

III

The EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS



OVERSEAS . . .

There was an atmosphere of urgency about the huge Staging Area which quickened the beat of our hearts even as we stumbled from the Pullmans and, burdened by our equipment, lined up on the long cement platform. A full tilt drive against time could be sensed in the officious bustling of the Transportation Corps officers [sending us to] the double-decker barracks [which] were something of a surprise. Many of us had expected to live in tents. But we did not spend much time day dreaming. Kilmer operated on a 24 hour basis and there was no overtime for night work. Reveille was before daylight and lectures, inspections, and last minute preparations generally continued until long after dark.¹

My memory of those few days is just one of a hectic blur of action continuing through excitement, nervousness, apprehension and fear. The whole environment seemed new again, yet with the same guys and the same uniforms but in strange though familiar world. The barracks were sparse and empty, as if they had never been used for any length of time, just constantly turned over to new occupants – new old beds, new old mattresses, familiar floors and windows yet not the ones we were used to. Since we were preparing for combat, all of our equipment needed to be ready. I do recall that suddenly those wonderfully new and modern yellow plastic canteens we had been issued were no longer suitable. Away they went! And our old arms were no longer up to snuff and so we were put to work cleaning gunky Cosmoline protectant from new rifles (a job no one wanted). Then we were lined up again for more physical inspections. We were checked as though our bodies suddenly had to be seen again to insure that we were just as presented and ready for service. (Strip down! Shoes and raincoats only! Attention!)

When we were at Bragg it seemed like only the older veteran soldiers ever got passes. Now that we were ready to ship out even we got 12 hours passes, just like the older guys. There were some of our fellows who came from nearby Philadelphia and one of them had persuaded me to be a pen-pal for one of his sisters classmates. I had been writing Millie while at Ft. Bragg. So off we all went to Philadelphia. I was very concerned about not staying over the 12 hours, so was very pleased to find that it did not take too long to get to his home town from Camp Kilmer. Somewhere on that trip I experienced my first ride on a subway. And the young lady was a very attractive high school girl. We walked around and talked and surely we must have gone to a movie or something but I don't remember at all. We corresponded all the rest of the time I was in service, only stopping after I got home. (I wrote her a thank-you note for all the nice pen-pal letters and Mother was mad that I stopped after that – as if I could ever get back to see her.) We did get back to base on time, of course, but years later, in reviewing Morning Reports, I was amazed at how many of the troops didn't.

Somehow we were all collected and put on our ships. I remember that for a part of the way to port we only had packs, and then there was that trudge down the pier with packs on our backs, dragging the stuffed to the gills duffle bags. The march ended with coffee from the Red Cross, the climb up the gangplank, the descent into the hold. There we discovered our sleeping quarters – steel walls and floors (decks?) lined with pipe rimed canvas cots hinged from poles, three and four high. Each man

had his bed. As I lay in mine, the canvas above pushed almost to my nose. And we were on a luxury liner, pride of the American fleet, the *George Washington*! Insult to injury, we were ordered to remain in the hold as we sailed out of the harbor. We all wanted to see the Statue of Liberty and take our last look at our shores, but security dictated that we remain hidden. (Surely if we had all rushed to the topside we would not have upset such a 26,000 ton vessel.)

With only the canvas cot to relax on and no more room to stretch out in than just the distance between stacks of cots, settling in was a snap. There was no spreading out of equipment. Everything remained as you brought it in. There was very little area you had sole responsibility to keep clean in this dingy off-white world. All you had to do was to orient yourself as to where you were. Even that was not too difficult – just a matter of counting how many cot stacks forward and how many left or right to get to only two places, the latrine or the way out of the hold. After finding the latrine, there was a matter of learning how to use those special sea-worthy toilets and then adjusting to the special soap needed to wash in the salty sea water, since no fresh water would be wasted on cleaning oneself. And the way out of the hold was of little importance until after we had left the harbor.

Once out of harbor it was up on deck to see the grey sea and to line up for our first chow. I have no memory of anything eaten the entire trip. I have no idea as to how often we were served in a day. I do remember entering the chow hall and finding lines of continuous tables anchored chest high to poles going from floor to ceiling. You got your food, brought it to a “table” and ate it standing up. There was nothing inviting or even pleasant about the place. Chow time only provided a break in the day from lolling on deck or laying around in the hold. On deck you could look around and see some of the other ships in our convoy, mainly the little destroyer escorts which were bobbing up and down and which you were so happy not to be on. Below deck you could read or play cards or roll dice. One day we even folded back our cots and scrubbed the deck.

Our biggest shipboard adventure was going on garbage detail. Now that was a job! There was this white tile lined room in which all the garbage cans were collected. During an eight hour shift our detail emptied the cans. We threw the stuff out of a big hole into the sea. When we were done we hosed the whole place down. A few of the ship’s crew directed our operation, which did give us the opportunity to speak with someone other than our fellow soldiers.

Then came the storm, a big Atlantic hurricane, said to be the worst in seventeen years. Our big ship rocked and rolled all about. Everyone was nauseous, some down right sick. No one seemed to want to go to chow, though we were advised that it was best to eat a little. One thing sure, it was better on deck than in the hold – which by now felt damp and oppressive and smelt of vomit. On deck you could see the big waves and see those little escorts sinking out of sight then bobbing up again. But then the storm got so bad that we all were confined below and all the hatches closed. This went on for 48 hours before things settled and we were allowed back on deck. We were later told that during the storm one of the ships had almost capsized and then had almost hit us. But the little escorts were still there on either side and the sun started to break through.

Most of us were up-top the sunny day we spotted the shores of North Africa coming up on our right, then later the land on each side as we passed through the Straights of Gibraltar. Now we really felt as though we were truly overseas, travelers across an ocean. Within a couple days we had landed at Marseille, France.

Down from our ship into landing craft, we were ferried onto dry land. We marched through the bustle, up out of the low port and on to our staging area. We camped in a plowed field – shelter halves pieced together into pup tents, pup tents lined up in rows – a real army bivouac. Some rain, some sun and cold Winter winds were starting to blow in. From there we were detailed back to port, helping assemble our division equipment – trucks and jeeps, cases of supplies. We sure felt pride in being able to use all of our internal resources to get our division ready for action. We also provided a sort of security, guarding against pilfering by the civilian stevedores. We were told all sorts of tales about their absconding with goods for the black-market. Indeed, there were some strange articles to protect. I remember one case falling and breaking open to reveal khaki colored ladies underpants. We couldn't figure out where all those lady soldiers were – we sure didn't have any with us.

