

# On the Line with King Company

by William Dirk Warren, 398-K

*Dirk Warren was a member of Company K, 398th Infantry Regiment.*

Most of my classmates in high school were already eighteen years old when we graduated in June 1943. Nearly all of them entered a branch of military service right after graduation. I was only seventeen at that time and was not eligible for normal military duty but I could join the Army reserve, which I did in November 1943. I was assigned at once to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) and sent to a former seminary, a subsidiary campus of Syracuse University, located in Auburn, NY. This program envisaged three years of college-level study resulting in a BS degree in engineering and a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army. After only one month in Auburn in December 1943, my classmates and I (as well as the thousands of other ASTP students all over the USA) were advised that the program had been terminated.

After my induction at Fort Dix, N.J., into the Army of the United States, I was sent to Fort Bragg, N.C. to join the 100th Infantry Division. We left New York in October 1944 and after going through a major hurricane, we landed at Marseilles with a shipload of seasick GIs.

We marched from the landing docks to Septemes les Vallons, a staging area a few kilometers away. Many of us spent a few days roaming around this well-known port city visiting, not surprisingly, such attractions as one of the many brothels which catered to the large number of carousing seamen from all over the world. As I recall, most of these young soldiers, including yours truly, declined to avail ourselves of the personal services of the ladies of the evening. A majority of these young men, including yours truly (who were referred to in the newspaper articles we read about our upcoming perilous undertaking as “The Flower of American Youth”), however, did watch a bizarre performance of two of these erotic dancers, as they later were called, who executed sexual acts for our amusement.

One member of our company was killed in Marseilles when he tried to climb onto the rear of a moving trolley car but miscalculated the difficulty of such a feat, fell off, and was run over by a truck following the tram so closely that the driver was unable to avoid the fatal accident. I often wondered how our company commander, Captain Randolph Jones, explained this tragedy to the parents of the victim.

We boarded a train carrying us at a speed that hardly exceeded thirty to forty kilometers per hour on a two-day trip to the town of Epinal. When we disembarked we were transported by truck to front-line positions in the area of Raon l'Étape where we relieved the 45th Infantry Division, which had been in combat since 1942.

As I have mentioned previously, our deceased comrade-in-arms, Ted Benjamin (he died from pancreatic cancer in 1996) wrote a daily record of combat operations of Company K, 398th, from our arrival in Marseilles on October 20, 1944 to August 14, 1945 (after April 1, 1945, his reports were no longer daily but at least every few days). Fortunately, I have a typed copy of Ted's report which helps me enormously to keep track of our wartime activity.

I was surprised to read that according to Ted, the first time Company K slept inside a building since our arrival in France was on November 15, 1944 in Baccarat (famous for crystal) where we were billeted in a schoolhouse. The rest of the time, we slept in foxholes and it was a real joy to sleep inside where we were dry and warm.

Ted faithfully mentioned the casualties we suffered and according to his report, the following Company K members were killed in action (KIA) in November 1944: Chesney, Downey, Lt. Moody, Spada, Stephenson and Wright. The following were wounded (WIA) Giffold, Martin (he was a T/Sgt. and my platoon leader), Lt. Newton, Solomon, Swanson, and Wayne. Through most of October, we had rain nearly every day. According to Ted's report, we had the first snow on November 12, 1944. Several towns we passed through in late November and early December are mentioned, as follows: Bust, Rosteig, La Petite Pierre, Trois Fontaines, Puberg, Sarreburg, Meisenthal, and St. Louis. Our company commander, Captain Randolph Jones was wounded December 2 and was sent to a hospital behind the front lines. His

wounds were apparently quite serious because he was not able to return to the company for the duration of the war. Also, around this time, McNutt, Proctor and Smith were WIA.

Ted's notes mention a wonderful break we had for four days at the end of November in a glass factory in Trois Fontaines where we were warm and dry, enjoying hot meals and packages from home. On December 5 we stayed in a house in St. Louis guarding an anti-tank gun. On December 10 we passed through Goetzenbruck and Lemberg. Coincidentally on November 9 and 10, 2012, my wife and daughter and I are visiting Bitche to attend the dedication of a monument in memory of the 100th Division combat action in liberating the Pays de Bitche from German control. We are also attending ceremonies in Lemberg where fighting took place 68 years ago in December 1944!

Following are comments I made to Ted Benjamin's daily report which he completed in August 1945. I believe my comments reflect quite accurately what we experienced during our time in combat during WWII between November and May 1945.

