

“What in the Hell Am I Doing Here?”

by John R. Miller, 397-L

I find it very interesting but I sometimes wonder how everyone remembered so much about the war. I was an infantry rifleman with Company L of the 397th. In all of the time that I was in Europe, I asked myself, “What in the hell am I doing here?”

The war was a long time ago, and I have some questions to ask and that I hope someone will be able to answer.

First, I would like to tell you a little about myself. I was raised near the Kentucky and Tennessee state line in the mountains of Kentucky. This area was called the “High Plateau Country,” and part of it now is the “Big South Fork National Recreational Park.”

When I became eight years old, I received for my birthday a Remington, single shot, 22 cal. rifle, that was my companion day and night and I carried it with me everywhere I went.

At this time, we were in the Great Depression and game for the table was always sought after. In order to obtain a box of 22-cal. shells, I had to take three dozen eggs to the store to trade for them. I found that the best way not to waste ammo was to become a good shot, and as I grew older, was an expert with the rifle.

I entered the service when I became eighteen, and was sent off to basic training and all that went with “Boot Camp.”

This was the first time I asked myself, “What in the hell am I doing here?”

After I had completed my training, I was awarded the Expert Infantryman Badge. It was very nice, made of silver with blue paint on the front of and not at all like the other cheap medals they gave that hooked together like ladders.

The same day that I received the EIB, I was shipped out to Fort Meade to go overseas.

I did not know how or where to place the EIB on my uniform so I did not wear it. I decided to find someone else who had one and ask them, but I never found another person with one on his uniform so I placed mine into my shirt pocket and there it stayed all the time that I was in the service.

No one told me that we were going to southern France or, for that matter, that we were going to the 100th Infantry Division as replacements.

Each and every time that we came to a new place I asked myself, “What in the hell am I doing here?”

I was assigned to Company L, 397 Regiment, 100th Infantry Division.

I could not speak French or German, and I was not sure that I could stand the cold, but endure I did although I kept asking myself, “What in the hell am I doing here?”

I was a Pfc. and nobody asked me how to fight the war or to read our maps or to plan the next offense. I was as you might expect lost from the time I arrived until I departed.

After Heilbronn we were moving so fast that we climbed on the trucks and tanks and rode to keep up, but the going was not easy and we met shell fire most of the way. There was no line or organized front. Our Company L and the tanks that were with us went to the support of the 1st Battalion in their attack on Lowenstein. We then we returned to take Rittelhof and on to Altbach.

When we arrived at Altbach, we caught the enemy by surprise and 300-400 of them surrendered.

Company L stayed at Altbach but some of us were asked to go on with the tanks as infantry riflemen. I was one of the lucky ones who went on to Ulm and New Ulm. In the farmland outside of Ulm, we found ourselves in a battle with German troops defending Ulm. During the course of battle, I was hit by what appeared to be shrapnel from mortar fire. I was hit in both legs below the knee and above the top of my combat boots.

The medic who came to my aid said that it looked more like the wounds were from rocks and gravel. As he taped me up I said to myself, “What in the hell am I doing here?”

I climbed back on a tank and went on through Ulm and New Ulm.

We continued on at a rapid pace and word came down that we were going to a prisoner of war camp. Everyone was excited at the possibility of freeing prisoners. As we came into sight of the camp, the

guards fled out the back of the camp and the prisoners broke out the front and came running to us. It was a sight that no one will ever forget. The POWs came to us with hugs, kisses, handshakes, and all the time crying, laughing, shouting, and just holding on.

We cried with them, we laughed with them, we hugged them, and we shared their joy. A large number of them were from the 100th Division and the greatest honor that I received in the war was that of escorting them back to our Headquarters.

As we loaded into the back of trucks for the return trip, I could have asked myself, "What in the hell am I doing here?" but there was no need to do so. Now I knew why we were there. We were fighting for freedom, for ourselves, for our loved ones back home and, yes, for the whole world. Thank god we were there and that we were successful.

The questions that I have to ask are:

1. What was the other infantry unit that was with us? Was it the 26th?
2. What was the name of the tank unit that we were fighting with? Was it the 4th or the 14th?
3. What was the name of the battle outside of Ulm, where I was hit?
4. What was the name of the POW camp? In what town was it located?
5. Who gave me my Purple Heart? Was it the tank people or my Company L of the 100th Division?
6. Where and how do you wear the EIB?

[Ed. Note: Here are a couple of answers. If anyone has other answers, let us know. The tank unit was the 781st Tank Bn. The EIB goes over the ribbons which are over the left breast pocket. You can only wear the CIB or EIB, not both, so you may not have seen guys wearing the EIB because they were wearing their CIB.]

November 2000 Association Newsletter