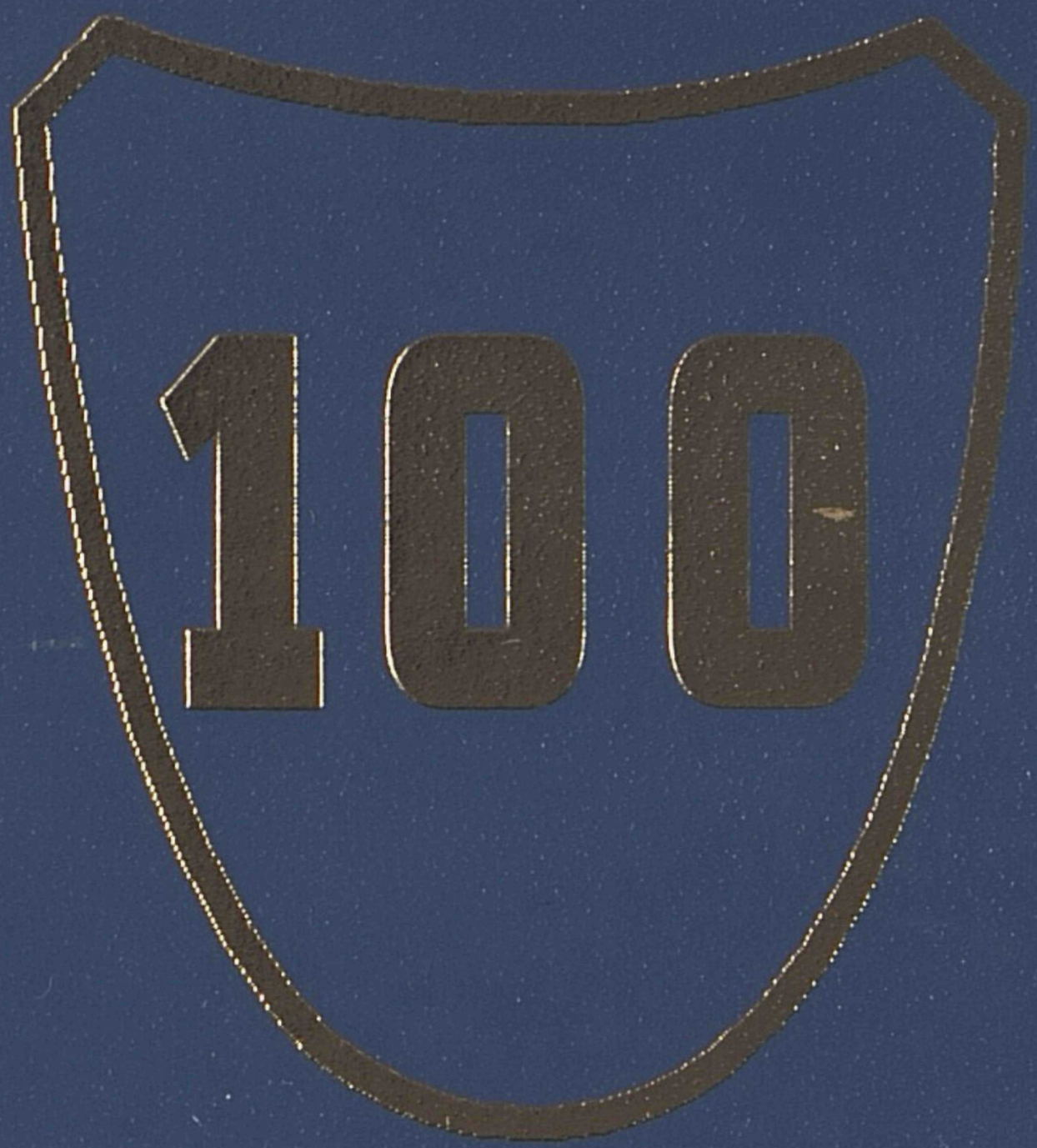
SON

OF

BITCHE



SON OF BITCHE 100

BY

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"Son of Bitche"

