

From Company E, 397th to Stalag IXB

by Don Hildenbrand, 397-E

I graduated from high school in May 1942, and a few weeks later, entered college in my hometown, after unexpectedly winning a full scholarship. By December 1942, when I was drafted into the Army, I had completed the equivalent of my freshman year in an accelerated program. After induction in March 1943, I took basic training with the 217th MP Company at Fort Devens, MA. After completing basic, I was sent overseas in July 1943 with an MP detachment to the Casablanca area in the Mediterranean Theater, to guard and process German and Italian POWs from the North African campaign. After returning to the States with a detachment guarding a group of these POWs, I rejoined the 217th MP Company in the West Virginia Maneuver Area near Elkins, WV. In Jan. 1944, I was transferred to the 100th Infantry Div. at Fort Bragg, NC, and assigned to the 1st Platoon, Company E, 397th Infantry Regiment. The 100th had just completed field maneuvers in Tennessee. I took advanced training with E/397 until we were sent to Camp Kilmer, NJ in Sept. 1944 for shipment to the European Theater. The 100th sailed on 6 Oct. 1944 in a convoy with the 103rd Infantry Division, reaching Marseilles harbor in Southern France on 20 Oct. 1944. Because port facilities had been destroyed, we debarked onto LCIs for transfer ashore to French soil. The 100th Division history, *The Story of the Century*, was instrumental in providing many of the details, dates, and background used in preparing this account.

Combat Experiences

After a week in a staging area outside Marseilles, we were moved by truck some 500 miles north to the Seventh Army sector near the city of Baccarat in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains of eastern France. The 100th Division officially entered combat on 9 Nov. 1944, in relief of the veteran 45th Infantry Division, and began a sustained attack eastward to break the German winter defensive line blocking the way to Strasbourg and the Rhine. I was armed with the M-1 Garand rifle, and my regular foxhole buddy, Ralph Frazier, carried a Browning Automatic Rifle, or BAR.

Nothing in our training could have prepared us for the shock of that first artillery barrage from German 88s during our initial attack. It seemed to last forever, throwing us into a chaotic world where rational thought and action were all but impossible. I'll never forget the screaming of the wounded, especially George Allers of our platoon whose upper thigh was torn apart and bleeding profusely. And what a shock it was encountering the body of Lieutenant Jack Christensen, killed on that very first day. Later, we somehow adjusted to those terrifying 88 barrages, enough to scramble for our foxholes and to keep from coming unglued, but never becoming indifferent or blasé about them. Another casualty of that first attack was likable Staff Sergeant Ed O'Rourke, our platoon guide. Ed was badly wounded and I never saw him again. I learned later that Ed was in the hospital for many months before returning to duty with Company E the following spring. He was seriously wounded again in a major attack about a month before VE day but, fortunately, did eventually recover.

Our battalion captured a number of towns around Raon l'Etape and we occasionally had the great luxury of sleeping in barns or houses at night, rather than the usual muddy foxholes. The weather was cold and raw, with occasional snow. We were getting used to the K and C field rations, which I felt were reasonably good. Of the Ks, the canned ham and eggs, the cheese and bacon, and the chocolate bar were especially good; with the Cs, the franks and beans, and meat and vegetable stew were best, while few liked the corned beef hash. Unfortunately, most cases of Cs were missing the franks and beans, no doubt removed by rear area troops. Being a non-smoker, I sometimes was able to trade cigarettes from the Ks for the chocolate bar.

We lost another one of our platoon's senior non-coms near Raon l'Etape, when Staff Sergeant Art Slutzkin was killed by shrapnel from an 88 burst over his foxhole.

