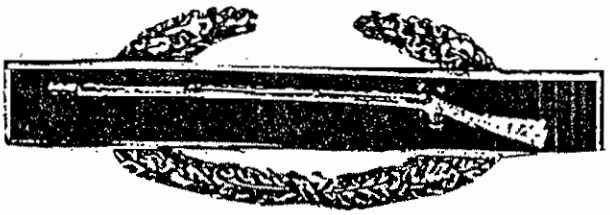
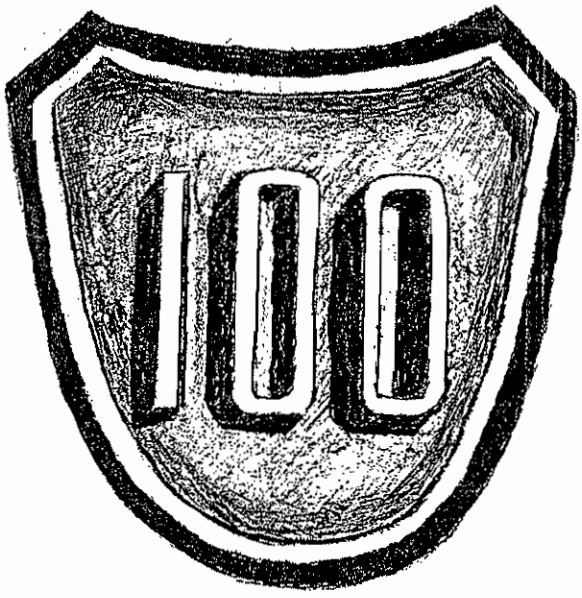


ONE HUNDRED DAYS ON THE LINE



Boyd

ONE HUNDRED DAYS ON THE LINE

Experiences of
BOYD SKELTON
During World War II
and Occupation of Germany

U.S. Army Air Corps, Air Transport Command
Boca Raton & Miami Beach, Florida

Army Specialized Training Program
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, Georgia

100th U.S. Army Infantry Division
398th Regiment
3rd Battalion
Company "I'
Fort Bragg, North Carolina
Alsace-Lorraine, France
Western Germany

U.S. Military Government
2nd Battalion
Wiesbaden & Stuttgart, Germany

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August, 1999

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FOREWORD

This manuscript will be a condensed history of my three years of U.S. military service during World War II. Perhaps my descendants may want an insight into "what made that old man so peculiar and intolerant of people who have it so good and who, at the same time, complain about minor inconveniences and discomforts".

Some passages in the latter pages of this manuscript will appear to be slanted against my World War II enemy, who repeatedly and constantly attempted to take my life during wartime. Realizing that according to modern American social standards my attitude is and has been politically incorrect for many years. I do not wish to apologize for my position in any way. However, since I have mellowed with age I now have little or no animosity toward my former enemy.

Dates and descriptions of events may not be 100% accurate due to the passage of fifty-four years and a few fading memories; nevertheless, I have taken more than ordinary measures and have made revisions to eliminate errors. My original manuscript dated in August of' 1945 wasn't written to suit me; however, it did contain a good record of events. For additional authentication Loraine and I visited several battle sites in the Vosges Mountains and in the Bitche, France areas in 1970 and again with our children in 1972. In May of' 1997 we took a third tour of both areas with some twenty members of the old 100th Infantry Division to retrace battlefield locations and events of a half century earlier. Articles appearing in The History Of The 398th Infantry Regiment, Stars And Stripes, the Smithsonian edition of June, 1997 and other publications were studied to support the details related in this manuscript.

These pages will relate primarily but not entirely to the writer's personal observations which may not necessarily be the most important happening during the war. Many details of "routine" firefights, daily shelling and combat strategies will mostly be deleted as well as some periods of nothing more than waiting, watching and listening for the enemy to appear.

