

# “Soldiers and Dogs Keep Off the Grass!”

by David Starkweather, 399-F

*David Starkweather was with 399-F. He told his story to Jimmy Calvert, a Progeny member, who started contacting 100th Infantry Division veterans in his area (and now beyond that). Jimmy helped David by writing down his story. This is an excerpt of the complete remembrance, which is being sent to the 100th's Archives at the Marshall.*

During my senior year of high school we were given aptitude tests for the Army which covered a number of things like math, English, science, and a number of other things. If you passed these tests, you were told that you could attend a college under the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Hey, what a good deal this is! I was lucky to graduate from high school when I was seventeen because during that time when you turned eighteen you were gone. That is to say, during that time if you saw a boy my age walking around town, your first thought was that he was 4F.

## **Training**

I had turned eighteen by the time of my induction into the Army on January 11, 1944 and was sent to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio. My parents were naturally apprehensive about me being called into service and as I remember, their last words to me as I boarded the train were “be careful—we love you.” Being the first time away from home, the first week there everyone was homesick as hell. For the following two weeks, I was issued my uniforms, received shots, and took more aptitude tests.

During the two weeks at Fort Hayes, I was put on night KP duty which ran from ten at night until eight the next morning. I can remember having to break some 3,000 eggs each night for breakfast. Then there was the cleaning and mopping the floor, followed by buffing it. They had a floor buffing machine and the first time I tried to use it, well, let's just say for the first few minutes it was who was leading who across the floor.

We left Fort Hayes around January 25 with about two railroad cars of us sent south to Fort Benning in Georgia where we spent the following four or five weeks in basic. Before leaving, we had been advised the ASTP program had been closed and that we had three choices where to transfer: Air Cadets, paratroops, or infantry. With 20/600 in my left eye, correctable with glasses, take a guess where I wound up. About ninety-nine percent of us were sent to the infantry.

One day as I was walking around I saw “Kilroy was here” painted on something, but at the time I had no idea what it was about.

Days here were spent learning close-order drill, inspections, cleaning our rifle, along with rifle drill and if you failed, you would have to sleep with it for a week. Then there were the times we would go out and run, hit the ground, get up and run, hit the ground again, and again. Training would go on for about eight hours a day, six days a week with only Sunday as a day off. During the whole five weeks here we were given only one eight-to-twelve-hour pass to go to Columbus, Georgia. Before leaving the base on this pass, we had to go see the medic who was an old staff sergeant. He showed us a short movie and gave us a short talk about girls. We were reminded as we left that the town of Phoenix City, AL, which was across the river from Columbus, was off limits. Let's just say it was due to the cat houses. Everywhere you looked or went, the town was crawling with soldiers and MPs. The four of us just kicked around the town looking for the USO show. The rest of the time we were pretty well confined to the base.

Along with all the training there was also the KP duty that had to be pulled, which brings me to our mess sergeant. The first time I met and heard him, I was led to believe he was a holy terror. It was while I was on KP duty one day he had made what I called raisin pie and had placed the sheets on the cooler unit to cool. The unit vibrated causing the sheets to fall to the floor along with the pies. All hell broke loose then and you never heard so much yelling and cursing as he did. You know, after that he turned out to be one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet.

I will never forget the day we had our first rifle inspection. I had been on KP that day when M1 rifles were issued to everyone and I hadn't gotten off KP duty until after lights out. Returning to the barracks, I found an M1 rifle on my bunk, coated in preservative. Tired as I was and it being late, I didn't know what to do with it, so I laid it on the floor beside my bunk and fell asleep. The following morning the first thing on the schedule was a rifle inspection. Everyone who hadn't been on a work detail the previous day had spent the whole day learning how to take the rifle apart and clean it. Dumb me! I show up for the inspection with my rifle still covered with preservative. Needless to say, the company commander was a little bit upset about my dirty rifle and let me know in his own loving way. He asked why—quite loudly and forcefully—my rifle was still dirty! I explained to him that I had been on KP the day they were issued and wasn't shown how to take the rifle apart or clean it. With the speed of light, a non-com was detailed to instruct me on how to take the rifle apart and clean it. POST HASTE!! Between the two of us, we got that rifle cleaned and assembled in nothing flat. We returned with the rifle and as I stood there sweating, the commander looked it over and I passed the inspection. THANK GOD.

