

The *Newsletter* did use some of the next part of Hugh's oral history concerning his time in the hospital in England after he was wounded, where he was being treated and waiting to be shipped home:

“One day—I was still bedridden with a cast on my left arm and dressings on my leg—the T-5 came in and said, ‘We’re going to have an inspection tomorrow morning, and when the inspecting officer comes in and I yell ATTENTION! I want all you guys to stand at attention.’ This one guy says, ‘Well, I got a leg off, and it’s going to be a little hard to do.’ And I say, ‘I don’t get up either.’ He said, ‘Then you lie at attention.’ There’s a little humor in that one.

“So he came in the next day, and this guy says ‘TENSHUN!’ The guys that could get up. I think the guy with the leg off kinda hung—wobbled—on the end of the bed. I lay real stiff in the bed, like I was at attention. This guy hadn’t gone halfway around that damned ward when the giggles started breaking out. The god-darned place started laughing. He got furious and stomped out. Served him right!”

XXI. OCCUPATION

It has been my regret that I was never able to get anyone's first-hand impression of what it was like to be on the front line on V-E Day. I have described my own observations from the window of the hospital in Nancy, but I have nothing else. I suspect this may be because nothing dramatic happened. It wasn't as though the

Company was in the midst of a pitched battle and was suddenly able to lay down their arms and embrace the opposing Germans. That would have been remembered, and told over and over again. I assume that what happened instead is that the Company was either on the way somewhere or stopped in some village for a while, and that the end of the war had no immediate dramatic effect at all on anyone—until later, perhaps.

At the end of 65 days I was finally discharged from the hospital as cured and returned to good old “G” Company, by then in residence in a school building in Kirchheim, a small town halfway between Heilbronn and Stuttgart in Germany. Here *Combat Company*, a little paper-bound book that was the first eye-witness history of our “G” Company’s role in World War II was published. In response to a 1997 request, when we began to reprint the text of the book, now—Dr. William S. Joyner, the book’s Assistant Editor, offered the following to the “G” *Company Newsletter*:

“V-E Day found Company G in the small Wurttemberg spa village of Bad Boll, the site of a German religious retreat center. We held our celebratory formation and parade there. Soon thereafter, we were moved farther east into the area between Stuttgart and Ulm and eventually settled into occupation duty at Kirchheim-unter-Teck, a town so-named because of Teck Castle located on a hill-top nearby.

“It was while we were at Kirchheim and after we had had some time to reflect on our experiences in the E.T.O. that *Combat Company* came into being. It was, of course, a collaborative effort. One representative from each platoon was selected to write an account from the perspective of his platoon’s experience. These accounts were then synthesized, co-ordinated, and melded into a single narrative by the editors.

“Anthony Altieri of the 2nd Platoon became Editor-in-Chief, and I agreed to be Assistant Editor, representing Company Headquarters. Contributing Editors from the other platoons were Chester Racke, 1st Platoon; Ron Fett, 3rd Platoon; and Frank Branco, Weapons Platoon. David Moss from Company Headquarters was named as Business Manager. Howard Hall, also from Company Headquarters, whose artistic ability had become well-known among us, was asked to do the illustrations. He came up with those unforgettable chapter headings and the pictorial map which became the ‘centerfold,’ depicting our pilgrimage from Rambervillers to Stuttgart.

“At length, the story with which you are familiar and the one that will be re-told to refresh your memories soon in the *Newsletter* came together. The art work was completed, the photos gathered, and those rather formal platoon formation photos were taken. The book was dedicated to Captain Hayes, who had led us with so much courage and inspiration. His picture and a dedicatory tribute were placed preceding the first chapter of the text.

“The next stop was production. Fortunately, we were able to locate right there in ‘downtown’ Kirchheim a small printing establishment, the Printeroffice Weixler. This printer was willing to take on the job in spite of language problems. He had a set of Roman type-face that we Americans were accustomed to read and had an adequate supply of paper and other materials to complete the work.

"I recall my dealings with the printer to have been quite business-like as we sought to work out a satisfactory line of communication, what with my college freshman German and his limited English. Several proof-reading and correcting sessions then followed, all of which were not enough to prevent several 'typos' from appearing in the finished product.

"In any event, at length the press began to roll and out came our 'little blue book,' *Combat Company*, just in time to distribute before we packed up to move on to Pforzheim near the Black Forest."

