



Robert Earle Herman, American Soldier

By
Paul H. Herbert

Bob's decorations include, from left to right, top to bottom: the Bronze Star with "V" device to indicate the award is for valor; the Purple Heart for wounds received, with one Oak Leaf Cluster to indicate a second award; the Good Conduct Medal for honorable service as an enlisted soldier; the European-Middle Eastern-African Campaign Medal with one Battle Star for the Rhineland Campaign; and the World War II Victory Medal. The stripes indicate his rank, Private First Class, at the time of his death. The blue shoulder patch indicates his division, the 100th Infantry Division, and would be worn on the left shoulder. The wreath indicates award to his regiment of the Presidential Unit Citation after the war. The small shield is the crest of the 397th Infantry Regiment and was worn on the overseas cap. The blue badge with a silver wreath and silver musket is the Combat Infantry Badge, awarded for service in combat with an infantry unit. The single bronze bar is an overseas service bar indicating six months service. The ribbons symbolize his medals and would be worn above the left breast pocket of his uniform. All of Bob's medals and awards were posthumous. Because he died in action, he qualified automatically for awards such as the Good Conduct Medal, Combat Infantry Badge and overseas bar that otherwise carried a time in service requirement. The Bronze Star and Purple Heart are engraved with his name on the reverse side.

Introduction

Shortly after our marriage in 1977, my wife Nancy and I moved to Germany where I was assigned to an Army unit in Bamberg, in northern Bavaria. One day, a package arrived in the mail containing a book published in Stuttgart just after the end of World War II. Its title was *Regiment of the Century*, and it contained a short note from Nancy's Aunt Marcella, saying it was the history of the unit in which her brother, Robert ("Bob") Earle Herman, had served when he was mortally wounded in November, 1944.¹ She explained that the memory of his death made looking at the book or displaying it too painful for the family, but that it should be kept by someone who would value it, and she thought that we would. Before leaving Europe in 1980, my wife and I traveled to Baccarat, France. From there, we followed the yellowing maps in the yearbook of the 397th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division, through the woods and hills near Bertrichamps, where Bob was wounded, to Clairrupt, Raon-l'Etape and on to Mouterhouse, a few of the many French towns liberated by his outfit. Guessing from information in the book, I believe we stood within a kilometer of the spot where he fell.

Despite a keen interest in military history, I did not make a project of recounting Bob's story for many years. Over those years, however, I became more and more aware of the depth of his sacrifice, and that of so many like him. At frequent family gatherings, I saw how the personalities and habits of Bob's surviving brothers and sisters, and their families, wove together as family tradition. Bob's sister Shirley (Nancy's mother) always had everyone to her house at Christmas; we knew that Uncle Kenny or Aunt Jane, Uncle Dick or Aunt Marcella, would do or say a certain thing, bring a certain dish to pass, tell a certain funny story. Those traditions became a wonderful memory for all of the cousins, and then for their spouses, and their children. At some point, I reflected that Bob, too, and likely his family, would have been part of all that life, had he not lost his life in his country's service so many years ago. Because of profound grief, his brothers and sisters hardly spoke of him over those years. Respecting that, I did not pry. Now, though, as I

¹ Samuel Finkelstein (editor), *Regiment of the Century – The Story of the 397th Infantry Regiment*. Stuttgart: The 397th Infantry Book Council and Union Druckerei GMBH, 1945.

watch Bob's great-nieces and nephews, including my children, grow to pursue dreams in a country both prosperous and free, I want to tell them about an uncle they did not know, and what he and his comrades gave them.

Stateside

Bob Herman was born in Galena, Illinois, the third of George and Gladys Herman's six children, on January 10th, 1926. He chose to leave high school at the end of his junior year in 1943 in order to work on a farm, which he loved. He also had a part-time job at the EW Heller Coal Company office in Galena, and a girlfriend about whom he was growing serious. Fun-loving and self-confident, he was proud of his older brother Dick, who went into the Army in 1943. Like most young men of that era, he undoubtedly thought about whether, when and under what terms the war and military service would eventually catch up with him. He probably had little idea of the powerful forces that would answer that question with his induction in March, 1944.

Bob's entry into service and assignment to the 100th Infantry Division reflected the strenuous demands that World War II at its height placed upon the manpower of the United States. As the Axis Powers overran much of Europe and Asia in the late 1930s and early 1940s, American strategists estimated that, should war come, victory for the United States would require an Army of some 8,000,000 soldiers in 213 divisions. This figure allowed for the continuation of a war economy and the manning of the Navy, Army Air Forces and supporting establishments. However, the demands for rapid generation of forces after the attack on Pearl Harbor meant that the Navy and Air Forces, which could be employed more quickly, took priority over forming new Army divisions. Likewise, bringing to full strength the thirty-some existing divisions so that they could be deployed frustrated the planners' hopes to raise 213 divisions at the scheduled rate. Once combat operations commenced in earnest in the Pacific and North Africa in 1942, replacing casualties in divisions already overseas also took priority. By the end of 1942, the Soviet Union, which confronted the bulk of the German army, had halted the German invasion and begun to counterattack. The 213-division estimate had been based in part on an assumption of Soviet collapse, which seemed imminent for much of 1941 and 1942. For these reasons, the United States adjusted its schedule for the mobilization of

new divisions downward to 100 by June, 1944, and also postponed from 1943 to 1944 the planned assault on Nazi-occupied France, viewed as essential to victory. Even these reduced plans proved ambitious: the United States mobilized ninety-one divisions for the war, of which Bob's division, organized in November, 1942, at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, was about the seventy-second.²

The 100th Division's activity in the twenty months it existed before Bob joined it likewise reflected the strains of war on the nation's mobilization plans. Starting with a cadre of officers especially trained at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the Division conducted its own basic training for its initial complement of recruits at Fort Jackson. It then trained progressively from the squad level all the way up through platoon, company, battalion and regimental exercises, following a plan designed for all infantry divisions by Lieutenant General Leslie J. McNair, commander of Army Ground Forces. From November, 1943, until Bob was celebrating his eighteenth birthday in January, 1944, the 100th participated in the Tennessee Maneuvers, where it certified its readiness for deployment by operating as an entire division in simulated combat missions against an opposing division in the field.

When the division moved to Fort Bragg, North Carolina that January, however, the war disrupted this carefully choreographed training plan. While the division trained, higher than expected US casualties in Italy, especially at Cassino and Anzio, created a demand for immediate replacements. Likewise, the Allies made the critical decision to launch the main invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe in May, across the English Channel. US divisions in England had to be brought to full strength to train for the world's most ambitious amphibious landing. Both circumstances demanded trained soldiers, not new recruits. Thus, the 100th Division and other stateside units lost thousands of their officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers to the replacement stream for Europe. In order to replace these men and bring the stateside units back to full strength, the War

² Russel F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*. MacMillan Wars of the United States Series, Louis Morton, editor. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967, pp. 435-436.

Department accelerated draft calls and recruiting, and terminated many programs deemed non-essential in order to convert the soldiers in those programs into infantrymen.³

Meanwhile, on his eighteenth birthday, January 10, 1944, Bob Herman dutifully registered with the local draft board in Galena. Neither in school nor a critical defense job, he was classified “1-A” on January 29. His draft records describe him as five feet, eight inches tall, 174 pounds, with blue eyes and brown hair. On January 31, the draft board notified him that he should report at 3:00 AM on February 4 for the trip to the Armed Forces Induction Center in Chicago for a physical. That exam found him “Physically fit, acceptable by Army for general military service.” Accordingly, on March 6, the board again required his early morning presence with an order to report for induction at 3:00 AM on March 16. The manpower needs of the United States were to be met; Bob had been drafted.⁴

Although barely eighteen when drafted, Bob’s service was legitimate by the rules in force, despite the widespread sentiment that eighteen-year olds were too young for combat service. In the early years of the draft, from 1940 until 1942, the Selective Service largely exempted fathers and men younger than twenty. After the age was lowered to eighteen in November, 1942, public opinion still resisted sending eighteen-year-old draftees directly to combat assignments immediately after their basic training. The War Department therefore tried not to send them overseas before they completed a year’s military service in the states. This policy was feasible early in the war when most Army units were still stateside and not earmarked for deployment for several months.

As the war progressed, however, the policy became difficult to maintain. More and more units were shipped overseas, leaving fewer and fewer in the states to accept the

³ Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants – The Campaigns of France and Germany, 1944-1945*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981, p. 374; Franklin L. Gurley, *Into the Mountains Dark – A World War II Odyssey from Harvard Crimson to Infantry Blue*. Bedford: The Aberjona Press, 2000, p. 37.

⁴ The following documents relating to Robert Earle Herman were loaned to the author by Ms. Jane (Herman) Leglar of Galena, Illinois: Registration Certificate (DSS Form 2), 10 January 1944; Postcard, Notice of Classification, January 29, 1944; Order to Report, Pre-induction Physical Examination (DSS Form 215), January 31, 1944; Certificate of Fitness (DSS Form 218), February 4, 1944; Order to Report for Induction (DSS Form 150), March 6, 1944.

younger replacements. Casualties mounted, creating an urgent need for replacements, especially infantrymen, overseas. Men of all ages who completed training at the replacement training centers found themselves bound for the front. But the public, Congress and commanders overseas questioned this policy, noting that stateside units continued training with more experienced soldiers who had been drafted earlier. In February, 1944, therefore, the War Department decreed that eighteen-year-olds would no longer be sent to combat as individual replacements after basic training as long as men with six or more months service were available elsewhere, meaning from units not yet deployed, like the 100th Division. Individual replacements would come from the stateside units, effectively stripping them of trained men, to be replaced in turn by the new soldiers just completing basic training. This way, the new men would acquire more experience and deploy with a unit with which they were somewhat familiar. When Bob deployed in September, 1944, he was eighteen years and eight months old, and had exactly six months' service.⁵

Bob entered the Army at Fort Sheridan in Chicago, along with fellow Galenians Charles Earl Turner, Nicholas Herman Kieffer, Charles Edward Wieters, James Willard Richardson, William Spain Garvey and John Patrick Connor.⁶ Shortly after induction, Bob received orders to the Infantry Replacement Training Center at Camp Wolters, Texas, near Mineral Wells, just west of Fort Worth. There, in the sweltering Texas plains, he underwent the prescribed seventeen weeks of infantry basic training. Included were the elementary tasks and culture of soldiering, such as wear of the uniform and close order drill, and critical basic skills like rifle marksmanship and first aid. Reflecting the Army's combat experience to date, he also underwent "battle courses," small, situational exercises in which the soldiers practiced infiltration, close combat, and village fighting, much of it using live ammunition and small explosive devices to accustom men to the feel of a battlefield. He wrote about them to his soldier brother Dick, cautioning

⁵ Robert R. Palmer, Bell I Wiley, William R Keast, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, The Army Ground Forces Series, United States Army in World War II, Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1948, pp. 201-209. Palmer et al note that these efforts to protect eighteen-year-olds did not last. Casualties soared in the fall of 1944 and the last stateside units deployed. By December, 1944, the fronts were the only places for a replacement to go. For the rest of the war, men of all ages were again ordered straight from basic training to combat overseas.

him not to tell his mother. A two-week tactical field exercise, where the men had to apply all of their individual skills as part of a unit in a continuous effort, rounded out his introduction to the Army.⁷ After basic, he enjoyed a brief visit back to Galena in July before reporting to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and the 100th Infantry Division. While at home, he talked about having made friends with another Illinois youth, John Vann, from Frankfurt. To his mother's distress, he boasted a bit about how he would deal with the German soldiers if he ever encountered them.



