

First to the Maginot Line?

by Mel Faw, 398-F

Mel Faw, 398-F, responded to a question from Hank Williams 399-AT, about whether Richard Rebolledo was the first US soldier to reach the Maginot Line.

I believe that the 100th was the first US Division to reach the Maginot Line, but Rebolledo was in the 4th Platoon in a mortar squad. He was a very outgoing person who loved to talk.

When Company A, 398th was captured, each company had to send men to form a new company. My squad leader, Bill Stoddard, was given a field commission and transferred as a platoon leader.

The 4th Platoon also had to send men and they didn't have enough men to carry the mortars and the ammo. I was in the BAR squad and was also the bazooka man. Since I was big and tall it was decided that I could go to the 4th Platoon and carry the entire mortar all by myself.

I was one of a small group who only had three weeks of basic at Fort Benning and then the six-week course at Fort Bragg. I was only trained on the rifle, carbine, and BAR. Upon transfer to the 4th Platoon I informed Lieutenant Horler of this fact. He was unperturbed and said he could teach me all I needed to know in just a few minutes.

Basically he had me start out at zero and then start firing ahead of the rifle platoons in daylight. This way I could determine how many cranks up and down and back and forth with shells with one, two, or three charges. I recorded the data needed to cover any area that the riflemen wanted covered. I had three stacks of shells, each covered by an ammunition bag, so that I could quickly zero in on the desired area.

We were dug in behind a hedgerow with the mortar in front of the hedgerow. Fried, being the senior member of the squad, set up the mortar and I, being the rookie, was designated to fire the first round. Being naive I didn't check placement and the first round I dropped hit a tree limb just above my head and exploded. There was a lot of fire bouncing around, but all the shrapnel missed me and all I suffered was more damage to my hearing. The most surprising thing was that nobody else in the 4th Platoon bothered to come over and see what happened. All of this occurred on Sheep Hill.

We were there for several days and I will bet that I fired more mortar shells than anyone else in the company. Even in that frozen ground it pounded my base plate so far into the ground that I almost didn't get it dug out. It was still dark but the 63rd Division guys who relieved us could see the rust on the base plate and would not trade. Fried never fired a round, but Rebolledo did give me an occasional break. So my feeling is that if Richard was the first soldier to hit the Maginot Line, he must have been lost.

I can remember traipsing through Freudenberg Farms with all the barbed wire and anti-tank dragon's teeth and we finally got a few yards from an actively defended fort. They had placed cabbage patches around the fort and had dug fairly deep irrigation ditches. We crawled up close enough that their machine guns could only hit the top edge of the ditches, but still sprayed rock all over us. We gave up for the night and the next day it was Company G's turn to continue the attack.

There were small open windows with no screens so the engineers made bombs that Company G men threw through the windows and put the fort out of commission.

The next day they pulled us out because of the situation at Bastogne. It was daylight and I was afraid we would be slaughtered because we had to go out into the open to get through the barbed wire. No one even shot at us, however. The roads were full of Army vehicles and I actually saw a Red Cross unit. They told us the main line of resistance was two miles behind us and to keep off the roads and bridges because they were mined. So whoever was the first man probably didn't know it and probably would rather have been somewhere else.

The first time we encountered the Maginot Line we were in a wooded area with a large field between us and the large fort. It had machine guns and a large gun that would come up and fire and then descend back into the fort. We shelled it with the usual artillery with no effect, so they brought up large howitzers and fired directly across the field at them and that was useless. Next they brought in fighter planes and

dropped five hundred-pound bombs on them. That didn't do any real damage but did blow off more cement.

So we gave up and decided that we would have to resort to manpower. At one point the machine-gun fire was so intense that I was afraid to look out of my hole, so I took my helmet off and held it up above ground level with my bayonet. Nothing hit it so I bravely looked out to see what was going on.

