

Can You Go Home Again?

by Cal Norman, 398-A

Cal Norman, took his children, Chris, Peter, and Susan, with him on a visit to the towns and battlefields where Company A fought during the war. His modern day visit was punctuated with memories of 1944–45 (in this article, the remembrances are indented).

The story following this tells the story of the trip through the eyes of Cal's son, Chris.

Years ago, Thomas Wolfe opined that “You can’t go home again.” Well, following the traditions of such as Paul Mosher and Bob Huffman, I returned to those areas of Alsace with my now adult children to the area of memories, testing Wolfe’s thesis. I guess, in many ways, he’s right.

My kids, Chris, Peter, and Susie, all contributed their skills and interest to the trip. Susie’s college French minor paid off and the boys’ interest in the driving and luggage hauling was great.

We drove by the Bois de Repy and into Etival but could not identify the houses we had occupied in November of 1944. Towns like this have modernized, shifted traffic patterns, and built anew.

I recalled, as a runner, carrying messages from the Company CP to our platoon. These were hair-raising chores as a German artillery shell slammed into a neighboring house and the next day the local undertaker was aiding family as they walked to the community church. I had to pull guard duty at the CP and this consisted of challenging patrols as they came by the darkened streets. The only respite was a feather tick in a bed, which served as our own HQ.

Our Company was a part of the Army’s chess game; move here so the Krauts have to retreat. Move again to effect the same thing. No firing, just movement. Accordingly we hiked into the steep slopes south of the Muerthe River, dug in, and kept a careful eye on any movement across the river. The weather turned sour and it snowed all night, creating lovely vistas of frosted evergreens. But then it melted during the day and dripped all over us. We were wet and cold most of the time. K rations were the staple of the day and we had to slide down the slope to a ditch to refill our canteens. A sawmill stood at the east edge of this hill but it was bad news as the Krauts had sown “schu” mines all over the area. We lost a platoon leader and a map sergeant to these mines in the space of a few days.

On this visit I was not interested in re-examining that sawmill.

During that period in 1944 we had a chance to go into Baccarat for a hot meal and a film. The cristallerie floor was awash with glass fragments.

On this visit we did some shopping and were told that the factory had worked throughout the war as a warehouse for prisoners and forced labor.

After another move into the Foret du Gran Reclos, our Thanksgiving meal was shattered by German artillery. Several were wounded and two were KIA. We continued our move into the outskirts of La Trouche, past a sawmill and a parked tank destroyer. We entered a few houses in that area.

The town has changed somewhat with some new construction and at the edge of a large cleared area to the NE of town there now is an RV and camping park.

Company B began an attack across this vast cleared area the next day and were badly hit. Mortar and artillery fire struck our 1st Platoon and we lost a good buddy that day. I had to carry messages from the Captain to our platoon and I amazed myself at an ability never before

exhibited, of climbing over a succession of fences through back yards in quick time. Company A was rerouted to the south and east of this to some high hills. The night before we heard the creaking of German wagon wheels as they negotiated the forest trails up those slopes we were to tackle the next day.

This time I wasn't up to such a climb, even though my boys were willing.

Once in position on the distant hills, we did get a break after a day or two and we went back into La Trouche where Service Company or Engineers had set up a shower unit by the sawmill where we could get a good scrub—the first since Marseille. This spring the sawmill was abandoned and the mill yard was picked clean.

After hunkering down on the far eastern slopes of the mountains, we were again pulled back down to La Trouche, this time to sweep north along the Plaine River toward Celles-sur-Plaine, Vexaincourt, the high point of this end of the Vosges at Donon, and down the mountain to Schirmeck. As we started out, the Germans had blown unending numbers of bordering trees down over the roadway. These we clambered over, letting any following vehicles to handle removal. Later, we became aware that the Germans not only blew down trees as barricades but also then booby-trapped them!

On this trip, we breezed by in our rental Volvo station wagon only to pause at a French memorial to escaping resistance fighters.