The first mention of snow in Ted's report was on November 12, 1944. According to my own recollection and the stories I have read about the winter of 1944/45 in the area of the Vosges Mountains where the 100th Division was fighting, there was an unusually large amount of snowfall during the months from November to February, sometimes reaching levels of two to three feet.

I recall quite vividly November 19, 1944 when 1st Lt. Edward Moody, the executive officer of our company, was killed by German sniper fire while we were advancing across an open field toward a wooded area in which enemy forces were located. Pfc. John Downey, a member of the 3rd Platoon, was also killed that day and Sgt. Bill Wayne, with whom I still to this day correspond, was wounded the day before.

Our platoon sergeant, T/Sgt. Lynwood T. Martin, was seriously wounded on November 20, 1944 and he only returned to the Company after the war when we were stationed in Germany. In a particularly tragic incident which took place on November 20, 1944, one of three members of Company K, 398th who was wounded that day, whom I will not mention by name out of consideration for the feelings of any family members who might by chance read this, received a serious wound in the stomach but because he could not be moved to reach a field hospital, he bled to death.

Toward the end of November while we were in Moyennoutier, we received the first batch of Christmas packages from home which contained various goodies such as cakes and cookies which pleased us greatly. The soldiers who received the packages made sure that the contents were shared with those who received nothing.

Ted Benjamin reported that we passed through the town of Senones, Le Vermont, and Le Puid on November 23. I remember well the town of Senones where a woman came out of a farmhouse and gave a number of us some hot milk, pouring it in as many mess kit cups as she could until her pail was empty. Because many of us suffered from weak bowels, we were delighted to discover that hot milk helped to cure this malady.

Large numbers of U.S. infantrymen, not only from our Division, suffered from diarrhea while in combat during WWII. This was due to several different factors, that is, open latrines, improperly cleansed mess kits and contaminated drinking water. Hot milk became my standard remedy for the oft-recurring "G.I.s," as we called this annoying, and frequently disabling affliction.

On November 26, Ted refers to the fact that the attack near Strasbourg was postponed. The reason for this was because intelligence reports were indicating that the Ardennes Offensive or "Battle of the Bulge," as it became known, was about to begin and it was decided that the thrust of the Division's movement, rather than pushing toward Strasbourg, would be better positioned further to the north. As Ted indicates, there were truck transport and foot marches during the next few days to the towns of Trois Fontaines, Bust, Puberg, and Rosteig where we spent some time in houses and in the abandoned glass factory in Trois Fontaines.

Our company commander, Captain Randolph Jones was wounded on December 2.

Bill McNutt, another comrade with whom I am in fairly regular contact via email to this day, was wounded on December 3 and, luckily for him, was returned to the USA for treatment. So for him, the war ended on this date.

Already by December 5, Company K had moved north as far as Meisenthal and St. Louis which was getting quite close to one of our most formidable objectives, the Citadel at Bitche.

Those soldiers who came close to the pillboxes Ted mentions in his comments of December 15 and 17, can vouch for the accuracy of the statement that the walls of these structures were so thick (up to ten feet) artillery shells often just bounced off doing little or no damage to the structures themselves.

On December 16, Ted notes that Army Air Corps bombs and artillery shells were directed at the forts—part of the Maginot Line—and no report of this kind of action would be complete without mention of the short falling of artillery and misdirected bombs, so called “friendly fire,” from which a number of Centurymen suffered wounds and some were even killed.

On December 18, S/Sgt. Paul Romero (he later received a battlefield commission) and Joe Hyde were wounded. I knew Joe Hyde quite well from Fort Bragg and, although we lost contact after the war, we met again at several conventions until his demise in the 1990s. I tried to contact Lt. Romero after the war but the only address I could find was no longer valid.

Under the above date, Ted also mentions Fort Freudenberg which at times we called Freudenberg Farms. Although Ted was not in 3rd Platoon as I was, he mentions his unit being stretched out very thinly along a road near Freudenberg Farms on December 21. I recall this location well and can vouch for the fact that my platoon was at this location.

I regrettably have no recollection of the Christmas dinner at the French garrison which Ted says took place on December 25, 1944. I do recall getting winter clothing in the form of reversible parkas, white on one side and green on the other and, a most welcome addition to our garb, combined leather and rubber boots (like the L. L. Bean type) which helped keep our feet dry, thereby avoiding trenchfoot in the almost constant rain or snow which we had experienced since coming on the line in early November.

