

# THE 100TH INFANTRY DIVISION

It began quietly enough, a little more than eight months after Japan's surprise attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor had forced America into a world war. In mid-August 1942, a number of War Department officials—the commanders of the Army Ground Forces, the Service of Supply, and the Second and Third armies—began assigning officers to a cadre around which a new infantry division would be built. Command of the division went to Maj. Gen. Withers Alexander Burress, who, although not a West Pointer, had established a distinguished pedigree in the prewar service.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1894, Burress had graduated from his state's military institute—the alma mater of Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and at which George S. Patton Jr. had spent a year before going on to West Point. At the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), Burress excelled not only in the classroom and on the drill plain but also, despite a rather unprepossessing physique (five feet nine and less than 170 pounds), on the gridiron. He impressed his instructors and teammates with his brains, energy, and competitiveness. He made lifelong friends, forged important

connections, and gained the enduring nickname “Pinky” in reference to his reddish hair, alabaster complexion, and many freckles. Soft-spoken and dignified, he allowed deeds to speak for him, and they did so eloquently. By 1914, his graduation year, his superiors had marked him as an officer of merit and ability.<sup>2</sup>

Three years later, Burress went to France with the American Expeditionary Forces as a second lieutenant in the 23rd Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. As his outfit’s assistant operations officer, he saw action at Chateau Thierry, along the Marne, and in the St. Mihiel offensive. After the armistice was signed, he served as commandant of cadets and professor of military science at VMI, whose superintendent, retired Marine Corps Maj. Gen. John A. Lejeune, pronounced Burress “a very successful leader of young men.” A cadet whose father had played with Burress on the football team considered him “a stern disciplinarian but very fair, which could be a tough assignment in dealing with a group of high-spirited college men.”

When his assignment at VMI ended, Burress attended, successively, the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Army War College in Washington, DC. In 1935, he returned to VMI for a five-year stint as its commandant. The year after Hitler invaded Poland, Burress gained a prestigious position on the War Department General Staff in Washington. Soon after America entered the war, he was back at Fort Benning as assistant commandant of the Infantry School. Early in 1942, he was assigned to duty in the Puerto Rican Department, from which he was recalled, at the behest of General Marshall, to lead the 100th Division as a two-star general. Marshall’s faith in his fellow VMI alumnus would prove well-placed.<sup>3</sup>

From his first days in command, Burress showed himself to be mindful of the well-being of his troops and desirous that they receive full credit for what they achieved. Even before the Century was officially activated, he instructed its public relations officer: “Remember that this division is going to be made of more than 15,000 officers and men. It does not consist of just a commanding

general and a few other high-ranking officers. . . . I want you to see that the officers and men who do the work and the fighting get recognition for what they are doing.<sup>4</sup>

Burress would win the unalloyed support of those men, many of whom came to regard him as a father figure. Others, impressed by his quiet dignity and Southern mannerisms, saw him as a latter-day Robert E. Lee. Superiors and colleagues alike learned to depend on his steady-going leadership. The respect and confidence he inspired would result in an unusually lengthy tenure with the Century. Although turnover among division commanders was extremely high, many being relieved for failure to perform to superiors' standards, Burress would finish the war as one of only three officers to have led the same division from basic training through the close of its combat service.<sup>5</sup>

Burress was typically low-key when participating in the ceremony that marked the 100th Division's activation. This took place on November 15, 1942, at Fort Jackson, a World War I-era installation in a corner of South Carolina that abounded in sandy soil, scrubby trees, and second-growth vegetation. On Jackson's dusty parade ground, Maj. Gen. William H. Simpson, commander of XII Army Corps, to which the 100th would be assigned, delivered a brief address before a gathering of local civilians that included state officials and business leaders. Simpson—future commander of the U.S. Ninth Army under Eisenhower—stressed “the severe trials which lay in the path of the Century Division.” The unit's historian noted that the speaker “clairvoyantly predicted the important role” it would play in helping gain victory in Europe. After Simpson spoke, state Sen. Edgar A. Brown, representing



Maj. Gen. Withers A. Burress was commanding officer of the 100th Division from its inception to the end of combat in World War II. (*National Archives*)

South Carolina Gov. Richard M. Jeffries, delivered an oration filled with patriotic slogans and appeals to national pride. He urged the embryonic unit to get to work at “annihilating Hitler and the yellow men across the Pacific” and declared that “you men of the 100th can decide the course of civilization for a thousand years to come.”