INTO COMBAT....

After several days of preparation and organization, in late October and early November, we were ordered north into battle, up the Rhone river valley, following the paths of the 3rd and 45th Divisions. Our trucks lined up for us and we loaded up, unit by unit, troops facing each other on folding benches on each side of the truck

bed, an air guard standing near the front. It seems to me that most of our travel days were sunny, though not particularly mild, and filled with the drone of truck engines broken only by the ten minute periods of silence out of each hour when the convoy halted for "piss call." There was a bit of sight-seeing – we passed an old fortified city to our right, like a fairy castle in the distance, a scene from some time warp. At the end of the day, we disembarked, set up camp, ate from our C-Ration cans, set up our tents and slept away the night. Our rations were opened by a key that wound up a strip of the side from near the top, so making a lid to pull open – and always providing a thin strip of sharp metal. Rumor had it that one of guys, in another company, had stuck himself in the eye with such a strip – and, that therefore wounded, would be getting a Purple Heart. This provided much discussion about his entitlement.

Another day's travel and we passed destroyed German tanks and vehicles – the first real damage we had seen and evidence of the war we were approaching. We camped that night in a park in Dijon – smooth ground covered with grass, a most pleasant and home-like spot. We were nearing the front lines and preparations were being made for our relief of the 45th Division.

From that time on personal baggage was stripped down to battle packs and were told we were following the 45th with advanced units moving with them. Following behind, we still were not digging in. And we were happy for it, since it had begun to rain. And rain. And rain. We could not envision laying down in muddy holes that were filling up with water. It was enough that we were damp clear through. Though we were still far enough behind the lines that we could still build some fires, they were hardly enough to dry us off completely and, anyway, the wood was becoming so damp it was hard to light.

We were getting reports from our advanced parties as to how it really was at the front. Different troops were being rotated through, unit by unit, and the 399th Regiment was gradually replacing 45th Division units.

We were becoming familiar with K-Rations – enough to have favorites. Breakfast in its yellow box had canned eggs, a fig bar, and instant coffee powder. Lunch in green had a kind of canned cheese with hard candy and "Kool-Aid." Supper in blue had apple-pork loaf (*Spam?*), bouillon powder and a candy bar like *Milky-Way*. One box would have 3 cigarettes and matches, another toilet paper, and so on

to complete the daily food supply. The hot bouillon tasted so good in the dampness that the supper was my favorite (when I could heat things up), though I liked the breakfast fig bar. The coffee powder came from different manufacturers. We all looked for *Nescafe* and learned that *Geo. Washington* coffee was bitter. Then about the time we became acclimated to the K-Rations, we started getting plain brown waxed ration boxes. The story was that these were old K-Rations picked up from the beaches of North Africa. At any rate, they sure weren't as good as the ones we had been getting.

By that time I was so thoroughly damp and depressed by the constant rain that I have never since been able to stand rain. (As a boy, I got a kick out of running in it, even walking through thunder storms. After France, I would shiver even at a hint of rain.) Though the rain coats we were issued kept the rain out very well, they were so thoroughly rubber that they also kept all the sweat in. No matter what, it was damp, damp, damp. Fortunately, though the skies were still overcast and November dim, the rain had turned to snow which, though wet, was not as penetrating as pure wet rain. So the chill and snow of Winter was welcome. Some of us were issued reversible parkas (tan/white) which kept out the cold and would breath; others, special "furry" liners for our field jackets. All were better than the rubber.

Our first casualties: The forward artillery observer is with us to direct fire in our advance. Everything fine until the fire comes right down on top of us. Observer screaming like mad into his telephone. Our own shells! Sure hope the German shells aren't as bad as these! He gets the firing stopped – but Sgt. Will is wounded. He was one of the "old hands" but he was a good one and will be hard to replace.

We had been moving toward the front for two weeks now. We were led to believe that the resistance was low, that we were facing green troops – young boys and non-German conscripts who did not really want to fight. We moved forward, one after another, down a gradual slope lightly covered with snow. Trees to our left and front, some to our right. On the alert. Rifles at port. As we moved forward, we passed a few captured Germans being sent to the rear. We looked at them and they at us. The "young boys" looked no younger than we! Oh, oh. Surely something was wrong with our intelligence – or were we "young boys," too? And though we may not want to fight, we were good and ready to do so. With much to think about, we moved forward.

Scouts out, First platoon moved along a road, a platoon to our right, both platoons partially in the trees to the right of the road. No one on the left of the road, but a field opened up there before a dense growth of woods started to our left front. The road clear, though some snow on the ground. Ahead you can see the road leading straight ahead to a house and that our scouts are approaching it. They disappear. All hell breaks loose. Machine gun fire. I hit the ditch between the road and the trees. Everybody down. Mortar rounds thump in. Silence. We get up to move forward. Machine gun fire. Down again. Mortars. Silence. Get up. Burp.... burp.... burp. Down. Now I've moved over into the trees. Have completely lost track of Lt. Angiers. No commands. Burp...burp. Thump. Thump. A bullet asides up to the tree beside me. Someone says a company to our left is trying a flank movement. Silence. More shooting and shelling. Report that attack has failed. Order to begin covering fire and to move back, covering us as we get up and move. We shoot until some backward movement is made, move back ourselves, cover fire for others, repeat. Am barely able to run, fire and carry my radio. Pass it off to another as I run. Get it back as he runs. We all get ourselves moved back away from the enemy fire, though still in the woods. Part of the platoon has gotten to the left of the road, back to the wooded area that before the open field. Part of us are still to the right with the rest of the company. Orders to dig in. No more firing from either side. This has taken all afternoon! It is beginning to get dark on this Tuesday the 13th of November. (Years later I have wondered if our lack of forward movement was due to enemy resistance or a message taught in a critique at Bragg in what seems now a life away.)

Almost dark now. Have a hole pretty well dug. Climb out of the hole to stretch and look around. Can hear the whirly whistle of heavy artillery shells moving over us. Guess it's ours. Almost constant. Then whistle sound of incoming. Hear an explosion. Hear another. Feel a push of air. Everything numb. See stars. Feel myself falling over, ever so slowly. What has happened? Quiet. Can't seem to move. More incoming. Call for medic. Hear other calls for medic. Quiet. More incoming(?). Later, movement around me. Someone looks at my neck and says, "He can't walk. Carry him." Some kind of stretcher with several men around me, carrying me back down a hill. Back through the dark, me and the walking wounded. I can see the night sky through the trees.