One of the contributing editors, Frank Branco of the Weapons Platoon, offered us this brief reminiscence:

"As I recall it was done in a rather serious manner with Tony Altieri and Bill Joyner doing the actual writing and those of us who were contributing editors providing the information based on our experiences with our respective platoons. If memory serves me right each platoon had its own representative. I represented the weapons platoon.

"I cannot speak for the other contributing editors but I assume that I was chosen to be a part of the writing, not because of my literary talents, but because I served with the platoon from the day we left N.Y. until V.E. Day without a break. I was one of the few lucky ones who was neither wounded or fell sick to hepatitis or some other illness.

"As I look back I feel we did a creditable job on the book and I am quite proud that I was able to make a small contribution."

Combat Company thus became the first—and until now the only—eye-witness history of "G" Company, 399th Infantry Regiment, in World War II. It is a most valuable document, and it must also be quite nearly unique. I have never heard of any other formal battle history, written almost on the spot by the participants, of an infantry company. However, to quote from the last page of *Combat Company*:

"In finale [*sic*], let it be said that this is not the complete story of Company G. This is the story of their combat experiences in the ETO. Interesting chapters have preceded this story, and undoubtedly others lie ahead to be written in the future."

True enough, except that there wasn't much future for the Company, nor for the whole 100th Division for that matter, after the Japanese capitulation later in the Summer that was written. Some of the other stories that can be told are unique; others give a different perspective to stories already related. We have been fortunate enough to have been able to collect, and give you, some more of these stories.

The 100th Division was to remain intact for a few more months as part of the early Army of Occupation, and shortly after I returned, the 399th Regiment removed to the Caserne Buchenberg (renamed Fort Breckenridge), a former *Wehrmacht* post near the city of Pforzheim. We were in real army barracks again, our bunks wooden boxlike double-deckers with straw in large burlap sacks for mattresses—at least until we found

them infested with fleas and had to burn them. Subsequently we slept on the hard boards with perhaps a folded blanket for a mattress, a memory that remains vivid.

Pforzheim itself is worth some comment here. It was a city of perhaps 50,000 or so, in a river valley surrounded by forested hills. It had been before the war a jewelry manufacturing center, and its factories had been converted to the production of precision parts for bombsights. At air raid alerts it had become the custom of the populace to leave the city and seek shelter in the nearby hills, something they were quite used to because of the strategic importance of the products of their factories.

On the night of February 23, 1945 the air raid alarm had gone off and people had evacuated the city. American high altitude precision bombers had come and gone, and near dawn the all-clear sounded. Everyone returned to their homes and beds, to prepare for a new day with as much sleep as they could salvage. At just about dawn, as I recall what we were told, a massive attack force of British bombers appeared over the hilltops at very low altitude. Again and again they saturated the city with bombs, until the devastation was nearly complete. The records showed that 28,000 died, but I don't know if anyone ever knew how accurate that number was; I do know that a great many of them were still there under the rubble in June, when we arrived. The whole center of the city was a pile of destroyed buildings, and the odor of death in the warm summer sunshine is a memory that will always be with me. In spite of all that, the people left on the fringes of the town seemed friendly enough. We were no longer looting, and we were getting our laundry done in exchange for bringing the soap and leaving it. And I began to learn some of the pidgin German I was to pick up over time.

William Matthews helped out the *Newsletter* again with a vivid reminiscence:

PFORZHEIM – CITY OF THE DEAD

“One day as I was on my way to Dillstein. I stopped halfway down the side of the valley to take a good, thoughtful, look at Pforzheim. There spread before me in the beautiful wooded valley was the shattered remains of one of Europe's most famous and charming cities. Was it really possible, I thought, that this ruin, this graveyard of more than 28,000 men, women, and children, had been produced in only 27 short minutes? But there it was.

“Rising above the jumble of fire-gutted buildings stood the old church—a deep reddish-black stone building with its tower and cross still high over the city. The windows were gaping holes and the blackened arched rafters were like the ribs of an old sailing vessel, lying inverted and decaying on the beach.

“The River Enz passed along by the church and on down the valley. In its shallow, clear water I knew there were hundreds of long, hexagonal incendiary bombs. Spanning this river in the center of town was the plain wooden bridge the engineers had constructed to replace the destroyed one.

“On the far side of the valley floor were the rail yards. Long rows of four-wheeled freight cars stood on the sidings and on the main lines. Nothing remained of some of the cars but piles of fire-blackened metal frames. An overhead roadway bridge crossed over part of the rail yards, with some of its black girders twisted and bent at crazy angles.

