

My Return to France and Germany

by Gene Pollard, 397-F

[Editor's Note: Earlier this year, Gene, a member of 397/F, sent me a list of reasons why he wanted to return to Central Europe. He accepted the idea of holding up publishing this material until his return, when a comparison could be made between his trip objectives and what was accomplished.

Presented below is an abbreviated version of the "Why" and then the full story of "The Trip Back."

Most of us who make this journey find it to be a very moving and emotional experience. Gene's write-up of this trip captures these emotions very effectively.

Gene entered the service in December 1943. After completion of Infantry Basic Training in Camp Fannin (TX) he was shipped off to Italy and assigned to the 141st Regiment of the 36th Division. However, by accident (a truck accident, that is), Gene ended up in the 100th Division. Gene tells of his travels, "I was hurt in a truck wreck as we were leapfrogging up the Rhone River Valley. I was in a hospital in Naples a long while. When I was returned to France I was sent to the 397th Infantry Regiment instead of being returned to the 141st where I had seen no action. However while I was in the Repple Depple near Caserta Italy and while I was in the convalescent hospital I heard a lot of 'war talk' from these older infantrymen about Salerno, Anzio etc. Now with the 100th I was eager to learn of their times of combat and somehow Rimling became a place of extreme importance to me and still is today." Gene joined the 100th 9 January 1945, just after our departure from Rimling.

After returning to the States April '46 he took up farming with his dad. Gene later worked for the Department of Agriculture until his retirement.

Why I Want to Return to Central Europe

There are a thousand reasons why I want to return to Central Europe. I want to visit the U.S. Lorraine American Cemetery near St. Avoird, France, and stand by the grave of John Cody and Leon Abernathy and, in the silence of my heart, pay my respects to these two men, one of which, fell in battle very close to me.

I want to return for a second time to the area around Bitche, Hottviller, and Rimling, France. It was here that the 100th Infantry Division fought its hardest battle. It was into this frozen, snow-covered world, into a cold and lonely foxhole, facing a battle-hardened German army that I came as a twenty-year-old infantry replacement. My chances of living through my ordeal were not very good. I was homesick and scared.

It is very important to me to visit Heilbronn one more time, and there perhaps I can renew my vow never to forget my brave comrades who fought so valiantly in the capture of this point of stubborn SS resistance. Can I find that rail yard, maybe to talk to a citizen who could direct me to where the rail yard was in 1945? Will I remember the place where my squad leader was shot through the heart, the place where I called for the medic, and how PFC Kline crawled forward and, finding the Sergeant dead, turned and ran to the rear only to be shot dead by the same sniper?

The Trip Back

There is so much for a veteran of WWII to see in Central Europe, but my most memorable day was spent in the Lorraine American Military Cemetery at St. Avoird, France. 10,489 dead lie here, men who gave their lives in our country's service and who came from every state in the union. One-hundred-fifty marble headstones mark the graves of the unknowns. Twenty-eight brothers lie side by side.

This cemetery covers 113.5 acres of rolling landscape in the Saar region. It is the largest American WWII cemetery in Europe. The memorial is a tall, rectangular structure sixty-seven feet high. Flanking the door is the declaratory inscription,

IN PROUD REMEMBRANCE OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF HER SONS AND IN HUMBLE
TRIBUTE TO THEIR SACRIFICES THIS MEMORIAL HAS BEEN ERECTED BY THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

The grave area is reached by a broad flight of steps from the front of the Memorial. It consists of nine plots laid out in a symmetrical pattern, divided by gracefully curved paths. The headstones are set in straight lines in each of the plots. Stars of David mark the graves of those of the Jewish faith, while all others are marked by Latin crosses. It was built and is maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

My son-in law, Sergeant Major George Swarner, and I walked to the high ground at the north end. From this vantage point, it is an awe-inspiring sight to look upon the long rows of marble crosses and to realize each cross of this vast grave site represents some mother's son who gave the supreme sacrifice to maintain our freedom from the Nazi regime. I realized more acutely than ever before that these were the bodies of my friends and comrades in arms. The caretaker took me to the graves of my two friends, Leon Abernathy and John Cody, with whom I served most of my 105 days of combat duty. I shed no tears, but surely I was humbled by this experience. Cody and I served as number one and number two scouts in 3d Platoon of F Company of the 397th Infantry Regiment, from our "jumpoff" near Hottviller, France, until the fateful evening he was killed by a *panzerfaust* as we entered the small town of Oberheinreit east of Heilbronn. It was April 13. Two days later, I was taken to a rest center at Nancy, France.

