--

Well, what had happened was that the Army came into many of the colleges and gave an aptitude test, I think, it was especially to the engineering students. And if you, if the student scored high enough in that test, the Army offered to send that person to college at the government expense until graduating. And then that person would be come out of college as a second lieutenant in the Army. And the only thing that the Army wanted was a promise for the student or soldier to stay in the Service for three years. In that the tuition was very high at that time, although probably negligible compared to today, it
sounded very appealing. I spoke to my parents about it. And they were, of course, dead set against their seventeen-year-old joining the Army, enlisting, but, after three days of argument, they finally consented. And I indeed enlisted in the Army Reserve, because I couldn’t be in the Army until eighteen. And they did, at that time, follow their promise and sent me to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. And I continued my engineering education there for a short time. I believe it was for two terms. At the end of that, I had become eighteen, and, unfortunately, the Army had decided to disband that program. The program was called Army Specialized Training Program. And the war had become hot and heavy, and they decided they needed soldiers more than engineers, so they disbanded the program. I got notice to discontinue my student time at U.W. and report to Fort Sheridan in Illinois for induction into the Army.

And were you-- you must have had probably mixed feelings at that time, or did you?

I was very disappointed in that the Army did not follow up with their promise. And I think all of us, there was a large number of us that were in the same program. And we all felt very cheated at the time, because we very well might have continued our college education where we were and possibly gotten a deferment for being in an engineering school, which many of the engineering students had at that time. It was questionable, and I didn’t worry about it too much. I wasn’t really thrilled about being ushered into the Infantry.

I’m sure your parents weren’t, either.

No. No. No. No. They, of course, hated to say I told you so.

Yes, I bet. And, at that time, your family lived in Chicago?

They, at that time, were in Chicago. My father was in business in Albany Park at that moment, so that’s where I went to the Army from.

And you had attended Lane Technical High School?

Yes, early. I had gone all four years of my high school education at Lane Tech - very wonderful school at that time.

So you come down to Fort Sheridan, then?

Right.

So then you had to have a basic training experience, then?

Right.

And where did that take place?
I was sent at that time to North Carolina. It was a basic training camp in North Carolina. And I spent my initial military training there. Right after that, we were given a pass to go home and wait for further assignment. I shortly, thereafter, received an assignment to join the 100th Infantry Division, which was also based in Georgia. And I trained with them for a short period and then from there we went to Europe.

*Was-- was that, your training camp experience in North Carolina, was that the first time you’d been-- of course, you’d been away at University of Wisconsin in Madison, so that wasn’t your first time away from home?*

Right. Well, the trip to Wisconsin was the first time, really, away from home.

*And then was it an interesting experience being in a camp away from home with people from all over the country and all different backgrounds*

Oh, yes.

*I imagine it was a real insight into what America was becoming.*

Really. Really. It was not only a melting pot of nations, but a melting pot of different parts of the country. And meeting people from Appalachia and all over the United States was an interesting experience.

*So then you were assigned to the, did you mention the 100--*

Yes. The 100th Infantry Division was known as the Century Division.

*And then you set sail for Europe then from a particular--*

From our camp in Georgia, we were sent to New York where most of the troops were being sent to Europe, and that’s where we debarked from. We left from the ports in New York and zigzagged across the Atlantic to Europe.

*So you were in this tech training path, as it were, and then the Army discontinued this engineering preparation programming or whatever?*

Yes.

*And then when they placed you in the Army, what your aptitudes were or your academic training were had no bearing on where they placed you in the--*

Unfortunately.

*Army, you were Regular Infantry, is that right?*
That is correct. Unfortunately, nothing in my past experience meant anything. I had been an excellent photographer, and that had been my hobby for some years. And I tried to tell them about that, because they needed photographers. And I talked about my engineering training. But nothing mattered. They needed infantry, and that was the bottom line.

*So when you zigzagged to avoid German submarines, I suppose*--

That was the story, yes.

*You were in a convoy, I suppose?*

Right.

*Did you land in Scotland or*--

No. No. We zigzagged across the Atlantic and landed finally in Marseilles, France.

*Oh, yes.*

And that was a big port. We, the Americans, had already made their initial landing in France and had already gotten a pretty good foothold by the time we arrived. And so we arrived in Marseilles and started our march through France and Germany from there.

*And was that difficult going?*

Well, by then, we had pretty well been hardened by our military training and knew what to expect in terms of effort required. The sounds, the first sounds, of exploding artillery and gunfire when we got near the front were a bit shocking and, very frankly, scary. So we were introduced to that within a short time after landing.

*And that was still in France?*

That was, yes. We were in the eastern part of France just before going into Germany.

*And how was Army food at that time? Did you feel like you were well looked after in the field or*--

No. All during basic training and training with the Century Division, we were treated to Army Camp food. And it was strictly institutional food preparation. But, at that time, we were working very hard and training very hard and any moment to relax and have a meal was not a time to complain about anything that was served us. Once in Europe, we were given rations, and each of us carried rations. There were a couple different kinds. There were C rations and K rations. The C rations were prepared can foods which could be heated over a Bunsen burner or any kind of heat that you could get going. And the K rations were dried food that came in a box similar to a Cracker Jack box. And it contained
crackers, cheese, a chocolate bar, stuff of that nature. The canned stuff was corned beef hash, and stew, and that type of food.

Was it either one or the other or--

No. We were equipped with both.

So you put them both together, you had a pretty good meal?

You could do that, but we usually didn’t do that. We didn’t eat too much at any one time. And we would either choose one or the other at any one moment when we decided to stop and partake of some food.

And were you able to write home to your parents

During--

and family

Yes.

at this time?

During the period of training, especially back in the U.S., much of the contact was having V mails with the family and friends. Once in Europe, it became a little more difficult for the mail to get to us, especially once we had gone into the battlefield and up at the front lines. Every once in a while, I would say possibly every few weeks, we would stop at a rest area, and mail would catch up to us, but it was not too often.

I’m guessing that as you work your way north, the 100th division from Marseilles up to East-Central France and closer to Germany, I imagine that it’s getting hotter.

Hotter by virtue of the action?

Yes. Yes.

