

LOVE COMPANY

RETURN TO LOVE COMPANY

The time came when I was declared fit to return to my company. I donned my old uniform all clean and new looking. A truck took me and others, from the hospital, to the Replacement Depot, usually called the Repple Depple, at Epinal. There I was checked in and waited for transportation to my company at the front. I was curious to learn what had happened in my absence. As I looked forward to a reunion with my old buddies, I was worried whether I would be able face the hell of combat again.

Most of the men at the Repple Depple were fresh from the States and had no combat experience. They were being given some last minute training to prepare them for combat. I was unaware of this as I was walking to the mess hall for my first meal there. Suddenly, I heard a burst of machine gun fire that came from a German burp gun. Instinctively, without a split second's thought, I dove for the ground. Again the machine gun blasted away, and I looked up and found the other GIs walking to the mess hall and looking down at me in the dirt. After I got up, I learned that the captured machine gun was being fired to give the new men some idea of what they would be facing at the front. The meal I had was not memorable, but my uneasiness was.

On 1 March 1945, I returned to Love Company after being away since 7 January 1945. With my clean uniform and my clean-shaven face, I was greeted as a new replacement. Only a few of my old buddies were still in the company. Almost everyone I saw was a stranger to me. This was not the old Love Company I had left.

I learned that on 18 January 1945, my platoon leader, now 1st Lt. Bennett D. Taylor, was transferred to I Company of the 399th Infantry Regiment. That was a big disappointment for me, because I had expected to be greeted by him. He was a good leader who was always in the middle of every attack the platoon made. We had been through a lot of them together.

As I talked to the new buddies upon my return, I soon learned what had happened in the company while I was away in the hospital. Details were sketchy. There had been several battles and many of my old buddies were gone. Some were killed and some were wounded. Our ex-

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ecutive officer, 1st Lt. Park Ashbrook, was killed. Al Lapa told me 50 years later how it happened:

"7 January 1945. Company L occupied some old French Army dugouts on the hills north of the town of Reysersvillier. We were separated from the Germans by a deep valley about 300 feet deep. During the day we observed German troops moving about on the next hill which was about 300 yards away. I recall setting my M1 sight at high limit and firing at the Krauts, not hitting anyone but making them scatter. We were in these positions for about 3 days. During this time, one of our guys was shot in the back by a German patrol. I can't recall his name but I remember dragging his body back to our platoon C.P. [Command Post]. During this time 3rd platoon was involved in a serious fire fight during a recon [reconnaissance] of a German position to our front. During this encounter, a fellow whose name was Clendenin [Pfc. Ralph Clendenin] received a life threatening wound to his thigh. I recall applying a tourniquet and dragging him back to our platoon C.P. where our medics took over.

"On 7 Jan 45 2 platoons were ordered to evict the Krauts from their position in order to straighten out the line. We were assisted by one tank. The attack started about 5:30 AM, preceded by an artillery and mortar barrage which lasted about 10 minutes. We had to advance from our positions over the crest of a hill which was entirely devoid of vegetation, therefore offering absolutely no cover. The tank started to advance over the crest of the hill. Some of our guys including Lt. Ashbrook stayed behind the tank as protection from the incoming small arms fire. At this time the Krauts let loose with a few 88mm rounds which exploded close to the tank. I was about 150 feet to the left of the tank and saw Lt. Ashbrook fall, evidently wounded by shrapnel from the 88s. The tank was backing up at this time and since Lt. Ashbrook was directly behind the left track and perpendicular to it, the tank backed over the lieutenant's prone body, directly over the pelvic area. From my position I could hear him scream and see his flailing arms in motion. Since there was about 12 inches of snow on the ground, his body was completely crushed as snow took up much of the compressive load. The Krauts increased the intensity of their small arms, artillery, and mortar fire and we were ordered to withdraw. We left the lieutenant on the forward slope of the hill and fell back to our starting positions. About 30 minutes later I saw the same tank approaching the lieutenant's body with 2 medics carrying a stretcher. The medics were on the side opposite from the German lines. They picked up Lt. Ashbrook and brought him back to our lines. I saw him on the stretcher before he was

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evacuated. He was still alive but gravely injured. That night we evacuated the area and moved to other positions. (What a waste!)”

1st Lt. Park B. Ashbrook was killed in action 8 January 1945. He was a fine officer, one that I would have called a true gentleman and a friend. (Note: Lapa wrote that this action took place on 7 Jan 44, but I was still in the company on that day and should have been in that attack. I think that the correct date should have been 8 Jan 44 when Lt. Ashbrook was killed.)

