

Beyond Heilbronn

by Denny Carmichael, 397-G

Denny Carmichael was assigned as First Scout in his squad of Company G, 397th Infantry. After Heilbronn, he and most of his buddies thought the “tough going” was over for the war in Europe.

On the morning after the fighting in Heilbronn concluded—tough, costly fighting in which 2d/397th had been deeply involved for over a week—Carmichael’s company was again on the road, advancing with M4 Sherman tanks and M18 Tank Destroyers, attached from the 781st Tank Battalion and 824th Tank Destroyer Battalions, respectively. Overhead, a light observation plane lazily circled with an artillery forward observer (FO) aboard, controlling artillery fire against enemy targets ahead of the column.

At one point, after reconnoitering quite far ahead, the aircraft flew in very low and discharged a small package in the vicinity of the advancing troops. In it was a message indicating that a bridge on the road ahead had not yet been blown by the Germans, and appeared to be usable for the accompanying armor.

The column forged ahead rapidly, and cleared several German villages without incident. At about 1700, however, the 2d Battalion encountered firm resistance outside the town of Oberheinriet.

As Company F attacked, Company G was held in reserve. Carmichael was positioned near a “Hellcat” tank destroyer whose vehicle commander provided a running commentary on the action in Oberheinriet, as he monitored it on the command frequency. Among the clearly audible rattle of small arms fire and occasional explosions, he relayed that one of the blasts had been the detonation of a panzerfaust rocket that had killed one or more Company F soldiers.

Clearly, the tough going was not over . . .

After dark, Company G was ordered to move up. German artillery and mortars were still firing at American positions in the town, and were even tossing rounds behind the advancing infantrymen. As the George Company men took up positions in houses on the town’s periphery, Carmichael had his most frightening experience of the war.

Carmichael’s platoon leader explained that the platoon had been ordered to advance to a nearby hill which overlooked part of the town, and take up positions to secure the company’s flank. Carmichael’s squad would lead the advance, and as First Scout, that meant that he would be the point man for the platoon. Carmichael mentally pictured a phalanx of German defenders dug in on the slopes of the hill, but with prodding from his lieutenant, moved out smartly nonetheless.

To Carmichael’s pleasant surprise, he encountered no Germans on the way up, but soon after halting near the crest of the hill, a self-propelled 88mm gun (“SP”) opened up and changed the situation entirely. Unlike the mortars and howitzers which were firing on a high arc from a great distance—and whose projectiles could therefore be heard on their way in, allowing at least a moment’s warning of their impact—these flat-trajectory, high-velocity 88mm rounds arrived practically at the same time as Carmichael and his buddies heard the sonic report of their firing. Shelling from the SP and the other, high-angle weapons continued throughout the night as the soldiers of Company G dug in.

Around daylight, Carmichael and the other members of his squad peered out of their foxholes to find three Germans walking casually among their positions. “Obviously,” Carmichael remembers, “they were unaware that we had taken the area. Someone yelled, ‘Krauts!’ and we all fired our weapons.” Incredibly, two of the three Germans managed to get away in the confusion and noise, but one was caught cold and captured.

Due to his high school education in the German language, Carmichael was asked to interrogate the prisoner. To everyone’s surprise, the German was quite stubborn, and arrogantly insisted that Germany’s cause was not yet lost. He also refused to give any information beyond the Geneva requirements.

Oberheinriet fell the next day, and George Company moved out with the rest of the battalion in pursuit of German forces retreating through Swabia to the south and east. The German Army was in the throes of total defeat, but some of its soldiers were not yet convinced they were beaten. Between 88s and some die-

hard troops, even though only three weeks remained until the Germans' unconditional surrender, the "tough going" was definitely not over.

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