

## **JIM PILGRIM'S EXPERIENCES IN WWII**

The following is an account of Jim Pilgrim's experiences in WWII as told to one of his sons. His son had heard his father talk about the war beginning when he was a boy, and he began to compile this narration on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

Although Jim was often asked to make a record of his memories, it became evident that he was never going to write down his experiences. He explained that since almost all the men his age served in the military during World War II, and in the eyes of his generation it was nothing special to have been in combat. Jim said he knew of other men who did more than he did, and many of these men did not survive the war. This recounting of Jim's experience will include some of these men. While World War II was a defining experience in the lives of the men who served in the military like Jim, he does not think he did anything so special as to deserve a written record. However, his son felt differently, and the following account was originally written for family members.

### **GOING TO WAR**

James Edward Pilgrim, known as Jim, grew up during The Depression in Memphis, Tennessee. He was one of two sons of parents who were fortunate enough to have jobs, but still had to struggle to provide the income necessary to support a family. Jim would say that he grew up poor, but they had what they needed. He had just turned 16 years old and was playing a pickup game of football when someone told him the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. His immediate reaction was, "Where is Pearl Harbor?", but like most Americans his shock turned to anger against the Japanese. From that time on Jim, like most males his age, knew they would be fighting in a war after they got out of high school.



Jim & Mildred

During high school Jim was dating a girl, but the relationship was casual. Somehow he met her cousin, and a romance developed between Jim and an attractive petite girl at another high school who would become his wife. Her name was Mildred Virginia Roe, and she had lost her father at about 8 years old. Her family consisted of two younger brothers, her mother, and Mildred's grandparents. Although the loss of her husband was a blow, Mildred's mother managed to raise her three children as a single parent. She was a graduate of a business school and Secretary Treasurer of Continental Gin Company. The family lived in a two story home on a tree lined street in a nice neighborhood.

Jim got his draft notice in March 1944 before he finished high school. He can still remember the draft notice began with "Greetings from the President of the United States". Jim and Mildred, with another couple, secretly went across the State line to a Justice of the Peace in Mississippi and got married. With the young men about to go to war it was not uncommon at that time for couples that age to get married this way. Jim finished high school at a private school so he could have a high school diploma before he went into the Army.

Jim traveled by train to a processing center at Chattanooga where he was given physical and written tests. He went with one of his friends named Pete who wanted to join the Navy. But Jim convinced him that they should join the Army to be in the Air Corps. They both ended up in the infantry, and Jim believes Pete cursed him for that throughout the war. Pete and Jim remained friends after the war and Pete and his wife were frequent guests in his home.

After Pete and Jim returned to Memphis they were sworn in at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Jim remembers a guy who had been drinking on the train throughout the night on the way to Camp Shelby. This guy passed out the next day while standing as he was being sworn into the Army. He also remembers one of the older soldiers at Camp Shelby had a car and a book of blank passes.



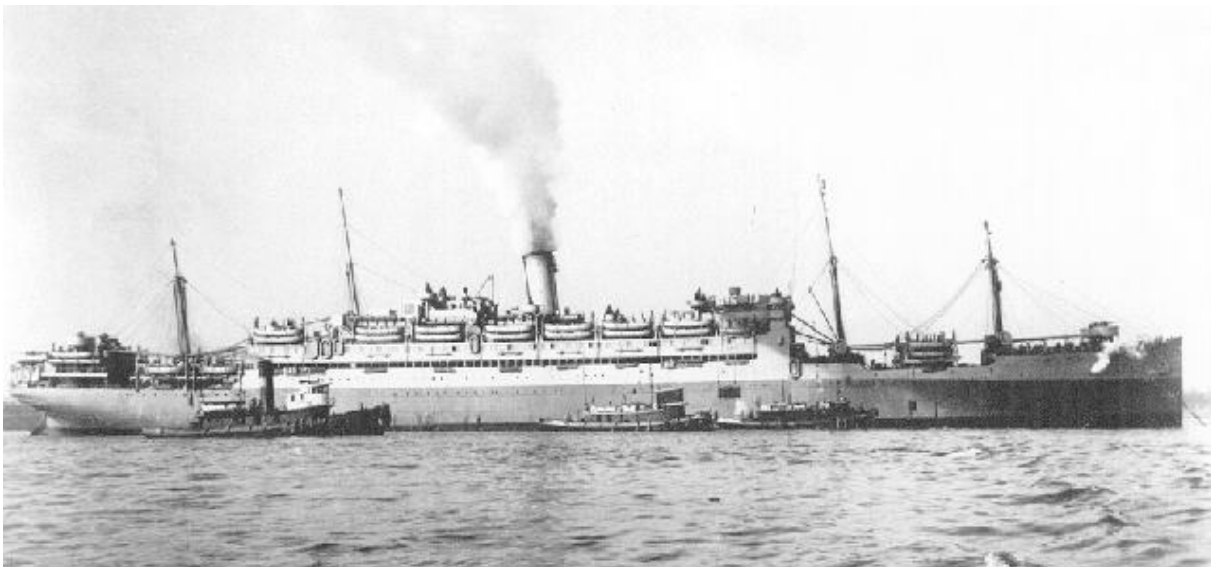
Jim & Herb Carroll (Right) on leave in New York City the day before boarding the USAT George Washington for France. Although they appear to be in a bar, they were actually posing in a sidewalk studio catering to tourists. Herb Carroll did not survive the war.

Jim went through basic training at Ft. Wolters in Texas, which lasted 17 weeks. He earned the expert infantry badge and made friends with another soldier named Herb Carroll. One night, while they were in the barracks at Ft. Wolters, the sergeant came in after the recruits were asleep. The sergeant turned on the barracks lights probably by mistake. Herb Carroll thought it was one of the other recruits who had turned on the lights and shouted out, "Who is the dumb f\_\_k that turned on the lights?" From that time on Herb was given the nickname "Dumb f\_\_k."

Following basic training Jim and Herb Carroll both proceeded to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. Between Ft. Wolters and Ft. Bragg the soldiers were given a 10 day delay in route, and Jim returned to his home in Memphis to be with his family and Mildred for the last time before reporting to his combat unit.