It was during one of our gas drills I learned I had the measles. I had just come out of the building and removed my mask when the sergeant saw that I had red patches all over my face. He called me over and sent me to see the medics who, after giving me a good look over, sent me on to the hospital where I spent a week. While there they would come around and give us what looked like clear cough syrup that tasted good and warmed you right up as it went down. The week in the hospital also put me a week behind in training and after leaving there I was placed into another company. It was here in the second company I met and got to know Eddie, who I would go through the war with.

During our last week here company officers came around and asked if any of us wanted to join the paratroopers or join an infantry company.

As the week came to an end, there were one thousand men sent to different places. A few of them were assigned to the paratroops, but most were sent to places like Louisiana or Fort Bragg, where a large number of guys and I were sent.

It was on Friday that I boarded the troop train for my trip south to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where the 100th was based. On the train I was placed on KP in the boxcar where the kitchen was set up. It was here that I got to know the old mess sergeant better and learned he did have a soul. The duty on the train wasn't bad and we had the best seats in the house. After we had finished with the meals, we would pull up a box at the side door which was open and watch the countryside pass by.

The 100th had been on the Tennessee Maneuvers and only had been back for a month by the time we arrived. We had also heard that prior to the arrival of the 100th; the 82nd Airborne had been training there at Pope Airfield.

It was also during this time that the eight of us got to know each other. Leehy was a thin southern boy from Mississippi who had a strong southern drawl. He also loved the outdoors, full of life, but was a quiet guy. He hung around with Robbins and as I recall he was one of the ones who left the company during January 1944 with trench foot. Robbins was a short guy, a little standoffish at times, but fun to be around. Later on, he was also placed in a different squad. Parker liked to watch out for everyone like a big brother and enjoyed attending church. He wanted to be a reporter. He was hit by a sniper's bullet in his jaw line. After the war he became a mess sergeant at a POW camp. Karkoski was from Allen Park, Michigan. He was the short, stocky guy and was engaged to be married to a girl whose nickname was Gussie. Roger was a boy from Iowa who loved sports. He hung around most of the time with Bingham. Bingham was a guy from Kansas and was the cocky one of the bunch. Eddie Webb was the guy I hung around with most of the time and was quiet, but very smart. All in all, they were a great bunch of guys.

Monday morning after we had assembled, it was my first time to see Lieutenant Emery who didn't say much in the way of welcoming us to the 100th. Captain Huberger had done that. Lieutenant Emery was a short, wiry guy who was a West Point grad, quiet, hard as nails, and all Army. It was also that day we got to meet Sergeant Mallet.

Sergeant Mallet was a tall guy from New York who didn't say much, leaving it up to the staff or buck sergeants to deal with us.

Most of the first day here wasn't bad and was spent learning the daily routines.

For most of the time off duty, the non-coms didn't mix very much with the privates and PFCs and went to their non-com club. Whereas, we lowly privates and PFCs spent our time at the PX. Saturday afternoons and evenings were big even in the nearby town of Fayetteville. Usually there were more troops in town than on the post. There were troops from the 100th Division; 10th Armored Division, who also were at Fort Bragg; and Pope Field who were the Air Corps Troop Carriers. It was so crowded in town on Saturday that the civilians had put up signs in their yards that said "Soldiers and Dogs Keep off the Grass." I recall laughing the first time I saw one of these signs.

One of the things the ASTP guys, which I was one of would do was get into a circle and toss a rifle with a bayonet around to each other. The idea was not to drop the rifle.

The base also had a compound that housed a number of German and Italian POWs who worked in the garbage details and the furnace room. The Germans were a snooty bunch whereas the Italians acted like they wanted to be our friends. One other compound housed a number of American prisoners. One day they overpowered this guy from Company F and made a break for it. They were all rounded up before they had gotten off the base. We had been carrying unloaded guns up till then.

Just before evening chow each day we would have an inspection in between the barracks in the company streets. With Fort Bragg being as sandy as it was you prayed to God there wasn't any sand in your rifle. Then on Sundays we had an inspection with us in our Class A uniforms.

There would be days we would be out on a hike along these dirt roads. As we went along, a column of 925th trucks and these tracked vehicles would pass through our lines leaving us in a cloud of dust.

