

Memories of Days in Combat with Company B, 397th Infantry Regiment

by Roger D. Goos, 397-B

What follows are memories of my days in combat with Co. B 397th Infantry. One might say the maturing of a soldier. These words are my memories of the events described and are not based on official records, but are in agreement with such records.

IF YOU KEEP FAITH

If you keep faith with me you need not weep
If I am killed, for I will not complain
Of any death if by it others gain
The things I think are worth my life to keep;
The right to have, to know, to love, to speak.
If all win these, I will endure my pain
And on the battlefield where I have fain,
Will find an honored place in which to sleep.
But if when peace returns to you once more
You break the word you gave humanity
By keeping not the pledge to which you swore,
Then carve in stone this epitaph for me:
“Here lies a fool who placed his hope in war
And gave his faith to insincerity.”

This poem appeared in the U. S. Army's *Stars and Stripes* in 1945. I clipped it out and carried it home with me; because it spoke deeply to me about the meaning of this war. Interestingly, when I received my official separation papers from the army, a copy of this poem is included in the correspondence. I guess it spoke to someone else as well.

About the 20th of October, we arrived in Marseilles, France. I remember that those who had a radio heard Axis Sally (German propagandist) welcome General Burrell and the 100th Infantry Division. So much for wartime secrecy. We soon disembarked and were moved to a staging area, where we regrouped and prepared for the trip to the front. We mounted 6 X 6 trucks, probably about 20 men on a truck, and began the drive up the Rhone River valley toward the southern front. Because the trucks were crowded, I remember some fellows suspended their packs on the outside of the truck. We had traveled only a few miles when we met a convoy of trucks headed in the opposite direction, and several of those packs were stripped off and lost. After that, nothing on the outside of the trucks, including hands and arms.

Our trip north was uneventful but memorable. We passed many burned out German trucks and tanks that were destroyed by American troops as they moved up the Rhone valley. It was hard to imagine that anything could be left of the German war machine, but we were to find out that they still had plenty of fight.

We reached the front in the vicinity of Epinal. Our unit was committed into the line on November 12, somewhere in the vicinity of Baccarat, with our first objective being Raon l'Etape. On our first or second day, we encountered Germans in a thick forest. There was quite an intense fire fight, and when it was over, Toby Reich of our platoon was dead. Tom Murn, also of our platoon, had caught a bullet through his helmet, so close to the skull that it split the knit cap he was wearing. I remember that he discarded his helmet and took Toby's, which had not been damaged.

A night or two later, November 13 in my memory but November 15 in official records, we dug-in in a perimeter defense in a densely wooded area. Around 5:00 P.M., a call came for volunteers to go to Battalion Headquarters for supplies. I shared a hole with Malcom Miller, and when I heard the call for

volunteers, I decided to go, even though conventional wisdom in the service was “never volunteer”. We were gone about five hours. The trip to headquarters was not too bad, as we were not carrying much gear, but we had to be alert for German patrols. At the Battalion C. P. (command post), we picked up the boxes of rations and several bandoliers of cartridges, and started back to the company. In order to carry the box of rations, it was necessary to sling my rifle across my back, which I didn’t really like doing, but there was no alternative. By this time, it was totally dark in those dense woods, and there was no trail to follow. The only thing I could think of was to follow the telephone wire that led from the Battalion C.P. to our company. I soon found that the easiest way to do this was to trail the wire through my hand, which is what I did. We kept in touch with each other as best we could, but we did not want to speak or otherwise make noise. By the time we arrived back at the company area, it must have been 11:00 o’clock. I was met by Lt. James (platoon commander) who told me I was to move to another hole, and that I was not to go back with Miller. I was pretty tired, and so did not ask questions. The next morning, I found that the hole I shared with Miller had taken a direct hit during my absence, and Miller was dead, literally cut in two by a huge shrapnel fragment. To this day, I do not know why God spared me, but I have never forgotten this incident.