At Ft. Bragg the Army was training glider pilots towing two gliders behind a C-47. Jim and Herb Carroll were both assigned to I&R (Intelligence & Reconnaissance) based on the testing at the processing center. They were assigned to the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division – 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion - 397<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment – Headquarters Company – A&P (Ammunition & Pioneering) Platoon. At Ft. Bragg Jim had to re-qualify for the rifle, hand grenade, and carbine. Mildred made a trip to Ft. Bragg, and they saw each other for the last time before Jim shipped overseas.

The 100th Infantry Division had been engaged in a series of maneuvers in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. This was an area in which there could not have been better preparation for what the Division would face twelve months later, in comparable mountains and weather, but 3,000 miles away in France. From 17 November to 11 January 1943 the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division learned to coordinate large units of infantry with artillery support, combat engineers, logistics, and armor. The soldiers were cold, wet, and utterly miserable just like they were going to be in France one year later. The men hardened both physically and mentally enduring bone chilling cold and rain to battle both the elements and the mountains usually without hot meals.



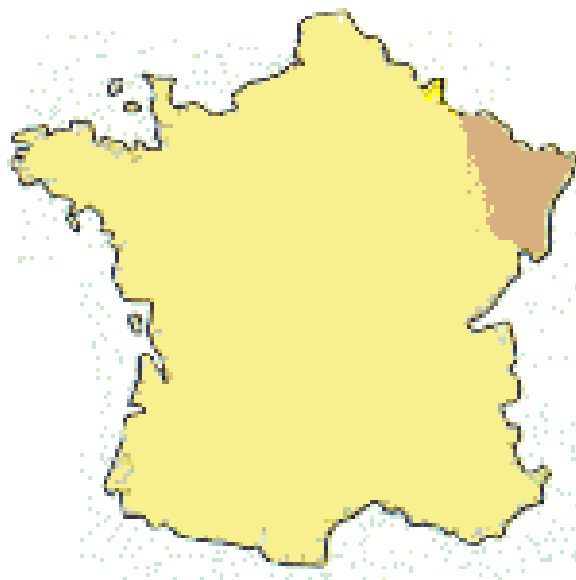
*USAT George Washington*

When Jim joined the 100<sup>th</sup> Division over 3,500 men had been taken out of the Division and sent as replacements to units already in combat. The infantry replacement training centers were simply not able to keep up with the demand as Army infantry units were bloodied in Italy and the southwest Pacific. Jim felt very fortunate to be in the 100<sup>th</sup> Division. Often soldiers were assigned to a replacement center and reported to a unit that had been in

combat to replenish losses. These soldiers were total strangers to their unit and were often killed before anyone got to know them or sometimes no one even knew their name.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division moved from Ft. Bragg to Ft. Kilmer, New Jersey prior to going overseas. At Ft. Kilmer Jim and Herb Carroll were in a barracks with more experienced soldiers who had previously been based in Panama and who also had higher ranks such as sergeants. These soldiers were savvy and were even intimidating to the sergeant at Ft. Kilmer. As a result the sergeant at Ft. Kilmer singled out Jim and Herb Carroll over the more experienced soldiers. Jim and Herb Carroll were blamed and unfairly punished for almost anything that went wrong. Resentment toward the sergeant built until one day Jim lost his temper, grabbed the sergeant by the shirt lapels, and told the sergeant in strong terms something to the effect to stop picking on him.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Division sailed from New York on Oct. 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944 with almost 14,000 men on four transports in a convoy. Seven other ships carried the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division and an advanced party of the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Jim was on the *USAT George Washington*, formally a German luxury liner captured during WWI and converted to a troop transport. Jim remembers the sight of the Statue of Liberty as they left New York Harbor. Life on the ship was austere, if not miserable. There were two meals a day; with a continuous chow line to feed all the troops (7000?) aboard. There were always some troops who were seasick. Jim took one shower on board the ship and wished he had not because it was a saltwater shower that made his skin feel sticky. He also spent as little time as possible in his bunk which were arranged three above each other. This resulted in hardly any space under the soldier above you. The *USAT George Washington* had a Navy gun crew, and the convoy escort included an escort carrier. The ships experienced two storms during the crossing, and the seas were so rough that Jim could see the screws of other ships when the waves lifted their stern out of the ocean. The convoy passed through the Straights of Gibraltar and anchored at Marseilles on Oct. 20<sup>th</sup> where the troops climbed down cargo nets with full equipment to landing barges that took them ashore.



The Alsace Lorraine Region Of France

After marching several miles Jim's unit spent the first night in France bivouacked in a field. Jim stood guard duty that night in a cold rain. He remembers how good it was to get a hot breakfast of bacon and eggs after coming off of guard duty the next morning.



From Marseilles the 100<sup>th</sup> Division traveled 500 miles by truck to become part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army during the early stages of the campaign through the Vosges Mountains. Not well known when compared to many of the battles of the war, this attack of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army was the first time in military history that a defender was driven from Vosges Mountains. These battles deserve to be just as famous as Normandy or The Bulge because the infantryman who fought his way through the Vosges did not have the massed armor of General Patton, and had only limited air support. The terrain favored the defender, and the weather was often miserable.<sup>1</sup>

As the truck convoy approached the front it passed the remains of German vehicles which had been retreating before the advance of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army. The Germans had been trapped by aircraft which bombed the front vehicles first and next by the last vehicles in the convoy. Every truck, car, and weapon had been trapped on the road and methodically destroyed.

At first Jim carried a bazooka which he did not like because bazooka rounds could explode on impact or if hit by a bullet. However, some men were needed for communications, and he was asked to report to a Sgt. Lancer. Jim thought Sgt. Lancer was the model sergeant with his lantern jaw who projected authority with a Brookline accent. He often went out on the more dangerous missions with another sergeant when he could have sent someone else.



Foxhole like Jim would dig and Lefty would chop down trees to cover the foxhole with logs. Note the hand grenades within easy reach.

