

next 30 minutes an artillery barrage was scheduled to hit where we stood. Obviously, we both got out of there and back to battalion.”

Now we turn to something a little different, with which we were very impressed when it came to us for the *Newsletter*.

## **XI. PRISONERS OF WAR**

In 1992, one of our First Platoon scouts on that fateful day for so many, died from complications of diabetes. Shortly before he passed away he was able to complete for us an account of his experience as one of our first POWs. We were much moved when his wife told us that it was one of his last wishes that she send it to us. He called it:

### **CAPTURED**

By

John J. Heron, Jr. (Pfc.)  
Company G, 399<sup>th</sup> Infantry

It was a cold November morning as we worked our way up the snow covered slope in the Vosges Mountains. I was second scout for the first squad of the first platoon, George Company, 399<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. This was our first day in combat. We had been in reserve of Easy and Fox companies in the 45<sup>th</sup> Division line for one afternoon but nothing had happened. We didn't know where we were going or what to expect, when we got

off the truck there was a signpost that had the names Baccarat and Neufmaisons on it.

We had been walking for quite a while when we began to reach the top of the hill. Suddenly I saw two Jerries off to my left under a pine tree. I whirled and shouted, "Come out with your hands over your head!" They stood up and came out from under the tree. It didn't register with me at the time but later I remembered that they didn't have overcoats on so they could not have been there too long, as it was cold. I turned them over to someone to take them back to the rear and we continued on for another 50 or 60 yards.

We broke out of the woods and into a clearing. About 600 yards away, across a blacktop road was a burned out house. To the right was a dirt road and then more woods. We stood there for a minute looking over the situation. Captain Clark came up and said, "Scouts out, search that house for a machine gun nest." The first and third platoons were in front so we started moving out in combat fashion, run about five yards, drop and roll over, cover your partner, then get up and run again.

There were Richards and DeFusco from the second squad, Weber and myself from the first squad. The third platoon scouts were Vasquez and Rector and two others whose names I cannot remember. We had gone about 200 yards when we ran into three barbed-wire fences. One third platoon scout had wire cutters and cut a hole thru the wire. We continued on, circled the house, threw a grenade in the cellar, and came back to the front. We stood there and discussed the situation, and decided the two scouts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon should go back and tell the captain the house was clear but it looked like there were foxholes up to the right.

As they ran back toward the company, the rest of us lit up a cigarette, which is what we always did back in training. It didn't mean anything at the time but as I reflect back, it gave the appearance that there was no danger. We saw the company start coming out of the woods before the scouts had gotten back. Then the artillery barrage started and we rushed for the ditch. Rector dropped right in front of the house where there wasn't any protection and was hit almost immediately. The rest of us lay in the ditch on the other side of the road.

Suddenly there was a shell that hit very close and Weber said, "I've been hit." I looked up and saw Vasquez wasn't in the ditch, his body had been blown out into the field. I asked Weber where he was hit and he replied, "In the little finger." I crawled up to him and looked at his helmet, and there were seven holes in the helmet but none had gone thru the liner. I bandaged up his finger. About that time the barrage stopped and DeFusco hollered, "Let's go." We jumped up and crossed the road. I looked up to the right and said, "There are Jerries coming down the road," and started to aim my rifle at them. DeFusco called, "Drop your rifle, Heron, they're right on top of us." There had been positions to the left that were closer and they were standing in the road looking down at us.

They marched us up to the house and around to the right side and lined us up against the wall and searched us. It didn't occur to me but both DeFusco and Weber said they thought that they might shoot us. When we had passed Rector he was badly wounded but still alive. There was a short conversation and

one of the Germans had gone back around the corner; there was a shot and he came back to where we were. Weber, who understood some German, said the soldier was told to shoot the wounded man. Then they marched us up the road to the right past the raw dirt we had seen, which turned out to be foxholes. We went down a steep hill and at the bottom was a bunker that appeared to be their company CP. From there we were marched thru a woods to a house that was either their regimental or division CP. We were asked a few questions, fed, and bedded down on the floor.

We stayed there until late the next afternoon when we were loaded into a Volkswagen bus that was powered by burning wood [*sic, probably charcoal*]. Every time we came to a small hill, we had to get out and push the bus up the knoll. That night we stayed in another house. We were joined by two POW's from the 45<sup>th</sup>. The next day we were moved to a house out in the middle of nowhere. As we waited more and more POW's arrived. About 11:00 PM we were told to get dressed, and were marched along the road about a mile where we came to a railroad track. We stood there until a train came along, and we were loaded into the last car. There were about forty of us by then. After an hour and a half we arrived at a railroad station with the name of Strasbourg. We were detrained and marched south for about an hour and a half to a large building.

