Chapter Four

Fort Bragg: 100th Infantry Division

The train arrived at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and we were taken on a siding to a place known as the airborne area--so named because it had been the home of the 82nd Airborne Division before it had shipped out to Europe the previous year. We detrained in back of an endless row of barracks and fell into formation with all of our gear. We then went to a line of barracks which included an orderly room, three barracks, a supply room, a kitchen and a recreation room. As ordered we peeled off at certain lines of these buildings each of which was a company and were temporarily assigned to the unit we ended up with in that distribution. The company our group ended up in was Company "C" 399th infantry regiment, 100th Infantry Division. We were assigned cots in an empty (or so it seemed) barracks, assigned a bunk and told not to completely unpack as this was a temporary assignment. We were bewildered by all the change! We stood formation in the company for about a week.

The person I remember was Captain Roman Campion who was the commander of that company during the war and the impression was of a kind and understanding

individual. Another thought of my stay in that company was the Sunday dinner we had there. The food after Fort Benning was delicious and the way the tables were set up with place settings that day and most memorable was the dessert—strawberry shortcake.

The next week we were told to repack what we had and prepare to move to our permanent assignment. We all hoped as many of us as could would be kept together. The next stop on this exodus from civilian life was to Company C 397th Infantry Regiment. This was for me to be my permanent assignment in the 100th Infantry Division. We still had doubts about the permanence of this last move. We began training to augment the last seven weeks at Fort Benning. At that time basic training was at least ten to thirteen weeks depending on the army's combat needs. This necessitated more time for us to meet the training needs to fulfill the requirements for combat.

The next six weeks we began to train under the guidance of two excellent officers, First Lieutenant Frederick S. Conley, Jr., a graduate of the US Military Academy and First Lieutenant Franklin G. Mrazek a reserve officer from Ohio. They were fair and adept infantry officers who had been assigned to the division in 1943. We also had four excellent NCO's to supplement them-- Tech Sergeant Jack Albaugh from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Staff Sergeant James H. Gore from Charlotte, North Carolina, Staff Sergeant Harry L. Skinner from Pittsburg, Kansas and Tech Sergeant William Smerhorsky of Camden, New Jersey. These men had been with the division from the start. Jack Albaugh had been with the army show that traveled the country in 1943 as the army's finest. He was a soft-spoken man who inspired confidence. Sergeant Jimmy Gore, a southerner, was another soft-spoken person who inspired confidence along with Sergeant Harry Skinner a Midwesterner in thought and demeanor. Sergeant Smerhorsky was a good NCO who could easily impart his knowledge to the men. Two of these men, later became officers through battlefield commissions and two were killed in action.
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The training at Fort Bragg was intense and effective as we gradually became soldiers in our own eyes and those of the officers and NCO's. During this training they continued to ship men out of the division—John Bishop of Davenport, Iowa, Eddie Bazelon of Chicago, good friends of mine, were among the numbers who left us. No sooner had we felt the loss of people we had gone to school with and trained with than an new influx of troops came in—men from the phased out programs of the Air Cadets and Anti-aircraft artillery. The Air corps personnel had retained their stripes and entered the outfit as sergeant, staff sergeant and other NCO grades. These men were incorporated into our ranks and became comrades and friends. One of them, Ray McGuire from Waterloo, Iowa, remains a close friend to this day. Those of us who remained from ASTP, especially Art Byrnes, Robert Dunn, and Bernie Lind of Escanaba, Michigan became even closer friends. We became a cohesive bunch of guys with a strong bond apparent to all. We took pride in marching smartly, in excelling in strenuous activities without a complaint and in accomplishing the missions assigned to us. There were times when the officers and NCO's considered the training excessive and would let up on us. One instance (I should say several instances) involved two-mile runs into the woods during calisthenics. Lieutenants Conley and Mrazek would run us down the path leading into the woods until we were out of sight. Then they would let us fall out for ten minutes to have a cigarette, re-grouping us on the return trail leading back out of the woods to the

training area. These guys were two very humane officers who knew we were hard-working men and would always put out when necessary. We weren't kids to them.