Pfc. Alexander J. Lapa was wounded on 9 January 1945 and did not return to the company. The Morning Report listed him as “LIA,” that may mean lightly injured in action. He was one of my good buddies and a brave soldier. I was sorry to learn that he was gone.

On 8 February 1945, 2nd Lt. Thomas D. Plante was transferred to A Company, 399th Infantry Regiment, after he had been on another assignment from 30 December 1944 to 4 February 1945. He was the best liked of the officers in the company, because he was not a stickler for discipline and army protocol. He was an officer who always cared about his men. We were not happy to see him go. Later we learned that he was killed in action at Bitche on 16 March 1945. In the Story of the Century, page 130, it was reported:

“The Weapons Platoon, under 2nd Lieutenant Thomas E. Plante, moved into a stable just south of the 1st Platoon. Once inside and slightly protected from the enemy fire, Lt. Plante ... and others of the platoon tried to set up defensive fires. But the German tanks came on, their 88s hurling shells directly into the buildings where the troops had taken cover.

“The leading tank fired its cannon and machine guns almost point blank into the stable. Two bazooka rounds shot by the Weapons Platoon had both missed the tank. Lt. Plante seized the bazooka and ran out of the building. He threw himself to the ground just ahead of the advancing tank and fired the bazooka. The round blew off a tread of the tank and stopped it. Lt. Plante leaped up and rushed forward to throw a grenade into the turret, but the machine gun on the tank fired a heavy burst and mortally wounded him. The ... German tanks turned tail and fled along the railroad to the southeast.”

He did what I thought he would do – sacrifice his life for his men. The second highest medal in the Army, the Distinguished Service Cross, was given to him posthumously.

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On 3 January 1945, Capt. Carl D. Alfonso, our company commander, left due to sickness and did not return. 1st Lt. Allen T. Sykes was company commander when I left for the hospital. Capt. Travis V. Hopkins (a.k.a. "Hoppy") was the company commander when I returned. Probably no captain in the 100th Infantry Division was better known than Capt. Hopkins. He had polio as a boy and overcame the disability by running and running until he had developed a barrel chest and tremendous endurance. Though he had a slight limp, he was in top physical condition. He was a no-nonsense officer who had a fierce look and was a tough disciplinarian. At Fort Bragg, he was company commander of I Company, whose barracks were near to L Company's barracks. Every morning before the reveille call "to get up and get out of bed" and we were enjoying the last half hour of sleep, the men of I Company would waken us. They were roused out of bed a half hour earlier and lining up in formation in front of their barracks. Then we heard the commands: "I Company fall in! Right face! Double time – March!" It was quiet again as they jogged all over Fort Bragg before the rest of the world woke up. When Hoppy entered combat with his company at St. Remy in November 1944, he was determined to lead his men up the hill against the dug-in German line. I was told that he said, "I am going to rout those Germans and get a Silver Star or a Purple Heart." When the battle was over, he was shot up and in the hospital with a Purple Heart and later was awarded the Silver Star, too.

Gone from the company was Pfc. Angelo Argiris who had spent many days in foxholes with me. He was transferred out on 23 February 1945. I remember one day, while we were in our foxhole he was chewing on a clove of garlic. I don't know where he got all the garlic, but the aroma wafted in my direction and I complained that it was polluting the air. He told me, "Garlic is very healthy for you. It can stop you from getting a cold." I was not convinced, but he insisted that I try a clove. When I bit into it, my tongue was burning and I almost spit it out. But to counteract the odor from Argiris, I chewed the garlic. It must have worked because I never got a cold. In the meantime, it is a wonder that the Germans did not locate our position by the smell.

They did, however, creep up to the foxhole of one of our men – Pfc. Charlie Strate, I am told – on 7 February 1945 at night. The voice in the dark whispered, "Hey, Joe, come here." "What do you want?" "I need your help, come here." "Where are you?" "Over here, Joe." Then Charlie went out of his foxhole to the man who was calling and was captured by

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the Germans. When Capt. Hopkins heard of it, he yelled, "I'll kill that soldier when I get my hands on him if the Krauts don't kill him first!"

