

The Battle for Mouterhouse

7–8 December 1944

by Rufus M. Dalton, 397-H

This article is about a two-day battle that took place as our regiment was pushing forward toward the fortress city of Bitche. The 397th Infantry Regiment had begun its attack on the German lines in the Vosges Mountains on 12 November, with the 1st and 2nd Battalions jumping off at 0900 hours. Twenty-five days later, most of us were still wearing the same clothes and hadn't had a bath; lived through some miserable weather; and lost some of our buddies. As of 6 December we had 167 dead and 511 wounded.

Following our successful capture of Raon l'Etape and St. Blaise, we had been pulled out of the line and moved by shuttle to another sector of the front, partly on foot and partly in 2 ½-ton trucks. This occurred on 26 and 27 November, with the final destination being the area around Ingwiller. The regiment went back on the attack on 2 December, with its ultimate objective being Bitche. Mouterhouse was the gateway to this objective.

In *Riviera to the Rhine*, authors Jeffrey Clarke and Robert Ross Smith speak of the advance of General Wade H. Haislip's XV Corps, of which our 100th Division was a part. It says, "On the Corp's left the 44th Division's 324th and 114th Infantry secured the Ratzwiller area on the 5th [of December] and seized Montbronn on the 6th. Although operating in more rugged and more forested terrain, the 100th Division easily kept pace, moving up from [highway] N-419 to the area east of Montbronn and occupying Mouterhouse, all against negligible German resistance." (p. 468)

What may have been recorded as "negligible" resistance in the history books was certainly more than that to the men of the 2nd Battalion who experienced the two-day battle for Mouterhouse. The record shows that our battalion had 17 men killed in action, 11 seriously wounded, and 36 lightly wounded in the two days. In this article, I have tried to relate the events of these two days, 7–8 December, as garnered from the history books, and from personal conversations and letters from men who were there.

On 6 December orders came down to take Mouterhouse. The 397th Infantry's history, *The Regiment of the Century*, states, "The Second Battalion left Reipertsviller, moving northeast in the direction of Mouterhouse for a distance of three miles, finally assuming a position 800 yards from the town itself. Company H dug in on Hill 335 (Actually Hill 336 on our map, I believe) and set up its 81mm mortars and machine guns to support the remainder of the battalion." I was a member of the Mortar Platoon of Company H. I recall that all seemed quiet that evening, and I was so tired that I decided not to dig a foxhole, and to just sleep flat on the ground in my just-issued sleeping bag. (Fortunately, there was little shelling that night, none close, but I felt so uneasy that I didn't do that again).

Our rifle companies had been unopposed in our final three or four miles and, thus, we supposed the Germans didn't know where we were as we settled into position for the attack to take place the next morning, 7 December. We hoped for a surprise attack.

A decision was made to send two 81mm mortar forward observation teams through enemy lines into the outskirts of Mouterhouse that night so they would be in advantageous positions for the attack. Each was accompanied by a small team of riflemen from Companies E and G. The one with Company E's men was the one recorded in *The Story of the Century* (p. 76). The leader of this team was Company H's Lieutenant Jim Harrison. Staff Sergeant Herbert Harvey, who spoke fluent German, was a very important member of the team along with Private First Class Ed Olbrys, radioman. Harrison and Harvey are still alive. Harrison recently sent me his recollections,

"We started down the hill through the thick woods in pitch blackness. After going two or three hundred yards, we discovered another group in the area. Expecting to get fired on at any moment, I gave the password and it turned out to be a listening post sent out by Company F, which had wandered over into Company E's area. That really shook us up because if they had been Krauts, they would have nailed us on the spot. We continued down the hill until we neared the road coming in to the town from the west. While preparing to cross the road, two Kraut soldiers came walking down that road heading in town."

Harvey recalls, "We all froze, lying down (against) the steep embankment. No one moved or said anything until the two-man German patrol passed—and disappeared beyond ear shot. They talked with each other—and appeared drunk to me." Harrison continued, "We let them pass and then crossed the road only to run into a swamp and we were knee-deep in mud. There had been a dam on the stream with a pond behind the dam. The Krauts blew the dam and, when the pond drained, the area left was soft mud. How we ever slogged through without being detected, I'll never know."

