

# The Willis H. Wahl Infantry Story

by Willis Wahl, 397-C

*Willis Wahl was a scout with Company C, 397th Infantry Regiment. This is the story of going from an office desk to the foxholes of WWII in six months.*

The US wide draft of all males of certain ages was conducted on 30 October 1940. My number was in the first 200. At that time, I was married with one child and worked for the War Department at Wright Field. I was given a deferment.

In early 1944 all deferments at Wright Field were cancelled unless you were working on RADAR or the Norden bombsights. On 4 May 1944, I was sent to Fort McClellan at Anniston, Alabama, to a technical services school. The second week I was there they closed the school and turned us all into infantry types, training me as a rifleman.

They told us we would go directly to Europe or the Pacific area as replacements. The next week was D-Day and the invasion of Europe started with the loss of thousands of soldiers. We then knew why the school was closed. I went to Europe on the French luxury liner, *Isle de France* in five days.

We landed somewhere in Scotland and were sent by rail directly to South Hampton, England and onto a landing craft. We stood on that craft two days waiting for the channel to settle down a little and then left for Le Havre, France. On the way over they found that there was still heavy fighting going on at Le Havre and they landed us about ten miles south.

It had rained for about two days and we were in a mess. We went quickly through several infantry replacement camps until on the morning of 3 December 1944 before daylight, another replacement, Robert Trego, and I were taken up to a slightly wooded hillside in the Vosges Mountains. Five men came out of a hole in the ground, dirty, unshaven, and exhausted. The sergeant in charge said he was down to five men (out of twelve) in his squad and was glad to see us. He made me a second scout and gave Trego the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) job. I was glad I didn't get that job because that is a heavy old dude and the ammunition was heavy.

I soon found out what real war is about. The Seventh Army under General Patch was trying to drive the Germans out of the French Maginot Line that they had captured when they had invaded France. We didn't have too much trouble driving out the German infantry that was dug in around the fort, but taking the fort was something else. We were hitting them with our heavy bombers, heavy artillery, even our 240's that sound like a train when they went over.

After about a week, seven other guys and I were awakened and were told to get going because we were being sent back for some training, but they didn't tell us what and it was a good thing. We rode in a big Army truck for about two hours and stopped in an open field loaded with Jeeps and various army personnel. They finally told us we were a part of four 2-man teams to train how to use a "flame thrower." The plan was, if nothing else was working, we would crawl up to the fort at night and fire through the gun openings and burn them out. It was lucky we never had to be used.

The fort we were trying to take was called "Bitche." On the day we were able to take it the brass decided we would move out a half hour before daylight rather than after daylight. By this time, I was a 1st scout instead of 2nd scout and on this day it was my turn to lead our company out. We always took turns. We reached the doors of the fort and our engineers blew the doors off and we got in and wiped them out. The fort was six floors high with little hand cranked elevators to go up and down on—they worked like watches and you could crank two of you up and down with one hand. The sixth floor had their ammunition and clothing, fifth floor was food and water, first through fourth floors were soldiers on steel bunk beds with only blankets. We think at full strength they would have had about 500 soldiers.

About two weeks after this action, we moved on south, clearing out towns on the French side of the Rhine River. One morning a non-com came carrying a clipboard hollering for "Wahl." I poked my head out and knew he was from way back in the rear because he had his rank on, something you never did on the front line. He said I had been awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge and would get an extra \$10 per

month as combat pay. Did I want it or should I send it home. I told him to send it home as Ruth Ann was only drawing \$82 per month for herself and the two children. He called out other names but none that I knew. I never did know why I got it, but cared less. My sergeant said he thought it was because I was the Company leadoff man the day we took Bitch.