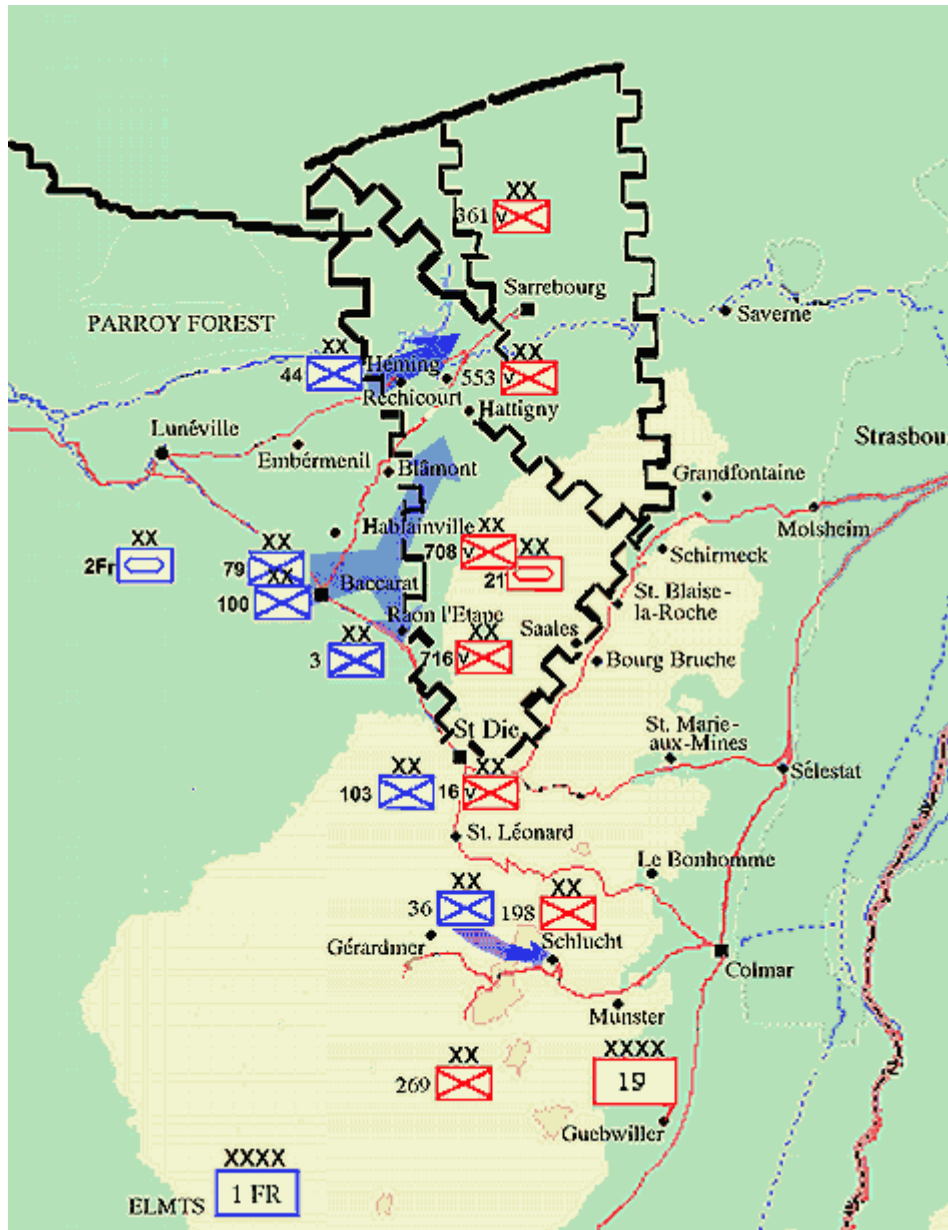
Herb Carroll was also assigned to communications. Lieutenant Dwyer in the A&P platoon wanted Jim and Herb Carroll to return from the communications assignment. Jim and Herb Carroll were split up since they were relatively inexperienced. Jim was paired up with a man

---

<sup>1</sup> Kieth E. Bonn, a military scholar and historian, authored a book When the Odds Were Even analyzing the Vosges Mountain Campaign. Kieth E. Bonn is a West Point Graduate, received his doctorate in history, and held the position of assistant professor of history at the U. S. Military Academy. He was a serving infantry officer when this book was published.

called Lefty (Orville Hillard). Lefty was a lumberjack from northern Minnesota where he said you could walk across the Mississippi River. Jim was impressed because the Mississippi is over a mile wide at Memphis, Tennessee.

Since the Americans were advancing they dug a foxhole every night. Jim would dig a foxhole for the both of them, and Lefty would chop down trees to cover the foxhole with logs. It was often raining, and the foxhole would become wet and muddy. They liked it better when the temperature was below freezing because the foxhole would be dry.



The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's Attack Through The Vosges Mountains

The job in communications consisted of following an officer with a field telephone stringing wire behind them. Jim felt that he was better off in communications than a regular infantryman. He usually got hot coffee at the battalion command post before moving out each morning with the officer. This was an important job because the radios were not reliable. The famous Walkie-Talkies only had a range of line of sight. The radio carried like a backpack was no better. The radios were FM (frequency modulated) type, and their use in mountainous terrain frequently limited their line of sight capability. Sometimes Jim would have to go out at night if a phone line was broken, often by artillery fire. GI's would use the

phone line to find their way through the darkness at night to and from the battalion command post. The Germans knew this and would booby trap the phone lines or cut the phone line to set up an ambush for the GI's.

Jim got to take his first shower since the saltwater shower on the *USAT George Washington* at a glass factory in a town called Baccarat.

## BACCARAT

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was committed to combat by relieving the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The Vosges Mountains in France resemble the Appalachian Mountains with rough terrain covered by thick forests. Advancing east through a village named Bertrichamps Jim saw his first dead American soldier. The soldier's rifle was stuck up in the ground by its bayonet with his helmet on top of the rifle butt. He said he cannot describe the way he felt.