There were a number of city boys in our company who had never fired a rifle and needless to say, by the end of the third day of firing their rifles, they came back with what we called M1 lips. I am sad to say that by the time we had left, some of them looked as if they had been in a good fight. As for me I had qualified as sharpshooter.

One day a group of C47s came flying over towing some gliders. As they released them the wind shifted and before we knew it we had gliders landing all over the place. Some landed in the motor pool area, the parade ground, and on the rifle range. I recall standing there as they set up two poles with a line across them. It was really something to see as that C47 came over and grab the line and off it went. The barracks I slept in were at the west side of the post and was in line with one of Pope's landing fields. There were times at night the C47s came over our barracks so low it sounded as if they were going to land on the roof. On the base, there was a full-size wooden mockup of a C47 that set off the ground on some posts and was used by the airborne guys to practice jumping out of.

During the last three weeks at Bragg, all the soldiers who had family living off the base were told to made arrangements to get their families back home. During those last weeks we packed and unpacked over and over again, each time checking our gear and replacing anything worn out. Then there was the going over our medical and shot records along with receiving any booster shots we needed. During the last week no one was allowed a leave or to leave the base.

The day we left Fort Bragg to go overseas I remember it well because it was my nineteenth birthday, which was September 26.

At the train station we placed all of our duffle bags in a boxcar before making our way to our assigned car. With our backpacks and rifles, Eddie and I boarded our assigned car and sat in the first empty seat we came to. There was a lot of talk on where we were heading but none of us was really sure where Camp Kilmer was.

As the train left the station, I remember looking out the window and seeing this boy by the name of Vennon Ashbey standing there waving as we pulled away. He had been in Company F but due to being underweight he was unable to go with us.

For our meals they had set up the kitchen in a boxcar. Each car of soldiers would make their way back to it with mess kits in hand. As soon as you were given our chow, you made your way back to your assigned car to eat. After you had finished, you once again returned to the kitchen and washed out your mess kit.

## **In Combat on the Line**

Days before Thanksgiving, we were lying in some thick woods along a river bank watching as the Germans shelled the town across from us for an hour. As far as I recall there weren't any of our guys in there, only civilians. After the shelling had finished, we stayed put in the trees for the remainder of the day just watching. The following morning we moved on through the woods to a small road. As I recall Baccarat took us about two hours to push the Germans out of the town.

One of the villages we came across was Wachenbach, which sat on the side of a hill. As we made our way down the hillside to this village, I remember sliding down the hill using only my boot heels to stop me. As we went through the woods we surprised a number of Germans, taking them as prisoners as we went. In one farmhouse we also surprised ten more and took them also as prisoners. All and all they didn't put up much of a fight. In Wachenbach we put our thirty prisoners in the large room of this house. We all took turns standing guard over them for one to two hours at a time all night. I remember sitting there in the room with them with my BAR and my back to the wall. As we came into Wachenbach, a number of civilians came out waving small glasses and thanking us. Each one of us was handed a small glass that had a clear liquid that turned out to be schnapps. As I drank it down, it burnt but tasted good and warmed me right on up. The following morning just before we pulled out, Division MPs took the prisoners off our hands. That morning we left in trucks heading north.

The next town and area we came to as we moved north was Raon l'Etape, where we spent the night. The following day as we moved across the mountains and valleys, we came across what looked to be a painted, wood-sided lodge or estate that was two stories high with a number of windows around it. It was run by an older lady who invited us in to have sandwiches. After being on rations for a month or so they tasted pretty good. After eating my sandwich I stepped outside and as I did, I saw a field next to the lodge and in it, laid a number of dead horses. "SANDWICHES?"

As we moved through the countryside and came across farmhouses or the houses in the towns, we would yell "comin z out" before entering them. For the most part if there were any Germans in them they would come out without a fight, but that's not to say there weren't times we came across one here and there who wanted to fight. We really didn't want to have to shoot up these houses because the civilians had been through so much, but if the Germans wanted to fight, the houses were fair game. For the most part, the Germans I recall seeing were twenty years old and older.