One could write many pages about the things that happened as we continued to press toward Germany. As the days grew colder and the winter weather intensified, it was a struggle just to survive the elements, let alone the Germans. The strength of unit continued to diminish, as men were wounded or killed, and many became ill. Our platoon had started out at full strength of 40 men, but by the end of November, we were reduced to fewer than 20 men. I remember a night when the company was told to send its strongest platoon to hold a road junction. Our platoon was chosen and we were only 14 men. One soon came to the conclusion that the probability of escaping injury or death was decreasing each passing day. Early in December, we were moved north somewhat, and committed in the vicinity of Ingwiller. The Division’s ultimate objective was the fortress city of Bitche, a part of the Maginot Line, but we had some ground to take before we would reach that objective.

About December 8 and 9, we engaged in heavy battle with the Germans. I remember that we were to take a road junction. The Germans occupied the position and had armored cars with 20mm cannon. As we advanced toward their position, they would spray the forest with 20mm cannon fire, which exploded on impact, scattering small fragments everywhere. Several of our men were wounded. Jimmie Pierce, a member of our platoon, caught a round in his hand that failed to explode and he had to go to the aid station with the unexploded round in his hand. I never heard the outcome of that. Jim never came back to the platoon as far as I remember. The Germans then began to shell us with mortar fire. I found an abandoned German foxhole and took refuge in that. We could hear the mortars fire and then in a few minutes the rounds would be falling in on us. It caused a panic among the troops, and soon everyone was running toward the rear. I followed after, but as I was carrying a BAR (Browning automatic rifle) and a heavy load of ammunition, I had trouble keeping up. Finally, I just had to rest, so I hid behind a log and waited to see if the Germans would follow. Fortunately, they didn’t. We lost many wounded that day, and some were killed. When we finally reassembled for the night, and a head count was taken, it was apparent that some men were still up on the ridge. The CO organized patrols to go up on the ridge to bring down the wounded. I didn’t go, because I was exhausted and felt I would be more of a liability than a help. The next day we resumed the attack, but with better success.

We continued to press on toward our objective. The days became a blur to me, with each day much like the day before. We were constantly in danger of small arms and mortar fire, and now the weather was also becoming an enemy. I had seen several of my comrades develop trench foot due to the constant cold and wet foot gear. I carried an extra pair of sox pinned inside my shirt, and would try every night to change my socks, putting on the dry ones with foot powder (when I had it) and pinning the damp socks inside my shirt to dry them. In addition I would massage my feet. It seemed to work, and I never developed trench foot.

On December 15, we were dug-in in a position outside of Bitche. An order came down shortly after noon for us to make an attack on a German position. Somehow, I was filled with apprehension about this attack. I remember that I knelt in our foxhole, and prayed that somehow the order could be changed. In a

little while, we heard that the order had been rescinded and that the attack had been called off. Soon, however, the Germans began to shell us with mortar fire. Joe Collie and I were sharing a hole that day, and when the mortar barrage began, we both jumped into the hole. I happened to land underneath Joe. I felt a sharp pain in my left leg, and as soon as the shelling stopped, I asked Joe if he was hurt. "No" was his reply. I then said to him: "In that case, get off me, because I think I am." Sure enough, I had a piece of shrapnel in the calf of my left leg. It had fortunately missed the bone and the knee joint, but it was serious enough that I needed to go to a hospital. So for me, the war took a different turn.

I was brought to the Battalion Aid station by the company Jeep, and went from there to the 11th Evacuation Hospital in Bar Le Due by ambulance. The doctors set about immediately to remove the shrapnel which had entered the forepart of my leg, but which I could feel in the back of the calf when I rubbed my hand over it. They gave me an anesthetic (sodium pentothal) and told me to count to 50. I reached 9 or 10, and then didn't remember anything until I awoke the next morning. It was not a painful wound as long as I was careful, and I thought that I would soon be walking again and going back to my unit. It happened that the Battle of The Bulge began that same day, and the medics were ordered to clear the hospitals to make room for the large number of casualties coming in from the front. I was labeled "Com. Z" (Communication Zone) and informed that I would be transferred to a hospital in England for recuperation. Thus, I escaped the worst part of the winter and some of the heaviest fighting our Division encountered.

I was sent to a hospital near Nottingham, which made me think of the stories of Robin Hood. It was a pretty area, with nice forests, and cottages with their thatched roofs. We were near a large air base. It was during the time of the round the clock raids on Berlin and major German cities. We would see the Flying Forts leave in the early morning, and return late in the afternoon from their daylight raids. Up to 1,200 planes would take part in the raids in a single day. Later in day, the British Lancasters would begin their flights, starting at about 4:00 in the afternoon, leaving for the night raids.