For various reasons, some German soldiers spoke perfect English with an American accent. In this case, Charlie should have asked for the password, which was changed every day at the front, so that he would know if he was talking to a friend or foe. The Army taught every soldier to ask, "Halt! Who goes there?" Then he asks for the password. When he receives the correct password, the stranger is told to advance, be recognized and then allowed to pass. If he does not receive the correct password, the soldier may fire at the intruder. Of course, many soldiers did not follow their orders, and Hoppy almost had a stroke when this happened. Pfc. Charlie Strate was listed as MIA.

On my return, I was assigned to the platoon of 2nd Lt. Alfred Coursey. He was a technical sergeant who was given a battlefield commission while I was away in the hospital. He greeted me with a warm "Welcome back!"

That first night, the platoon was ordered to reconnoiter the enemy line. Old buddy Lt. Al Coursey honored me by saying, "Khoury, I want you to be point on the patrol." We went out across the open area of no-man's-land, which sloped down into a small valley and up the other side where the Germans were dug in. As we drew closer, we were greeted by machine gun and rifle fire. Everyone hit the ground, and we were ordered to retreat. No one was hit, and we headed back to our line at a faster pace than we had advanced.

It was a very routine assignment for an infantryman but no one enjoyed being shot at. I was glad I had gone on the patrol because it quelled my fear of returning to the front. I had not lost the courage to face the enemy. Then I had time to acclimate myself to life in a foxhole because there was little other activity on our front. Both sides were dug in, just holding their positions and not launching any serious attacks. It was an unusually quiet time.

I vividly remember looking up at the sky at night from my foxhole and seeing the most beautiful panorama I had ever seen. The sky was filled with billions of stars against a clear black background, not a cloud anywhere, and it was cold. There was no moon, only shooting stars, a shower of meteors, streaking down from every direction. The Milky Way was never more brightly lit and I was like a little mole looking up from a hole in the earth. It was so magnificent that I thought heaven must be a wonder-



Temporary wooden barracks at Fort Bragg, N.C., that housed the 100th Infantry Division in 1943. More than half a century later, they are still in "temporary" use by the Army.



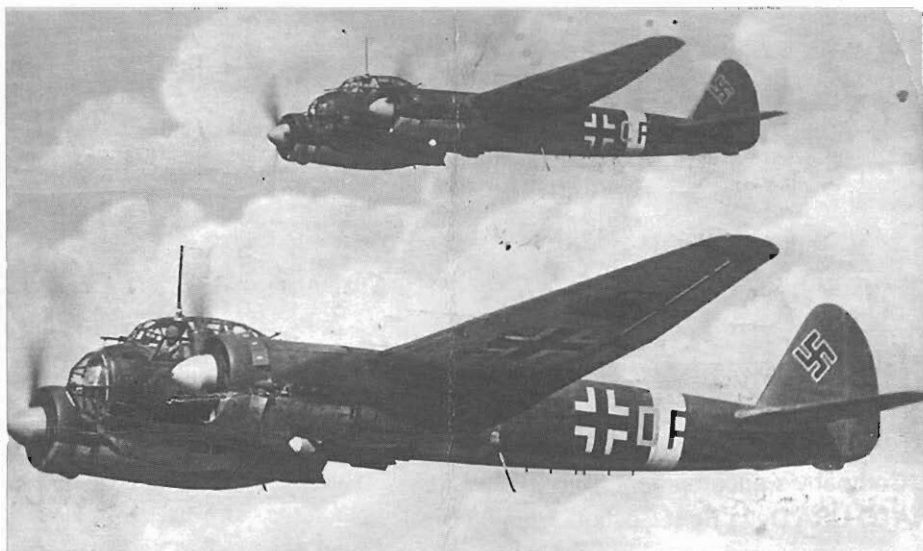
Sgt. John Baud, squad leader, at Fort Bragg in the summer of 1944. Baud was the first soldier of Love Company killed in action, at St. Remy, France, on 14 November 1944.



L Company's encampment from 21-25 October 1944, Aix-en-Provence, France, NATO USA Delta Bear Section, Staging Area No. 1.



In photo left, Cpl. Stanley T. Cardozo, left, and Pfc. Fernando H. Erquiaga, also known as "Mo and Erky," enjoying camping with their canteens, mess kits, and helmets in front of their tent. Right, Pfc. Alexander J. Lapa, better known as "Skull," bringing a bale of hay to cover the muddy ground inside his tent. Home was never like this!