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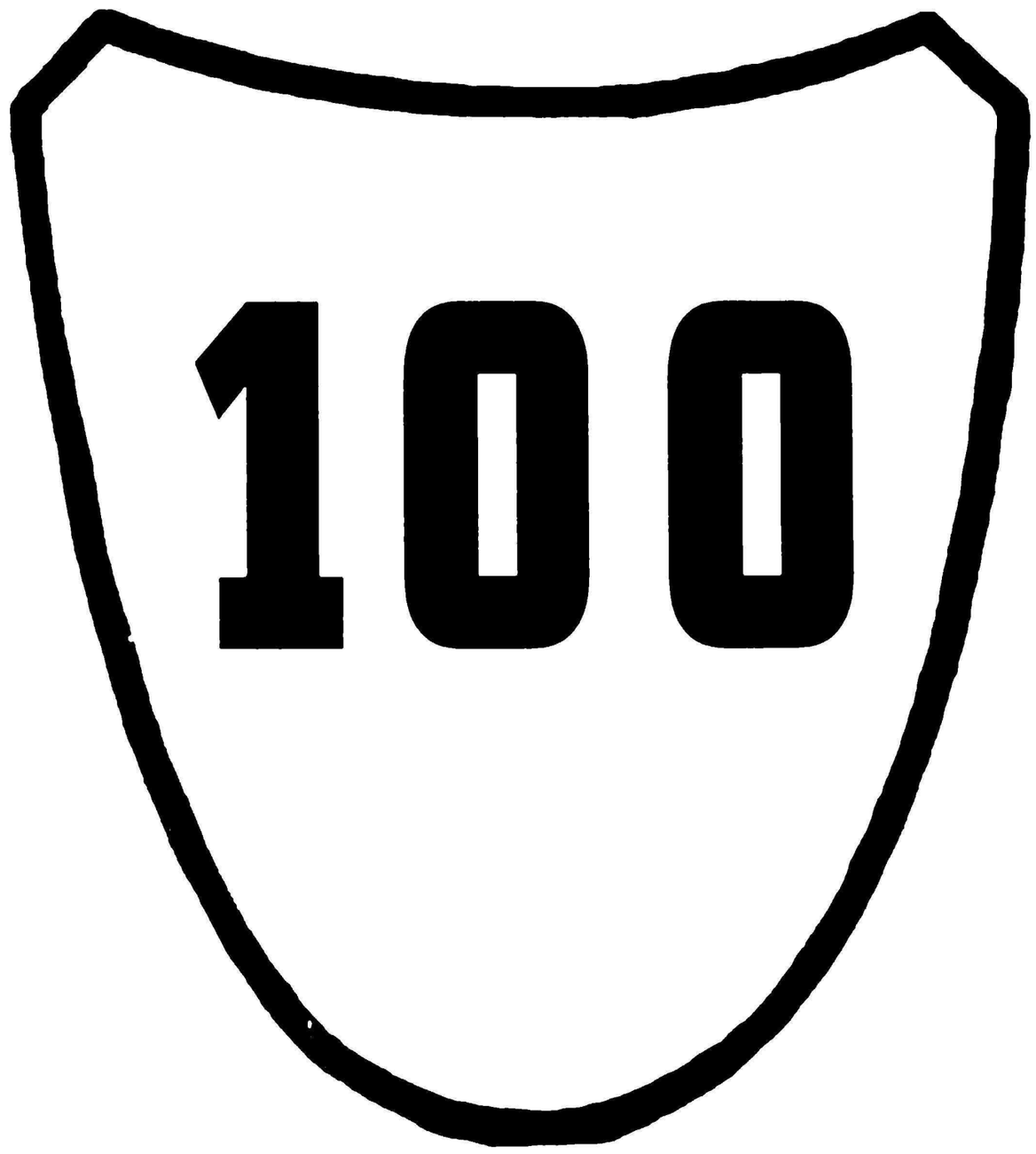
SYNOPSIS

This is a story about a young infantryman in WW II written 50 years retrospectively. The stimulus came from a close war buddy who suggested an Anniversary bus trip in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) with other older members of the 100th Division. The trip turned out to be therapeutic in traveling back in time and to places in France and Germany where the battles occurred.

