

LOVE COMPANY

ATTACK, ATTACK, ATTACK

Throughout the month of November and into December 1944, the company was on the offensive in coordination with I Company and K Company of the 3rd Battalion. Each attack consisted of two companies in the van and the third company in reserve. There was a regular rotation of assignments. The Germans were giving us stiff resistance as they slowly retreated.

Our attack would sometimes be preceded by a barrage from our mortars and artillery. Our rifle company would then move forward against the German lines. Usually, they would have retreated to prepared positions behind the front we attacked. It was then that we would often be bombarded by the enemy 88mm artillery and 81mm mortars as we reached their abandoned positions. They knew the pinpoint range to their former positions and the barrage could be devastating. If our attack was stopped and we were ordered to return to our lines, the Germans would return to their previous positions. Then we would have to prepare for another attack unless they counterattacked. Whenever possible, it was always better to push through and take the objective and hold it, regardless of the casualties we had to suffer. We learned that if you retreated, you had to go back at them again, and your first attack was wasted.

On 18 November 1944, in the area of Neufmaisons, France, the 3rd Battalion was assigned the task of taking the high ground on the road to Raon l'Etape. L Company suffered heavily from a barrage of mortar and artillery fire. The enemy attacked at 1400 against the left flank of the company, which was also the left flank of the division. If the attack had succeeded, the division flank would have been exposed, but after a two-hour battle the Germans were repulsed. The Story of the Century had the following report:

"Pfc. William J. Ansel was one of the deciding factors in Co. L's success that afternoon. Ansel, who had become acting squad leader earlier in the day when his squad leader suffered serious wounds, was directing his squad in digging an emplacement for their machine gun when the enemy counterattack began. (He) first noticed the enemy moving on his position less than fifty yards away. Ordering his men to take cover and open fire with their small arms, he tried to mount his machine gun. but the en-

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emy was closing in too rapidly. ... Ansel began firing the heavy gun from his hip. ... The enemy hesitated but soon were advancing again, directing most of their fire at him. Ansel was forced back twice, once because of the enemy onrush, and the second time to insert a new belt of ammunition in the smoking gun. With the new belt inserted, Ansel grimly walked toward the thickest part of the Jerry attack, firing as he advanced.

“Seven enemy were killed and 11 wounded before Ansel ceased firing, having broken the counterattack and enabled Co. L to retake the ground it had lost. ...”

For his action, Pfc. William J. Ansel received the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest medal, and was promoted to sergeant.

Among the casualties on this day was Spider – Pfc. John J. Hudec, who was severely wounded and evacuated to the hospital.

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THE ATTACK CONTINUES

As we pressed our attack against the enemy, we came across shoe mines, which were designed to blow up under the footstep of an infantry soldier. The shoe mine was a simple device: a wooden box about 4" by 4" with a hinged cover. Inside there was about ¼ pound of dynamite with a detonator and spring-loaded firing pin that exploded the shoe mine when it was stepped on. Many a soldier lost a foot or a leg because of them. Some who fell on them were killed.

The Germans also had other antipersonnel devices, such as bouncing bettys that were buried in the ground just below the surface. They would be set off when stepped on and would shoot a shell up about three feet, which then exploded sending steel balls and shrapnel flying for 50 feet in every direction. Fortunately, we did not come across any bouncing bettys.

During this period of pursuit, I got into the habit of looking in every direction as if I had 360 degree vision. I dragged my feet as I trudged through the woods, because I didn't want to lose a foot by stepping on a shoe mine, which was usually placed on the ground covered with leaves or some dirt. By doing this, I thought I would kick the shoe mine out of my way.

On one attack, I remember moving through a wooded area made up of trees that not only were barren of leaves for winter, but were skeletons with spindly branches and stunted growth. Heavy artillery shelling had splintered them into grotesque shapes. A fog formed by the smoke left by artillery shells hung over the entire woods. The sun could not come through the gray pall that covered the whole scene. There was the smell of gunpowder in the air. I thought that I had come to a world of the supernatural – a world of grays and whites with no living things and just me walking in a dream through it. My buddies were there in a skirmish line on my right and left, but I could not see them in the smoke and fog. There was the sound of artillery, but it seemed artificial – unreal. I finally shuffled through to the other side of this eerie world where I could see the reality of winter in evergreen trees on an open field. I looked left and right to see the other dogfaces emerging from the woods.

