

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

27. THE 100th DIVISION

Our 100th Division consists of the three infantry regiments, three 105 mm artillery battalions, a heavy artillery unit and other supporting elements such as MPs, QM, medics, the 325th Engineer Battalion, motor pool, reconnaissance company, and others.

The entire Army is built from the 12-man rifle squads and groups of three, starting with the three rifle squads in a platoon. Every unit of three has one or more supporting units, including a Command or HQ unit. Three rifle platoons, a weapons platoon, and a headquarters platoon make a rifle company. Three rifle companies, one HQ company, and a weapons company make a battalion.

Continuing up the organization; three battalions make a regiment, and each regiment has an antitank company, recon unit, cannon company, and a regimental HQ company. Our infantry regiments are the 397th, 398th and 399th. Each regiment is supported by a field artillery battalion of 105 mm cannon.

The business of threes goes on. The three field artillery battalions (374th, 375th and 925th) each has three batteries of 105 mm guns. In addition, the Division is supported by the 155 mm cannon of the 373rd Field Artillery Battalion.

Each battalion of each regiment consists of a Headquarters (HQ) Company, three rifle companies, and a heavy weapons company. Companies are designated by letters as follows:

First battalion: rifle Companies A, B, and C; plus heavy weapons Co. D.

Second battalion: rifle Companies E, F, and G; plus heavy weapons Co. H.

Third battalion: rifle companies I, K, and L, plus heavy weapons Co. M.

We are Co. M, the heavy weapons company of the third battalion of the 399th Regiment. Our phonetic names are Item, King, Love and Mike. We are the last company of the last regiment of the 100th Division.

I wonder why there is no "J" Company. Maybe because, a long time ago, a code of flags was devised by a British Royal Navy Captain (Sir Home Popham) to send messages between ships. By allowing Admiral Lord Nelson to control fleet movements, the messages helped win the stunning victory at Trafalgar. The economical Popham deleted several letters which he thought were not needed for phonetic communication and "J" became an outcast. More likely, "Jay" just

sounds too much like "Kay".

28. PLATOON BARRACKS

John Langley and I are the newest ammo bearers in the fourth squad of the second machine gun platoon of Company M of the 399th Regiment. Not yet (but almost) nineteen, we explore our new world.

Mike Company is housed in the last row of a long line of identical sets of five buildings. Each set serves a Company. At one end, nearest to the main post, is the 399th HQ. Next is the First Battalion HQ followed by Companies A to D; Second Battalion HQ; Companies E to H; and last, at the far end, is our Third Battalion HQ followed by Companies L to M.

Headquarters and the Supply Room for Mike Company are back to back in a one-story building at the north end of our row of barracks. The first, second and third platoons are each housed in their own two-story barracks, placed end to end. At the South end of the row is the one-story mess hall.

In our second platoon barracks, the first and second squads are combined in the first section which lives on the ground floor. The third and fourth squads constitute the second section that lives upstairs.

Section leaders are staff sergeants and share a room, while Platoon Sergeant Hogan has his own room. Each squad has a row of bunks occupied in this order; squad leader (a three stripe or "buck" sergeant); first and second gunners (both Pfc.'s); and ammo bearers. There is no corporal in the machine gun squad.

The rest of our row of bunks is occupied by HQ and mess personnel, the platoon messenger (a corporal); and the "technical ratings:" company clerk, mail clerk, and cooks.

A few signs remain of the previous tenant: the 101st Airborne Division, now training in England for D-Day. We are upwind from nearby Pope Field, so at intervals, day and night, there are C-54's and C-47's taking off directly over our barracks. Some are training flights for glider pilots. We can picture paratroopers riding those same planes a few months earlier.

For the first time, I am issued a steel helmet which fits snugly over the plastic liner that served so well in basic training. The liner's strap fits across the helmet's visor and keeps the liner in place when the helmet is not being worn. I fasten the helmet's strap under my chin, and the two and one-half pounds makes my head wobble. We wear the helmets during all training formations, and I gradually feel my neck muscles getting stronger.

29. SIDE ARMS AND GUNS

The three rifle platoons in a rifle company are supported by a weapons platoon equipped with air cooled 30 caliber machine guns and 60 mm mortars.