Even though the 100th Infantry Division was on the front line for 163 days no single individual could claim to being face-to-face with the enemy for that number of days. Time spent in a hospital, in reserve positions, in a rear rest area or being 1000 or more yards to the rear, which was a relatively safe place to be, should not be classified as being "on the line", in my opinion.

During combat, troops deployed only a mile or two apart will have completely different perceptions of what "really" happened on any particular day or week since events were different. As examples: (1) While my position in the Maginot Line seemed to me to be under incessant shelling and rocket fire for several days other troops nearby didn't think it was too bad since they were sheltered in concrete pillboxes or forts.(2) While our and enemy forces were being killed and wounded by the dozens or hundreds during Operation Nordwind the 398th Regiment was enjoying peace and quiet some of that time without knowledge of the violence nearby. Some of us in Item Company had a vigorous touch football game one afternoon during that period three or four miles behind the front line.

PREFACE TO SERVICE

My military career began with two years of R.O.T.C. at Boys' High School in Atlanta, then followed by one quarter at North Georgia College in Dahlonega and then by two quarters at Georgia Tech. I joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps at Georgia Tech on December 11, 1942; thereafter, on March 31, 1943 reported to Fort McPherson for processing and assignment to a military unit.

With some influence, commencing with my father who was a U.S. Army Colonel at the time, I was shipped to Miami Beach to take Army Air Corps basic training. After completing thirteen weeks of easy basic training orders came for me to report to the Air Transport Command (A.T.C.) headquarters in Boca Raton, some fifty miles up the road from Miami. I assumed my transfer orders originated with the same source as earlier orders that sent me to Miami. In any event, it was a real sweet deal!

My duties at Boca Raton with the A.T.C. and later back in Miami for about three months were not too specific. I don't believe they knew what to do with me. I do clearly remember having dinner several times at Joe's Stone Crab restaurant on South Beach, taking calisthenics in the sand on the beach, marching up and down the streets in formation and taking target practice with an M-1 rifle. Upon reflection I believe these two latter events took place before I transferred to the A.T.C.

While I was still assigned to the Air Transport Command on Miami Beach I remember being billeted at various times at the Ger, Fleetwood, Floridian and Shoreham hotels. Three or four years earlier I was with my family on vacation in Miami and had stayed at the Shoreham and in the same room where some of my Air Corps time was spent.

On September 20, 1943 I received orders to report to Georgia Tech in Atlanta for assignment to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Even though I had not made application for this program the assignment appeared magically. Ordinarily such duty was hard to get, even with luck.

After a week or so of psychological and academic testing at Rollins College in Winter Park and Stetson University, also in Florida, most of my "class" was shipped to Georgia Tech.

Everyone's stripes, and I assume bars, had been taken away upon arrival at Tech. Everyone was now a yardbird again, regardless of previous rank. Academics were fiercely accelerated and outside preparations were more demanding than anyone but the very brightest students could handle; I was not in the above elite category. I had taken entry level chemistry, algebra and analytical geometry at both North Georgia College and at Georgia Tech about a year earlier and had made fairly good grades. Even at Boys' High School I had had the same algebra course. This time around, at ASTP, I did worse in grading on the same courses than I had done any of the

times before. In figuring out chemistry problems, I never did figure out what "valence" was; the binomial theorem is still a mystery.

In April of 1944 the ASTP was disbanded without prior notice going to anyone affected. Evidently the Army realized it did not have enough able-bodied men to fight the war but knew where to find men who could be made infantrymen in a matter of days. Considering my own good fortune in being assigned to plush jobs and locations, this, without a doubt, was the mother of all backfires. Actually, I didn't take the news badly since I was glad to get out of the school environment.

Most of the ASTP soldiers were shipped from Georgia Tech directly to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I doubt that less than a week went by between the ASTP demise and it's complete assimilation into infantry companies of the 100th Infantry Division.

INFANTRY TRAINING
FORT BRAGG

Prior to arriving at Fort Bragg I had spent exactly one year in the Army doing little more than performing menial tasks and repeating R.O.T.C. which I had endured three times before in high school and as a college freshman.