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The company was moving constantly from the end of November until the end of December 1944. When we marched from one area to another to take up a new position, the company would be strung out with a column on each side of the road. A distance of 4 or 5 yards between each man was kept to minimize our casualties if we were hit by artillery or enemy attack. On one occasion, while we were walking along in our usual desultory manner, we were suddenly alerted to the roar of a low-flying airplane. We looked up to see a P47 Thunderbolt with U.S. markings bearing down on us and firing a burst of machine gun bullets. In an instant, every one of us hit the ground. There was not a single dogface standing on the road. Fortunately, no one was hit.

As I got up I cursed the pilot and thought of Spider, "General Arnold doesn't want us back, after all." Some of the guys thought that it was a German flying a captured P47 Thunderbolt, but it was more likely another snafu (situation normal all fouled up) – just an unfortunate mistake. Love Company formed up again and we resumed our march.

One battle faded into the next. I cannot describe every firefight with the enemy. It was almost always the same. We attacked with mortars and cannon shells followed by riflemen moving ahead with rifles, grenades and machine guns. They returned our fire with their fire. Then it depended on which side had the greater firepower and the fewest casualties to advance or retreat. Fortunately, we outfought the Germans in almost every battle. Some were very costly.

Each patrol was a repetition of the last. Whether it was a battle or a patrol, I remember the shots of German burp guns and machine guns whizzing over my head as I hugged Mother Earth. They spewed bullets in tremendous bursts. Trees and branches splintered around me as they were hit. I could only fire back with the M1 Garand rifle that I now had when they stopped for an instant or fired in another area.

When we were bombarded with artillery shells they came down on us and tore up the ground as they exploded. The shells also exploded in the trees and showered us with shrapnel. They maimed and killed more men than any other weapon. The soldier had no defense against the enemy artillery bombardment except to dig a foxhole with a cover. When you could fire back, you did it with anger and vengeance for the buddies that were hit.

Captured enemy soldiers also complained that American artillery was the most feared weapon of all. Some of them surrendered because they could not take any more shelling from our gunners who were deadly

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accurate in their firing. They may not have had the rough life of a dogface as they fired from their cannons from a mile behind the front line but they were loved for their support.

After one particular battle, when everything was quiet, my foxhole buddy and I were having a meal of K rations outside our foxhole and relaxing when we were suddenly surprised. Standing before us in a spotless uniform and polished boots was a German officer. He wore an officer's cap and not a steel helmet. He had a pistol in a holster on his belt, but he did not take it out. He said in an authoritative way that he wanted to see our commanding officer. We were so stunned that we grabbed our rifles and pointed them at him. We took his pistol, which was a P-38 and not a prized Luger, and checked to see if he had any other weapon. He sneered at our unkempt uniforms, dirty, unshaven faces, and plodding movements. That was answered with a powerful shove that almost sent him into the muddy ground as he was escorted back to the rear. This officer was more than a lieutenant, probably a major or a colonel (Oberst). We wondered how he managed to walk from his own front lines alone across no-man's-land and not be noticed. He seemed to materialize out of nowhere. I did admire how he surrendered in style.

Our movements were usually on foot whether we were in reserve or were sent back up to the front line. As one company pushed through our position, we would then be following the front. We would rest a few days and then march up to push through K or I Company's position. Until we reached their line, we would march along in the usual manner on both sides of the road with five-yard distances between each man. On a few occasions, there would be a dogface who had unfortunately soiled his trousers ahead of you. It was a result of fright or a delay in planning ahead. Though the smell was sometimes strong, we did not add to the embarrassment of the poor guy who was just a boy of 18. He would clean up his outfit as soon as we reached reserve quarters.

The roadside sights on those marches told of the destruction of this war. There were burned-out tanks, destroyed trucks, rubble piles that were once houses, dead horses and cattle lying on their sides with their four legs sticking straight out in rigor mortis, and there were dead soldiers, too. The destruction of men and military materiel was from both sides. However, when it was an American soldier, we were especially grim, and we felt a loss even though we did not know him. We passed the body of an American sapper who was lying in the middle of the road where he had been killed by an enemy mine that he was trying to disarm. His arm was reach-

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ing into the hole where the mine was buried. It exploded and then it was all over for him. I felt a shiver of pain, but it just added to my feeling of numbness.