I vividly recall one particular attack when our platoon was in the lead, heading up a hill through the forest. Suddenly, there was intense German machine gun and mortar fire, and someone crawled back to my position saying that the two lead scouts, Earl Davis and William Wattson, had both been killed. Then

enemy artillery started coming in. At this point, our squad leader, an older buck sergeant, took off, crawling to the rear saying that he couldn't take it any more. I heard later that he was busted to private and assigned to permanent KP in a rear area. In any event, I never saw him again, but about a year after VE day, back in the States, I received a letter from him, seeking to be forgiven for what he had done; I told him that he had my forgiveness. The rest of us mostly younger GIs were left leaderless in that badly exposed position, among the dead and wounded. After some time, our platoon leader, Lieutenant Richard Schmidt, crawled up to our foxhole and wanted to know what was going on. We told him about the casualties, while the intense machine gun and small arms fire was still coming in. Suddenly, he said to Ralph "Give me that BAR" and started to get up. Both of us said, "Stay down, you'll get killed," but he stood up and was immediately hit several times in the chest, falling back down into the hole on top of us, badly wounded. We managed to get him on his back, checked his wounds, and called for a medic to come up. While waiting, he asked for some water, always a precious commodity. I said that I'd try to get his canteen, which was under him, but he said, "No, give me yours," which I did, of course, albeit reluctantly because of the difficulty of getting drinking water. After things calmed down a bit, he was taken to the rear, but to my knowledge he never returned to our unit. From that point in early November, our platoon was without an officer in command, as our much-respected platoon sergeant, Tech Sergeant Peter Petracco, became acting platoon leader. (After the war, I found out that Pete was awarded a battlefield commission the following March but, in one of those tragic ironies of war, he was killed shortly thereafter while leading our platoon in an attack on the German city of Heilbronn.). In an especially sad event during this attack, a popular medic with our group, Tec 5 Fulgencio Montano, was killed by a sniper while tending the wounded, despite his arm-band and the clear markings on his helmet indicating him to be a medic. About that time we were also shocked to learn that our long-time regimental commander, Col. William Ellis, was killed in an ambush while trying to visit front-line units. Of course, the battlefields also contained many German dead. A few, very few, of our GIs were eager souvenir hunters seeking pistols, watches, insignia, and other personal items.

These attacks on German positions, with the enemy machine gun and mortar fire and the ever-present 88 barrages, became a part of our daily life. At first it seemed as if our leaders would recognize that front-line troops should be given some type of periodic respite, to recover and recharge their batteries after the constant tension of combat, but it didn't happen. In the Army newspaper, *Stars & Stripes*, we read about rear-area rest centers with USO shows and the like, but few infantry groups apparently had such opportunities. The pace of the war was such that you just had to keep going, toughing it out.

As we continued to attack eastward through the Vosges foothills, I have many memories of long night marches past burning houses as we tried to close up on the retreating Germans. Several times, I recall some apprehension as my friend, Ralph, nearly twice my age, was unable to keep up with our forced marches, and I feared we would be separated. But somehow he always showed up the next day, much to my relief. Ralph and I frequently talked about what we might do after the war, if we survived. He was a postman from the Cincinnati area, age 37. Despite the age difference, we got along well, and often talked hopefully about sitting around the kitchen table after the war with a couple of beers, looking back on our wartime experiences.

Since our days at Fort Bragg, I'd had many discussions with Joe Cosby, a friend and college student from another platoon in Company E, about how best to serve our unit in combat. Joe and I were both appalled by the killing and carnage of war, especially now, and Joe felt strongly that we should request a transfer to the 397th Medical Detachment for service as combat medics. It wasn't a matter of fear, since service as a combat medic was every bit as hazardous as that of a rifleman. We were mainly concerned about the killing, taking the life of another person. However, we became separated before coming to any joint agreement. Later, I found out that Joe did indeed become a combat medic, happily surviving the war in good shape.

In early December, the 100th Division moved northeast of Sarrebourg, and became involved in attacks directed toward the fortress complex around the city of Bitche, the *Campe Militaire de Bitche*, astride the Maginot Line. (Many years later, my wife, Nancy, and I visited the fortress complex, and because of the

massive construction, it was easy to see why our biggest artillery shells, the 240s, simply bounced off the walls without inflicting any major damage.)

The new area had a distinctly German flavor to it, with many of the towns having German-sounding names like Ingwiller, Rohrbach, Lemberg, Urbach, Hottviller, Mouterhouse, and so on. The land had changed back and forth between German and French control a number of times over the years. In one of these towns, I met some old comrades from the 217th MP Co. It was great to see them, but we were on alert and I was unable to accept their kind invitation to visit my old unit. I also recall one brief interlude when we were waiting in one of the houses for our unit to move to another location. My friend, Pfc Chester Merrill, was playing a piano that somehow survived the devastation, and was keeping us entertained with all the old favorites we liked so much. Chester was about my age and of a similar background, with one year of college completed before being drafted. Many months later I learned, much to my sorrow, that he was killed in Germany, not long before the war ended.

