

The Thousandth Man

by John Villani, 399-G

*ONE man in a thousand, Solomon says,
Will stick more close than a brother.
And it's worth while seeking him half your days
If you find him before the other.
Nine hundred and ninety-nine depend
On what the world sees in you,
But the Thousandth Man will stand your friend
With the whole round world agin you.
—Rudyard Kipling*

Among the first timers attending the 57th Convention in Boston (Newton) were Lou Gentile and John Villani, who vaguely remembers attending a convention at the Statler Hotel in Boston, MA in 1950. Lou and John are lifelong residents of Milford, MA, and through some quirk of fate, wound up as members of the 1st platoon, Company G, 399th Regiment. Lou and John were boyhood chums who at the time of their induction into the Army lived across the street from one another and for about two years before that actually lived in the same house.

Their birthdays being less than two weeks apart, they were inducted into the Army on the same day in September 1944 at age 18 plus three or four months. They were assigned to an Infantry Replacement Training Center at Camp Blanding, Florida, for training. They were in separate companies during the training cycle, but saw each other every couple of weeks. When the Germans counterattacked in December 1944, in what became known in the media as the “Battle of the Bulge,” their training was cut short and they were shipped overseas as replacements aboard the French liner *Ile de France* after about 14 weeks of training.

After landing at Firth of Clyde, Scotland, they were transported by train to Southampton, England, where they boarded another ship for the channel crossing to LeHavre, France. At LeHavre they were loaded into 40-and-8 boxcars and shipped to a “repple depple” in Neaufchateau, Belgium. Even though their names were alphabetically pretty far apart, by keeping close to each other in lines they managed to get into the same boxcar.

At Neaufchateau, they were issued brand new Garand M1 rifles loaded with cosmoline and given a couple of hours to get them cleaned and zeroed in at a makeshift range. Another day was devoted to attending lectures on the German soldier and the type of weapons he would most likely be carrying. After this they were loaded on trucks to be transported to their respective outfits. At a convoy pit stop in Strasbourg, John, who had not been feeling well, checked into a field hospital. They found that he was running a temperature of about 103 degrees and decided to hold him over for a couple of days. The convoy, with his buddy, Lou went on without him. John felt certain it was to be the last time he saw his buddy, Lou, in the ETO.

After 3 or 4 days John was released from the hospital and “jeeped” to Sierstal, a small village in the Alsace region of France, being used as a Company G rest area and CP at the time. At the CP he met Sgt. Harlow and Lt. Fritz, who introduced himself as the 1st Platoon Leader. After some discussion, they decided to assign John to the 1st Platoon. John was surprised to find out later that his hometown buddy, Lou Gentile, had also been assigned to the 1st Platoon. They pulled outpost duty together as one of their first assignments and were members of the infamous daylight patrol to Steinkopf Hill, where three members of the patrol lost their legs to schu mines, and which resulted in one of the three losing his life.

A few days after this episode, the BAR man in the squad headed up by Sgt. Arthur Cornelius came down with hepatitis, which some GIs referred to as “yellow jaundice,” and had to be sent back to a field hospital. Lou Gentile was assigned the BAR and John became his assistant or ammo carrier.

In this capacity they participated in all of Company G’s action assignments until the Germans surrendered in May 1945; including the attack and capture of Signalberg, Little Steinkopf and Steinkopf hills on March 15; the race to the Rhine on top of Sherman tanks; outpost duty on the banks of the Rhine, when a German night patrol of about 10 men came within 10 yards of their position on the way back to their boats; crossing the Neckar River in paddle boats; the assault and capture of Heilbronn; the attack on Talheim; the capture and retreat from Schozach, and finally, the beginning of the occupation in the vacated German garrison above Pforzheim.

Lou and John remained together until the war in the Pacific ended. Being very low pointers, they were transferred to other outfits to make room for high pointers as the Division was being readied for its return to the United States. Sometime in late September 1945, or thereabouts, they were finally separated, with Lou winding up in the Mechanized

Calvary and John with Company D, 381st MP Battalion guarding U.S. mail and supply trains out of Neunkirchen in the French zone of occupation.

They were discharged in July 1946. Lou pursued his carpentry vocation that ultimately led to a few large-scale homebuilding projects in the Milford area and John pursued his drafting vocation that led to couple of engineering management positions. They are both retired and still live within a quarter mile of each other.

Lou and John consider themselves lucky to have been selected for duty in the 100th Infantry Division. Despite the horror stories about replacements recounted in the book *Citizen Soldier* by Stephen Ambrose, they were treated more like “kid brothers” than burdensome rookies by their squad leader Sgt. Cornelius and other old pros in the squad like Mike Sirockman of Donora, Pennsylvania, who taught them the difference between “incoming” and “outgoing” mail, and told them when to “duck” and when “not to worry.”

Lou and John extend their best wishes for long life and good health to all 100th Division survivors still out there, and congratulations to the Association directors and committee members for the splendid work they are doing in perpetuating the history of the Division and sponsoring activities to benefit those who will come along after we fade away.

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