Being in the holes, we didn't know dates, write letters and so on, but there are days I can remember such as Christmas Eve, 24 December 1944. We were dug in for the night when orders came down to Lieutenant Dinning to take the whole platoon and move into the top floor of an old farmhouse. In the infantry you never go to the top floor because it is the worst place to be—if an artillery shell hits it, you are gone. We were expecting a counterattack of company size. The idea was that we could see way down an old logging track and it was expected that the Germans would come down that way. We were told not to shoot until they were all past our position and ran into our company second line of defense. When they started shooting we were to block their retreat and our brass figured we would wipe out their entire company.

On the top floor the owner had stored lots of apples and covered them with straw. We ate a lot of them. Four of us would stay on watch and the others would sleep.

It seems that I snored so loudly that the lieutenant had my head covered with someone's extra blanket because every time he woke me up I would go to right back to sleep. What a Christmas Eve. Luck was with us as they did not attack that night. The previous Christmas I had no idea where I would be in 1944 or how I ever got there so quickly.

At this time, the Seventh Army had about 20 miles of the front, General de Gaulle's Free French Army had about 14 miles of front to the South of us and General Patton had about 20 miles of the front to our north.

We never heard of the Battle of the Bulge up north, but one night at about 10:00 p.m. we were awakened and told to get ready as we were pulling out in 30 minutes. We had about six inches of fresh snow on the ground and we started walking (not marching) north into General Patton's area and we wondered what happened. We thought maybe he got scared and went home. It was all icy and slick. After walking a short distance, I fell at least four times, and thought the next fall I wouldn't be able to get up, but strong arms of buddies were always there. I wasn't the only guy falling because they were falling everywhere.

We walked until at least 5:00 a.m. when we stopped and were told we were halting where we were. We were lucky Patton's men had dug good foxholes but we wondered where old "2 Pistols" went. We never were told, but found out after the war that he had gone up to save his buddies Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, Alexander, and Montgomery. We (Seventh Army) always thought we were at the end of Ike's list and didn't get the help that the others did. De Gaulle also thought he got the short end of things. At this time I was at squad level.

Now we go up to New Year's Eve 1944. We were dug in on the wooded side of a valley about 2 miles wide with good farmland. The Germans were on the other side and with field glasses we could see them move around. The trouble was we heard tanks on the move off and on all day and night. We finally went to sleep and about 11:00 p.m. we heard volley after volley of outgoing artillery going over and hitting the Germans with white phosphorous shells that would light up like noon. We thought they must be coming and they did. They hit the 398th Regiment hard and it lost upwards of one-third of their men, but they held their lines. Those that lived later got a lot of medals. What Hitler had done was figured Patton would be pulled out and sent north and the already short Seventh Army would have to cover his front—just like it happened. Later history books tell us Hitler had 10 infantry divisions lined up to hit us for 3 days and then when they cleared out our infantry he would then send in 26 miles of tanks he had lined up for this action he called "NORDWIND" and they would head south cleaning out the Seventh Army and DeGaulle's and he would have the French side of the Rhine River again.

Up north Hitler thought he was clearing out Eisenhower in the "Battle of the Budge." History books tell us that he called the Seventh Army a bunch of boy scouts and that on New Year's Eve, we would all be drunk, but we weren't. Again, Hitler was wrong, but if he hadn't attacked Russia it would have been very hard to beat Germany in the strength he had built up.

Several days later we were sent across the ravine and found the Germans didn't have tanks over in front of us but dummy cardboard and plywood ones and were playing records of tanks and we found plenty of them and the equipment that played them.

Now we go to sometime in January 1945. On this date, it was my turn to lead off as 1st scout for our company. We were in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains and lots of woods. As we were going up a slight hillside, I came to a logging trail and as I looked to the right I thought I saw a reflection of something and I hit the ground but couldn't make out anything. As I lay there, the sergeant kept telling me to go on, but I didn't move. Up crawled Lieutenant Dinning to see what the hold-up was and I told him. He had high-powered field glasses and looked things over and couldn't detect anything and suddenly he said, "Oh my God, they have got an 88 and a machine gun set up in those bushes to the left." They would have probably let us pass and then wiped us out. He pulled us back about a mile to the east. About an hour later, there was a heavy firefight where we left and another outfit had probably run into the Germans. About two days later, Lieutenant Dinning made me his runner and I wonder if it was because of that event. Don't know what happened to his old one, you never asked those things.