Infantry training at Fort Bragg was thorough and intense in many respects but lacking in others. Trainees were well taught regarding nomenclature of weapons, walking guard posts, running obstacle courses and managing one's self at night during field exercises. I was and remain critical of the Army's low priority relating to frequent and prolonged firing and use of weapons. Troops, including myself, never threw but one live hand grenade in training. Being in a machine gun section I never had the chance to fire a 40 mm mortar shell even though the mortar section was in my same platoon. Men in machine gun squads were never trained on the technique of "fire, advance, fire" during an attack on the enemy so far as I know.

Later, combat activities convinced me that a flaw in our infantry training produced a less effective soldier than he could have been otherwise. My observation during training was that too much emphasis was put on personal concealment in battle and that one would give his position away unnecessarily by firing his weapon. This element of training was more strongly implied than was spoken. The result of this training flaw was that some men seldom, if ever, fired at the enemy unless he was visible.

It was a part of training for the infantry to do three and six mile hikes every week and occasionally a nine-mile hike. One afternoon late in the training program I read on the company bulletin board that all troops not assigned to other duty would fall out on the company street at 7:45 p.m. that evening before going out on the single required twenty-five mile hike. Troops were advised to be saddled up with full field packs weighing some thirty or forty pounds plus their weapons.

Earlier that same day I had been assigned to K.P. duty. I got off K.P. a little early, by about five p.m., and after reading the orders decided that I did not want to go out that night since I was already tired and would miss a night's sleep. My conclusion was that since I had already had one tour of duty that day I would have a perfect excuse for not understanding the notice, and shouldn't be required to take the hike. I knew I would be excused or given light punishment if it was determined that I was goldbricking. After all, enlisted men were considered to be little more than semi-literate anyway.

At the appointed time the company saddled up while I watched from the steps of the barracks just a few feet away. The men marched off into the night while I just sat there. One of the guys waved to me as they moved out. After getting a good night's sleep the troops completed their march and awakened me at about dawn. I never heard a word from anyone regarding my absence from the preceding night's activities.

Going back to the second week with "I" Company, Captain Bill Clepper, company commander, had each new man come into his office for an interview. Captain Clepper seemed to be extremely interested in organizing a company boxing team. Following some questioning I advised him that I didn't know a lot about boxing; however, I did tell him I had been in a couple of street fights and wasn't too bad at kicking. He was not impressed with my combative skills and dismissed me. I do not remember ever talking with Clepper again until six months later during a combat situation on a mountain in eastern France.

After completing most of my infantry training I received notice that Congressman Paul Brown from Elberton had secured an alternate appointment for me to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. A few days later I was directed to report to the Fort Bragg base hospital for my preliminary physical examination.

As I climbed the steps up to the front door of the hospital I hesitated and asked myself why I wanted to go to West Point. I did not get any good answers so I turned around and returned to my company without further considering the appointment.

Everything considered, I believe I made the right decision. Had I been successful at West Point, thereby side-stepping my war duty in Europe, I almost certainly would have been shot up in Korea or Vietnam while serving as an infantry officer. It is and was a fact that junior grade officers don't last long in ground action combat.

Two or three weeks before embarking for Europe I took a week's furlough back home to have a last visit with my family and to tell several sweethearts good-by. As I remember my good-bys I got the impression from family and friends that they thought I was going on just another assignment and not to a war zone where it would be my duty to kill people while the enemy would be doing his best to kill me. My perception of their attitude could have been all wrong; nevertheless, they all no doubt knew what an infantryman's general duties were.

TRANS-ATLANTIC CROSSING

On September 26 or 27, 1944 the 100th Infantry Division moved by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey for further deployment to the European Theater of Operations (E.T.O.). On October 6 the division embarked from New York harbor, my ship being the General William H. Gordon. There were approximately 4,500 U.S. Army passengers aboard in addition to crew members, equipment and battle supplies.

