

# Vignettes from the Vosges (and Other Places the 100th Has Been)

by Joseph E. Fleming, 397-B

*Joe Fleming was a member of 397-B. Joe was a meatcutter from September 1939 until August 1985 (except for his time in service). He was awarded the Bronze Star, just as everyone else in his company did, he says. Now residing in Lakewood, CO, these vignettes of Joe's time in the 100th remind us of the "snapshots" of memories that can be so clear it is as if they were just yesterday . . . and, in some ways, they were.*

I joined Company B 397th in September 1944. The division was preparing for European duty at the time, not too many memories, other than the rush to get things ready to leave Fort Bragg, NC. We left Fort Bragg for the New York area where we boarded the *George Washington*, our transportation to Europe. The first night aboard and below deck, some of the men were discussing the possibility of our being torpedoed. I went to sleep with that on my mind. During the night I had a nightmare and awakened everyone by shouting, "Get off this damn ship, it's sinking!" I angered a lot of men. The next night we were at sea, I was informed by some of the men that if I did that again, they would throw my ass overboard.

We had a rough time at sea, storms, rudder problems and for a while we could not keep up with the convoy. We eventually did catch up and made it to Europe. As we were going through The Straits of Gibraltar, we could see lights from a city in North Africa . . . a strange feeling for a hillbilly from the south. As we continued on, I remember watching dolphins or porpoises swimming along side the ship, fascinating sight. As we sailed into Marseilles, lots of destruction—wrecked ships, damaged buildings and several balloons in the air around the harbor, protection from German planes.

We headed north through the Rhone valley. Although I knew we were headed for combat, I enjoyed the trip through the valley. One night we camped on the zoo grounds at Lyon or Dijon, I cannot remember which. It was a wooded area with leaves all over the ground. I suggested to some of the men that we rake all the leaves out of our way so we could lay down our bedding. We raked them into a big pile and I promptly laid my sleeping bag on top of it for a nice, soft night. I took a little cussing from the men because they had been suckered. At last, we reached our destination before combat. It was somewhere near the town of Baccarat, France near Nancy. We all knew that we would soon be in combat but had no idea what we would be exposed to.

Being first scout, I had the opportunity to amass several German pistols, which I was selling to the artillerymen. I then sent the money home to my family. One of the officers suggested that I share the pistols with others in Company B. My reply was, "If they want to take my place as a scout, they could get all they wanted." I had a nice pair of binoculars that I had taken from a German soldier. Kenneth Barrett from Vermont borrowed them one day, as he was lead scout. He had the misfortune of having them shot off his neck, but thankfully was not wounded.

In Heilbronn, we came to a wooden fence on one side of a wide street. I was ordered to check out the building across the way. Someone boosted me to the top of the fence and I dropped down. I could not enter the building from the front and was told to go around behind it. I thought, my god, that's another world back there and was scared. It turned out the building was empty but there was a machine gun in a second story window that was still warm. I was checking another building when a young lady met me at the foot of the stairs. In perfect English, she asked me to come up the stairs with her. I told her if anything started to look strange, I would kill her. She said she understood and pointed down a hallway to an open door. I cautiously approached the room and there sitting at a very large table was a German officer. At the far side of the table, his Luger lay there out of his reach. He asked me "What kept you? I have been waiting to surrender for two days."

Another time in Heilbronn, Baxter Smith and I accompanied an artillery Major to the fourth floor of an empty building to spot where our artillery rounds were landing. The target was some tanks on the top of hill, which we could clearly see. While at the window, we saw a column of German troops marching down a wide boulevard directly toward us. Baxter began firing his Light 30 machine gun and I started shooting my M-1 rifle. When the tanks saw where the firing was coming from, here they came, blasting our building with 88's. They knocked the stairway completely away between two floors and we had to leap from one landing to another to get out. As we were running down the alley to get away, the tanks were already firing at us. Baxter was wounded either in his foot or in the lower leg. The Major and I were much luckier and were not injured. My acting commanding officer, Lt. Kirkland told me that we would be recommended for the Silver Star. Later that day he was killed by a German sniper . . . end of Silver Star. That same day, some of our men had a chance to knock out one of those tanks at very close range with a Bazooka round. It was a direct hit on the turret and the tank spun around and started firing on us with his 88. Damn near tore the wall out of the building.

During another incident in Heilbronn, a young kid joined us as a replacement. I was told to take him with me as a lookout to a burned out building shell. I told him what to do and what to expect if the screaming meemies the Germans were firing got close to us. One salvo was getting closer to us and I yelled for the kid to follow me to the cellar down below. He froze, scared to death to move. He was too far away for me to get to him and as I made a run to the opening to get out, we were hit. I was blasted clear out across the alley but was not wounded. I had dust in my eyes so bad I could not see but could hear someone crying. As quickly as I could see again, I ran back into the building. There stood the new man crying and too scared to move. Some bricks that had been blasted through the air hit him in the legs. The same jeep that brought him to us took him back to the aid station. While in Heilbronn in early April, we got word that President Roosevelt had died. He was the first president I ever voted for and have voted as a Democrat ever since.

We lost a lot of men in Heilbronn. It was pure hell for the Division and we were glad to leave there. We did not see a whole lot of action after that. Once we got into a fierce fire fight at close range in a wooded area. Soon after, Company B was in reserve in the little town of Plochingen.

Later we moved to Stuttgart, where Lt. James Burrowes selected John Lasko, Tom Seeling and me to help run the Battalion Officers Club. It was the nicest job I had in the Army. The rest of the outfit was guarding a railroad tunnel near Stuttgart. The building the club was in also happened to be the home of the engineer in charge of building the Autobahn. The home was a beautiful place that overlooked the city of Stuttgart.

Oh, yes! While in the city of the Ulm on the Danube, I saw something that still chokes me up to this day. Displaced people from the Baltic countries were decorating the train that would take them back home with green boughs and blooming plants. In huge letters written on white paper was this message. "Tank you America." That sight brought tears to my eyes. Later I served in the little resort town of Bad Orb with the O.S.S., which was a forerunner of the CIA. This turned out to be very interesting duty. I finally got back home in March 1945.

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