On Nov. 14<sup>th</sup> Jim experienced his first combat. The battalion got caught in an artillery barrage in the open. The Germans had set up a kill zone and the inexperienced U. S. soldiers walked right into it as they crossed a narrow valley with no cover and steep sides. The artillery and mortar rounds began to fall as the first Americans began to reach the far side of the valley. The advance was stopped by rifle and machine gun fire from the Germans who were dug in on the high ground. He could see men all around him being killed and wounded. The shelling became so intense it was a continuous roar. Jim remembered having two thoughts go through his mind. He wondered how men could do this to one another, and he could imagine his mother and wife receiving a telegram that he had been killed in action. It was Jim's most frightening experience. The battalion had to retreat back up a hill out of a ravine where the Germans had set up fields of fire for their machine guns and small arms fire. Sixty years later you can still see in his eyes the horror as Jim told of this experience.

During the artillery barrage Jim was following the battalion commander with the field telephone and stringing the phone wire behind as they advanced. The battalion commander went to pieces. He had been a police chief before the war. He was replaced as soon as possible. The new battalion commander was a West Point graduate who was very capable. The soldiers had a great deal of confidence in the new commander. One of Jim's friends, a private named Roger Fiebelkorn, rallied some men including Jim in the midst of the chaos to go back to recover wounded. Jim said it was terrifying to go back into the kill zone even though the artillery and small arms fire was not as intense. But he overcame his fear and with another soldier carried a wounded man back to an aid station on a litter. Roger Fiebelkorn, who would be awarded a silver star for a previous action, organized another group to recover the wounded and was killed later that day.

## RAON L'ETAPE

One night Lefty and Jim were told to go to a village called Raon L'Etape to set up a listening post with a squad of soldiers. A listening post was set up forward of the front lines to report back enemy activity over the field telephone.

As they advanced toward Raon L'Etape, the squad could hear what sounded like a German tank. The squad scrambled, and Jim ended up in a ditch along the side of the road. As he readied a hand grenade he realized it would be useless against a tank, and infantry almost always accompanied a tank. As he pondered his situation, to his relief there was no German tank. It was an American mess truck with the cooking equipment making a noise that sounded like a tank as it bounced and rattled along the rough road. Jim said it was not uncommon for Americans to mistake each other, especially at night, and inflict casualties due to "Friendly Fire." But this time everyone in the squad realized it was a case of nerves before anyone in the darkness mistook an American mess truck for a German tank.

As the squad continued toward Raon L'Etape they came to a point along the road under observation by the Germans. The Americans had to advance through fire from mortars and small arms, but made it through without any casualties.

The squad thought the Americans had liberated Raon L'Etape, but as they approached the village the soldiers encountered a Frenchman and asked where the Americans were located. The response was, "No, Bosch!" as he pointed in the direction of Raon L'Etape. The Frenchman probably saved this small group of Americans from walking into the German positions and being captured or worse. The squad retreated back through the gauntlet of mortars and gunfire, again with no casualties.



The Square Of Raon L'Etape

The 397<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment entered Raon L'Etape on Nov. 18<sup>th</sup> after four days of intense fighting. The Germans had been arrayed in positions that had been prepared by laborers and improved once they occupied the positions. Poor weather had grounded the P-47's that could provide air support for the Americans. The mountains and forests restricted tanks to narrow and winding roads that the Germans extensively blocked and mined. While the Americans advanced through unfamiliar terrain, the Germans had surveyed the battlefield for their artillery and had chosen excellent positions for observations of the American advance. The Germans could also choose positions offering the best fields of fire and advantages of topography. The trap that Jim's battalion walked into at Baccarat combined artillery, small arms, and the landscape to deadly effect. Unlike the Germans who occupied prepared positions with overhead cover, the American soldiers were completely exposed to the cold and rain of winter weather. They were unable to build fires for warmth or cooking because it would be like a beacon in the night for the Germans to direct gunfire or artillery on their position. The Americans were almost always cold and wet, as well as susceptible to the immobilizing agony of trenchfoot. While the Germans waited in their strongholds and often managed to cook food, the cold rations available to the American soldiers could not match the nutritional requirements required to climb and descend the mountainous slopes while carrying 40 to 60 pounds of equipment. After four days of the horrors of war, the Americans were exhausted, hungry, and physically degraded by exposure to the cold and rain. However, the entire 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had overcome all this and made an outstanding account of themselves during their combat debut.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kieth E. Bonn, When the Odds Were Even



Raon L'Etape had a central square with statues of French soldiers from WW I. After the fighting Jim entered Raon L'Etape and began to run the phone wire along the second story of buildings through the openings where windows had once existed. At one point he leaned out of a window opening to feed the wire into the adjacent room when a hand grenade fell out of his pocket and landed among the American soldiers below. The hand grenade did not explode because the pin had not been pulled, but it still caused a terrifying moment for the soldiers on the street. These soldiers let Jim know in strong language that they did not appreciate this false alarm.



397<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Advancing Through A Roadblock In The Vosges

#### SAINT BLAISE-LA-ROCHE

The American army had broken through the initial German defenses in the Vosges Mountains and was now racing to prevent the German army from withdrawing to a second line of defense. On Thanksgiving Day the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had taken a village called Saint Blaise, but was driven out by a German counterattack. Jim thought it was somehow noteworthy that his father had been in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in WW I and seriously wounded while fighting in the same vicinity of France. Audie Murphy, the most decorated American soldier in World War II, was a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division; but that is a different story and made famous by the movie *To Hell And Back*. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 397<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment took the town back from the Germans so suddenly that night that many Germans did not know the Americans now occupied Saint Blaise. Jim's unit advanced toward Saint Blaise past two roadblocks with mines. The American tanks were stopped waiting for the engineers to clear the road. They continued past these roadblocks until they ran out of telephone wire. Lefty and Jim were told to wait for more wire while their unit continued toward Saint Blaise.

While Lefty and Jim waited in the darkness, Germans began appearing waving anything they had that was white to surrender. There was nothing Lefty and Jim could do except direct the Germans back toward the Americans they had passed at the roadblocks. The additional telephone wire did not arrive, and since Lefty and Jim were only the two American soldiers apparently among many Germans they decided to rejoin their unit in Saint Blaise.