During the proceedings, the new division’s flag was ceremoniously handed to its leader. Although lacking the glibness of an orator, Burress rendered a response worthy of the occasion. He cited the duty he felt toward the nation that had bred him and to the young men he would lead in combat. He accepted the command

with a full realization of the responsibility it entails, and all it symbolizes: the responsibility that we have to our high cause and our country, the responsibility to mothers and fathers, to give their sons the best in preparation for battle. To these ends and to the accomplishment of our immediate task, which is success in battle, we do hereby dedicate, without reservation, all that is in us.

Burress added the obligatory appeal to divine support: “With God’s help and guidance we shall succeed.” Spectators cheered and clapped, a military band thumped and tooted, and salutes were exchanged all around. Thus a worthy enterprise was launched and a small but not insignificant step taken toward a goal that an earlier war had failed to attain: making the world safe for democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly before the activation ceremony, the War Department had completed assigning Burress’s ranking subordinates. These included Col. Maurice L. Miller, assistant division commander; Col. Theodore E. Buechler, commander of the division artillery; and the leaders of the regiments that would furnish the bulk of the command’s manpower, Colonels William A. Ellis (397th Infantry), Robinson E. Duff (398th Infantry), and Andrew C.

Tychsen (399th Infantry). All were professional soldiers with years of service in the regular army or the reserves, and all but Ellis would attain the rank of general officer.

The forty-eight-year-old Miller, a native of Minnesota, was a 1916 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. During World War I, he had commanded a battalion of the 34th Division in France, where he was wounded. In the peacetime army, he had been an instructor at West Point and a staff member at the Infantry School. At Fort Benning, he forged a close friendship with Burress, who upon activation of the 100th Division selected him as his executive officer. Miller was, like his superior, steady-going and reliable, but a heart condition would deprive him of a long association with the Century.<sup>7</sup>

Buechler, a Nebraska native, West Pointer, and 1933 graduate of the Command and General Staff School, would serve as the division's artillery chief through its critical activation and training period before being replaced in October 1943 by Brig. Gen. John B. Murphy, a member of the West Point Class of 1918 who had graduated too late to see action in World War I. In the interwar army, Murphy had drawn a succession of field artillery command, staff, and instructor assignments that took him as far away as Hawaii. Before joining the 100th Division, he had commanded a brigade in the 7th Armored Division during its stateside training period.<sup>8</sup>

Of the regimental commanders, only the forty-nine-year-old Tychsen—like Burress a veteran of thirty years' army service—would leave a lasting mark on the division. A native of New Jersey, in boyhood he had relocated with his family to the northern plains. At twenty he dropped out of college to enlist as a private in the Minnesota National Guard, quickly rising to first sergeant. After serving on the Mexican border during the army's fruitless pursuit of Pancho Villa, Tychsen entered the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). A high score on an aptitude test gained him a direct commission to captain. In 1917, he went overseas as a member of the 88th Infantry Division. In France he commanded a machine-gun unit that fought in the Vosges Mountains sector as

well as at Verdun and in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. In 1919, Tychsen joined the regular service, where he spent the next twenty-three years as an ROTC instructor, a staff officer under then-Col. George C. Marshall and other superiors, and a student at various service schools, including Leavenworth. Somehow he found time to coauthor a celebrated manual on cadence marching.

When America entered the European war, Tychsen was in command of a unit of the Organized Reserves in Camden, New Jersey. Assigned to lead the 399th Infantry, he would prove to be a martinet, a severe disciplinarian, and a commander hard to please. According to Private Gurley, who became chief scribe of the 399th, Tychsen's men referred to him (behind his back, of course) as "Old Spit and Polish," as well as by several other nicknames—"not all complimentary." In time, however, Tychsen won their grudging respect for the thoroughness with which he trained the regiment for battle and the utterly fearless way he led it in the field.<sup>9</sup>

Ellis's, Duff's, and Tychsen's outfits traced their lineage to National Army units activated during World War I. Each was disbanded at the close of that conflict, only to be reconstituted in the early 1920s and assigned to an Organized Reserve unit. The coat of arms of each outfit displayed colors and insignia that symbolized its state attachment. For the 397th, blue and black connoted the infantry and the coal-mining region between the Monongahela and Ohio rivers of West Virginia; the unit's motto was "Death Before Dishonor." Blue waves and a diamondback rattler adorned the heraldic shield of the 398th Infantry, previously headquartered at Charleston, West Virginia; the regimental shield carried the motto "On the Alert." A similar sentiment, "I Am Ready," was emblazoned on the coat of arms of the 399th Infantry, whose origins dated to Lexington, Kentucky. The regimental shield displayed a Kentucky long rifle and a powder horn. The latter design greatly impressed its new colonel. "The Regiment had a very handsome coat of arms," Tychsen later recalled. "I grew to be very proud of that insignia. We were known at once as the Powderhorn Regiment."<sup>10</sup>

The patch of the division into which these units would be integrated was less colorful and perhaps less evocative. Worn on the left shoulder of every Centuryman's uniform, it consisted of the numeral "100" in white and gold on an infantry-blue background. The simplicity of the insignia would not prevent it from becoming a potent symbol of unit pride.