Figure 1 View of the main garrison area of Camp Wolters, Texas, during World War II

New arrivals had been filling up the 100th Division again since May, 1944, when the division began a “supplemental training period” to integrate the new men and teach them the field skills so carefully nourished in Tennessee. The division also performed a host of special missions and formations such as parades, War Bond drives and other

⁶ Undated newspaper clipping saved with the memorial record book of Bob's funeral.

⁷ Palmer et al, pp. 387-393.

public affairs. When Bob's leave at home ended and he arrived at Fort Bragg, the division had once again worked up to regimental-level exercises.

Bob was assigned to Company A, 397th Infantry Regiment, and became a "scout" in the first squad of the first platoon of that company. The 397th was one of three infantry regiments in the division, the others being the 398th and the 399th. The regiment consisted of about 3200 officers and men organized into three battalions of three rifle companies and a heavy weapons company each. In addition, the regiment had specialty companies such as the Cannon Company and the Anti-Tank Company. Within Company A, there were three rifle platoons of about forty-one men and a second-lieutenant platoon leader, as well as mortar and machine gun sections. Each platoon was organized into three rifle squads. Each squad consisted of a staff sergeant squad leader; a sergeant assistant squad leader; two scouts; an automatic rifleman; a sniper; and six riflemen. All these men were organized into three teams. During movement, the scouts, as "Able" Team, often with the squad leader, could be advanced ahead of the main body of the squad to find the best routes and provide early warning of danger. When not so employed, they moved with their squad as riflemen.⁸

Bob was at Fort Bragg for about two months, from his arrival in July to the division's departure for Europe in late September. During that time, he underwent a variety of training exercises to prepare his unit for combat. Included were platoon firing tests of all weapons, more regimental exercises, and familiarization with landmines and booby traps, the "bazooka" light anti-tank rocket launcher, and the rifle-launched grenade. His squad and platoon practiced common battle drills, such as how to clear a house of enemy soldiers, dozens of times.⁹ Bob made friends among the other new arrivals in his platoon, soldiers from all parts of the country with names like Cook, Scyphers, Mills, Rummel, Vaughn, Hood and, in particular, Raymond L. Rae from Freeport, Texas. At first, the new men drew together to stay out of the weekend fights

⁸ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, pp. 25-26; Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 100.

⁹ Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 114.

The General likened the intense schedule of training to that required of a boxer about to face the “Big Champ.” The soldiers cheered. They were eager to get beyond the stigma of being among the last combat units still in the States. Heavy ground fighting had commenced in Europe with the June 6th Normandy invasion. In the Pacific, the drive to liberate the Mariana and Caroline Islands would soon bring Admiral Chester Nimitz’s Central Pacific drive to union with General Douglas MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific forces. Clearly, there was a war to be won. Before leaving the parade field, Bob saluted with his comrades as the division band played the Star Spangled Banner.¹¹

Before departing Fort Bragg, the 100th Division mandated that all of its soldiers undergo training and testing for the Expert Infantry Badge or EIB. The badge itself was a silver musket mounted on a blue rectangle, worn above the left breast pocket. One of several devices authorized by the Army in 1943 to boost morale and esprit among infantrymen, who were suffering the worst casualties of any group in the war, the competitive nature of the EIB test spurred infantry soldiers to hone critical combat skills to a high degree of precision.¹² Soldiers were trained and then tested to very exacting standards on such skills as land navigation, physical fitness, pistol and rifle marksmanship, first aid and so on. Only one out of every four earned the EIB, making it both highly competitive and attainable. The badges were awarded in a division ceremony in late September. Because orders were not prepared formally awarding the badge, there is no record of whether Bob was a recipient.¹³ Given his natural self-confidence and competitiveness, it is likely that he was; certainly he was among the serious contenders.

¹¹ Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 55. By the end of September, 1944, the US had 40 divisions in Europe; 4 (including the 100th) en route; 21 in the Pacific; and 24 remaining in the States. Due to the heavy fighting that remained in 1944, all 24 of these were deployed to Europe, and all US divisions but two saw combat by war’s end. Maurice Matloff, “The 90-Division Gamble,” in Kent Roberts Greenfield (editor), *Command Decisions*, Washington: Center of Military History, 1960 and 1990.

¹² “The present war has demonstrated the importance of highly proficient, tough, hard, and aggressive infantry, which can be obtained only by developing a high degree of individual all-around proficiency on the part of every infantryman. As a means of attaining the high standards desired and to foster *esprit de corps* in infantry units, the Expert Infantryman and Combat Infantryman badges are established for infantry personnel,” *Section I, War Department Circular 209, 27 October 1943* as quoted in “History of the Combat Infantryman’s Badge (CIB) and the Expert Infantryman’s Badge (EIB)” on the website of the Army ROTC Detachment, Pennsylvania State University, <http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/j/r/jrr17/infantry/cib-eib%20history.htm>

¹³ Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 59-60. The company commander believes that Bob did earn the EIB and, with it, promotion to Private First Class. Telephonic interview with Captain Fredrick S. Conley, Jr, August 8,

Finally, very early on September 25th, the 397th Regiment formed up for the last time on their sandy drill field to await the order to move to the trains. Perhaps reflecting the seriousness of the moment, the soldiers stood quietly beside their neat piles of individual gear. A token breakfast had not boosted morale much. When at last his group was called, Bob hoisted his 70-pound pack, threw one arm into the sling of his M-1 Garand rifle and the other into the loop of a 100-pound duffel bag, and began the three-mile struggle to the boarding site. Several of his comrades collapsed in a heap from the effort. Once aboard, the soldiers all found seats and places for their equipment, and watched, perhaps wistfully, as the train gathered speed and Fort Bragg disappeared in the distance.¹⁴

The train ride lasted the night of September 25 and ended on September 26 at Camp Kilmer, just east of New Brunswick, New Jersey. This was the staging area for units waiting to board troop transports in New York for the voyage to Europe.¹⁵ Despite a hectic schedule of training, equipment exchanges, inspections and administrative processing, Bob and his fellow soldiers were well treated at Kilmer. They lived in two-story barracks rather than the tents many had expected. Intramural sports complemented the physical training regimen. Movie star Pat O'Brien came to wish the GIs well and made a special visit to A Company.¹⁶ Cooperative operators worked hard to

2002. Conley was drafted into the infantry out of Rhode Island State College in 1942, but applied for Officer Candidate School and earned a commission on October 9. He was assigned to the 100th Infantry Division upon its activation and served with it throughout the war, including command of A Company for all of 1944 and until war's end. He lives in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. Colonel (Retired), and then-Private, William B. DeGraff to the author, August 2, 2002. DeGraff was a Second Scout in 2d Platoon, A Company. He was wounded, earned a battlefield commission, and finished the war as a 20-year-old rifle platoon leader in the 36th Infantry Division. He went on to West Point, graduating first in his Class of 1950, and fought again in Korea and Vietnam before retiring in 1974.

¹⁴ Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 62; *Regiment*, p. 40.

¹⁵ Camp Kilmer was activated in June, 1942, and named for New Jerseyman and World War I soldier-poet Joyce Kilmer. By war's end, more than twenty divisions and some 2.5-million troops had passed through Camp Kilmer. See "Camp Kilmer - A Digital Recreation Of An Original War-Era Pamphlet Distributed To The Boys Coming Home," at <http://www.skylighters.org/places/ckpamph.html> and <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/WW2/ww2women/kilmer.htm>

¹⁶ DeGraff to the author, August 2, 2002. O'Brien was well known for his title role opposite Ronald Reagan in "Knute Rockne--All American" (1940); opposite Jimmy Cagney and Ann Sheridan in "Torrid Zone" (1940); and starring in "The Iron Major" (1943). Hollywood.com, at <http://www.hollywood.com/celebs/bio/celeb/346689>

accommodate long lines of soldiers waiting to make telephone calls home, an especially welcome privilege as their mail had undergone censorship ever since the deployment alert at Fort Bragg. The soldiers were still uncertain about their destination, and the rumors in the barracks included both the Pacific Theater and Iceland.



RECEIVING MAIL AT CAMP KILMER, N. J.



Figure 3 Soldiers receiving mail at Camp Kilmer, NJ, sometime during World War II (above) and (below) the main headquarters of Camp Kilmer in the early 1950s.

Training at Camp Kilmer focused on familiarizing the soldiers with the newest equipment and preparing them for the upcoming ocean voyage. Bob underwent gas mask drills and

practiced loading a lifeboat over the side of a ship, complete with a tall, wooden wall to simulate the ship and a wobbly lifeboat floating in a ditch full of water. He attended lectures on security, censorship, and health and sanitation. He received inoculations and underwent a very cursory physical exam in which soldiers later claimed to have had to run past the examining physician! He went on at least one twelve-hour pass and visited New York City with his buddies.¹⁷

On October 2, the division was alerted for deployment. Passes and telephone calls were terminated and the soldiers began their detailed preparations for boarding their ships. Late in the afternoon of October 5, Bob and the 13,994 other officers and men of the 100th Infantry Division again shouldered heavy packs and marched to the waiting trains. There, numbers were chalked on their helmets and they took assigned seats in assigned cars for the hour ride to the Hudson River docks at Hoboken. Another quarter-mile walk brought them to the ferries. Bob was dressed in his winter overcoat, steel helmet, field pack and cartridge belt. He carried his rifle and duffel bag. He was undoubtedly tired, hot and sweaty by the time he found a space to rest aboard the cramped ferry, crowded in among fellow soldiers, gear of all kinds and boxes of impedimenta marked “T.A.T” for “to accompany troops.” Likely, he watched the lights of Manhattan for the thirty minutes or so the ferry took to cross the Hudson and reach the piers of New York on the far side.¹⁸

Arrival at the piers improved things briefly. After another “bag drag” up the ramp to the main level of the dock itself, the soldiers encountered a small band playing popular music and volunteer Red Cross girls with doughnuts, chocolate bars, and paper cups of hot coffee. After some time, Bob’s outfit was called to board the huge transport tied to the pier. He waited as the First Sergeant called out last names. “Herman,” came at last,

¹⁷ Michael A. Bass (editor), *The Story of the Century*, New York: The Century Association – 100th Infantry Division and Criterion Linotyping and Printing Company, Inc., 1946, pp. 39-40; *Regiment*, pp. 45-46; Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 64-66, 229. All of these sources mention twelve-hour passes to New York. Raymond Rae went on pass to New York more than once (“we got into some good ones”) and is certain Bob was with the small group of friends that always went together, Rae Interview, July 31, 2002. William DeGraf remembers that “all the men got the chance to go there,” DeGraf to the author, August 2, 2002. The only existing photographs of Bob in uniform were taken by Photo Industries, Incorporated, 10 West 47th Street, New York City 19, New York, likely while he was on pass from Camp Kilmer.

and he responded “Robert E.!” Then he followed the long file of comrades behind a guide up the gangplank, into the hold and through a maze of passageways, ladders and steps to a spot that probably surprised him. Instead of a cramped space below the ship’s waterline, barely large enough for two tiers of three hammocks, A Company had billets in the old passenger steamer’s former ballroom. Collapsible bunks were stacked in fours on sets of poles arranged the length of the room. There were hooks for the men’s rifles, packs and gas masks, but their other equipment had to be stowed in whatever space they could find. When everyone was in his bunk, the men had several inches of space above them, unlike their comrades below decks. This arrangement would be Bob’s official home for the next two weeks.¹⁹