On Thanksgiving Day it was pouring down rain as we made our way down the a small one-lane road in ankle-deep mud until we had come to an area where the kitchen had been set up in some trees. There I stood in the chow line—with my raincoat on, rain running off my helmet down my face and back, barrel of my rifle pointing down trying to keep as much water out of it as I could—with my arm stretched out, mess kit in hand. As I side-stepped my way down the line, the cooks dropped turkey, potatoes, gravy, and dressing into my kit along with their so-called raisin pie (or that's what I thought it to be). By the time I had gotten to the end of the line, the dinner was now sitting in a tray of water. I tipped my kit to one side allowing the water to drain out. Looking down at my mess kit I thought to myself, "O God, it isn't home but I'll take it." After eating we moved on down the road and came across an M8 armored car in the ditch. They had chained a 6-x-6 to it and were doing their best to pull it out.

For the remainder of November we made our way through the woods and down roads in the on-and-off rain until we had reached an area where a convoy of 6-x-6 trucks waited for us.

It wasn't long before we started seeing "Kilroy was here" on signs, sides of houses, and fences. The first time I had ever seen it was while at Fort Benning.

## **December 1–7, 1944:**

### **The Road North**

From December 1 to 7 we made our way north in the back of 6-x-6 trucks with the canvas tops over them due to the cold rain. As far as being able to see any of the countryside as we went along, the only thing I was able to see is what I saw out the back of the truck, a house here and there, one what looked to be an estate house. All the roads were small one- and two-lane stone roads with a number of sharp curves in them, so the convoy had to move slowly up them. It is hard to tell how many trucks were in the convoy because I could only see the two behind the one I was in. By now I had ditched the BAR for an M1 rifle.

The move north took us through a number of small towns and villages should as Petersbach, Hinsbourg, and Rosteig-Volksberg. Each day we would stop in the villages to spend the night and train on how to take out pillboxes by using a house. With us getting closer to our finally stop, we would also send out recon patrols.

Patrols were always done with twelve guys, usually at night. You would be out there as long as three or four hours at a time. As you made your way through the woods or up a road, you would move slowly, stopping and listening as you sat there. By the end of the third hour I was always happy to hear "let's head back in."

By the December 7, we had made it to Wingen where we hiked the last ten to fifteen miles on foot to Goetzenbruck where we spent the night in a glass factory.

As we moved closer to the front lines we passed lines of civilians with everything they could get on wagons heading for the safety behind the lines. The town and villages they had left reminded me of ghost towns, giving you an eerie sense as you walked through. Seldom would there be anyone remaining in them and the only real sign of life would be the dogs roaming the streets.

A lot of the houses showed the scars of war with large holes in the walls and roof. Outside, near the windows and doors, holes from rifle and machine-gun fire covered most houses. Walls were plain with no pictures hung on them, but over the fireplace you would see a cross here and there. The furniture was always plain and simple. The houses had never had electric in them; they were lit with oil lamps. The civilians heated the house using a fireplace and cooked on a woodstove. The houses and barns were under one roof, connected by a small access. In the barns you found cows and horses. The fields they worked joined the backyards. They used root cellars for cold storage.

While we were here someone had came up with a grease gun and said, "Here, try this out."

## **December 8–10, 1944**

### **What Went Wrong**

Early on the morning of December 8 we left the town of Goetzenbruck on foot down the Mouterhouse-Lemberg road but we hadn't gone far when we left the road and started our cross-country hike for a crossroads. At first it was in an eastward movement before turning back to a northward path. At the time I was carrying a grease gun, and my squad was at the rear of the platoon during this movement. As we neared a dried creek bed that lay just yards from the bottom of a hill, we came under fire from the hill, so some of the guys took cover in the creek bed. I made it into the tall weeds that were in the small field between the creek and the hill. In the low light of dawn we couldn't see where the fire was coming from because the hill's heavy woods covered the source and it was not light enough yet. So as far as being able to giving cover fire went as the men made their way across the field it was like taking a shot in the dark.

It was also at this time that Edwin Miller, a boy who I had been with since boot camp, was hit in the head. Out in front of me I had heard someone yell out for a medic and that Miller was hit in the head. He didn't die right off and laid there yelling for his mother. It is hard for me to describe how I felt lying there with my face down in those weeds knowing I couldn't go to his aid and having to listen him cry out for his mother. I felt so helpless knowing there wasn't anything I could do or even be at his side. The medics were as pinned down as we were, and were only able to work on those they could get to.

