

Remembering

by John Courter, 399-D

I knew I was destined for the Army Specialized Training Program at the time I was drafted from Osborne County, Kansas. I certainly did not know, though, that I was going to eventually become a Centuryman with Company D, 399th Infantry Regiment of the 100th Infantry Division.

I joined the Division in March 1944, at the same time as many other ASTPers were shipped there after the ASTP program was abandoned.

Most of the first-person stories that have appeared in the 100th Division Association Newsletters have told the experiences of frontline soldiers as they engaged in combat with the German enemy.

The account of my experiences overseas are not as exciting, but tell a story of what went on “behind the scenes” so that our fighting troops could be fed, supplied, and receive their mail.

To our buddies in the foxholes, we were “rear echelon.” Even though we were occasionally exposed to danger, we could always return to relative safety and comfort several miles behind the lines. I always felt some guilt mixed with gratitude that I was in that situation.

As the cliché goes, however, “somebody had to do it.” My admiration for the guys at the front was tremendous. That did not diminish my desire to do my best where I had been placed by the powers that be as one cog in a wheel that moved inevitably and victoriously through the Vosges Mountains and on to Stuttgart.

You’re in the Army Now

On July 10, 1943, I was notified to report for induction. On August 11 or 12, Dad and Mother took me to meet the bus that was to transport all of the Osborne County inductees to Fort Leavenworth for our physical exams and final induction. The good-byes were said with mixed emotions for me, but for my parents it must have been a particularly emotional experience to see their youngest off to war. They already had a son-in-law in uniform and their eldest son was soon to be drafted.

Bitche to the Rhine

Things changed suddenly on March 15. The Division jumped off from the winter line that they had held for seventy-two days and went after the town of Bitche. The Germans defended the outposts with a lot of artillery and mortar fire, but in the long run, gave up the municipality and Citadel without much of a struggle. An officer and six men from Company C “captured” the mighty fortress.

March 15 and 16 were hectic days, with mop-up operations going on at a furious pace on the outskirts and a great deal of uncertainty about what we were going to do next. That night I remember sleeping on the floor of a house with other men from Company D virtually in the shadow of the Citadel.

For the next three days our battalion, the “Red Raiders,” was motorized for a rapid movement. Riding in trucks and jeeps we quickly passed through the awesome Siegfried Line, which the Germans had built to protect themselves from France, and went on a “rat race” to the Rhine River. Along the way Germans had hung white sheets and pillowcases out their windows to show they were not resisting. Some of the towns were utterly devastated. Zweibrucken and Pforzheim, two small cities, were totally flattened. I could not conceive how civilians could have lived through that kind of shelling and bombing. There were a few pockets of resistance, but the German soldiers we saw were in groups that had surrendered and were on their way to an American POW camp in the rear. We also saw many refugees—slave laborers of the Germans (many were Polish), carrying their belongings on their backs or pulling wooden carts.

March 23, we arrived at Ludwigshaven across the Rhine from Mannheim which had been liberated and essentially destroyed by another division and the Air Corps.

I wrote home, “Well, here I am on Hitler’s own soil. It’s quite a change over France. The people seem a lot different and certainly are much cleaner. In the small villages of France there was a manure pile in every front yard. I haven’t seen any in all of the towns I’ve been in.”

We passed through some beautiful farm country and I wrote sort of a prediction. "One thing I would like to do in peacetime is to take a motor trip through Europe. It would be one of the most interesting things a person could do."

On Easter, April 1, we were billeted in a German home and we were able to attend Protestant services (led by our Chaplain) in a packed Lutheran Church. That same day, most of our outfit crossed the Rhine on a pontoon bridge built by the Army engineers to Mannheim, another city that was a desert of rubble, walls, and shells of buildings. I rode across on the backend of our 6x6 truck like a conquering hero.

Heilbronn

Another "rat race" ensued south to Heilbronn on the beautiful Neckar River. It appeared that the war's end was fast approaching, but it was an ill begotten hope. A major battle was about to take place at Heilbronn where the Germans had rallied their forces for a determined effort to keep the 100th on the west side of the river.

We went into the neat town of Bockingen across the river from Heilbronn where I had the luxury of taking a bath in the house where we were billeted. On April 14, I wrote, "You should see the house we're in now! It's really quite a mansion. I made good use of the bathtub today and soaked several weeks' dirt out. Heated water in a GI can and carried it upstairs. I got to change clothes, too, so I felt like a new man." I also mentioned our shock at President Roosevelt's death and the troops' concern about the affect on the war. The battalion was under surveillance by the Germans and barrages of "screaming meemies" with their particular blood-curdling whine kept us on edge.

Our forces were in a holding pattern while our engineers constructed a pontoon bridge across the river. The enemy kept up a steady barrage of artillery and mortars fire to harass and inhibit activity and the preparations for the river crossing by the 100th Division troops.

The bridge was blasted and ruined but some troops got across the river by boats. The pontoon bridge was finally repaired and remained intact long enough to get troops across the river. The battle for Heilbronn was a major one for the 100th Division, especially for our battalion. After crossing the river, much of the fighting was person to person, house to house, in and out of buildings and factories.

My friend, Bob Fair, was badly wounded when shells from a "screaming meemie" came in and he jumped under a jeep for protection. Several shells hit in the close vicinity and one hit the jeep directly and set it on fire. Bob was pulled from under the jeep by squad members and taken into a nearby house where he was found to have been hit by shrapnel in both arms and severely injured in his left leg and foot. He was evacuated to a field hospital and subsequently to England and back to the States. He spent several months at various hospitals undergoing treatment and convalescing and was finally discharged in February 1946, about ten months after his injury. In the same barrage, the driver of the jeep also under the vehicle, was killed and another squad member was wounded.

Evidence of the fierceness of the battle for Heilbronn is the fact, recorded in the regimental history, that on April 13, 1945, the 399th Regiment was awarded four Distinguished Service Crosses, dozens of Silver Stars and numerous Purple Hearts took 1,500 prisoners—many of whom were SS troops and *panzergrenadiers*. An official accounting of the nine days of fighting indicated a total of eighty-five of our men killed and probably three times that many wounded.

There was still fierce fighting to be done in the hills southeast of Heilbronn where the Germans continued resistance designed to retard our progress.

Finally, on April 20 the regiment began a virtually unimpeded movement toward Esslingen where one company captured the city of 60,000 with two platoons. On April 25, after 179 days of continuous combat, the Century Division was officially taken off the line.