Soldiers from the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Advancing  
Through The Snow In The Vosges Mountains

Lefty and Jim were tired, hungry, and cold when they got to Saint Blaise, and they went into one of the first houses they came to. There they joined some men from another company. They could not build a fire, but somehow Jim managed to heat up some bullion from his K-rations. He said it was some of the best chow he ever tasted. When he got his three layer socks called shoe packs off to warm his feet he found ice had formed from his own sweat. This brief lull was suddenly interrupted by the fire from a machine gun the Americans had set up in the doorway of the house covering a length of the street through Saint Blaise.

Since the Germans were not aware that Saint Blaise was again in control of the Americans, they continued to come into town expecting to find their command post. Jim told Lefty that he did not want to be around the machine gun because it would draw a lot of fire from the Germans. Also, he did not like being someplace where he did not know what was going on. They moved down the street farther into the village. There was one incident when a German staff car drove into town unaware of the presence of the Americans. It seemed like every American in Saint Blaise was firing at the staff car as it drove the length of the street through the town. Somehow the driver made it to the square at the end of the street and turned around to drive through the gunfire a second time and made it back to the German lines.

There was another incident when a truck full of German soldiers drove into Saint Blaise unaware of the presence of the Americans. When the truck stopped Jim and other American soldiers surrounded it demanding their surrender. Jim remembers being frightened because he did not know if the Germans would fight or surrender. With hair-trigger nerves Jim was prepared to empty the full magazine of his M1 rifle into the Germans who were still in the truck. After a few highly tense moments the Germans realized they were in a hopeless situation and surrendered.

The Germans attacked that night, and Jim could hardly see anything in the dark. He would fire from the house from a window opening at a rifle flash or movement in the dark. Anytime he fired his rifle he would immediately move away from the window because the Germans were also firing at his rifle flash in the dark. You could tell the Germans would advance through the village by the sound of the gunfire until the machine gun in the house where Lefty and Jim and initially rested would begin firing driving the Germans back. The Germans would regroup and attack again. Throughout the German attacks Jim worried that the Germans would overtake the house that he was in and thought about what he would do if that happened. When the sun came up the fighting stopped, and Jim experienced a great

relief to be alive. The morning revealed many dead Germans and the horses they used which were lying in the road and approaches to Saint Blaise.

Although Saint Blaise was securely and permanently in the hands of the Americans, the GIs had to remain under cover due to sniper fire.

That morning tanks, trucks, and soldiers started going through Saint Balise. At first Jim thought they were American, and a breakthrough had been achieved. The American army had broken through the German lines, but the tanks, trucks, and soldiers belonged to the Free French Army using American equipment and uniforms. The Free French Army was advancing to liberate Strasbourg.

## MOUTERHOUSE

At the conclusion of the Vosges campaign the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry division was transported by truck about 35 miles to the north to the town of Ingwiller to begin a campaign on Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> that would culminate in the attack on the mid-evil fortress of Bitch. The fight to take Mourterhouse was over by Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> with the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in procession of the town. The advance continued to the north with the Division occupying successive positions on high ground. The Americans could tell by the sound of the shells passing overhead that the Germans were using larger caliber artillery.



Advancing Through The Vosges Forest

There was a sergeant who had just earned the bronze star. One day the sergeant refused to go into combat with the company commander. Jim was told to go and he replied, "Well, give me his stripes." Jim said he was a smart aleck at times when he was young. He added that any one could run out of courage at times or break under the stress of battle.

At times Lefty and Jim got to spend the night in farmhouses. The 100<sup>th</sup> Division was in a border region which France and Germany had fought over for centuries called Alsace Lorraine. Many of the inhabitants spoke German although the area was now considered part of France. In one farmhouse there were pictures of a woman's husband and sons in German uniforms. In another farmhouse a man surrendered a burp gun. Jim and Lefty gave his family K-rations, and their daughters brought up wine from the cellar. Jim remembers a farmhouse where a French man and woman milked a cow and warmed the milk for Jim and Lefty. It was some of the best milk he ever tasted. Jim played a harmonica that got his mind off the war as much as he could. The other soldiers also enjoyed the harmonica music. One night he played Christmas carols and everyone started singing along. The American soldiers were singing in English and the women and children in German. He especially remembers *Silent Night*.

The night before Jim was wounded he slept in a baby bed in one of the French farmhouses. It was during one of these advances following the liberation of Mouterhouse that Jim was wounded on Sunday, December 10th. He had turned 19 years old less than a week earlier. They were advancing up a wooded slope called Hill 395 when the Germans brought the 3<sup>rd</sup>

Battalion under mortar fire. Jim was lying on ground with his hands over his helmet when a mortar shell hit a treetop resulting in what was called a tree burst. There is hardly any way for an infantryman to shield himself from a tree burst especially when caught without a way to gain protection from the shrapnel from above. It felt like someone whacked his left arm with a baseball bat. He said in a matter of fact manner, "Lefty, I've been hit." When he could not move his arm or feel his fingers he told Lefty just as unemotionally that his arm had been blown off. Jim walked back down the hill to an aid station holding his arm. Probably in shock, he does not remember if he walked to the aid station with someone or by made it alone. He does remember saying that if he had to go back into combat he wanted to go back to his unit.

Combat soldiers got propriety for equipment and supplies, and as Jim was lying on the stretcher in the aid station the non-combatants began to relieve him of items such as his shoe packs, his trench knife, wire cutters, hooded jacket, and combat boots. Whoever took his footwear put another pair of size 13 boots on Jim. He remembers someone saying, "Look at the size of this man's feet!" Jim did not care that others were taking his personal items because he began to realize that he had a "million dollar wound." The war was over for him, and he was going home.