This new, unused postcard had the description on the back: "Junkers Ju 88 Horizontal und Stutzbomber der Deutschen Luftwaffe im Einsatz." It was sent home with the message: "France 11/17/44, Dear Mom and Pop, Here's a little card I picked up during my travels over here. Interesting? Love to all. Please don't worry, Johnny."



Pfc. Russell Hackett and friends digging the first of many foxholes for refuge and comfort in the picturesque Vosges Mountains in November of 1944.



In Lemberg, France, on 9 December 1944, L Company's 3rd Platoon, led by 2nd Lt. Bennett D. Taylor Jr., was given the objective of taking this railroad crossing over the highway leading into town. Enemy forces were in strong defensive positions with rifles, machine guns, mortars, 20mm anti-aircraft guns, and artillery. This photo was taken 50 years later by Alexander J. Lapa.



June 1945, at Kirschheim, Germany, Brigadier General Andrew C. Tychsen, Assistant Division Commander of the 100th Infantry Division, awarding the Bronze Star Medal for Valor to Pfc. John M. Khoury and others.



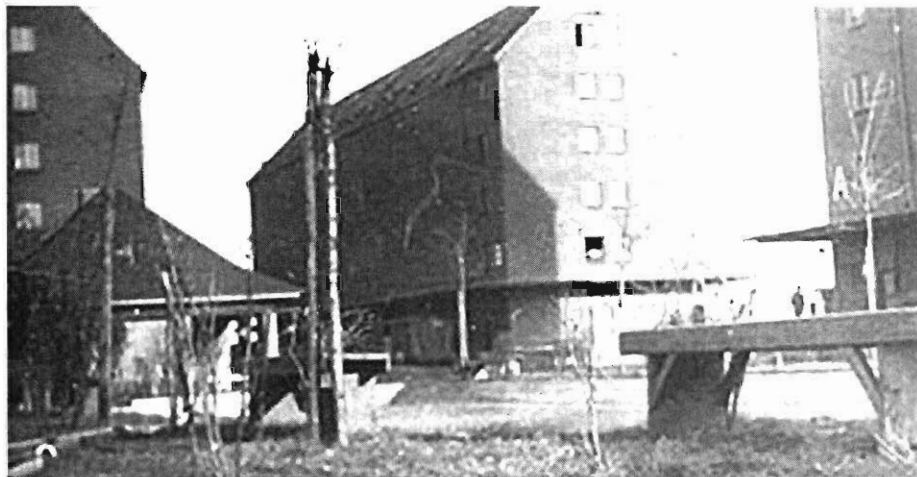
Staff Sgt. Franklin R. Saathoff, left, and Pfc. William C. White capturing the last "German" soldier at the end of World War II. Their prisoner bears a strong resemblance to Sgt. Orland W. Gabriel, Jr.



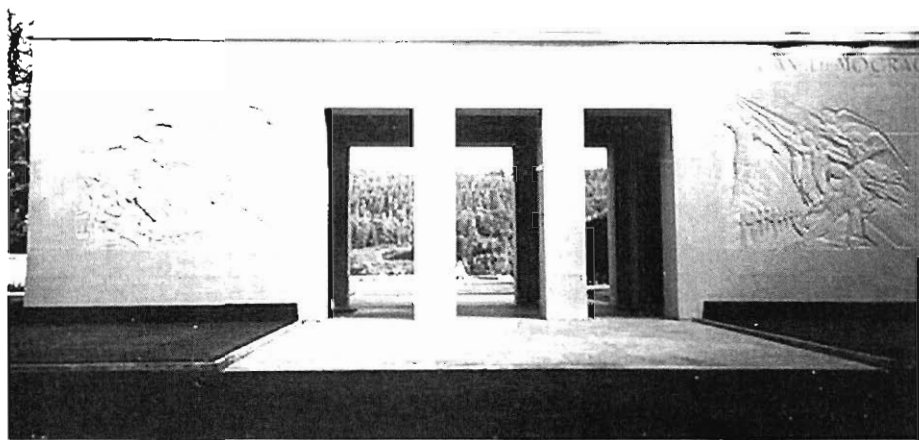
Postwar survivors of the 3rd Squad, 3rd Platoon, Love Company, 399th Infantry Regiment, in the summer of 1945, in Bavaria. Standing from left: Cpl. James A. Todd, Pvt. Junior P. Ogle, Pfc. William H. Young Jr., Pfc. John M. Khoury, and Pvt. Stanley F. Grim. Kneeling from left: Staff Sgt. Frederick A. Hafeman, Pvt. Russell H. Crump, Pfc. Pasquale P. Labriola, and Pfc. Russell V. Guinn.