This had been **our** "*Purple Heart Lane*". . .

. . . *the front was quiet for the 398th, but in the sector held by the 399th there was a small action which was a portent of what was to come. Co. G, advancing through the forest about a kilometer south of its positions of the night of 12 November, broke out of the woods into a clearing just to the*

west of Hill 409.9, about two miles south of Neufmaisons. The 1st and 3rd Platoons were in the lead with the 2nd and the Weapons Platoons in support. Just north of the hill stood a house, called Du Rouge Vetu, with perfect fields of fire and observation. As two scouts started to reconnoiter this house, intense mortar, machine gun, and rifle fire began to pour upon the two platoons in the clearing. . . . Four officers, including the company CO, were wounded, and 25 men were wounded or killed in this fight.²

Got to a darkened tent. The Battalion Aid Station! They take me in and the officer in charge has me sit up and removes my coat and shirt and examines my wounds. As a first treatment, he begins working on the shrapnel in my back. I can not believe there is so much. I sit there thinking, he's got to be treating my pimples! Next thing I know I'm flat on my back on a stretcher lashed to a jeep. Then everything went black.

I wake up as I am being wheeled into an operating tent. Over to my left I see a surgeon rapidly thumbing through a large book, looking at colored illustrations of the human anatomy. He stops at a picture of the back of the neck. "All right, soldier, start counting." A black nose mask comes down and I am back to sleep.



I wake up again and am lying in a cot. Don't dare move my head. See nurses going by. Sense people in beds on either side of me. Stiffly raise up a little and see a blue box on a table beside me. Drop back down. Back to sleep. Awake again. Doctor comes by: "Move your head, soldier!" He must be crazy! He reaches down, grabs hold of my head and snaps it around. "Now keep turning it from time to time. It won't fall off." Ouch! Back to sleep. Awake again. Look around. They make me set up and eat. Notice then that the blue box is a Purple Heart. Pretty soon I'm up and being forced to move around. Whole tent full of wounded. One guy seems to have had all the skin blown off his penis. So glad I'm not him.

Before I know it, I'm off again to another hospital – in a real building and seemingly in some big city. There I get to move around another ward all full of wounded, including the one fellow who wakes up late at night and uses a spoon to keep his wound open so he won't have to go back to the line. This time the hospital seems to be in a large institution-like building, a real hospital or school or something like that. And now there is an orderly who comes by daily to apply gentian violet to all the little wounds on my back. I get the large dressing on my neck changed. By the beginning of December I must have been improving because I was packed off onto

a train full of other GI's headed back to the lines.

That is how I found myself, still 18, with a wad of bandage on the back of my neck so large I couldn't get my helmet down over it and in a Replacement Depot to be sent back to my company. The replacement depot was a large camp filled with soldiers all over the place, new replacements just coming up, old hands awaiting return to their outfits. The depot was organized in such a way that new personnel would be sent to the outfits needing replacements while units would be notified of their returning members. Until such time as they could be picked up by their units, they stayed with the depot.

I certainly did not feel in any shape to fight, though by then I was certain I would return to my old outfit (although not every man was so lucky). Fortunately for fellows like me who were still healing, there was a review provision. I appeared before a medical officer and showed him my wounds and the inconvenience of the bandage. Grasping the situation, he ordered me to a convalescent hospital. Off I went, secure in the knowledge that I now had the chance to get into better shape – and to at least spend my 19th Birthday in the rear. Or so it would seem.

The convalescent hospital turned out to be some sort of garrison. The barracks were one story stone buildings arranged in an orderly manner as befits an army installation. It had all the facilities needed for comfortable living for a soldier – clean cots, a place to eat, suitable toilet facilities, and a most promising program most efficiently done – doing nothing! We laid around and rested, walked and talked, underwent whatever medical treatment was needed. The installation was strangely surrounded by a relatively high stone wall topped by a cover of broken glass cemented into place and we could never figure out if it were originally intended to keep people in or to keep people out. But we were happy to stay in. And so I enjoyed my birthday in a warm dry pleasant place.

One of the guys in the room with me happened to be one of the fellows that had been sent out as a replacement from the 100th. He had ended up in the 44th Division. Had a D-Ration Bar with him. Said that was all they had been given to eat for a quite a long time – a daily ration of this fairly large rather pleasant tasting chocolate bar, designed to provide nourishment while not cloying in taste but not repulsive, either – especially if you were hungry and if you hadn't tasted chocolate for a while. So we compared notes and decided the 100th had been better fed. (I never saw him again, but the 44th was our left flank unit during much of the Winter.)

Then there were those strange two German officers(?) who wandered around. Their uniforms looked like what we had been taught to expect them to look, with great coats that appear both warm and authoritative – but the colors were strange, light pinkish on one and lavender-like on the other. This was as much a puzzlement as the glass-topped wall. We figured they were captured and being held here, but must be of some high or strange rank to be so carelessly guarded – or else were not Wehrmach at all. Never did find out.

But my neck was mending and the bandage becoming smaller and smaller as the days past after my birthday. There were some stories of a German counter-attack, but we weren't particularly bothered about it. Then, all of a sudden there was much excitement and hurried up orders. The camp was to be emptied out. All troops back to their units. The Germans attack was succeeding! Everything was in a state of flux. We couldn't believe it. When wounded, all of our units had been on a roll. Though we had met resistance, none of us felt there was anything that would stop us. Now this. This was how we heard about the "Battle of the Bulge."

THAT COLDEST OF WINTERS. . . .

Back to the 71st Replacement Depot. Wait while our units (the 399th Infantry Regiment for me) were notified. Then I was alerted that someone from the 399th Infantry had come for me. Well, really for all of those at the Depot who came from the 399th. Into trucks and away we went to the 100th Division Area and then the 399th Area and then one by one we were dropped off in our company's rear area. So I ended up with the cooks of G Company, waiting until the jeeps went up with food and supplies. Just then a German plane flew over and someone began firing the 50 caliber anti-aircraft guns at him – all trailing off short of the target. Slept a restless night there. I must say I was not eager to go back to the line; I felt condemned to death. Much had happened since I left, so I no longer knew my position in the company – or platoon – or who was left or what was in store for me. I prayed a lot that night.