Cody and I spent many hours conversing together in the foxholes in the Maginot line through the winter months. He had a wife and a sister that I always thought I would contact after the war. I became too busy, or did not want to remember at that juncture of my life. (I would give anything for that opportunity today.) When my son-in-law and I left the cemetery, we were conversing in whispered tones. Somehow, I was terribly moved. I wouldn't take anything for that day.

The Hun Strikes the Century Division

January 1, 1945, nine German divisions were thrown into the NORDWIND attack against the Seventh U.S. Army, according to Trevor N. Dupuy in his history of the Bulge, *Hitler's Last Gamble*.

As we drove eastward away from St. Avoird and toward the Bitche area, the countryside began to look very familiar to me. We were hungry, so my chauffeur son-in-law found his way south into the town of Rohrbach. I had a strange feeling about the place because I remembered some of the 100th Division men had had a rough time here. After our lunch, we drove straight north and found the town of Guising that I knew to be straight south of Rimling and was the place to which F Company fell back to upon leaving the blood-drenched town of Rimling the 9th of January 1945. This was the place where exhausted infantrymen finally fell down and slept. After missing the road a couple of times, we ended up coming into Rimling from the west. Now this was a beautiful country to my family, but some way or other, I saw it all in a different light. You see, this entire area, Rimling, Dollenbach, Hottviller, Bettviller was a battleground for the men of the 100th Infantry Division and many of our buddies lost their lives wresting this corner of the world away from the stubborn German defenders. I can't help but view this part of the world as a battlefield; a place where brave men defended a town against a foe of far greater numbers; a counterattack of no small proportion where our men were pitted against a far greater number of fanatical Germans, determined to wipe out the 100th Infantry Division so other *Wehrmacht* forces could exploit the hole in the line, and effect a general breakthrough that would threaten the Seventh Army's entire defensive stand. The 397th had different ideas! This was the place a Medal of Honor was posthumously awarded to Sgt. Charles Carey, 2d Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment. And a place where for many of our men, a life of hell began as they became prisoners of war to our ruthless enemy. This great outdoor amphitheater, by the designs of a dictator, had become dedicated to the institution of death.

(We should all reread pages 161-62 of *The Regiment of the Century*.)

Hottviller, five miles east of Rimling, brought about another set of memories for me. It was here where we would stay for a few days when we were out of the line. It was a 1,000 yards northeast of Hottviller (according to the record) where I saw my first foxhole duty in January 1945. I remember well my fear of the nighttime vigilance. I could never say too much about the cold of the winter of 1945. The nights were by far the worst and our morale was invariably raised with the coming of daylight. In retrospect, I have come to believe that these tense and uncertain times bore on the nerves of a man more than direct contact with the enemy. I remember how twice I was called on for night-time reconnaissance patrol duty. It was

scary for a rookie. Never will I forget this duty! Whatever these memories did to me, I will carry to my grave. I did not dare tromp out into this privately-owned land.

Later in the afternoon, my son-in-law and I started to Lemberg, but the road was closed for construction. Not knowing for how long, we returned to Bitche and once again, I took the tour through the Citadel. My wife wanted to know if the Germans occupied this fortress in 1945. Yes, I know from the book, the Germans used the Citadel in their defense. I was able to explain something of how the German defense was so stubborn here, with such good observation for their heavy guns. I am reluctant to write much about this hard-fought battle around Bitche because of my lack of first-hand knowledge, so I will defer further comment. My respect for these men is great. I suspect Mo Lloyd has become one of the 100th Infantry Divisions' most honored fallen soldiers. I am proud to have served with such a great bunch of men as the 100th was made up of when I came in.