Records state that we were at sea for fourteen days, having taken a circuitous route across the Atlantic and to Gibraltar, thence to Marseilles. My memory was that the voyage took only ten or eleven days. There was no good way to keep track of days and nights since troops were below deck most of the time.

My bunk on the Gordon was something like a stretcher, being the fourth bunk above the deck and located near the stern of the ship. While going through rough waters and a bad hurricane in the mid-Atlantic I could feel the reverberations of the propellers shaking the ship whenever the stern was out of the water. I had no fear or discomfort even though many of the men became deathly ill from seasickness.

Destroyer Escort craft (D.E.'s) escorted our vessel across the Atlantic to give us protection against German subs. These ships reminded me of greyhounds; they sailed low in the water, were very fast and skinny and were armed with depth charges and above board artillery guns.

Troops ate their meals only twice daily at odd hours in the galley. In rough seas the meal trays would slide up and down the stand-up counters unless they were held fast. Passengers had to stay below for two or three days during the hurricane since being washed overboard was a real hazard.

During this time at sea a soldier, whose name I do not remember, borrowed ten dollars from me, probably for gambling purposes. Ten dollars in 1944 would be worth at least one hundred dollars today. Anyway, the soldier never offered to pay me my money and every time I would ask for it, he would always offer to pay up "tomorrow." I didn't get my money back but learned a good lesson about lending to friends. A couple of months later the fellow was out on patrol one night and fell into a deep rock quarry and was seriously injured. I don't know if he recovered or not since I never saw him again.

It was a relief to reach Gibraltar and calm waters. The General Gordon anchored overnight in sight of the rock on one side of the straits and the distant coast of Morocco on the other. Dim flickering lights were visible across the straits in Ceuta, located some twenty miles east of Tangier, Morocco.

Our ship arrived in Marseilles two or three days later after having gone through another storm. While the ship moved up close to the docks, about a mile or two out, I was standing on the bow alone. At that time I spotted a large round black object floating about forty feet away off the

starboard side. The object looked like a mine, of which I had seen pictures many times. The ship continued forward and nothing happened. I concluded that we were immensely lucky not to have been blown out of the water or that the mine was only a dummy which the crew knew about.

Late in the afternoon of October 20 troops disembarked from the General Gordon in the harbor and bedded down in the rain in an open field six or eight miles above Marseilles. We remained in the field for several days awaiting supplies to be assembled before our trip North to the front.

Upon arrival at the bivouac area field kitchens were set up and I recall the first meal being beef stew. Since no one had more than two meals a day for the previous two weeks I, and probably other G.I.'s, decided to get caught up with the food shortage all at once. I believe I must have eaten at least three full mess kits of that delicious beef stew. I remember being very sick that night and most of the next day.

Several infantry soldiers were assigned the duty of unloading supply ships. This activity had to have no particular purpose other than to keep the men occupied and out of trouble. No one was at dockside to assign duties. Quantities of supplies, munitions, building materials, food, clothing and everything else imaginable were enormous. An M.P. warned us that he'd shoot anyone he saw in the act of stealing supplies. We thought he was serious.

While still in bivouac near Marseilles many soldiers would go down into to the city in the evenings. One fellow, who I believe was with "M" Company, never came back. He was riding on the steps of a street car and was killed by a sideswipe of another vehicle. What a waste!

Not being as adventurous as others I would go in the evenings with others from my platoon into a little town nearby (I believe it was Septemes). We would go to restaurants that had almost nothing to serve but potatoes, soup, raw greens and pungent red wine. I had never had wine before and was disappointed. The atmosphere was dark, glum, quiet and depressing like we would see more of later.