So on the 23rd of December, 1944, I returned to Company G. Crisp and cold and snow on the ground. I was no longer attached as a runner for now, but I was still with the First Platoon. (This was one of the neat features of the American Army: as much as possible we were returned to your old unit, rather than being dumped into

some new organization, and in the 100th you got sent back right where you started.) And I was just in time for the short march back to near Lemberg.

Three days after our bloody fight of 13 November, the Division began piercing the Voege line, going through a series of maneuvers against heavy resistance to final penetration by 26 November. This was the first time any army had ever penetrated a winter defense line in the Voege mountains! From this success, the 100th was moved into a new sector and began the attack on the Maginot line, specifically in the area of the fortress city of Bitche. A series of successful movements against the enemy through Lemberg, Lambach, Reyersviller, Fort Freudenberg, to the College de Bitche and beyond, by 21 December placed the Division in a position to take the fortress when the orders came to "stand down." Gen. Patton's Third Army had moved up from the Seventh Army flank to relieve the pressure at the Bulge and our entire Seventh Army was ordered on the defensive, spreading out to cover both our original front and that of the Third Army.

From my arrival, through the hike and the next day and in bits and pieces, I was told about all that had happened since I had left, was placed with a couple others to dig in and gradually resumed my place in the platoon. There was much frustration that they had not been able to take Bitche, but the greatest interest was on what we would get to eat for Christmas. Of course we had the turkey and dressing and cranberry sauce and everything the folks at home were told we would have – it was just not particularly warm since it had been jeeped up to the front for us. And sitting on the edge of a cold fox hole eating out of cold aluminum mess gear was not really very celebratory.

Since we were now on the defense, most of our activity was in moving around into different locations and getting arranged in the best defensive posture possible. I ended up as platoon runner again. And it snowed. From our Christmas positions near Lemberg we moved to Enchenberg and then by New Year's Eve to a position near Hottviller. The platoon headquarters were in a barn – along with several other members of the platoon. Since it was so cold, the barn was an attractive cover in which we could keep warm while rotating into foxholes. This was an unusual practice, but action was really expected. The barn was near the bottom of a hill which rose gradually to a ridge and then down on the other side. Foxholes were manned along the ridge with an outpost hole down the other side. Another slope rose on the back side of the barn. A road extended from the front of the barn to the left gradually

into enemy territory and to the right, half way down the forward hill, around a long curve to a pill box where our company CP was located. This was our platoon position on December 31, 1944. The front was quiet and the Germans were retreating from the Bulge. The word was out that the artillery would unleash a barrage to celebrate the New Year.

The ground was snow covered, which helped our night vision. We were also helped by “artificial moonlight” – far to our rear search lights were pointed up toward the low clouds which covered the sky. From our outposts we had gotten a few reports of noises like motors or tanks, but it was assumed that the Germans were probably using trucks to move their troops back – if that is really what was heard. There had been some rumors of activity on the flanks of the Division but nothing official. And it was New Year’s Eve and we were winning the war and all was well and we were somewhat relaxed.

Suddenly shots from over the ridge. Connections to our outpost disappeared. Other positions reported enemy and began shooting. Much confusion sorted itself out as our other positions held and kept up the firing, while men from the barn moved out and up to cover the ridge. The Germans managed to get a machine gun up to the ridge and attempted to fire down on us. From the sight of their tracers rising straight up it was obvious they were having trouble. Though they had the high ground right there, our ridge positions flanked them and they eventually withdrew.

While the fire fight continued, we lost connections with our Company CP. The sound-powered phone was not working. I tried using the SCR 300 with no success. The radio only worked point to point and there was a rise in the ground between us and our Company CP which blocked the signal. I slipped out of the barn up the hill to our rear and attempted to make contact from there. Even standing up I could not get it to work. Back to the barn. Put down the radio; had to track the break in the telephone line. Back out onto the road and slowly making my way toward the pill box, I picked up the wire and let it slide through my hand until I got about halfway to my destination. There I found the break. Off with my gloves. Got the wire ends stripped of their insulation and the wire tied together and recovered. (Part of my equipment was a roll of insulating tape.) Went on the rest of the way to check on any further damage and to be sure communication was reestablished. Sure was glad to see the guard at the entrance to the pillbox. They opened the door. Shaft of warm light. Rushed in. Nice and cozy. But the enemy was attacking all along the front. Back to the platoon with orders to hold. And we did.

But to little avail. The Germans had made a three pronged attack – one to our left to penetrate between the 100th and the 44th and another to our right where they overwhelmed the 117th Recon that tied the right flank of the 100th to the French First Army. The center, where we were, repulsed the third prong. This was the German Operation *Nordwind*³. By the end of New Years Day the 100th was stabilizing both its flanks. Indeed in the entire Seventh Army, the 100th Division was the only one that had not been forced to fall back under enemy pressure and was ordered to hold its front while the other divisions were regaining the positions from which they could jump off in the spring offensive.⁴ So we just readjusted, back a little here and there but still in the same relative locations – Lambach and Lemberg and all those other positions were still in our vocabulary. The entire German operation did not wind up until near the end of January, but we stayed in the same general area the entire month and this general position was one that we held for the rest of the winter.

And the winter was reported to have been one of the coldest on record. I remember cold clear moonlit nights and cloudy days. Too many of them. We looked forward to those days when the sun shone, followed by cloudy nights. We learned that it meant we would gain heat during the day and that the cloudy nights would hold the warmth. Two men in a foxhole meant 4 hours on and 4 hours off. I learned that by standing and hitting one foot against the other would keep the feet warm and the body working while maintaining my attention to what was going on about me. At night, when not on watch, I would curl up in a blanket and try to sleep. During the day I would try to move around without being shot at. Most of the time no one was shooting at us, anyway. There was that one night, so clear and cold and moonlit, I stood beside the hole and saw airplanes wing to wing from one horizon to the other, covering the whole sky and moving to the East. Their drone filled the night the entire four hour watch. By my next watch there was an occasional sputter of an engine passing overhead toward home. Nothing more.

