

397th's Company H Machine Gun Section – The Rest of the Story

by Rufus Dalton, 397-H

Over the years since the war, Rufus Dalton, 397-H, has been in contact with many of his Century buddies, which, among other things, he puts the pieces together of a story that happened in 1944.

I would imagine that all of us in the 397th Infantry Regiment recall the day we took Raon l'Etape. That was on November 18, 1944. Our regiment had gone into the cold and wet forests of the High Vosges on November 7 as greenhorns and, by the 18th of the same month we were veterans.

On that day, my unit, the mortar platoon of Company H, moved down off the high hills into Raon l'Etape, but we had hardly gotten our breath when orders came down to resume the attack. So, we had to turn right around and climb back up those high hills under our heavy loads. The following day, November 19, our battalion was pressing forward. Company E was advancing and two squads of our Company H's Heavy Machine Gun Platoon were right behind them. Second Lieutenant Joseph Bilder was leading the two squads as they moved up a densely forested hill following the attacking Company E.

These two heavy machine-gun squads were strung out in a single file, under the loads of their disassembled guns and other equipment. Suddenly, a German counterattack struck from around the flanks of Company E, and the Germans came charging down the hill, firing their rapid-firing "burp" guns into our men, quickly overwhelming them. Only one man, the one at the very end of the line, managed to escape. That was Carl Birkhofer. I spoke with him shortly after it happened and I developed a mental picture of what took place that stayed with me through the years.

Years later, our company commander, Captain Tony Maiale, sent me a copy of his memoirs regarding this incident.

These are his words,

"This day shall live in my mind as one of the bitterest memories of my life. To see six of my men around their machine guns and, around them, about twelve men of 'E' Company, also dead, was almost more than I could bear. There they were in their various attitudes of resistance. One boy still had his hand on the machine gun trigger. He was shot through the head. One still had his hand raised. I suppose he had tried to surrender. They never had a chance. When I finally made the rounds and identified the dead, I found that eight men were apparently captured, six dead, and two wounded among my missing machine-gun section (2 squads)."

I often wondered what happened to those men who were captured. I knew that Carl Birkhofer, who had escaped capture, was later killed by artillery fire during the fighting around Oberheinreit on April 14. Tragically, this was only 16 days before our fighting was over. Fellow Company H men, Henry McCorkle and Myron Hersom, had applied a tourniquet and called for a medic, but Carl passed away, probably from shock. I assumed I would never know about the other men who had been taken away by the Germans.

Then, in the year 2006, my friend, Richard Drury, reported that he had run across two Company H men's names in Bud Lindsey's book, *A Soda Jerk Goes to War*. I checked this out and found that they were two of our men who had been captured in the above incident. Lindsey speaks of these two on pages 219 and 220 of his book.

In reading Lindsey's book, I learned that these two men, Albert Delano and Stewart Arft had spent their captivity in Stalag VIIA. According to Lindsey, this prison camp was built in 1939 and was designed for about 10,000 men in 85 acres. It housed French, British, American, and Russian soldiers, in separate compounds, totaling about 80,000 at the time of liberation. [For more information about Stalag VIIA, visit <http://www.moosburg.org/info/stalag/indeng.html>]

Stalag VIIA was located at Moosburg, about 25 miles northeast of Munich. Lindsey reports that the food served at the camp consisted of a cup of hot "so-called" coffee for breakfast. Lunch was a cup of some type of vegetable soup. And, the evening meal was soup with an occasional piece of meat and a piece of bread, and sometimes potatoes.

I was pleased to find that both of these men were still alive in 2006, although Stewart Arft had some health problems. I have exchanged correspondence with Albert Delano and he has given me some information about the day he was captured. He told me that the Germans captured five of his squad and that all were wounded except for him. This was their condition: 2nd Lieutenant Joseph Bilder was hit in the head with a gun butt. Sergeant George Giese was shot in the mouth and cheek. Private Stewart Arft had the ends of his fingers shot off. Private Howard Gentry had the right side of his butt shot off. Delano carried Gentry down the mountain and the Germans took him to a hospital. Delano shared with me a

letter he had received from Gentry in 1960. Gentry wrote, "I still think of you a lot of times. I sure would like to see you some time and to thank you for what you did for me."

Just recently I heard from Stewart Arft who is recovering from a stroke. He has provided additional details to the story. He said that Sergeant Giese could speak German like a native and that was probably the only reason they were captured instead of being killed. He wrote,

"I happened to glance at Sergeant Giese at the moment he was wounded. It looked like his head exploded. Actually the bullet cut a furrow from the corner of his mouth through his cheek to the distal of his masseter muscle and out. After capture, we were being directed back of the Kraut lines and Giese asked the guard (in German) if we could stop a moment in the forest so that I could bandage his wound. The guard said, 'Ya'. So, using my emergency bandage and sulfa, I bandaged his head, stopping the bleeding. (The blood was running all down his side). Soon after this, we were separated and made our way via a number of means of transportation to Stalag VIIA in Moosburg. We were taken into Munich every day in R. R. boxcars to do manual labor (cleaning up bomb debris, etc.). We were transported 50 men to a 40 x 8 boxcar; once being locked in a boxcar for days. The food was sparse and meager and rotten. We lived with lice and fleas covering our bodies." [For further details, see Bud Lindsey's book, Ed.]

Arft further wrote that he was living in the railyards in Munich (in a boxcar) when that city was taken by the American Rainbow Division. He said that they were flown from Munich on C-47s to La Havre, France, where they were deloused and given clean uniforms and real food. Then they were loaded on a ship for the twelve-day voyage to New York City. Like so many others, he said the most wonderful sight of his life was to see the Statue of Liberty come into view.

From Bud Lindsey's book, I have learned that Delano became a postmaster in his hometown of New Market, Indiana, and that Stewart Arft became a dentist in Pleasant Ridge, Michigan. I recently learned that George Giese did make it back safely from Europe, but that he died some ten years ago. His last home was in Trenton, New Jersey. As earlier mentioned, Howard Gentry also made it back, but Delano has told me that he is deceased. He was from Beattyville, Kentucky. I haven't been able to learn anything about Lieutenant Bilder. If anyone knows of him, I would appreciate hearing from them.

It was good to find that some of our machine gunners who had experienced such hardship did make it back safely and had a good life.

Postscript: Coincidentally, as the above article was being prepared for print, an e-mail was received at Aegis from a Karl Birkhofer asking for anyone who might have information on his kin, Carl Birkhofer. Through subsequent e-mails we have learned that Karl is the great nephew of Carl and that he is doing some research on the Birkhofer family. He said that Carl had two brothers, both now deceased. Both enlisted for the Army, but after the death of Carl, their mother urged them to switch to other branches of the military. One of them, Harold J. Birkhofer, joined the Air Force, and was a major at the time of his death in 1979. The other, Karl's grandfather Alfred Birkhofer, Sr., joined the Coast Guard in which he served for a long time. He had four children. Carl also had a sister, Alice, and she is still alive.

An additional piece of information provided by Karl was that Carl's dad is believed to have been a high-ranking officer in the German army during WWI.

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