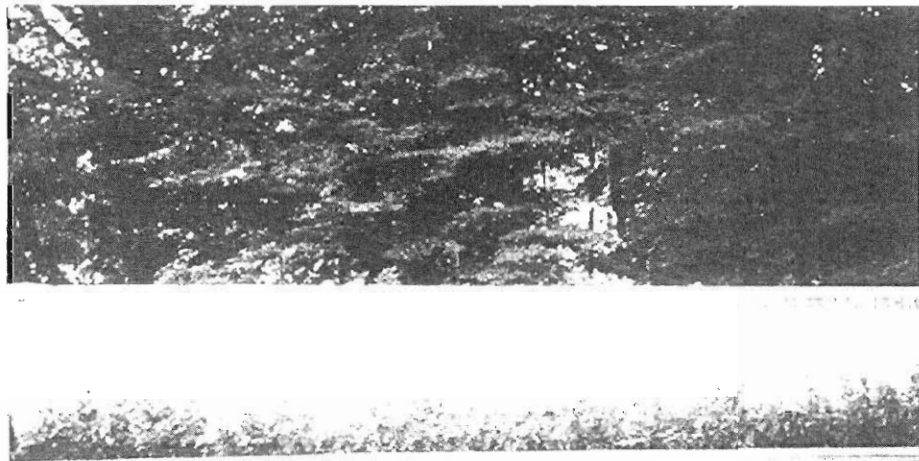
La Promenade des Anglais – with few people and fewer cars – in Nice, on the French Riviera, as seen during a furlough in the summer of 1945.



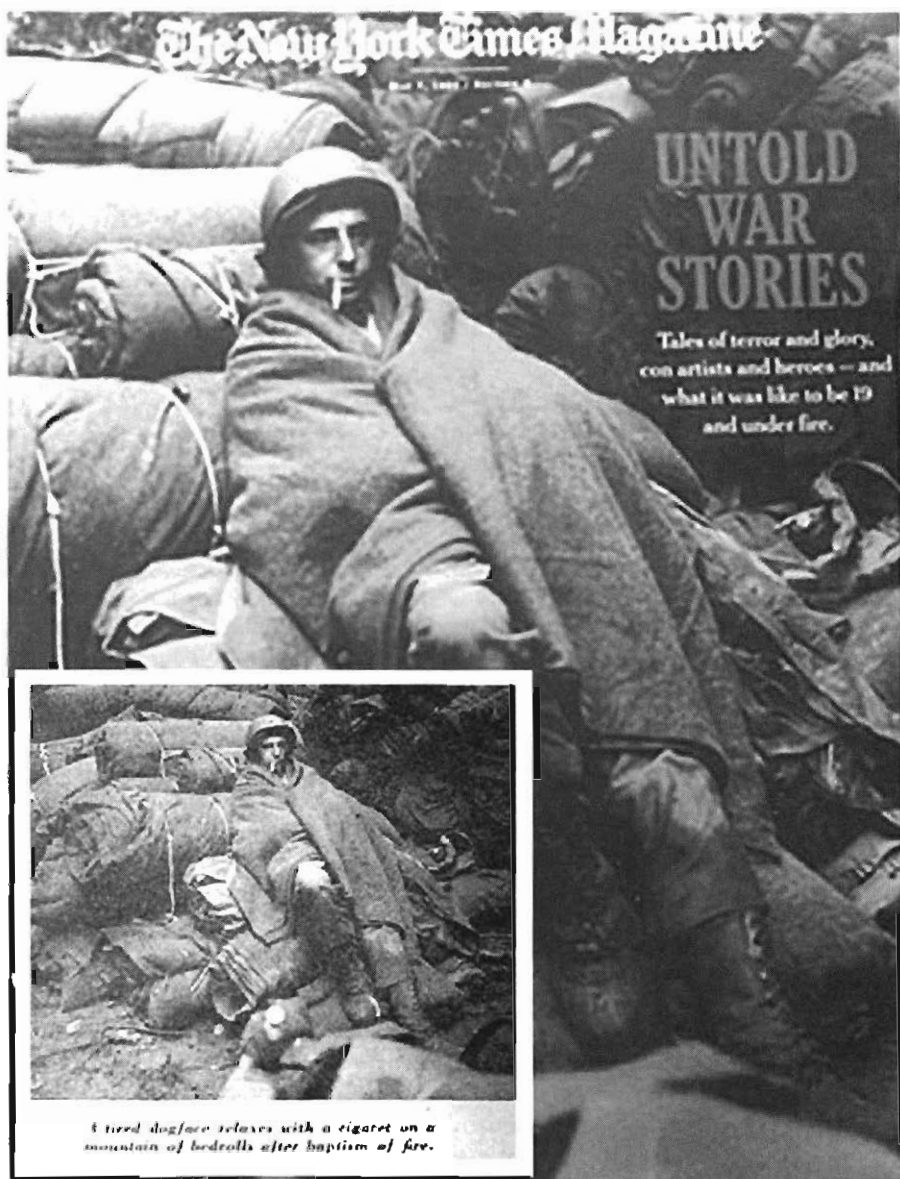
Autumn 1945, in Kassel, Germany. The U.S. Army of Occupation used former Wehrmacht warehouses to supply food, fuel, and clothing to Displaced Persons camps.



