

Combat in France

by Robert Kelly, 397-B

We at last sighted the west coast of Africa and turned north, following the coastline. We were very glad to see land once again. The convoy passed the Rock of Gibraltar. The Rock of Gibraltar is very large and was an imposing sight to see. We passed thru the Straits of Gibraltar entering the Mediterranean Sea. We followed the north coast of Africa passing Morocco and Algeria, at last turning due north toward France. Our convoy entered Marseilles harbor on October 20, 1944, fourteen days after leaving New York City. Our assignment was to relieve the three US Army divisions—the 3rd, 36th and 45th Infantry—that had been pulled out of the line in Italy for the invasion of Southern France (Operation DRAGOON) on August 15, 1944. We were informed that our convoy contained the first US troops—to arrive directly from the United States and to land in Southern France—following the invasion.

Our address: Co. B, 397 Infantry, APO 447 (Army Post Office), c/o Post Master, NY, NY.

We disembarked from the George Washington using rope netting to climb into landing craft and be transported to shore. We then formed into our various companies and were marched twelve miles inland to a staging area at Septemes, France. We then broke out our tents and made camp. It took about a week to unpack our trucks, equipment and supplies from our supply convoy.

At last the Division and our equipment were loaded onto trucks and we drove north along the Rhone River Valley. We were told that our Division had unloaded and set up faster than other units had, coming over with all their equipment packed up. The first night we pitched our tents and camped in a park in Lyon, France. The next day we continued north driving over 500 miles north from Marseilles into Alsace-Lorraine to Baccarat.

In Marseilles on October 26, 1944, I had a caricature drawn on V-Mail that I sent home. My father framed it and had it hung on the wall. I have it included in my book of memories.

The 100th Division was assigned to the Seventh Army, VI Army Corps, and the division moved to several positions, around Baccarat, doing support work. The Seventh Army was under the command of Lieutenant General Alexander M. Patch. We thought he should have been given more credit than he has received for his leadership. Several units of the 100th Division went into action at the beginning of November. At last Company B received orders that we would be going into combat at 0600 hours on November 11, 1944, Armistice Day.

It was winter and quite cold, with some snow, so it was not pleasant fighting under these conditions. We had to dig foxholes in the hard ground to protect ourselves from German artillery fire. It was very uncomfortable sleeping in foxholes in the cold and damp. We had to do sentry duty day and night. My wristwatch had a luminous dial; at night on guard duty, I was instructed to wear my watch on the inside of my wrist so that German soldiers could not see the luminous dial shining at night. I still wear my watch that way to this day.

The 100th Division fought in many locations in the High Vosges Mountains. Some times Company B would be the lead unit; at other times we would be supporting Companies A and/or C.

We appreciated the Red Cross giving us pocket books to read, as the pages were very helpful to tear out and use when we went to the latrine. I saw many wounded and dead along the roads and in the fields as we advanced, both Germans and US troops. I would rather not discuss these sights of the wounded and dead.

Company B helped free the town of Raon l'Etape during the period November 12 to 20, 1944. The people were happy to see us and we were invited into their homes that night. In the house where I was, the owner went into his back yard and dug up wine, schnapps, brandied apricots, etc., that he had hidden from the Germans many years before. We celebrated!

As a messenger, I was not actively involved in the combat fighting, as many of the other men were. There were two company messengers and we went between Company B headquarters and 1st Battalion headquarters relaying messages and doing many other duties as assigned. As company messengers, we had to move about a lot, at times laying telephone wire, other times carrying messages, etc., and doing

whatever duties were needed. We therefore did not carry the heavier M1 rifles as the rest of the troops did, but instead were issued carbines, which were lighter in weight, shorter, and used a clip of thirty bullets which made them fast firing.

One day in November, I was at Battalion HQ. When I returned to Company B, I was told that PFC Larry Pease, the other messenger, had been sent out to bring in some German soldiers who indicated they were surrendering. When they were close enough, the Germans fell down, opened fire with a gun, killing Larry. I was told the company opened fire and killed them. I was lucky to be at HQ as who knows, I might have been the one sent out.

For Thanksgiving Day, General Eisenhower issued an order that all troops on the front lines were to be served a turkey dinner with all the trimmings, for our efforts fighting.

On November 30, about 1500 hours, we were taking cover from German 88mm artillery fire on the side of a hill near Weinbourg, France. For those who have not heard one, a German 88 artillery cannon has a very loud and distinctive sound and the shell sounds like it is coming right at you. A shell hit a rock and then a piece of shrapnel (a fragment from the shell) ricocheted and hit my left arm. It was cold, so I was wearing my fatigue jacket and overcoat. This gave me some protection as the shrapnel hit my coat at the left elbow and ripped the coat and jacket sleeve open to the cuff. The shrapnel then plowed into my left hand and the knuckle of my index finger, breaking them. I was sent to the 325th Medical Battalion Station, which was attached as part of the 100th Division, where they put my hand and finger in a wooden splint.

When I came out of the field hospital my carbine was gone, as these guns were in great demand by all the US troops. After two days at the medical station, the doctors wondered why my hand and finger were still so swollen and sore. X-rays were then taken, after two days, and they found my left hand had been broken, the knuckle of my index finger was smashed, and the bone in my index finger was split part way down the middle. My hand was then put in a plaster cast. This action was part of Von Runstedt's Winter Offensive, which was fought along the entire front. The 100th Division was awarded a battle star for its fighting in the Ardennes/Alsace region.

In 2003 and 2004 the Midwest Chapter of the 100th Division took on the task of copying all the morning reports for all the companies in the 100th Division, that were in storage in St Louis, MO. They were copied and bound and are now in 100th Infantry Division Archives at The George C. Marshall Research Library located at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Virginia. I was able to obtain copies of the morning reports for Nov 29, 30 and Dec 1, 1944 for Company B, 397th to verify my being lightly wounded in action (LWA) and where it happened. The morning reports also contain the report of Larry Pease being killed in action (KIA), not missing (MIA). On the Web, I found that Larry is buried at Epinal Cemetery, France. These morning reports should be of valuable assistance for historians in the future. VMI was the alma mater of our division commander, General Withers A. Burrell, who commanded the 100th from its formation in 1942 until the end of the war.

The 100th Division was given a nickname Sons of Bitché. Bitché was a fortress and citadel on the Maginot Line in Alsace. The fortress had never fallen to any attacking army before in history and the Division was given the task of capturing it. They fought from December 1944 to March 1945, at last capturing the fortress. The German Army had bypassed the Citadel when they overran France, as they could not capture it. The town's name gave them their nickname. A story I was told was General Eisenhower and General Bradley were at a reception in Washington, DC and a Company B platoon leader, a lieutenant, was there. General Eisenhower called over General Bradley and said "Brad this officer was with the 100th Infantry who call themselves Sons of Bitché." (The fortress is pronounced Bitch-é).

The Division is now named the 100th Infantry Training (IT) Division, headquartered at Louisville, Kentucky, with various training units located throughout the south central states.