Our training days were very busy—bayonet exercises (jab, slash, smash, and ram), judo training, compass and map reading, parachute training. On the right side of the parade ground in front of our row of barracks were mock-up planes at different heights left after the departure of the 82nd Airborne Division which we used for parachute drills. At increasing heights that mimicked air drops we learned the basics of jumping, landing and rolling. The purpose of this training was to show us how to land with a parachute and not break and ankle or a leg. Hikes were a real test, especially the speed marches in which our battalion would make a nine-mile hike in two hours or less. It was pride that drove us to finish these marches with a full field pack weighing 60 lbs. in one and a half to one and three quarters hours without a man dropping out. Regular marches of 5 to 15 miles were a snap for us who were in excellent physical condition. We could all do from 100 to 150 push-ups with no strain, though our pull-ups and sit-ups were not as spectacular. Our marching formations were great with a remark made later by observers of regimental parade that West Point should take note. We learned to look at our fellow GI's and say if he can do it I can do it and this is very important in combat.

We were firmly incorporated into the company assigned to permanent platoons and equals. I was assigned to the second Platoon, second Squad and became first scout. My squad leader was Staff Sergeant William Hurley, a rather cocky but likable fellow, the assistant squad leader was Clarence Merrill who was a friendly soft-spoken chap from Maine. To this day all of the surviving members of the 2nd platoon would like to find out what happened to him. More about this later. We all knew we were an outfit and proud of our affiliation with it. We were Century men.

We had had rifle training and marksmanship was part of our training and though most of us qualified, some rated sharpshooter awards. I didn't make sharpshooter as the M1 rifle which had become our personal firearm and which was assigned to us by serial number. We learned to clean it especially when we were assigned new rifles covered with cosmolein (grease). We had to clean them on issue and learned to take it apart blindfolded with each piece burned into our memory and we learned that this was a rifle, a gun was something large and fired faster than the rifle. In Fort Benning the Sergeant had been quite crude on what he required if we called a rifle a gun, he would get the offender in front of the platoon with his rifle in one hand and make him repeat over and over "This my rifle and this my gun (pointing to one's fly). This is for work and this is for fun". Very crude, but effective in embarrassing the person who made the mistake. When we did this in the division we were not subject to the same embarrassment we had had at For Benning. It was drilled into us that in combat you needed a buddy, one you could depend on to cover you and vice-versa. You dug the foxholes together, pitched tents together, in some ways he was your alter ego in the field. The man assigned to me in the states was John Shanto of Nemacolin, Pennsylvania. John was a worldly-wise person compared to a lot of us when it came to working in the field we clicked. One day during a field problem we dug a foxhole together. When we had finished we had to be pulled out of it. I guess we were too eager to do the right things. They told us to dig deep and we did it! One fellow we made an impression on was Robert Wynne of Cincinnati, Ohio. He explained at the time that if either Ken Bonte or John

Shanto were wounded, he'd get the heck out of there. (And he did, because he shot himself in the foot on the way to Bitche!) After I was wounded and was returning to the company, guess who was sitting next to me in the Jeep—Wynne!)

John Shanto had been in the Anti-aircraft Artillery group that joined the Division in May. The movement of troops out of the Division had ceased and we were filling spots that were lost in the exodus. The days were passing quickly and our training as a unit became the dominant aim.

Field problems of battalion and regimental size were being enacted every week. The troops that had been in the Division when we younger GI's were assigned to it had spent the last winter in the field in Tennessee on maneuvers. They had learned to operate as a Division in combat situations. We also had a few men in the Division who had been in combat in Africa and were considered seasoned troops. These men were interspersed throughout the Division. Some were in our company.