Writing the story was aided by letters that had been sent home during WW II and preserved. They were never disturbed until motivation occurred to record those fateful events of long ago.

The title "Son of Bitche" relates to a Fort de Bitche built in the Vosges Mountains in the sixteen hundreds that successfully repelled "all" attacks, even after it was augmented by the Maginot Line and attacked by the German Blitzkrieg on France in 1940. The German Wehrmacht could not conquer it, and had to wait for the surrender of France and its soldiers in the Fort.

The 100th Division did "take it" from the Germans and formed the organization "Sons of Bitche", of which I am a member.



(Disclaimer: The organization "Sons of Bitche" did not sponsor the writing of this manuscript, nor has it given its endorsement.)

1. In transcribing the letters, I may confuse the reader by discussing events that later occurred in combat which related to earlier training. I placed that commentary in parenthesis.

INTRODUCTION

War clouds were gathering in Europe in 1939 that would draw the United States into armed conflict with Japan and Germany along with Italy. On December 8, 1941, the U.S. Congress made a formal declaration of war on Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, and four days later on December 11th declared war on Germany and Italy.

Like all red blooded American boys, I wanted to go fight the Japs. I had turned 16 less than two months before, and my parents wanted me to finish my junior and senior years of high school.

In 1943 almost every 18-year-old who was not 4F or had an essential war effort job was being drafted or volunteering for service. I did voluntarily take the V12 Navy written exam, and passed along with three Anthony classmates. We were all then called to Kansas City for a physical exam that all of us flunked. Only three candidates out of sixty passed. The reason I didn't pass was because of "overbite", no other reason was given.

After that experience, I decided to get as much education as possible before going into the service. I was able to start the early summer session at the University of Wichita two weeks before graduating from high school. The second summer session followed with continuation that September into the fall session.

My eighteenth birthday was October 22, 1943. Soon there after I received a draft notice to report to Ft. Leavenworth for induction. There was no question in my mind about reporting for duty because my stepfather served in WW I, and my older brother was already in the Army. Once in the service in December the same year, I wrote frequently to my parents because they wished me to do so. Later on the letters helped to keep me balanced and my thoughts organized. Writing letters also stimulated more correspondence which proved to be a significant morale builder.

There are several reasons after fifty years that I decided to review my old letters from WW II.

I received an 18 page questionnaire from the Army Department that was divided into five sections: Part I - general military education; Part II - overseas service; Part III - combat; Part IV - occupation and demobilization; Part V - postwar experiences. One question stands out in my memory, "What were your reactions and your units reactions to V.E. Day?" The answer was straight forward, we were alive and the war in the E.T.O. was over.

I received a call from my closest comrade in WW II, Bill Rogers. He suggested that we go on the 100th Division 50th Anniversary Tour to the places we had fought in France and Germany. I had avoided anything that recalled

those terrible memories. I had not joined the American Legion, and had failed to become active in the Veterans of Foreign Wars despite my stepfather's encouragement to participate. Bill insisted we go. It was hard to turn him down because we had visited each other after the war, and I was Best Man at his wedding. After consulting my wife, we agreed to go.

I warned her that the language might be raw because communication in the old infantry was always salted with profanity! Much to my surprise, 50 years had improved the communication skill of all the men. I suspect that having their wives along had something to do with it.

We recalled many experiences while riding on the tour bus. With our paratroop guide we were able to drive to areas where we could almost identify the places where we had dug foxholes. We were welcomed as heroes in a couple of towns in France. Raon L' Etape had a French military band that we marched with to a memorial honoring WW I and WW II soldiers. The band then played "The Marseilles" followed by "The Star Spangled Banner". Speeches were given by the Mayor, and the school children surrounded us with joy wanting to shake our hands. Even my wife was a hero to them, and received their thanks!