The editor of the 100th Division's official history, *Story of the Century*, saw a far-reaching significance in that ceremonial passing of the command flag to General Burress. On that occasion, "something more than speeches or bands or latrine duty had happened. The Century Division was no longer an embryo. It was no longer anything as impersonal as an 'It' or a 'They.' The 100th had been born. A living, breathing, pulsating entity had been created out of the heart and will of a united nation. From now on, 'It' or 'They' would not suffice. From 15 November 1942, it was 'We.' *We* fighting men of the Century."

Some of these men had already arrived. Cadre officers had been in place since mid-October; in later weeks, they were augmented by four hundred "filler" officer personnel who came to the division principally from Officer Candidate School (OCS). By mid-October, one thousand five hundred noncommissioned officers, most of them from the 76th Division, others from replacement training centers mostly in New England and the Middle Atlantic states, "added brain, bone, and sinew to the fighting machine struggling to crack its shell." The greater part of this machine—the recruits—began to trickle into Fort Jackson within days of the activation ceremony; within weeks they became a veritable flood. By year's close, some thirteen thousand enlistees and draftees were clogging the twenty-five-year-old installation outside Columbia, the state capital.<sup>11</sup>

The initial contingent included eighteen-year-old John Angier. At first, the armed services did not consider the native North Carolinian to be soldier material; severely myopic, he had failed

his navy physical. Despondent over his situation, Angier dropped out of college and headed north to take a defense job in the shipyards of Baltimore. He considered himself to be marking time before the army, which had lower physical standards than the sea service, snatched him up, and he was right. Through some miscommunication, however, he would not learn until he was overseas that his local draft board had classified him 4-F, “with a notation that I would never be called into the Army.” By then Angier, drawing on four years’ experience in a military prep school, had won an Expert Infantryman’s Badge and promotion to platoon sergeant. He would finish his military career as a battle-hardened lieutenant.

Angier had begun his army service by enlisting in a paratroop battalion and was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for training. He spent a few weeks drilling on muddy practice fields before the War Department decreed that all recruits who wore glasses would be shipped out to regular infantry units. Happenstance sent him to the 100th Division as a member of the first contingent of recruits at Fort Jackson. Upon his arrival, Angier’s feelings probably mirrored those of the thousands of youngsters who followed him: “As I stepped off the train my first impression was a complete blank. To think that I had left all of that good rain and mud for acres and acres and acres of sand, scrub oak, and more sand! . . . Well, I was in the Army, and what more could I expect? Anything any better than this would have surprised me so much that I would have fainted.”<sup>12</sup>

Few of Angier’s fellow recruits fainted upon reaching Fort Jackson. However, the training regimen they were introduced to took a toll on those who lacked the physical skills, the stamina, and the fortitude to transition from happy-go-lucky teenagers to accomplished fighting men. Their cadre staff went to great lengths to knock the civilian mentality out of them and, as one of Angier’s superiors put it, make them “the best damn soldiers in this man’s Army.”<sup>13</sup>

The instructors strove to teach their new charges not only the basics of soldiering but the nuances of the profession to which they had bound themselves through their own volition or at the

urging of their draft boards. More than a few recruits insisted that their noncoms were motivated by a sadistic desire to inflict as much pain and misery as possible during the time these idealistic, innocent youngsters were at their mercy.

That time was relatively brief, yet lengthy enough for its purpose. Basic training, which consumed twelve to seventeen weeks depending on circumstances, commenced at Fort Jackson three days after Christmas 1942, to be followed by three months of unit training. The recruits' day began at 5:30 a.m., when reveille was blown. By 7 a.m. they had eaten breakfast, made sure their quarters were orderly enough to pass inspection, then underwent various forms of physical training, including calisthenics and a turn on the post obstacle course. Beginning in mid-January, they were introduced to the weapons training range, "where we waited for the tardy winter dawn to permit firing." Becoming conversant with the care and handling of small arms such as the M1 sometimes proved a painful process, especially for those recruits—especially kids from the cities and suburbs of the East—who lacked experience with firearms.<sup>14</sup>