While in England, I managed to obtain a short leave to visit Dick Lynch who was stationed at an air base near Norwich. To get there, I had to take a train through London. I also had to borrow money from the Red Cross, because I had not been paid since we left the U.S. Darwin Vint was also stationed near Norwich, so one day the three of us had a reunion in England. Think of the probability of that! Three classmates from the 1942 class of ten (5 boys, 5 girls) from little Beaman High School getting together in England in 1945.

I was in England for about two months, before I was sent back to the continent to rejoin my unit. We passed through the port of Le Harve, which was at the center of the D-day invasion, and then by rail to the front. I rejoined my unit at Heilbronn, Germany, just in time for a major battle. The Germans held the high ground around the city. To advance, it was necessary to cross the Neckar River. The crossing was made by small boats, and the plan was that the advance units would secure the opposite shore. A pontoon bridge would then be set up to bring over supplies, artillery and tanks. German artillery on the surrounding hills was zeroed in on the bridge, however, and as soon as it neared completion, the Germans would blow it up. Thus, the advance infantry was cut off from the support unit. It took about nine days to capture the city. The Battalion earned a Presidential Citation for its part in this battle.

I have some vivid memories of those days in Heilbronn. One morning we heard the clop-clop-clop of metal shoes on the street. We thought it was German infantry, as they often wore shoes with metal cleats, but when it became light enough to see, we found that it was a couple of horses with metal shoes. On another occasion, we entered a warehouse that was being used for a slaughter house. There on the meat hooks were the carcasses of several horses intended for human food. After the city was finally taken, I remember we were on a hill side outside the city when the news came to us that President Roosevelt had died. We pondered about what this meant for us and for the country, as we watched two P-47's work over a German position.

After Heilbronn, the front became very fluid, and it seemed that we were advancing day and night. German defenses collapsed, but still there was always the danger. On one occasion, a convoy of German troops came up the road and drove right into our company. We took to the ditches on either side of the road to escape being hit by the vehicles. There was some exchange of gunfire, but most of the Germans

just wanted to quit. I was lying in a ditch and looked up to see a German vehicle out of control and heading right toward me. I jumped up and ran, taking cover behind some vegetation. The car stopped in the very place I had been laying. My weapon was laying under it. The driver was dead. His companion stepped out of the car and handed me his semi-automatic machine gun. My only war prisoner was taken when I was unarmed. Who knows, if I had been armed, he may not have surrendered.

It was only a few more days of this kind of activity, and the Germans surrendered. I remember the word came to our Company in the night, possibly around 10:00 or 11:00 P. M. We were billeted in several German houses in a German town. Capt. Hines (our Company C.O.), wearing only his G.I. shorts, a steel helmet and combat boots, and carrying a captured German sword, went from house to house, telling the troops: "At 12:00 noon tomorrow, you will cease firing on all German troops." And so came the hoped for day, for which we had waited and prayed.

Victorious armies like to hold victory parades, and so a victory parade was held in Haidenheim, Germany, probably in June of 1945. There must have been at least 10,000 American and Free French troops involved in the parade. The Army was very conscious of the potential danger of assembling that many troops in one area, and there were machine guns on roof tops, tanks at strategic sites, and jeep patrols all around the parade area. A huge reviewing stand was set up, and commanding officers of all forces in the area were on hand. I believe General Patch, Commander of the US 7th US Army was there as well as several other Generals, including General Burrell of the 100th Division. Each general was assigned a flag-bearer to carry the general's flag, which showed the general's rank. I don't know how it happened, but I was selected to carry the flag for General Le Claire (two stars) of the Free French Army, and so I had a place on the reviewing stand. Now, when I get discouraged, I remind myself, "remember, you carried the general's flag."