I had an unsettling experience one dark night in that region, while on watch at a machine-gun outpost with two other GIs from Company E. We were just beyond the front lines, keeping an eye out for German activity, something that was always a bit nerve wracking. Around midnight or so, one of my outpost comrades broke down and just lay writhing in the bottom of the pit behind our MG, moaning and groaning about how he just had to get out of there, he couldn't stand it anymore. The other GI and I were afraid this guy was going to give our position away, and we tried to keep him quiet. We finally got rid of him when a sergeant checking our position took him off our hands. This particular guy transferred into the 100th from the Army Air Force just before we sailed for Europe and, despite his tough talk, proved to be unfit for combat. We never saw him again.

In the push toward Bitche, our battalion led the attack in early December on the village of Mouterhouse, just to the south. Mouterhouse was down in a valley between two ridges. In preparation for the attack, Company E assembled atop the ridge south of town, where several officers from battalion HQ met with our CO, Captain William Garden, and other officers to plan the attack. After the meeting, I was assigned to escort the visitors, two captains, back to their CP in the rear. We left around dusk, and after delivering them safely to the CP, I headed back to our position on the ridge, somewhat uneasy about traveling alone through our lines in the dark, but completed the trip without incident.

Next morning, the attack downhill through the forest into Mouterhouse began, with the 1st platoon of Company E in the lead, and myself as the lead scout. As we approached the edge of town where the forest ended, all hell broke loose with intense enemy fire from 88s, mortars, MGs, and small arms. This heavy fire continued for some time without letup. In the lead, I was in a badly exposed position, and the rest of my platoon did not advance during this time. Communications had broken down. I finally ran through a graveyard and behind a large church on the south side of town, where I joined a group of GIs from G/397 attacking to our right. German artillery was falling among the tombstones in the graveyard, sending stone fragments flying through the air as we ran. We gained entrance to the church through a rear window, and re-grouped there until the remainder of E and G Companies advanced. By this time it was late afternoon, and I was still separated from most of my unit. We spent the night in the church. Next morning we cleared a number of houses as the Germans retreated north, and I rejoined my platoon. They had just cleared a house on the north edge of town and were moving in for the night. Sadly I learned that another good friend, Pfc Murray Hornstein, had been killed by a sniper just before I arrived. We remained in Mouterhouse for several days, clearing the town, and even had showers, clean clothes, and mail.

The capture of Mouterhouse and surrounding areas cleared the southern approaches to Bitche and opened the way for elements of the Division to attack the fortress complex. During this time, E/397 was clearing and securing the area around the road and rail junction at Rohrbach, just east of Bitche. This area contained a large cluster of Maginot pillboxes and forts, connected by tunnels with underground facilities for housing troops. These interior facilities were largely in ruins. Much of our time was spent patrolling around the Rohrbach area and maintaining defensive positions while the 398th Infantry attack on Bitche was in progress. One afternoon, as we were positioned in open fields astride the road north of Rohrbach, one of those strange incidents of war occurred. A German vehicle, their version of our Jeep, with several occupants came barreling down the road toward our positions. They seemed entirely unaware of our

presence. As they neared us, our troops along the road began firing, killing them all and sending the vehicle spinning crazily off the road. It was probably an incident not unlike the one that led to the death of our regimental commander.