Our platoon sergeant Lyle Hemmingway was one of these men. He had fought with the first Division in Africa and was wounded at El Guitar. The fact that we had a combat veteran as a leader gave our platoon comfort and a bit of cockiness. The sergeant was a good leader and knew his job. He emphasized the welfare of the men in the platoon first, and that everyone in the platoon should look after each other for the good of the whole. During this time, we received a new platoon leader, Lieutenant John Bacos of Brooklyn, New York. He was short, looked young and we would allude to him when his wasn't around as "junior". This actually became a term of endearment as we came to care for him as a leader who cared for us.

The time had come for everyone to take furloughs so they could get a leave within at least six months before any movement from the states. I got my papers and prepared to take my leave. I had saved some money and also received some from home to help meet costs. I was lucky to get my fifteen days in May, 1944 and spent them at home. When I bought my tickets for the train, Bernie Lind, from Escanaba, Michigan, whom I had gotten to know well during training at Fort Benning asked if I could loan him some money for his ticket because he was short of cash. I lent him $15 to get his ticket. He said he'd pay me back sending me the money when he got home. We bought our tickets and traveled together to Chicago and from there went our separate ways. We boarded the the Atlantic Coastline train out of Fayetteville on May 15th—the first lap of our trip home. The train was scheduled to arrive in Washington, DC on the following morning. Our connection on the B&O was to leave at 4:30PM that day. After arriving in Washington the first thing we saw was the Capitol. We were in awe. It was the first time for both of us. We walked down Constitution Avenue and arrived at the USO Canteen where we remained until it was time to leave for our train. The USO Canteen was set up to provide coffee, donuts (no limit), writing facilities, travel assistance, dancing at night. At all hours it was busy with GI's and sailors passing through Washington. We took a cab back to the station and boarded our train to Chicago. It was an experience for both of us and we enjoyed the whole day. Bernie was quite a kid, blond hair, blue eyes and a look of innocence. He was a good, clean-cut lad who deserved better than what was in store for him.

Boarding the Capital Limited Train, we settled in our seats and later went to the club car to have a couple of drinks. We got a couple of sandwiches from the vendor and dozed off for the night. We were awakened passing through the Allegheny mountains and immediately fell back to sleep until arriving at Union Station in Chicago at 7:30AM on time. We got off the train, said our goodbyes agreeing to meet up again on our return trip.

I went to the LaSalle station and caught the 10:30 AM Rock Island Rocket arriving in Moline at 2:30PM. My dad met me at the station with our '38 Buick Century. It was a great looking car in those days! Dad had gotten (I still don't know how) enough gas and ration coupons to last my entire leave. When we arrived home I went into the store. Mom was waiting there very happy to see me. She had very religiously supplied me with care packages all the while I was away and now on leave she wanted to be sure that I had what I needed. It was the old cliché – My son, My son, expressed in many different ways. All I carried when I came home was my furlough bag with an extra uniform (khakis), underwear, socks, a toilet kit and cigarettes. She immediately asked if there was anything I could use while home. After getting settled the first thing I did was call Mary. She was working, but arranged the next day to get off early. She was happy I was home, but still would not commit to be my steady. That night I stayed home and talked to my folks and drank beer—not in the store, since Dad wouldn't serve me, underage kid that I was. I told him all the things I could except the classified parts.

The first pal I got a hold of the next day was Ricky Schattaman of Moline. He would not be old enough to enlist in the service until his birthday in October, but we had been close friends since I was a sophomore in High School. Ricky wasn't able to go out with me to most places but we hung around together whenever it was possible. His brother George, a year older than me, was also a friend. George was due home shortly and Ricky arranged for me to see him. George was a Corpsman in the Navy on Tarawa and was awaiting his assignment to the V12 program—the equivalent of the army ASTP program. I also found out that Neil de Clerk, a friend who had introduced me to Mary, was home on leave and we eventually all got together. I also got in touch with some of my other friends.

