



This map shows in closer detail where we were going that mid-November of 1945, and what we faced in getting there. This time our little box is marked "399" and "100."

XII. WINTER CAMPAIGN (1)

Thus we embarked on a way of life involving almost unrelieved misery and discomfort that was to last, with only occasional short respites, for the next two months. We were during this time moving through country that was mostly mountainous and heavily wooded. Towns named St. Remy, Baccarat, Raon L'Étape, Wackenbach, Moyenmoutier, Sarrebourg, La Petit Pierre, Lemberg, Hottviller, Sierstal, Lambach, and many others were familiar places for a few days and then soon forgotten as we

constantly moved on. It rained a great deal, and then it started to snow a lot. In that latitude and time of year the days were short, wet, and cold, and the nights were long, wet, and cold. We had for protection from the elements only what we could carry with us: a shelter half, a blanket, and maybe a raincoat. We were also loaded down with entrenching tools, grenades, a weapon, ammunition, and a handful of personal items. Each day we would be issued food, dehydrated K Rations, more often canned C Rations, which could be heated if one could build a fire, and, less frequently, a hot meal from the mess tent at Company headquarters. We went many weeks at a time without being under a roof and without a change of clothing or a bath.

We had been issued what were called shoepacs—boots with rubber feet and leather tops. These were a mixed blessing. They kept the outside wet out but also kept the inside wet in, thus promoting trench foot and other unpleasantness. My mother periodically sent me two pairs of heavy hand-knit wool socks. I would wear one pair for a day with the other wrapped around my waist under my clothes to dry, then alternate, and discard both pairs when new ones came. This was an unmitigated blessing.

From Armistice Day to Thanksgiving we ate K Rations every day. Then on Thanksgiving Day, through someone's well-meant but misguided inspiration, we got a hot meal: turkey, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, all of it. We were under roofs in the tiny village of La Petite Raon that night, for the first time in two and a half weeks, but it didn't do us much good. Almost all of us were deathly ill during the night, and up getting rid of that rich food from one end or the other, or both. Digestive systems on an exclusive diet of dehydrated food for so long couldn't adjust so abruptly.

It was nearby, not much later, that we actually "liberated" a settlement, deep in the forest, called Les Quelles. That is, my squad were the first (I was sixth, "by actual count," according to one of my letters) Allied troops to appear after the Germans left, only hours before we got there. It was like the liberation of Paris in microcosm. We had people cheering and crying on the roadside as we passed through (we always passed through the good places, we never seemed able to stay anywhere even remotely resembling pleasant), women trying to kiss whoever they could, and everyone offering gifts. Somehow I acquired a miniature pair of wooden shoes, doll sized. I managed to carry these in the breast pockets of my field jacket from then on, and actually got them home. My daughter has them to this day.

One of my sketches of the early 1950s was about this incident and got into the *Newsletter* as this:

LIBERATION

[This episode took place somewhere between La Petite Raon and Les Querelles—and you need a pretty detailed map to find either of them. The time is late November 1944.]

It was a tiny, remote village nestled in the forest of the Vosges Mountains. At this phase in our tortuously slow but steady pursuit of the Germans over endless steep hills and bottomless valleys, through a light but incessant rain, my squad was ordered away from the main body of the battalion to circle around through a tiny village that showed on the map, to make sure that it was cleared of the enemy. The Krauts in our sector were on the run at that time anyhow, so our

pursuit was none too thorough, but this was just the sort of spot where a few might hole up in the hope that we'd overlook them.

There were eight of us, and we turned at the next fork in the road with some little trepidation. We'd just been through our initial "baptism of fire," the company had been rather badly cut up, and most of us were pretty tired of war already, what with this incident and the endless rain of Alsatian November with no shelter but a blanket and a raincoat a large part of the time.

We'd progressed only a few hundred yards when the replacement who was acting as scout let out a yell and came running back. We stopped dead, and I started dully eyeing the roaring torrents along side of the road that passed for ditches, for a soft spot to fall into in case that should become necessary. It turned out though that the replacement's cause for alarm was only two Germans, both very dead, that had gotten into the way of an artillery burst, apparently several days past. Loud and vociferous was the indignation directed at the poor rookie.

Then the tension mounted in earnest, we were approaching the village; as we entered, conversation ceased, we drew further apart, and rifles were lowered. Was this a dead town? No, it didn't seem likely, the buildings were unscarred, farm tools lay about the barnyards, and a bedraggled chicken was forlornly scratching about a wagon. Where then were all the people? The open door of a shed gently closed. Three of us lowered our rifles at it, but nothing more happened. Had it been the wind?

As we neared the center of the village a middle-aged woman opened a window and inquired in faltering English whether we were Germans or Americans. "*Nous sommes americains!*" I shouted, perhaps a little rashly.

At that, the whole family appeared at the door, still fairly doubtful. We soon dispelled their fears, however, and in a few seconds the street was crowded with crying women and cheering men and children. Never before or since have I seen so much unadulterated happiness. The Germans had left two or three days before and these people had been left in a state of suspense, wondering what was to come next.

An old grandmother ran along side of us for a few yards, trying to find someone to kiss, and numerous bottles of schnapps were held out to us. Our squad leader decided, however, that we were in a terrific hurry just then and that we had to leave, post haste. As we trotted out, I looked back and unashamedly wiped away a few tears.