“After we got out of the swamp, we came to a large, multifamily apartment structure on a slight hill at the west end of Mouterhouse. On reconnoitering the building, we discovered that all of the tenants were huddled in the basement. This points out that the Krauts must have told them we were coming and the shooting was about to start. Staff Sergeant Harvey, one of my squad leaders, spoke German, and after listening for several minutes he didn’t think there were any military personnel in the basement. We charged through the door, scaring the hell out of the civilians. We left two GIs to guard them and keep them in the basement. In *The Regiment of the Century* (p. 177) it errs in reporting there were German soldiers in the building. During the rest of the night we set up the observation post on the top floor of the building.”

Meanwhile, a second forward observation team was also moving into position. This team was comprised of Lieutenant Murry Abrams, Staff Sergeant Tom Grant and Private First Class Keith Hadley, radioman. Abrams and Hadley are still living, and I have recently spoken with each. Lieutenant Abrams told me that our captain, Tony Maiale, had summoned him and told him that he had an important mission for him—to set up an OP inside the German lines to provide effective covering fire for the next morning’s attack by the battalion. A rifleman from Company G led Lieutenant Abrams’ team, by a concealed route, to a house on the outskirts of Mouterhouse.

Upon entering the house, they found it abandoned and decided to stay there for the night. Apparently there had been a skirmish in the immediate area late that afternoon for there was a dead German whom men from Company G were carrying out. During the night, Lieutenant Abrams said they left the house to scout out the area and, at one point, could hear the enemy cursing in German and could see their lit cigarettes.

Early the next morning, Abrams said, they moved through the woods to a hill overlooking the town so they could spot targets of opportunity. They did not attempt to dig in as it would have called attention to their location.

We were expecting the following morning’s attack to be a surprise to the Germans, but there is evidence that this was not completely so. Aside from the little skirmish for Company G, as reported above, Jim Nance, radioman for Captain Garden, commander of Company E, recalls,

“As night came on, the company commander sent out patrols to be sure no Germans were hiding in the woods around us. We dug in for the night. The next morning Companies E and G were to assault the town. Before we launched our attack, an enemy patrol infiltrated as far as our command post. And in the early dawn a short fire fight took place, killing one of our men. After capturing two Jerries and chasing the rest off, we began our push for the town. I reported the enemy at our CP over the radio, but Battalion wouldn’t believe me. ‘Are you sure they’re Jerries and not G Company?’ they said. ‘Sure, we captured two of them,’ I answered. It wasn’t funny then.”

It is interesting that Private First Class Erie Theimer remembers the weather conditions on that morning. He was the acting sergeant of one of Company H’s heavy machine-gun squads attached to the reserve platoon of Company E and, therefore, further up the hill than the platoons leading the attack. He recalls,

“The morning was cold with a pale sunshine filtering through the leafless trees leaving a slightly speckled pattern on the ground. All of us, machine gunners and riflemen, were crouched on the ground on a hill sloping down into town.”

The attack on Mouterhouse began at 0915 hours, with Companies E and G coming down the slope of Hill 336, across an open space of 75 to 100 yards and towards a substantial stone church and its cemetery. According to *The Story of the Century* Company E was on the left, but I have had conflicting stories as to who was on the right and left. Apparently it doesn’t matter as the advancing men of both companies ended up behind the protection of the stone church after they were greeted with heavy automatic fire into the town. Whichever unit had started through the cemetery to the left of the church, “suffered several casualties as enemy fire chipped pieces of stone from the tombstones and sent them spinning into the crouching infantrymen.” (*The Story of the Century*, p. 77)

Company E’s Private First Class Dick Drury recalls,

“Our two companies were going to rush into the town simultaneously. Concerned over my bum ankle, I crawled forward as far as possible so I wouldn’t get left behind. On the signal, we took off. The enemy reacted immediately with the usual weapons plus a new one, a dual mounted antiaircraft gun called a *Flakwagen*. Due to the ferocity of all that firepower, the attack stalled and retreated into the woods. About twenty of us made it to the shelter of the church. Soon we were joined by a few Company G men fleeing from their meager protection of the cemetery. I considered a dash around the corner of the church to its massive front door, but the intense fire was chewing the bricks out of the corner. Four or five of our men had a bit more cover at the other end of the church and made a dash for the parsonage, moving in with the

priest. Artillery and mortars were causing havoc on the backup platoons waiting in the woods. Vaguely we could hear someone yelling instructions. Then a runner was sent down. He made it halfway before getting cut down. Now there were two bodies lying on the slope.