I tried to see Mary as much as I could and we went to all our familiar places. It had been over six months since we had been together and we enjoyed dating. The last night of my leave we went out and I did something I would regret for the next seven months. I began to feel sorry for myself and started to drink heavily. Mary did not like this and chided me. I was to leave the next morning at 5:30 to return to camp. She had agreed to see me off. The next morning my Dad took me to the station in Moline, and when I arrived there was no Mary. I realized then that I had goofed and wouldn't see her. But I did not realize how bad I had goofed until the next January. My luck was not holding out too well with train either. We were informed that flash flooding had wiped out some of the bridges in Iowa and the train was not expected until 9:00AM. We returned home and later called to check on the new arrival time of the train. They said it would be 10:30 or later. If it would come much later I would not make my connection with the B&O at 4:30PM in Chicago.

Dad immediately called the airport and though passenger service was hard to get during the War, he had friends in the right places. If the train were too late he arranged a seat for me to Washington International Air port, leaving a t 1:00pm and arriving a day ahead of schedule for train to Fort Bragg. But the train did arrive in Moline at 11:30 and I was assured that it would make the 4:30 connection in Chicago. So we did not need to use my Dad's good connections.

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My trip to DC was made without any problems. I made my connection from Chicago on the Capitol Limited at 4:30 and arrived in DC at 7:30 the next morning. I didn't meet up with Bernie Linn as we had agreed, because he left on an earlier train, After arriving in DC, I had to wait until 3:00pm for my Atlantic Coastline connection to Fayetteville, North Carolina. While in DC I visited the White House, the Capitol and other monuments and spent my lunch at the USO in downtown Washington. That afternoon I boarded the train and was relieved that I would return to camp on time.

I got to my seat and then went to the club car for a beer looking for someone to talk. A woman seated at the bar looked over at me and asked, "Where you going, Soldier?" I replied, "Fort Bragg". She proceeded to talk about her husband who was a Lieutenant in the field artillery at Fort Bragg. She asked me what part of the Fort I was assigned to and I replied, the Airborne area. She said her husband was going to meet her at the station in Fayetteville, and asked how I was getting to the base. I said I would try to get a bus, if we didn't arrive too late. She then offered me a ride with her husband to the base. By the time we arrived, it was Midnight and I knew if I didn't get a ride I was in trouble. She introduced me to her husband after we got off the train, and said that she had offered me a ride to the base. I finally arrived at the barracks at 1:00pm and crawled into my bunk. My fifteen-day leave was over and I knew that leave would be scarce for the remainder of my time in the army.

The next day I settled into the routine of barracks life at Fort Bragg and we were just beginning organizational coordination with other units of the 100th Division. It was the end of May and we of the ASTP had become full-fledged Century men. Among the new Century men there were cadets (who retained any rank they had previously held), anti-aircraft artillery men, and we of the ASTP. The cuts had been made in our ranks earlier before integration into the Division. Friends we had acquired at Michigan State and Fort Benning were transferred because they were deemed unable to meet the standards set by army higher-ups. Among them were Eddie Bazelon from Chicago and John Bishop from Davenport and others we had spent the last eight months with; they disappeared from our lives at that instant of our army career.

The second platoon had retained Art Byrnes, Harold Childers, Jason Colbath, myself, /Gerald Pyne from Michigan State and Jim Naughton, Art Sutton, and Louis Hutton from Fort Benning. We were one as a unit and we would prove later that we could act like one.

Second Lieutenant John Bacos was the platoon leader, Tech Sergeant Lyle Hemingway was the platoon Sergeant and Staff Sergeant Crumrine was platoon guide, Staff Sergeant Angelo Pierro was first squad leader, Staff Sergeant Bill Hurley the second

squad leader and Staff Sergeant James Gore was the third squad leader. I was in the second squad which had Clarence Merril assistant squad leader, Art Brynes, Henry Kloh, Les Gluesenkamp, Al Bartelson, John Shanto, Leroy (Spike) Ackerman, Robert Chadwick, Joe Fahlman, Charles Nyman, Joe Orosz, and Jim Walters. This roster will remain the same until our first day of combat.

