

November 12, 1944—A Long Day

by Herbert Church, 374-B

Herbert Church was a forward observer (FO) and later was an assistant intelligence officer for Battery B, 374th FABn. During the war, he kept and almost daily hand-written diary which he sent to his sister. Herb passed away in 2003. Herb wrote, November 12 was a long day, one of the longest I was to live through, so I'll stop here and give you a little tactical fill-in, based on facts which I did not know when I wrote the diary. Submitted by his widow, Gail Church

On November 12 the Seventh Army attacked in force to break the Germans' "Winter Line" in the Vosges. A key city in that line was Raon l'Étape, sitting squarely on the Meurthe River. By November 12, the 100th, which was the first "new" division to join the Army since its landings, had completely relieved the 45th. The 3rd and the 100th were to bear the brunt of the attack: the newest and one of the oldest divisions in the west on that day. The 100th was north of the 3rd, whose main objective was St. Die.

Our plan to take Raon l'Étape was to send the 397th and 399th, our strongest regiments, over to the east bank of the Meurthe at Baccarat, where the 45th Division had obtained a toe-hold on the Winter Line. Then send them around to the northeast of Raon l'Étape, while the 398th held the line facing the town to the south and pretended it was bigger and fiercer than it was.

About 0700, a dozen German shells landed close by. I'd hear the rising whistle, then hold myself rigid until the bang; then I'd relax, breathing hard. We didn't talk about it, but I guess the others did the same. It started to snow as we ate our cold K-ration breakfast. After it, we rolled our bedding, loaded it into the jeep, and watched it go back with the infantry supply jeeps. Our feet would carry us from here.

About 0850, we loaded up and prepared to move. Cooper carried the wire, and was to lay it. Hill had the radio, a terrific load, but we had only one pack board, and could not break it down. I carried phone, glasses, and extra radio battery. Cheney did the same.

Promptly at 0900 we moved into the woods, shuffling silently through the snow. The section was to go with Company Headquarters; I tried to stick with the CO. It was tough, as he ran all over the place, weighted down only with a carbine.

We crossed a little stream, and went up a steep hill, dark with spruce trees. I lost Stalworth, but bumped into a mortar observer named Abrams, and went up with him. Lord knows where the others were. We wandered all over the map, at one point getting in front of the company, a perfectly horrifying experience! At the top of the rise I met Hill, but didn't see the others. There were GIs around, and they walked down the other side of the hill, so we followed.

I don't know when the shots began, but I gradually became conscious of them. You couldn't see anything, of course, in the woods. We reached the bottom of the hill, crossed a small stream, and faced another hill. Stalworth was there, and so was Colonel Quinn, the battalion commander. Hill and I flopped down beside them.

Then came the first taste of Hell. Z-z-z-z-wham! Z-z-z-z-wham! In they came, and close. We lay flat on our stomachs, and clutched at the ground, as if to pull it around us. I had a thousand thoughts: where were Cheney and Cooper? What should we do? And Oh, please God, keep this one from hitting us! . . .

I saw and hailed the two missing fellows, and they flopped down beside us. We were all shaking like leaves. Cooper had laid all his wire, and did not have enough, so we could not use the phones. All the while, the shells screamed in. One hit the top of a tree, not fifty feet away. It blasted with a brilliant flash, deafening us, blowing dirt around, and knocking Hill's helmet off. All around us, the doughboys, too, lay flat. The shelling started to ease off, eventually, and the riflemen moved up the hill.

Next started a sharp chattering, with an accompanying "snap" as the bullets raced around us. Again we fell flat. The doughs, God bless them, didn't stop, but kept on up the hill, shooting right and left. A shattering roar came from the woods.

Someone hollered "Jerry patrol on the left!" About six riflemen and BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) men trotted down that way. They caught the Krauts in a wooded glade, and surrounded them. 60mm

mortars were set up, and shell after shell “crrrrumped” into the hostile spot. There was bedlam as we hear the shots, high-pitched German weapons, the deeper barks of Garands, and the put-put-put of BARs. With as little fuss as when they went to work, the GIs tramped back. There were a few less Jerries in the world.

Meanwhile, the racket continued on the hill. A soldier chased a German back to the rear, our first PW. From up above came a terrible cry, “Medic!” An aid man sprinted up the hill toward the call, bullets whizzing around him. He, of course, was unarmed. And to think how we used to joke about “pill-rollers” back in garrison.

Gradually the shots above us died out. Following Stalworth and Quinn up the hill, we found a dead German shot in the throat and gray of face. My stomach recoiled a bit at seeing him. There were other dead in the vicinity, including some figures in OD, and a number of wounded. Soldiers around me were silently digging holes in the snow. All you could hear was the clink, clink, of their shovels, as they hit rocks. We started to do the same.

Every once in a while a stray shell would hiss in and land with a wham! as we all fell flat, hearts pounding.

Battalion HQ was in an old German dugout. I asked what I could do, and was told, “Get something out there, anything.” We set up the radio; no go. She was busted. When I went back, Quinn was roaring over the phone, “Listen, Zeb, we came through Hell to get here, we did it by guts and nothing else and we’re going to stay here. You tell the Colonel if he’ll come up here and lead us we’ll go on, but otherwise we’re sticking right here. . . . Damn right, we lost men. . . well, Chris, for instance. . . yes, he’s dead. . . you understand, Zeb? OK, tell the Colonel.”

I told him my plight, asked to use his phone. His hand was trembling when he gave me the hand set. So was mine. Chris had shared my room on the boat, coming over—a grand, easygoing friendly, second looey.

I rang the phone. “Fearless Gray” (not the real code name for the battalion, as it’s still confidential), [Frolic White] said a quiet voice, so different from our strained ones. I got through the Fire Direction, but the connection was so poor that the 397th operator had to relay my commands. Finally, over they came. A great tearing overhead, and then crashes out front of us. The grandest noise I ever heard. The doughs around perceptibly relaxed, and grinned a little. I adjusted the fire until it was directly in front of us, good in case of a counterattack. Then back to digging holes. I was more tired than I ever have been in my life. Humphries appeared just as darkness came, with our rolls. Cheney and I took one hole, Hill and Cooper the other. Humphries, went back to the 374th to get us a new radio. We lay facing the falling snow, munching our K-rations. Our nerves were in a state, but we were more tired than anything and fast went to sleep.