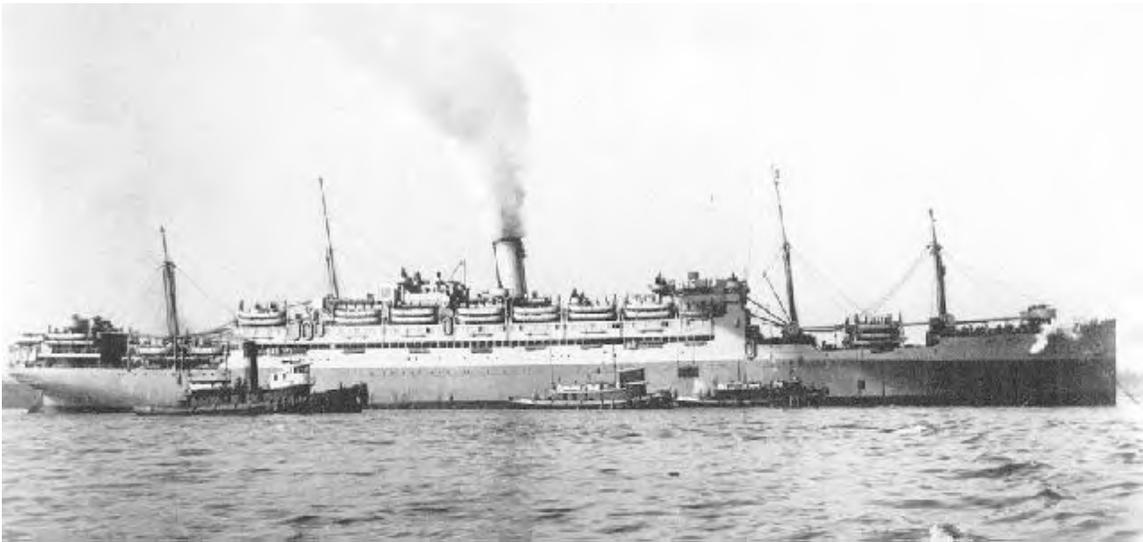


Figure 4 US Army Transport *George Washington*, from US Coast Guard photo contributed by Bob Tessmer, I/397th Infantry Regiment, at the website of the 100th Infantry Division Association

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 40; *Regiment*, p. 46; Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 66.

¹⁹ *Regiment*, pp. 47-48. Rae Interview, July 31, 2002. See also the firsthand descriptions at the website of the 100th Infantry Division Association at <http://www.100thww2.org>.

From New Jersey To France

While Bob underwent training at Camp Kilmer and took a well-earned pass in New York, events in Europe changed the plans for his division. After the landings at Normandy on June 6th and the heavy fighting to break out of the “hedgerow” country of the Cotentin Peninsula in July, a dispute arose among the senior Allied commanders over how best to pursue the enemy back to Germany. British Field Marshall Sir Bernard Montgomery, commander of the Allied 21st Army Group, favored a “narrow thrust.” By this, he meant that the Allies should designate one army group (his) as the main effort. It should have first call on all available resources, and attack north across Belgium and Holland to seize the critical German industrial area of the Ruhr, likely bringing the main German field army to decisive battle in the process. His boss, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower, disagreed. He believed that both army groups then in northern France, Montgomery’s and US General Omar Bradley’s 12th, should advance together, on a broad front. This would give the Germans no opportunity to concentrate their defense against either army group, and also would prevent them from making an organized withdrawal into their West Wall fortifications along the German border by winter.

Logistical considerations drove this dispute. Once the Allied armies broke the German defenses in Normandy, they advanced much more rapidly than they had expected or planned. This lengthened their lines of supply back to the Normandy beaches and made resupply more difficult. At the same time, Allied planners had hoped to liberate the major French ports early in the campaign in order to bring supplies and material ashore more efficiently. They failed to do so, with the result that all supplies had to come over improvised docks at the beaches of Normandy, a slow process at best. Because he could not adequately supply both army groups for a full-paced offensive, General Eisenhower gave in to Montgomery’s demands in part. He allowed Montgomery to attempt an airborne seizure of the Dutch city of Arnhem and its bridges over the Schelde River, followed by a single armored thrust across the lowlands of Holland and

into Germany itself. When this “Operation Market-Garden” failed in late September, Eisenhower renewed his determination to advance on all fronts, and focused Montgomery on the main task of seizing the huge Dutch port facilities at Antwerp.

Meanwhile, in August, Allied forces landed at Marseilles, in southern France, and advanced north toward Lyons to threaten the southern flank of the main German armies. When these forces linked up with Bradley’s 12th Army Group, they were designated as the 6th Army Group, under US General Jacob M. Devers. That officer lobbied General Eisenhower to give his command more forces and higher priority, noting that he enjoyed his own secure line of communications through the Rhone River valley to the port of Marseilles, which was improving every day. Finally, Eisenhower agreed. On September 22, he ordered that the US XV Corps, part of US General George S. Patton’s 3d Army in 12th Army Group, be assigned to the 7th Army in Devers’ 6th Army Group. Further, three US divisions then embarking for England and eventual employment in northern France were to be sent instead to Marseilles to join Devers. Those divisions were the 103d Infantry Division, the 14th Armor Division and Bob’s 100th Infantry Division.²⁰

This change caught the division by surprise, a circumstance that contributed to the rumors among the troops at Camp Kilmer. Believing that their destination was England, the division dispatched an advance party there by air to make the preliminary arrangements. This had to be recalled when the orders changed. Another party then made the very long journey from New Jersey to Marseilles to meet with the division’s new chain of command: General Devers; General Alexander M. Patch, commander of the 7th Army; and Lieutenant General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr., commander of the VI Corps. While all this took place, Bob and the other men of the division embarked aboard their vessels. They would not know their actual destination officially until they were at sea.²¹

Bob and the other men of the 397th sailed aboard the US Army Transport *George Washington*, a German-built passenger steamer that had been captured in World War I

²⁰ Jeffrey J. Clark and Robert Ross Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, United States Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations Series, Washington: Center of Military History, 1993, p. 254.

²¹ Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 63; *Story*, pp. 37-39.

and used as a troop ship then. It was one of eleven vessels comprising Convoy CU-40 and carrying the rest of the 100th Division, all of the 103d Infantry Division and the advance party of the 14th Armor Division. The *George Washington* pulled away from the pier on the morning of October 6 and slipped down the Hudson River, past the Statue of Liberty, and on to the convoy rendezvous point just beyond the coastline. At 721 feet in length and a displacement of 24,000 tons, the *Washington* carried 7,000 troops and was the largest of the four vessels carrying the 100th Division. The other three were the *George Gordon*, the *McAndrews*, and the *Mooremac Moon*. The assembled convoy included a destroyer and four escort destroyers that would guard against German submarines for the entire voyage, aided periodically by escort aircraft carriers.

Life aboard the *Washington* was difficult at best, but at least not as hectic as the weeks of training ashore. For many soldiers, sailing on the *Washington* more than anything else brought home the reality of the war and their own roles in it. Many took heart from the appearance of the large convoy, sailing in disciplined and purposeful formation, knowing that it was only a fraction of the power of the United States.

Other than such reveries, Bob and his companions made do as best they could. Because living spaces were crowded and stuffy, time on the main decks was regulated, and enterprising soldiers looked for ways to spend more time there than allowed. Bob and his companions found that the space inside an overturned lifeboat was sufficient for sleeping and playing cards. They made it their unofficial home, substituting Hershey bars and Coca-Cola for at least one meal.²² Because of the difficulty of cycling all the soldiers through the ship's galleys, the soldiers received only two meals per day, and had to present meal tickets to be punched to ensure equal distribution of the food. The food was satisfactory, but easily spilled in crowded conditions aboard a rolling ship.

Soldiers were encouraged to take French or German lessons during the day, and also participated in very limited calisthenics to stay in some sort of shape. The division public affairs office published a daily newspaper called the "Hatchet" which the men had

²² Rae Interview, July 31, 2002.

to pass among themselves because of the limited number of copies. Gambling for money was prohibited, but keeping score in a card game with match sticks was not; there were many such games. After a few days, when most men overcame their seasickness, they organized variety shows. Paperback books and small musical instruments were distributed, movies were shown at night, and church services of most faiths were held often enough that each man could attend once per week. The men could rarely shower, and when a turn came, it was a dousing in cold saltwater. Equipment inspections, and more medical and dental exams also occupied days punctuated by constant announcements over the ship's loudspeaker system.

By far the most harrowing days of the voyage began on October 9 when rising winds and thickening seas developed into a major storm of hurricane proportions that lasted over forty-eight hours. All the soldiers were compelled to remain in their hammock spaces; hatches and portholes were secured. Most men were very seasick and soon the sleeping areas became stagnant and foul. The few men able to work were detailed to the galleys but most declined to eat. As the storm rose in intensity, the wild rocking of the ship caused its beams and joints to groan and crack ominously. Sometimes, the sea would lift the stern out of the water so that the props were exposed, causing the engines to race with a terrible roar that rattled the entire ship. Through the portholes of the ballroom, Bob's friend Ray saw water crash over the deck of the escort aircraft carrier just abeam of the *Washington*. Soldiers lashed themselves into their hammocks and bunks with ropes, belts and rifle slings. Some wept or prayed aloud and might have been even more terrified had they known that the *Washington* narrowly missed colliding with the *McAndrews* during the first night. The *Washington's* captain first tried to maintain the convoy's course, but when this proved too dangerous, he elected to ride with the storm until it passed, and then rejoin the convoy. This maneuver eased the rocking somewhat. By October 11, the storm passed and the *Washington's* exhausted but relieved passengers emerged on deck to clear skies, calm seas and a major project cleaning gear and decks.

The convoy's course had taken the *Washington* southeast of New York and, after the storm, due east, passing 180 miles south of the Azores to a point 70 miles off the coast of Casablanca. Here, it turned north, the zig-zag route intended to make its course unpredictable to any enemy observers until the last minute. Finally, on October 17, to starboard, the men could make out the low, hazy shape of the coastline of Africa, prompting spontaneous shouts, backslaps and hugs of celebration. On October 18, word passed down the chain of command that France, not England, was the convoy's official destination. Off Tangiers, the ships pulled quite close together at last light to pass through the narrow Straits of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea. They followed the coastline of Africa until October 19th, when they turned north, braved another, milder storm while crossing the Mediterranean, and, on October 20, reached the Port of Marseilles and France.²³

Marseilles was the major port city in southern France and its possession by the Allies was an important factor in the war in Europe. Allied leaders had debated whether an attempt be made to land in southern France in cooperation with the cross-Channel attack on Normandy or priority maintained to the Allied effort in Italy. The decision was for France, but there were not enough landing craft or naval vessels for two, simultaneous amphibious assaults, so the attack on southern France had to wait until the Normandy front was sufficiently stable to allow the repositioning of vessels to the Mediterranean. US, British and Free French forces stormed ashore along seventy kilometers of coast south of Cannes on August 15-16, 1944. On August 28, the Germans defending Toulon and Marseilles surrendered to the Free French forces of General d'Armee Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's French Army B. Port construction engineers landed that day from Liberty ships braving the mined harbor and began clearing the thorough demolition work the Germans accomplished before surrendering. By September 15, direct ship-to-shore debarkation was possible and by September 25, as the 100th Division prepared to leave Fort Bragg, fifteen alongside berths and twenty-three off-shore berths were in operation.