We were now entering June with a full schedule ahead of us. A select group under Lieutenant Coronel King our battalion commander was in New York for the Army Day Parade. The details of this assignment led Division personnel to state that this Division will never make it overseas. Suddenly one morning the 6th of June, the duty clerk woke us with the words, "This is it! The invasion is on in Normandy." We all felt the effects, as we knew some of the men from the 100th Division had been sent overseas and were assigned to the first wave divisions. After that day training became more intense and we began training in larger units as combat teams of regimental size.

The infiltration course took on more status. Individual effort at the firing range improved in order to qualify as marksman and map reading meant more than just reading

2nd Platoon C. Company
397th Infantry Regiment
100th Infantry Division

Roster as of November, 1944

2nd Lt. John Bacos,
Sgt. William T. Hurley
Sgt Crumrine

1st Squad	2nd Squad	3rd Squad
Angelo Pierro-Sqd. Ldr	Clarence Merill-Sqd. Ldr.	Jimmy Gore-Sqd. Ldr.
Charles Bouchard	Leroy Ackerman	Everett Browning
George Harmon	Alfred Bartleson	Harold Childers
Lyle Hemingway	Kenneth Bonte	Arthur Christensen
Louis Hutton	Arthur Byrnes	Jason Colbath
Joseph Kurucz	Robert Chadwick	Eitzen
James Naughton	Joseph Fahlman	Earl Evans
Joseph Tatem	Lester Gluesenkamp	Antonio Gentile
Robert Wynne	Henry Kloh	Allison Jones
Reese payne	Chares Nyman	Gerald Pyne
Charles W New	Joseph Orosz	Arthur Sutton
Ed Raynor	John Shanto	William Whidden
	Jim Walters	James Biller

a map. We began to act like soldiers and put more effort into our training. Morale shot up and pride in our division rode high. We all said we were the best Division in the States and could do anything the army asked us to do.

We covered the nine-mile forced march with one-hundred pounds of equipment in one hour and a half—fifteen to thirty minutes less than the army requirement. As the peak of the summer approached we practiced live action missions at Division and Regimental level. In one operation we got on trucks at night and were dropped off at an

mock location behind enemy lines. We were given compasses and grid information and told to be at a certain drop zone at zero hour to get our meals and prove we were on target for our objective. As a regiment we attained our objective on time and with pride.

Our next exercise had us moving under live artillery fire, advancing to attack the enemy. Some of us—and I was with this group-- were assigned as referees to critique the performance of the regiment. Our group suddenly found ourselves ahead of the troops in the midst of exploding artillery shells. Being too far forward, we had to radio the howitzers to stop firing. The shells were landing close enough to make us think that we were actually under enemy fire. It was a good experience and would serve to help us in real combat. That day I was really scared about what happened, but it gave me a little bit of confidence about how to react under fire.

Summer passed along with training in house to house fighting, air drops, hikes, and small arms training. The rifle grenade launcher was a challenge. The range firing of the BAR—which I qualified on as an expert—and the most memorable incident of all, a 25 mile medical march. This march started out in front of our barracks as a formation. The first sergeant had all the enlisted men open their canteens and then he proceeded down line after line to dump a salt tablet in each one. This was tantamount to poisoning our water—because we couldn't drink it during the six-hour march. The sweltering 125 degree heat and lack of pure water made many men ill and ready to collapse if not for the help of their comrades-in-arms who took their packs and held them up along the march. Nevertheless we completed this 25 mile march without loosing a man. Once we arrived at the company area a third of the company fell to the ground and the medics administered first aid. This march tested our discipline and proved our stamina--a new stage as a Division with the ability to survive the ordeals ahead of us and in the eyes of both American and German generals a crack Division. The spirit of the 100th Division. Not bad for teenagers!

As the end of August approached, we began to hear rumors of overseas movement. We had a company beer party in mid August that was really a bash. John Bacos in order to reward the platoon for its efforts, sent one of us into Washington DC with a bit of his cash and orders to buy as much of the best whiskey he could put his hands on. The beer party was an event—between the beer and the whiskey we got sloshed and were riding to the moon. WACs from Pope Field Airbase were invited to the party and were chased by some of the inebriated men all around the mess hall eventually joined by some of the even more inebriated members of the 2nd platoon namely staff Sergeant Hurley, Privates Jim Walters, Bob Wynne and others. The party finally broke up at 1:30am.