The next "hero" French town was Bitche which had been a very important fortified town in the Maginot line that the Germans defended fiercely! The actual "Forte de Bitche" had 14 foot walls from the time it was built in the 17th century, and had successfully helped defend all previous attacks. The 100th Division finally managed to take it away from the Krauts, and formed the exclusive organization called the "Sons of Bitche". We were toasted with excellent French champagne after a speech by the Mayor. We then traveled into Germany, and across the Rhine River. We had bypassed Heidelberg during the war, but had a major battle in Heilbronn. However, we were not received there officially. We proceeded south to Stuttgart where the Mayor, Manfred Rommel, Field Marshall, Erwin Rommel's son greeted us. Standing beside him was General George Patton's grandson who was a handsome young man on vacation from a university in Switzerland. My wife even volunteered to be his grandmother.

Mayor Rommel spoke excellent English in a speech about the reunification of Germany, which had caused a significant financial hardship on the industrialized city of Stuttgart.

East Germany required heavy economic support to catch up with the West after years of Russian domination. Young Benjamin Patton also gave a short speech.

The next stimulus to review the WW II letters, also came from Bill, who had been communicating with some of our buddies in Kentucky and Ohio for the 100th Division 50th Anniversary Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. We went and, much to my surprise, our "F" Company commander, Captain Newton Heuberger, was there along with First Sgt. Addi and several others. Our former Captain was very friendly, and even agreed to come to our room to review some slides we had taken on the 100th Division Tour of France and Germany. He was able to fill in some details about our battles for us riflemen.

Another stimulus came from the Florida Chapter of the 100th Division. I found that Capt. Heuberger was a member, and lived in Tampa. He planned to attend the Deland meeting so I made a special trip from Gainesville to visit him again.

He had kept track of many men in his company, and again filled in details of "F" Company in combat. The common infantry rifleman on the front-line has a constricted understanding of battles because being "shot at" is a very personal experience requiring intense attention to the immediate surroundings for survival!

Lastly, the time had become available from my partial retirement to read and record the contents of the numerous letters that I had written to my parents. Further, after I had filled out the 18 page questionnaire and mentioned the letters, the U.S. Army Military Institute at

Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania stated they would be most pleased to become their custodian. They wanted me to donate the letters to the institute which considered them vital sources of information that were among the most used by scholars and historians.

My mother had faithfully categorized the letters, and I was impressed with the "tidy way" she had preserved them. Each month's letters were tied with string in a bowknot and in sequence. On the back of each envelope was the date it had been received and the date it had been sent. There was unmistakable devotion, and I felt obligated and somewhat driven to preserve the contents she had faithfully maintained. The letters were my parents' tangible evidence of my being alive, and an expression of an almost daily relationship. Like every combat soldier in war, there was the possibility that I might not return.

I spoke to Wayne Sandefur, a Gainesville neighbor, who was a Captain of an infantry company in the South Pacific, and told him I was reviewing the letters. He said his mother also preserved his letters, but he threw them away not wanting to recall any of the horrible details of his combat experiences against the Japanese. I am sure that many of the veterans of foreign wars felt the same as Captain Sandefur. It is only in recent months that I have felt differently.

Chapter 1 Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP)

My first letter was from Ft. Leavenworth Induction Station. "We finally arrived around 4:00am and were rolled out at 5:30am which all of us enjoyed immensely!" The following day the Army gave an aptitude, classification and radio test. "It's a funny thing, the first day you wonder what is going on, then the next day you receive your G.I. uniforms, and you really feel proud to be in the Army. However, about the third day you begin looking forward to a furlough."

On January 17, 1944, we had interviews for the Army Specialized Training Program (A.S.T.P.). Although the Sgt. didn't promise anything, he advised me to hold out for the program. He suggested we would take basic training and probably then be sent to school.