In mid-December, we were often on night patrols around Rohrbach, looking for German infiltrators said to be dressed in GI garb. We didn't find any. A few days before Christmas, we became aware of the major German breakthrough in the Ardennes, and knew that our lines were being stretched thin as Third Army troops to the north were being rushed to counterattack in the Ardennes, the Battle of the Bulge. The 100th was stretched to cover ground vacated to the north of us, while maintaining our sector to the south. The 2nd Battalion of the 397th Infantry made several moves to the northeast, taking over ground formerly held by the 44th Infantry Division, ending up in positions between Rimling and Guising, close to the German border. Around 5 Jan or so, our 1st Platoon moved to new frontline positions on a hill just northwest of Rimling, as part of a move relieving our 3rd Battalion. As we moved up under cover of darkness, word filtered down about the dangerously exposed positions we were moving into. The second platoon of Company E was already in place there, and had taken a number of casualties, including serious wounding of the platoon leader, Lieutenant Dominic Cuccinello. As we settled in, our platoon was on constant alert, as German probing attacks were being made all along the thinly held lines, with a lot of harassing fire. We took turns manning MG outposts around the perimeter of our hill-top position, on watch for stronger attacks that were thought to be in the works. During daylight hours we had to stay under cover, as any obvious sign of movement brought on a hail of enemy fire.

Just after midnight, in the early hours of 8 January, after a heavy artillery, mortar, and rocket barrage, several hundred German infantry, accompanied by tanks, attacked toward Rimling, bypassing our platoon's position and overrunning other Company E platoons. With the Germans to our rear, we were now cut off, and had lost contact with the Company E CP as the telephone line was apparently severed. In an attempt to re-establish communications and seek further orders, the acting platoon leader, Pete Petracca, called for a volunteer to try to make it back to the company CP. When no one else spoke up, I volunteered, hoping that my experience as a cross-country runner in high school and college would be a plus. As I set out over the snowy ground, it was still snowing lightly, but pitch-dark. I was trying to follow our telephone line to the CP, since we had moved up to our present position in the dark of night to avoid detection, and the area was unfamiliar to me. Making good progress, I had covered about half a mile when suddenly a flare went up. I hit the ground immediately, but rifle and MG fire quickly opened up in my direction. Fortunately, I was not hit, but in short order, several Germans pounced on me, took my M-1 and ammo, and led me back to their tank as a prisoner. My first reaction was one of anger at myself for such a blunder, but I decided it might be best to hide any anger in the interest of survival. As I found out at first light, the tank was sitting astride the telephone line I had been following, and had no doubt broken the connection.

POW Experiences

At dawn, I joined with other POWs from our 2nd Battalion, 397th Infantry, as we removed dead and wounded Germans from the battlefield. In the process, my reversible white camouflage parka became quite bloodstained. Later, we were taken to a barn and waited as we were interrogated one by one. Since we had nothing else, I recall eating bits of raw sugar beet, stored in the barn as food for the cattle. After a bit, we were taken to the railway station at Zweibrucken and herded into boxcars for the trip into the German interior. We were heading for Frankfurt am Main, and along the way were strafed by Allied planes. Standing in the station at Frankfurt overnight, our boxcar remained locked as Allied bombers gave the area a heavy pounding. Fortunately, we emerged unscathed. Next morning we were allowed to leave the boxcar under guard, and attend to our needs down among the rubble near the river. Frankfurt had been heavily bombed, and there was much destruction. Our destination was Stalag IXB at Bad Orb, not far from Frankfurt, arriving about January 15. As I jumped out of the boxcar at Bad Orb, my frozen feet had no sense of feeling and I fell on my face, as did most of the other POWs. Bad Orb was a large Stalag, with at least several thousand US POWs, many from the 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions that had been badly mauled in the initial German breakthrough in the Ardennes.

At IXB, I was reunited with other POWs from the 2nd Battalion, 397th Infantry, also captured in the battle around Rimling. It was good to see friends again, but under difficult circumstances. I learned a little about the aftermath of the battle, but nothing about my comrades in the 1st Platoon of Company E. Tech Sergeant Melvin Duck from the 2nd Platoon of E Co. was the ranking non-com among us. Pfc Melvin Olson told me about being trapped with his squad on the second floor of a house in Rimling, as many Germans were spotted in the streets outside. They killed some by firing from the upper windows, but Melvin fell asleep while they were waiting to leave under cover of darkness, only to awake and find the others gone and himself a POW. We were rousted out of the barracks one morning and made to stand in a snowy field all day as the German guards sought several POWs responsible for breaking into the Stalag kitchen in search of food, then either killing or badly wounding a guard who surprised them. They were examining us for signs of a struggle, and I was worried about the bloodstains on my parka from the Rimling battlefield. Fortunately, I had reversed the parka and the bloodstains inside went unnoticed. The guilty parties were eventually found and we were able to come in out of the cold in the evening. We received very little to eat, usually a cup of thin soup or ersatz coffee in the morning, and a loaf of bread split between ten or more POWs in the evening.