“Next came a memory that I will never forget.” Drury continued. “Our platoon sergeant, Pete Petracco, was in charge because Lieutenant Schmidt was killed in the Vosges. Pete was the kind of guy who lectured us before we first entered combat that he didn’t want any stupid heroics. He was also the doting father of a new son called Jody, named for the baseball legend Joe Dimaggio. Watching the young runner die, he could not send another man down. He came himself. As he came by the boy’s body he stumbled, fell forward and lost his helmet. He then somehow SWAM to safety. He used his arms like a swimmer combined with powerful leg thrusts to carry him to the shelter by the church. He boosted Staff Sergeant Buddy Thomas from Company G up the brick wall to break open a stained glass window. Buddy saw that the interior looked clear, dropped in, and opened the front door. We started the parade of dashers for that door. Darkness came fairly early and the crowd in the church grew in number. We reorganized and continued the attack into town.”

Private First Class Bill Ditto, also of Company E, recalls his experience,

“When we began down the slope (the open space leading to the church) Jack Faulkner, our first scout, went first. I think that Jesse Cawood was our second scout at the time; he would have been the second man. Danny Lynch was our assistant squad leader and was the third man. As the BAR man, I was close and was fourth. I can’t remember who was next, but he was killed. We continued running downhill. I saw a nice looking clump of grass and started to step on it when a lot of German guns, of several kinds, opened up and a bullet hit the clump of grass, and I stepped in the hole the bullet left. The man just behind me was killed and the squad leader was killed, too. . . . We made it to the priest’s house and went in there. With all the firing going on we didn’t venture out.”

Shortly before dark, Ditto said they were joined by some others including Tech Sergeant Bellavia. After that Ditto told me that his memory gets dim, “as things were not as intense.” He did recall that they moved out of the house after dark.

Boxcars and Burps, the history of Company E, 397th Infantry Regiment, written by Captain Craig Davison and Major Bill Law, records the following, “Once established in the church, we set up our light machine gun and one heavy against the murderous German flak and machine-gun fire.”

Acting Sergeant Jim Nance recalls the dash from the wooded area to the church,

“I was carrying the radio on my back when I ran across the open area and got to the church. There I went up into the church steeple with the artillery forward observers. They would locate the enemy and call in artillery fire. They located an enemy machine gun and flak gun and silenced them.”

When the attack began the two forward observation teams started calling in mortar fire. Lieutenant Harrison recalls,

“When the rest of the battalion started the attack, we had a front row seat for the festivities. We kept dropping rounds on the Krauts whenever they showed and our best effort was putting a round right into a machine-gun nest on the hill north of town. When they showed their position by opening fire, we had them out of commission in about two minutes. We had been firing in the area earlier, so we made the adjustment and called for three rounds. The first was a little over, the second ten yards short, and the third went right into the hole.”

Over at Lieutenant Abram’s forward observation point, they began calling in firing instructions to our 81mm mortars, but were dismayed to find that they had lost radio contact with the guns. By switching to another wavelength on their radio, however, they were able to hook up with a battery of 4.2mm mortars emplaced at Melch, and they willingly provided fire on targets called in by Lieutenant Abrams and his team. Unfortunately, a German soldier spotted Abrams’ team and opened fire, wounding Staff Sergeant Grant in the arm.

When the attack started, Abrams said there were a good number of German soldiers who came running out of the houses and took off out of Mouterhouse. Evidently, the line troops stayed and put up a stiff resistance, however. On that first day, the record shows we had 6 men killed, 4 seriously wounded, and 19 lightly wounded. Somehow, the German artillery never found our mortar position so we didn’t suffer any casualties.