We had one position where the Germans had a machine gun zeroed in on the ridge of the hill which we occupied. Periodically their bullets would whistle in over your head. If you were on the peak when they decided to shoot, you might get hit; on the down slope you were OK. So our foxholes were on the forward slope and the CP to the rear. The slope of this hill did drop off just ahead of our line and on one occasion the Germans tried to slip up on us under the protection of this slope. It took a lot of firing to chase them off. Peculiarly this ridge line extended in a long sweeping U around a draw and the heights on the other leg of the U were occupied by the enemy. Night patrols would be sent out regularly. One night one of our patrols, thinking in the dark that it had returned from around the ridge, brazenly

approached one of German foxholes. They got out of there when both sides realized they were speaking different languages but felt they were too close to do anything.

I did manage to take care of the problem I had reaching the trigger of my M-1. One of the men in the company who was authorized to carry a carbine was evacuated. As he was carried out, I traded him my rifle for his carbine. Problem solved! Carried that carbine the rest of my days in combat.

The rest of that January, all of February and part of March were spent in the same positions. Seventh Army had been thinned out too much for a sustained offensive action. Within our Division the regiments stayed fairly well put, but battalions, companies and even platoons rotated through different positions, thus allowing us a sense of change and relaxation. So for those months we were sometimes in a town, sometimes in a farm house, sometimes in a Maginot line fort, sometimes in a foxhole. We seemed to rotate to another position about once a week. There were times when we were in towns and our clothing was collected and cleaned while we were showered down and cleaned up. Once, while in one of the towns some Red Cross women served us donuts. The women were a little frightened, feeling like they were really on the front lines; we felt like we were a million miles to the rear. (This was a typical feeling: half a mile back almost felt like you were out of the war.)

Farm house. Big warm feather bed for three or four. Tossed in between a feather mattress and feather cover and fully clothed ready for action it was plenty warm. And those who did not fit in the bed were welcome in the kitchen by the hot wood burning cooking stove. Not only did we get the farmer's bed, but he went out into "no-man's land" and shot a rabbit, dressed it and his wife roasted it for us.

Small village. Entire company in houses. Each house crowded, but that spread out time spent on guard. The Lieutenant had "liberated" a P-38 pistol and we all spent time together figuring how to field strip and clean it. Cloudy nights for guard so could not see too well. Heard that in a neighboring village a German patrol had moved through and that we should be alert.

One position was near a chemical mortar battery. (They did not shoot chemical shells; their type of shot was made so it could be lobbed close with a large percussion and so was ideal for close defense.) Their men were housed in a small building. Now by that time it had become quite a thing to make french fries. One guy would get some grease, another some potatoes. There were wood fired stoves all over – some even GI pot-bellied things – but they all had rather large holes in the top and our helmets would set just right in these holes. You take out the liner, put the helmet in

the hole, fill it with grease, build a fire, pop sliced potatoes in the hot grease and *voila!*, french fries. Well those mortar men built up too much of a fire with too much grease and got a real nice kitchen fire. Caught the house on fire. We were really concerned that the light from the flames would attract the Germans. But we lucked out – and so did the mortar men. They were rescued by an infantryman who later was awarded the Soldier's Medal for his actions.

Another town, another time. We were welcomed into a home. Slept on the floor – all throughout the place. Big round table in the dining/kitchen area. The owners had slaughtered a pig and butchered it on the table. Intestines were pulled out and cleaned and meat was ground and stuffed into them. Some blood sausage. They scrubbed down the table, cooked the sausage and set the table for us to eat it. Have never appreciated blood sausage.

In another farm house. Fields stretched away to the East, sloping down and away, then rising to the enemy horizon in the distance. Warm and cozy inside, but it was some kind of headquarters. Remember a Major and Lt. Colonel. Big stuff. But outside our weapons platoon had set up their 60mm mortars. Showed us how they readied the shells, pulling the pins and lining them up so they could grab one after another and plink plink plink them down the tube. Once before I had seen them in action. That time they had zeroed in on a group of Germans on top of a hill and chased them off with a pattern of rapid fired mortar shells. This time they plunked a shell way out and we could see it explode in the distance.

Edge of Freudenberg farm, a pill box on Maginot line. It covered a sharp turn in the road. Looked like only a machine gun emplacement with a door, but it had two stories. The top floor had the entrance and machine gun position and a large enough room for at least a squad. The lower floor had beds and a passageway that went somewhere unknown, plus another passage to an exit into a valley between two small hills – cover for patrols to enter and exit. Because we did not know where the one passage went, and this station was a part of a general fortification which the enemy held, we stayed on the upper floor and were constantly attentive for any sound from below. Now water dripped into the tunnel, but still you could never tell what was really going on, so if there was a sound that was peculiar, someone would just toss a grenade down the staircase. Made a big bang and was very reassuring.

Two things happened at that location: (1) Our Lieutenant got a “grease-gun.”

Now this “grease gun” was a strange weapon supposedly made for the underground resistance, fashioned of stamped steel with a heavy wire retractable stock and a magazine that was handle as well as shell holder. It used 45 caliber shells like his issued pistol. We all admired it, though it did not seem too accurate. The Lieutenant enjoyed going outside and shooting it. (2) One of the guys got too far out from our “home,” bent over and got an enemy shot in the butt. As far as I know he was our only casualty in the rear.

Then there was the time – dug in near that Maginot line installation, but up close where we could see the main Freudenberg farm “house” manned by the Germans – when it was decided that there would be an air strike to support our positions. This meant that our lines had to be marked out so they would be visible from the air. This meant I had to lay out a “panel” in front of our lines. These panels were large pieces (maybe 2 feet by 4 feet) of heavy material, orange on one side and white on the other. (They were another bit of equipment we messengers were responsible for.) And it had to be done now – in the full light of day. Well, I worked myself up the line of foxholes that belonged to one of our squads, along a path that led among them through a grove of trees. A panel would have to be out ahead of your position, so I went out of the tree line into the open field between us and the enemy. Got out about as far as I dared, laid out the panel and started back in. Poof, poof, poof – a barrage of mortar shells fell on top of me as I dived into the nearest hole. Boy were those guys mad at me for bringing all that fire in! And you know, I do not ever remember reclaiming that darned panel!

We did some ordinance experimenting in our spare time. One of the battalions had found that you could lay bazooka shells on a piece of corrugated steel, wire them up with a battery and fire them all at once like a battery of small rockets. So we had to try that. We also took 60mm mortar shells wired onto rifle-grenade adaptors, used extra charges in our rifles, pushed the gun stocks into the ground holding the gun at an angle by putting a foot in the sling and found we could do almost as well as real mortars – even to getting some control over the distance.