In early February, I was part of a group of 350 POWs from Bad Orb that were sent by train about 200 miles east to a construction project at Berga am Elster, south of Leipzig. Other POWs from the 397th Infantry in this group, as shown from records I obtained later, were Co. E.: John Bean, William Dodson, Granville Fuller, and Lloyd Thompson; Co. F: Arlie Cook, Alfred Dasher, Gerald Daub, Robert Frew, Edward Kulas, Russell Johnson, Robert Rudnick, and Frederick Schmeiser; and Co. G: Andrew Dowdell and Robert Parkin. (Of these, Johnson, Parkin, as noted later, and Schmeiser perished before liberation.) We were designated an "Arbeitskommando," or work group, and housed in flimsy huts each holding about 30 or 40 men. We slept on wooden planks covered with straw and, before long, we were all thoroughly infested with lice, a most unpleasant experience. Whenever one became slightly warm, as when we huddled together for warmth or as later when warmed by the sun, the crawling would begin. Ugh! There were occasional disinfectant showers, but they were ineffective. We naturally segregated into groups from our former units, and I was housed and worked with a group from E, F, and G Cos. of the 397th Inf. None were from my old platoon, but there was nevertheless a feeling of solidarity about being with men from your own combat unit. Most of the others were from the 106th and 28th Inf. Divisions.

We worked from dawn to dusk, seven days a week, on the construction project where, on a bank above the Elster River, tunnels were being dug into the side of a hill, later to be joined into a large interior enclosure for an underground weapons or armaments factory, so the rumors went. There were also many political prisoners at the Berga construction site, in their striped suits. They took a lot more abuse than we did. After blasting into the hill, we loaded the rock fragments into railcars and dumped the rock down the bank along the river. Another regular task was unloading segments of railroad track from flatcars, and then laying the track. It was all hard manual labor, with little time to rest, and nothing to eat during the workday. Before work, we received only a cup of ersatz coffee, and after work in our hut were given a loaf of dark bread usually split between ten men; occasionally there was a cup of thin soup with some type of vegetable, and very rarely a little meat. When I tried saving part of my bread ration for the next day's lunch, the bread was stolen while I slept, no matter where I hid it. This stealing became quite common, and I never knew who was involved. In the latter part of March, when the weather warmed a bit, we often disrobed during the mid-day break and tried to pick the lice out of our clothes. The German guards and civilian workers were aghast at this, forcing us to climb down the rocks near the river and to stay away from them during this operation.

I recall two significant events during the time at Berga. First, I was interviewed by a civilian official of some sort, a man in a black hat and black leather coat, with a black leather briefcase, just like the movie villains. However, he was very soft-spoken and polite, and offered me a cigarette, which I refused. His purpose was to find out what I knew about US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, what type of man he was and how much influence he had with President Roosevelt. As I recall, Morgenthau had advised the President that after unconditional surrender, Germany should be returned to a completely agrarian economy, no more steel mills, auto plants, shipbuilding, aircraft production, and so on. Obviously, the

handwriting of Germany's defeat was already on the wall, and government officials were no doubt trying to develop a strategy for the future, how severe it would be and the like. Of course, I knew nothing about the US plan for Germany's future, but the Germans were clearly worried, as they should have been. I don't recall what I told the official, but it surely could not have been anything significant. I assumed that records had shown that I was a college student before the war, and that students like myself and others would be expected to have a better knowledge of current events and their consequences. Secondly, we received several Red Cross food packages, split up among the group. As I went into the camp commandant's office to receive our package, I recall him saying, "Hildenbrand, that's a fine German name!" Anyway, the food was too rich for our weakened intestinal systems, especially the Christmas pudding, and we did not benefit much from it. Even so, we continually thought and talked about food, to the point of trying to recall every detail of meals we had eaten over the years before the war.