After spending most of the morning pinned down and then having to clear the Germans from the hill, in the afternoon we were able to continue our slow movement to the crossroads.

As the Germans fell back, one or two soldiers at a time would stop along the way and as we drew near they would fire one or two shots before falling back. Each time they fired we'd have to take cover or drop to the ground. The sound of the shots echoing off the hillsides made it hard to determine where the shots were coming from. We would have to lay there until someone had slowly moved forward, checked it out, and given the all clear. This went on a number of times during the day as we advanced closer to the crossroads.

Having to move so slowly, it was getting late in the day by the time we had reached the crossroads and had gotten set up. Half of 2nd Platoon was to dig in at the top of the slope overlooking the crossroads and railroad tracks and as I climbed my way up the slope my foot slipped causing me to drop my grease gun

which fell barrel first into some mud. After I finally made it to the top, I removed the barrel and cleaned it out the best I could.

Below us the other half of the 2nd Platoon had dug in some tall weeds that ran alongside the road. The 1st Platoon was dug in some high weeds and brush about 250 yards across from us. The 3rd Platoon was set up back across the railroad tracks on a hill with the machine guns and mortars in the tree line.

We had gotten set up and just sat down to eat when shots rang out below us from the guys of the other half of our 2nd Platoon. By the time we had stood up it was all over. From where we were, we couldn't see what had happened. I learned later that two German soldiers had been spotted walking down the road talking to each other as they made their way.

As they came into view, someone pointed them out to Lieutenant Emery and as they came within yards of them, Emery yelled out, "Shoot, kill the both of them." As he yelled out, the two Germans took off running back down the road. Some of the guys felt it went against their grain just to ambush the two soldiers, where as why not just have stood up and captured the two Germans. Lieutenant Emery's brother had been killed months earlier and he took the news of his death pretty hard. After it was all over, someone had dragged both of their bodies over into the ditch beside the road.

If the Germans hadn't known we were there, they did now with all the shooting that had just gone on.

After that we settled back in for the night, which turned out to be a bitter cold one, and all we could do was try to keep warm as we catnapped.

Just as daybreak came the following morning all hell broke loose against the 1st Platoon across from us. I remember watching as the two flak wagons (mounted anti-aircraft guns on half tracks) made their way through the weeds and brush, firing as they made their way into the middle of the 1st Platoon. We jumped into the fight with everything we had except we didn't use the mortars because they were too close to the platoon and we were afraid of hitting some of our guys.

As the Germans made it into the middle of the platoon Lieutenant Emery yelled for us to stop firing and to withdraw back across the railroad tracks to the hill where the 3rd Platoon was set up. The hill had some trees for cover, but as we made it into the woods, mortar rounds started falling just as we started digging in. Thinking back now, as we retreated back across the road, I didn't remember seeing the two German bodies as I ran past the ditch where they had been. Here again, though, with all that was going on and the flak wagons firing at us as we made our withdrawal, it wasn't something I was looking for.

Once again the night became bitterly cold with a heavy wet snow falling most of the night. Scared to death thinking the Germans would attack us at any time, no one slept a wink, but it was an attack that never came.

The following morning we slowly made our way down the hill and back across the road where the 1st Platoon had been overrun. With each step closer we expected to run into a German ambush, but the only thing we found was our dead lying in their holes. As we walked around in shock, looking at these guys laying there, who days before we had been talking to, there it really hit home for us. In the past we had seen a number of dead Germans along the roadsides and walked past them, never having a second thought about it, but this time it was our guys lying there.

As we checked out the area, my squad and I were sent out on a contact patrol down the lane that looked to have been the way the Germans had gone, only to find a number of our guys laying face down with a hole in the back of their heads. If the first shock wasn't bad enough, our eyes were really opened now. No one said a word, but you knew what everyone was thinking because you were thinking the same thing.

As we moved farther on down the lane a yellowish colored German flak wagon came into view sitting in the woods. Nothing looked to be wrong with the flak wagon, so we guessed they just abandoned it. After making sure there weren't any Germans around, we moved in closer to check it out. As I walked around the beast I recall wondering to myself if it was one of those used the day before in the attack on the 1st Platoon and if I had been using black tip ammo (AP) would it have penetrated it.

By mid-morning we had regrouped and started our way back to Goetzenbruck as the snow started to fall again.