

Engineers on the Line

by Herman Zederbaum, 325-EC

An excerpt from the memoirs of Herman "Zeke" Zederbaum, Company C, 325th Engineering, submitted by his son, Scott.

One day I was selected for guard duty. My tour was two hours on and four hours off. It wasn't hard in the daytime, but got pretty lonely at night. Almost everyone in camp was visiting Marseilles. I spoke to Sergeant Garfield and he promised me a pass for the next day. When it wasn't forthcoming, I went and for a few hours, while coming home that night I jumped over a wire fence guarding the railroad tracks. My foot got caught on the top strand and I fell on the rails, breaking a couple of ribs. I had a couple of run in with this same sergeant because of this escapade.

On the 29th of October we started out on a 300-mile trip to the front. It took us three days to arrive. Three nights we spent in a field near a small town. We burned grapevines to cook our food and to help us wash. The first night we slept in the National Park of Dijon, during the night a jeep ran over one of the boys while he was sleeping in his bedroll. I don't know how badly he was hurt, but I do remember all the fellows envying him, because he was going right back to America.

Our last night before we hit the line, we bivouacked in an old German camp. The Americans must have caught them there because the few bodies lying around were near their weapons and didn't have complete uniforms. The bodies didn't arouse any fear or horror, they were more like was images in some cheap museum. They didn't even look too real.

We stayed here for a few days, then on 1 November we moved up on the line. We camped in the woods outside of the town of LaSalle. Not far from where we were dug in were the bloated bodies of four cows. We were fortunate that the weather was cool. Otherwise the smell would have been terrific.

Every day we were issued two cans of "C" rations with biscuits and sent out on some job. They usually took from early morning until long after the sun went down to complete. Most of the jobs were routine. For instance, one of them was to lay a corduroy road for a quarter of a mile through a sea of mud so the jeeps and ambulances could convoy the supplies to the front and the wounded to the rear. There wasn't much danger, but it was very hard work and most of us were pretty nervous listening to the firing that went on.

The morning of 5 November we went out as usual with our ration and we stopped at a little town called St. Remy. The town was the usual cluster of buildings of stone with the barns connected to the houses. There must have been at least two dozen of them on the main street. The town was built on a hill and as we stood looking out of our hiding places we could see the valley sloped downward about 300 yards and then rose gently into another hill like the one we were standing on. There wasn't a tree or a shrub in the whole valley except for a clump in our extreme left about a quarter of a mile away. On our side of the valley about 30 feet from the top of the hill was a small stream about 10 feet wide. We were told to put a bridge across this so jeeps could go over and pick up the wounded. All this time the German were dropping light mortar shells around our houses, as yet no one was hit.

The Lieutenant called Bottoms, Dunbar and myself over to his doorway. He told us that some Tiger Tanks were in the vicinity and that we should go out as a frontal and flank guard. Bottoms was the bazooka man, Dunbar was his ammo bearer and I carried an "M1" to give them protection against foot traps. (Boy, were we green!) We were supposed to run down through the valley and into this clump of trees off to our left and stake ourselves in a strategic spot. Later Lieutenant Bell would come down and see how we were doing. We waited until there was a lull in the shelling and then we started running down the hill. I ran until I thought my lungs would bust but I finally made the clump of trees. I had been the last of the three to reach the trees. Bottoms remarked that it was very odd that all firing had ceased while we had been running. We found a spot that looked like a good one. We could see across the valley while they couldn't see us. Suddenly someone opened fire on us, with a rifle. The sniper couldn't see us but he knew the vicinity we were in. We debated whether I should shoot back but decided against it since it might give away our position. By this time we were wet through and through as the rain was coming down in torrents. An hour or two went by and we started to get worried. We were in strange country, it was starting to get dark and we didn't know the password. Lieutenant Bell had not showed up and nobody else knew where we were. The shelling had intensified in the valley and our sniper friend let loose a volley at us just to let us know he hadn't forgotten us. Suddenly we heard a wild yell. Looking backwards from the way we had come we saw an awe-inspiring sight. There, charging down the hill with fixed bayonets and looking like they were coming for us was a company of doughboys. We were in no-man's land. If they saw us we were goners. They would shoot first and ask questions later. After all they didn't expect to find any friendly troops ahead of them.

Luck was with us and we weren't seen. After the first wave went by we decided to leave. We were about half way back when we ran into a searching party. They were looking for our bodies. The Lieutenant had heard the sniper firing and since he didn't hear any return fire, assumed we were casualties. After we had gone out they had started work on the bridge, but hadn't gotten too far because of small arms fire.

Now the work was being resumed. Slinging my rifle I grabbed a stringer with Bottoms and started walking down the hill. While we were occupied with this, the second wave of infantry poured down in the valley. They were spread in a thin line as they moved. It looked like a football team going down after the kick off. They forgot everything they had learned. Nobody tried to seek cover, hit the ground, or throw the enemy off. They just kept going down into the valley and up the other side where the Germans were waiting for them. We finally got our bridge finished and the jeeps started rolling across to pick up the wounded. The Jerries on the hill had quit by this time and GIs were straggling back with prisoners. One doughboy came back with five of them. One had been shot through the stomach and the others were half carrying, half dragging him by his arms and legs. His groans were mingled with the GIs threats to blow their asses off if they didn't hurry up.

After it was dark we were told to load up. Garfield went in the lieutenant's jeep while we got in our respective trucks. The three trucks moved off in the dark. Everybody was confused. We got to a crossroad and a guard stopped us and told us to turn around and go by a different road because this one was under heavy machine-gun fire. We turned around! After a few minutes, we decided we were lost. My seat was up against the cab of the truck. I took off my helmet and hung it on my rifle that was standing between my legs. I put my head on my helmet and tried to sleep. I was hungry and my broken ribs ached from the cold and from shaking so much from fright. I must have dozed off, for the next thing I remember was a terrific crash, and everybody was all tangled in the truck. I couldn't feel my legs and I felt something hot on my hands. My first panic over, I thought very calmly, I wondered how bad I had gotten hit? First I reached down and felt for one foot. It was all there, then, I inspected the other one. It seemed all right. Where was the blood coming from? I touched my face, Yep, it was covered with blood. By this time I noticed the truck was almost empty and that it sloped down over to the front left side. I made my way to the tailboard and got ready to jump down. I was told to be careful how I climbed out. Don't step on a mine. It hadn't been artillery or mortars, but a minefield we had blundered into. The jeep had gone through safely and so had the first truck, but we hadn't been so lucky. We carried out our driver who had a shattered ankle and Sergeant Johns, who was suffering from a cut on the head when he fell out of the cab. We went into a farmhouse, and waited around until the Lieutenant got back from Headquarters. Infantry medics who were stationed at this farm fixed up our wounded and told us that 100 yards down the road we were traveling was enemy territory. How Lovely!

A tall GI from the infantry was telling us his father had been in this same territory in the last war. The Frenchman upon hearing this showed us where the first AEE had written their names on a big beam. The soldiers' fathers name was seventh on the list. The fellow was so excited he could hardly hold his trench knife straight as he added his name to the list.