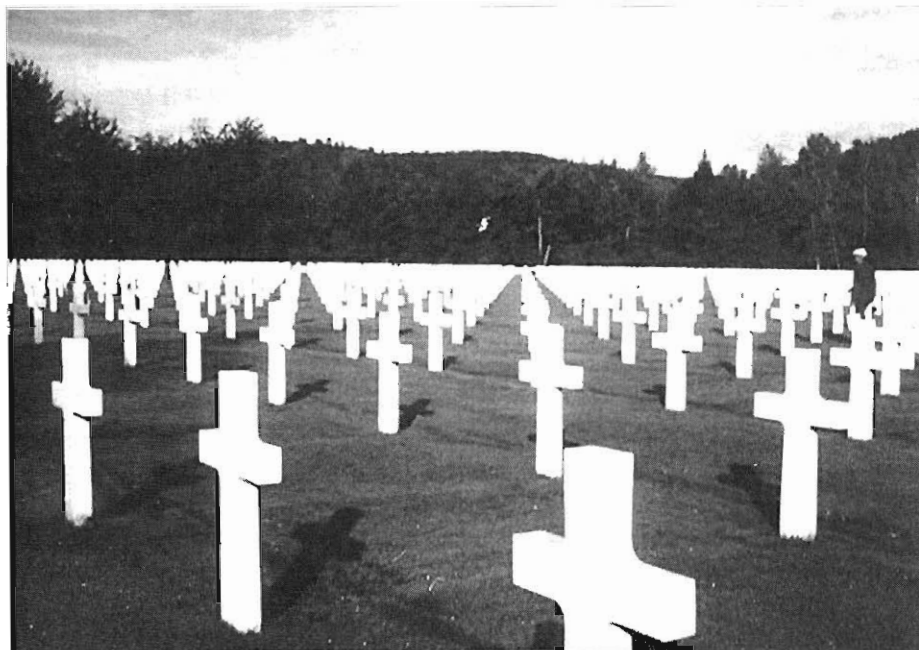
The entrance of the American Military Cemetery at Epinal, France. The bodies of American soldiers that were not shipped home to the United States are buried here. Among them are many from the 100th Infantry Division.



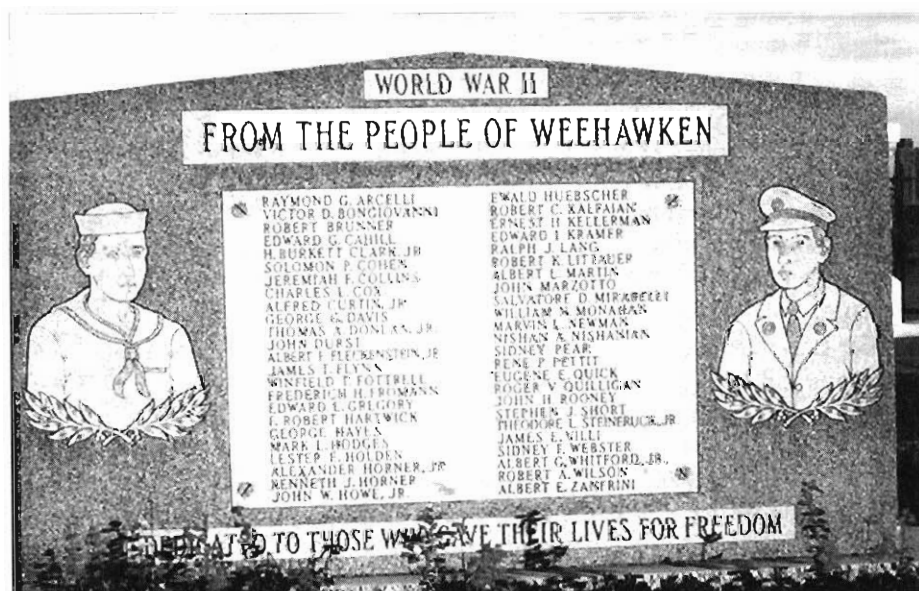
Inscribed on the wall at the Epinal cemetery: "This is their memorial – the whole Earth their sepulchre."