In November 1944, our descent from the Donon was aided by a few tanks from an accompanying tank battalion. We were interrupted by rifle fire from an opposite embankment, but this was quickly quelled by the tanks. Shortly after this pause, a jeep came driving up from the head of the column with a wounded German "landser" strapped to a stretcher. Houses were ablaze at the entry to the small town of Michelbrunn, or Grandfontaine, and we entered alert to any enemy. That evening, Germans came out of the brush to surrender to us.

This spring the town was peaceful and quiet. A silver mine above the town was closed so what the local inhabitants were doing for work was hard to discern. We continued on down to Schirmeck to locate the railroad station where we loaded on 6 x 6s to take the Company back down to St. Blaise.

I recalled the junction between the route down from The Donon and the main north-south high Highway through Schirmeck. Dead Krauts were splayed across the road and captured ones were penned into a barn nearby.

Just a short distance away, the Germans had located the only concentration camp in France. This camp, the Struthof, at Natzweiler was known as a "*Nacht und Nebel*" operation where resistance fighters from Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France were spirited away to wither and die and be killed with no one else's knowledge of their whereabouts. It was truly "Night and Fog." It was closed in September 1944 when the Nazis executed the remaining occupants, some 100+, and fled. And, in November 1944, we were unaware of this atrocity.

During our visit we noted school groups from both France and Germany visiting the site.

The Company then moved to Vallerysthal where we did some brief training assaulting pillboxes. We then were trucked to the town of Lohr and began our approach to distant Wingen-sur-Moder. This time, Lohr brought back no images! The Company made its way past La Petite Pierre and Zittersheim along the high points of a long ridge that ran to the north toward Wingen-sur-Moder.

On this trip, we drove along the highway, stopped at the towns to walk through the streets, and continued on to the north.

If I recall, in 1944, Company C was approaching the area but from the west side of the road.

On this visit, we stayed with Mrs. Linda Bergmann in her Relais Nature in Wingen-sur-Moder. We had met her previously in our 1989 visit. Using this as a base camp, I led the family on an orientation walk through the town. Son Chris recalled the railroad station when he visited the area in 1979.

The steep embankment opposite the station was a source of extreme discomfort for the *Gebirgsjäger* in January when they charged down the hill, unaware of the steep and precipitous fall.

We met a local lady, Mrs. Truding, who was one of the few local folk who were aware that Americans were in the town on December 3, 1944. We received a message from Bill Glazier that his touring group would meet us in Wingen-sur-Moder on May 7.

On May 6, we continued our exploration of the larger area by driving through Goetzenbruck, Lemberg, Enchenberg, Petit Rederching, and Rimling. We snapped photos of a pillbox, part of the Maginot Line, and then visited Simserhof for a tour of the inner workings of the Maginot Line fortress. Continuing on to Bitche, we found a place for lunch, but did not climb to the Citadel.

When Bill Glazier's group arrived, I joined them and shared my account of the Company A arrival, pointing out the tall ridge and the river plain through which the Moder River meanders. I pointed out the houses at the southeast end of the town, the gardens behind the houses that were crisscrossed with German-prepared trenches and foxholes, and the few houses we occupied. I told the story of the German assault as we crossed the river plain and showed them the house and barn of the local forester where our medics had taken our many wounded, victims of mortar, 20 mm cannon and small arms fire. The houses on the Rue de L'Ecole had undergone some renovation as the entrances I recalled had been altered.

But the shattering small arms and *panzerfaust* fire quickly dispelled efforts to respond and the lights went out for Company A, the Company D machine-gun section, and the 375th FAB forward observer team.

Bill Glazier's 100th Division group, aided by Lise Pommois, local historian, laid a spray of flowers at the base of the memorial by the town Mairie and, later, visited a 70th Division memorial plaque by the local Catholic church, dedicated to the lads of the 70th and 45th Divisions who fought here in January 1945.

At that point a team from Strasbourg's TV News filmed Nat and me as we observed the plaque and responded to some questions by the TV team's newsman. It was shown, to my amazement on their evening news of Saturday, May 8. My 20 seconds of fame!

My children, Chris, Peter, and Susan seemed to appreciate this visit to my own past. Chris said he could now place in a real context, some of the stories and incidents I had recounted over the years. Now they have more to reminisce about.