Upon reaching our destination where we were to attack through another company's line, we would follow orders when to move ahead. On one particular action, we had to wait in a column in a wood and could hear the sounds of a fire fight in front of us. There were American and German machine guns and rifles firing away in loud bursts. It seemed that the men ahead of us had run into strong enemy positions and were pinned down. My platoon was in the rear of the column, and we had stopped to await orders. Out of nowhere, we were joined by a lieutenant colonel, the regimental commander, whom I had never before seen so close to the front. He stood with us for a few minutes and then shouted, "Tell those soldiers to move up! That's an order from the Colonel! Pass it along!" The command was picked up by the company noncoms and soldiers and yelled to the men further ahead nearer the fighting. "The Colonel says, 'Move up! That's an order!' Pass it along!" It was not too long after that when we received the reply from the front, "Screw the Colonel! Pass it along!" He did not stay there with us, but got into his Jeep and left. We, of course, did move up into the line as the situation developed and our platoon leaders gave the orders.

For the dogface at the front, the orders of his sergeant and platoon leader are the only ones he feels confident to obey, because they are there with him in the middle of the fight. Very high-ranking officers are not overly respected by those at the very bottom of the military ladder unless they have proved themselves in combat.

In fact, it was rumored that the big army brass at the top levels sent an order to the 100th Division to the effect that our casualties were not consistent with the amount of territory we were capturing. This meant that there was something wrong; that we must be having an easy time and were not pushing hard enough against the enemy. We were having a walk in the park. Incidentally, long after the war was over, our division commander, Maj. Gen. Withers A. Burress, was asked what he was most proud of while in combat. He said that the 100th Infantry Division conquered more enemy territory with fewer casualties than any other division in the war. For that reason alone, I think "Pinky" Burress was one of the unsung heroes of World War II.

Morning reports of that period read as follows:

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28 Nov 44 Entrucked 0755 at Moyenmoutier Fr. 32 miles to Brouderdorff, Fr arr. 1200.

We arrived there after a brief rest during Thanksgiving to take our position with other companies in the 3rd Battalion of the 399th Infantry Regiment.

A story was told that a sergeant and a few of his men had come in from the front to the kitchen of regimental headquarters for a Thanksgiving dinner. They had seen a lot of action and were on special assignment to have this special treat. Of course, they were in miserable shape, dirty and smelly, and they were greeted by an arrogant mess sergeant who said to them, "You're too late. The kitchen's closed. There's no more turkey." This did not please the hungry sergeant and his men. They took their rifles off their shoulders and pointed them at the mess sergeant and his cooks. "We have just come in from killing the Germans! Now, do we get a dinner or do we have to shoot somebody?" They were promptly fed.

2 Dec 44 Left Brouderdorff Fr. by motor 0640 Arr. Siewiller Fr. 0815 motored 16 miles.

From this point we advanced on foot. Many of the towns in this part of France, which is Alsace, have German names and the people speak German and French, but they are true Frenchmen. For the next few days, we met little resistance because the Germans had retreated. Nevertheless, we had to dig in each day because of sporadic enemy shelling.

3 Dec 44 Left Siewiller Fr by foot 1015 and arr at Lutzelstein Fr 1410 distance marched 8 miles.

As we were slogging along a muddy road on one particular day, we passed a few tanks of the 781st Tank Battalion, which were attached to our division. We noticed all the extra items they were able to carry on the outside of their tanks. They had cartons of "10 in 1" rations that contained cans of orange marmalade, bacon, meat, vegetables and loaves of real bread and butter. As we passed alongside the tanks, several of our men liberated a few of the choicest items they were able carry. The tankers did not seem to notice anything as they sat comfortably inside and smoked cigarettes as we went by. One of best items that was carried off was a full-sized shovel. That shovel was used to dig a foxhole in one-quarter the time it took with our regular entrenching tool. When we had to "dig in" this shovel made it almost a pleasure. It was passed around to everyone in the platoon. That spade was carefully guarded, but one day, it mysteriously disappeared. We never caught the culprit.

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The tankers' food was a big treat. When we stopped at a farm house for the night, we decided to have toast and butter. A fire was lit in the farmer's wood burning stove, and the bread was toasted and the butter liberally slathered on it. The one thing lacking was cinnamon for cinnamon toast. On the chance that one of our men who was noted for carrying everything imaginable might have some, we asked Pvt. William Bailey, also known as PX Bailey, "Do you have any cinnamon?" After he searched through his pockets and his musette bag, he came up with a can of cinnamon! That was one of the most memorable meals I had in the Army: bread with marmalade, cinnamon toast, crisp bacon, and real meat. The fact that it was liberated from the tankers made it more delicious.

4 Dec 44 Left Lutzelstein Fr by foot 0730 and arr at Puberg Fr. 1010 distance marched 5 miles. 5 Dec 44 Left Puberg Fr by foot 1500 arr at Huhnerscherr, Fr 1710 distance marched 5 1/2 miles.