Very much so. Temperature-wise, it was quite cold. And we were there during the winter, and it was cold, and many a night was spent in a foxhole with rain coming down. And I, at one point, was in a foxhole for about eight or ten hours with freezing water up to my ankles. And in the morning, when we decided, when our commanders decided, to move out, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t walk. And they took me back to a rest and recuperation area where I stayed for about 48 hours. And, fortunately, I did not have frostbite. But close to it. And so the weather was very cold, and it snowed, and, so, we were subject to that kind of thing.

This is November, December?
Right.

1944?

Correct. Correct.

And then all the time you are getting closer to the, I'm imagining, to the Battle of the Bulge Area?

That is right.

That you mentioned on your form.

That is correct. As we approached Germany, we were pushing the Germans back, of course, into their own land, and the action became quite heavy. And we were subject to a tremendous amount of artillery attacks more than anything. We did have a number of front-line rifle skirmishes with German troops. And that was always scary and dangerous. But the big danger was from the artillery. The Germans were very adept at their artillery attacks. They had artillery equipment that they could zoom in. And the soldiers would say they could put a shell in your hip pocket if they wanted to. And, of course, as I say, the artillery attacks became more numerous as we approached Germany.

Finally, in the end, that's where I was wounded on December 11th, 1944. We were in the Black Forest. And we had dug in into foxholes and the shells began to fly. And the bombardment lasted it seemed like for hours, but I'm sure it probably wasn't more than 30 or 45 minutes. But, during that time, shells came, were exploding all around us. I was in a foxhole. We had just begun to dig in. The foxhole that I was in with two of my buddies was only about a foot deep. When the shells began flying, and we could no longer stand up or kneel down and dig, we just lied down flat in this one foot deep foxhole. There was a soldier on either side of me. I was in the middle. And we just lied there while the shells exploded all around us. Of course, the rest of my outfit was spread around the area as well. At dusk, the shells started about dusk. And, in the morning, all I remember is waking up to daylight. And there were aid men, first aid men, standing above me and helping me up. And I found out later that the two other soldiers, one on each side of me, were killed. It was quite shocking.

So did you recall when exactly you were hit?

No, I do not. I do not recall it.

You were lying on the ground with--

Right.

And then through the night and then--
Through the night.

*And then morning came and--*

As a matter of fact, during the night, I had already been wounded unbeknownst to myself. And I could not understand later on why I did not feel pain. And the doctors explained that your body is traumatized and, I guess, going into shock. You just don’t feel the pain. There are other things involved, some physiological thing that I will not ever understand. But at any rate--

*So you were hit in the back? In the back?*

No, the shell that got me, and I think I was lying on my right side with my left side exposed, and somebody said, later on, that the shell might have hit a tree and the shrapnel bounced off the tree and hit my left side, my entire left side had been torn up by fragments, artillery fragments. My left leg was broken. Both bones of my lower left leg and tibia were broken in half. My chest was punctured. I have a, today, I have a six-inch scar in my chest where shells, where part of a shell, entered, punctured my chest and punctured my lung. How I ever survived all of this, I don’t know. It was a miracle.

*Miraculous. Do you think it was the-- I don’t know if this is an appropriate question. Do you think that the same shell that so injured you also was responsible for taking the lives of the two soldiers?*

Very likely. Very likely. It was hard to tell, because there were so many shells landing at that time, but certainly--

*Were you taken back to a hospital or medical area?*

Yes. Many people are familiar with the program M*A*S*H. This was a First Aid hospital right behind the lines of any battlefield. And the program well describes what these hospitals were like. And they were, the purpose was to immediately save the soldier’s life rather than try to heal up the wounds, necessarily. And I was taken back to a MASH hospital.

I was unconscious for three days. Whether it was the drugs, or the shock, or what it was, I don’t know. But I woke up three days later. And there were nurses around. And I was still in a haze. They had given me a considerable amount of morphine to counteract the pain, so I wasn’t entirely with it. But slow but sure, my head began to clear. And I was aware that the Army, with all injured soldiers, immediately sent notification to the family by way of a Western Union telegram. The first thing that hit me was if my parents saw that telegram, they would be frightened to death, and I had to try to contact them prior to that telegram. I didn’t know how fast the telegram went out. I was encased in a cast from my toes up to my waist. My chest was bandaged with pressure bandages. And I couldn’t really move. I was flat on my back, so I couldn’t, of course, write. My first thought was
to write my parents a letter saying that I was okay. One of the nurses came by. And I asked her if she would be kind enough to write this short letter that I dictated and send it back to my parents. She said she would be happy to, so I dictated a letter. And the letter went out. Unfortunately, it went out after they got the telegram. When they got the telegram, they were quite shocked. And because of all of these soldiers that were wounded and killed at the time, we lost 10,000 men in the Battle of the Bulge. There were quite a few of those telegrams that went out.

Yes. You were kind enough to submit a copy here of that Western Union telegram, which we will include in your memoir. It informs your parents that you had been seriously wounded.

Right.

They must have been--

Right. They were quite shocked.

Yes.

And more so, because they could not get additional information.

Pardon me, where you were wounded, was that near a particular town or, you say, Black Forest or--

I am sure it was

Were you moved to a hospital in a particular area at a particular town?

Later on.

Yes.

I was moved back to Dijon.

Dijon.

France.

Which was quite a bit farther back from the front lines. I don’t know a particular town that we were near or an area we were fighting to get into at the time I was wounded. They told me it was the Black Forest. And I just accepted that. I really didn’t care.

You really had a lot of, a lot to try and understand.

Yes.
Or make sense of.

Yes.

You were worried about your parents, and then you learn that your two buddies are--

Right.

Yes.

My goodness.