The three rifle companies in a battalion are supported by a weapons company, equipped with water cooled 30 caliber machine guns and 81 mm mortars. Compared to the air cooled guns and 60 mm mortars, ours are justly called "Heavy Weapons."

Each heavy weapons company includes the first and second machine gun platoons, and a third platoon of six 81 mm mortar squads. The Company HQ platoon has several 50 caliber machine guns, mainly for antiaircraft. The 50 caliber gun and its ammo are too heavy to carry far from the jeeps.

Each machine gun platoon has four squads. Since we are the fourth squad of the second machine gun platoon, we are numerically, the last machine gun squad in the Division. Only the six mortar squads of the third platoon follow us.

Machine guns and mortars are "crew served" weapons and, at full strength, the crew is a six man squad. The men carry a variety of "side arms" or personal weapons.

The only rifle in our squad is an M-1 Garand with bayonet, carried by the squad leader. The two gunners each carry a 45 caliber Colt "automatic" pistol, Model 1911A and a trench knife. Each of the three ammo bearers carries an M-1 carbine and a trench knife.

The pistol is called an "automatic" but it is really "semi-automatic" since each shot requires a separate trigger pull. Pistols, carbines and rifles each require a separate trigger pull for each shot.

Only the machine gun is "fully automatic." One long trigger squeeze will

fire the entire 250 round belt through the machine gun, in about 30 seconds. (We have no Browning Automatic Rifles in our Company.)

John Langley and I are issued carbines and trench knives. We admire the neat little carbines which weigh only five and a half pounds, compared to more than nine for the Garand rifle.

John came to the Division without benefit of basic training and ASTP time, but his father is a "Regular Army" Colonel, now retired in Riviera, Texas. We are in the "Army of the United States" and not part of the "Regular Army." Gregarious John is a natural leader. He sings of the Yellow Rose of Texas, studies training manuals, and introduces me to quiet Bob Howell from the first platoon.

30. GUN DRILL

Our "gun" is the famous "Model M1917A1 Browning Water Cooled Machine Gun," the standard in its class during WW I & II, the Korean War and for some years afterwards. (Several models are exhibited at the Ft. Benning Museum.)

The first gunner, in addition to his pistol, carries the tripod and cradle assembly. The unwieldy combination weighs 53.2 pounds and must be carefully manipulated.

The olive drab tripod has two short front legs and a longer rear leg. Each leg is adjustable so that the gun can be set level on uneven ground, or all three legs can be strapped together to make a more compact bundle for storage or transport. The black cradle rides on top of the tripod, and allows the gun to be moved freely, up, down, and sideways. When the cradle is clamped down, its aiming wheels allow the field of fire to be adjusted up, down and sideways, a few mils at a time.

To lift the heavy tripod, stand it on the long rear leg, hoist it up by the near foreleg, crouch to get the weight to your shoulder, then pivot the tripod onto your back and stand up. The forelegs hang over your shoulders; the weight rests on one's back, or over the pack, and the long rear leg hangs down in back. Not easy.

Once positioned, the adjusting handles usually put all of the weight on a few spots on your shoulders. It is the heaviest and most awkward load in the squad.

The second gunner, also armed with a pistol, carries the gun; a 38 inch long, ugly black monster with a bulky water jacket. The pintle, attached to the gun, fits into the cradle. Gun and pintle weigh 32.8 pounds; seven pints of water or glycol antifreeze in the water jacket brings the total to about 40 pounds. The gun is balanced on the shoulder, usually with the barrel to the rear and positioned back far enough to counter the weight of one's arm, draped over the receiver.

To set up the gun, the squad leader determines the required field of fire, looks for terrain to provide cover or concealment; and tells the first gunner where to set the tripod.

The first gunner drops the tripod in place, the second gunner fits the gun into the tripod's cradle, and the ammo bearer brings up two boxes of ammunition. The second gunner feeds the ammo belt in from the left.

To load the gun, the first gunner's hands go through a smooth series of alternating motions. Left hand raises the sight leaf, right releases the cover latch and raises the cover, left feeds in the ammo belt, right pulls the belt through the receiver, left closes and latches the cover; right pulls back and releases the bolt. A spring slams the bolt forward, carrying a round from the belt to the chamber, and the gun is ready to fire. Left hand grabs the handle, and left forefinger rests on the trigger, ready to fire the gun. The right hand is poised to adjust the aiming wheels at the rear of the cradle. A smooth 3 or 4 second operation.