The war ended on May 8, 1945. We were involved in occupation duty until the fall of that year, when I was reassigned to a military government unit. Our duties were mostly to guard critical facilities, like electric plants, or water facilities, and communication centers. For a time, we were also involved in processing displaced persons, of which there were many, especially immediately after the war ended. In October, I was assigned to the military government in Weisbaden, a lovely city, little damaged by the war. Weisbaden is famous for its baths, which are supposedly helpful for arthritis and other maladies. There is a beautiful state opera house in the city, which during the time I was there was occupied by the Red Cross. It was a nice place to go to read (there was a good library) or to listen to music. They frequently had quartets playing classical music, which I enjoyed very much, and sometimes they would provide special entertainment. Life in Wiesbaden was pleasant and under normal conditions, I could have enjoyed living there. I was assigned to work in the motor pool, where I met two young German lads, one 14 the other 15. I became especially close to the younger one, whose name was Herman, and at Christmas time he invited me to his home to meet his mother and sister. His mother had been sickly as a child, and her family thought that she should not marry and have children. She worked for a local school teacher as a housemaid. When she was thought to be past child-bearing age, she became the teacher's wife and to everyone's surprise gave birth to Herman and his sister. Herman's father, being older when he married, died during the war, and so his mother carried on as a widow. On our visit on this Christmas Eve, Herman played *Silent Night* for us on his violin, accompanied by his sister on the recorder. This became a very touching and memorable event to me. I never made any effort to keep in touch with Herman or his friend after I left Germany, but when Mary Lee and I visited Weisbaden in 1984, we were able to find both of these young men and to have a visit with them and their families. The mercies of God pass our understanding.

I left Europe toward the end of March, 1946, sailing from Antwerp, Belgium, on the *USSR Victory*. We received the traditional welcome at the pier in New York City, with the band playing "Sentimental Journey", and we were soon on a train heading for the middle west. I was discharged at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, near Chicago, and began to make my way home to Iowa. Although I was glad to be going home, I remember feeling just a touch of sadness that the whole adventure was coming to an end. Perhaps it was in realizing that Uncle Sam was no longer going to be my provider and that now I was going to have to be responsible for myself, or perhaps it was just that transition is always stressful and the road

ahead held many unknowns. Whatever, it was short lived. Once that train reached Marshalltown and I was reunited with my family, I was eager to catch up on all that I had missed.

I have many memories of those days in Europe, particularly of the days in combat and of the special men I met during this time. I want to mention just a few of them as I close this chapter.

Buddy Millet

Buddy was my squad leader in Ft. Bragg and when we first went overseas. He came from Belmont, Mass. (near Boston), and was a very sensitive, caring individual. He was a true Christian, faithful in church attendance, and living a right life in the midst of all temptations of military life. I will never forget that during the battle for Raon l'Etape, we were together in a foxhole. By this time we had lost Malcolm Miller and several other men from the platoon. As we sat there, waiting for the next move, we talked about the war and our experiences thus far. Buddy took out his New Testament and began to read from Romans 8. Verses 31 to 39 particularly impressed me, and I have never forgotten his sharing them with me on that particular day. I really believe I owe my life to Buddy, not for any one particular thing, but for his watchful caring for the men whom God had given into his charge. Buddy would give you his meal or his shirt, if that were needed. Years later, we had opportunity to visit Buddy at his home and to meet his family. In fact, we visited with them many times. He was always the same loving, caring man that I had known during those days in battle. He became an early supporter of the 100th Division Association and was, I think, its eighth President. Always a faithful church member, Buddy touched many lives. As his pastor said at his memorial, Gladstone E. Millet, a GEM, and he truly was.

Malcolm Miller

Malcolm came from Platteville, Wisconsin. He was killed in the battle for Raon l'Etape. We shared a foxhole that night, but I was gone at the time he was hit. Malcolm was a fine young man, and his loss was one of the tragedies of war. I have written elsewhere a story about him, so I will not repeat it here. Mary Lee and I visited Malcolm's mother in 1946, and then in 1996, we went to Wisconsin to visit his grave and to spend a few hours with his family. Grandma Engel, Suzanne and three of her children were with us. Both of Malcolm's brothers and his sister were there, as well as his nephew, Monroe. All of the spouses were also there. We had a good time of sharing.