We ended up with a short sleep because First Sergeant Malley had us rise and shine at 4:30am for a five mile march to the transition firing range. We were hardly in great shape with two hours of sleep, having to pack full field knapsacks with splitting headaches and wobbly footing. It took us a full hour to fall in by 5:30am and we were still struggling to get it all together. What a sight to see. Packs were unfastened messes, loosely hanging off shoulders, dragging on the ground. The sun peaked out over the horizon as we moved along the road, sweating the alcohol out of our system. After a

couple of hours we reached the transition firing range. Holding our carbines, which we were using for the first time, we aimed at silhouettes of enemy soldiers popping up and down in front of us. Firing in turn we emptied our magazines each of us rated on the number of hits. By the time we finished, we had cleared our heads and sweated out the poison. When we returned to Company C area, we were told that as a Company we had fired exceptionally well. We didn't believe it! We laughed uproarishly.

The alert came for the Division to go POE (an army term for preparation for overseas movement—literally: port of embarkation). We prepared all our crew-served weapons and sent all items (not government issue) home, packing all GI items in our duffle bags—the first issued by the army. Our new duffle bags held as much as we stuffed into them a companion to the barracks bag that we took along. Rifles were cleaned and oiled. We checked all webbed equipment—belts, packs, canteens, covers, leggings—and if they were worn they were replaced. We sent to our homes the new overseas address of the division: APO 447. We stripped all our uniforms of unit designations. As we packed we wondered what our next destination was.

Ken in front of Fort Bragg barracks

At last the day came; we marched to the marshalling area and boarded a troop train. The trip took three days from Fort Bragg to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. During the trip we were indoctrinated in censorship procedures and were strenuously reprimanded about violations—for example use of Divisional identification symbols or revealing our location-- in letters home. We slept in our seats and had our meals in the baggage compartment using our aluminum mess kits for dinner ware.

On the evening of September 21, 1944 we arrived at Camp Kilmer and took our

sleeping assignments. The following days were spent on POE actions; we received new overseas equipment—new entrenching tools (a first issue that took the place of two previous tools), new field jacket (longer and with more pockets than the one we received at Fort Sheridan), boot packs, four pairs of heavy socks for dry feet. After briefing and receipt of the new equipment, we learned the use of landing nets to disembark from the ship, the use of life-jackets, boarding procedures into LCI's (landing craft infantry) and LCT's (landing craft tanks), and boarding the ship. In all this we had no inkling of where we were going.

After all finishing all these activities, on October 3 we received 36 hour passes into New York City. This was our last state side liberty. We saw a lot of New York. I went to Jack Dempsey's Night Club, saw the stage production of Oklahoma, called my girl Mary (but couldn't get in touch with her), and spent the night at the Times Square USO. New York was a great place.

The next evening back at Camp Kilmer we repacked all our gear and got ready to embark. On October 5 we left Camp Kilmer, took the train to Jersey City and the Ferry across the Hudson River to the Manhattan pier to board the transport for our unknown destination.

We boarded the USS George Washington, a ship with a history dating back to World War I. In 1917 it was a German transport liner seized by the US and converted to a troop ship. A friend of my father's told me, after I came home, that he had come home from France in World War I on the George Washington. We learned while given instructions about the ship, that the 1936 US Olympic Team had taken this ship Germany and that Eleanor Holm had thrown a huge party which caused quite a scandal.