Right. I was a bit traumatized. And I think we have to understand, as I think about it now, that I was nineteen years old. And as I look at my grandson who is just about that age, I think how did they send these babies to war? So that, it was true most of us that were there, we were all in that age group, eighteen to twenty, as are the soldiers today. So, it’s very discouraging that this should happen to our youth. I think an interesting--I mentioned the letter that the nurse wrote. I think it was interesting to note that my parents did receive that some days later after the telegram. And while the letter I dictated said: “Don’t worry, I was just scratched. And, fortunately, I’m going back to a rest area, and I won’t have to face any more action,” I’m trying to ease the burden of the telegram, but when they saw that, they knew it was not my handwriting, and they could not imagine why somebody else would be writing this. Did my hands get blown off? Was I blind? Was I-- and I didn’t realize that until, much later, they told me about it. But that wasn’t as smart an act as I thought it might be. They thought I was far worse off than I was. Not that I wasn’t seriously wounded, but I certainly didn’t lose any arms or legs, or was blinded.

Was it sometime during this period that you experienced your “fifteen minutes of fame”? No, no. That was quite a bit later. From the MASH hospital, where they did life saving work, and the doctors and nurses that were there doing miraculous work with less than what they, the equipment they might have had in the hospital atmosphere. They used paper clips, staples, tape, anything to put the soldiers back together again. From there, once I was stabilized, I was sent back to a general hospital in Dijon, France. In Dijon, France, I went through four major surgeries where they corrected all of the things that were wrong with me at that moment. My leg was cast, reset and cased, and my chest was sewn up, and, for the most part, there was just a matter of healing after that period. I was there for; I’d say, probably a month or so, possibly a little longer.

From there, once I was well on the road to healing up, they sent me back to a hospital again in Marseilles, France. This was a hospital known as an R & R place, which was Rest and Relaxation, and it was a hospital that was set in a beautiful area. And I recall finding great peace and rest once I arrived there. I was there for several weeks, enjoying that rest and relaxation when I was told I would be going home again. And the process of
sending soldiers home from that point was to cart them back to Paris, France, via trains, and, in Paris, fly them back to the United States. And that’s when I say I had my experience that I called fifteen minutes of fame.

And this is sort of the way it went. I was seventeen years old when I enlisted in the United States Army in October of 1943. I was eighteen years old in December of 1944, when I was seriously wounded during a German artillery attack in the infamous World War II Battle of the Bulge. I turned nineteen while in the Army hospital in France recovering from those wounds. And that’s really where my story starts. In February of 1945, after being treated in three different medical facilities in France, I was sent to a convalescent hospital in Marseilles for R & R, rest and relaxation. Not only was my recovery incomplete, but my body was encased in a cast that went from my left foot with just my toes showing up to my belly button. It was not a pretty sight.

About noon on a beautiful, bright February 2nd day, I was given the news that every soldier prayed to hear. “Soldier, you’re going home.” It wasn’t more than a few hours later that I was loaded on a stretcher and taken by ambulance to the local train depot. It was only then that I became aware that I was one of about forty or fifty other recovering wounded GIs that were about to be loaded on a hospital train and begin the trip home. Our train’s destination was Paris, France, where we would all be transferred to an airplane for the trip back to the United States.

The railroad cars were former passenger cars that had been especially converted and outfitted to carry patients on stretchers. The cars were gutted of seats and rigged with long horizontal brackets mounted to the side wall of the cars to which the stretchers could be fastened. They were mounted three high with about 36 inches between them. I wound up in the middle position with a stretcher above me and one below. It was the furthest thing from deluxe travel as you could possibly get. However, none of us there had a complaint. We were going home. And it didn’t matter how. The trip to Paris was an overnight journey. The train started rolling at about dusk. I can still hear the exceptionally loud clickety-clack of the wheels. I guess that the exaggerated sound was because of the extreme bareness of the reconverted railway cars.

I had drifted off to sleep and was awakened about ten p.m. by severe pain in my casted foot. The pain was so intense that I called for a medic, a first aid man, who was on duty in our car. When he checked my foot, he explained, with concern, that it had swollen up badly, and the pain was probably caused by the cast cutting into it. He told me he was going to get a tool to cut the cast and relieve the pressure.

But, first, he called to an assistant to stay with me until he returned. The assistant was a pleasant, smiling lady dressed in olive drab army fatigues. What I remember most was her sincere concern, sympathy, and kindness. Her voice was calming and comforting and took the edge off the pain. The first aid man returned shortly and proceeded to cut away the cast. And my discomfort was soon relieved. During the entire process, the lady angel held my hand and spoke soothingly about our return home. The medic asked me if I was okay. I assured him, and I thanked him very much. He said he would return later to
check on me. Then this lady angel asked me to reassure her that I was okay. And when I did, she leaned over and kissed me. Holy Smokes! She kissed me! In that instant it took for the shock to wear off, she was gone. I was devastated. I never got a chance to thank her. About a half hour later, the medic returned to check on me, and he said, as he said he would, once I assured him I was okay, he asked me, “You know who that lady was that held your hand?” I said I didn’t and was disappointed that I didn’t get a chance to thank her. “Soldier,” he said, “that was Marlene Dietrich. She rides these trains regularly as a volunteer maiden of mercy. She prefers being anonymous and doesn’t look for any thanks.” Well, we arrived in Paris the next morning, later that day, we were loaded on an airplane and flew back to the US. I never saw Miss Dietrich after that one special night. I can tell you that my experience during World War II could fill a small book. But the one of the most outstanding and memorable was my fifteen minutes of fame when Marlene Dietrich kissed me.

Thank you. Thank you.

So you’re basically-- you basically were a very healthy young man. I mean you--

To begin with, yes.

To recover from that degree of harm suffered by your body and then-- but the Army decided you were not going to go back to the front. You were going to go back home.

Oh, yes. Yes, I was too seriously injured. I couldn’t walk or do anything at that point, so my days in battle were over.

They were definitely over.

Right.

Because of the injuries?

Right.

So you land back from Paris. You were flying back to the United States.

Right. We landed in New York, and they loaded us into a waiting area, and, while in that waiting area, they interviewed us as to where our homes were. And with the prospect of bringing us back to a hospital near our homes where we would continue our recovery and where it would be easier for families to visit us, I, of course, told them that I was from Chicago. And I knew there were some good hospitals in and around Chicago. And they said, “Sure. We will be happy to see what we can do.” Later that day, things moved very fast. I was really quite surprised. Later that day, I was loaded onto a train for a trip back to where I thought I was going. But I didn’t ask any questions. The next day, when the train arrived at its destination, I found that I was in Topeka, Kansas.
Oh.