The gunner fires with his left hand on the single handle and his left forefinger on the trigger. His right hand manipulates the aiming wheels, one on the side of the cradle to traverse left and right, and one below to change elevation. (Only the 50 caliber machine gun has the two handles so beloved by the movies.)

The front sight is a covered blade mounted at the top front of the water jacket. The rear sight is similar, but bigger than the Springfield Rifle sight. It has both aperture and open "U" sights in a leaf about 5 inches high, with a small windage adjustment, and a range of some 3,700 yards at the top of the sight leaf.

I watch the smooth performance of the team in amazement. Then we change places and drill, drill, drill, until all of us are proficient at all of the positions. At the end of our first day of training, we learn a pleasant new ritual; squirt oil on our side arms, put them in the racks, and then we are free to leave the barracks.

Some of the non-noncoms are married and spend the off nights with their wives in cramped, scarce rooms or apartments in the nearby Fayetteville area.

This is a happy contrast to the never ending cleaning and extra hours duty in basic training and the dedicated study nights at The Citadel.

In the evenings, Howell, Langley and I take in a movie at the Post Theater, or visit the PX or the service club. In basic training, there was never so much leisure. More astonishing, at the end of the week, after the Saturday morning review, or inspection, we are free from noon until Monday morning's Reveille Formation.

The first free weekend, I ride a bus to Fayetteville where there are 40,000 soldiers from the camp, and maybe 10,000 civilians in the entire town. It takes less than an hour to walk both sides of the main street. The local service club is crowded with GIs. A real milk shake hits the spot, and I reluctantly board the bus, back to camp.

31. RALPH AND THE CAPTAIN

Ralph Reeves also came to the 100th from the Citadel. He writes as follows:

"I enjoyed the whole Army experience of not worrying about yesterday or tomorrow. Each day was a total concern enough."

"Mom never raised a dummy. At Ft. Bragg, it occurred to me that hiding behind a hill with a mortar was a great improvement over aiming down a machine gun at someone who was aiming back. I recall all of us standing at attention in front of the M Company barracks and the 3rd platoon sergeant was given first choice because he wanted the biggest guys for toting the mortars and ammo."

"I had no choice in the matter, but stood tall as I could and tried to look my cherubic meanest. I was muscular and hard as nails, a medium 175 pounds, but got chosen (assigned to first squad, third platoon). That sergeant and a bunch of old timers were promptly transferred overseas, so I don't recall his name, but the Company Commander was Captain Quentin Derryberry. Man, what a name!"

"I grudgingly learned to admire Captain Derryberry because he could run

like a gazelle and led us all on those half-hour chases which I actually enjoyed. I ran cross country a lot as a kid and I loved it. 'QMD,' or 'Quartermaster Depot,' as we called him, was a good soldier and I had a great respect which became tremendous respect and admiration since I last saw this fine soldier."

Sgt. (later lieutenant) John Aughey of the first platoon wrote this story about Captain Derryberry:

"Many years ago, according to Aesop's fables, a village in Arabia was celebrating a feast attended by one Abu Hassan. Abu and the others were seated in a circle on the ground, partaking of the food and wine presented in the center. Abu, being quite full, stretched for yet another morsel, letting fly a fart, loud and terrible! Abu was so mortified that he fled the party and country."

"Some years later Abu returned to the village in disguise. He happened to overhear a conversation between a mother and her small daughter. The child asked, 'When was I born?' The reply: 'Oh my child, thou was born on the very day that Abu Hassan farted!'"

"Abu thought to himself, 'Verily, my fart hath become a date.' And he fled the country, never to return."

"We move forward to an evening in October, 1944. By command of the CO, all NCO's of Company M were seated on the ground for a short meeting before chow. As the Captain prepared to address the group, a distinct fart was heard from somewhere within. The air became even more quiet. The captain paused to gather his thoughts, then asked, 'Who did that?'"

"A sergeant rose and acknowledged the deed, whereupon the captain stated: 'A breach of wind is a breach of military etiquette. Report to the orderly room after this meeting.'"

"What happened thereafter is unknown to the writer who, however, mentally dated subsequent events by the number of days since Sgt._____ farted."