As the days rolled by, we all became progressively weaker from the hard manual labor and from malnutrition. Nevertheless, we were made to work as hard as ever. There were the inevitable accidents, such as when a railroad flat car overturned as we were unloading rails. The foreman refused to listen when we indicated that unloading all the rails from one side would cause the car to tip over, as it did with rails flying in all directions, leading to a number of broken bones. There were a number of deaths among the POWs, mostly from pneumonia and the like. But I began to notice that some men in our hut became very despondent, began to get a wild look in their eyes, and were very withdrawn. We all expected that the war would be over by now, late March, and those in such deep despair began saying things like "We're never going to get out of here," or "I know I'll never be going home." Three or four of these men in our hut, ones that I knew personally, simply expired in their sleep without ever waking. On the surface they seemed no less physically healthy than the rest of us. It appeared that they had simply given up. I determined that somehow I was going to make it back, if at all possible. But it showed that the margin between life and death can be very narrow, like the proverbial razor's edge.

In early April, the camp at Berga was evacuated, and we headed south on foot, with the most seriously ill POWs riding on a wagon. The group was now down to about 320 POWs. There were also columns of political prisoners heading south as well. Apparently, with the fall of Germany imminent, we were all heading for the legendary alpine redoubt south of Munich. Our group continued to grow weaker, as there was little food provided. We scrounged the fields when we could for whatever potato scraps or anything else we could find. Almost every night there were a few more POW deaths, and I was often part of the burial detail that tried to provide a decent resting place for the remains of our comrades. Sometimes tearful German civilians from nearby homes brought flowers. But when the villagers tried to give us scraps of food, the guards angrily pushed them away or knocked them down. I remember one burial that included the body of Bob Parkin, a friend and comrade from G/397. (About a year after the war, I received a letter from Army Col. Parkin, Bob's father, seeking information about the location of the burial site. A surviving GI from G Co. indicated that I might be able to spot the site, and suggested that the Col. contact me. He sent me some detailed maps of the area and I marked the spot as best I could. Perhaps a year later, I received a wonderful letter from Col. Parkin saying that Bob's remains had been found, identified from the dog tags, and returned to the States for burial; he was most grateful.)

Our route took us through Greiz, Plauen, Hof and Selb, some of the towns that I recall. On shop windows, I repeatedly saw the handwritten note "Keine Fleisch" (meaning "no meat"), a sign that few people in Germany were eating well then. During this latter part of the war, Allied aircraft had complete control of the skies, and on clear days US planes were busy strafing any moving targets they could find behind the lines in Germany. So we often slept during daylight hours and marched at night to avoid this threat. But the Wehrmacht did not give up so easily. I recall several times watching in horror as flights of US low-level bombers came over in attack formation, while the German anti-aircraft gunners stood their ground and fired back, often shooting down one or two planes from each flight of three. It was sobering to watch.

Near the end of our march, I particularly remember pulling into a walled farm village with all the houses placed around a central square. When our commandant explained the situation to the village burgomeister, the latter inspected us, noted our emaciated condition, and then proceeded to berate the

commandant for our terrible medical condition. The burgomeister insisted that we all should be taken to the nearest hospital. After much shouting back and forth, the commandant finally agreed to take a number of the worst cases to a nearby hospital. The rest of us were to continue on next day. But the villagers found little ways to help us, against the wishes of our commandant. I recall a villager whispering in my ear “Milch ist daruber,” and pointing across the square to a door that was slightly ajar. When I wandered across the square and stood near the door, an arm thrust out a large cup of warm milk, fresh from the source. What a treat! Little things like that really helped to restore our spirits.

The march was taking a toll on everyone; some could no longer walk unaided. I remember helping to support one of my work-mates at Berga, John Bean, who had joined E/397 as a replacement not long before being captured. When John could no longer walk, even with our support, we had to reluctantly leave him by the side of the road, unsure of what his fate might be. (Happily, he made it back home to Alabama, and wrote me that he bought his boy a pony to celebrate the homecoming.)

