

An Early Combat Replacement Recalls How It Was

by Richard Seelnacht, 398-C

Most of us who have survived combat with the 100th Division in Europe went through training with the division in the USA and were shipped overseas as a unit. It was quite different, we realized, for the soldiers who came in as replacements in France and Germany. It was tougher for replacements and their casualties often were higher.

Lately one of those replacements—one of the first to come up from a “repple depple,” reported in to say he went all the way through combat with his rifle company after joining the 100th in the forests of France. From what he remembers, Richard Seelnacht ended up in the 100th because of his place in alphabetical order. He was with Company C, 398th Regiment all through its remaining combat and occupation.

His story came to light after a son learned of the Sons of Bitche and urged his father to obtain an official membership card. Seelnacht was a 17-year-old high school student living near Pittsburgh in late 1943 when he volunteered for the Army. From the reception center at Ft. Cumberland he was sent to Ft. Hood, TX for infantry basic—like so many of us as preliminary training for the ASTP program.

When ASTP was canceled in the spring of 1944, he ended up with a shipload of replacements being sent overseas—by coincidence on the *George Washington*, which later carried the Century soldiers. Departing from Boston the ship docked at Liverpool.

Seelnacht recalls that they were sent to a tent city in a place called Illthicombe, England where they trained endlessly, running in and out of the ocean. “We did that so much and so long that my shoes cracked and split from the salt water.

After the Normandy invasion, he said, an English ship loaded up 5,000 of them and anchored off Omaha Beach. They waited while the replacement GIs were called up daily in alphabetical order. Since his name was in the “S” group, he waited quite a number of days before landing crafts carried them onto the beach where he saw the first American combat dead.

After more days and weeks of typical Army waiting, he found himself sent up to the front to join the 100th, early on in its fall 1944 combat period. “The platoon lieutenant shook my hand—but was dead five days later,” he said. “I was with the 398th, Company C in every battle in the Bitche area where we took pillbox after pillbox. I was a rifleman, BAR man, and then a second scout. One time I was nicked in the leg by artillery. They sent me back and bandaged me and said I would get a Purple Heart but I never did. When the war ended there were only a dozen or so still in our outfit. I’d been promoted to Pfc.”

“We were in occupation relieving a French unit near Stuttgart. After some months I was transferred to Bremerhaven and came back to Ft. Dix where I was discharged in April 1946 after 22 months in the Army. I used my GI Bill eligibility to go to marine engineering school.

“When I retired as a marine engineer we were living in California, then moved up to a ranch in Elgin, Oregon. I have never thought much about the Army during the years since then until my son asked me to get a Sons of Bitche card so he could keep it.”

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