Now we head south cleaning the Germans out of all the French side of the "Rhine River basin." We got word that the Germans had failed to destroy a bridge across the Rhine River at Remagen so we did a quick about face and headed back north to get into Germany for the first time. We had about 150 Company C soldiers, 2 tanks and 2 small cannons with 4 "cannoniers." When we got there the Germans had already sunk the bridge with artillery fire but our engineers had brought in 5 seagoing barges and lined them up side by side clear across the Rhine River. Somehow they got one-and-one-half-inch steel plates and welded them together so we could walk across and enter Germany. When we walked across they still were shelling the bridge, but their shots were too long and were hitting into France—didn't come close to us. We then headed back south clearing all the small towns and knocking out all church steeples and checking all houses for soldiers. The German civilians treated us better than the French civilians. They would help us look in the attics, basements, etc. Of course we helped by telling them if a shot came from their house, we would immediately blow their house up. I think this helped them cooperate a little better!

I would like to say that during any 24-hour period on the front line, many things happen and many people are lost, captured or hurt, but some actions are hard to face. One of these actions is the following which I thought there was no way we could accomplish.

On February 23, 1945 we were in a hold mode, so the Seventh Army could straighten out their lines, bring up replacements, improve our supply lines and also look for a possible counterattack, or so we were told. At that time a "heavy" machine gun had been spraying our lines several times a day and at night. At about 4:00 p.m. the company commander Captain Roe's runner came to our hole (Lieutenant William Dinning, platoon leader, Willis Wahl runner and T-5 Peter Katavolos, platoon medic) and said Lieutenant Dinning was to take a combat patrol out and destroy the heavy machine gun. Now this was a big order that would be all a company team of 180 men could do.

He sent me down to a position to get Sergeant Lorin Speaker, who was one of the best squad leaders. Sergeant Speaker said he thought the firing came from a hillside at about one o'clock from his position and there was low ground to the right side. He and Lieutenant Dinning both thought the only chance of success would be if we could sneak up behind them as they slept and drop hand grenades. They decided on this action, which Lieutenant Dinning laid out. All were to meet at his foxhole at 1 a.m., leave their steel helmets with all their identification in them and wear their wool caps. He was afraid a steel helmet could rub on a limb and awaken the Germans. He also said all were to leave their M-1s and we would all carry the .30-caliber carbines. He was having them brought up. He instructed each soldier to carry four hand grenades in case we got pinned down. He also said he wanted me to go along because I had a good sense of direction. I knew what my duty would be if we got pinned down. He wanted to take himself, Sergeant Speaker, me and five others. He also selected who the three grenade droppers would be and the position each man would be in if the Germans were asleep. He instructed us, if they were awake, we would withdraw for another night or different plan of action. At about 1:20 a.m., we took off and using our "stealth" training we followed the low ground for what seemed about a half hour. Suddenly the third

man in the line stopped and pointed up and sure enough there was the top of a machine gun with a soldier setting or standing behind it. We all huddled and watched as Lieutenant Dinning decided the German was sitting on the edge of the hole and indeed was asleep. We decided to go in about another hundred yards and then to sneak in the planned sequence. When we were behind the man, Lieutenant Dinning would motion for us to move in. Everything was going good until we were about twenty feet from the hole and the man was still asleep. Someone in the rear must have detected us and fired two parachute supported flares which made it like mid-day. We moved fast and I heard all three grenades go off.

Two German light machine guns started cutting loose. As we reached the bottom of the hill we ran into concertina barbed wire. I saw the fellows to my right clear the wire and were not hit. So the machine guns apparently weren't covering the wire. I am only five feet seven inches tall and I doubted that I could jump high enough to make it but somehow I did. My toes did not catch on any of the barbed wire. Thank God we didn't have the heavy steel helmets on or were carrying the Garand M-1 rifles.