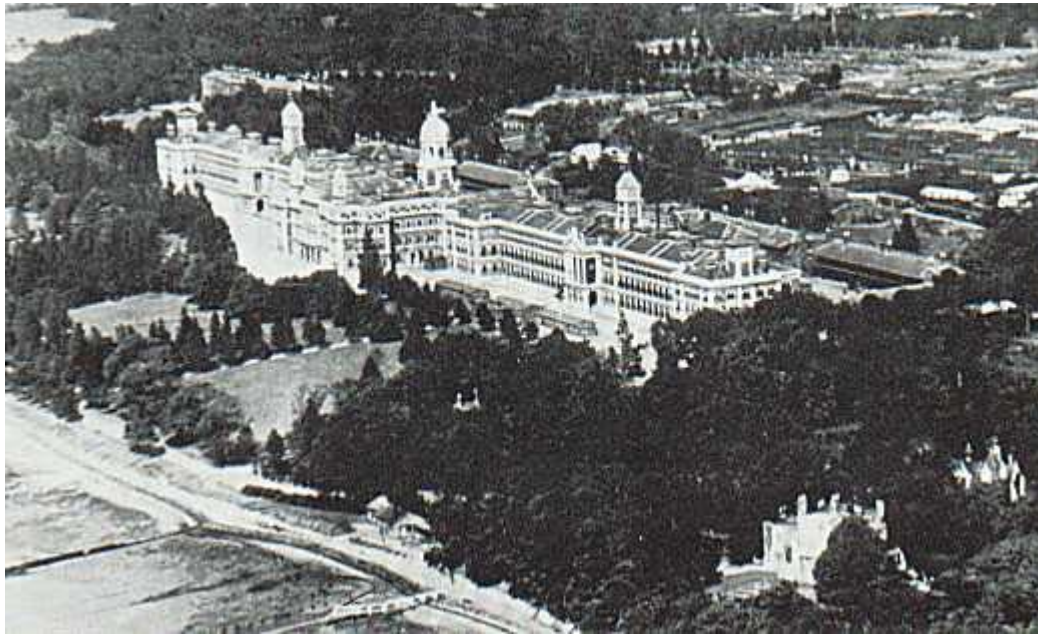
The aid station was set up in tents to be able to relocate in order to stay close to the combat. Jim was taken from the aid station to a hospital in an army ambulance. He was asked if he wanted morphine, and he said no; but the ambulance ride was so bumpy he wished he had let the medics administer the pain killer. In the hospital there was a soldier who would smile and try to hide under the covers when the hospital staff was giving all the wounded shots of penicillin. Jim later found out that he was a German POW. Another wounded soldier recounted his good luck because a bullet had gone between his helmet and the helmet liner.

Jim was taken by train to a hospital in Paris because the weather was too bad for planes to fly from the air-evac hospital to a hospital in Naples. He remembers getting coffee and donuts with fighter pilots.

## RECUPERATION AND RETURN HOME

Jim was in the hospital in Paris during the Battle of the Bulge. He remembers the hospital being full of casualties from that battle with their feet bandaged and elevated from frostbite and trench foot. He was in a full body cast with his arm immobile in an extended position. Jim was in a group of casualties evacuated from France to the 79<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Netley, England near Southampton. U-boats had just sunk 5 ships in the English Channel during the previous 4 days before the ship Jim was on made the crossing. He believed that he had no chance of survival if his ship was torpedoed and sunk. In Southampton the hospital put Jim's arm in traction. The doctors had to reset his arm five times, but managed to save it. He was in Southampton 4 or 5 months until his arm was taken out of traction.





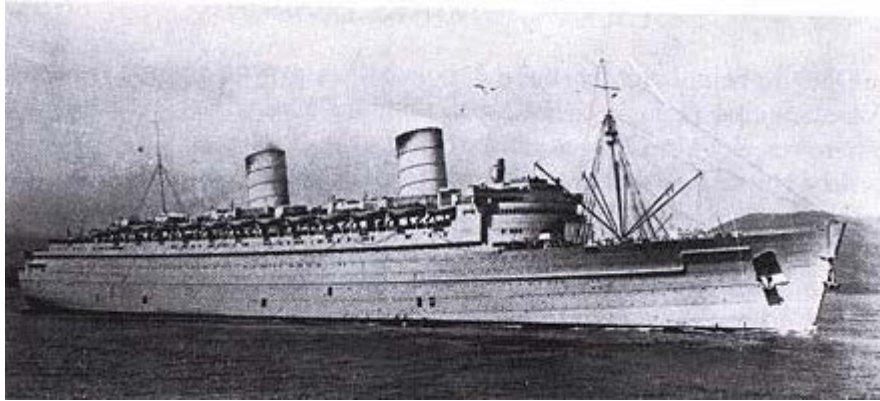
79<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Netley, England

While Jim was in the hospital in Southampton his mail caught up with him. That was when he found out that Sgt. Lancer had been killed in combat. Sgt. Lancer had been promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. before he died in combat.

In the hospital in Southampton, Jim made friends with a paratrooper from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. They had both just gotten out of traction. The paratrooper was still in a wheelchair that Jim could push around. The paratrooper was Hispanic from California, and called Jim "Tennessee". He can still remember the paratrooper yelling in his Spanish accent, "Tennessee, Tennessee, go this way" or "Tennessee, Tennessee, go there".

Along with the paratrooper from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division; Jim also made friends with a paratrooper from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in the hospital in Southampton. There was also an orderly at the hospital that contacted Jim almost 50 years after the war. The orderly went by the name of Nick since his last name was Nichols. Nick had saved every bed tag of the wounded soldiers he cared for in the hospital. Nick had traveled to Memphis from his home in Florida to visit Jim.

While Jim was in the hospital in Southampton a soldier arrived who Jim believed intentionally injured himself to avoid combat. This soldier said he had just sailed to the British Isles on the *Queen Elizabeth* and landed in Glasgow, Scotland. Jim joked that he was going back to America on the *Queen Elizabeth*. To his surprise he was taken by train to Glasgow and actually sailed to New York on the *Queen Elizabeth*. The *Queen Elizabeth* sailed without an escort since it could outrun any U-boat. Jim got a stateroom on board the ship, and food was brought to his stateroom. The English crew continually asked if the food was good and if there was anything they could do for him. He remarked that returning home on the *Queen Elizabeth* was a hell of a lot better than going to France on the *USAT George Washington* with waits in long lines for bad food and sleeping with another man's butt in his face.