Heilbronn, Our Final Assault

Heilbronn, Germany, was the last major engagement with the German forces for the 100th. Being last did not make it least, for here we encountered a tough force of SS troops and Hitler youth, ready to defend this city to the last man. We had hiked from our crossing of the Rhine River for three days and were a weary bunch when we arrived at the smoking remains of this pre-war Neckar River city of 100,000. The 100th was sent to smash this last bastion of Nazi resistance with all haste. The enemy we met in Heilbronn had not been weakened or demoralized by the Ardennes offensive. My company crossed the rapid running Neckar River late in the day of April 4, some of us after dark, and occupied a large factory-type building for our first fearful night in this Nazi stronghold. This was a factory area and the rail yards brought death to many of our men beginning April 5, 1945. The most hellish firefight we had encountered was waiting for us in these rail yards.

October 14, 2000, I stood again where I stood 55 years ago. This day, I saw a modern miracle, a very beautifully rebuilt city. As I viewed the city from the high ground east of Heilbronn, I stood transfixed by the emotions of the hour. It seemed as if I could see, as if superimposed over the modern city, the bomb-scarred ruins of the blasted rail center we had conquered in '45. As I stood there alone, I could again see our troops creeping across open spaces, amid firefights and smoke bombs. The memory of a war of men and death tore at my soul. So it was, this rainy fall day became my own personal commemoration of those honored dead, not only those whose graves I had visited at St Avoird, but many more, men I knew so intimately, that were taken by their families to grave plots in the United States. In years gone by, I have tried to write not only of the events of the war, but of the emotions and feelings of a front-line doughboy, so now being true to myself and all my comrades, I am trying to tell something of the sense of comradeship that comes between men who have shared such unforgettable experiences. This may not sound right or even patriotic to some, but once we got into it, we fought for each other more than we fought for flag or country.

April 12, 1945 we climbed the high ground east of the city and dug in a perimeter defense. Heilbronn was conquered, we were glad, our company strength stood at seventy men. We didn't feel like heroes, but were still those plain American boys from across our country that had done a job that had to be done. Tomorrow would no doubt see us in another firefight in another town and somehow we would find the strength to win another battle.

Fifty-five years after the Heilbronn battle, those nine days of street fighting are still the most memorable days of my life. Some events in Heilbronn stand out in my memory like fires in a blackened night. I am sorry that I am not acquainted today with anyone that fought with me there. We are quite isolated in rural Idaho. There were three of us here from the 397th, Charles Hummel, an architect in Boise, Idaho, served with Company I of the 398th Infantry Regiment and saw action in Heilbronn. We met when I dropped by his office in 1994. Donald J. MacKay also served with the 397th and saw combat action in Rimling, being wounded on January 7 and, after hiding in a basement for two days, was taken prisoner January 9. He somehow survived his wounds and was released to the GI forces April 1, 1945. This is according to his own interesting story of which he sent me a copy. At the same time expressing his desire to meet me and we had better not wait too long! I read of his decease in the summer of 1997. We

had lived nearly 400 miles apart and neither of us had made the sacrifice to get acquainted. At least we had each others' stories. The thing that baffles and disappoints me is why those other men that were beside the rail tracks when our squad leader (PFC) and our good Medic Kline were killed are no where to be found. I have needed some help in reconstructing some of the times of action, but for whatever reason, about six other men that were there do not belong to the Association and are silent. I have made one bad error in my recollections of that battle. I also believe there are two events that were not recorded the way they happened. Nobody is perfect.

In closing, I believe the movie "Saving Private Ryan" has brought a new interest in our war. And I believe Tom Brokaw's books have become an asset to we who want our legacy preserved. Without waxing too eloquent, I would like to conclude in this way. I am much older now, we were kids when we found WWII. When those brutal memories come to mind, I would like to lead every American to Heilbronn and say, "Look, something awful happened here. My buddies died here. Please never forget these brave men." May we veterans resolve never to forget!

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