We all headed to our foxholes and stretched out to catch our breath when someone hollered that Sergeant Speaker was not back. Lieutenant Dinning sent me back to Captain Roes foxhole to tell him that we had a man down. He immediately sent two litter bearers to look for Sergeant Speaker. He ordered all of Company C to lay heavy fire to the top of the German position. He ordered Company D heavy weapons to open up and a lot of firing took place. I finally got back to my foxhole and all of a sudden a flare was shot up and all the firing stopped. The word got around that Sergeant Speaker had been recovered but we did not know his condition. I often wondered what happened to him. We later learned we destroyed the machine gun and the soldiers.

A noteworthy event happened in a small town where we knocked down a steeple. A platoon ahead of us was taking German prisoners down an outside staircase. The way they surrender is to carry their rifle by the barrel and lay it down on the ground. The fourth guy came down and swung his rifle and hit one of our men in the face and maybe killed him, we never found out. The German died at the scene and looked like hamburger. He never knew what hit him—I would say about 30 8mm slugs—and we just let him lay. The war could have been over for him as at that stage we just de-armed a lot of them and sent them home to their families. We now moved pretty quickly, taking town after town, but we still lost quite a lot of men as they tried to get as many of us as they could—especially the SS soldiers who thought they were real tough guys.

We knew the war was about over and our main concern at this stage of the war was to try to survive. As we reached Stuttgart, we were told to hold our fire unless we were fired on. After two to three days, we got out of our foxholes for the first time and moved into an old SS headquarters. I think for about a week all we did was sleep and eat—the first hot food most of us had for months. One day our company commander came around and said we would all be going home quickly based on a point system which we had never heard of before. He said we combat troops and the tank boys should have a lot of points based on earned medals, battles, campaigns, etc. First we had ever heard of it, but good news. Finally charts were received with our names and the amount of points we each had. We never did know what the specifics were but I was glad to see I had 60 points and two of our guys had 70. Both had been wounded twice and awarded Purple Hearts and I am sure they got at least 5 points for each. If anyone questions me having 60 points, look at my discharge papers, item 55, which says I had 60 points as of 2 September 1945. It did not include points I would get for my Bronze Star Medal.

Now comes an interesting event. We had four guard posts around each corner of our area. To keep us busy, we took 4-hour turns to control people coming in and out.

On one night I went on duty at 0400 and sometime that night I laid my head down on the open shelf of the window (we sat on stools) and I guess I went to sleep—nothing going on. Sometime after daylight, a noise woke me up and when I looked out, there sat 4 Army motorcycles and behind them was an Army staff car with 5 stars on the front and although I was half asleep I knew Eisenhower was the only 5-star general over there. Here I was about ready to go home and maybe I faced a court-martial.

About that time, a captain stepped up with a clipboard and wanted my name and serial number, and before I could stammer out my name he suddenly walked away and they all started going toward our building. Well, to make a long story short, Eisenhower was going to a meeting with the French General

DeGaulle and he was a little early and wanted to see the German SS troop headquarters we took over. As the story goes, all of our officers and staff were asleep and the only people awake was a bunch of German cooks getting our breakfast ready. We were told that Eisenhower said, “we were all full-time combat troops and we had earned the right to be asleep and no one would be written up.” He looked the place over and went onto his meeting. A later edition of Stars and Stripes published a picture of Eisenhower and his group in front of our building. I later got a copy of the Stars and Stripes and sent it home. It should be in my files somewhere.

About 5 months later I was on my way home on a Liberty-type cargo ship that took 27 days, but I ever got seasick as many did. I was discharged January 28, 1946 at Indiantown Gap Military Center, Pennsylvania, and read in the Stars and Stripes that all Combat Infantryman Badge recipients were also to get the Bronze Star Medal and that they would be mailed to us by the War Department. My total service was from May 4, 1944 to January 28, 1946. It was short, and a rough time. When I got home I told nobody why I was home so early and told nobody of my experiences, not even to Ruth Ann. Don Slonaker, and Harold Hale were in years before me and got home way after I did. I said only one thing, “the luck of the draw,” when asked anything, I avoided a hell of a lot of questions. I am sure some may of thought that I got kicked out. So be it.