There was a mysterious death of Private First Class Lloyd Neseth, one of our heavy machine gunners, as related by Corporal Clarence Rincker, also of Company H,

“We were ready to begin the battle for Mouterhouse, but were waiting for the assigned time for attack. Lloyd had sat down and leaned up against a tree and several fellows were sitting on the ground visiting with him. Without even a grunt, Lloyd keeled over and was dead with a bullet through his head. No one had heard a sound from a sniper’s rifle or any other weapon. Needless to say, we searched the area for a sniper, but found nothing.”

A possible solution to this mystery might have been found when the riflemen entered the church involved in this article. Dick Drury recalls,

“Behind the high altar there was a timber platform with a piece of stained glass removed from the area of Jesus’ knees. The Germans had built a sniper’s perch up there.”

Erie Theimer, one of the men with Neseth at the time of his death, recently responded to this conjecture,

“The possible location of the sniper in the church makes a lot of sense and I would tend to believe it as accurate because all of us on the hill would have been exposed to direct sighting from the church.”

One could guess that this sniper took this one last shot then withdrew from the church in light of the forthcoming attack.

What happened for the rest of that first day is a little confusing as is normal under battle conditions. Apparently, as darkness fell the rifle companies began infiltrating into the town. Company E’s history, *Boxcars and Burps*, reads,

“Covered by machine guns, the 2nd Platoon moved from the church through a graveyard to their zone at the west end of town. They reached the house they were to clear by ingeniously crawling down a shallow ditch and through sewers. The 3rd Platoon with a mission of taking the eastern portion of the town were stymied when they moved from the church to the nearest house in their zone and found they had picked a house perched on a twenty-foot cliff, the side of which was being continually peppered by machine-gun and sniper fire. It was too ‘hot’ to move from their house and darkness was falling, so they elected to remain there for the night.

“The 1st Platoon, originally in support, moved into a house near the 3rd and soon found itself in the same predicament; these men were ‘bottled up’ for the night. The CP remained at the church, with the mortar section as security. The 2nd, meanwhile, was not encountering serious resistance, so they continued through western and central parts of the town. . . . It was a long night waiting for the inevitable German counterattack, but our artillery must have convinced them that we intended to stay, for their usual tactic was not employed.”

The Story of the Century reads,

“Company F of this fighting battalion left reserve positions late in the afternoon and, swinging east, crossed into the northeastern part of town. The 2nd Platoon, coming up through a defilade, so surprised a number of Germans dug in on a cemetery that they surrendered. By the end of 7 December, the 397th was well on the way to taking Mouterhouse.” (p. 77)

The “bloodletting” was not over, however. The record shows that the battalion suffered 11 killed, 7 men severely wounded, and 17 lightly wounded from the fighting on the second day, 8 December. Staff Sergeant John Lubrano of Company G was one of those severely wounded. This is his story,

“We got out of the church and went into the town late that day. We were going in one place and Germans were running away. We stayed in a house that night. . . . We got up that morning (Dec. 8). We were getting ready to move out. All hell broke loose. We started to get mortar fire on us. I was wounded pretty badly. All I remember was bleeding badly. I passed out. I did not know anything until I woke up in a hospital.”

Private First Class Denny Carmichael was returning to his Company G from the battalion aid station on the evening of 7 December, and recalls,

“I was led on a trail through a heavily wooded area until reaching my platoon; it was now in a schoolhouse and by a cemetery that had been the scene of a fire fight with the Germans earlier that day.

My platoon leader informed me of the situation in Mouterhouse and told me that we would be moving out early the next morning, attacking across a river, then capturing a house located next to the main road entering Mouterhouse. He said that I would take the point leaving the schoolhouse, that German artillery and mortar fire was continuously coming in, and we could expect sniper fire. So, early on the morning of the 8th, I moved out cautiously but without incident until I reached the river. I saw that the bridge had been destroyed and in its place were some wooden planks. Seeing this, I stopped to seek advice from my platoon leader. I asked how we should cross the river: try crossing by using the planks or going through the river? The planks seemed insecure and weak, the river icy cold and shallow. I favored trying the planks and he said OK. Sensing sniper fire in this exposed position, I decided to run across the planks as fast as I could. So, I took off running, reaching about half way when the plank gave way and I found myself in the river. Fortunately, I didn't have far to fall and waded across to the far bank and took off for the house that was our objective. I have tried to recall unsuccessfully how the rest of the platoon got to the house without being completely soaked. I did receive preferential treatment in getting closest position to a stove in which a fire had been started.

