

The 100th Infantry Division Defends Maginot Line Fort Schiesseck in Operation Northwind

by William F. Schmidt and Samuel J. Errera, 399-E

Combat memories of William F. Schmidt and Samuel J. Errera edited by W.S. Glazier:

Built in the 1930s to defend France from German attack, Fort Schiesseck was part of a series of large underground fortresses with exposed combat blocs. The Germans were aware of its strength with disappearing turrets mounting cannons, machine guns, and mortars and chose not to attack it. In World War II, the French troops in the fort only surrendered five days after France's defeat and armistice with Germany in 1940. German troops then occupied this and other Maginot forts to defend against American and Allied armies in 1944.

When the 100th Infantry Division came to Bitche in early December, 1944, its Colonel Zehner decided that Fort Schiesseck's guns must be silenced before Bitche could be liberated. From December 14-20 the 398th Regiment of the Division with artillery and aircraft support neutralized Schiesseck. But before the order could be given to attack through Bitche, the Germans had started their Ardennes Offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge. Patton's Third Army shifted north to help stop that attack and the Seventh Army had to occupy the front line vacated by the Third. The 100th then assumed a defensive line rather than one for attack.

The Germans, noting the thinning of the Seventh Army lines, decided to strike through American lines centering at Bitche in an attempt to push south to Strasbourg and split Allied armies to make up for their Ardennes defeat.

100th Division engineers used tons of high explosive to make sure that Fort Schiesseck that overlooked Bitche could not be used a second time against American troops when the Century Division would resume its push north into Germany. Two of its entrance blocs were still useable, the mechanized equipment entrance to the south of a road running west up the hill from Bitche and the personnel entrance up on a hillside across the road.

Both blocs had "fosse," concrete walls with gun apertures built in. Above them were round steel "cloche" bell-shaped steel structures with firing slits for machine gun or small arms fire. The concrete walls were from two to four feet thick and very secure from most attacks.

The First Platoon of E Co., 399th Regiment of the 100th Division was positioned at both of these entrance blocs to form road blockage to stop advancing troops or vehicles coming west on the road up from Bitche past Freudenberg Farms with its two concrete "abri" or concrete boxlike antipersonnel forts, and further on the French Garrison buildings of Fort Simserhof, which the 100th Division had occupied as part of its defensive line that stretched all the way to Rimling.

Sgt. Sim's third squad occupied the position at the personnel entrance and dug a foxhole for a bazooka team overlooking the road to the front of the bloc. There, Sgt. Pohlman, John Dubel, and Charles Underiner were captured by a German patrol on December 29th. On the 30th, Sgt. Frank Sims with other squad members: Rayburn Thomas, Marion (Bud) Matthias, Winfred Polson, Arthur Whitehouse, Lloyd Gross, a replacement two-man bazooka team, and William (Bill) Schmidt, who supplied the information about the following action.

The foxhole was considered necessary to cover the road below since the entrance bloc was set back and its gun ports could not accommodate the bazooka. Sgt. Sims' squad thus occupied the secure entrance itself. Since the Germans had the run of the top of the fort, they could have the advantage of overlooking the bazooka foxhole, and that may have been how the earlier team had been captured. If vehicles were

heard approaching, the team could occupy the foxhole to fire their bazooka, but they would have to hope that no one was waiting for them from above.

A phone line was laid across the road for communication back to the command post, but either a shell fragment or a German patrol cut the wire. The squad had C and K rations to eat and warmed themselves with a little campfire inside the bloc. About four inches of snow had fallen earlier in the day, but the evening was clearing. In Bill Schmidt's words, "I was settled in for my nap and awakened by the explosion shortly before midnight. The defense was throwing grenades out the door of the lower level. Sgt. Sims saw that the turret (cloche) was unmanned and sent me up. I still had the rifle grenade launcher on my rifle when three men came running. I got the launcher off and fired. One was hit and ran. One fell and died. One disappeared. Bud came up, so I went down. The third man exploded a grenade by Bud, and I went up, and the two of us stayed together the next hour.

The action then was our artillery sending rounds all around us. They could not hurt us, but it scattered Germans, and they took no more offensive action against us that night. The night had a bright moon and a coating of snow. Beautiful when it was still."

Sergeant Sam Errera and his first squad had occupied the mechanized equipment entrance and had dug a foxhole near the road for a Browning Automatic rifle and several men with M-1 rifles. His bloc was in a depression, and to cover the road, a field of fire had to be close to it. Bill Schmidt continues, "Sgt. Errera tells me that when the noise erupted at our bunker, he and his men made an orderly retreat." We will come to his story soon. Page 78 of *The 399th in Action* mentions Sgt. Sims' squad as missing in action there.

Bill Schmidt relates how Sgt. Sims squad became MIA. "The next day, January 1, we saw no signs of battle going on. We saw a few German soldiers digging in preparing to take us. The bunker could be approached from the direction the three Germans came from and be neutralized. We all discussed the matter and opted that unless something good happened, we would surrender while it was still light.