As the Winter neared, the weather and our living conditions worsened. It seemed to rain or snow almost every day. We spent most of our daylight hours on the move somewhere, sometimes in trucks, but mostly on foot. Every once in a while we'd spend a night, or sometimes only a few hours, in homes of villagers or farmers. That was when we would, very occasionally, get showers or clean clothes. The rest of the time we lived and slept in the dirt, often mud. And it was at about this time that the diarrhea started, and, as we gradually began to realize, the infectious hepatitis.

Let me try to give a picture of how we lived during those days of November and December 1944. On a given day, after a march of 15 to 20 kilometers we would arrive

at a position—maybe the edge of a woods or just over the leading edge of the crest of a hill—and be assigned spots to dig in. Typically, two of us would dig a hole together, line it with our shelter halves or raincoats, cover it with boughs or logs and earth, and at night take one or two hour turns sleeping in it while the other stood guard. Sometimes we would be in such a spot for a week or more, other times we'd be ordered to move on before we'd even finished digging or—worse—just after finishing. From these positions we'd go out on periodic small group patrols, and of course we were on guard against similar enemy patrols. Naturally, we had no real protection from the weather. If our kitchen was set up near enough in the rear we would get a hot meal once a day. For the rest of the time it was mostly C Rations, K Rations having apparently been belatedly recognized by our leaders for what they were, emergency food.

If we were in reserve on this static front situation, we'd spend our day, or hour, or week in a house in some tiny farm village, often with stables on the ground level of the house, and always with a huge mound of manure in the town square, awaiting Spring use for fertilizer. We seemed to be out far more often than in, however, and our lives reverted to the most primitive sorts of conditions that were then imaginable in what I thought was the modern, civilized world. And we were never out of danger. Even on a "static" front people were constantly being killed or wounded in the frequent clashes between small groups or larger.

Occasionally something would happen to mitigate all this misery just a little bit. Once it was something our Captain did. It had been an awful day. We hadn't seen any fighting, though it was all around us, but we had been all day slogging through mud and wet. It had rained all day long, and it was December, and cold. Eventually we arrived at some nameless spot in the woods and were told that this was it, where we were to spend the night. It was black dark at 4:00 p.m. and we had nothing to do but dig our foxholes and try to figure how to keep from getting any wetter for the night. The Company Jeep might or might not show up with hot food, no one ever seemed to know until it arrived, which it often didn't.

A runner from Battalion or somewhere was on hand to tell the Captain that a farmhouse for him to set up his command post in had been located nearby. That it would be warm and dry everyone knew. The Captain was still a little new with us and we naturally accepted the idea that he and a few others would be spending the night in relative comfort, in compensation for the demands of command. Then we began to understand that we had a real leader. He turned down the farmhouse, saying that if everyone couldn't be under cover no one would be, and spent the night out in the rain and the mud like the rest of us. Unimportant-seeming gestures like that, made with sincerity, can have enormous significance, given the time and the place.

Here is another kind of story, one I've never mentioned until now, which illustrates what the stress of the kind of life we were experiencing can do to people. It's December I think—I really have little chronological sense of these events now—and 2nd Battalion is ordered to attack once again, perhaps for the first time after Purple Heart Lane. Our Company objective is a German position at the top of a small but very steep, quite heavily wooded hill, a nasty spot that could prove very bloody for our force. However, we had tanks. Our idea was that we would advance behind the tanks, using them for small arms cover. However, it was a peculiarity of our tankers, we knew from

previous experience, that they expected us to advance in front of them and to cover them from anti-tank fire. We were a while that morning sorting that out, but our way finally prevailed. Two of the three tanks were quickly rendered useless, however: one had engine problems, another got stuck and threw a track, and the crew of the third would not advance alone. So we had to.

The way up the hill when we got there was so steep and narrow that we had to struggle up single-file, a very perilous maneuver. However, word soon came back from those in the lead that the enemy position, though nearly impregnable, with this hill on one side and a mine field in a pasture on the other, was very lightly held and the Germans didn't have the heart to fight for it. They had surrendered! But just before I reached the position there was a burst of gunfire. B.A.R. fire, it turned out, and when I got there a German soldier lay face down in the dirt in a flowing pool of brilliant red blood. After surrendering, he had not been able to resist taunting our men, in fluent English. The war was over for him, he had said, and no doubt he'd be sent to the States as a pampered prisoner of war, while we had to stay there in the wet and filth and probably die. This snapped something in the mind of one of my fellow B.A.R. men who was standing a few feet away. He just raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. About half the 20-round clip must have hit home and death was surely instantaneous. I was horrified and revulsed, but our friend showed no sign of remorse, or that he necessarily considered himself finished shooting, so no one said anything.

This was, in a sense, cold-blooded murder, though probably mitigated by something like temporary insanity, and certainly, given the circumstances, provoked. Memories of this episode returned to me at the time, many years later, when the details of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam were being revealed. Undoubtedly there was a difference between the two happenings, and indeed between them and the Malmédy massacre of American troops by their German captors that was to take place only a few weeks later, and not many miles from where we stood then. But the differences were of degree, not kind, and all these episodes simply underline the dehumanizing horror of war.

XIII. ALSACE

The attitude of most of the local populace toward us, in the limited time we had to observe it, often seemed ambivalent. This was France, and our orders were to treat the people as friends—allies. Complete respect was to be shown to personal property, and when we occupied homes it was, technically at least, as guests. The occupants stayed in their homes and made do as best they could. We were never long in any one place. However, this was also Alsace. From 1872 to 1918 it had been a part of Germany, and it had again been occupied by Germans since 1940. Many people spoke German as well as French, and local patios seemed to be a mixture of both languages. It was by no means to be taken for granted that all of the people were totally committed to the Allied