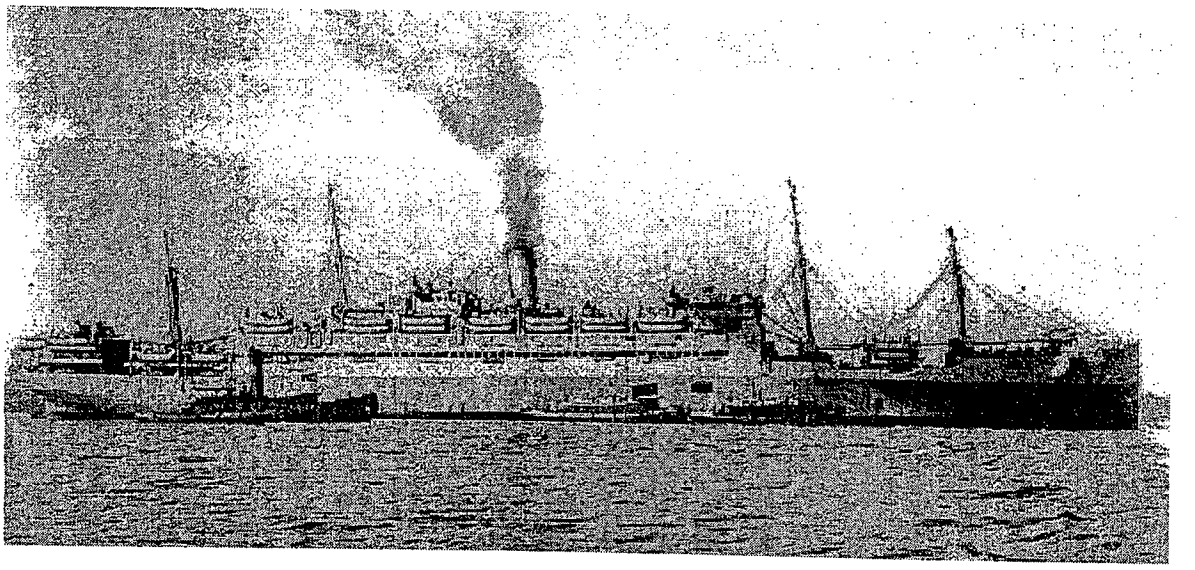
We settled on the ship and got our duties. Our battalion drew kitchen police duty with Company C in charge of serving breakfast and Company A in charge of the evening meal. The rest of the battalion drew the noon meal, caring detail and dinning clean-up. Troops with unassigned duties received two meals a day—breakfast and supper—and those with duties got three meals.

Thus began the grand adventure of our lives. The voyage to Europe had some good days and some bad days, but it was an experience we would remember for the rest of our lives. The morning of October 6, 1944, the engines churned out of New York harbor with a convoy of eleven transports and their escort ships—destroyers, a baby flat-top carrier, and the protection escorts. When our ship left port Company C, below deck serving breakfast, missed seeing the Statue of Liberty.

The first days aboard ship were calm and serene. We rose at 4:00am to get ready to serve breakfast at 5:00. About 7,000 men lined up cafeteria style twice a day for their meals aboard the ship. A few laughs broke the tension and boredom. One morning at breakfast the coffee had a foul, sickening taste. We had to re-make it. Joe Kurucz had coffee duty that morning: one bag of sugar and one bag of coffee. It turns out that he mixed up the bags and used salt instead of sugar. What a flavor! We teased Joe for

days—and to this day he remembers goofing up. Things went smoothly for four days until the ship turned south and ran into a hurricane. One merchant seamen who had sailed this route before the War said it was the worst he had seen in 20 years. The convoy rolled like bottles bopping up and down. Huge waves crashed over the bow, some up to 50 feet or more continuing for three days. Finally we rode out of the storm into calm seas. Everyone sighed in relief. Luckily I didn't get seasick throughout it all. We ate a lot at breakfast and I think that saved me.

On the ninth day we passed a convoy that had lost a ship to a U-boat. We proceeded to the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea, passing lighted cities on the African coast. The ship turned to our final destination, Marseilles, France, which had been retaken from the Germans a few weeks before we arrived. In the afternoon of our 16th day out to sea, the George Washington dropped anchor. Our voyage to destiny was complete.



The USS George Washington