I would like to point out, you will never hear a “RIFLEMAN 745” giving a speech at any event or standing up with a lot of medals showing and leading the event never, never. Just check the next service you attend or see in the paper and see what service he was in. No discredit, but a fact. Remember what the rifleman was doing was through no fault of his own. It was not our way of life so many were just young boys, 18–20 years old. I was 24.

I would like to add to those who often ask if we thought we would make it home. I say this to them and it is for all soldiers, from the company commander on down, “What would you have thought if for 24-7, a strong army had only one thought in mind, and that was to kill you?”

With regard to letters from home, they always had encouraging and endearing comments about the future and caused the infantryman many heavy hearts, despite their intentions. Things did not look too good for our future at that time.

### **Addendum #1**

With the end of the war you can never know what a pleasure it was to get a letter from home and not worry if you would live long enough to read it. An infantry rifle company was a bad place to be.

There is one important event I failed to include in the basic document that must be included. A few days after the surrender, I received a letter from Ruth Ann that gave me the address and phone number in Paris of Harold Hale, her brother. He was stationed at a major hospital in Paris. I knew I wouldn't be able to get a pass to go there because too much was going on.

A French passenger train had just been repaired and started a route from Stuttgart, Germany, to some city west of Paris, going through Paris itself. The starting point was about 6 blocks from our barracks. I kept walking over to see what and how things were being run. I found out that if you got there real early, you just walked into a car and sat down. About an hour before departure time a Frenchman in uniform came and checked things out and controlled who got on. I soon had an idea: I would go down early and get on and con the guy to let me go. I had a buddy answer the roll call for my name.

Early one morning I was on board with my cap pulled down, like I was asleep. When the guard kicked my boot, I came up mad as hell for kicking me and chattering in English, which he couldn't understand and I couldn't understand a thing he said. After a lot of crap, I laid Ruth Ann's letter on my knee and slapped it hard and told him that was my pass—along with a lot of swear words and he finally gave up and walked away.

So far, so good. The train finally took off with me acting like I was asleep. After a couple hours, I saw a sign that said Paris and the train stopped at the edge of a town and I knew I didn't want off there. The next time it stopped, I decided this must be in Paris, so I got off.

Frenchmen everywhere, I held my fist to my ear with a thumb stuck out and someone realized I wanted a telephone. An old man pointed to a telephone on the side of a building and gave me a coin to put in it. I

dialed the number and a French speaking girl came on, but thank God she understood English and I told her I had to get a hold of Harold Hale and she told me to hang on—seemed like a half hour, but believe it or not, Harold came on and wanted to know where I was at and I told him I had no idea. He told me most streets had signs on the corner and for me to locate the closest one—I found one and spelled it out. He told me to stand in view and he would try to get a jeep and come down to get me. About an hour later, he showed up. He wanted to know if I had a pass and if not, how did I get there. I told him! We headed back to the hospital and he had made arrangements for me to stay over a fire station that had beds for this purpose. I bedded down and he said he would go get a pass that would get me into a cafeteria in the hospital. He said don't say anything, just show the pass and walk on in. He got off duty and we had a good two-day visit of the city.

Now came the matter of getting back to Stuttgart. Here they checked your pass or authority as you got on. Here most understand English. We made out that Harold would hold my arm and say this guy is AWOL from Stuttgart and we have to get him back there. We had an American soldier M.P. friend just walk along for effect and not say anything. We kept moving and got on. We went clear to the end of the car and Harold and the M.P. went to the last car and got off where the guard couldn't see them get off. No one told a lie and I am on my way back. Got back to my base and no one had missed me.

What a True Story!

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