We were moved to a large barracks where there were 20 other POW's. They had arrived early in the day and told us that there had been a shipment out that night of 150 POW's to a camp in Germany. They had been told that there was a shipment out every Wednesday Night. The next day we were interrogated by the officers. They knew a great deal about the division and officers, but their information wasn't current enough to know that Captain Clark had become the company commander. The next day we marched out to a railroad track and were ordered to dig a trench along the tracks. The air raid siren sounded in the afternoon and we marched about a mile down the tracks to a road tunnel under the railroad tracks. We stayed there about an hour until the "all clear" and then went back to digging.

The next day was the same as the day before except there was an air raid in the morning and another in the afternoon. Sunday we did not work, and were allowed to walk around the inside of the compound. It was built in a block "B" shape except it had two cross sections. There had been vegetable gardens in the open sections of the "B" and there were still cabbages growing there. There were faded Red Crosses painted on the roof. The building might have been a hospital, some time in the past.

Monday we returned to work on the trenches. There was a long air raid in the morning, and there were two raids in the afternoon that lasted most of the day. We went out again Tuesday and spent the entire day either in the shelter or marching to it. We could hear a lot of activity of planes diving and anti-aircraft fire. We could also hear the explosion of bombs. Wednesday we were put to work in the attic of the barracks. A young German soldier came up and said good-bye to an older guard. He said he was being shipped back to Germany, there was still one railroad bridge left. It appeared there would be no shipment out that night.

The next morning was Thanksgiving Day, and the camp commander came up and told us that the city was surrounded. He said that it probably would be taken in the next couple of days. He stated that they did not plan to fight, they would wait until the fighting was over and then would surrender. He warned us to stay away from the windows. It was late Saturday afternoon when we were liberated by elements of the 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. They decided that we should stay where we were for that night and they would move us the next day. The next noon their cooks fixed us a Thanksgiving dinner and then we were trucked to the Repo-Depot in Épinal. After being reoutfitted we were returned to our unit.

In all we were POW's for fourteen days. We were not mistreated in any way and except for the instance with Rector we didn't encounter any brutality. As for food, I think we were fed in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Every morning we received a bowl of coffee, a tablespoon of fat, a tablespoon of jam, and a slice of bread.

We were hungry, and constantly thought about food. I remember that we all fantasized about what we would like for our Thanksgiving dinner. I am sure we couldn't have continued on that way, or it would get to you. I don't think any of us had mentally accepted the fact that we were prisoners and might spend months or even years in a prison. I think this realization would have come when we actually entered Germany and were interned in a prison camp.

Whenever I am asked how I was captured my stock answer has been, "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," and my response to how did I get away is, "I was in the right place at the right time."

When we printed this in our Newsletter it inspired two of our readers to write us of their own personal involvements in, or observations of, that POW episode. The first was from William "Buckeye" Smith:

"After reading John Heron's memoir 'Captured' sad memories were brought back from my years in WW II. You see, I knew Don Rector personally. I also knew that Don had been shot in the head, but I assumed it was from a sniper. Thanks to Pfc. Heron, I now know the truth.

"Don Rector to me was more of a friend than just a G.I. buddy. We were together almost from the start. Don hailed from Eaton, Indiana and I met him in '43 at Camp Haan, California. He and I were assigned to the same A.A.A. gun section and buddied from then on. In May of '44 we were transferred to the 201<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment at Camp Carson, Colorado, both to Company L. In September we were shipped to the 100<sup>th</sup> at Bragg. We ended there in Sgt. Irvine's 3<sup>rd</sup> Squad, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon.

"I had talked with Don on that fateful day he was killed. He told me, 'I think I'm gonna make it home from this war all right.' Fate was the hunter and Don's luck had run out. Later I was put in Hq. Platoon, but my heart remained with Lt. Siemasko and the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon."