Given enough time and practice, most novices became sufficiently adept at handling the tools of war—including 45-caliber Colt automatic (actually semiautomatic) pistols, air- and water-cooled 30-caliber machine guns, 60- and 81-mm mortars, and other specialty weapons—so that they knew how to protect themselves and their comrades in a variety of hostile situations. Later they would learn how to wield bayonets, grenades, and even bazookas; how to protect themselves against a poison gas attack; and how to succeed at hand-to-hand combat. Some recruits were schooled in Asian defensive arts, though few enjoyed the experience. According to a member of the 375th Field Artillery Battalion, "judo classes were among the more unpopular features of training. Some men took their judo training [too] seriously," with the result that the classes had to be disbanded "before the law of 'the survival of the fittest' could take its toll."<sup>15</sup>

Every feature of basic training was an arduous test of the recruit's ability to endure and overcome. One of the most memo-

rable was the infiltration course, which simulated an invasion of hostile territory. Sometimes known by the sarcastic name “mental conditioning course,” this exercise required the would-be soldier to maneuver under full pack across open ground almost the length of a football field, to surmount obstacles including ditches and barbed wire, and evade dynamite charges planted in the ground. The recruit had to accomplish this mainly from the prone position and to the accompaniment of small-arms and machine-gun fire. At first he was subjected to “dry fire”—blank rounds—but at some point he found live ammunition whizzing barely three feet above his head. A veteran of the 397th never forgot “being one with the worms, burrowing for the entire 75 yards as if our life depended on it”—which it did.<sup>16</sup>

Other demanding exercises, never fondly remembered, were the three-, six-, and nine-mile hikes required of each recruit every week during basic training. At some point, he was subjected to a twenty-five-mile hike on which he lugged a full pack of equipment in addition to his M1, which weighed nine pounds, or a nineteen-pound Browning Automatic Rifle. Virtually every recruit complained of the frequency and severity of these and other exercises (“God, did we march!” exclaimed one veteran), although those who took a mature view of this training admitted its value. Pennsylvanian Thomas J. Tillett of H Company, 398th Infantry, declared that “twelve weeks of Basic Infantry Training . . . [made] me a man. Long hikes and then Hikes with a full 40[-pound] pack would gradually get those muscles to another level. I started at 135 Pounds and changed all that to muscle.”

Despite his continuous progress, Private Tillett, a machine gunner, sometimes felt intimidated by his newly acquired comrades: “It still seemed to me that everyone else was older and about twice my size.” They differed from him in other ways, too, including their choice of words and how they uttered them: “Most spoke a language that I had never heard before. Swearing was something I had never used before and soon it seemed as natural as if I had always talked that way. Life experiences were so differ-



100th Division soldiers marching through a forest in southern France soon after their arrival in Europe. These GIs are carrying a variety of equipment and armament, including bed rolls, shovels, ammunition boxes, and a .30 caliber machine gun and its tripod. Before long, most soldiers in combat discarded all but the most important field tools and personal equipment. (*National Archives*)

ent on the farm, in the big cities and on the bayous of Louisiana that it seemed every night I heard another strange story.”<sup>17</sup>

Tillett’s eye-opening exposure to young men from distant corners of the country, with their unique mannerisms, attitudes, and dialects, was the result of a large and socially diverse nation at war. By early 1943, the melting-pot process was in full swing at Fort Jackson and dozens of other training installations throughout the land. Through close confinement and enforced teamwork, basic training helped create a cohesive, integrated team from the disparate elements of American youth: scions of old New England families and the less fortunate offspring of South Boston and East Hartford; cocky, jive-talking zoot-suiters from “New Yawk” and “New Joisey”; sons of the New South, fulfilling family military tra-

ditions; kids from the farms, towns, and cities of the weather-ravaged plains and the solid-stolid Midwest; youngsters from the villages, ranches, and oil fields of the Southwest, including sizable contingents of American Indians and Hispanic-Americans; mellow Angelenos and urbane San Franciscans; and descendants of the hardy pioneers of the Pacific Northwest. This gathering of the disparate and far-flung—an “amalgam of Runyonesque and Faulkner like characters,” in the words of one college-educated recruit—came together on the flat, dusty fields of the Carolina Piedmont.

As soon as its manpower began to arrive, the Century Division assumed shape and organization. In quick time the command expanded from its primary components—the 397th, 398th, and 399th Infantry regiments, the 373rd, 374th, 375th, and 925th Field Artillery battalions, and their associated headquarters elements—to include a variety of combat support units: the Division Headquarters Company, the 325th Engineer Combat Battalion, the 325th Medical Battalion, a Special Troops battalion, the 100th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, the 100th Quartermaster Company, the 100th Signal Company, the 800th Ordnance Light Maintenance Company, and the 100th Military Police Platoon.

The next phase of divisional training, involving combined arms, began in mid-July when the recruits left Fort Jackson for a two-week round of field exercises. During this period, the various units of the Century came together to form regimental combat teams—ad hoc combined-arms units—and operate for the first time as a cohesive entity. The men “sweated on long marches, deployed through thick woods, and learned to make one canteen of water last for a day’s drinking and washing.” The division’s historian added that “with the temperature in the 90’s, however, we didn’t do much washing.”

