

## 1: MARSEILLE

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After a comparatively rough Atlantic crossing the 398th Infantry Regiment, together with elements of supporting units, disembarked from the Army transport *General William H. Gordon* on 20 October 1944 at Marseille, France.

To call Marseille a port, at the time, would give the impression our landing operations were without difficulty. It was scarcely two months before that the American Seventh Army smashed into this area. Ours was the first convoy to land at Marseille from the United States. The debris and litter of amphibious assault operations were in evidence—and in our path. Blown-out installations and facilities hampered our operations and the Germans conveniently scuttled ships in the harbor and alongside docks before being driven out. But little time was lost in getting the men, equipment and supplies on land.

The *Gordon* nestled alongside a gutted and keeled-over hulk of what was once a ship. Following a few coarse shouts and commands from the bridge of the *Gordon*, motors roared, wheels turned, heavy chains clanked and fell, and the transport was made secure. Bridges were laid from shore across the sunken hulk to the *Gordon* and the men of the Regiment poured on to French soil.

Ashore, the men for the moment lost contact with thoughts and ideas, springing from doubt as to their disposition. They were silently obsessed with a seemingly rapid confusion of activity. Other regiments were disembarking; landing craft darted around in the harbor, shuttling to and from the newly arrived ships; small freight-carriers on the pier moved about in no apparent controlled lanes of traffic. It was all a colossal race against time. Work had to be done in the daylight hours. The Germans frequently flew over at night, compelling blackout regulations to be rigidly enforced; darkness hampered our operations. No activity that required the aid of a light could be carried on at night.

With it all came not the words but the feeling "This is it." This peculiar sensation rose from the pit of the stomach and lodged uncomfortably somewhere in the throat, making swallowing a trifle difficult and causing the Adam's apple to bob noticeably.

Our reception was homespun. Bent from the load of our equipment, we filed from boat to shore. Coming fresh from the States made us the target of ribs and taunts from the port battalion men. They swept the paths before us and ceremoniously doffed their caps and made a low bow in a welcoming gesture. We were quick to catch the spirit of the occasion and generously heaped them with a like amount of, if not more, rubs. This good-natured mud-slinging buoyed our spirits and soon everyone was wise-cracking and laughing.

That same night with full field packs, rifle, and helmet we started to march inland. Being in Europe, the sights we strained our eyes to see in the darkness took our minds off the march and weight, but soon our steps became shorter, our pace slackened.

The road to the staging area was long, dry and dusty and, for the most part, uphill.

Motor convoys were constantly rolling past in both directions and not slowly despite the darkness. Many times we were obliged to get off the road as big amphibious DUKWs and trailer-trucks changed gears and swept by, kicking up clouds of dry dust. We couldn't see it but felt it rush into our nostrils with every breath we took.

Then it came—our first taste of enemy action. "Air Raid!" Sirens screamed and star shells flew into and lit up the sky leaving heavy wisps of blue smoke in their wakes. We kept marching with our necks craned but didn't see or hear any planes.

Early the next morning, extremely tired after marching all night with full field equipment, hungry, and thinking the march would never end, the men started to mount the last hill before reaching the staging area. Leg muscles pulled, ached, and burned. The men no longer shifted their packs to more comfortable posi-

tions with a twist of the body as they had been doing earlier. They just let them lie. The burden felt more like a part of the body, and to hike the weight into an easier riding position meant extra effort which just wasn't there to be spared.

The hill came to an abrupt ending. Although we couldn't see where we were going we knew the descent was at a much sharper angle than that of coming up the hill. Reaching the bottom we at last heard the words that meant finish to a gruelling march, "Fall Out!" We had reached Septemes, the staging area.

All over the area men gave a tired groan as they worked themselves free of their packs and let them fall. We dropped to the ground, huddled up in blankets, and slept hard. We woke up once when it started to rain but, being too tired to pitch tents, just pulled the shelter-half over our heads. Daybreak came and it was still raining. We crawled from under the shelter-half and blankets—wet, cold and muddy—and started to pitch our tents. Now we could see exactly where we were. Our encampment was in a huge basin surrounded by an even-height range of hills. The rain washed down from the high ground and settled in and around the tents.

What next? Details were immediately formed to return to Marseille to uncrate and assemble the equipment that was put ashore. Vehicles and heavy weapons were left at the port and had to be distributed to units without delay. It was a difficult job and one which entailed twenty-four-hours-a-day labor. As fast as wheels could be put on trucks and jeeps they were driven to our area. Machine guns, antitank guns and other crated weapons were cleaned, assembled and distributed.

While at Septemes we got our first glimpse of the foxholes, gun emplacements and fortifications the Germans built on surrounding hilltops. We were impressed and found it hard to imagine how this territory was taken in view of the over-all commanding positions of the enemy. Occasionally, a piece of German equipment was spied, but we dared not wander too far into the woods as fields of mines and booby traps had not been fully cleared.

Too, we picked up our first bits of French from the children—"Chocolat" and "Cigarette pour Papa?" From the elders we got wine and bread for cigarettes. They had no compunction or reservation in their dealings. Many times the men and women would approach us with wine as we were in the act of relieving ourselves in our open-air toilets.

At the chow line we got a good idea of the food situation in France and Europe. Groups of children and grownups would dash for the scraps and leavings we had intended to dump into the garbage pails. Each one had a can into which everything including coffee was put. Later we found one little French boy first drinking and draining off the coffee, then gingerly picking out and stuffing himself with what he thought were choice bits.

Passes to Marseille! We had not seen a city like it in the states. Cosmopolitan and clouded in a Singapore atmosphere, its winding dark streets gave one an uncomfortable and lonely feeling in the blackout of night. But if a door was opened from which a slight shaft of light leaked out, one was certain to find a smoke-filled cafe jammed with people of many creeds and colors.

From the soldiers and sailors of many nations we got what we thought was first-hand information on combat. They told us of the hardships, misery and sacrifices of campaigns. Later we were to find that some of the things they told us were true—others grossly exaggerated. Leaving them we thought we knew what combat was, but one never knows what something is until he actually experiences it.

We stayed at Septemes from 21 September to 31 October. Mud and C rations, shoepacs and "long johns" and French wine, securing and assembling of equipment, and our first glimpse of a foreign people in a foreign setting—through it all one singular train of thought was as constant as the chill, wet weather that enveloped us. It filled us with apprehension. Where were we going? When were we moving? What would it be like—this combat we had trained for so arduously? The answers were not long in coming.