The other letter came from Jack Porter:

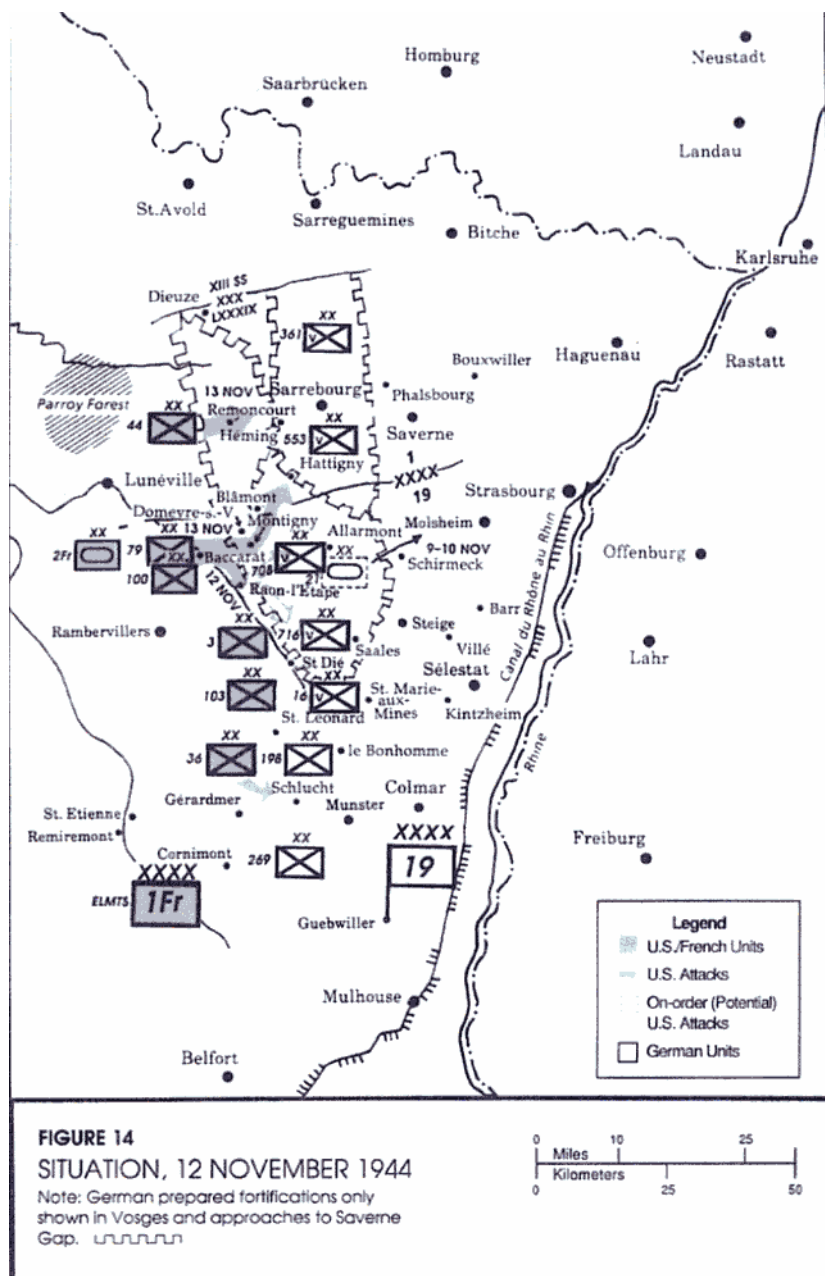
"Thank you very much for ... Heron's 'capture' memories. Their capture was often a topic of conversation in First Platoon. I could even take part, because

I was standing with Captain Clark, and saw them cut the wire at the German position. Shortly after that, all hell broke loose, and Captain Clark was down with a bad wound, and even I got nicked.

