

# First on the Front?

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

*On November 1, 1944, as Headquarters Scout for Captain Champion's Company C, 399th Infantry Regiment, the first company of the first battalion to go into the line replacing the battle-weary 45th Infantry Division, I was taken by the scout from Company C, 179th Infantry Regiment, to their frontline position near La Salle to be familiarized with their location and password, returning to my unit to guide them to their first front line foxholes—about half as many as needed! (As fate would have it, the young, bearded lieutenant then commanding Company C, 179th, became a business associate and friend of mine over twenty-five years later in St. Louis, Missouri. His name was Jerry Tramont from Buffalo, New York.)*

*Did this my first assignment as a runner on our first day at the front qualify me as FIRST SOLDIER of the 100th on THE FRONT?*

*Perhaps Historian Frank Gurley, 399/A, also a former runner, could answer this—for whatever the title is worth!*

## Frank Gurley writes:

Harry asks whether his first assignment as a runner on our first day at the front qualifies him as First Soldier of the 100th on the front. According to my research, his activity as runner on that day qualifies him as one of the first, but it is probably impossible to determine who, if anyone, qualifies as the first.

To explain why, I refer you to *Into the Mountains Dark* (p. 93), where I relate the top command decision that our 399th Regiment would move forward immediately the afternoon of that day, November 1, rather than spend three or more days reorganizing after the long journey from Marseilles, as the original plan provided. It reads, in part:

Colonel Tychsen reported to the CG (Commanding General) of the 45th Infantry Division, who turned out to be Major General W. W. "Bertie" Eagles, an old friend and classmate of Tychsen at the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth. General Eagles said Tychsen's regiment would go on the line in a few days, relieving a regiment of the 45th that was under-strength and in need of rest and refurbishing. Our regiment would be under General Eagles' direction temporarily until further notice.

"Sandy Patch at Seventh Army and the new VI Corps Commander, Ted Brooks, have asked that our divisions work together closely at all levels to help your regiment adapt rapidly to combat conditions," Eagles told Tychsen. "In practical terms, this means our officers and men will give aid and advice to yours in matters of bivouac, assembly areas, available cover and shelter, routes of advance, enemy order of battle, intelligence, and standing operating procedures in the corps."

"Fine," Colonel Tychsen said.

A moment later, General Eagles was called to the telephone. When he put down the receiver, he said to Colonel Tychsen, "Bingo! That was Ted Brooks' Operations Officer. Plans have changed, Andy. Brooks wants your regiment in the fray at the earliest possible moment. You will go up tonight to relieve Colonel Jack O'Brien's 179th Infantry Regiment sooner than we had anticipated."

"I know O'Brien from Jefferson Barracks days!" Tychsen said.

"Good," General Eagles said. "I'll ask Jack to leave his regiment with yours for a few hours before pulling back. That way his boys can shoot the bull with yours and hopefully answer some of their questions about front line conditions."

"Much obliged," Colonel Tychsen said. "I certainly appreciate all your helpful advice, Bertie," Colonel Tychsen said as they shook hands.

At that point, Harry was one of at least six—and very possibly more—men from the 399th to go forward to serve as guides to conduct the relief of the 179th by our regiment. The line companies of the 1st and 3d Battalions were relieving their counterparts of two battalions of the 179th, so there had to be at least one representative from Companies A, B, C, I, K, and L, respectively, up front to guide their buddies in. Since 2d Battalion remained in reserve, it is unlikely that any of their men had to go all the way up front on that night. However, it is possible that some engineers may have gone up front early to become familiar with the barrier and obstacle plans with the 45th's engineers . . . and you can't be much further up front than when surveying minefields, barbed-wire fences, or rolls of concertina wire. It is also likely that some forward observers—from battalion mortars, regimental cannon company, or the 925th FA Battalion—would have gone forward very early to coordinate fire plans and become familiarized with the reference points and preplanned targets established by the 45th's DIVARTY. Finally, some representatives from the units with crew-served weapons, such as

light and heavy machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank guns, would also have had to gone up very early on to ensure smooth replacement of those critical weapons.

The relief of the 179th by the 399th was carried out flawlessly on the night of November 1–2.

July 2002 Association Newsletter