By this time, we were beginning to hear the unmistakable sounds of artillery firing in the distance, but coming ever closer. We heard a rumor from one of the locals that we would be liberated in a few days, we were that close to the front. Early on the morning of 23 April 1945, a date forever etched in my memory bank, near the village of Cham (about 80 mi east of Nurnberg), we heard firing close at hand. The German guards were running about, shouting that we should all get on the wagon and clear out. As they tried to force us on the wagon and go back for more, we jumped off and burrowed back into the hay in the barn. After a bit, the Germans could see that this was not working, so they ran off and left us, free at last. When we were sure they were gone, we went outside the barn and looked down on a magnificent column of tanks and other armored vehicles with big white stars on them. As we stood and waved our arms, a shell was fired at the barn, and we all immediately hit the ground and stayed there. Soon several vehicles drove up to find out what was going on, and we were back under US control. Hallelujah! We had covered something like 150 miles on foot since leaving Berga, and now it was over.

Liberation

The armored crew told us to stay put, that they would soon send some medics to look after us, welcoming us back into the US Army. The armored column was a combat command from the US 11th Armored Division, still on the attack on a salient far ahead of the front. They could not take us to the rear at this point, but said they would figure out what to do with us later. While waiting for the medics, I walked down the hill to the road and bummed a case of rations from a passing tanker. But I was unable to lift the case. I then fell to the ground and could not get up, no matter how I tried. I suppose I had finally hit the wall, after running on empty for so long. Eventually, after what seemed hours, a field ambulance stopped, I was carried aboard on a stretcher, and was taken to join my POW comrades in a hospital run by Catholic nuns in the city of Cham.

The “schwesters” at the hospital were very good to us, attending to our most urgent needs, although they had little to work with until the US medics brought in supplies. We cut each other’s hair and shaved our heads to get rid of the lice, then bathed in disinfectant. I weighed in at 90 lbs, way down from my normal 160 lbs, typical for everyone. We ate very sparingly, despite our great hunger, trying to give our intestinal systems a chance to recover. The GIs of the 11th Armored were wonderful to us, paying frequent visits to bring us news and to leave many souvenirs they had picked up along the way. To this day, I still have the 11th Armored’s triangular red, blue and yellow shoulder patch; I wouldn’t part with it for anything.

After the rear area caught up with us in a few days, we were taken back to a field hospital with an adjoining airstrip. As we waited in a large tent near a pile of blankets, a harried physician rushed in and shouted something like, “These men are ex-POWs and probably full of lice. Keep them away from those blankets, and don’t let them near anyone else!” Not a very warm reception, but we understood and obligingly kept our distance. At the airstrip, C-47s were flying in fuel, ammo, food, and other supplies for the troops, and then flying medical casualties back to their base in France. The latter included us, and we were soon winging our way west to France. The air crew told us our destination was something that sounded like Marmillon, and that was all we knew. Over the years, I tried to spot it on the map, but

without success. Actually, as I found out many years later, it was spelled Mourmelon, and was an ancient military garrison town about 30 km SE of Reims, most recently used by the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divs. when pulled out of combat for refitting. From there, I was sent to a US Army hospital in the Alsatian city of Epinal, not far from where the 100th Division had first entered combat so long ago. There I was put on a strictly regulated diet that would reduce the shock to my system as I began the return to a normal lifestyle. On May 9, I vividly recall witnessing the joyous celebration of VE Day, the end of the European war, with all the fireworks and such. It was a super feeling. My overall condition was improving rapidly, with no major damage apparent. My badly frostbitten feet were continuing to give me trouble, but the prognosis was that they would heal completely in time.

When the medical staff at Epinal judged me fit to begin the long journey home, I was first sent to an Army hotel in Paris for R & R and medical observation. What a great experience to be free to roam that wonderful city. While sitting at a sidewalk cafe one afternoon, I received a hearty slap on the back that nearly knocked me off the chair, and looked up to find Herman Travazos, an old comrade from the 217th MP Co. Herman was an outstanding soldier, but with a checkered Army career going back to 1940. He had a fatal attraction to the ladies of the night, and had gone through several cycles of promotion-demotion, from T/Sgt to Pvt and back because of contracting VD. Herman had also been transferred to the infantry in early 1944, and we spent a couple of hours sharing our exploits of the last year. In addition, he filled me in on the night life in Paris, still up to his old tricks. That chance visit gave me a much-needed lift on the road back to a normal life.