We got the chance to keep up with our reading. During our “reserve” periods we could get books to read. These were *Armed Forces Library* books. They were paper back books, about seven inches by four – just the size to fit one or two in a field jacket pocket – and all the latest Chandler and Perry Mason mysteries and hits like *Forever Amber*. We read them during lulls and when we had the light. We would

pass one around until everyone had read it and then the last person would keep it for toilet paper. [After the war when Don Hehner complained of losing all of his library when his ship went down, all I could think of was my library – one book to read, one to wipe.]

Ah, the educated infantry.

During that winter my folks would send packages. The prize package was a pair of clean jockie shorts (which always arrived between our laundry days), a corn-cob pipe and a pack of smoking tobacco. Dad would send messages written on prescription pads – one message per prescription. Jotted them down while at work, of course, at the prescription counter. Now his writing was a thing of itself under the best of circumstances and so I would have to give everyone a chance at deciphering just to figure out what he wrote. Everyone seemed to look forward to his missals and sometimes we even got an entire letter deciphered.

But we got warm food! The story, as I understand it, is that after the Division started getting all those old K-Rations, diarrhea became rampant. Our good General Burrell had had enough and ordered that from then on his troops would have at least one hot meal a day. And we did. The menu was usually adapted for portability, into sandwiches and the like, but always warm. We had thermal cans – large metal insulated cans, looking like some giant metal Thermos jugs, which in a sense they were. There were round metal cans with lids that nestled in these insulated containers. These liners were filled with various foods or sometimes with all the food for one squad. The cooks would bring these cans, along with similar cans containing hot coffee, as far forward as they could safely bring their jeep. One or more of us would bring the chow up to our line, usually to where the platoon HQ was. Then I would take the squad food out to the squad leader, or go out and notify him that the chow was in and then his men would come back one or two at a time and get their rations.

So it went – everyday a little different and yet everyday the same. Some snow, some clouds, some sun. One town to another, one hole to another. Rumors of this and rumors of that. News came that the Russians were advancing. We rooted them on and were willing to see them come over the next hill. After all, they were our allies – and we would just as soon they do all the work.

All through that winter I wore size 10 shoe-paks – a rubber bottomed, leather topped big boot with a felt lining – along with heavy woolen socks. I kind of swam in them since my shoe size was 5D. As spring approached, we had to get back into combat boots. They couldn't find mine, so I was sent back to the rear to be fitted all over. For my fitting I was sent out into a ploughed field covered with shoes and boots of every size, very loosely organized by size. While walking through the field, carefully searching out a really small size, I happened to look over. There I saw another short guy about my same size way far away, head down wandering around looking, too. We both went away properly fitted.

In the middle of March, while we were still near Siersthal in France, three of us got word that we were being given four days R & R at the 15th Corp Rest Center in Nancy – Racke, Nichols and I. While we stayed back to get on the truck, a day patrol went out. (Years later I found it was one of Dick Laurens's hardest memories. He had been on that patrol when two of the guys stepped on shue-mines, blowing off feet. One of them later died.) We did not learn about the event until our return.

Nancy, France. It was nice to get away from the combat zone for awhile. We were housed in what I remember as an old factory building. Two or three of us were in a room like some kind of office with windows overlooking another part of the plant. No pretense at being neat or soldierly. Just kind of throw your bed together. I don't remember any food we may have gotten. I know there were no tours of any kind for us to take – we all were sort of on our own. A line of soldiers stretched around one block waiting to get into a building – but we were all above that sort of thing. There was one place where we could buy souvenirs and have them sent home. Bought a bottle of Chanel #5 and a whole pile of charms, each representing a different part of France. I had my portrait taken by a very busy photographer. I had the feeling that all these people had been doing this over and over again and that as the last Wehrmach soldaten walked out one door an American walked in another and they just kept on doing their same old thing. For night life we saw the movie *Tall in the Saddle* with John Wayne. And I saw and heard Gertrude Stein ("A rose is a rose is a rose").

ON THE ATTACK....

We got back just on time for the big offensive. Everyone, American, British, Canadian, French, all jumped off together on the 15th of March. We were in regimental reserve, so I did not have to be dumped off the truck from Nancy into the midst of a fire fight.

But as soon as the offensive began, the Division launched its attack on Bitche. Our regiment protected the southern flank while in the attack. G Co. moved out of Reyersviller and attacked up Signalberg Hill, reached our objective and held until relieved. As I remember that day we formed up in a thin line, sunny, clear field, fence to our left, spread five yards apart. Lieutenant was sure nothing would happen. And it didn't. Our line moved across the field to our objective and then we held our advance line until trucks came and picked us up.

The next couple days we marched to a different town each day as we moved to a holding position north of Bitche, actually ending up in Germany. Then we got trucked back to almost where we had begun. And there was this road winding up a hill. It seems to me that the whole Regiment was clumped up on it. It was almost like a joyful reunion – we were seeing guys we hadn't seen in months! Many hellos and joyful hollers. We were either getting on or getting off trucks but were certainly not too close to the front or we would not have been permitted to be so piled up. I think we could see Reyersviller down below. At any rate, it was not long before we breezed through Bitche (which had been almost completely abandoned as we surrounded it) and got to see the Citadel and the gun emplacements that the Division had tried so hard to knock out (even using Air Force heavy bombers) as we moved to join the rest of the Division holding north of Bitche.

Now through the Maginot Line, the Army moved on the Siegfried Line (the German defensive wall of pill boxes and tank traps and mine fields). The plan was for the 3rd Division to make the attack with the 397th Inf. (100th Div.) holding on its right. Our battalion made a fast move to our left behind the 397th. Seems to me this was mostly at night. Our first stop was in a ghost town between the German and French Lines,⁵ completely empty, doors and windows gone, barren and cold. We spent the rest of the night there. At daylight we got the orders, "Roll'em up. Moving out in 5 minutes."⁶ An hour or so later, we formed up in our usual column of ducks⁷ and moved out like the proverbial herd of turtles.⁸

By the time we got near our new position, the day had turned sunny and warm with that languorous breath of new spring air you often see in March. While our leaders sorted out just where we were to go I lay resting on the side of a hill, listening to the birds, half dozing off. What a beautiful day to waste on a war!