The following morning, we were called out to pick up cigarette butts. We were told that those who had made a hundred or above on their classification test could volunteer for flight training as a pilot, navigator, or bombardier. I held out for the A.S.T.P..

I wrote, "I am sorry about not being able to write yesterday, but Kitchen Police (K.P.) kept me busy all day. I did receive a letter from Uncle Roy who told me that he felt "real easy" knowing that I was in the Army!"

On the tenth day at Ft. Leavenworth, there was a very sad story from fellows who had been in the A.S.T.P.. Their advice was to get into the Air Corps. However Bob Knight, an old friend, was in the program, so I decided to hold out for college under it.

Seven days and five letters later, five of us were informed that we were on shipping orders for basic training at Ft. Benning, Georgia. We were transported by train, and stopped in Evansville, Indiana. We got off that evening, and were given a free dinner with dessert by the women citizens of the United Service Organization (U.S.O.). Two girls played accordions while we ate. It was the nicest thing that had happened to us so far!

We arrived at Ft. Benning on February 6th, and were issued ammunition belts, pup tents, gas masks, steel helmets, and field packs. We still had more tests to take to classify for our educational level.

We all loved our Corporal because each morning he gently wakes us with words like, "Get the h- out of there you lazy S.O.B.s." He suggests we wear olive drab uniforms to ease the pain and strain. The Sgt. then countermands the order to fatigue dress. We change clothes on the average of four times a day to stimulate the heart beat.

Over the next four days, I found that I qualified for a second year of college because of a 138 on the aptitude test and a satisfactory interview. The average score was 120 which may have helped to qualify me for pre-medicine with the hope of later being accepted in medical school.

Finally, we started basic training on February 14th. Eight days later, we learned that the A.S.T.P. Program was closing down! We were all disappointed and confused about our future, but the possibility of a transfer to the Air Corps remained a consideration. We continued basic training at Ft. Benning, and kept our parents informed of the changing situation.

The following day, our Cadre kept us from feeling too sorry for ourselves by taking us on a 10 mile hike with full field pack. We no sooner returned when we had to G.I. the barracks, clean rifles, and shine shoes to get ready for inspection. We did wonder what we had done with all our free time as civilians.

We received a grenade lecture that included the area of fragmentation. The Lt. took out the safety pin, but told us it could be replaced. In attempting to replace the pin, he dropped the grenade and ran! The rest of us did the same. The non-coms laughed at us because it was a "dummy", and so were we.

On March 6th, our Lt. announced that all transfers to the Air Corps had been stopped. It appears that we are in the infantry to stay. I plan to make the best of it. Ten days later and after more basic training, we found that our new station was to be Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. It was evident that we A.S.T.P. boys were headed for line infantry outfits to fill the ranks.

Chapter 2 (ASTP) Rifleman - 100th Division

Upon arrival at Ft. Bragg on March 22nd, I was reclassified as a Rifleman in the 100th Division, 399th Regiment, 2nd Battalion, "Fox" Company. (Fifty years later, I found out from Capt. Newton Heuberger that he was delighted to have us A.S.T.P. boys in his company. He was a college graduate, and thought we would make good soldiers. Unfortunately, the Cadre of the 100th Division did not share his enthusiasm. At almost every turn, they pointed out our lack of discipline and knowledge of military matters. We were smart enough to realize there was no Court of Appeals, and that the non-coms had us where they wanted us. We gave them respect, and in time they respected us because in combat we would be depending on each other to survive.)

Our Company Commander talked to us this morning, and laid down the law. My garrison hat is taboo in a combat outfit, so it was sent home. The Capt. told us to keep our hands out of our pockets at all times. If he caught us with

them in the pockets, they would be sewed up. A couple of days later, we had an inspection by the Captain. He was rather lenient, but we are anticipating a tougher go the next time around. Our definite plus has been the good and plentiful food the 100th Division puts out. This was in contrast to the food at Ft. Benning which didn't compare because I was always hungry!

