

I Remember Christmas '44

by William D. Paschal, 397-G

I was one of the college greenagers dropped off on the street of Company G, 397th Infantry Regiment, 100th ID, at the end of March 1944. The old hands greeted us cordially but ten minutes later, one of the guys from Hoboken stated, "Youse shure talks funny." He apparently had never been in contact with a GI from another planet (north central Kansas), before.

We integrated pretty well with the old hands already there. We obliged them by listening to the tales of the struggles of their life during Tennessee Maneuvers. We kids were so impressed that we believed that combat would be an indoctrination and graduated to the mini maneuvers in the piney woods west of the main post. We fought a number of battles to capture Gaddy's Mountain and took the hills of Central Park in New York City. Those of us from the Midwest marveled at the tall buildings, Times Square, the Staten Island Ferry, and Coney Island. We didn't get the battle stars or the ribbons for those campaigns, however. On the slopes of the Vosges Mountains of France we learned to dig slit trenches, some of which filled with water from the ground water table. We slept outside in rain and snow. We learned to keep a pair of socks under our undershirt so they could be put on after the day's assaults were over. Gaps appeared in our squads and platoons from those who were missing in action, wounded, or killed. Almost immediately we were no longer the newcomer college kids and the old veterans who had been in service for a couple of years or more. We bonded and became a cohesive unit—the beginning of a band of brothers. The accuracy of the German mortars and of the 88s convinced some of us that it was a matter of "when," not "if," we would get hit.

By the third week of December we became hardened in body and in mind and actually thought of ourselves as soldiers in a fierce struggle. The mail from home lightened our spirits but we had almost forgotten such things as hot meals, cozy beds, and the luxury of clean clothes and a morning shave. We looked sort of scruffy and unwashed. The gloomy days seemed long and the long nights all too short. At daylight we knew we would make another assault up those rocky slopes.

The first German prisoners we took did not look like the Aryan super race. There were some big and some small, some brown-eyed Krauts, and for the most part they were older than us. We crossed the Vosges and thought we were in Germany. The structure of the houses changed. The maps had German sounding place names and the civilians were blue eyed. We commented on the fact that there were so many brown-eyed Germans and so many blue-eyed French. We were making progress but had no idea how long this war would last.

In December we saw that the pine trees had been decorated with long strips of tin foil, reminding us of the Christmas season. This was due to the bomber crews who decorated the trees for us as they flew overhead.

On December 24 we were temporarily in a reserve position. I believe the little town we were in was Guiderkirch. Word came down the line that the populace would have their Christmas mass in the little stone church to celebrate their liberation and also the Christmas story. They had invited us to attend. Our platoon marched to the church and fell out. We locked our rifles together in the tripod fashion and went in. One lone figure was left outside to guard the stacked rifles. Most of us sat in the rear of the church. As the organ began to play we noted a small elderly man pumping mightily away on the handles of the leather bellows that powered the pipes. To our amazement the songs that came out were the old familiar Christmas songs we often sang back home in the States. Some of the GIs stepped to the bellows and took over the pumping task from the old man. The handles moved up and down so fast that I feared that the old leather of the bellows would have a blow out. That organ really gave forth with the sound of Christmas. We sang in English along with the crowd of civilians singing in German, not French. The sermon and the prayers were given in German, but the meaning was clear to us Yankees just the same. It was a memorable and inspiring experience. We left the church humming those Christmas songs. The entire world was not madly making war. There was still hope for peace and the goodness of mankind. For a few hours we were home again and could dream about the next Christmas when we would celebrate with our

loved ones in the States. It was so uplifting and stayed in our memories forever. I remember Christmas '44 in France.

Holiday 2011 Association Newsletter