²³ *Story*, p. 42-44; *Regiment*, pp. 48-55; Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 71-73; Rae Interview, July 31, 2002. These accounts are vividly complemented by veterans' firsthand recollections at <http://www.100thww2.org> and at "1944 World War II Troop Ship Crossings" at <http://hometown.aol.com/troopship/shipli44.htm>. Bob's

The arrival of Convoy CU-40 represented a significant strategic advantage to the Allies. Troops and supplies could now arrive through a major port instead of the Normandy beaches. From Marseilles, they joined the allied forces in southern France that threatened the southern flank of the main German armies in northern France as well as the German border itself.²⁴

October 20 was a warm, clear, breezy day as Bob's ship pulled into the huge harbor and took its place at anchorage just offshore. Bob likely spent the better part of the day repacking his gear for debarkation, standing inspection and waiting. From the main deck, he could see the wreckage in the harbor wrought by the German demolition crews and allied bombing and artillery fire. Many of the ship-to-shore causeways the Allies built were erected on the hulks of ships the Germans sank in the harbor. Not until nightfall did the 397th begin to disembark. The soldiers were called out of the hold by company. They immediately put to use the training they had received at Camp Kilmer: they clambered over the side of the *Washington* on cargo nets and climbed down some forty feet to landing barges waiting below. This process suddenly halted for about a half an hour due to an air raid alarm and blackout that plunged the harbor into total darkness. Men still on the cargo net stopped climbing and clung to it, straining under the weight of their rifles and packs. Bob and his comrades could hear the distant firing of anti-aircraft guns, their first sense of actual combat. Smoke generators blanketed the whole port area in thick smoke to conceal the ships. When the alarm ended, searchlights panning the harbor played eerily on the smoke and wreckage in the harbor.²⁵

Once ashore, Bob realized his two weeks aboard the *Washington* gave him a case of "sea legs" not well suited to the infantryman's march he was about to make. Troops in the city would create congestion and be vulnerable to air attack, so the plan was for immediate dispersal to staging bases in the surrounding countryside. The 397th Regiment's assigned base was "Delta Base Staging Area Number 1" near the village of

experience aboard the *Washington* may have been slightly less harrowing because his was the largest vessel in the convoy and therefore more stable in rough weather.

²⁴ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, pp. 218-237.

²⁵ *Story*, p. 44; *Regiment*, pp. 55-58. DeGraff to the author, August 2, 2002.

Septemes, about ten miles from the port. Company A set out shortly after assembling ashore. The uphill route along city streets and country lanes flanked by stone walls progressed from the coast into the hills around Marseilles. Nearly five hours passed before the weary soldiers arrived at the designated spot at about 3:00 AM on October 21. As the soldiers filed into an unprepared field and flopped onto their packs to sleep, a light rain began.

Bob remained at “D-Base” for ten rainy days. The soldiers eventually pitched their “pup” tents in orderly rows. Details had to dig latrines and build field kitchens. Weapons were cleaned, inspected and test fired at an improvised range adjacent to the bivouac area. Daily physical training was conducted to get the men into shape after the sea voyage left them, in the words of one veteran, “weak as cats.”²⁶ Trucks brought the soldiers’ duffel bags and other heavy equipment to the bivouac area from the ships and the men unpacked it, cleaned it, and readied it for use. General Devers, the Army Group commander, inspected the division on October 23. Bob had time to get one brief note off to his parents telling them he had arrived safely in France. It is likely that Bob got into Marseilles sometime during those ten days, either on one of the many details sent to the city for one reason or another, or on an unauthorized “pass.” If so, he would have encountered the overwhelmingly gracious attitude of French civilians toward the GIs; the exotic uniforms of French colonial troops from Africa on garrison duty; the faces of German prisoners of war awaiting shipment to camps in the states with a mix of wariness and hope; and the bustle of the wharves where military shipping was offloaded at a frenetic pace. Some soldiers were able to use the public baths to get clean for the first time since leaving New York. All of this was a welcome relief from the bivouac area, soon turned to a sea of mud by rain and thousands of GI boots.²⁷

But the 100th Division had not come to France for camping or site seeing. Soon, orders arrived for the front. On October 29th, Bob’s sister regiment, the 399th, mounted a

²⁶ Comments of veteran Bob Bowers at <http://hometown.aol.com/troopship/shipli44.htm>.

²⁷ *Story*, pp. 44-46; *Regiment*, pp. 59-62; Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 76-79, 82-88. Rae Interview, July 31, 2002; DeGraff to the author, August 2, 2002; undated newspaper clippings saved in the record book of Bob’s funeral.

long convoy of two-and-a-half-ton trucks and much smaller jeeps and led the division's movement north. The next day, Bob and the men of the 397th struggled aboard their trucks for the long journey to the foothills of the Vosges Mountains where the VI Corps, now commanded by Major General Edward H. Brooks, needed them badly.

To The Front

Bob and his outfit boarded their trucks early on the morning of October 30. The men sat on troop seats on either side of the cargo bed, facing each other inward, with another eight or so men sitting on packs and equipment in a row down the center. So loaded, about two rifle squads and a few extra men such as medics or radio operators could fit on one truck. Because of the rain, the trucks had canvas cargo covers stretched over wooden bows, so the soldiers could not see out very well, except over the tailgate to the rear. The front of the cargo cover was rolled back to the first bow, creating a space of about eighteen inches so that one or two soldiers could stand up and look over the truck cab to the front, and over the cargo cover to the rear. These men were “air guards.” They kept their weapons at the ready on the theory that a large volume of small arms fire from all the trucks might at least cause an attacking German airplane to pull out of a strafing run early. Although no such attacks occurred, Bob very likely took his turn as air guard for an hour or so each day, a welcome break from hard seats and cramped space. An obvious disadvantage of the air guard provision was that rain entered the truck through the open space in the cargo cover, keeping men and equipment wet for most of the journey.

The convoy ground onward 142 miles on Highway N-70 along the Rhone River, passing through the ancient towns of Aix, Avignon, Orange and Montelimar, and reaching the pre-arranged bivouac site at the French Riding Academy in Valence at about 4:30 PM. Along the way, the soldiers saw the wreckage and smelled the stench of the battlefields from the fighting in August. The hulks of German and US tanks, half-tracks, trucks and artillery were strewn about. In other places, derailed trains or the remains of a long German convoy destroyed by Allied fighter aircraft provided grim reminders that this was indeed a war zone. While at the bivouac site, Bob likely found a chance to chat with some of the truck drivers, men detailed from the 45th and 36th Infantry Divisions, who had been fighting in France since the Allied landings on August 15th.

Bivouac broke early the next day in a drizzle and, after a cold breakfast, the convoy started off again. It passed through St. Rambert, Vienne, Brignois, Champagne, Macon, Chalon, Chagney, and Beaune. After a long 190 miles, it reached a bivouac site at Dijon. The soldiers camped in a wooded park in neat rows of pup tents, disappointed that they were there restricted and unable to explore the city. From Dijon, the 397th endured one more ride of 134 miles through Langear, Langres, Montigny, Meause, Damarshe, Domerot, Darney and Villoncourt. This leg of the journey took them through a very rural area. The pungent odor of manure piled near each farmhouse was small price to pay for offerings of fresh bread (and occasionally a bottle of wine) from friendly and grateful locals. No less grateful were the GIs who received such welcome supplements to their daily K-ration lunch. As the convoy pulled into the 397th's designated assembly area at St. Helene, only six miles from the front, artillery fire echoed in the distance. The stiff and weary soldiers de-trucked one last time to establish their fourth bivouac in as many nights. Undoubtedly to their delight, they found that they were to be billeted in private homes in the village!²⁸

Bob and his comrades spent five days in St. Helene while their commanders planned for the 100th Division to relieve the battle-hardened but weary 45th Infantry Division on the front lines. It rained steadily. The soldiers cleaned weapons, practiced battle drills, wrote letters home, read books they had brought from the *Washington*, and stayed as dry and comfortable as possible. Some undoubtedly practiced with their hosts the French they may have learned at sea. Again, they reorganized their personal gear into that which they would carry with them into battle, and that which would be stuffed into their duffel bags and moved with the unit's other bulk supplies. On November 5, the 397th received its first mail from the States since arriving in Europe. On that same day, Bob's sister battalion, the 3d Battalion of the 397th Infantry Regiment, boarded the trucks that took it to the front lines where, the next day, it relieved the 3d Battalion, 179th

²⁸ *Regiment*, pp. 62-64; Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 89-91; 397th Regimental History, 3100-INF (397) -0.3 11-1-44 to 11-30-44, File 26807, Record Group 407, National Archives Building II, College Park, Maryland.

Infantry Regiment of the 45th Division. The rain grew colder and turned to snow that evening, ushering in the wettest and coldest European winter in thirty years.²⁹

²⁹ 397th Regimental History, 3100-INF (397) -0.3 11-1-44 to 11-30-44, File 26807, RG 94, NABII; *Story*, p. 50; *Regiment*, p. 64; Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 99.

Combat

While Bob and his comrades advanced from Marseilles to the front, the war had not stood still. The key issue in Europe was whether enough means could be brought ashore fast enough to sustain offensives that would end the war in 1944. After the failure of Operation Market-Garden, Montgomery's 21st Army Group settled into the hard fighting to clear the Schelde estuary and seize and open Antwerp. This effort would not succeed until November 28. In the center, Bradley's 12th Army Group made its main effort north of the infamous Ardennes Forest in order to stay close to and support the 21st Group. This brought the US First and Ninth Armies into the approaches to Aachen, in Germany, and the very difficult terrain of the Hurtgen Forest. South of the Ardennes, Patton's Third Army struggled to maintain offensive momentum toward the fortress city of Metz. Despite the opening of the French port of Brest on September 20, all of these formations faced grave supply challenges, worsening weather and stiffened enemy resistance.

In late October, General Eisenhower met formally with the Combined Chiefs of Staff to consider and reject an all-out offensive to end the war by 1945. It was not logistically feasible. However, Eisenhower remained convinced that continuous offensive pressure all along the Allied front would drain enemy manpower, deny the Germans opportunities to regroup and improve defenses, and perhaps create a breakable weak spot somewhere in their stretched defenses. Also, offensive operations, especially in cold weather, were preferable to static, defensive operations for the morale of the soldiers.³⁰ Therefore, he issued Supreme Command Allied Forces Directive 114 (SCAF-114), providing guidance for offensive operations to the end of the year. Basically, Montgomery was to seize and open Antwerp, and all three army groups were to advance to the Rhine and cross it if possible. General Devers therefore planned his main effort as an offensive by Patch's Seventh Army in the north (where it would be helpful to Third

³⁰ Cold weather would plague American ground forces throughout the European campaign, inflicting fully 91,000 casualties. Michael D. Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy – How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994, pp. 240-241.

Army) to seize Sarrebourg, clear the Saverne Gap and reach and cross the Rhine River at and north of Strasbourg. Assuming that the offensives then ongoing within 6th Army Group were successful in reaching a stable line along the Meurthe River by November 5, Devers planned to launch his offensive on November 15. This date provided him ten days to replace the divisions of VI Corps with those just arrived from the States.³¹

The original Allied plan called for offensives by the First and Ninth Armies to begin on November 5; by Third Army on November 10; and by Seventh Army on November 15. Such “echelonment” of the attacking forces would catch the German defenders repositioning forces to meet the first attacks, and thus not firmly grounded in defensive positions to receive the subsequent attacks. Severe weather and problems coordinating First Army’s attack with the British on their left forced postponement of the First and Ninth Army attacks, but Eisenhower asked Patton to go ahead with his scheduled attack in Third Army anyway. Patton not only met this request, but advanced his attack date from November 10 to November 8. However, Devers’ headquarters did not learn of this change until November 7. In order to have the same synchronized effect on the Germans, Devers advanced his attack date from November 15 to November 13. That attack would be led on November 13 by the XV Corps, recently acquired from Third Army, on the left, and the II French Corps on the right, followed by a VI Corps attack in the center on November 15. This scheme retained the full ten days for VI Corps to exchange its divisions.³²

Such an exchange was necessary. The divisions of VI Corps had been in continuous combat since landing in southern France on August 15th and were near exhaustion. Their most recent offensive, Operation Dogface, bogged down near the town of St Die but short of the Meurthe River. Seventh Army Commander Patch therefore committed his two other corps, XV and II French, to supporting attacks on either flank of the VI Corps. These succeeded, the XV Corps’ 2d French Armor Division taking the key

³¹ Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *A War to Be Won – Fighting the Second World War*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2000, p. 462; Forest C. Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, United States Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations Series, Washington: Center of Military History, 1954, pp. 305-311; Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, pp. 351-355.

city of Baccarat with its bridge over the Meurthe on November 1. This allowed the VI Corps on November 2 to advance fitfully toward the Meurthe. On its left, the weary 45th Infantry Division, heartened somewhat by the arrival of lead elements of the 100th Division, advanced from Rambervillers toward the French town of Raon-l'Etape just upstream on the Meurthe from Baccarat.³³ Clearly, though, the VI Corps divisions were spent. Generals Patch and Brooks therefore agreed that the arriving 100th and 103d Divisions would begin relieving the 45th and 3d Divisions respectively as soon as possible, and not during the ten day interlude originally foreseen.³⁴ The new divisions would continue the combat missions of their predecessors: establishing a solid line along the Meurthe River as the jump-off for the planned general offensives.