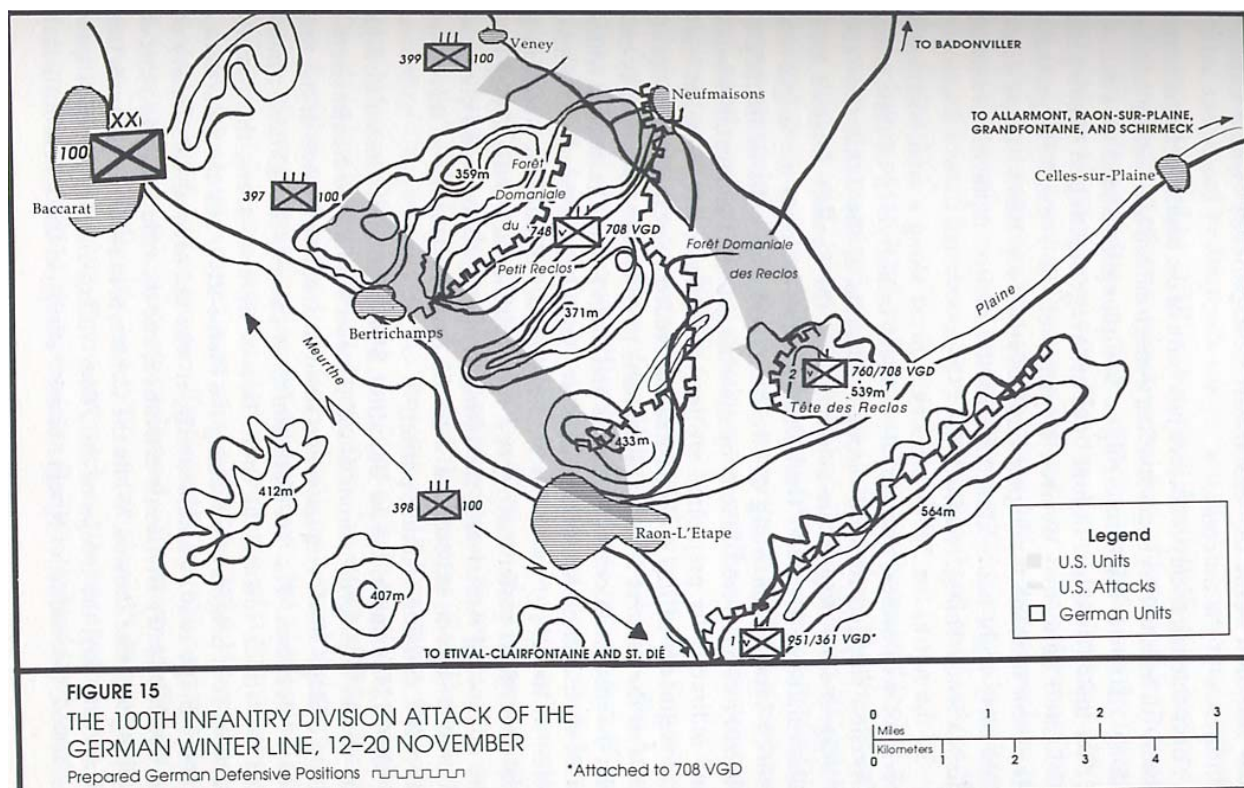
"It may even be a bit of wartime trivia. I wonder how many infantry platoons had four scouts captured, then recaptured, to spend the rest of the war in combat against the enemy? Probably not too many.

"I knew all of them well. They were extremely fine guys. Heron was usually a quiet one. Weber was sort of irrepressible. I can't remember his ever being 'down.' Leonard Richard and I were pretty close; we used to play Casino together whenever an opportunity presented. Got a kick out of Heron's account of Ernesto DeFusco in the capture. ... He was a handsome kid—looked like Perry Como, but better looking. Great in combat, but was never the talkative type. Apparently, he said more during the capture than he ever said to me when I had the platoon. Now, I realize he probably never said anything unless he thought it important.

"... Was interested that Heron restrained himself to writing 'only' about his own experiences. There was much more that they talked about when in a group: an incident about a 'new wallet,' that I think concerned Weber; Richard's interrogation by a German officer, who was a Dartmouth graduate; and much conversation about food. Also, it was interesting to see Heron's comments about how the Germans treated them. Although always hungry, all the guys seemed to think that the Germans tried to treat them as well as they were able. In turn, I don't think that First Platoon was ever guilty of mis-treating a prisoner. We always remembered *they* had been good to our guys."



This map shows our position the day before our baptism of fire at "Purple Heart Lane." We had just relieved elements of the 45<sup>th</sup> Division. Note the little box with "100" next it. If any of us had seen this map then it would have meant about as much as a map of the bottom of the sea. We never had any idea of exactly where we were.



This map shows in closer detail where we were going that mid-November of 1945, and what we faced in getting there. This time our little box is marked "399" and "100."

## XII. WINTER CAMPAIGN (1)

Thus we embarked on a way of life involving almost unrelieved misery and discomfort that was to last, with only occasional short respites, for the next two months. We were during this time moving through country that was mostly mountainous and heavily wooded. Towns named St. Remy, Baccarat, Raon L'Étape, Wackenbach, Moyenmoutier, Sarrebourg, La Petit Pierre, Lemberg, Hottviller, Sierstal, Lambach, and many others were familiar places for a few days and then soon forgotten as we