- John Aughey.

(The flatulent sergeant died in France less than a year after this incident.

Captain, later Major, Derryberry was wounded and went on to a successful law practice. Ralph Reeves' good opinion of the Captain was not shared by all of the officers who served under him. Lawyer Derryberry died in 1992.)

Aughey's story brings to mind two bits of farmer's wisdom relating to flatulence and leadership:

"A farting horse won't weaken." - and -

"You will never grow rich following a horse's ass."

(I have followed many a horse's ass and sure enough, not to riches.)

Finally, from Dr. Nicholas Senn, professor of surgery at Rush Medical Center, we learn: "Qui crepitat vivat!" - Who farts, lives! (My apologies.)

Ralph Reeves continues:

"Inescapably, any and every mortar man could not help but think about the security of that hill or house in front of him, but no one talked about such thoughts. No one chose his lot in the Army. It was like a drawing of straws or a cast of the dice that decided if one would be a rifleman, machine gunner, mortar gunner, or whatever. Those in more or less safe places could only thank their good luck."

"My great happiness was being permitted to carry a 45 Colt automatic side arm and never carry a damned rifle again. To this day I think I have a permanent shoulder injury from toting the M-1, Enfield and even a Springfield all over Ft. Benning. In fact, given my druthers, I'd rather carry the 44 pound mortar tube or the mortar bipod on my shoulder. Must have been the fit."

"I first was amazed at how lousy I was with a pistol. Couldn't come within five feet of a bull's eye. I became very very expert. In combat mine was always fully loaded with only a thumb safety to flip down. My holster was soft and pliant and I could quickly draw as if the fastened flap was not there. As I drew, my thumb lifted the flap, flipped down the safety and I could fire in a fraction of a second."

"I have never been able to understand the way police carry their weapons sticking out as if begging to be taken; no way to quick draw, but it is easy to take their pistols away from them. Of course later, in combat, my enchantment with the pistol turned to disenchantment in direct proportion to proximity to Germans."

"One day, in mortar training, I fancied myself the best 81 millimeter gunner

in all the Army; I set the mortar up in 19 seconds, when 60 seconds made one an expert."

- Ralph Reeves

32. PARADES

We sweat for hours in the traditional massed battalion formation that no longer has a place in battle, but is so loved by commanders of every army in all of history.

The misnamed "Company Front" formation is some fifty men wide, an entire battalion in a mass of humanity; wavering in a struggle to maintain straight lines. When turning a corner, the men in the outer end of the line take giant steps, trying to keep to the beat of the drum, while the men near the hub mark time. Squads and platoons are disregarded; each company lines up with the officers in the front rank, then riflemen in order of height, followed by men armed with pistols or carbines.

The 29th of March is clear and warm, a lovely spring day. The Division Band plays as we march onto the parade field in our class "A" khakis and steel helmets. The riflemen, including our squad leaders, carry bayoneted rifles at "right shoulder arms." The rest of the weapons company men are near the rear of the formation where our carbines (carried at "sling arms") and holstered pistols do not break up the lines of rifles.

The midmorning sun warms to the heat of the day as the speakers drone through the qualifications for the yet-to-be-awarded "Expert Infantryman's Badge;" forced marches; infiltration, obstacle and bayonet courses; and qualification with a variety of weapons. It is tougher than basic training. Qualification will bring a \$5 per month bonus as authorized by Congress. (Later, The Combat Infantryman's Badge paid \$10 a month.)

Finally, General Leslie McNair presents the very first expert infantryman's badge; the famous EIB. A precursor of millions, it goes to Sgt. Walter Bull. He is the alphabetical first of a small group who have earned the new EIB. About 12th on the list is our own Tech Sgt. Hogan.

We are assured that we will all have the opportunity to go through the same grueling qualification that these men have completed. I wonder if I can qualify. The extra money is a significant amount next to my basic pay of \$50 a month. We parade past the reviewing stand in honor of this small elite group of men. Lucky Sgt. Hogan; he will get his five bucks next month, but he'll have to do most of the qualification all over again with us!

Everyone volunteers for the "provisional battalion;" 1100 men will be drawn from all units to represent the Division in a parade in New York City. The odds against being selected are better than twelve to one, since the battalion will be less than one-twelfth of the Division strength.