“Below and in front of me was a large four-story hospital. Still visible on the few remaining tiles of the roof was a large painted red cross against a white background.

“The streets were lined with stone ruins, the rubble having been cleared to the curbs and piled high along every sidewalk. Here and there on top of the rubble piles was a small cross and sometimes a few flowers. Frequently the whole face or side of a building had been sheared away as cleanly as if a gigantic knife had been used.

“As I started on my way again to Dillstein, I knew I would long remember Pforzheim, city of the dead.”

We were not far from Stuttgart, where we were able to spend many off-duty hours. Bomb damage in some sections of the city was relatively light—the opera house was undamaged, for example—so there were some things left to do there, as there were not in Pforzheim. Usually we hitch-hiked on military vehicles on the *autobahn* or caught rides with our own people. I recall seeing there a USO show with Jack Benny, Ingrid Bergman, and Larry Adler the harmonica virtuoso. There had been one time during the fighting when we heard there was a USO show near our position, but no one I knew got near it. We were impressed by Miss Bergman, who sat for hours at a card table in the opera house lobby and chatted with anyone who wanted to wait in line for her—and there were many.

At some point during this time I had a bizarre encounter with a strange and intriguing girl who took up a lot of my attention for a while. She spoke very passable English, and, I think, excellent German, though she assured me she was Yugoslavian. She was probably in her early 20s, short, rather thickset, but bright, vivacious, and attractive. Her story was that she had spent a good part of the war as the servant and virtual prisoner of a German army unit in Yugoslavia. She had been badly treated, forced to do menial work, regularly raped, and severely beaten. She claimed to have whipping scars on her back, but she would never let me see them. I spent many off hours with her, and of course I had the usual expectations of a 20-year old male regarding sexual exploits. However, though I'm sure there was some kissing and necking, she never let me touch her in any serious way, blaming her sensitivity on her brutalization at the hands of the Germans. I even remember spending the night once, in a farmhouse near Stuttgart where she was living, in not only a separate bed but a separate room.

Yet I was intrigued, She fascinated me for a while, and, though her stories may not have been true, I still rather believe they were. She claimed her mother had been born in the U.S.A., in Bristol, Tennessee, so that she was half American. She wanted to get to the U.S. somehow, and thought she had some right to because of her mother. For reasons unclear to me now—since I can't imagine what good we thought it would do—I wrote to the city clerk of Bristol asking if there was any record of her mother's birth. No reply ever came.

Next I suggested that we get married so she could go to the States as my war bride, which would, I guess, have made her a citizen eventually if not automatically. Then we could get divorced if we didn't want to stay together, and she would have

gained her end. The only surviving memory I have of that hare-brained scheme is that it didn't happen. Whether I scared myself or just gradually lost interest, I don't recollect, but I stopped going to see her eventually, and I never knew what became of her.

So the summer passed. We kept busy with desultory training, making a presence for the Germans, and—most of us—just marking time, wondering what was to come next. At one point I had a minor disciplinary encounter with MPs in Stuttgart (it was a uniform violation that I got a little verbal about). Our wonderful, patient Captain, rather than court martial me as had been suggested, elected to send me away on detached service, to the mail room at Division headquarters in Göppingen, about 50 miles east of Pforzheim. Here I spent lonely hours sorting undeliverable mail for return to the States, and rather solitary off-hours as well. I was there when the news of the Japanese surrender came early in August, which meant mostly to me that now I would surely be going home, and out of the Army—soon I hoped.

After my return to the Company, in September I had another stroke of luck. Furloughs were rare, and to the most desirable places—Switzerland and the French Riviera—almost non-existent. However, my name came up somehow and I ended up with a week vacation on the Promenade in Nice. I remember a long train ride to the Riviera, with an overnight stay in a hotel in Lyons, and then a solitary week in the luxury Hotel Ruhl right on the beach front in the center of Nice. It was solitary partly by choice, partly by circumstance. I was with no one I knew, and I had a single room. Most of the time it was impossible to be alone in the Army, and I didn't mind a little more of it. Every morning I went to a bathhouse on the pebbled beach in front of the hotel, rented a towel and a bathing suit, and spent the time until lunch swimming, sunbathing, and ogling bare-breasted women. Afternoons and evenings I explored the city, mostly bistros, I guess, but some legitimate sightseeing too. One day I took a bus tour along the coast as far as the Italian border, and fell in love with that part of the *Cote d'Azur*, where the beginnings of the Alps rise right out of the sea in startling scenic loveliness. It was a wonderful week for me, over too soon.