By the end of August, having solved six regimental combat-team problems, the Century began training as a division. In stifling heat, the troops maneuvered through chigger-infested stands of

cypress trees and loblolly pines and across fields abounding in saw grass, sand fleas, and a ubiquitous climbing vine known as kudzu. Directed personally by General Burrell and his ranking subordinates, the “Battle of South Carolina” attracted visits from top brass, including General Simpson and Lt. Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall, commanding general of the Second Army. Fought mainly across a twenty-five mile stretch of “battlefield” between the towns of Winnsboro and Chester, the exercise ended in victory for the Century and with the sound defeat of its numerically inferior opponent, the 6th Cavalry Regiment (Mechanized). By late October, the division had returned to Fort Jackson, where the liberal issuance of passes enabled the recruits to celebrate their triumph and homecoming with wine (or at least beer), women (those able to elude the long arm of their families), and song (much of it rendered in boisterous but slurred tones).<sup>18</sup>

The Battle of South Carolina formed a prelude to an even larger and more strenuous round of campaigning in the wild. In mid-November, most of the division was trucked to the Tennessee Maneuver Area, a fifteen-thousand-square-mile tract atop the steep and rugged Cumberland Plateau. In this forbidding environment, the recruits, who were slowly but surely rounding into some semblance of combat troops, spent two months maneuvering as part of a corps-size force. That force included elements of the 35th and 87th Infantry divisions, the 14th Armored Division, and the 3rd Cavalry Group, units that the Century sometimes joined and sometimes opposed in simulated but quite realistic combat.

At first, bad weather—which included several days of near-freezing rain—the treacherous terrain, and inadequate clothing caused unit morale to plummet. It revived once the men were permitted to build fires and spend a sufficient time resting in the rear of the fighting lines. Objectives were more easily attained, and exercise scores improved across the division. This trend lent further encouragement to the troops, who began to appreciate the benefits of roughing it. The scribe of the 925th Field Artillery Battalion noted that with passing time “we knew that our training was paying off. The officers were becoming more efficient in han-

dling the mass movement of troops and in combat-team coordination. We were learning to work under adverse conditions. We were being hardened to the cold, the rain, and the mud, and learning to get along with the makeshift instead of the prepared.”<sup>19</sup>

Only later did the division learn that this phase of its training, which had helped whip it into fighting trim, might have been dispensed with had events played out differently. During the summer of 1943, the command stood a good chance of being shipped directly from Fort Jackson to England to take part in the cross-channel invasion of the Continent. When that operation was postponed to the spring of 1944, the War Department decided the Century was not yet needed in Europe. Frank Gurley, among others, theorized that the division had been sent to Tennessee for winter maneuvers “more or less to keep busy and kill time while awaiting the order to pack for overseas.”<sup>20</sup>

The beneficial effects of the maneuvers were nearly squandered once the exercise ended in January 1944 and the participants were transported to their new duty station, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Initially Bragg was thought to be the stepping-stone to deployment overseas, but in a matter of weeks the division had grown too small to go into action anywhere.

By early spring, some three thousand five hundred recruits, all from the lower ranks, had departed Bragg, but not as Centurymen. They were bound for the replacement depots (“repple depples,” in army parlance), whose mission was to supply infantry units already in combat with reinforcements. Most of the departing men would be assigned to the U.S. Fifth Army, then struggling to break out of a beachhead on the Italian mainland near Anzio and Nettuno against heavy German opposition, and the Sixth Army, which had just made an amphibious landing at Saidor on the coast of Japanese-held Papua New Guinea as part of Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s Huon Peninsula campaign. The loss of so many combat-ready troops severely compromised divisional readiness.

It became clear that the Century was not about to go into the field any time soon.

Over the next eight months, replacements were funneled to Fort Bragg from an array of units, including airborne, military police, and barrage balloon trainees; Special Services members; and Army Air Forces and antiaircraft recruits whose classes had been washed out in order to feed the army's constant hunger for riflemen, machine gunners, and mortar men. The largest source of replacement manpower was the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), whose members found themselves ejected from the hallowed halls of learning and deposited on the practice fields of Bragg and other training installations. This program, implemented in December 1942, was designed to "provide the continuous and accelerated flow of high grade technicians and specialists needed by the Army." Applicants for these positions, most of whom were already on active duty, were required to have a high school diploma (or, if older than twenty-two, to have completed at least one year of college), and to have scored a minimum of 115 (later raised to 120) on a standardized IQ test. A qualifying ASTP candidate would be sent to one of 227 land-grant universities around the country that had contracted with the army to provide instruction in such areas as engineering, foreign languages, personnel psychology, and medicine. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and Army Chief of Staff Marshall had begun to heed the concerns of ASTP critics, including Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, commander of U.S. Ground Forces, who complained that "with 300,000 men short, we are sending men to college." Early in 1944, the War Department began shutting down the program, although elements of it would remain in operation throughout the war. It was estimated that between three thousand and four thousand of the washouts found their way into the 100th Division at some point in 1944–45.<sup>21</sup>