A photo of T-5 Frank Johnson, a member of Love Company, 399th Regiment, 100th Infantry Division, was taken by an Army photographer and appeared in "The Story of the Century" (inset), published in 1946. The photo was reprinted in 1995 on the cover of the "Special World War II Issue" of the New York Times magazine.



The author visits some "old buddies" almost 50 years later. It is not true that "time heals old wounds." We cannot ever forget the young men of our war. Our bonds can never be broken.



A memorial in Weehawken, N.J., is across from the New York pier from which the U.S.A.T. George Washington sailed for war on 6 October 1944 with most of the 100th Infantry Division on board. At the bottom of the left column is John W. Howe Jr. (Redbird) of Love Company.

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ful place. Since I was alone with nobody around to talk to, I wondered if the German across from me had the same feeling.

On nights when the moon was overhead and the air was cold and cloudless, the area all around was lit with a somber grayness. At nearby foxholes, shadowy figures moved noiselessly, occasionally whispering to each other. On the ground, the snow reflected the moonlight, but the trees were gray and cast black shadows. Occasionally, a white and orange flash would light the sky and the stillness would be broken by the muffled boom of a cannon seconds later. Then there would be a response from the other side – a flash and then a boom. It was a duel of artillery against artillery. There was a war still going on.

When we heard the sound of men moving in front of us, who might be the enemy, we called for a flare to be sent up over our area. The flare would come from a mortar shell and it was timed to burst open with a bright burning light and descend slowly on its parachute. While it burned it cast the trees, bushes and everything into an eerie world of surreal shadows.

At times, the night would be changed to daylight by powerful searchlights mounted on trucks parked a long distance behind the front lines. They would aim their beam skyward at a cloud bank which would reflect the light down onto German positions in front of us.

During this period of late winter, a strange new weapon that we had never expected entered the battle zone. When we heard it, we said, "What the heck was that?" It was called the Nebelwerfer, but we knew it as the "screaming meemie." These were rocket artillery shells that were fired out of hollow tubes like the bazookas of the infantry, but they were much larger and more powerful. They were fired in clusters of several rounds at a time. As they flew in on us, they sounded like an express train, chugging in the sky, and then they made high-pitched screaming sounds before they landed and exploded. They were terrifying missiles when the Germans sent a barrage of them at us. Fortunately, they were very difficult to aim and took erratic paths in flight.

In time, we learned to accept them as just another piece of death-dealing military hardware that we had to be aware of. Frankly, we had less to worry about the screaming meemies at the front, because the Germans could not be sure where they would land. They might hit us but they could also hit their own soldiers at the front because we were only a few hundred yards apart. The rockets were not nearly as accurate and deadly as the

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German 88mm artillery, which, probably, could drop a shell into a well from miles away.

It was not very long after that that the U.S. Army countered the screaming meemies with our own rocket artillery that sent barrages of shells from the back of a 2½ ton truck or from an open-topped tracked vehicle. It seems that for every new weapon that one side invents the other side will always find a counter weapon. The urgency of war usually creates the inventions that advance our knowledge and sciences. They often are blessings in the aftermath of the bloody sacrifice of millions of lives.

For the two week period from 1 March until 14 March 1945, it was relatively quiet along our front. There were regular reconnaissance patrols and artillery duels. No major attacks were launched by either side. It was an uneasy peace that was not destined to last. A deliberate and steady buildup was being prepared by the Seventh Army for a major offensive along our entire front. The only question was: When will it begin?

I felt that we had to start attacking soon. Waiting in a foxhole was boring. I was anxious to get this fighting over with because I was very sure that we were going to win the war. It had to be done sometime and now was better than later.