I don't want to bore you but all this is documented in our company history. When the company was in Fellbach after the war the survivors wrote anecdotes and, using the executive officer's notes, wrote and published the history in Fellbach. We each were sent a copy, but as years rolled by more people wanted copies so Oscar Braman found a Chinese printer on Guam who republished the book at a reasonable price. The only difference is that there were a lot of color graphics and pictures in the original that were too expensive to reproduce in color and the original was in hardback. The book is digitized at VMI.

Incidentally when we had the battle we call Suicide Hill, Sergeant Wortman told me to take a machine gun. I told him that with my excellent training the only machine guns I had seen fired were on the infiltration course. So he told me to take two canisters of ammunition and leave my carbine and parka behind because Company I, 399th was being overrun by Germans. So as soon as the battle started

Wortman and his two experienced machine gunners took off for the woods and hid in one of the German winter holes until the order came to withdraw. They never fired a shot. I was out in the open all by myself, but I was near a crest of the hill and I could see Lonsberg. As soon as the smoke was thick enough I rolled down the hill to where he was. I had already been hit by that time . . . paralyzed right hand and penetrating wounds of my left hand. He said that there was nothing more I could do there, so that I should take off for the aid station.

[In answer to Hank's question about what happened to me after I was wounded] I went from the aid station to the field hospital to the 11th Evacuation Hospital. There were so many casualties that we were just put on stretchers on the floor of the lobby and halls.

A neurosurgeon came by and told me that my wounds were serious but not life threatening and they would take me to surgery when the critical cases were done. I went to surgery at 3 AM. They did an excellent job of suturing the severed nerves in my right arm and repairing the compound fracture of my left hand.

They were not sure that they had done all that was needed, however, so they just packed the wounds and sent me to the 36th General Hospital. Everything was fine, though, so they closed the wounds and put a cast on my right arm from my hand to my shoulder and on my left hand and forearm to the elbow and wrote ZI in big letters all over my casts. I asked what that meant and discovered that it meant Zone of the Interior and meant that my recovery period would exceed six months and I was headed for the States.

I had to wait several weeks and finally got on a hospital ship whose commanding officer was a cousin of mine, Dr. Wylie Melvin Faw, from Cumberland, Maryland. The ship docked in Charleston, SC and from there I was sent to a neurosurgical hospital, McClosky General, in Temple, Texas.

I was in physical therapy every day, but I had a lot of free time so they had me help with a research study they were doing on guys with head injuries. They taught me to read electroencephalograms and I would read them all day and then a neurologist would come in during the evening and go over them with me and explain their significance.

When that study ended they had no new ones coming up so they transferred me to an annex at Waco, Texas. This was an old CCC camp. I had to pass the carpenter's test, the mechanic's test, and the radio repair test (my dad was a mechanic, welder, machinist, etc., and I grew up working in his garage) and then they arranged for me to go to Baylor for a semester. I had one pass from 7 AM to 4 PM and then had to return to base and pick up another from 4 PM to 11 PM.

I had had two quarters of physics while I was in ASTRP and needed another quarter of physics to complete my required ten hours of physics and I also took a course in Ancient European History and a course in English Literature that I needed for distribution requirements for my degree.

It was difficult for me to write with the paralyzed right hand, but I could hold a pencil in my clenched hand and learned to write by using my whole arm. The CO had warned me that he had had to stick his neck out to get me set up to go to Baylor and that he expected me to make all A's, so I did.

Then at the end of the semester they decided that I needed more work on my left hand so they sent me to a Hand Center in Springfield, MO. When I arrived there the CO told me that they were booked up seven months ahead for surgery and that if I wanted he could send me before a CDD board the next day and I could have more surgery at either the VA or when I got into medical school. So I took the discharge and started back to college the next week. I carried a heavy academic load and graduated with a BS in chemistry at age twenty-one.

So I went on active duty at age seventeen in 1943 and was discharged from the hospital on 24 October 1945, had my chemistry degree in 1947 and my MD in 1951 and finished my four years of residency in 1955. So I benefitted tremendously from being in the army and even more from being seriously wounded. And I acquired a great many friends I otherwise would never have known.

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