"We stayed in place in the house the rest of the day while holding the position at the entrance of Mouterhouse while other units continued to occupy the rest of the town. After drying out, I was assigned to an outpost overlooking the highway into town. While at the outpost, I heard incoming tanks which I soon identified as ours. Fearing that I could be taken as the enemy, I stood over my foxhole yelling to them that I was a American with the 100th. Recognized as such I was much relieved and informed the platoon in the house. Mouterhouse was in American hands, but the German artillery and mortar fire continued to fall in Mouterhouse. We spent an otherwise quiet night in the house on the 8th."

The Story of the Century reads,

"The 397th had completed its capture of Mouterhouse during the day of 8 December. Because the mortars of Company H and the 4.2 chemical mortars emplaced at Melch had forced the enemy to abandon Hill 275 [actually Hill 278 on our map, I believe] Company G was able to clear the western part of town without undue difficulty while Company E, unopposed, was sweeping the factory district in the center of town." (p. 78) This book also reported "the capture of a few enemy guarding a roadblock east of town by a squad of Company F mud sloggers."

This ends our story of the battle for Mouterhouse. I believe it demonstrates how the 2nd Battalion worked as a cohesive team with all units participating in and contributing to the success of the operation. Perhaps this story will encourage others to send in their personal memories of this battle.

Please note in this story on Mouterhouse, I have tried to be as accurate as possible in giving the rank of those involved at the time of this action. Most, if not all, of those mentioned advanced in grade as they continued to fight on and assume positions of leadership.

Aftermath: The Germans soon got their revenge on Lieutenant Jim Harrison who had led one of the forward observation teams at Mouterhouse. Here is his personal account,

"I don't know how much longer we (our Mortar Platoon) tarried in Mouterhouse, but we probably moved out on 9 December. On that night, we dug in on a hill north of Mouterhouse, two or three miles. You may recall that tactics for mortars call for clearing trees in front of the guns, setting aiming stakes and then digging in for the night. We usually started this about two or three hours before dark because it took that long to set up. We then covered the advancing forces until they got out of range at which time we leapfrogged guns forward to provide continuous coverage.

"We remained in our location during most of the day, 10 December. Normally, I traveled with a rifle company as forward observer but 1st Lieutenant Carl Bradshaw, our platoon leader, offered to switch with me that day so I stayed with the guns. About 1400 hours, we were ordered to prepare to move forward. I went ahead to reconnoiter positions for placing the guns and it was to be close to the trail junction where (one of our machine-gun sections was dug in). I then returned to the gun position to lead the first element forward. It was getting late in the afternoon as we moved forward and we came under heavy fire from 88s or mortars. Not being eager to risk more men and realizing it would be tough to get new positions ready in the dark, I decided to return to our previous position set up on the 9th. I radioed ahead, told them what happened and said we would remain in position but move up before dawn to cover the advance on the 11th.

“The next morning, 11 December, we started forward before dawn, leaving one section to cover until we set up in the new location. I was leading because I had been there the day before and knew where we were going. Suddenly, something told me that things weren’t right. I knew my location—I wasn’t lost, but intuition, ESP or Divine guidance, told me to park the platoon, scout on ahead to see what was wrong. I asked my section sergeant, Walter Lorek, to go with me.

“We started down the trail and no footprints showed in the snow. We had gone about 300 yards when we came to the trail junction where (our machine-gun section was supposed to be located). There, in the half light before dawn, I saw the silhouette of a man move. Knowing our troops were in the area, I didn’t duck off the trail, but, in just a split second, I heard a “*Leutnant, leutnant*” in a German voice as he called for his lieutenant. With that, the machine gun started firing at almost point-blank range. I think we were only about 15 to 20 yards away from the gun. The only thing that saved us was because he was firing back at us; the gun must have been on the end of its traverse.