We were soon settled in. There were a couple houses along a road that ran along the other side of the hill on which we had rested. We moved around to them and moved into the ones we had been assigned. Two stories. Upstairs you could look out the windows and see Germany. And the Siegfried Line! You could watch the 3rd moving around to take a pill box. Just like a movie! Then bam! The enemy knew we were there and what an observation post we had. Boy, did we get downstairs fast! Fortunately their ammunition supply must have been low, since after that the only shells we got were when Company tried to send a jeep down the road. But if the jeep went fast enough it could get by all right.

We were soon out of the houses and dug in to block a road intersection not far from this little settlement. We knew the enemy was just below, but had little contact on either side so we were being very cautious – whispers, no lights. Then came a regiment from the 71st moving up to relieve the 397th. Bang, clatter and pop. Full field packs, just like state-side, even with extra shoes hanging loose. Right through us, barking questions as they came. They disappeared down the hill in the dark and we were much relieved.

Then there was that shed!⁹ We had moved to a different spot. There was a place to be comfortable! Someone had found this lovely shed with a tin roof filled with bales of straw. The first one there had dug a hole into the bales, covered the opening with a blanket and made a cozy home. I was invited in. A couple anti-tank armored cars pulled up beside us to stand guard on the road that ran by the shed. Spent the night there. Had candles to light up the place. The only problem was, the Germans had the place zeroed in with their mortars and so on and off through the night a round would whistle in. You could hear it



The Shed

whistling almost from the time it left the mortar tube – or so it seemed. Then it would thump on the roof. Sometimes one would explode. Most often there was a kind of soft rustily thump as one would get buried in the straw. (If the farmer got back to it, he was certainly due for some surprises.) But we got out OK. Certainly envied those anti-tank guys the whole night. Next morning found they were envying us for having such a safe place to stay – while they were only protected by thin steel.

As the 3rd broke through we rejoined the Division and headed north to take Ludwigshafen and go across the Rhine. We were loaded on trucks (and some tanks) and took off. The entire 100th Division was able to move using just the vehicles that belonged to the Division, supposedly an unusual event. Of course, we rode those tanks just to give them infantry support. Somewhere along the road north, and it must have been about half way to Ludwigshafen, we stopped for the night. G Co. moved through some woods in the dark and arrived at a house on the Rhine. The house was almost art deco style, simple white cement, large windows, very modern, overlooking the river. Capt. Hayes said we were the only Americans on the Rhine between Ludwigshafen and Speyer. We could hear the splashing of the river and in our minds it was the sound of German troops crossing for home – and it may well have been. We kept bottled up and quiet.

Back on the trucks and away we went to Dannstadt and the suburbs of Ludwigshafen. We moved through the southern part of Ludwigshafen to the Rhine. As it happened, the 94th Division of the 3rd Army also had Ludwigshafen as its objective and they had gotten there first. We moved into houses and prepared to go into the attack from the south, but the 94th asked that we lay low so we would not end up shooting at each other. We pulled back to a suburb and let them occupy Ludwigshafen. We later went back through the Ludwigshafen in a clean up operation before crossing the Rhine.

One March 31, 1945, we crossed the Rhine on a pontoon bridge, drove through Mannheim, observed the undamaged GM building there and went on to Bruhl where we stayed overnight. The next day we climbed on tanks and moved on and secured Hockenheim. At that point the 2nd Battalion was on the extreme right flank of the American Armies and over to our right were the French. We knew they were there because a French tank approached us from the front and a squad of Moroccans with their red hats moved past us going the other direction.

While we were occupying Hockenheim, the 1st Battalion took Reilingen. The next day G Co. reenforced the 1st Battalion at Reilingen and it was during this period, with the Regiment guarding the right flank, that there was an opportunity for pictures



Laurens Miller

to be taken. This was certainly a time of relaxation as you can see by the absence of arms of any kind, though some of us more timid ones kept our helmets on. And it was warm enough to go without field jackets. You will also note

that it was our practice not to wear our Division patch. And you can get a faint idea of the houses if you look past those handsome soldiers. These pictures belong to Dick Laurens. I'm sure he took most of them and labeled them, though none of us knows what this bridge was over or what kind of machinery we were on. You will also note that I have been able to name the towns we were in or about. This is more from material I had at hand – morning reports, Regimental and Divisional histories¹⁰ – than from memory. From them I have been able to correlate dates, places, pictures and bits of memory.



DeFusco Richard Terrien Miller



**McFadden Seidel Richard
Heron DeFusco Miller**

From that time on we moved mostly by tanks. It was an exciting time. We were advancing rapidly. There was little opposition. We were so far ahead of our supplies that we had orders to forage for the food we needed. We rode along with cases of white Rhine wine, drinking as we went. We passed whole streets lined with houses, sheets hanging out as flags of surrender. At night we occupied homes and slept on real beds. Along the route, in one of the houses in which we slept, I found a delicious jar of home canned cherries,

the tastiest thing I had had in a long time. Indeed, until I found that treasure, I had been slowly losing my appetite.

As our drive from Mannheim took us east toward the Neckar River, I remember barreling into the Neckar River valley. I had found home! All this flat land stretched out before us and in the distance I could see the shadowy outline of the bluffs. It was as if I had just headed out of town on the road to Edwardsville for a nice Sunday drive. And as on a Sunday drive, we didn't stay long – into the valley, across the plain and up onto high ground south of the river. We had a war to win.

There were a few scares. We never seemed to be able to keep contact with the French on our right. Our company made a couple sweeps while other parts of the Battalion did run into resistance. (Records show that the Battalion had a fight to take Schluctern, a communications center, but no memory of that.) Almost made a night patrol, but that got called off. Then there was this sunny day, marching along single file but close (must not have been expecting any trouble), when some German civilians tried to tell us that Roosevelt had died. They seemed to think that that would make a difference. We were all confident that our form of government would easily cover such a loss and knew that, at any rate, we weren't dependent on any one man.

The records show that we went on tanks from Schluctern to Bochingen on April 8. Now I don't remember that move or ever realizing we were in Bochingen. To me we were in Heilbronn.

