

Requiem for a Soldier

by Lowry Bowman, 397-I

It is doubtful that Pvt. Lindsay Howell or any of his fellow riflemen in 397/I ever heard of Operation INDEPENDENCE. Plans for that operation had been worked out by General Eisenhower and his staff while the 100th Infantry Division still were aboard the USS *George Washington* en route to Marseilles in October 1944.

Summertime hopes of a quick victory over Nazi Germany after the breakout from Normandy and the successful landings in the south of France were melting in the mud of autumn, and Operation INDEPENDENCE might bring them back to life. It was to be a general assault in early November all along the Allied front from the Netherlands to the Swiss border. If nothing else, it was hoped the assault might clear German defenders from the area west of the Rhine and open the way for a Rhine crossing in 1945.

The 100th's immediate goal in this assault was the highway hub of Raon l'Etape, known as the "gates of the Vosges." But high strategy was not on the minds of 100th Division men when they reached Alsace and took over muddy foxholes from the dog-tired men of the famed 45th Division. They didn't know what they faced.

Lindsay Howell was a comparative newcomer to the division. Like many of the other enlisted men, he was a teenager. He had been drafted at 19 in March 1944, and went through basic training in Florida before being assigned to Item Company of the 397th shortly before the division sailed for Europe.

Bill Howell grew up on the family farm in south-central Tennessee, one of the eight children of Charles E. and Elizabeth Howell. Work in the fields was hard, but nights were made for hunting coons and possums with his brothers and cousins. He might have escaped the draft had he wanted to because of childhood injuries, but he was ready to go when called.

He had not had time to get to know many of his companions in Company I before the division sailed, but he made a special friend in Pvt. John T. Weimerskirch, a native of Pittsburgh, PA. While aboard ship, he confided to Weimerskirch that he had a premonition of death. He did not expect to see his home again. Many others felt the same fear, of course, but with some it was more a conviction than a mere premonition.

And it proved to be true.

On 14 November 1944, as part of that general assault called Operation INDEPENDENCE, the men of Company I struggled up one Vosges Mountains slope and down the other side to find themselves in a cleared field with barbed wire at the bottom. They couldn't see the camouflaged trench behind that barbed wire where German machine gunners and riflemen were awaited them. Artillery and mortars already had the field zeroed in.

It seemed like hours, but it may have been only minutes before fifteen men of Company I lay dead. At least twenty five others, including the company commander, were badly wounded. John Weimerskirch was paralyzed by a shrapnel wound in the head. Lindsay Howell was killed by a bullet in the neck. One of the company's four medics died from a bullet through the Red Cross on his helmet.

That's the story, and other men in other companies in the 100th and in other divisions know how common it was.

But there's a twist to this one.

Randy Risner, a great-nephew of Lindsay Howell, is a lawyer who lives in Fresno, CA. He never knew his Great-Uncle Bill, of course, and he had only a vague understanding that such a man once lived and died in the service of his country.

Early in the year 2000, he went to see the movie "Saving Private Ryan." The graphic scenes troubled him. He decided to find out something about this long-dead relative who left home in 1944 and never came back—who was buried in the military cemetery at Epinal, France. He asked his mother, who had only dim memories. She was only four years old when she last saw her uncle.

Risner turned to the new source in cyberspace—the Internet. He found the 100th Infantry Division Association website where he discovered that John Weimerskirch had moved to Fresno, and he was able to talk with him directly. Weimerskirch well remembered Pvt. Howell's premonition of 1944, and Risner was particularly struck by the thought that his great-uncle "was a young man who went into battle knowing, at least in his mind, he would never come back, and yet he went ahead and did his duty, anyway. He gave his life for his country."

The more he found out, the more he was convinced that there should be some sort of memorial service for the benefit of surviving members of the family. Although Howell was killed on 14 November, he was carried as missing in action until 10 December (the standard Army practice at that time), and after his death finally was confirmed, the family received a package containing the Purple Heart medal and a US flag stenciled with the location of his grave at Epinal. But there never was a funeral in the traditional sense—never that mysterious thing called "closure."

"I was just a little girl," Risner's mother, Shirley, said, "but I was told that for a long time after Uncle Bill was killed, his father would sit at the window and look down the road waiting for him to come home."

Risner said he felt it was particularly important that his two young sons understand "the sacrifice their great-uncle made."

He began an e-mail correspondence with Paul Mosher, a former member of Company I and a former president of the 100th Infantry Division Association. Mosher contacted officials of the 100th Division (IT) in Louisville, and they were quick to offer both help and personnel for a proper service.

On 14 November 2000, the 56th anniversary of Pvt. Lindsay Howell's death, members of the family and friends gathered at the Scott's Hill Missionary Baptist Church in rural Giles County, TN, to remember the man only a few of them had actually known. Two of Howell's brothers, Wallace and Dewey, were there, but a third was too ill.

Maj. David Druckenmiller, a chaplain from the 101st Airborne at Ft. Campbell, KY, conducted the brief but impressive service. CSM John J. Perry, 100th Division (IT), from Huntsville, AL, arranged for fourteen men and women from various Army units who made up the military honors team. Three former members of 397/I were there including Mosher, Dow Crews of Memphis, and me.

Mosher told the gathering that while none of the three former I Company men knew Lindsay Howell in one sense they all knew everyone in the company in another sense. An infantry company is a family, he said, and "it was a family bond." The tragedy of Nov. 14 solidified that family bond, he said, and "in honoring Lindsay Howell you honor us."

Outside in the neatly-kept cemetery the group gathered in front of a newly installed granite marker in the Howell family plot next to the stone marking the grave of Pvt. Howell's parents. A squad of riflemen fired a salute. A bugler sounded taps.

The body of Pvt. Lindsay Everett Howell still rests with other fallen comrades in Epinal American Cemetery in France, but his spirit has come home.

April 2001 Association Newsletter