"We surrendered about 4 p.m. They went to our empty bunker and exploded charges in it. They then had us carry their dead comrade to a Command Post about 100 yards down the road toward Bitche, and then walked us toward the town as it got dark. In the darkness, barely seeing the road, but acutely aware of the soldiers on either side, I had some doubts about their intentions, but after we had walked for a while, a sliver of light came from an opening door, and we were in the interrogation room. No one gave more than name, rank, and serial number. The German asked one of our group about our not having gas masks and hearing the reply, 'We tossed them.'

"In the next days we walked to the Siegfried Line, rode 90 in a boxcar to where we wrote a card to our folks, and when the inner lining of my coat and a blanket were taken away. Another boxcar via Hamburg for an Allied bombing raid (six planes) to Muhlburg to get our POW tags, and then on a boxcar via the not as yet bombed Dresden to our labor camp near Bad Schandau/Elbe until the war's end." Bill was most interested on the 100th Division European tour in 1998 to see the Schiesseck entrance bloc where he was captured and climb on top to see the cloche from which he fired at his German attackers. The cloche was made of curved three-inch thick steel that could deflect shots from our most powerful guns.

We now hear from Sam Errera's perspective about the same Operation Northwind attack from across the highway to Bitche. "I was with the first squad and perhaps part of the second squad in the other pillbox, which you refer to as the mechanized equipment entrance.

"On December 29th, we were told that Sgt. Pohlman and Privates Weldon and Dubal of Sim's group had been captured from a foxhole outpost in front of their pillbox. On December 30th, I received eight Christmas packages from home, and Malcolm MacGregor, Glenn Mayer, and I were sent out to a foxhole outpost perhaps 100 yards in front of our pillbox. We took two ammo bags with ammunition, and one with candy bars. We were in the foxhole outpost again on December 31st.

"That afternoon we heard the pop of an enemy mortar. The shell landed about 20 yards short of our foxhole. A second mortar landed 10 yards short, and a third landed about five yards short. Fortunately, there was no fourth round. They may have thought they had scored a hit.

"We had communication with the CP in our pillbox but no direct communication with Sim's group. Lt. James Walsh, Sgts. Lennerton and Lilore may have been in the CP. At about 10 p.m. we could see lights

in the sky on the horizon in the distance which appeared to be a convoy of trucks moving up to the front. Later we could hear the German troops apparently having an alcoholic New Year's Eve party to boost their courage for the impending attack." (Sgt. Errera could see the center of Bitche to his right which included a fine view of the ancient Citadel. At the College de Bitche the Germans were assembled and liberally supplied with alcohol which largely incapacitated them for combat rather than being a benefit.)

"I was on guard at our foxhole at about midnight when I heard what sounded like a rifle barrel scraping on barbed wire. I woke MacGregor and Mayer, and in a few minutes we could see a single file of Germans coming up the hill to our right about forty yards away headed toward our pillbox, and we notified our CP. We had a BAR at our foxhole which had been out in the snow and cold for some time. When I pulled the trigger, the bolt slid forward very slowly. There was room at the entrance of the foxhole for two of us to fire our M-1 rifles which worked properly, while the third man reloaded for us, rotating the third rifle. When he reached for the ammo bag, however, he grabbed the one with the candy, and we had Clark Bars on the foxhole floor.

"It wasn't long before our artillery was sliding over the hill right on target. They obviously had the area zeroed in. The attack was stopped, and the Germans apparently withdrew. Somewhat later we were advised by one of our non-coms, Gunther Weierstall (he was on our side despite the name), that we had been ordered to withdraw. I had no information on Sim's squad at the time. I think we withdrew to a place we referred to as the Garrison and had our New Year's dinner for breakfast."

The French Garrison was a series of buildings both residential and farm about seven hundred yards due west of the Mechanized Equipment Entrance of the Maginot Line's Fort Schiesseck where Sgt. Errera's squad was positioned.

By E Co., 399th Regiment of the 100th Division occupying the two entrance blocs of Fort Schiesseck and defending them in the German Operation Northwind assault, the original purpose of the Maginot Line was fulfilled, to check German aggression. Sgts. Errera's and Sim's squads along with the artillery barrage about 10 p.m. on New Year's Eve delayed the German advance in their sector for seventeen hours, a tremendous accomplishment for two infantry squads, even backed by artillery. The Germans had had a double purpose for capturing their positions, use of the highway west from Bitche and also to regain use of Fort Schiesseck which they had enjoyed for the four years of their occupation.

The cost to the American side was the capture of Sgt. Sim's squad and their dreadful prisoner of war experience. With the number of German soldiers in their vicinity and the open field of fire, there appeared no way for them to escape across the road and back to American lines. The Germans failed to breach the 100th Division lines in Operation Northwind thanks to the courage and skill of C Co., 399th men and others in the Division.