The Liner *Queen Elizabeth* In Wartime Grey

The wounded from Europe were processed through Staten Island where Jim spent two days before being sent to a hospital in Nashville. In the hospital Mildred got to see Jim for the first time since he had gone overseas. On weekends there were bands with dancing on the tennis courts with WACS. The wounded could play golf, go out on canoes, and pitch horseshoes. Although Jim got his arm out of the cast in Southampton, it was still in a sling. Jim had to sleep with a glove on because lack of movement did not allow circulation of blood, and his hand got cold. He could also get a weekend pass to go into Nashville, but Jim would hitchhike to Memphis to see Mildred. From Nashville Jim was sent to a rehab hospital in Indiana for about a month. Jim was discharged from the Army at Camp Atterbury in August 1945. He was in combat less than four weeks and in the hospital for over eight months. He would have a large scar on his arm running from his elbow to his shoulder for the rest of his life.

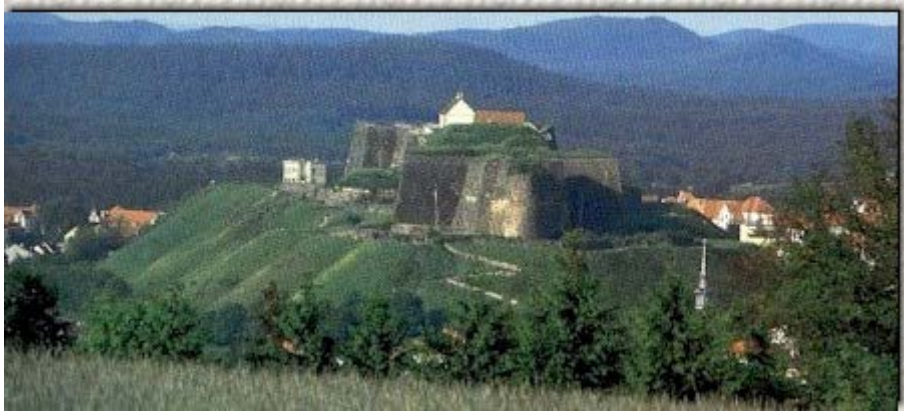
Because Jim had been wounded he escaped some of the intense combat that followed. The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division attacked the Siegfried line that included the medieval fortress of Bithche. Built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the fortress had withstood several assaults throughout its history. Those assaults included a German attack in 1940 when France fell to the Nazis that resulted in heavy casualties comparable to those suffered by the 100<sup>th</sup> Division four years later. The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division lost more men around Bitche than it did in all other sectors combined in its six months of continuous combat<sup>3</sup>. Bitche had never fallen until the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division mounted its attack. Another major action was Operation Norwind, a German offensive coordinated with the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans intended to create a pincer envelopment, but the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division mounted an unflinching defense which halted attacks from three sides and allowed for reserves to stop the German offensive before it turned into a disaster<sup>2</sup> similar to the Battle of the Bulge. Jim remarked how he had known some men who were in the invasion of North Africa, Sicily, Southern France and the remainder of the war and were not even wounded. To him it seems impossible. No wonder; on the average an American soldier on that front lasted only an average of six weeks before he was killed or wounded<sup>3</sup>.

Jim returned home to Memphis after the war and worked as an electrician for 25 years, owned a small business, and became a real estate broker before retiring. Mildred and Jim raised two sons who learned to love sports and the outdoors from their father. While they were growing up Jim found the time to be a scoutmaster. His sons became an engineer and an architect. Jim lost his wife of 57 years when Mildred passed away on Thanksgiving Day in 2001.

---

<sup>2</sup> America's Forgotten Army, Charles Whiting, Sarpedon Publishers, 1999, page 155.

<sup>3</sup> 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Webpage, <http://www.100thww2.org>.



The Fortress Of Bithche

It was about that time that Jim read in a Division newspaper that Herb Carroll had been killed in combat.

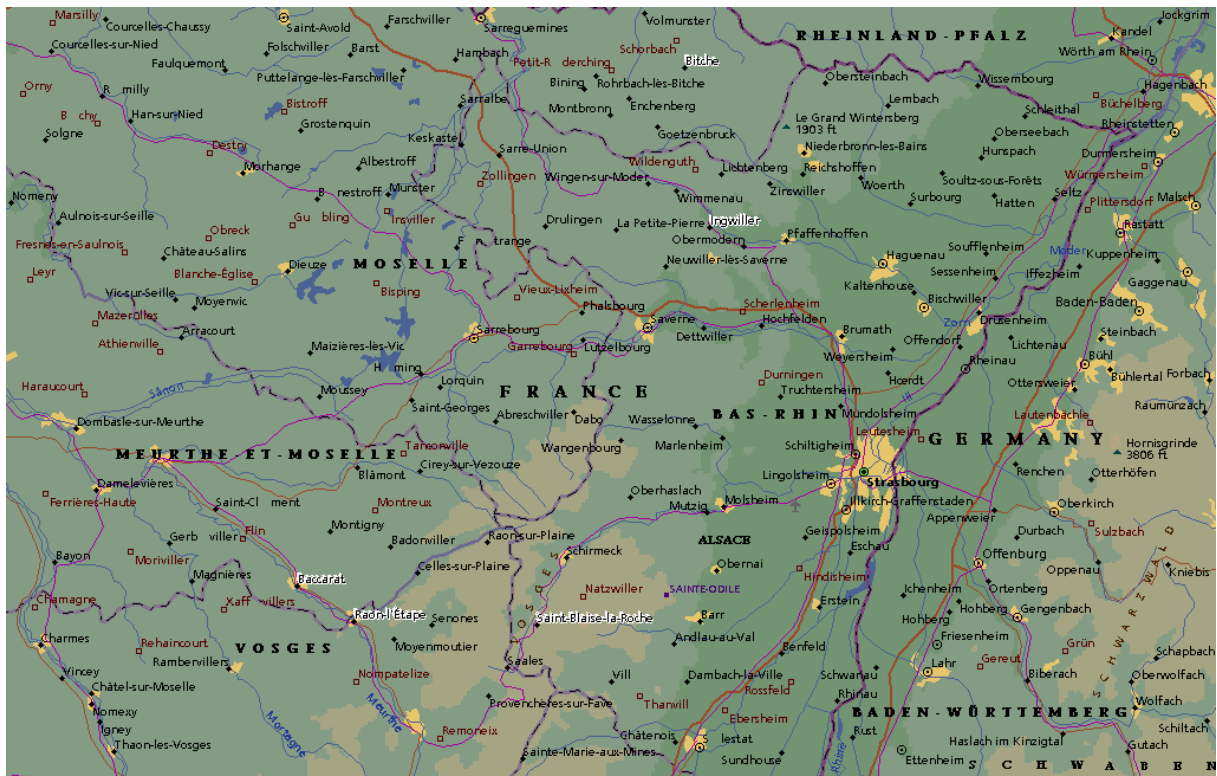
Also not long before Mildred passed away Jim got a surprise phone call. It was Lefty! Lefty had traveled to Memphis by bus to see Jim. They reunited overnight, but this time in a comfortable home instead of a cold muddy foxhole. They talked mostly about the funny things that had happened and the good things like getting the warm milk in the French farmhouse. They did not discuss any bad memories. Lefty recalled how much he enjoyed Jim playing the harmonica. Lefty remembers how much he liked Jim to play *Wabash Cannonball* and *Home Sweet Home*. Lefty told about the time after Jim was wounded that the battalion came upon a minefield and used sheep to find their way across. Jim occasionally used the expression of “someone you would want to be in a foxhole with” to describe a person who you could trust and depend upon.