So, they, whoever I spoke to who interviewed me, either didn’t hear well or didn’t know his geography very well. So, I was quite disappointed. But when you are in the Army, it doesn’t pay to complain, so--.

That was another train trip back then, was it?

No, no, that’s where it was. I was brought into the Winter General Hospital in Topeka, Kansas, which happened to be on the same location with the Menninger Clinic. The Menninger Clinic was a psychological hospital. And when I heard that, I thought to myself, oh, my God, am I nuts? Is that why I wound up here? But it turned out that Dr. Menninger had donated half of his facility to the Army for recovering GIs. And it had nothing to do with psychological problems. But that’s where I spent the balance of my recovery. And the staff there was good. The doctors were good. And I had no real complaint other than it was practically impossible for my family to visit, except for one member of the family, an uncle, who represented the family and came out to see me.

Excuse me. When you landed in New York, were you able to make a telephone call?

Yes. Yes.

To your family?

Yes. I did. Indeed, yes, I did.

Boy, that must have been great news for your mother!

Oh, yes, yes. Yes, the family cried pretty good at that point. All the soldiers as well. We were in a big room the size of a gymnasium. And it was almost comical or pitiful to see all the soldiers crying at having come home.

So you were down there in Topeka, Kansas. Is that-- you were there until October of 1945 then or--

That is correct. I arrived there the middle of March and spent the balance of the year until October at Winter General in Topeka. And they had to do some minor repairs as I, during the healing process, and, but I spent my last days of the Army recovering there and got my honorable medical discharge from there.

You also received a Purple Heart and Bronze Star.

Yes. Yes, I did that, and that was rewarded back in, actually, in Dijon, France. During my stay there, it was not unusual for officers to come through the wards and speak to all of the men. And, occasionally, there was a ceremony where soldiers were awarded medals.
And, at one point during one of the ceremonies, I was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

*So you were down in Topeka when Germany surrenders?*

Right.

*And you were also there when Japan surrenders?*

Yes. I can’t recall.

*Were there-- were there any celebrations?*

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, there was always something going on, partying. And we were all happy to be alive and in one piece. And it was better days.

*Were there people, entertainers, or dignitaries, visiting the hospital?*

Very often. Very often. I don’t recall having been party to any of the entertainment like the Bob Hope business while I was in Europe. But once back in the United States in the hospital, we had a number of people come by. I particularly remember Kathryn Grayson. Of course, when I mention all of these names now, nobody knows who they are. But Kathryn Grayson was a quite popular actress and singer. And there was a number of people. Barney Ross, the boxer, he came by. So we saw a number of dignitaries and stars that came to visit the hospitals.

*The-- so, then, you’re discharged. And then was it a train ride at that point back to-- back to Chicago?*

Yes. During the period that I was in Topeka, at one point, I graduated to crutches. My leg was still in a cast, and, during the period, I received a pass to visit home and went home on crutches. And that trip was made on a train and back again to the hospital, of course, and, once discharged, we also received tickets to return to our home. And that was done on a train.

*So you were back in Chicago then?*

Right back home in Chicago.

*So is there still-- does your rehabilitation kind of have to continue for a while after that or were you pretty much able to move around the city on your own?*

No. I was pretty well healed up by that time. I must say that the work done by the Army hospitals and Army nurses and physicians was more than adequate. And I have no complaint like I’ve heard in recent days about wounded soldier care. We were taken care of very well. And I bless the doctors and nurses who put me together and who were
responsible for my recovery. They were very, very excellent. And my recovery was quite complete by the time that I was discharged. It was a matter of maybe learning to walk without a limp or something to that effect, but I was totally healed up.

*To a complete layperson sitting here, in the most ignorant sense of that word, I mean, it's amazing! That's within the year.*

Right.

*From December, you suffer all those horrendous injuries and then less than a year later, you're able to-- you've recovered.*

Right.

*To some degree. Amazing. Amazing.*

I guess I was pretty well healed up. The funny part about that particular subject is they could not remove all of the tiny shell fragments that had entered my body and particularly in my leg. I had some shell fragments that were lying against a muscle and ligaments. And they were afraid, that if they went to remove them, they might injure more than they could repair. So those shrapnel pieces were not really causing me any difficulty at the time I was discharged, but, later on, within, I think, a year, the fragments began to move. And one of them, actually, my skin opened up, and it popped out, and, after that, I had some pain. And I had a very good private doctor at home, and I went to him. They x-rayed my leg. They said, “Yes, you still have a shell fragment in there and why don’t you go back to the V.A. and remove it?” And I said, “You know, I’m here. Why don’t you do it?” And I was operated on here at the-- I’m trying to remember. I believe it was the Weiss Hospital on the outer drive and Wilson. And they removed more shrapnel from my leg at that time. And I was okay. I still-- I didn’t totally eliminate a limp, and I, also, my breathing is affected. I don’t have the lung power that I once had. So, I was left with some scars and not only psychological, but physical and things that affected my later life, but not that it stopped me from getting a job, getting married, and going on with life from there.

*So that-- was that your improving physical condition and then this worry or this sensation of these alien fragments in the body, I mean, that’s a mighty psychological factor when you come back into civilian life?*

It is, except for one thing, when you’re young, you’re invincible.

*Other vets have said that, yes.*

*So, did you-- were you able to resume school or--*

Yes. At that time, the Army had a program called the G.I. Bill, and that bill entitled returning veterans to go back to school at the government’s expense. And I took
advantage of that, and returned to college, and did attend college, a couple of different colleges, because I changed my major.

You didn't go back to I. I.T. or--

No. I had decided that, I don't know why, there were a number of reasons. I think I had a bad taste in my mouth because of the engineering experience. And I had a cousin of mine who was a very successful dentist. And I decided, I saw him making a lot of money, and I decided that was the way to go. So, I enrolled at the Loyola Dental College, the north campus of Loyola, and started my training as a pre-dent. But, in my second term, they asked me to dissect a frog. And when they handed me the poor dead frog to dissect, I said I cannot do this. And I decided that the medical world was not my place.