We were issued M-1 rifles packed in grease that took a night and a day to get clean. We begin basic training again tomorrow, but we are now in a line outfit. I later wrote that we had shed a "tear" for the 36,000 boys in the Air Corps that were going to be transferred to the infantry. We suggested that they should get their T.S. cards punched. There was about 1300 A.S.T.P. trainees integrated into the 100th Division to bring it up to strength along with the Air Corps men. The division had already been on maneuvers. Most of the non-commissioned and commissioned ranks were filled, so about all we could look forward to was advancement from Private to Private First Class.

We have a Training Sgt. who is about 50-years-old, and went through the last war in the Battle of the Marne and Chateau-Thiery. Everyone thinks he is tops. I missed his sage infantry stories today, because I was pot and pans man on the K.P. with threats coming from the Mess Sgt. because he did not like our speed. The Army buys the best food that can be had, but the cooks always manage to screw it up.

Today we fired a grenade launcher on a "03" Springfield rifle. This weapon can be used against tanks, so a light tank was brought up for us to fire on. (On March 15, 1945, in a general attack with "F" Company in the lead, I used a grenade launcher to fire a phosphorus grenade with a direct hit on a German command post on a hill outside of Bitche, France.)

This morning, the platoon ran a 300 yard dash. Although I came in 5th, if a German got on my tail or we were in the attack mode, I could do better than that. (On December 7, 1944, outside of Lemberg, France, we had to retreat and run like hell or be captured. We were out gunned by the Krauts with a 20mm flak wagon firing directly into us, supported by German infantry.)

The afternoon was spent in a fast 10 mile hike that took less than 2-hours. We were in "accordion formation" most of the time with the front of the column walking rather fast, the middle double timing, and the rear running the 100 yard dash. Usually the tall guys are in front, and we shorter guys are in the middle or in the rear.

Easter Sunrise Service started the day followed by a regular service later. I sang in the choir both times. We sang again in the afternoon at the Service Club. Just a lazy restful day.

Today before we started on a tactical problem the Sgt. sent me over to "Training Headquarters" to obtain a guide for the problem. I got mixed up, and went to "Regimental Headquarters". I kept asking around trying to find a guide until the question worked its way up to the Colonel, but he couldn't figure it out either. He finally told me to get into his jeep, and he would take me out to the problem area. I knew a mistake had been made when I got into the jeep, but there was not much that could be changed. The Colonel was intent on clearing up the "guide question". The Sgt. saluted when the Colonel and I drove up, and a brief discussion followed. The Colonel seemed satisfied and drove off. Much to my amazement, Sgt. turned to me and said, "Forget it, If I worried over a little thing like this, I would go nuts later on in combat!"

A couple of days later, I was ordered to report to the Captain because my rifle had not passed inspection. My heart was beating very rapidly when I walked into the Headquarters Building. I unfortunately walked right by the First Sgt. to see the Captain. He reamed me out, telling me no one saw the Captain without his permission. I apologized by saying, "I'm sorry sir." He immediately informed me that I was never to call him sir! I then asked him if I could report to the Captain. He told me he would ask

the Captain, and let me know. I finally got in to see the Captain. He inspected my rifle and found it to be OK. He then asked why I had not passed inspection. I replied, "No excuse sir!" The three answers given to an officer are: "Yes Sir", "No Sir", and "No Excuse Sir"!

By the middle of April, we began to sight the M-1 rifle on various targets in preparation for the rifle range. That afternoon, we had map reading out in the swamp. We rightfully called it swamp maneuvers then asked why the creator put those bodies of water on earth.

Jerry Paul, a University of Wichita classmate, was at Ft. Benning and transferred to Ft. Bragg with the A.S.T.P. when I did. He had asked for a weekend pass, so that we could go to Raleigh together. We two innocent young boys didn't find a lot of action in the big city, and returned to the Ft. ahead of curfew.