His son once told Jim that he thought his father was a hero. Jim reacted quite strongly that he was not a hero, and added, “I did not do anything more or anything less than everyone else did.” After Jim told about Roger Fiebelkorn and Sgt. Lancer, Jim’s son understood what he meant. It makes you realize that probably a lot, if not most, of the heroes did not survive, and we will never know their story. Perhaps the only difference between Audie Murphy and many men like Sgt. Lancer was who survived and who did not. Nor will we know the stories of Herb Carroll, 376 more soldiers of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division who remain buried in six cemeteries in Europe, an additional 537 men killed in action, or 180 missing in action<sup>3</sup>. Most were like Jim just out of high school, but never had the opportunity to have sons and daughters; and if they did, never had the chance to see them grow up. Hero or not, Jim, and hundreds of thousands of ordinary men like him did an extraordinary thing. No doubt the Nazi’s would have dominated the world if the Axis Powers had not been defeated in World War II. There is no need to repeat the atrocities, genocide, and tyranny committed and documented elsewhere, and there is every reason to believe it would have continued had not these ordinary men collectively done something so extraordinary. I can think of no other generation whose young men literally saved the world.

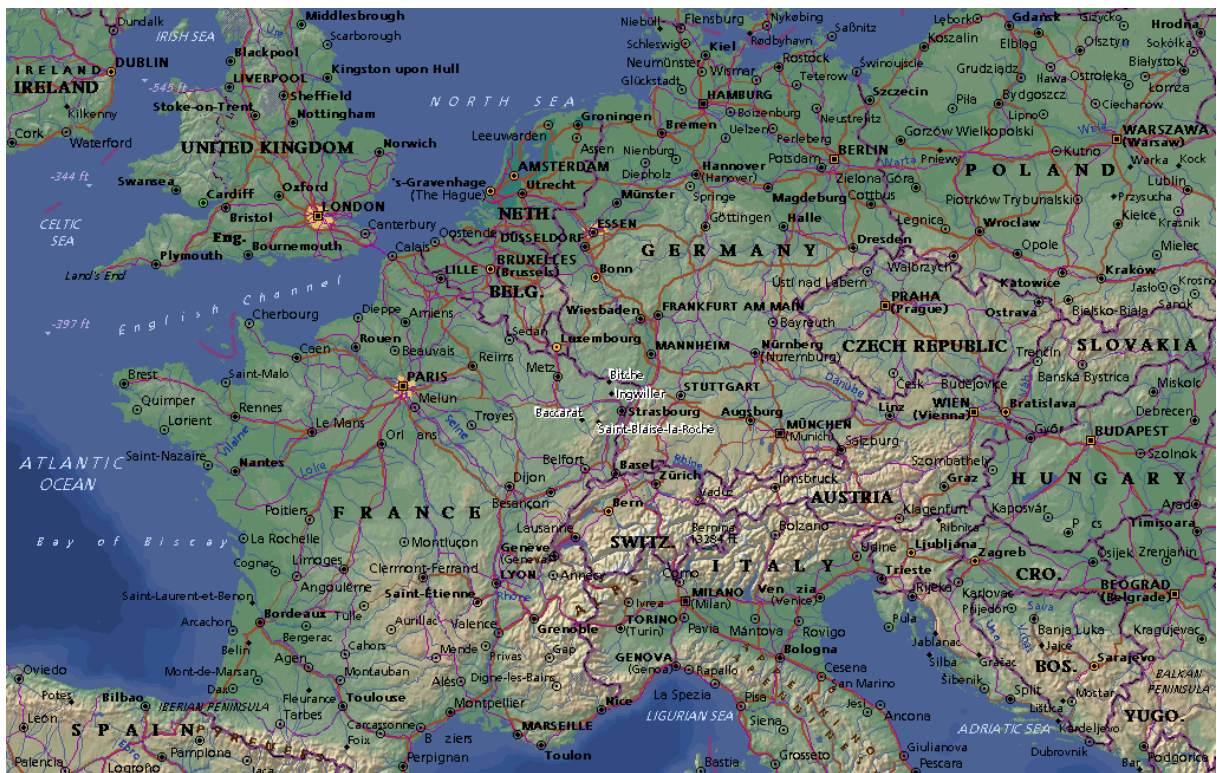
---

<sup>3</sup>100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Webpage, <http://www.100thww2.org>.





Copyright © Rand McNally & Company or its licensors. All rights reserved. <http://www.randmcnally.com>



Copyright © Rand McNally & Company or its licensors. All rights reserved. <http://www.randmcnally.com>





The patch of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Combat Infantryman Badge, and the Purple Heart.  
An honorably discharged veteran of World War II who earned the Combat Infantryman  
Badge was authorized a Bronze Star for Meritorious Service.