So, I switched to a course, a major in business, transferred to Loyola campus, downtown, and attended Loyola for a while. I attended the Loyola downtown campus as a business major for a while. And friends of mine had enrolled in Roosevelt College which just received their charter in downtown Chicago. And they asked me to join them at Roosevelt. And I transferred and went to Roosevelt College for a while, still with my business major.

During that period, I met the young lady who became eventually became my wife and, once married, I had lost my taste for education, wanted to get back into the work world and earn some money, and start my life as a married and family man. So, my children, to this day, kid me about having attended five different colleges and never getting a degree!

They probably made up for it, though, I have a feeling.

Yes. Yes.

Yes. Did you stay in contact with anybody, any your wartime buddies, after the Service or--

There was a couple that I kept in touch with for a while. One of the gentleman that was a soldier, I didn’t have any contact with any of the people that I fought in Europe with, as I say, 90 percent of the outfit I was with were wiped out, and I never, I lost complete touch with anybody in that 100th Century Division.

Was that all during the period when you were injured?

Right.

They suffered so many casualties.

Right.
Yes.

When I got back to Topeka and was in the hospital there, I made some friends. One of them was a gentleman by the name of Forman who was one of the sons of a big dealership, car dealership, in Chicago, Forman Motors, who later made news by being shot by a robber at the place of business. But he and I were buddies. And I recall, at the hospital, he, when he befriended me, he said when I got out of the Service, “You come and see us. I’ve got a job for you in our dealership.” That never happened, of course, but we did-- we were close friends at that time. I did have contact with him after I was discharged, and we had lunch a number of times. I had other things that I wanted to do, so I didn’t take up his offer for a job. But, other than that, I have not had any contact with military personnel that I had come in contact with ever.

Did you join any veteran’s organizations?

I belonged to Veterans of Foreign Wars for a short time. I do not, at this time, belong to any, but I did a short time after I got out of Service. I was preoccupied with work, and family, and other things, and I didn’t really have time for organizations.

The young lady that you married, had she ever seen you in uniform?

Never.

She met you after?

She met me afterwards. Except for pictures, she never saw me in uniform, no.

As we enter the-- approach the last part of the interview, one of the questions that we always ask of our veterans is to reflect how do you think your service and experiences affected your life?

To the extent that I hate war and hate the reports of young men being killed and find that it is a terrible disease of human beings that they fight one another. Beyond that, I can’t say there was much other effect.

I think that leads right into the second question, which you may have answered. Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Oh, yes, definitely, definitely. I, of course, am proud of all the young men that go to fight. But I am very sorry for them and sorry for their parents and families. I guess there’s no way out of having armies and protecting one’s country, but the idea that young men have to go to war and be killed, it really destroys me.

Is there anything, as we reach the end of the interview, is there anything that you would like to add that we may not have covered in regard to--
No. I think that this has been an excellent interview, and I really appreciate the time and effort that you do, Mr. O’Shea, and those of you those that work with you, and I think it was-- I feel honored that I was interviewed.

*You are very kind. Thank you. It’s a beautiful interview. And there’s a lot to be learned from listening to this interview, I’m sure.*

Thank you.

*And then you’re also very generous with some of these documents and letters and pictures that relate to the interview today. And we’ll add this to the transcript and sort of illustrate it in a way.*

Great.

*Okay. And I think we’ve reached the end of the interview.*

Thank you very much.

Nice meeting you.

*You too, sir.*

**Reader’s Note:** At the time of his interview Mr. Abramson provided copies of the following, illustrative material:

- Army Specialized Training Reserve Program sheet
- Letter home from Camp Wheeler, GA
- Application For Ration Currency
- Last night on the town in New York before embarking for France
- Happy four-page letter from France
- Western Union telegram of his being “seriously wounded,” received by parents
- Mr. Abramson’s explanation of his first letter home after his wounding
- Letter home he dictated to nurse for writing
- Mrs. Abramson’s response letter to her son
- Important Army cards of record
- Good Conduct Medal authorization, 10/23,1945
- Honorable Discharge Certificate
- Enlisted Record and Record of Separation
- World War II Honoree, WWII Memorial, print-out.

**Also appended are:**

- Mr. Abramson’s annotated chronology, “Military Service Record”
- and his moving memoir, entitled “My Fifteen Minutes of ......Fame??”, followed by a related 2001 newspaper article.
GENERAL ORDERS:

No 68

Under provisions of AR 600-68 dated 4 May 1943, and CL thereto, the GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL is awarded to the following enlisted men, Detachment of Patients, this general hospital:

T/Sgt Miller, Meredith W 37606974
S/Sgt Zajicek, Ralph A 16028983
Sgt Oho, Toivo M 1607110
Sgt Swickard, Ralph C 36010333
Cpl Reno, John D 37301468
Pfc Abramsen, Irving M
Pfc Bell, Oscar F
Pfc Goble, Raymond O 37753267
Pfc Doucette, Bernard J 35895062
Pfc Erickson, Elmer H 37773770
Pfc Hammer, Edwin W 37435590
Pfc Hanks, Carl E 36327090
Pfc Kozuch, Anthony, Jr 35843675
Pfc Peters, Robert J 36876134
Pfc Rice, William F 36772304
Pfc Rothfolf, Morton D 3779022
Pfc Teal, Joseph B 37640193
Pfc Thelan, Ward D 37691937
Pvt Gross, Earl H 36714588
Pvt Warchal, Walter F 36700000

BY ORDER OF COLONEL GAUTI:

EDWARD M. MONES
Lt Colonel, FO
Executive Officer

OFFICIAL:

ORMAN G. CONRAD
Captain, MAC
Adjutant
Mr. Abramson's Honorable Discharge, dated 10/25/1945.

Army of the United States

Honorable Discharge

This is to certify that

ERWIN M. ABRAMSON

Private First Class, Company L, 397th Infantry

is hereby Honorably Discharged from the military service of the United States of America.

This certificate is awarded as a testimonial of Honest and Faithful Service to this country.