The Meurthe River, running from southeast to northwest, is one of several that drain the western face of the High Vosges Mountains of eastern France. Reaching elevations of 3000 feet, the High Vosges begin at Belfort, near where the Swiss, French and German borders meet. They run in a northern direction just west of the north-flowing Rhine River to Strasbourg, where they begin to taper off to become the Low Vosges and Hardt Mountains. Across the Rhine from the High Vosges is the German Black Forest. North of neutral Switzerland, then, the combination of the High Vosges Mountains, the Rhine River and the Black Forest, presented a series of highly challenging obstacles to an army moving east toward Germany.

At Strasbourg, however, at the northeast end of the High Vosges and on the French side of the Rhine, this geography changes slightly. The Rhine valley is wider here, providing some maneuver room for large forces. The Rhine itself is not yet as formidable an obstacle as along its lower reaches farther north. And across the Rhine northeast from Strasbourg, the Black Forest gives way to the more open, rolling country between the Danube and Main Rivers. This ground provides a viable strategic approach into southern Germany. For the Allied 6th Army Group, approaching Germany from

³² Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, pp. 355, 363.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-342.

³⁴ The 36th Infantry Division remained in the line until designated as a general reserve division in late December, giving it nearly 150 continuous days of combat operations.

southern France, then, Strasbourg was the key objective. To reach it, they would have to force their way through the High Vosges Mountains.

The German commanders, of course, could read maps, too. The German *Nineteenth Army*, commanded by General Friedrich Wiese, had conducted a fighting withdrawal ahead of the VI Corps since August. It offered stiffer resistance now that it occupied the more defensible terrain of the High Vosges closer to Germany and the rest of *Army Group G*. Also, it had been reinforced somewhat by *Volksgrenadier* divisions hastily assembled from within Germany. The Germans determined to delay any Allied advance here in the western foothills of the Vosges along the Meurthe River long enough to improve their main defensive line generally along the crest of the High Vosges. In this *Weststellung*, they hoped to defend successfully for the winter of 1945. Wiese and his boss, *Army Group G* Commander Lieutenant General Herman Balck, agreed that an offensive by 6th Army Group would aim to force the Saverne Gap and reach Strasbourg, and they weighted their defensive preparations accordingly. Balck ordered a “scorched earth” withdrawal into the *Weststellung*, meaning removal of able-bodied male French citizens to Germany as forced labor; concentration of women, children and old men in so-called “safe areas;” and the emptied towns and villages burned to the ground.

General Wiese had significant challenges, however. His army had a very low priority among German forces, which were busy confronting renewed offensives all along their front and gathering forces for their planned Ardennes counter-attack which would precipitate the Battle of the Bulge. *Nineteenth Army* held over 120 miles of front. The same mountainous terrain that afforded them tactical advantages in the defense also made lateral maneuver, logistical support, and artillery displacement difficult. Much of their available armor had been withdrawn to the north. While the newly arrived *Volksgrenadier* divisions provided additional fresh manpower, they were comprised of men from the Navy, Air Force and support troops who lacked skill in infantry tactics and had been together barely long enough to constitute cohesive teams.³⁵

³⁵ Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, pp. 339, 362. See also Keith E. Bonn, *When the Odds Were Even – The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944 – January 1945*, Novato: Presidio Press, 1994, p. 87, 100, 104. Bonn notes that the German defenders fought from buildings and prepared positions and were

Confronting the 45th Infantry Division of the US VI Corps in early November between Baccarat and Raon-l'Etape was the 951st Grenadier Regiment and the 21st Panzer Division. On November 8, however, the 708th Volksgrenadier Division relieved these units, which headed north. The 708th was a remnant of the former 708th Infantry Division, a coastal defense unit that had been badly battered in the fighting in Normandy earlier in the summer. Commanded by Generalmajor Joseph Paul Kreiger, the division spent six weeks in Slovakia to integrate and train its replacements before being sent to the Vosges. With about 4,000 soldiers, the 708th had three infantry regiments of roughly 800 men each; an artillery regiment with twenty-four 105mm and twelve 150mm howitzers; nine towed anti-tank guns and fourteen self-propelled assault guns; and a number of anti-aircraft, engineer and reconnaissance troops. Their infantry was armed with the new MP44 assault rifles, which were automatic, and every squad carried a .30-calibre MG42 machine gun.³⁶ Despite their disadvantages, they were a formidable enemy on good defensive ground. Accordingly, they concentrated their limited forces in strong points to deny the Americans access to the few routes that traversed the Vosges Mountains.

One such position was the town of Raon-l'Etape. Situated where the Plaine River flows into the Meurthe from the northeast, Raon-l'Etape controls access to the valley of the Plaine and Highway N-392, which could carry a sizable military force nearly a third of the way through the Vosges Mountains toward Strasbourg. As the 100th Division relieved the 45th Division just west of Raon-l'Etape beginning on November 5, Major

thus less exposed to the elements than the Americans, who suffered significant casualties to cold weather injuries such as trenchfoot in beginning of the coldest winter in Europe in twenty-five years.

³⁶ Keith E. Bonn, *Friends and Enemies of the Century – Military Units Which Supported or Opposed the 100th Infantry Division in the European Theater of Operations, 1944-45*, Bedford: The Aberjona Press, 2001, pp. 52-53. The MP44s (for Machine Pistol, Model 1944) were important. Derived from a long line of German sub-machine guns going back to World War I, the MP44 and its three immediate predecessors, the MP43, MP40, and MP38, were assault rifles. They combined a high rate of fire (hence, GIs referred to them collectively as “burp guns”) with penetrating power. They gave German squads a great deal of firepower that compensated somewhat for their less abundant artillery and air support.

General Burress accepted that division's task of crossing the Meurthe River and seizing the city.³⁷

Burress placed the 397th Regiment on the division's left flank initially. The 3d Battalion relieved the 3d Battalion of the 179th Infantry, 45th Division, in the vicinity of Baccarat, and established defensive positions there on November 5. The 2d Battalion and regimental command post moved into Baccarat itself on November 6. Also on November 6, Bob's 1st Battalion took up defensive positions in regimental reserve near the village of Thiaville, southeast of St Helene, relieving elements of the 180th Infantry Regiment there. At 10:00 AM on November 7, Colonel William A. Ellis, the 397th's commander, formally accepted responsibility for the sector of the 179th Infantry, which withdrew. Meanwhile, the 398th Regiment came into position opposite Raon-l'Etape and to the right of the 397th, and the 399th adjusted its position to the left to close on the 398th. In all of this movement, both the 398th and 399th Regiments encountered small German patrols. They engaged in brief fire fights and artillery exchanges, suffered casualties and took prisoners. Except for artillery and mortar exchanges, the 397th's sector was quiet. On November 9, General Burress accepted the entire 45th Division sector along the Meurthe, centered on Raon-l'Etape.³⁸

To capture Raon-l'Etape, thereby securing the jump-off positions for the major offensive to begin on the 15th, Burress planned to avoid a direct assault across the Meurthe River. Instead, he intended to outflank the city by exploiting the intact bridge in Baccarat, about five miles away. The 398th Regiment would close to the west bank of the Meurthe opposite Raon-l'Etape and, together with other divisional elements, demonstrate as if about to force a crossing. This, hopefully, would fix the Germans' attention. Meanwhile, the 397th would cross the Meurthe at Baccarat (most of the regiment was

³⁷ The division's 399th Infantry Regiment, the first to arrive from Marseilles, was immediately attached to the 45th Division on November 2 and participated in combat operations with the 45th until the relief was completed on November 9. It suffered the 100th Division's first casualty when Private First Class Estile Crittendon of Company L, 399th Infantry regiment was killed in an ambush of his reconnaissance patrol near St Remy, France, on November 3. Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 188

³⁸ *Story*, pp. 51-52; *Regiment*, p.77; 397th Regimental History, p. 2, 3100-INF (397) -0.3 11-1-44 to 11-30-44, File 26807, RG 94, NABII.

already across), as would the 399th. These two regiments would then attack generally abreast, southeast, along the east bank of the Meurthe and into the more weakly held flank of the German defenses, seizing the dominant high ground north of Raon-l'Etape. The 397th would move southeast and adjacent to the river itself; the 399th would move east, on the 397th's left, to take the town of Neufmaisons and approach Raon-l'Etape from the northwest. General Burress set November 12 as the day of the attack. This was a creative and ambitious plan for the untested division in its first major action, but one its soldiers were confident they could carry out.³⁹

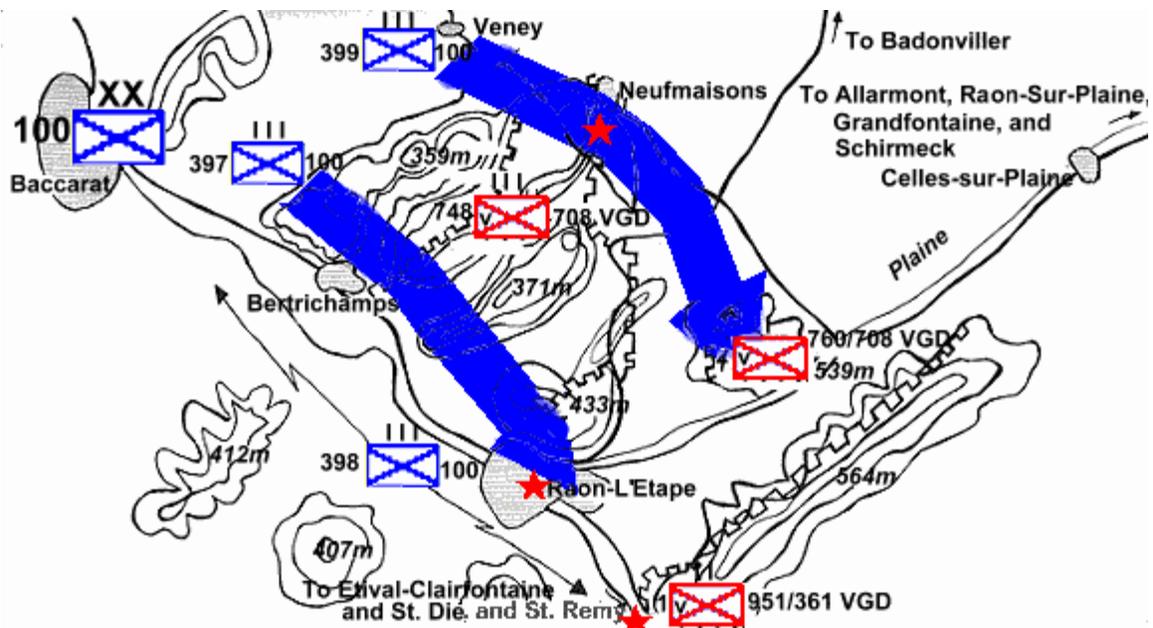


Figure 5 MG Burress' plan of attack on Raon-l'Etape, November 12, 1944, from the website of the 100th Infantry Division Association.