The newcomers, many of whom seemed to regard themselves as students instead of soldiers, did not like their altered status one bit (the program's demise was "one big rip-off," a veteran of the 398th recalled many years later, with more than a trace of bitter-

ness). When they reached Bragg, ex-ASTPs were especially bothered by the “difference in intellect” between themselves and their instructors, many of whom appeared functionally illiterate. “We were a bunch of youngsters, scarcely out of high school,” wrote Private Miller of the 399th, another ASTP, “but quite confident of our intellectual abilities.” Not only did the college men consider themselves superior intellectually to their noncoms, they believed, as J. P. Smith put it, that “we were smarter than our officers—which in some cases was true.” Private Smith admitted, however, that “there is nothing worse than an eighteen-year-old kid who thinks he knows everything!”<sup>22</sup>

But not every recruit harbored a grudge against his instructors. Private Bourne of the 399th, who before joining the ASTP had spent a year at Yale University (where he admitted to “not learning much except how to ingest alcohol”), changed his early, quite unfavorable opinion of his instructors, but it took time:

We of the ASTP were very young, had been quite privileged for the most part, in and out of the Army, and it was very easy at first for us to think of these guys as mindless cowboys and sadists. They were experienced professional soldiers, a few years older for the most part, who knew a great deal more about what we were supposed to be doing than we did and scorned us in turn as smart-assed kids. That had to change and it did. Most of us turned out to be good soldiers when the time came to prove it, and most of us realized that the cadre was one of the major reasons for this.

That said, a balanced perspective on his training period “didn’t percolate down into my brain until many years later. How do you rationalize that some guy whom you really hated and feared saved your life over and over again, even though he may have at first despised you as well? It’s a tough thing to process, but it’s better after you do.”<sup>23</sup>

As befit recruits whom their instructors thought of as playing at war, while at Bragg elements of the Century became performers. VIPs, including newspaper publishers who could furnish the army with favorable publicity and businessmen courted by the War Department were invited to observe the division conduct infantry-artillery attack exercises using live ammunition. Other simulations edified manufacturers who wished to observe how the war goods they produced were used in action. Secretary Stimson, Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson, visiting Allied commanders, and General McNair reviewed the division at different points. Members of the division even traveled to New York City in June 1944, and marched down Fifth Avenue as part of a War Loan drive.<sup>24</sup>

While the 100th Division had proven itself adept at military showmanship, its ability as a combat command remained untested, and the timing of that test remained uncertain. The Century appeared to be stigmatized by its frequent participation in parades and exhibitions, which had given it, in some circles, a reputation as a show division. This image was strengthened by its acceptance of numerous Special Services personnel, including a five-hundred-man contingent from the recently disbanded Army War Show Task Force, a group that had traveled around the country putting on demonstrations of military hardware as part of the war bond effort.<sup>25</sup>

Some openly referred to their command as a “4-F outfit” that would never go overseas. The big brass appeared to agree. Late in July, Gen. Ben Lear, the new commander of U.S. Ground Forces (General McNair had been killed during an inspection tour of Europe), spent two days at Fort Bragg reviewing the division from top to bottom. The division’s historian stated that Lear “was publicly non-committal as to his impressions.” Rumor had it, however, that upon departing the installation he told a group of officers, “If the war is over when this outfit goes overseas, then, God bless you; however, if the war is still on, may God help you!” According to another rumor, General Marshall, who continued to consider

Withers Burress “a top notch general,” had had to talk Lear out of giving the division an unsatisfactory rating.<sup>26</sup>

Other, more welcome rumors indicated that the division would ship out before the end of the summer. As early as mid-July, the recruits were being trained in jungle warfare, suggesting an imminent transfer to the Pacific. Still other rumors had the division bound for such remote climes as Alaska and Norway. With passing weeks, however, it became increasingly likely that its destination would be the European theater. While the division’s composite battalion was en route to New York for the war-bond parade, America had learned of Operation Overlord, the invasion of the European continent by U.S., British, Canadian, and Free French troops under the overall command of General Eisenhower. The opening of a new front suggested an imminent need for troops on the ground in northern France.

