

# Entering Combat

by Louis H. Shelton, 397-D

*Louis Shelton related the story of his first guard duty in a combat zone in the last issue of the Newsletter. We join him as he enters combat.*

It was time to get tactical and dig protective positions for the night. The platoon sergeant designated squad areas, got into the platoon leader's jeep and took off. No one knew where.

On the evening of the 12th we were told that the following morning we were to jump off in the attack. We were prepared with holes for the night. Until this time we had heard only general area bombing, artillery and mortar fire. Nothing had been directed specifically at our unit, although several times the barrages were close enough for us to hear the rounds approach and to begin learning to judge what was coming our direction and what was not.

We were up early on the morning of the 13th. Again we had had a light snowfall during the night. Not enough to completely cover the ground, but just enough to keep everything soaked with water.

As the rifle companies crossed the line of departure we were in firing positions designated by the platoon, in support of the planned movement. The first squad was assigned a position at the forward edge of light pinewoods. We had to cut out several pine saplings to get an unobstructed line of fire for the sector we were to cover. We got to register on a base point, so at least the observers would know where to start adjusting our fire, if it was to be needed.

We knew we had passed through Baccarat and we were told that our battalion objective was a small farm town of Bertrichamps. In mid-morning, after having fired only one or two desultory missions, we were told to pick up to move. This involved only picking up the gun, stakes, ammunition and moving. We moved left and forward, down a rather steep hill in very heavy, fully-grown woods.

Here we observed for the first time the effect of artillery on heavy woods. The tops and most branches of the trees were shattered. As we passed through the woods we got to see the effect even more closely. What we learned was that an artillery shell, which usually hits the ground and throws most of its shrapnel up and forward would explode 30 to 50 feet in the air, throwing all its hardware downward and forward. The area of danger to troops was much larger in the woods. Lesson: try to avoid heavy woods when establishing a defense. They are basically an unsafe place to be when artillery is falling. Second, you can't fire mortars from heavy woods without the hard work of clearing a sector overhead.

We set up our mortars at the forward edge of the woods. We were a couple of hundred yards from and parallel to the road that ran into the town. The rifle companies had crossed the road and were now on the top of the ridge on the other side.

There were a few desultory missions called for and fired through the afternoon, but nothing that had the feel of real importance. Late that afternoon the rifle companies were 300 yards or so beyond the road, so we were moved across the road and up the side of the ridge. Our platoon set up in an apple orchard belonging to a farmer who had a house along the road. We spent the night in the house. The guns of all six squads were set up along the same line. All the squads were under roof, in three contiguous farmhouses, for the first time since we arrived in France, more than three weeks before.

The next day we were prepared to do damage. Throughout the morning nothing much was required of us. We cleaned our mortars, re-setting everything for maximum accuracy. We had communications established, sound power phones from the platoon and the Fire Direction Center (FDC), and to the houses in which we were resting. We were providing security all the time both to the gun positions and to the troop area. In the late morning, while I was at the gun position with one other man with me, I got a call on the sound power phone that there was an emergency target. I was the only one available for several guns. I took the basic data to be set on the gun. By the time the remainder of the gun teams could sprint the 40 or so yards up the hill I had the guns set and the ammo ready to fire. No time was lost. I was one of the fastest gunners around; the only one faster was Ted, my squad leader.

The target was a group of infantry counterattacking one of the companies. We fired several volleys at the position called. We probably fired search and traverse missions, which is the way to cover the maximum area with the minimum number of shells in the minimum time. The report was that the volleys fired by my gun stopped the attack. The rifle company had only minor damage and was very appreciative of our support.

That afternoon the lieutenant of the second section passed the word that the first section (I was a member of the first section) was invited to partake of a pot of lieutenant-made vegetable soup. He had used his time in the farmer's house to cook the largest pot he could find of homemade vegetable soup. The fog was low and cold. The soup was hot and tasted of home. It was good.

July 2006 Association Newsletter