On April 22nd, General Burress, our 100th Division Commander, spoke to us former A.S.T.P. trainees. He told us that we were considered a part of the 100th, so will continue to train and ship over with the "Century Division". His revelation was not surprising to us, and in a way it was consoling to realize that we were full fledged members of the "Century". We also knew beyond any doubt that as a soldier in a line outfit, we would be seeing action.

Today I am a broken man because it took only four shots with my M-1 rifle to beat my upper lip to a pulp. From then on, I either flinched, closed my eyes, or didn't squeeze off the shot correctly. We fired on the 200 and 300 yard range, and I still came out 10 points above average. This was a disappointment because as a boy out on the Western Plain, I had hunted with a 22 caliber rifle and a 4-10 shotgun with fairly good accuracy.

The next day, we had rapid fire practice which requires firing one round, then putting in a clip with eight rounds, and completing the firing in 51 seconds. Much to my surprise, I scored a 43 out of a possible 45, but my lip sure took a beating. We also qualified on the 500 yard range, and my designation was a sharp shooter with a score of 171. The highest score was a 185 out of a possible 210. Bill Rogers who had never fired a weapon scored a 177.

The infiltration course requires hitting the ground on command with your M-1 rifle, and inching forward on your belly underneath barbed wire with a machine gun firing live ammo over your head. It teaches the very important lesson of keeping your head down while advancing.

This morning we had our first experience with a "handy" talky radio which can transmit about a mile, but could receive within a 10 mile range. We finally got around to throwing grenades, and don't let anyone tell you there is nothing to it. We were down in the pits when I pulled the safety pin and was drawing back to throw when another grenade went off that someone else had thrown correctly. I properly threw the grenade, but I later had to change my underwear.

We fired on the transition course today, and I came out with an 18 out of a possible 24. We have now completed preparation for overseas movement (P.O.M.) which includes grenade throwing, the infiltration course, and the transition course.

I was assigned two men today on prison guard detail. One was 25 and the other was 28 years of age with supposedly four years in the Army. They are both serving one to six months. Fortunately, there was no major problem while they were picking up trash and loading it on a truck. I could have ridden on the truck, but decided to walk behind them with my rifle.

Webb, an A.S.T.P. fellow from Idaho, and I went over to the post exchange (PX) and bought a pint of ice-cream a piece. We then took in a show. All this cost us $.30 each. Webb is a redhead and a very good, rather quiet soldier. (Little did I know that he would eventually become my assistant when I was acting squad leader after we crossed the Rhine River).

Later we went through an open woods course as a squad. It is dangerous because everyone is issued 16 rounds of live ammunition. A scout sights the enemy, and the squad leader quickly forms the squad into a firing line. The command is given to open fire, and a Browning automatic rifle (B.A.R.) and eleven M-1's begin firing all at once. Our squad had the best hits on the targets. It is T.S. if anyone gets in the way. (On March 15, 1945, Lt. Matlose ordered me to signal "G" Company to move up because "F" Company was pinned down. When I jumped up waving my hand and yelling to "G" Company to move up, I was as much concerned about friendly fire and German fire because I was between both.)

Denham, another A.S.T.P. trainee, woke up in the barracks this morning and said, "I'm tired of playing soldier, I want to go home!" Of course, he was joking and we all got a kick out of his remarks, but it kind of hit the nail on the head.

Today on K.P., we were on the run because the Mess Sgt. was gigged for having the dirtiest mess hall line in the regiment. He was confined to the company area for eight days. He had to take it out on someone, and we K.P.s came in handy.

Our Company Commander ordered us to write our mothers for "Mother's Day". Each one had to hand in a letter to him to make sure the troops were compliant. (Turns out that the "old man" as he was called was only four years older than we eighteen year olds.)

In the morning, we ran the bayonet course that was located in the middle of a swamp with knee-deep mud. It was 300 yards long with many dummies to bayonet every few yards. One's arms grew tired of lifting and thrusting the rifle and attached bayonet toward the end of the muddy swamp. (I made up my mind that I would never allow a Kraut to get that close to me as long as I had firepower.)