July 2004 Association Newsletter

Revisiting Company A in France

by Chris Norman, son of Cal Norman, 398-A

When I was 19, I hiked with a friend for four days along the newly opened, rugged Oregon Coast Trail. We backpacked with our freeze-dried food and canteens of water along the windy beaches and through

the damp coastal foothills. On one occasion, I remember we made hot chocolate from reused water that had cooked our spaghetti the previous night. Naturally, it tasted foul.

Later when I called my dad to confirm a pickup point for us to meet him, I related the details of the hike—the sun, the rain, the wind and the starchy-tasting hot chocolate.

His response, “Just be glad that at your age no one was shooting at you.” My dad is Cal Norman of Company A, 398th Infantry, 100th Division, and his response has always stayed with me.

In May 2004, my dad, brother Pete, sister Sue, and I traveled back to the Vosges Mountain region to see the French villages and terrain that helped to shape his early life—when someone was shooting at him.

We retraced my dad’s route through the back hills of Etival, the crystal warehouses of Baccarat, the tiny two road village of La Trouche, the small mountain town of Grand Fontaine, the urban bustle of Schirmeck and the solitude of Lohr. We concluded our trip in Wingen-sur-Moder, spending three days in the town where my dad had been wounded and captured along with most of Company A.

My dad had already written a book about his unit’s World War II experiences, entitled *What Ever Happened to Company A?* It’s one thing to simply read those anecdotes from the troops who moved into Wingen on December 3, 1944, but it’s a moving experience to reread those GI memories now having had first-hand context of the terrain.

- We trudged up into the steep hills outside Wingen into the Kirschberg ridge, where Company A had arrived at dusk and where S/Sgt. John Canavan had described how the GIs had been shelled by German mortar and artillery.

- We walked down the logging road toward Wingen that Sgt. Bertrand “Jim” Caouette wrote was lit up by German machine-gun tracers.

- We found the forester’s house at the base of the ridge where Pvt. Roland Kimmey had lain wounded for two days.

- We passed the open field where Pfc. Ed Rawlings described he had been soaked to the knees as he ran through the Moder River.

- We walked up the slope where Pfc. Thad Samorajsky said German trenches had been dug, now home to a child’s backyard swing set.

- We identified the spot below the houses on Rue de l’Ecole where my dad said Pfc. Homer Shue had been killed.

- We came to the houses on Rue de l’Ecole where my dad had entered a basement with other GIs. He was later wounded by a concussion grenade and captured by the Germans.

It rained on our last day in Wingen. With temperatures in the low 40s, my dad said the weather was much like what he had experienced 60 years ago.

So it’s a powerful image to visualize 100-odd, perpetually cold and wet men moving out of the dense, lush Vosges Mountain forests, down a steep incline, across an open field and into what should have been the safe haven of a couple of houses . . . under mortar and machine-gun fire . . . at night . . . with constant uncertainty.

When that imagery involves your 19-year-old dad, it puts a lot of life’s obstacles into instant perspective.

Two Other Notes

- An unanticipated highlight in Wingen was the presence of two French TV journalists filming VE Day stories who interviewed my dad and other veterans for the Strasbourg Channel 3 TV. So the next night, we watched my dad’s interview dubbed in French on the evening news. (Also on the evening news were other members of the 100th Division who were in Wingen on a Bill Glazier–led bus tour. They had stopped in town for a VE Day ceremony at town hall.)

- In Wingen, Linda Bergmann, who runs a B&B called Relais Nature, has kept track of the town’s WWII history and has a fascinating small museum of “before and after” photos as well as artifacts from the debris of war. It’s well worth a visit.

Fellow Progeny—Sons and Daughters of WWII Vets!

The sands of time are falling quickly. Don't miss this opportunity to take your family's veteran back to Europe. Revisit the villages, towns, and forests that helped shape his entire life.

I just returned from such a trip with my dad, and it was a great experience. You'll be surprised at how much colorful detail those veterans remember. Once you get past the plane flight, it was an easy driving trip, with lots of good memories—and good food. Don't delay! Plan your trip now.

July 2004 Association Newsletter