On December 10, 1944, Ted mentions that Company K moved into Lemberg on the way to a planned attack on Reyersviller. The attack was called off due to darkness and we dug in near Lemberg. The town of Lemberg has become somewhat of a symbol to Centurymen who have made the journey back to Bitche in recent years mainly because of the fact that a 100th Division soldier, Pfc. Maurice Lloyd, was killed in action on January 1, 1945 at a spot just outside Lemberg. Lloyd was in a foxhole adjacent to the railway line which was being defended by German forces, when he was shot and his body was covered by snow before the graves registration people got to the area; for this reason, his remains were not discovered until 1978. For the past several years, Rev. Bill Glazier and Mme. Lise Pommois have organized a tour for Centurymen from the USA to Bitche which usually includes a visit to the site where Pfc. Lloyd’s remains were found. A French citizen by the name of Justin Gehl erected a monument on this site and whenever the tour group makes the trip from Bitche to Lemberg, they are joined by local officials from Bitche and Lemberg who recall the tragic death of Pfc. Lloyd in their eulogies.

Ted mentions in his comments of December 14 that Gene Brugère and Al Lenhardt were wounded in the intense fighting near Fort Schiesseck (another frequently visited site on the tours back to the Vosges) and I want to note here that Gene Brugère was a very close friend of Ted Benjamin and the two carried on a lively correspondence during the entire post-war period right up to Ted’s demise in the mid-1990s. I also had close contact with Gene Brugère, seeing him at several conventions and keeping in touch via frequent emails. I met Al Lenhardt at the 100th Division convention in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1996, and although I have tried to talk him into attending subsequent conventions, I had no luck in this.

Centurymen who entered Siersthal on December 29 will never forget the fact that we enjoyed that day, our first hot showers since coming on the line in early November. This was an exquisite pleasure for combat soldiers who had, of necessity, been denied the everyday comforts of normal life.

Ted reports that Louis DiPrizito was killed in action on January 2, 1945.

In his comment of January 5, 1945, Ted mentions an unnecessary five-mile foot march in “very deep snow” (in my recollection two to three feet) in the area of Gross-Rederching where we took positions around pillboxes.

I can recall an experience I had, probably in this area, where I took my squad under cover of darkness away from our foxholes about one hundred yards to investigate a small pillbox from which we suspected that German troops were directing artillery fire at our positions. When we got close enough to the

entrance, I tossed in a hand grenade and, after the smoke cleared, we were able to enter the pillbox where we determined that there were no German troops inside. I was happy to get my squad back to our foxholes without mishap.

Although I do not believe I was ever in La Petite Pierre for a rest period during the time I spent in combat, Ted reports that he spent three days of “R and R” in this town around January 17. In the 1990s, my wife and I joined Rev. Bill Glazier and the 100th’s tour group driving over from Luxembourg. Because the Relais des Châteaux Forts in Bitche was fully booked where Bill and the other members of his group normally always stay, my wife and I stayed at the best hotel in La Petite Pierre, the Clairière which is only about twenty miles from Bitche.

Ted mentions that T/Sgt. Rizzo (later 2nd Lt.) narrowly escaped shooting himself in the town of Guisberg on January 19 where the entire company (probably at that time about 100-plus men and four or five officers) “was squeezed into one little house.”

Company K, 398th members who spent time in the area of Lemberg will recall a building which we called “The Château” and have fond memories of it. While two of the three rifle platoons in our company were positioned on the line, the third was resting in the Château from January 22 to March 13. The platoons rotated every few days and Ted recalls that Red Cross girls came up to this location just a few miles behind the front to serve us coffee and donuts. We even saw movies now and then and otherwise enjoyed our short respite from combat action.

I came down with hepatitis (as did large numbers of Centurymen, including Ted Benjamin, in that area), sometime in February, so I was sent first to a field hospital then to a larger evacuation hospital near Saareguemines. It was located in a spacious monastery or castle which was better able to treat the many soldiers who had been infected by this disease. I was finally transferred to the 98th General Hospital in Epinal where I remained until mid-April 1945. Due to the large numbers of US troops being moved around Europe at that time, it was not possible to go directly from a hospital in France to a combat unit which by that time was involved in final battles with the enemy in Germany. As a consequence, I was shipped to various replacement depots (we called them “reppel-deppels”) in Thionville, Aachen, Worms, and Ulm before rejoining my unit, Company K, 398th Infantry on May 21, 1945 which was then stationed in the small town of Gschwend about fifty miles outside of Stuttgart. For me, this was almost like a homecoming because many of my comrades-in-arms were in Gschwend and gave me a hearty welcome.