Given at

Winfield General Hospital, Topeka, Kansas

Date

October 1945

R. E. MULT

Colonel, Medical Corps

Commanding
**ENLISTED RECORD AND REPORT OF SEPARATION**

**HONORABLE DISCHARGE**

<table>
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**Date of Separation:** Oct 45

**Place of Separation:** Winter GH Topeka Kansas

**Date of Birth:**

**Place of Birth:**

**Army Service:**

**Enlistment Requirement:**

**Enlistment Date:**

**Attendance on Which Enlistment Will Be Skept:**

**Assignments:**

**Military History:**

**Selective Service:**

**Enlistment Campaign:**

**Total Length of Service:**

**Highest Grade Held:**

**Service Schools Attended:**

**Reason and Authority for Separation:**

**Certificate of Disability for Discharge:**

**Pay Data:**

**Service Dates:**

**Insurance Notice:**

**Remarks:**

**Inactive Service in ERC:**

**Signature of Person Discharged:**

**Personnel Officer:**

**COF MIL PERS HR**
Dear Folks,

It seems like months since I wrote you last. For a week and a half, we've been out hiking and camping out and working tactical maneuvers. Tonight will be the first time I've slept in a bed for a week and believe me am I going to sleep. I think if you stretched the distance I've marched in the past week and a half in a straight line, the line would stretch from here to Chicago and back here again. My feet really feel it too — by golly, tell them they killing me. The heat and mosquitoes around here don't make things any more pleasant either.

And the size of the mosquitoes — ouch! I heard two of them talking over my tent last night and one said to the other — 'Say what do you say we carry this guy home with us — He'd make a good feast.' Then the other said, 'Now if we took him home, the bigger mosquitoes would only take him away.
from us.

I'm really too tired to write a good letter today. I'll try to get a good one off over the week end. I just wanted to write this note to tell you everything is O.K. and that I'm fine. So goodbye for now.

Love and regards to everyone.

P.S. We're having a great time.

Camp Wheeler, Ga.

The Abramson
3827 W. Lawrence Ave.
Chicago 25, Ill.

June 9, 1944
APPLICATION FOR RATION CURRENCY

FOR MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES ARM WHEN ON LEAVE, FURLough, OR PASS,
OR WHEN AUTHORIZED TO BE ABSENT FROM STATION FOR ANY OTHER REASONS

S6545 HASTP
Organization and station

Date: December 4, 1943

Applicant states that he intends to consume 18 meals at
the home of Louis Abramson, 3827 W. Leavens Ave.,
inclusive, and that he has no war ration book.

The Local War Price and Rationing Board having jurisdiction is
requested to issue to bearer ration currency in conformity with the
above.

Signature of Applicant

Signature, grade and organization of authenticating officer

Received by Signature of person receiving ration currency

Note: This application may be presented to a Local War Price and
Rationing Board at any time during the period indicated hereon or within
15 days thereafter by the applicant, his host, or member of the host's
household.

Cir. 115 (43)
DEAR GUYS,

Picked Shorty up after I called you. We walked down Broadway thru Times Square and just glanced at Radio City. Then we came here. Dined, danced and saw a good show. I really had a swell time. We left here about 11:30 P.M. and took a long walk. And among other things, saw a little more of N.Y. City. It got late and I had to catch a bus for camp. So I dropped her off at the subway... said Goodbye... and caught my bus, which brought to an end a perfect evening.

To Irving:
Here's hoping you return home real soon.
Blanche

Two nights before sailing for France and who knew what??
Mr. Abramson wrote the four-page letter which begins below from France where we was having a "hell of a time" on Wednesday, November 23, 1944.

Day after Thanksgiving

Dear Folks,

Believe it or not I'm sitting at a big desk (with my feet atop it) in a big chair smoking a cigar and writing this. Not only that, but I just finished an enormous Thanksgiving feast and I'm full to the top. And not only that but I got these pages just now, one from you, one from Uncle Dave and one from Mr. Bick (thank her for me), No kidding I'm having a hell of a time. I'll explain...

The big desk & soft chair (and big bed behind me in gonna sleep in tonite). The action in and around the front lately has been intense and exciting. I've been in on the liberation of a couple of the towns you've been reading about in the papers lately. Well, I've been kissed by a million Frenchmen (I mean women) and have more than tasted some delicious wines. Yesterday...
Abramson had been kissed by a "million Frenchmen."

This week we were housed in a small boma (where I am now) and so the spent a couple of comfortable days over Thanksgiving.\footnote{I got about 5 letters from you all today also. I can't remember all of your questions but I'll tell you that I'm swell, don't need a thing and if well as the war keeps going as going, I'll be seeing you in not so very long a time. A bunch of the fellows came in the room and started to go to work on the planks. I don't mind though - there's so much there. I've got some swell new dresses to hang up in the front room to remind me how much to appreciate home when I get back.}

Until next time,

Love,

[Signature]
LOUIS ABRAMSON
3827 W. LAWRENCE AVE CHGO

REGRET TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON WAS SERIOUSLY WOUNDED IN ACTION IN FRANCE ELEVEN DECEMBER UNTIL NEW ADDRESS IS RECEIVED ADDRESs MAIL FOR HIM QUOTE PRIVATE IRVING M. ABRAMSON SERIAL NUMBER (HOSPITALIZED)
CENTRAL POSTAL DIRECTORY A P O 640 C/O POSTMASTER NEW YORK NEW YORK UNQUOTE YOU WILL BE ADVISED AS REPORTS OF CONDITION ARE RECEIVED

BUNLOP ACTING THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

UP Newservice. Chicago April 15
Irv Abramson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Abramson, 3827 Lawrence Ave., recently received the Purple Heart for wounds suffered Dec. 11 in France. A graduate of Lane Technical high school, Irv attended the Armour Institute before entering the service 1 1/2 years ago and has been overseas since October 1944.

"Last week I was dozing off" wrote Irv, from a hospital in France, "when all of a sudden in walks a colonel, a major and two captains. The colonel made a very pretty speech and said how proud they were of all of us guys who were out there on the front lines. Then he pinned the Purple Heart on my pajama top." The Abramsons received the medal in the mail last week. They have another child, Annette, 13, a student at Roosevelt high school. Irv is the grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Kushnir, longtime Residents of Albany Pk.