Then, ten weeks after D-Day, elements of the U.S. Seventh Army—principally the 3rd, 36th, and 45th Infantry divisions of General Devers’s 6th Army Group, followed by forces from the French First Army—launched an amphibious assault, known as Operation Dragoon, on the coast of southern France. A complement to Overlord, this second invasion secured for the Allies additional port facilities on the French Riviera while also supporting the recent Allied breakout from Normandy. By mid-September, supervision of Dragoon had passed from the commander of the Mediterranean theater to Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.<sup>27</sup>

On August 29, two weeks after the first landings near Marseille and St. Tropez, General Burress assembled the thousands of officers and men under his command and announced that the division had received orders to deploy overseas. It would leave North Carolina as soon as it passed final qualifications and inspections and packed up. He did not disclose the destination, but the division had been alerted to stand by for shipment to some point in Europe.

Frank Gurley noted that Burress, addressing the troops in an exaggerated Virginia drawl, likened the division’s immediate

future to final conditioning before a prize fight. The general reported having heard “some fellows complainin’ we been trainin’ too long here at Fort Bragg. But Ah’ll tell you this, when you’re gonna take on Jack Dempsey, the Big Champ, you need all the trainin’ you kin git!” According to Gurley, these words drew “wild applause.” An only slightly less enthusiastic reaction greeted Colonel Tychsen’s speech to the 399th. Tychsen assured his men that, contrary to the well-publicized opinions of some high officials that “the war in Europe is all over but the shouting . . . I’m here to tell you we’ll need less shouting and more *shooting* if we hope to win. I can promise you that this Regiment will see plenty of combat before it’s finally over.”<sup>28</sup>

Eager to shed the label of permanent training unit, the men of the Century were ready to ship out, but they had few illusions about what lay ahead. “Most were tired of training,” Private Fair observed, “but were not anxious to go into combat.” Private Howsmon agreed that the division was eager to remove the “reple depple image” it had acquired, “and most of us, I think, felt that it was time we got into the war. This is not to say that we didn’t have fear about what lay ahead. No one looks forward to being shot at and maybe killed, but I believe, as a unit, our state of readiness and general morale overwhelmed the fear.”<sup>29</sup>

The exodus from Bragg began on September 25, when a contingent of the division entrained for New York City, the port of embarkation. Over the next several days, this vanguard was followed in increments by the balance of the command: 762 commissioned officers, 44 warrant officers, and 13,189 enlisted men. Within twenty-four hours, the multitude began arriving at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Accommodations at that two-year-old embarkation center were Spartan at best, but the duty demanded of the soldiers there was light. It consisted largely of clothing and equipment inspections and lectures on various subjects such as the importance of safe-

guarding military information (to enhance deployment secrecy the men were ordered to remove the division patches from their uniforms). Another lecture informed the soldiers of their rights under the Geneva Convention if taken prisoner.

On October 5, everyone was readied to move out. Late that afternoon, the men of the division, clad in full-dress uniforms and woolen overcoats, carrying their rifles and lugging not only full field packs but also duffel bags crammed with their belongings, left Camp Kilmer for the thirty-minute ferry ride across the Hudson to New York. Debarking at the ferry slip, they passed up a steel stairway to a pier where several transports were berthed. In the darkness of early evening, the GIs filed across the main decks of the ships and down into their holds, which had been converted into sleeping quarters. Almost one thousand nine hundred troops were crowded into one of the vessels, the U.S. Army Transport (USAT) *J. W. McAndrew*. One of them, a private in the 399th, identified the ship as one that his father, an employee of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, had helped convert years before into a military vessel: it had originally been a banana boat operated by the United Fruit Company.<sup>30</sup>

Six thousand three hundred forty-one officers and men of the 397th and 399th infantries inhabited the USAT *George Washington*, whose 23,788-ton displacement made it the largest troop carrier in the army. Built in Germany in 1908 as a passenger liner, it had been interned in New York at the outset of World War I; in 1917, it had carried thousands of doughboys, including then-Capt. Andrew Tychsen, to the fighting front in Europe. After the war, it had borne President Woodrow Wilson and his staff to the peace conference at Versailles. Other members of the Century's fleet included USAT *Henry Gibbins*, the USS *Monticello*, the USS *General Gordon*, the USS *General J. R. Brooke*, and the SS *Santa Maria*; each carried nearly two thousand troops. Convoy vessels included an escort carrier, the USS *Solomons*; a destroyer, the USS *Dewey*; and three destroyer escorts. One GI aboard the *George Washington* thought that the escort vessels "did not look very formidable because they were so much smaller than our ship, but they were floating arsenals."<sup>31</sup>

