

XIX. HEPATITIS

We were following the fleeing German army at a rapid pace. Mostly they were fleeing, that is. Every so often some of them would stop behind a hill or on the edge of a village in a defensive position and attempt some sort of a stand. Short, intense little battles would ensue that had no effect on the actual outcome of the war, but which were destructive and vicious. We were lucky for a while, and missed these resistance pockets.

Combat material from the *Newsletter* is sparse from here on, but we do have one short piece submitted by William Matthews. He called it:

AN EVENING IN APRIL

"Late in the afternoon we heard the bad news. 'Roll up and be ready to go at seven,' said the platoon runner as he went back to the Command Post. In dismay, I looked at the neatly arranged blankets and mattresses on the cellar floor, all made up and ready to crawl into.

"At seven it began to sprinkle as we left our bedrolls and formed in the usual attack formation. Shortly after we moved off. Our objective was the lower section of Heilbronn, Germany. The double files of men, one of each side of the street, moved away silently through the yellowish twilight.

"Easy Company was leading, and naturally they drew the first fire. German '88s' were zeroed in on a roadblock, and they shelled it frequently. We stopped, wondering what all was going to happen next. Anticipating the possibility that we might be shelled, and to be on the safe side, the doors of several nearby houses were forced open, and we were all ready to dive for the *unterkeller* if it became necessary.

"As we waited anxiously for the next move, three of our tanks sped down the road, returning several minutes later. Then came the news we longed to hear; we were to go back to our houses and wait for daylight. That night I slept as comfortably as anyone could ever wish to sleep, even if I did have to stand guard for an hour in the middle of the night."

The city of Heilbronn was a stop for us where we spent a little time, and here I had what eventually turned out to be, on balance, a stroke of good fortune. It started when I got a three-day R & R pass that sent me quite suddenly and totally unexpectedly to a rest center in Nancy, the capital of Lorraine, back in France. I got back to the center by truck, and by the time we arrived it was late, so I just went to bed in a sort of barracks which I don't remember much about. What I do remember is waking up the next morning feeling terribly, terribly ill. I have never been so sick before or since, and it kept getting worse. Somehow I managed to locate and drag myself to a large U.S. Army hospital that was near the rest center. I recall that somewhere on the way I glimpsed a copy of the *Stars and Stripes* armed forces newspaper with the headline announcing that President Roosevelt had died, so that pinpoints the date, April 13. There's no other way I could remember it.

I was admitted into the hospital and immediately bedded in an isolation room. Here I had raging fever alternating with terrible chills, delirium, semi-comatose periods (all this I was told later) and a series of doctors trying to find out if I had ever been anywhere that I could have contracted malaria. I had not, but a day or so later, still deathly ill and very weak, I began to turn yellow and was promptly diagnosed as another infectious hepatitis victim. The hospital was full of them, and I was moved into a large ward with some of my fellow-sufferers. This ward became my home for the next two months. At that time the treatment for hepatitis was bed rest and a low-fat diet, and that's what I got. Before I got out of there I also got something called atypical pneumonia and a strep throat infection. Everything got cured eventually, and I've never had any after-effects, except nobody has ever let me be a blood donor.

Shortly after I left for my supposed R & R, "G" Company hit one of those pockets of resistance—hard. Action, I was later told, was heavy for a while, and the Third Platoon had most of it. It resulted in two Distinguished Service Crosses (one posthumous), and two Silver Stars. There were also three more friends killed in action and a number wounded whom I never saw again. But that turned out to be, to all intents and purposes, the end of it.

V-E Day came May 7 and, still weak but ambulatory by that time, I watched the celebration in the streets of Nancy late into the night, from a hospital window. Thus ended five and a half months, for me, of more or less continuous combat life—November 1, 1944 to April 13, 1945—which still seems in memory a much, much longer period of time.

My attitude toward this dramatic happening for which we had waited and struggled so long seems somewhat ambivalent now, as evidenced in these lines from a letter to my father dated May 8:

"Well, here it is at last! The war is exactly half over, maybe not in time, at least I hope the Japs don't last another 5 years. It's just like the 4th of July here, flags, fireworks, and all. All Nancy was out singing in the streets last night, and they had some sort of demonstration in the center of town. Here I sit in the hospital, watching it all out the window. I feel sort of left out, but it all seems sort of anti-climactical now anyhow. It seems hard to realize, though, that the nearest fighting is now over 14,000 miles away, by boat."

The bad part of the war was actually over for me, though I didn't know it right away, of course. The big question then was the continuing war in the Pacific and the probability that we might yet have to participate in it. Would we go as a Division or as individual replacement troops? If and when we went, would it be direct or would we get home for a time first? There was even speculation about becoming part of a "permanent" army of occupation in Europe. Of course, by August it was all academic. As time passed, and I realized there would be no more fighting, I gradually became so obsessed with the desire to go home that the interesting times to come often seemed only obstacles to that end.

I continued my convalescence, eventually getting well enough to go out and explore Nancy a little bit, sit in the park, and go to the service club and the movies. In

the early days of my hospitalization, I learned much later, since it wasn't known exactly where I was, some of my mail was returned as undeliverable. This must have been a source of considerable distress for everyone at home, but they never said much about it to me. Eventually, of course, I was well enough to write them, and my mail did get forwarded as well.

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XX. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

It is impossible to complete this story using original sources that we have used in the *Newsletter*; there are no more. It was not long after the last transcribed Stimes letter that we have was written that I left the Company on my three-day R & R pass to the Nancy rest camp that ended up with my hospitalization for hepatitis. Thus I have no personal memories of what happened to the Company during the very eventful final weeks of combat—and of course Bud never got the opportunity to give us his impressions of that time. I have been able to unearth only one other on-the-spot recollection of what happened—and that never got in the *Newsletter*.

In 1995 I was able to meet with Hugh Gillin—once a sergeant in our third platoon—to discuss his proposed biography, that I would write using oral history tapes which he would provide. Hugh had made a quite dramatic mid-life career change to become a successful Hollywood actor, and I thought his story was worth telling. For a number of reasons the project didn't come to fruition, but I was able to get from the tapes, among other things, verbatim accounts of his experiences in the Company G action at Talheim up to the time he was wounded, plus some of his experiences after being wounded: in hospitals in Germany, England, and back home. Some of this material has been used in the *Newsletter*, most has not, and some of that is what follows:

“April the 12th Roosevelt died, when we were in Heilbronn, Germany on the Neckar River. We were on the safe side. I would guess the west bank, kind of reserve. Somebody got the town cleaned up and then we went across, on a pontoon bridge as I recall. Got into town and most of the fighting was done, moved through the town. We were advancing and we were heading toward the town of Talheim. (I know this now, didn't know it then, it's about 10 or 15 miles outa Heilbronn goin' southeast. I got some old maps.) We started to move in there. As we're advancing you could see the town up ahead of us maybe a