We expected the battalion to consist mostly of experienced riflemen, so we celebrate when John Langley, Sgt. Revere and I are selected; three of us from a six man machine-gun squad! We are surprised when our two gunners are left behind; they have seniority over John and I.

Newspapers report the invasion of Northern France. Censors barely allow mention of the Normandy beaches. We spend D-Day, June 6, 1944, on a hot train steaming up the East Coast.

From Union Station, Army trucks carry us through Manhattan, across the George Washington Bridge; turn North along the Hudson River, re-cross the river, and arrive at hilly, wooded Camp Shanks, an hour's drive north of New York City.

After the heat of Ft. Bragg, this is a fun summer camp in the cool shade of big pine trees, with rustic log buildings, a neat, well stocked post exchange, - and no training duties.

Several squads are sent to the City to demonstrate the machine gun squad operations while I pull KP duty. There is a reward; an overnight pass.

PFC Bob Howell and I take a train to Baltimore. Bob, a Missouri farm boy, is an eager tourist. "Show me," he says; "I've never been to the East Coast, tell me about it." From the train windows we see the Susquehanna River, the headwaters of the Chesapeake Bay; oil refineries, shipyards, and then the streets of Baltimore.

We make a quick walking tour to see some of my friends. The girls seem wistful; they like this quiet Midwesterner. Bob and I look like soldiers now; our bleached khakis are stiff with starch. Blue infantry piping and regimental crests decorate our overseas caps. Bright blue Division patches ride proudly on our left shoulders. Shirts are garnished with new PFC stripes, marksmanship, and good

conduct medals. And muscles too, all brand new! Quite a contrast to my first visit in new baggy khakis!

We have dinner with my family. They gather around us, the guests of honor. Bob tells us that he plans to study agriculture, and eventually improve his family's farm near Fristoe, Missouri. His sister is an Army nurse in England.

On a warm sunny Sunday, June the 11th; our trucks roll across the George Washington Bridge into New York city. The big deuce-and-a-half's and smaller weapons carriers pull up along the north end of Central Park. We form up on Fifth Avenue at 81st Street in starched clean khakis. To my right I see a row of bright blue Division patches, each shaped like a shield with the number 100 in white and yellow. I wear a steel helmet, light pack, pistol belt with ammo pouch, trench knife, canteen and aid packet. The empty carbine, muzzle up, hangs behind my right shoulder..

As usual, we carbineers bring up the rear of the formation. Ahead we see files of rifles and steel helmets. As far as we can see, rows of "bloused" trousers and leggings swing in time to the music. We march down Fifth Avenue, from 81st to 40th Street; the 100th Division Band right behind us, doing full justice to Sousa; "The Thunderer," "Hands Across the Sea," and the incomparable "Stars and Stripes Forever." (Later "The Story of the Century" reports that we marched "up" Fifth Avenue, but I remember climbing down from the truck at 81st Street next to Central Park, and marching south with the noon sun, almost overhead, and in my face. Maybe "up" is South towards City Hall?)

It is a great day to be walking in New York, sunny and not too hot. We join the spectators in thinking of friends, sons, brothers and husbands, on the beaches of Normandy. Emotions are palpable; many spectators are in tears. Our brave appearance and bold music contrasts sharply with the realities of war as reported in the daily papers. Tears are not limited to folks in the crowd.

We march again in the City on Infantry Day; June the 15th. This time, up lower Broadway, to the City Hall. Standing in the marble portico above the wide steps, Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia ("the Little Flower") presents our Commanding Officer with a big gold painted "Key to the City." We give him a cheer and march off to the trucks for the ride back to Camp Shanks.

In a few quick days we return to Ft. Bragg without Sgt. Revere. For 30 days, he is a member of a platoon which has no other duty except to present a retreat ceremony each evening at Radio City Plaza. Tough assignment for Revere, he "billets" at his Brooklyn home, a short subway ride away. He rejoins us in time for the EIB qualification.

More ominous are the empty beds of the first and second gunners, already on their way overseas as "replacements." Langley and I take their places. We move to the first and second bunks next to Revere's empty bunk and exchange our carbines for pistols. New replacements fill the void we left as ammo bearers. The training intensifies as we begin qualifying for the Expert Infantryman's Badge.