After the 7th Army breakthrough to the Rhine in late March 1945, the 100th fought one of the last major battles of World War II in Europe with the assault river crossing of the Neckar River at Heilbronn, 3 - 12 April 1945. In the teeth of fanatical resistance, fueled by an errant RAF bombing raid which had mistakenly hit the city center, instead of the intended German rocket-launcher school nearby, the enraged populace became enthusiastic helpers of the city's defenders. A scratch force of Volkssturm-militia, veteran mountain infantry from the 2nd Mountain Division; infantry from the 553rd, and 559th Volks-Grenadier Divisions, and the remnants of other units – backed by considerable quantities of rocket launchers, artillery, and antiaircraft guns in the direct-fire mode – the defenders fortified the already highly defensible city on the right bank of the Neckar using hundreds of tons of rubble from the shattered buildings. During a brutal eight-day battle, the 100th wrested this, one of the last remaining German strongholds, from its tenacious defenders, in a street-to-street, house-by-house fight.¹¹

That railroad yard! Our platoon occupied the vast railroad switching yard that serviced the industrial town of Heilbronn. It was, however, located across the river in Bochingen, a suburb. Tracks all over the place. Wrecked engines were scattered about on the rails. Little cement guard houses, suitable for protecting one man, here and there. We were centered in the control building. The lower floors were mainly office and living quarters while the upper story housed the center from which the rail traffic was controlled. Plenty of light. Lots of windows. We spread out and relaxed. Jeeps could get to us with chow and mail. I still wasn't eating much and the rest wasn't helping, either. (Some of the guys were coming down with yellow jaundice, but it hadn't hit me yet.) It was there I got the letter telling me about the death of my Grandmother (Mother's mother). I even wrote some letters there. One of the guys found a pile of pictures of the German-American Bund sent to one of the railroad workers from a relative in America. They were turned over to G-2. Fighting was going on around us. You could hear the explosions. Now and then screaming-meemies dropped in on us – big tubular rockets that screamed their way in and went off with a loud boom and a great concussion. The building was provided with a small air-raid shelter, heavily lined with concrete and down in the ground. We would all dash for it as soon as we heard the screech of the rockets.

Apparently our Regiment was in a holding position (still having trouble maintaining contact with the French!), so we escaped the serious fighting. But as the battle wound up we were ordered across the Neckar to move south along its western bank. Very early in the morning we moved out of our railroad yard down to the bank of the river. Smoke shells were fired to cover our movement while we rowed to the other side in small boats. Once there we advanced up from the wharf area onto a wide business street. Some sort of industrial building was at the end of the street. A dead German soldier lay on the sidewalk in front of a bank-like building at the corner where we turned to our right and headed south into a residential area.

We stopped when we got to houses and moved into them to rest. We all laid down. Can't say I felt much like moving – too weak. Then a medic looked at me and told me I'd better fallout. The whites of my eyes had turned brown, my skin yellow. Hadn't noticed before, but my urine was brown. Traded off my trusty carbine for an M-1, crawled into a jeep and was off to the Aid Station. Went back to an evacuation point where I got to spend the night on a stretcher. By the time morning came I was having trouble breathing. This time the doctor diagnosed my condition as pneumonia. Off to the hospital.

This hospital was in a school-like building. I was in a large room, high ceiling, maybe twenty or thirty beds about. At one end, on a stage-like area with a curtain pulled, there was a wounded soldier. The ward was amazed by a story that the doctors were using maggots to clean out his wound. Some of the guys peaked in just to check on the story. Behind a screen in a far corner they had cordoned off another patient who was dying. Between them were these rows and rows of cots. Each of us was in a different stage of repair but most of us were getting penicillin. These penicillin shots were given every four hours, around the clock. I only missed one shot. Had made my bed very tight and the mattress and springs dipped way down so the blanket was straight across even while I was in the bed. I was fast asleep with my head buried under the pillow. The medic giving the shots thought the bed was empty. The guy next to me thought it was real hoot. He was recuperating from captivity. He had been with the 106th Division which was overrun at the very beginning of the Battle of the Bulge and had been a prisoner of war from then until a very recent liberation. He was much like the rest of we ASTP guys and he and I got along pretty well, though neither of us was up to doing much.

Then I was moved to another even bigger room in a different building. This was like a gym. It was loaded with troops – most of whom seem to have been from the 101st Air-born. We all had jaundice.¹² The treatment at that time was to feed you a low fat diet, so we were all put together and fed together. Did a lot of reading there. And resting. But. . . .

I was anxious to get back to the outfit. It was during my hospitalization there that the Germans surrendered. We were all relieved when V-E day was announced, but there was certainly no great celebration. We were all too concerned about what was next, whether we would be sent to Japan.

1. Bass, Michael A., ed., The Story of the Century (The Century Association, 1946) p.38
2. Bass, p.57
3. “. . .conceived by Hitler when he realized the battle of the Bulge was going to bog down. . . . [Operation *Nordwind*] was large-scale three-pronged complex operation involving several corps, SS divisions and key people. . . . The objectives were ambitious: destroy Seventh Army in northern Alsace, tie up the Allies there, endanger de Gaulle’s provisional government, retain the initiative, and boost up German moral. . . . by your resistance you contributed to the successful defense of Alsace.” – from a speech by the historian Lise Pommis, author of *Winter Storm*, at the 2004 Boston *Burress Banquet* of the 100th Division Association,
4. Bass, p.121
5. There were many of these towns, all of whom had been evacuated at the outbreak of hostilities leaving them abandoned except for training. Essentially they were between the Maginot and Siegfried lines in a no-man’s land.
6. By this time we had been issued sleeping bags which we “rolled up.” We were always “moving out in 5 minutes” which meant “hurry up and wait.”
7. A column of ducks meant forming up in a column of twos (from the French *deux*) and surely must have dated from WWI. In combat we moved on either side of the road with a five yard interval between men.
8. A ‘herd of turtles’ is best understood if you can visualize this large body of men spread out over a wide area slowly moving forward – as a herd of turtles might.
9. The picture is of a shed that Lt. Lahti claims was the one – though I am not sure it is – or that we were even in the same shed, though our stories seem to jive.
10. a - 399th in action with the 100th Infantry Division (Aegis Consulting Group reprint);
b - Bass, ed. The Story of the Century, previously cited;
c - Official “Morning Reports” (from Government Record Center) for G Co. 399th Inf.
11. From “The Story of the Century”
12. Was later told that so many of our troops had yellow jaundice that special stations were set up in the Division and that that was as far back as the sick were sent for treatment. Long after the war a surgeon from the 5th Army in Italy told me it seemed like most of that 5th Army had also gotten the jaundice.