The first bullet hit me on the right hip, then, as I fell, one ripped across the face of my wristwatch but did not hit my skin as it tore up my field jacket sleeve. Another bullet creased across the base of my left thumb, and the one that did all the damage shattered the bone in my left leg. Somewhere during the firing, probably as I was falling, a bullet ricocheted from the dirt up into my left buttock, and then the firing ended. Sergeant Lorek, who was about ten feet behind me, had one bullet graze his hand and another cut his canteen from his hip but, other than the hand graze, he was unhurt. The Kraut gunner then pulled a “potato masher” grenade out of his boot and I thought, “this is it when he throws it.” But, he put the grenade under the gun and it exploded, overturning the gun. After the Kraut blew up the gun, we heard, but did not see, other Krauts as they all took off down the trail.”

What had happened was that on the night of 10 December, a German patrol had slipped in and captured a complete section of our heavy machine-gun platoon; as many as 16 men. It was a good thing that Lieutenant Harrison and Staff Sergeant Lorek had gone forward without our mortar platoon.

Some years ago, Staff Sergeant Lorek recalled the above experience to me. He said that after he and Lieutenant Harrison had fallen to the ground, that Lieutenant Harrison was groaning from the extreme pain he must have been experiencing. He said he whispered to Lieutenant Harrison to be quiet so the Germans would think them dead. He said one of the Germans actually came down the trail to check them out, so Lieutenant Harrison was apparently able to suppress the pain and convince the German they were actually dead.

On a visit with Jim Harrison last summer, he told me of his experience after being wounded. While he was waiting for a medic to get to him, three or four German mortar shells crunched in at the trail junction and he took a fragment in his left leg. Later, while being evacuated by litter down the trail to the aid station, another mortar barrage came in. He said the litter bearers dropped him in the middle of the trail to find cover. Fortunately, he didn’t take another hit. The rest of his story in his words, “I was wounded about dawn, arrived at the battalion aid station about 0900 or 1000 hours and then sent to a field hospital and arrived there about noon. From the field hospital, I went to an evacuation hospital where they started the surgery about 2100 on that same day.” He was fortunate to have survived. He has had a good life although his wife passed away last year. He presently lives in Seaside, Oregon.

One might ask how the heavy machine-gun section could be captured intact. The answer probably lies in the fact that we had just, within the previous few days, been issued sleeping bags after being without even blankets since the first few days of combat. There was a great temptation to snuggle down in that sleeping bag and pull the hood over the top. There was also a light snow that night, which probably cushioned the sounds of anyone approaching. Apparently the soldiers in the machine-gun section weren’t the only ones who slept that night. Lieutenant Harrison recalls,

“After the Kraut blew up the gun, we heard . . . other Krauts as they all took off down the trail. A couple of minutes after they left, about ten yards to the right of the trail, two guys stuck their heads out of the hole and said, ‘Is the shooting over?’ They must have been the two riflemen assigned as ‘security’. It would be interesting to talk to them.”

How each of us responded to receiving the sleeping bag would be interesting, I suppose. It made me feel careless enough not to have dug a slit trench at Mouterhouse. Here is Clarence Rincker’s first experience with his sleeping bag, “I was so tired when we finally reached our destination (Hill 335, above Mouterhouse) I dug only a slit trench about a foot deep to sleep in. I slid into my new sleeping bag, laid down in the slit trench, and fell asleep. The next thing I knew I had awoken and found my arms pinned to my sides inside that sleeping bag. I instantly flew into a claustrophobic panic. I don’t know how I did it, but with one big lunge I ripped that sleeping bag wide open. Once I could get my arms free and got out of the slit trench I was all right. It was dark, so after I calmed down I got back in the opened sleeping bag and just laid on

top of the ground for the rest of the night. The next morning I discovered that I had not ruined my new sleeping bag, but that the zipper was designed for a quick release as I had given it.” We soon learned that the safest way to use those sleeping bags was to pull them up to your armpits so as to keep your arms and head free.

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