6 Dec 44 Left Huhnerscherr Fr by foot 0920 arr at Goetzenbruck Fr 1145 distance marched 4 1/2 miles.

It was somewhere in this region when we were ordered to dig in along the crest of a hill that was terraced with grape vines. I had selected a spot for our foxhole, but my buddy who was to be in the hole with me did not like my choice and started digging about 50 feet to the left. I did not argue because one spot was the same as any other. We had been hacking at the frozen earth for a short time when, suddenly, we were being pounded with artillery shells. Both of us dove into the partly hollowed out foxhole as the earth around us shook with the explosions. Dirt and shrapnel flew up and around us. This lasted for about 10 minutes as I tried to crawl as deeply as possible into my helmet for protection. Finally, all was quiet and we came up to see what had happened. The spot I had chosen for a foxhole had a direct hit! A thing like that unsettles the nerves and brings on a prayer of thanks.

The shelling did not sound like German 88mm artillery, and it was rumored that one of our officers or the forward artillery observer had read the contour map wrong. He gave the number of the hill we were on and called for artillery fire. He should have given the number of the hill in front of us, where the enemy was dug in.

Not only were the Germans trying to kill me, but I had to worry about my own officers! Fortunately, mistakes like this did not happen very often. I don't know what casualties we had that time, but every day someone got sick, wounded or killed.

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LEMBERG, FRANCE

8 Dec 44 Traveled 1 mile by foot to Lemberg, Fr.

This small town in the Vosges Mountains is an important intersection for main roads and a railroad leading in all directions. The strongest forts in the Maginot Line were located at Bitché, which is only about five miles to the northeast. The Germans retreated to this town and set up strong defenses to hold it against our advance.

On 9 December 1944, early in the morning, the 3rd Platoon moved through the woods following a road leading to a railroad trestle. We reached the edge of the woods and were deployed along a draw facing an open field that sloped upward toward the embankment where the railroad tracks ran. The road to our left ran under the railroad trestle. We were able to peek over the edge of the draw and look across the open field, but we could not tell what the enemy had facing us. All the dogfaces were tense as they fixed bayonets. I had my M1 Garand rifle and was given a grenade launcher and two rifle grenades. We waited for the command to charge across the open field into the German positions. Our mortars and artillery did not lay in a barrage before us. The attack was supposed to be a surprise. Smoke shells were probably used to screen our movements, but they did not do much good. Everyone was quiet. There was no talking.

Then our platoon leader, Lt. Bennett Taylor, gave the order to charge, "Let's go!" he yelled. It was like a reenactment of a World War I movie as we all rose up and started running across the open field toward the embankment. We had not gone more than five yards when the Germans opened up with their rapid-fire machine guns, rifles, and mortar shells. They even fired their 20mm anti-aircraft gun at us with tracers and exploding shells. There was booming noise and smoke and streaking bullets whizzing all around us. I had the strangest feeling that I was not really there in the middle of all this mayhem. In my mind, I was floating as I was running straight for the cover of the railroad embankment, and I did not feel any terror or exhaustion. It was not me, but someone else who was there, and I was just an observer. I didn't even seem to hear or smell the battle. It was like a dream. Some would call it an "out-of-body experience."

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In what seemed like an instant, I ran across the open field, straight into the enemy fire, cut to the road just to the left of the underpass and hit down on the side of the embankment. It was safe there below the range of fire of the enemy guns. Running with me and landing in the dirt beside me was Moping Mo, Cpl. Stanley T. Cardozo, who said, "I've been hit!" I turned to him and asked, "Where did you get it?" "In the ass," he said. He lay on his stomach. I examined his behind and found a slit about an inch long on the right cheek of his pants, and poked it with my finger. "Ouch!" he yelled. A piece of shrapnel from a 20mm shell had exploded and hit him in the butt. Fortunately, it was not serious.

Meanwhile, right over our heads, the Germans were firing away with a machine gun and the 20mm cannon. I crawled up over the embankment to see where they were and caught sight of the position. I crawled back down the embankment, removed my bayonet and attached the grenade launcher to the end of my rifle. I loaded a blank cartridge in the chamber, and slipped the grenade onto the launcher. Carefully, I aimed for the spot just beyond the railroad tracks and to the left of my position where I had seen their emplacement. I fired the two rifle grenades, and in the turmoil I don't know if they hit the target, but there was no more firing from there.

In the meantime, Al Lapa who was on my right was firing his BAR near the head of Lt. Taylor. That did not make the lieutenant very happy.