PVT. ABRAMSON WINS 'HEART'
Wounded on December 11, 1944, Mr. Abramson explains below how he decided to let his folks know that he had been injured, trying not to alarm them. The nurse’s letter, as he dictated it, follows on the next page.

After I was wounded I was brought back to a hospital where I was unconscious for two or three days. I was seriously wounded and when I finally "came to" my first thoughts were of my family back home. I knew the government would send them a notice of my being hurt and I didn’t want them to worry. Since I was in a body cast from my chest to my feet, I could not write by myself but I wanted to send them a letter to tell them I was OK and not to worry.

There was a very nice nurse taking care of me and I asked her to write a letter that I dictated to her. What follows is that letter.

While I didn’t want my parents to worry, the letter did the opposite, in a way, because since I did not write it myself my folks thought (and feared) I had been blinded or had my hands blown off. At least they knew I was still alive.
Mr. Abramson's first letter home after being wounded, dictated to "very nice nurse" on 12/15/44 and postmarked 12/19/44.
After she learned of her son's injury, Mrs. Abramson wrote this letter to him.

Dear Son,

I wish I could find the right words to start this letter. Especially today on your birthday.

To think that you are 19 years old to day and so far away from home. Believe me when I say that we are all with you where ever you are.

Dad and I consider ourselves very lucky to have a son as good as you.

We are so very proud of you. You have given us a lot of joy and happiness. It seems as though we have done so little for you in return.

But clear the only thing I can say now is that we are praying to God that you should recover your health and return home to a normal and peaceful life.
Scans of a photocopy of Mr. Abramson’s key army records for Immunization Register, Identification Card-Enlisted Reserve Corps, and Selective Service System Registration Card.

**IMMUNIZATION REGISTER**

**IMMUNIZATION REGISTER**

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**SMALLPOX VACCINE**

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**TRIPLE TYPHOID VACCINE**

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**YELLOW FEVER VACCINE**

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**IDENTIFICATION CARD-ENLISTED RESERVE CORPS**

This is to certify that Irving M. Abramson, Private, U.S. Army, Serial No. 1481131, Home address: Chicago, Ill., was enlisted in the grade shown in the Enlisted Reserve Corps of the Army of the United States, on the 1st day of September, 1940.

**SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM REGISTRATION CARD**

**THE RUPTURED DUCK INsignia of the Honorably Discharged Veteran**

**REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that in accordance with the Selective Service Proclamation of the President of the United States, the above-named person has been duly registered this day of , 19 at the office of the Selective Service Board.
Irving M. Abramson

BRANCH OF SERVICE
U.S. Army

HOMETOWN
Chicago, IL

HONORED BY
Irving Abramson

ACTIVITY DURING WWII
100TH INFANTRY DIVISION, FOUGHT THROUGH THE EUROPEAN THEATER.
SERIOUSLY WOUNDED IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE. ENLISTED AT 17
YEARS OF AGE.
MILITARY SERVICE RECORD
P.F.C. IRVING ABRAMSON
MILITARY SERIAL #

In 1943 I graduated from Lane Technical High School and enrolled for college at the Illinois Institute of Technology with expectations of being an engineer one day. Tuition was very expensive for those days and it was quite a hardship for my parents to help me financially. At the end of my first term the Army came to the school and gave all interested students an aptitude exam. Those who scored high were given a chance to go to college at government expense. I felt this was a way to get an education without my parents sacrificing so I agreed. The following is what happened as a result of that decision.

August 16, 1943: I enlisted in the U.S. Army when I was seventeen (17) years old. The army promised if I enlisted at that time they would send me to college at government expense for four (4) years. At the end of the four years I would receive a B.S. in mechanical engineering and be advanced in rank to a second lieutenant. In return I had to promise to serve in the armed forces for a minimum of three (3) years.

Sept. 8, 1943: I was sent to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wi. to begin the education promised under the “Army Specialized Training Program” (A.S.T.P.). I attended school there for one full term.

Feb. 1, 1944: The army disbanded the program and all of the men in the program were sent home to await further orders. In about a month those orders came by mail.

March 13, 1944: I was ordered to report to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, for induction into active military service. Previously I had been in the inactive reserve forces. I was then sent to Fort Wheeler, Georgia for basic military training.

Mid July, 1944: After basic training I was assigned to a permanent military unit. I was sent to an army camp in North Carolina to join the 100th Infantry Division (The Century Division). The training at this point was more specifically battle related.

Oct. 6, 1944: I, along with the 100th Division, was sent overseas to join the U.S. fighting forces in Europe. By this time the U.S. had already established a beachhead at Normandy and was beginning to move east through France. Our unit was sent by train to New York to a port of debarkation from which we would board a ship to cross the Atlantic for Europe. I spent 48 hours in New York (Manhattan) before boarding a troop ship (which I believe was named “America”). The ocean voyage took about 12 or 13 days. We zig-zagged across the Atlantic to try and avoid enemy submarines which preyed on troop ships. We ultimately crossed the ocean safely.

Oct. 20, 1944: We arrived in Marseilles, France. We stayed in Marseilles for about 48 hours while our superiors received specific orders and reorganized our unit for a long march through France. I was eighteen years old and in France. It was hard for me to believe. We marched out of Marseilles in a couple of days and marched and fought, and marched and fought all through France and Germany (See “100th Infantry History” attached).
Dec. 11, 1944: For several nights before this date we were pushing east through the Black Forest. We had been battered by constant artillery attacks by the Germans. At dusk on this day we stopped our advance and started to dig fox holes to rest for the night. Because of the extreme cold weather, the ground was very hard and it was difficult to dig those fox holes. Several soldiers got together to dig one large hole that they could all get into. When we had dug down about a foot deep, another artillery attack began. I had been digging with two other soldiers. The three of us laid down, face down, in this shallow hole in an attempt to protect ourselves from flying shrapnel from the exploding artillery shells. I was in the middle between my two buddies. Several hours elapsed. When things quieted down I looked up and realized that my two buddies had been wounded. I laid there pondering what I should do when I lapsed into unconsciousness. I woke up three days later in a M.A.S.H hospital. I learned later that the two soldiers with me had died in that hole. I had suffered a broken leg, numerous burns (from the searing fragments of the shells) and a chest wound which had punctured my left lung. I was told that this all happened at the height of action during the “Battle of the Bulge” The M.A.S.H. hospital was a tent hospital set up right behind the front lines to take first aid, emergency care of the wounded. I was in a cast from my left foot up to my left arm pit. I was unable to be moved for about a week. Then I was moved to a full service hospital many miles west to Dijon, France. and later to a large hospital in Marseilles, France. I was hospitalized in Europe from 12/11/44 until 3/11/45. During that time I had numerous surgeries and periods of recuperation to put me back together again. To this day I bless the compassionate and miraculously talented doctors and nurses that saved my life. During my time in Dijon I was awarded the Purple Heart during a short but impressive military ceremony.