Joe Moran

Joe came from New Jersey. He was not cut out to be a soldier, and I used to think him as the man in the comic strip who always went about with a rain cloud above his head. Without intending it to be so, Joe always seemed to be in some kind of difficulty. I remember once, when we were making an attack along a road, the Germans fired on us with small arms. One of the rounds hit Joe's rifle in the bolt mechanism, and Joe, rather than getting out of there and under cover, began to call to his sergeant, "Hey, Guilline Hi, my rifle won't work." Another time, we were billeted in a cow barn. It was getting to be near Christmas, and somehow, mail was brought to the platoon that afternoon. Some of the men received packages, and Joe was one of them. He opened his box, and what did he find? A pair of bedroom slippers that his grandmother had sent! Totally impractical for our situation. Probably the most disappointing for Joe, however, was the day we entered Senones, France. The people met us with cheers and with such food as they had. One lady came out of her house and gave to each of three of us a fresh egg. One fellow and I asked her to cook them for us. Joe said: "Not me, I am saving mine for later", and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Not long after, a group of school children came up to us shouting and rejoicing that the Germans had left. A couple went up to Joe, and pounded on his chest, shouting "Viva La France". Joe soon had scrambled egg in his jacket pocket. Such was life for Joe, but he survived the war, I think without injury.

Art Scherrer

Art came from the St Louis area. He was a well mannered young man, and one could sense he was used to some of the finer things of life. He was a good soldier, and well liked by the men. One day, in December, 1944, our Company occupied a position near Wimmeneau, France. We moved into the

position near twilight, and immediately began to set up a perimeter defense. Art and I chose a site and dug in for the night. We were near the brow of a low hill, and the terrain rose above us, perhaps three hundred yard across an open field to a forested area. We were unaware that the Germans occupied the forest, but in the night we heard them conversing. In the morning, we spotted a German weapon which had not been there the night before, not far from our position. We knew that a German patrol had past near us during the night. We occupied this position for the coming day. It soon became evident to us that Germans had us in their view, and they would occasionally send a round or two over our heads just to remind us of this. We passed two nights and two days in this position, but on the third day, it began to wear on Art. In the middle of the morning, he suddenly began to cry and to say "I want my mother". There was nothing to do but to get him out of there, which was managed by crawling out on our stomachs under cover of the hillside. I brought him to the Company Aid Station, and left him there. He was soon sent to the rear. I never heard any more from him or learned what became of him, but I have always assumed that he made it back to St. Louis.

Alex Lassiter

Alex came from Weldon, North Carolina, and served as assistant to the Supply Sergeant. He also drove the Company Jeep, that is, he did until one day a German round exploded on the hood of the vehicle. Alex escaped without injury, but was deeply impressed by his narrow escape! Alex was a likeable fellow. I really got to know him after the war, when we were both assigned to the same Military Government unit and shared a room. The fellows in the billet liked to play hearts, and we played several games almost every day. The object of the game is to get rid of all the hearts in your hand, especially the queen, which counted for 13 points. Alex went home ahead of me, and I remember writing him a letter and enclosing the queen of hearts. I don't think I ever heard from him. I wonder why.

Joe Collie

Joe came from Danville, Virginia, and was proud to let you know it. When countered on any matter, he often answered: "I, Sir, am a Virginian", and that made things right, at least to Joe. Joe was quite a student of German history. He was also a good conversationalist, and full of good humor. We shared a hole the day I was wounded, and even though I was under Joe when the shell exploded, I was the one wounded and Joe escaped. In subsequent years, that experience has always been a topic of conversation between us. Joe survived the war, and we have corresponded at Christmas time regularly. Mary Lee and I visited Joe and his family, probably around 1980, when we were making a trip to Florida. Joe became a chemist or chemical engineer, and was quite involved in the chemical business. He made several trips to Germany after the war, and was President of the 100th Division Association in 1996.

Alfred Nelson

Al Nelson came from Toledo, Iowa, about twenty miles from my home town. He was a cook in B Company. I never really got to know Al well, although we were always friendly with one another. One thing about Al I will always remember, however. We had been in battle probably for two months, and on this particular day, we were served hot chow. As I passed through the chow line, Al was serving me, and he suddenly said: "Give me your gloves". My gloves were wet and badly worn, and I thought perhaps he was going to dry them for me, and so I gave them to him. As I did, he reached into his jacket pocket and gave me an almost brand new pair of gloves. "Take these", he said, "You need them more than I do." I have never forgotten that instance. We have seen Al and his wife at reunions of the 100th.