The German defenders of Raon-l'Etape were neither ignorant of their vulnerability on the flank nor lethargic about preparing their defenses. They prepared, of course, to defend against the anticipated river crossing. They also prepared defenses in depth through the city, liberally mining and booby-trapping its buildings and obstructing

³⁹ Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, pp. 392-393; *Story*, pp. 54-55; Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 156-7. The most thorough history of US infantry divisions in World War II calls the plan "inspired" and attributes it to the professionalism of General Burress and the soundness of the Army's system of preparing divisions

its streets. To protect against the possibility of attack from Baccarat, they extended their defensive works west of Raon-l'Etape, using Highway D8/9 leading north out of the city as a principal supply line. Here they "built extensive barbed-wire barriers, cleared fields of fire, and constructed an impressive network of trenches, foxholes, bunkers and machine-gun emplacements." Forward of these main defensive works, in the direction of Baccarat, and generally just east of a country road running north out of Bertrichamps to the village of Veney, they prepared a less extensive system of outposts. These would warn of an enemy's approach and disrupt his attack before it reached the main defensive line. Carefully camouflaged, the defenses used terrain and the overcast weather to negate American superiority in artillery, armor and air power, and force a close-in, infantry battle.⁴⁰

Rain turning intermittently to snow had fallen steadily since November 5 when Bob crossed the Meurthe River bridge in Baccarat with the rest of the 1st Battalion on the morning of November 11. Most of the 399th Regiment had crossed the night before, the movements under blackout conditions and stern noise discipline intended to conceal the repositioning from German patrols. The Regiment's plan of attack was to cross the line of departure (occupied by the 3d Battalion) southeast of Baccarat at 9:00 AM on the morning of November 12 with 1st Battalion on the right (south), 2d Battalion on the left (north) and 3d Battalion prepared to follow in reserve. This placed 1st Battalion closest to the Meurthe, clearing the high ground just north of Highway 59, which paralleled the river and led to Raon-l'Etape. 1st Battalion's planned axis of advance took it about three miles past the villages of Bertrichamps and Clairupt to its objective, Hill 438 overlooking Raon-l'Etape. It called for C Company to advance on the right just along the highway; A Company to advance on the left between C Company and the 2d Battalion; and B Company to follow in battalion reserve. A Company's plan was to attack with 1st Platoon

for combat. Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe – The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945*, Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1999, p. 209.

⁴⁰ Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, p. 393; Bonn, *Odds Were Even*, p. 107, 120. Bonn notes that the Germans had been working on their defensive preparations for some weeks, using both military units and German and Alsatian laborers.

on the left, 2d on the right, and 3d and the Weapons Platoon following in support. The company command group followed 1st Platoon.⁴¹

Once across the Meurthe, 1st Battalion moved through Baccarat and marched about a mile southeast of town to a wooded forward assembly area from which they could move quickly to cross the line of departure at 9:00 AM. The route would have been reconnoitered in advance and guarded by the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron; Bob would have passed outposts of these soldiers along the way. The men would occupy a forward assembly area tactically, meaning that they would be dispersed, silent, alert and ready to fight should the enemy attack first. They may have dug shallow foxholes that would afford some cover but would require little time, effort or noise to construct. The men would have been sweaty from the march initially, and then shivered as their body heat dissipated and the cold of a snowy night settled upon them. Captain Conley ordered patrols to reconnoiter beyond the line of departure. As the night turned to gray, drizzling dawn on Sunday, November 12, Bob and his fellow soldiers were undoubtedly tense with anxiety over what their first fight would bring. Fear, certainly, was one emotion, but so was a general nervousness over their own behavior, and an eagerness to end the waiting: what would it be like? How would they act? Would they make mistakes? Would they “chicken out?”⁴² Such fears would have been allayed somewhat by officers and sergeants making periodic, last-minute checks of men, equipment, weapons and plans, both annoying and re-assuring to the anxious GIs.

At about 8:00 AM, A Company Commander Captain Frederick S. Conley, Junior, reported the company ready to move. Shortly after, Company A moved out in formation. They went about a mile, past the forward positions of 3d Battalion and, at 9:00 AM, across the line of departure, the Bertrichamps-Veney farm road. They were officially in the attack. The first 100 yards crossed an open field, which let the soldiers adjust to their

⁴¹ Field Order 1, Headquarters 397th Infantry, V265848, France, 2000A 10 November 1944; Overlay, RCT 397th S-3 Section 2400A 11 November 1944; Headquarters 397th Infantry Periodic Report No. 5 102400A-112400A November, 1944, Baccarat, in 3100-INF(397)-0.3, Operations in the Battle for Raon-l'Etape – 1st Battalion, 397th Infantry, 12-18 November 1944, File 26810, RG 407, NABII; Operations Summary – 397th Infantry Regiment – November, 1944, 3100-INF(397)-0.3 Operations in France, November, 1944, File 26807, RG 407, NABII; Conley interview, August 8, 2002.

positions in the formation. Very likely, Bob and the Second Scout of his squad, and their squad leader, moved several yards in front of the rest of the squad and reached the woods on the far side first. Here, they would have halted briefly to be sure that the squad members saw where they entered the woods. Now their route ascended a steep hill. The soldiers struggled under heavy combat loads. The scouts, closely gripping their rifles, strained to hear from beneath their steel helmets in the dripping woods. They looked for a good route up, neither difficult nor obvious. The men picked their way carefully, attempting to see without being seen, and not to accidentally betray their presence by avoidable noise. They watched closely for signs of landmines underfoot, and for the enemy ahead. They jumped nervously at the sound of melting snow falling in the woods. As A Company ascended the hill, C Company's heavy machine guns on their flank began firing. Suddenly, enemy artillery and mortars whistled ominously overhead and exploded with their telltale "crunch" and "whumpf" somewhere to the rear. This startled the green soldiers; some took cover until they realized that the rounds missed. There were no casualties in A Company. One of their "firsts" was behind them, but clearly the enemy knew they were coming.

By about 9:40 AM, Bob reached the top of the hill, quickly ensured it was clear of the enemy, and signaled for his squad to follow down the far side. Somewhere along this route, he pointed out footprints in the snow that he took to indicate recent enemy movement. It is likely that he could see the squad moving adjacent to his, and possibly the men of the adjacent platoon. The far side of the hill descended sharply into a deep draw. At about 10:00 AM, as the lead scouts and the rest of 1st Platoon started up this draw, they were met by a burst of enemy machine gun fire, followed immediately by heavy fire from automatic "burp guns" and rifles. Several men went down, some wounded, some seeking cover. Snow and dirt flew everywhere from the pelting bullets. More machine guns joined in. The enemy, forward elements of the 748th Regiment, 708th Volksgrenadier Division, was well dug in on higher ground on the opposite side of the draw.⁴³

⁴² Gurley, *Mountains*, p. 96.

⁴³ The description of A Company's fight on November 12 is reconstructed from *Story*, pp. 54-57; *Regiment*, pp. 78-79; "The Battle for Raon-l'Etape," 5-page typed manuscript; 397th Infantry Regiment S-3 Log, 12

Details of the fight over the next three hours are uncertain. Bob's squad leader, Staff Sergeant Raymond Guy, attempted to pull back and outflank the enemy position with the men not wounded. The company First Sergeant yelled to the men caught in the kill zone to "charge." Bob moved out in front. The enemy fire intensified, and threatened to pin down both lead platoons. Enemy artillery fire began to fall among the company. Bob crept and crawled to a position within grenade distance of the enemy. From there, he threw grenades and fired his rifle at the enemy until he was wounded. Staff Sergeant Nicholas Micari came to Bob's aid before continuing to lead men against the enemy position until he himself was killed. The 2d Platoon, moving adjacent to Bob's on the left, joined the assault. Its leader, 2d Lieutenant Thomas J. Stillwagon, went down with a severe wound but continued to direct his soldiers.⁴⁴ Captain Conley called for artillery fire and maneuvered soldiers up the hill and onto the flanks of the enemy position. On his right, C Company, also in a hot fight, was unable to surmount the heights and pulled back some 200 yards. Most of the enemy withdrew, but A Company took fifteen prisoners, their first. They began to occupy and reorganize the recently evacuated German positions.

As soon as Bob's squad succeeded in knocking out the machinegun that initially took them under fire, Ray returned to the spot where he had seen Bob wounded. Ray saw

Nov 1944; 1944 Unit History, 397th Infantry Regiment, 22 February 1945, all in 3100-INF (397) -0.3 11-1-44 to 11-30-44, File 26807, RG 407, NABII; and Letter, Frederick S. Conley Jr., to Paul Herbert, August 10, 2002. Bob's role is derived from Citation to Accompany Award of the Bronze Star Medal, November 2, 1945, in possession of Ms. Jane (Herman) Leglar, Galena, Illinois. Details have been added or confirmed based on Rae Interview, July 31, 2002 and Conley interview, August 8, 2002. For infantry tactics involving scouts, and specifically in the 100th Division on November 12, see Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 108, 166-172. Gurley was a lead scout in A Company, 399th Infantry Regiment. See also Bonn, *Odds Were Even*, pp. 120-123 and "The 100th Division in Combat – The Attack on the German Winter Line, 12-20 November 1944" at <http://www.100thww2.org/combat.html>.

⁴⁴ The First Sergeant, Bennie C. Morre, a wounded veteran of World War I, was severely wounded in this battle. SSG Micari earned a posthumous Silver Star for "crawl[ing] from one scout to another when fire from concealed enemy machine guns wounded both...[and] advanc[ing] alone to within 25 yards of the enemy emplacement and kill[ing] two of the foe before he himself was killed." Lieutenant Stillwagon was wounded a second time, taking him out of action. He also received the Silver Star. The lieutenant leading first platoon "went to pieces" under fire, was relieved on the spot and replaced by Technical Sergeant Walter Gunter. Gunter led the platoon until killed in action in February, 1945. SSG Guy, Bob's squad leader, was killed in action two days later, on November 14. *Regiment*, pp. 93, 95, 100; Rae interview, July 31, 2002; Conley interview, August 8, 2002.

that Bob was hit in the legs and abdomen and, though conscious, appeared badly injured. As he applied a tourniquet to Bob's bleeding leg, he talked to Bob cheerfully, congratulating him on getting the "million dollar wound" that would take him out of the war. He stayed with Bob until a medic arrived, and then left to rejoin the squad.⁴⁵



Figure 6 Elements of C/397th Infantry road march through a cleared German obstacle in the High Vosges, mid-November 1944. The soldier on the left side of this photo is SSgt. Norman Stephens and behind him is Les Gluesenkamp. On the right side is Lt. William Nugent. Behind him is SSgt. William Hurley, Pfc Kenneth Bonte and Pfc Joseph Pelowitz. Information submitted by Les Gluesenkamp, C/397th, to the website of the 100th Infantry Division Association.

A Company had a busy afternoon on November 12. Although the enemy had withdrawn, intermittent shelling continued. Reorganizing to defend against possible counterattack, or to continue the attack, was top priority. There was momentary confusion between the battalion, regimental and division commanders whether the battalion should remain where it was or press on immediately.⁴⁶ The prisoners had to be

⁴⁵ Telephonic interview with Mr. Raymond L. Rae of New Caney, Texas, February 12, 2002.