From Paris, I was sent to one of the military embarkation camps near Le Havre; I think it was Camp Lucky Strike. My intestinal system was still protesting this rigorous new routine after many months of passive activity, but I was pretty much OK otherwise. While at Lucky Strike, I gave testimony to War Crimes investigators regarding our treatment as POWs. In the end, no more than 280 of the original 350 POWs sent to Berga survived till the end of the war and made it home. Surprisingly, some of my testimony, which was stored in the National Archives, surfaced just a few years ago in a book about treatment of military POWs in Germany. In due course, I was on a ship bound for the US, and towards the end of June was re-united with my family and given a 90-day furlough. What a wonderful summer it was. I was much surprised to find, in a letter from the Adjutant General's Office, that I had been awarded the Silver Star Medal for my ill-fated attempt to seek help for my platoon that fateful night near Rimling. Possibly, my experience did encourage the others in the platoon to seek escape by a different route than the one I had taken, but they did escape capture. At the end of the furlough, I reported to the Rehabilitation Center in Miami Beach, FL, then was transferred for duty with the Army Ground Forces Separation Center at Fort Bragg, NC, my last state-side post with the 100th Division. There were many ex-POWs in the group and it was a real pleasure getting to know them. We were all ready to be discharged, most of us anxious to resume our college education. Just before my discharge, the commanding general at Fort Bragg presented me with the Silver Star Medal in an award ceremony in his office. Interestingly enough, the general had been on the staff of the Seventh Army in Europe, and he filled me in on the big battle that led to my capture, using maps to illustrate the situation. The Germans called it Operation NORDWIND, and it was meant to divert attention from the major counter-attack in the Ardennes, the Battle of the Bulge, keeping Seventh Army troops from attacking north. Nordwind was referred to by some as "The Little Battle of the Bulge." Finally, on December 21, 1945, I was discharged and headed home to Baltimore. Within a month, I was back in class at Johns Hopkins U., resuming my education under the fabulous GI Bill. This was a wonderful thing for someone from a family of very modest means, with no expectation of a higher education.

Aftermath

The transition from combat soldier/POW to college student was very abrupt, and I was quickly caught up in the frantic routine of completing my education and getting on with my life. Wartime experiences soon faded into the background, replaced by a focus on the educational process, and eventually a career. I completed my undergraduate work at Hopkins in 2½ years, then went on to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, still on the GI Bill, earning a Ph.D. in Chemistry after another four

years. In the process of marriage, raising a family, and pursuing a rewarding scientific career, little thought was given to WWII experiences, but they were always there in the background.

Ralph Frazier and I did indeed sit at his kitchen table and reminisce over a couple of beers in 1949, and met once again at our house in 1958. Over the years we kept in touch, mainly through Christmas cards. Ralph died in 1993 at age 86, one of those kind, considerate, and resourceful comrades that are truly the salt of the earth. Our friendship and concern for each other was surely a big factor in surviving WWII, not an easy accomplishment.

More recently, many new books about WWII have appeared, many about combat experiences, as the remaining veterans are approaching that last patrol. Of course, this has brought thoughts about WWII back to the surface. In a related matter, I heard from friends in 1997 that the US Justice Department was accepting claims from holocaust survivors and some ex-POWs for reparations from the German government. After tracking this down, I did file a claim, mostly from curiosity, and found to my surprise that Berga was indeed considered to be a concentration camp, one of the very few POW lagers considered to be such. I was pronounced eligible for a monetary award from Germany, but mainly am astounded that all this activity should be occurring more than fifty years after the main event. So after going over my thoughts in preparing the claim and re-kindling my interest in WWII, it seemed worthwhile to prepare this account for historical purposes.

In retrospect, service in WWII was clearly one of the most significant events of my life. I think we can all take pride in what was accomplished. Even now, however, I find it difficult to think back about Pete Petracco and the others like him, those who did not come back, without deep feelings of warmth and sorrow. In my view, they were the real heroes, and we all owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for the wonderful lives we've had over the last half-century.

In closing, I'm reminded of something I read about a parachute infantry company in the 101st Airborne Division. Long after WWII, a grandson asked "Grandpa, were you a hero in the war?" and the former paratrooper replied, "No, but I served in a company of heroes." Amen.

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