Fred King came over this evening, and we talked about good ole Wichita University. He was a roommate of ours off campus, and was a hard studying student. Fred did not think much of the infantry in the 398 Regiment, of the 100th Division. (Fred had a grandfather who was a doctor, and Fred planned to follow in his foot-steps.)

The next evening, we went out on a night problem between our rifle company and a weapons company. This required a full field pack weighing about 40 pounds and consisted of: a blanket, one half of a pup tent with poles, rope and pegs, mosquito netting, a mess kit, a full canteen of water, a helmet, a bayonet, and a rifle. We no sooner moved out before the enemy

hit our point. A decision was made to stick to wooded terrain the rest of the night. We walked about 18 miles, and never engaged the enemy because of a wrong compass reading. We managed to get about 1-hours of sleep. In the morning, instead of having the rest of the day off, we had a division parade.

Tonight a big crap game got underway. One fellow lost more money than he could cover. Not a good idea! The boys who lost their money to him were upset and angry, but amazingly gave the fellow until the next payday to pay off.

On another night problem, "F" Company was supposed to infiltrate three other companies, but ran into an enemy outpost and got captured. Denham and I decided to make a break for it. While we were making our plans, a Sgt. came up and asked us how many prisoners we allowed to escape. Obviously, he had mistaken us for some of his guards because we had positioned ourselves on the outer perimeter. We led him on by saying that we would be more careful. It was also very dark in the woods, and when I kneeled down an enemy passed within two feet of me not knowing my presence. We finally worked our way back to the enemy outpost, laid down beside them, and started talking. Denham lied so fast that I started laughing which made the outpost guards suspicious. We knew we were sunk when they asked us for the pass word, so we both ran in different directions. Denham was captured once more, but I got away. I managed to get through the lines to our company.

On returning to our barracks the next day, I was told to report to the Communications Sgt. for instructions on the "walkie talkie" and all types of infantry radios. It was ordered that a soldier in each platoon should be able to use the radios. (I was lucky to be given the job of carrying a "536" radio as the platoon messenger, until I had to bury it when capture appeared eminent outside Lemberg, France.)

After Jerry Paul returned from furlough, I went over to the 3rd BN to talk with him. He stayed with his twin sister in Washington D.C., then went on to Wichita where he spent eight days at home.

There has been a lot of new anti-aircraft men transferred in, and the barracks are getting crowded. They have had to erect tents to accommodate everyone.

June 6, 1944, is the day that everyone nationwide had been anticipating. I thank the fellow above that my brother and I were not in on the Beachhead Attack. The lights went out, but a radio downstairs picked up the President's voice. He gave a prayer for the boys over there. All the fellows stopped whatever they were doing to bow their heads in prayer. The invasion makes a fellow proud to be an American soldier. It reminds him that he is doing something worthwhile.

The Sgt. let me be barracks guard today, so I could get things together for my furlough. I went over to see Jerry last night, and found the round trip would cost $42.50. I have $49.00, so I am in good shape.

The train leaves Fayettville on Saturday at 5:30pm, and arrives in Washington around 1:30am on Sunday. I catch the next train at 6:00am, and arrive in Chicago 17 hours later around 11:00pm. If my luck holds out, I should be in Wichita on Monday night. (I slept on the floor of Union Station in Washington D.C. with a lot of other GIs and remembered the multicol-ored water fountain outside. In 1951, I took my wife to see it when we had stopped in the evening on our way to see some buddies in N.Y. It was late, and as we sat down to admire the beautiful fountain they turned the lights and water off.)

I guess I had a pretty nice furlough, but why shouldn't I? Just look at the wonderful parents I had to go home to. I had breakfast in Wichita with Sherry, Aunt Lois, and Uncle Roy. They took me to the train station for my official send off. My train to Chicago was about two hours late, and I almost missed the train to Pittsburgh with one minute to spare. So far, I have had a seat all the way. (I recall having to stand most of the way home, it was so crowd-ed.)