This attack was recorded in the Story of the 399th Infantry Regiment on pages 60 and 61, which was written shortly after the war. (I do not know the author or the source of the quotation.) It reads as follows:

Love Company spearheaded the 399th into Lemberg, when they made a dash from the eastern woods to reach the RR underpass in the center of town in midafternoon. The Railroad was the German MLR.

"Lt. Taylor's 3rd platoon reached the RR embankment and Lt. MacDonald's 2nd platoon dashed up a draw to hit the railroad on the right. Charley Goldman stuck his head over the embankment and got hit by a machine-gun bullet. Sgt. John Butler tried to lead the 2nd across the tracks but didn't make it. They were firing a hail of 20 millimeter stuff and machine-guns up and down the tracks. *The only possible way into Lemberg was through that underpass and the Germans knew it.* A bunch of krauts came charging through the underpass and we wiped 'em out with guns and grenades – Harvey Rohde, Al Lappa [Lapa], and Bob Binkley shot up plenty. *George Demopoulos of the Medics amputated a Mike boy's arm*

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under fire. Then two mortars were rushed up behind the RR embankment and set up like infantry cross-fires, each firing a different direction. John Khoury crawled up on the tracks and directed fire to knock out a flak wagon and a machinegun. Then we opened up with everything we had, charged through the underpass, and made a dash for the first couple of houses in Lemberg.”

There was enemy small arms fire and 88mm artillery shelling as we sought cover inside a house that had thick masonry walls. To watch for a counterattack, Pvt. Carroll Stratmann was assigned to guard the rear of the house. He had just joined the company as a replacement on the 26th of November. He posted himself about ten feet from the door. Just then a shell exploded in the yard and Stratmann was seriously hit. Pfc. Al Lapa and others rushed outside and carried Stratmann into the kitchen. He was placed on a table as the medic, Geogre Demopolis, treated his wound. He had been hit in the chest where there was the sound of air being sucked into his lungs. The actual wound was small with very little blood around it. The medic poured sulfa onto the hole and cut a piece of a raincoat to cover it. Soon a Jeep came and Stratmann was put on a litter and taken back to the Battalion Aid Station.

In the meantime, I was crouched by a window, and was surprised to looked up and see a German position opposite us in plain view on a low hill. Then an officer or noncom walked upright in front of the dug-in soldiers and was silhouetted against the sky, apparently giving orders to his men. He was about 200 yards away, and I took careful aim from the window, fired one shot, and missed. He did not flinch or duck or take cover. I fired a second shot that did not miss. He stopped and collapsed backwards. That was my small contribution to the memory of Stratmann, who later died of his wounds.

Meanwhile, in a house at the end of the main street, there was a German sniper firing from the upper window at any GI in the street. A Sherman tank was called in and it sent one 75mm cannon shell into the window, which eliminated the sniper but did not improve the house. The town was taken after some house-to-house fighting, and the enemy retreated to fight at his next line of defense.

According to the Morning Reports of 8 December 1944, there were six officers and 150 enlisted men in Love Company, and on 10 December 1944 there were five officers and 139 enlisted men.

Killed in action on 8 December 1944, were S. Sgt. John P. Butler, Sgt. Monroe W. Dixon, Sgt. Francis J. Touri, Pfc. George C. Rex, and Pfc.

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William G. Zilliox. On 9 December 1944, Pfc. Eugene Greenbaum was killed in action.

A number of men were wounded on 9 December 1944, among them was Pfc. John W. Howe, Jr. When I heard that, I remembered Redbird on the ship as we left New York, looking at his house across the river and laughing, "If I didn't think I was coming back, they would never get me on this ship." I had not seen very much of Redbird after we went to the front on 1 November. We didn't have much time for social activities, especially since he wasn't in my platoon.

Of course, news circulated fast of who was wounded or killed or missing. That news always hurt everyone. On that day, word came that Redbird was hit and was taken to a house nearby where our medic was giving him first aid. A couple of old buddies stopped in to see him and reported back that the Redbird sent a message that he was okay and would be back soon. Later, he was sent back to the Battalion Aid Station and then to the hospital. I prayed that he would be all right.

He had been hit by shrapnel in several places, and his wounds were so severe that he did not survive. I felt both sad and angry, because he was such a good old buddy. (Today, if you pass along Boulevard East just a little bit north of the marker where Alexander Hamilton was shot by Aaron Burr, there is a memorial for those from Weehawken, New Jersey, who gave their lives in World War II. At the bottom of the first column is Redbird, John W. Howe, Jr.. He had come home.

For their action at the railway bridge, 9 December 1944, the soldiers of the 3rd platoon were awarded Bronze Star Medals for valor, as per an order of 7 January 1945.