March 11, 1945: I was sent from Marseilles to Paris France in preparation of a return to the U.S. for the balance of my recuperation. (See “My Fifteen Minutes of Fame”, attached)

March 12, 1945: I was loaded on a stretcher and put on an airplane with a number of other wounded G.I.s for a trip to New York.

March 13, 1945: We arrived in New York and put up in a temporary hospital prior to being assigned to (supposedly) a military hospital near our own homes. Somebody didn’t know much about geography because I was assigned and subsequently sent to a Winter General Hospital in Topeka, Kansas. I still had a lot of healing to do and spent seven months at this hospital. During that time I was given passes to come home for short visits. This was the first time I saw my parents since my training days in the U.S. a year before.

October 25, 1945: I was finally released from the hospital and given an honorable, medical discharge from the U.S. Army.
MY FIFTEEN MINUTES OF.....FAME ???

Irv Abramson

Why the question marks in the title? Well, I’m not sure of how loose you’ll allow me to get with the word “Fame”. With apologies to those who may think I’ve given it too broad a definition, here’s my story. For myself, I will always think of the incident as “my fifteen minutes”.

I was seventeen years old when I enlisted in the United States Army in October of 1943. I was eighteen years old in December, 1944, when I was seriously wounded during a German artillery attack in the infamous World War II “Battle of the Bulge”. I turned nineteen while in an army hospital in France, recovering from those wounds and that’s where my story starts.

In February, 1945, after being treated in three different medical facilities in France, I was sent to a convalescent hospital in Marsailles, France for “R and R” (rest and relaxation). Not only was my recovery incomplete but my body was encased in a cast that went from my left foot (with just toes showing) up to my belly button. It was not a pretty sight.

About noon time, on a beautiful, bright February 2nd day, I was given the news that every soldier prayed to hear.....”Soldier, you’re going home!” It wasn’t more than a few hours later that I was loaded on a stretcher and taken by ambulance to the local train depot. It was only then that I became aware that I was only one of forty or fifty other recovering wounded G.I.s that were about to be loaded on a hospital train to begin the trip home. Our train’s destination was Paris, France where we would all be transferred to an airplane for the trip back to the United States.
The railroad cars were former passenger cars that had been specially converted and outfitted to carry patients on stretchers. The cars were gutted of seats and rigged with long, horizontal brackets mounted to the side wall of the cars to which the stretchers were fastened. They were mounted three high with about thirty-six inches between them. I wound up in the middle position with one stretcher above me and one below. It was the furthest thing from deluxe travel as you could possibly get. However, none of us there had a complaint. We were going home and it didn’t matter how!

The trip to Paris was an overnight journey. The train started rolling at about dusk. I can still hear the exceptionally loud clackety-clack of the wheels. I guessed that the exaggerated sound was because of the extreme bareness of the reconverted railway cars.

I had drifted off to sleep but was awakened about 10:00 P.M. by a severe pain in my casted foot. The pain was so intense that I called out for a “medic” (first aid man) who was on duty in our car. When he checked my foot he explained, with concern, that it had swollen up badly and the pain was probably caused by the cast cutting into it. He told me he was going to get a tool to cut the cast and relieve the pressure but first he called to an assistant to stay with me until he returned. The assistant was a pleasant, smiling lady dressed in olive drab army fatigues. What I remember most was her sincere concern, sympathy and kindness. Her voice was calming and comforting and took the edge off of the pain. The first aid man returned shortly and proceeded to cut away the cast and my discomfort was soon relieved. During the entire process the lady “angel” held my hand and spoke soothingly about our return home. The medic asked me if I was O.K. I assured him I was and thanked him. He said he would return later to check on me.
Then the “angel” asked me to reassure her that I was O.K. and when I did she leaned over and kissed me. Holy smoke! She kissed me! In the instant it took for the shock to wear off, she was gone. I was devastated; I never got the chance to thank her.

About half an hour later the medic returned to check on me, as he said he would. Once again I assured him I was O.K. Then he asked, “Do you know who that lady is that held your hand?” I said I didn’t and was disappointed that I didn’t get a chance to thank her. “Soldier”, he said, “That was Marlene Dietrich. She rides these trains regularly as a volunteer “maiden of mercy”. She prefers being anonymous and doesn’t look for any thanks.”

We arrived in Paris the next morning. Later that day we were loaded on an airplane and flew back to the U.S. I never saw Ms. Dietrich after that one special night. I can tell you that my experiences during World War II could fill a small book but one of the most outstanding and memorable was “my fifteen minutes of fame” when Marlene Dietrich kissed me.
Berlin gives Dietrich a birthday gift

BERLIN—The city of Berlin
issued a formal apology for treat-
ing Marlene Dietrich as a traitor
to Germany. The apology was
designed to mark her 100th birthday.

At a ceremony on Thursday, Ger-
man President Johannes Rau
presented Dietrich with a
wreath of flowers. The city also
opened a new museum dedicated
to her legacy.

Dietrich, who was born in
1901, had long been
identified with Berlin and its
rich cultural history. The city's
apology came after years of
controversy over whether she
should be remembered as a
traitor or a symbol of Ger-
man resistance.

Dietrich's career spanned
both sides of World War II,
acting as a spy for the Allies
and later supporting the Nazi
regime. Her film career lasted
until the late 1940s, when she
moved to Hollywood.

The new museum, located in
a former railway station,
will feature exhibits on
Dietrich's life and career,
as well as a multimedia cen-
ter for visitors.

By Toby Helm