The first ships to sail cast off from Pier 19 on the morning of October 6, 1944. Then and there began an adventure most of the soldiers would never forget—for good and for ill. Landlubbers with weak stomachs and inner ear problems quickly became seasick, some before their ship cleared the harbor. Khoury recalled that when belowdecks “the smell of vomit from sick men was overpowering. It was great to be topside where hardly anyone got sick, but if a man did get seasick he just heaved over the side.”<sup>32</sup>

Those who could not keep food down gave their meal tickets to those with hardier constitutions. The men were fed two meals per day, consumed while standing in the ships’ galley and wearing life jackets. Pvt. Paul S. Mosher of I Company of the 397th, whose stomach revolted with every roll and pitch of the *Washington*, could keep down only fruit cocktail, provided by a friend working in the ship’s galley. Mosher consumed so much of it on the voyage that in later years he could not stand the sight of it. Other GIs developed lifetime aversions to the smells of diesel fuel and exhaust, and even such common scents as cooking grease and boiled eggs. Wilfred Howsmon recalled a greater variety of smells: “a mixture of every body odor known to man.”<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the voyage, men’s ears were assailed by the noise of the ship’s engines and other heavy machinery. Storage space was at a premium and maneuvering room so limited that “two men passing had to right angle and squeeze by.” Most of the men had to bathe and shave in saltwater, which left a residue on the skin and a sensation of being unclean. Only those who made friends with their ships’ naval, coast guard, and merchant marine crews got to shower in fresh water, as the crews themselves did.<sup>34</sup>

The situation worsened for everyone when, four days out of New York, the winds changed, the seas grew frighteningly rough, and a full-fledged hurricane—the worst in almost two decades, according to older crew members—struck the flotilla. Ships were tossed about like driftwood; at one point the *Washington* nearly collided with the *McAndrew*, an event that would have sent hundreds of young men to a watery grave. John Courter recalled that when lying on his bunk he would find himself “practically stand-

ing on my head and then standing on my feet with my stomach doing a flip-flop up to my throat and then to the other end. . . . I later learned that we were within five degrees of capsizing.” By order of the ships’ captains, the soldiers were kept belowdecks for forty-eight hours, all hatches closed, until the storm abated. By then even the hardiest seagoer had been laid low by sickness or terror, or both.<sup>35</sup>

On October 17, after twelve days at sea, the coast of Africa became visible off the starboard bow. Passing Morocco, the transports entered the Straits of Gibraltar. At their mouth they witnessed a sobering sight: the burning hulks of two U.S. merchant ships that had been torpedoed by German U-boats.

The voyage continued along the coast of North Africa. The ships passed Algiers and then turned north toward the Balearic Islands. Here they encountered another storm—tame by comparison with the hurricane—that continued until, on the twentieth, they entered the harbor of Marseille. That night, because the landing facilities had been virtually destroyed by the retreating enemy, the men scaled the sides of their ships via rope nets, a harrowing experience for troops under such heavy weight as they carried: one misstep and they might drown. At least one man lost his footing and was crushed between the hulls of two ships berthed side by side. Most of the GIs were conveyed to shore by landing craft; others crossed the harbor on foot via the decks of partially submerged ships, sunk by the Germans in a futile effort to make the harbor unusable by their enemy.<sup>36</sup>

Climbing ashore in the dark, the Centurymen had a limited opportunity to inspect their new surroundings. Few Frenchmen beyond local stevedores were on hand to greet them as they set foot on the shore of the country where, after frustratingly long delays, they would be introduced to a shooting war. In fact, the only truly memorable welcome they received upon landing came courtesy of a German radio broadcast by “Axis Sally”—a.k.a. Mildred Gillars of Portland, Maine, a would-be actress who had emigrated to Germany in the 1930s and had become a leading Nazi propagandist. Even as the Centurymen were touching dry

land in southern France, Sally gave out this cheerful greeting: “Welcome, 100th Infantry Show Division! We have 20 divisions just waiting to welcome you.” Lieutenant Fishpaw of the 374th Field Artillery Battalion recalled that the balance of the broadcast featured American dance tunes. “We enjoyed the music,” he recalled, “but her statement about twenty divisions waiting for us took the joy out of it.” Also troubling was the evident fact that the precautions taken by the division to prevent the enemy from learning of its arrival had failed. Accordingly, 100th Division patches were quickly reattached to the men’s shoulders.<sup>37</sup>

Punctuating Sally’s greeting, the enemy provided sound effects on cue. John Angier recalled that “as we continued to grope our way in the darkness to the outskirts of the city, we could hear in the distance the rumble and roar of heavy artillery firing round after round into the southern sector along the Mediterranean coast. Little did we know that the fighting was that close.”<sup>38</sup>