⁴⁶ "Journal CT 7" records that at 2:35 PM, November 12, the 1st Battalion was digging in. At 2:50, General Burress himself called to say that he wanted the regiment, including the first battalion, to continue the attack. The regimental operations officer, Major Wisdom, passed this direction on to 1st Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel John M. King. Colonel King left A Company in the position they had just

guarded, searched and moved to the rear. As of 1:30 PM, the company reported a total of nineteen men wounded, all of whom needed medical attention and evacuation. All of this activity had to be accomplished despite losses among key leaders and the shock to green soldiers of having to deal with extensive damage so shortly into their first fight. In addition to Staff Sergeant Micari, the dead included another squad leader, Sergeant Marion C. Fordham, and two soldiers, Privates First Class Robert E. Miller and William E. Schulz.⁴⁷ The Regiment's operations summary for the day described "light enemy resistance," but it is doubtful that any GI in A Company would have agreed.⁴⁸ The company remained on its hill through a miserable night, with few blankets and little water resupply.⁴⁹ It was ordered to resume the attack the next day, November 13, but the Germans attacked first. On November 14, it resumed the offensive, liberating the tiny village of Clairrupt on November 15. The attack on the hills over Raon-l'Etape succeeded on November 17 despite intense enemy counterattacks, and on November 18, Major General Burrell declared that city liberated. By then, the Seventh Army's main offensive had begun.⁵⁰

The impact of twenty casualties on a line company in an hour or so can hardly be overstated. Even if a third of these were "ambulatory," meaning able to walk and thus help in their own evacuation, that left more than a dozen men to be evacuated by litter, in addition to the remains of the four men killed outright. To move a wounded soldier by litter usually required four able-bodied soldiers, one at each corner of the litter. Two men could do it for a very short distance on even ground, but more were required when the

taken, and continued the attack with C Company and his reserve company, B Company. 3100-INF(397)-3.2, Journal CT 7 21 October – 31 December 1944, RG 407, NABII.

⁴⁷ Robert Miller and Bill DeGraff were both scouts in 2d Platoon and were good friends. Robert was killed outright in front of Bill. They had taken Robert's fiancée to dinner in New York on their last pass before shipping out. Robert was also an Illinois man, from Bartonville. DeGraff to the author, August 2, 2002; *Regiment*, p. 101.

⁴⁸ "November 1944 Operations of the 397th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division - Original Monthly Narrative Report Submitted by the Commander," entry for November 12, pp. 2-3, reprint provided by the 100th Infantry Division Association.

⁴⁹ Raymond Rae recalled that he and a soldier named Scyphers dug their foxhole to a depth of about six feet and "you talk about shaking...we shook for four or five hours!" Rae Interview, July 31, 2002.

⁵⁰ "This spirited and effective attack served both its purposes: it fixed the 708th Volksgrenadiers in place, allowing the 103d and 3d Infantry Divisions to attack across the Meurthe...without fear of interference from the north. It also focused the efforts of the 708th Volksgrenadiers in the southern portion of their

casualty was down among trees, rocks, and foxholes or had to be moved down a hillside, across rough ground or for any distance. All of these conditions applied, in addition to rain, snow and mud, so for awhile, about forty-eight men from the company were tied up moving the casualties to a safe collection point. Add to this the psychological impact of the recently completed firefight, the likelihood of counter-attack and the fact that all of the men were witnessing combat casualties for the first time, among friends they had trained with for months, and the compounding difficulties become apparent.

Because Bob was conscious, he may have been able to treat himself before Ray arrived to help him. To stop bleeding, either man would have dusted Bob's wounds with sulfanilamide powder and placed on them a small field dressing, which each soldier carried. Ray undoubtedly took up the cry, "Medic!" until an aidman arrived, but then had to leave to rejoin the squad. The 1st Platoon aidman, Technical Specialist ("T-4" or "Tech-4") Gurney Vogt, was someone Bob certainly knew. He would have spoken to Bob reassuringly, given him a shot of morphine to ease the pain, checked more carefully to identify the specific wounds he bore, and applied additional dressings. He was with Bob only a few minutes. With several casualties scattered over the battlefield, Vogt and the other aidmen scampered from man to man, sometimes under fire, in what was their first real test of skill.⁵¹

It is unlikely that Bob felt much pain. While some wounds are indescribably painful, not all are. Ray recalls him as conscious, but not agonizing; shock, and then morphine, would do much to alleviate pain initially. It is also unlikely that Bob fully sensed his condition or the activity around him. Wounded soldiers frequently recount a surrealistic feeling of removal from their immediate surroundings. Bob may have drifted in and out of consciousness.

sector, allowing XV Corps to launch its main attack toward Sarrebourg against a distracted and confused foe." Bonn, *Odds Were Even*, p. 123.

⁵¹ Conley interview, August 8, 2002. Vogt received the Bronze Star for his valor saving lives that day, *ibid.*, and *Regiment*, p. 98.

Shortly, a litter party arrived, composed of men either from the company command group or the weapons platoon. These men lifted Bob as carefully as possible onto a litter fashioned from a shelter-half and carried him and his personal equipment down off the hill slope to a company casualty collection point on the floor of the valley north of Bertrichamps, near the line of departure. Here, aidmen did what they could to further stabilize the wounded men. Before long, medical litter teams arrived by jeep from the rear. Highway 59 parallel to the battalion's route of advance was available and there were numerous farm roads and trails by which vehicles could move up to the front lines. This was hazardous work; the entire sector was still under enemy artillery and mortar fire; the trails traversed steep terrain and were extremely muddy from the incessant rain and snow; and the Germans had mined the area thoroughly. At night, German patrols sometimes infiltrated back into the area and ambushed US troops, including litter parties. Due to the severity of his wounds, Bob had a high priority for evacuation and left before nightfall on one of the first evacuation vehicles.

Bob was taken to the battalion aid station just east of Baccarat and near the medical company supporting the 397th Infantry.⁵² There, a medical doctor would see him for the first time. The doctor's job was to make a tentative diagnosis; supervise life-saving and stabilizing treatment so the patients could survive further evacuation; and sort the patients into priority categories for evacuation based on their probability of survival. Wounds would be cleaned, bandages changed, blood plasma and more morphine administered if needed, and an anti-tetanus shot given. A medical tag was completed and tied to each patient's shirt. Patients were given blankets and kept as warm and dry as possible. Probably a chaplain was at the aid station; he would speak to the conscious patients and pray for all of them.

⁵² "The town of Bertrichamps was...the site of the battalion aid stations." *Medics of the Century – The 325th Medical Battalion, 100th Infantry Division*, Stuttgart, 1945, p. 25, 3100-MED-0.1, File 26708, RG 407, NABII . However, this source does not say when the aid stations were established there. Because Bertrichamps was between US and German lines on November 12, it seems unlikely that the aid stations would have been that far forward. Captain Conley remembers them as being on the eastern edge of Baccarat initially, Conley interview, August 8, 2002. That would have put them close to Company A, 325th Medical Company, which set up in Baccarat on November 10 to support the 397th Infantry in the upcoming attack.

From the aid station, evacuees passed to the regimental clearing station in Company A, 325th Medical Battalion, in Baccarat. Here, Bob likely received a transfusion of whole blood, and another doctor took measures to halt his bleeding, immobilize any fractures, control pain and discourage infection. Then, he would have been transported by field ambulance to the medical battalion headquarters near Rambervillers, some eight miles away on a good road. Doctors here were capable of some surgical procedures. If Bob were transportable, however, he would be readied as soon as possible for evacuation to the 10th Field Hospital, which could provide the full range of life-saving medical attention. If not transportable, the 325th Medical Battalion headquarters would hold him and try to stabilize his condition. A platoon of the 10th Hospital was positioned forward with the 325th specifically to assist with that situation. At every stage, the medics' job was to prolong life long enough to get the patient to the field hospital. Only if the patient were in danger of dying soon would they delay his further evacuation in order to give him thorough treatment. During a battle, when there are many wounded men in all varieties of condition, such decisions become very, very difficult.⁵³

Whether Bob was evacuated farther than Rambervillers is unknown. Despite the medical attention given him, he died of a “gunshot wound to the abdomen” on November 16, 1944, while in the care of the 3d Unit, 10th Field Hospital. He had been in the Army exactly eight months. On November 18, 1944, his uniformed remains were placed in a mattress cover and, after a simple Protestant service, he was buried in Plot P, Row 32, Grave 2255, in the temporary US Military Cemetery near Epinal, France. He had arrived at the field hospital with two identification tags (“dog tags”). One tag remained on his person; the other was nailed to the wooden cross that marked his grave.⁵⁴ On December 2, 1944, official evidence of his death arrived at the War Department. A telegram went

⁵³ This reconstruction of Bob's probable experience is based on *Medics of the Century*; Unit Report of the 325th Medical Battalion for the Period 1 November to 30 November 1944, 3100-MED-0.3, File 20203, RG 407, NABII; Albert E. Crowley, *Fighting for Life – American Military Medicine in World War II*, New York: The Free Press, 1994, pp. 130-131, 153-156, 263; Geoffrey Perret, *There's a War to Be Won – The United States Army in World War II*, New York: Random House, 1991, pp. 487-489; *Story*, p. 59; and Gurley, *Mountains*, pp. 118, 205, 240.

⁵⁴ Report of Burial, QM Form 1 – GRS, 29 Nov 44, Individual Deceased Personnel File, US Total Army Personnel Center, Alexandria, Virginia; copy obtained by the author.

out to his mother, Gladys Herman, in Galena, that day. One can only imagine the anguish caused by its arrival.

On the day Bob died, his outfit was still in heavy fighting. His regimental commander, Colonel Ellis, was killed in an ambush on November 16; his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel John M. King, took command of the regiment. Raon-l'Étape fell to the 397th on November 18th; Moyennoutier on November 21; Senones and Le Petite Raon on November 22; and Le Puid, La Saulcy, Belval and St Blaise on November 23. On November 24, the regiment went into division reserve for relative rest for five days, then re-deployed to Ingwiller. On the day Bob's mother received the awful telegram, Fred Conley, Bill DeGraff, Ray Rae, Gurney Vogt and the other men of A Company were back in the line, fighting to liberate Mouterhouse, France, a task that would take a week. They and their comrades fought all the way through the Vosge Mountains. They repelled a vicious German counterattack at Bitche while, to the north, other units fought the Battle of the Bulge around the Belgian town of Bastogne. They crossed the Rhine River and fought into Germany itself and, finally, experienced the grim satisfaction of the Nazi surrender on May 8, 1945.⁵⁵

Bob was among 586,628 US Army casualties suffered in the European Theater of Operations. Of these, 456,779 occurred in the fighting divisions between the landings at Normandy on June 6, 1944, and the German surrender on May 8, 1945. He was one of 80,211 dead. These numbers comprise fully 49% of all US Army battle casualties in World War II. Bob was in the most dangerous work of the war: infantrymen constituted only fourteen percent of the Army's overseas strength, but suffered seventy percent of the casualties.⁵⁶ "No period saw more dogged fighting or required more stamina and physical tenacity on the part of the soldiers than that between late October and the end of December. It was a time of stockpiling supplies, of digging in, and of battling painfully to straighten the lines. This period more than any other of the war in northern Europe belonged to the foot soldiers. The high-level

⁵⁵ *Regiment*, pp. 74-75, 113.

⁵⁶ "Casualties" includes killed, wounded, missing, captured and injured; US Army Air Forces are included. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy*, pp. 239-240.

communiqués...were insufficient tributes to [their] fighting qualities...”⁵⁷

Coming Home

It took nearly another three years for Bob to return to Galena. Not until June, 1945, were his personal effects returned: 1 wallet, 1 red stone ring, 1 cigarette case (damaged), 23 photos (at least one torn), 1 fountain pen, 2 souvenir coins. That same month, his mother requested the return of his body to the United States, but the Army denied the request. No such returns would be attempted until the fighting was over.⁵⁸

On July 4, 1945, the Army notified George and Gladys that Bob’s Purple Heart, likely awarded at the field hospital before he died, would be mailed to them. Apparently it was not sent, because in November, they were told that Bob was also awarded the Bronze Star. On January 6, 1946, in what must have been an awkward ceremony, US Army Air Forces Lieutenant William F. Krueger from the Freeport Recruiting Office awarded George and Gladys their son’s Bronze Star for Valor and two Purple Hearts at their home on Meeker Street in Galena.⁵⁹

Another fifteen months would pass before the Hermans heard from the Army again. Most other Galena veterans had returned by then; the town and the country slowly put the war behind them. On April 14, 1947, the Hermans received a photograph of the cemetery at Epinal. Finally, in July, they were notified of their right to have Bob’s body returned. For some reason, their reply was misplaced, and so a second notice arrived in September. This time, George completed the forms officially requesting Bob’s re-internment in Galena. Meanwhile, Gladys mustered the courage to ask for more information about Bob. Apparently she had received a letter of condolence from the

⁵⁷ Pogue, *Supreme Command*, p. 305

⁵⁸ In June, 1945, Germany had surrendered, but Japan was still at war. The United States was planning to move many of the combat divisions from Europe to the Pacific for the anticipated invasion of Japan itself. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, and declaration of war by the Soviet Union against Japan, triggered Japanese surrender before the transfer became necessary,

⁵⁹ Undated newspaper clippings retained in the memorial record book of the funeral in the possession of Ms. Jane (Herman) Leglar, Galena, Illinois, and loaned to the author.

397th Regiment chaplain, because on December 4, 1947, she wrote to the Quartermaster General's Office, attempting to contact Chaplain Bonner E. Leeter "who wrote to me about my son... I would like to know more about his death." Her letter was duly forwarded to the Army Chief of Chaplains, but there is no record from there of a response or any further communication from Chaplain Leeter.⁶⁰

On January 27, 1948, a detail of the 46th Quartermaster Company disinterred Bob's remains at Epinal. The report notes "Identification tag found on remains," so there is little likelihood that the remains returned to Galena were anyone's but Bob's. On February 3, Bob's remains were sealed in a military casket and prepared for shipping. Because of the large number of remains awaiting return, it was nearly two months before Bob's could be shipped. On May 4, George and Gladys requested delivery of Bob's remains to the Nash Funeral Home in Galena. By May 7, Bob's remains were aboard the US Army Transport *Lawrence Victory*, with those of 4,182 of his comrades. Bob and 11 others from northwestern Illinois were destined for the Chicago Quartermaster Depot.⁶¹

On Thursday, May 20, 1948, at 12:55 PM, Illinois Central Train 15 bearing Bob's remains arrived at the railroad station in Galena. Four soldiers, Sergeant Elmer H. Morton, and Privates BJ Eberhradt, AJ Henning and Paul West, provided a military escort. An honor guard of Galena veterans met the train and accompanied the remains to the Nash Funeral Home. There, veterans maintained an honor guard until the burial on Saturday. Hundreds of Galenians called at the funeral home to pay their respects.

On Saturday, at 1:00 PM, the veterans removed Bob's flag-draped casket from the Nash home and escorted it to the 1st Presbyterian Church on Bench Street where it lay in state for an hour. Veterans Harold Larsen and DeLoss Orcheid stood as the honor guard at the church. At 2:00 PM, stores throughout the town closed in respect as people made their way to the church for the funeral. Reverend John Hodgson delivered the eulogy. The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Veterans' of Foreign Wars attended as a group. Following

⁶⁰ Forms and correspondence in Individual Deceased Personnel File, US Total Army Personnel Center, Alexandria, Virginia; copy obtained by the author.

⁶¹ Undated newspaper clippings retained with the memorial record book of the funeral.

the service, US Grant Post 2665 of the VFW and the Fickbohm-Hissem Post 193 of the American Legion escorted the cortege to Greenwood Cemetery, where Bob was buried with full military honors. A fourteen-man firing squad fired three volleys; veteran William Spillane played taps; and the veterans' detachment commander, Edmund Spurr assisted as Sergeant Morton folded and presented the flag from Bob's casket to George. Robert Earle Herman was home. Asked at the funeral if she worried whether the casket actually contained Bob's remains, Gladys replied, "If it's not my boy, it's somebody's boy."⁶²

⁶² Ibid., and conversations with Jane and with Shirley (Herman) Jahncke, another of Bob's sisters.

Epilogue

Bob was one of eighteen Galena youths killed in World War II and the third returned from overseas after the war. While other American towns suffered more, and other countries more than the United States, eighteen deaths among fewer than 5,000 Galena residents is still arresting as a measure of the war's magnitude.

When Bob's mother Gladys attempted to contact Chaplain Leeter in June, 1945, she wanted to know more about Bob's death. It may be best that she never heard from the chaplain; she died in 1965 without learning much more about Bob's wartime service than was contained in his Bronze Star citation. While no explanation could have assuaged her from her loss, she might have gained small comfort from what is apparent now.

Bob entered the Army at a very young age because, literally, his country needed him. He registered for the draft shortly after his eighteenth birthday and did not live until his nineteenth. Many Americans at the time believed that eighteen was too young, especially for combat service. Both the Congress and the Army struggled to craft policies to prevent "boys" being sent to the front. There were, however, few good choices. To replace casualties in units already at the front in the Army, Army Air Forces, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine, while readying new units for deployment, and maintaining an accelerated wartime economy of heavy industry and agriculture, required Herculean efforts by the government, Armed Forces and society. The same pressures that brought millions of women into the American workforce, and thousands into the Armed Forces, also brought men as young as Bob into the infantry.

Bob was neither too young for wartime service nor was he poorly trained. The seventeen weeks of basic training he received at Camp Wolters, Texas, to become an infantryman are comparable to the training infantrymen receive today. Training there in the spring of 1944 had been upgraded steadily with the lessons learned in combat in

Europe and the Pacific. Bob was trained in basic soldier skills, advanced individual skills for the infantry, and small unit battle drills, often under live fire conditions. Probably the best testimony of the quality of his training was his own self-confidence while on leave in July, 1944. At Fort Bragg, he underwent another two months of increasingly realistic training with the men he would accompany into battle. Training continued at Camp Kilroy, aboard ship and at Marseilles. While Bob was at Camp Wolters and again at Fort Bragg, both installations underwent rigorous training inspections by the War Department. Likewise, no sooner had the 100th Division arrived in France than Army Group Commander Devers arrived to inspect its combat readiness and training. Undoubtedly every GI who served in World War II can recall incidents from his training that seemed inefficient, bizarre or irrational, but overall, the Army trained its soldiers, Bob included, exceptionally well.

Bob went into battle under competent leadership. While there were many pressures to get the 100th Division into the front lines quickly in order to relieve other units and facilitate Eisenhower's overall scheme of a general offensive, the unit did not rush headlong and pre-maturely into battle. The deliberate relief of the 45th Division by the 100th allowed the soldiers to acclimate themselves to a combat environment before initiating major contact with the enemy. Major General Burress' plan to seize Raon-l'Etape deliberately avoided a river-crossing and frontal assault, with likely heavy casualties, and instead emphasized deception and envelopment of the enemy's flank. In hindsight, one might wish that the 397th's attack on November 12 had been preceded by better reconnaissance and supported by better artillery and mortar fire. That it was not makes it little different from the first combat operations of most units in Europe. It simply took time and experience to get many of the details right, and in the meantime, the enemy fought back.

Most striking about Bob's leaders on November 12 was their presence on the battlefield. Bob's squad leader was with him in action, and would be killed two days later leading his men. Another came to Bob's aid and was killed outright. Other casualties that day included another sergeant, a lieutenant and the company First

Sergeant. Company commander Conley personally led the successful maneuver of his platoons. On the day Bob died, his regimental commander, Colonel Ellis, was killed in action. Bob was not an automaton sent into battle by the orders of an impersonal hierarchy. He was led there by his fellow citizens in uniform.

Bob fought and suffered among friends. Raymond Rae recalls that Bob was one of a group of buddies from the platoon who formed at Fort Bragg and stuck together through the deployment and into combat. Ray was at Bob's side as soon as possible when he was wounded and stayed with him until a medic arrived. Captain Conley recalls that men from A Company carried Bob and the other casualties to the casualty collection point and remained with them until jeeps arrived from the aid station. While Bob probably knew few if any of the soldiers he encountered in medical channels, his experience in combat was with men he regarded as friends.

Most details of Bob's medical evacuation are unknown, but the few facts suggest that it was reasonably efficient. Bob received aid from a buddy and a trained medic almost immediately. The company promptly moved him to a casualty collection point out of danger. Aid station jeeps used Route 59 to get the casualties from Bertrichamp to the battalion aid station at Baccarat, a distance of only a few kilometers. Bob was wounded on November 12 and died on November 16 in the 3d Unit, 10th Field Hospital. The furthest forward units of the 10th Field Hospital were at the 100th Division's main medical facility at Rambervillers, several kilometers behind Baccarat. This means that Bob was evacuated at least that far, and may have made it all the way to the field hospital itself. It appears from this evidence that Bob was evacuated according to Army doctrine and the actual plan of medical support for the 100th Division. That he did not survive is likely due to the severity of his wounds, which Raymond Rae recalls as substantial, and not to the unavailability or inefficiency of medical help.

Finally, the Army treated Bob with dignity in death. Medics and quartermaster soldiers scrupulously recorded his identity from his dog tags and recorded his burial site. They buried him in uniform, in an individual, marked grave, with religious rites

according to his faith. They maintained the cemetery as sacred ground from its establishment in combat to this day. The Army knew how to contact Bob's family, and did so immediately upon confirmation of his death. Fellow soldiers preserved his personal effects, which were returned to his family. His unit knew he deserved the Bronze Star for Valor and the Purple Heart for his wounds and duly recommended him. Within little more than a year, an officer presented both awards to his family. The record of his dis-internment shows check marks where officials, using the original burial records, confirmed the remains as Bob's by the dog tags still on them and on the grave marker. They affixed one of these tags to the seal of his casket where it remained until removed at the Nash Funeral Home and placed in the memorial record book of the funeral. It is still there. Gladys' friend need not have worried her; the boy she buried was her boy, no doubt. That some actions occurred in the impersonal manner of a big bureaucracy is less important than that they occurred at all. Given combat conditions, a world war and twelve million Americans in uniform, the attention paid to Bob's individual case is a tribute to the values of the nation that sent him to war.

Bob's death was a terrible tragedy. Young and courageous, he had been a soldier for only 240 days when mortally wounded, minutes into his first and only battle. He lived another four days, and died eight months to the day after his induction into the Army. His death devastated a family and wounded a community. No one can say what he might have contributed to either had he lived. His death was not a sacrifice in that no one offered him to be killed in any cause; no one could be satisfied by his death. Instead his death was the consequence of risks accepted by his country, his community, his commanders, his comrades and Bob himself. They believed it was better to risk such death than to risk a future dominated by nazism and fascism. The deaths came, but so did the victory. "Peace don't mean much to us mothers that have lost our sons," wrote Gladys to the Army in June, 1945. Surely it could not. But a peace free from the dangers of that time has meant a great deal to Bob's brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews. Lest we forget.