On October 3O, 1944 my regiment loaded onto small railway boxcars, known as "Forty and Eights", at Septemes pursuant to a 450 mile ride to the front near Epinal. Forty men and eight horses was the capacity of each boxcar, this being the derivative of the term "Forty and Eight". During the trip we passed through Dijon which had been bombed heavily when it was occupied by German forces a few weeks earlier. The rail yard was in disarray beyond description. Twelve or fifteen locomotives were piled up on top of each other like logs in a lumber yard. I had no idea how such a mess could ever be untangled.

The regiment unloaded from the train at Epinal some fifteen miles south of the front on November 2.

The 398th Regiment moved up from Epinal by truck into the woods near St. Gorgon where Item Company set up a reserve position for four days on top of a hill. I believe the reason for our four-day bivouac was to get the troops accustomed to the noise of shell fire a few hundred yards ahead. Due to the cold we built fires and ignored our Battalion C.O.'s orders to put them out. The air was hazy in a cloudy overcast and we thought the enemy would not be able to see the smoke. Obviously they didn't since we weren't shelled.

On about November 6 the battalion moved up to within five km. South of Raon-l E'tape facing Thiaville. We caught some light incoming fire at that location. Don't believe we had any casualties.

Other elements of the 398th were having difficulty taking Raon in frontal assaults. The town was heavily fortified by the enemy so a flanking maneuver was planned to attack the town from the north. On November 16th the 398th moved into Baccarat, four or five miles northwest of Raon 1 E'tape (Baccarat has been widely known for many centuries for its manufacture of fine crystal). Baccarat had been cleared of the enemy the day before. The company unloaded from trucks just after crossing the little river that flowed through the town which I believe was the Meurthe. After moving about a mile or so northwest of the town we waited around for orders without digging in.

By this time it was after dark and temperatures were probably in the low forties. Knobby Monahan and I bedded down together under a canvass shelter half and were warm on the bare ground even though it snowed a little overnight.

The next morning we moved three or four miles by truck as I recall, and then unloaded. We advanced up a hill about 300 yards through the woods and then waited for about a half hour for orders.

Without any warning we were hit with an intense barrage of artillery fire. Since no one had dug in most men lay prone behind trees; others stood behind trees because they knew most of the explosions were caused by tree bursts from above, and by standing they would be smaller targets. I recall that the ground seemed to be jarred with each shell burst and that little puffs of dirt and debris popped up all around due to shrapnel. A minute or two after the barrage let up I saw the ground littered with a mangled rifle stock, a boot sliced in half and other gear scattered around.

My squad leader, Sgt. Kelley, was hit badly in the chest and several others were wounded. Someone propped Kelley up against a tree where he died within a few minutes. I retrieved his entrenching tool, a kind of folding shovel, since I had been outfitted with a worthless pick for entrenching purposes.

Two hundred yards further up the hill, near the top, I discovered two German foxholes, complete with blankets and other supplies. Evidently, the occupants had not been gone for more than a few hours.

Advancing cautiously another hundred yards through a wide clearing in the woods we found several dead American soldiers from another company ~~that~~ who had been mowed down by an enemy machine gun. The German machine gun bunker was expertly camouflaged about 100 yards ahead. The abandoned position could not be seen until we were almost upon it. I doubt that our earlier advancing troops ever knew where the fire originated.

We dug in for the night and the next morning we moved about another four hundred yards ahead and came upon a small group of enemy dead which had been hit by our artillery fire, probably during the night. These dead Germans were no doubt some of the same ones who did us so much damage the day before.

It is interesting how similar a forest of evergreen trees, after heavy shelling, looks like a thicket of pines after a tornado. The smell of smashed trees mixed with smoke and gasses of exploded shells is an odor that all front line troops never forget.

By the afternoon of November 17 Item Company had moved with light to moderate resistance about four miles Eastward to a point on the north side of Raon 1 E'tape, thence, to the edge of an open shallow valley where Highway N-392, the La Plaine River and the village of La Trouche could be seen. The Germans remaining in Raon at this point would have to fight or die or retreat to the east or surrender. They took all of these options in the next day or so.

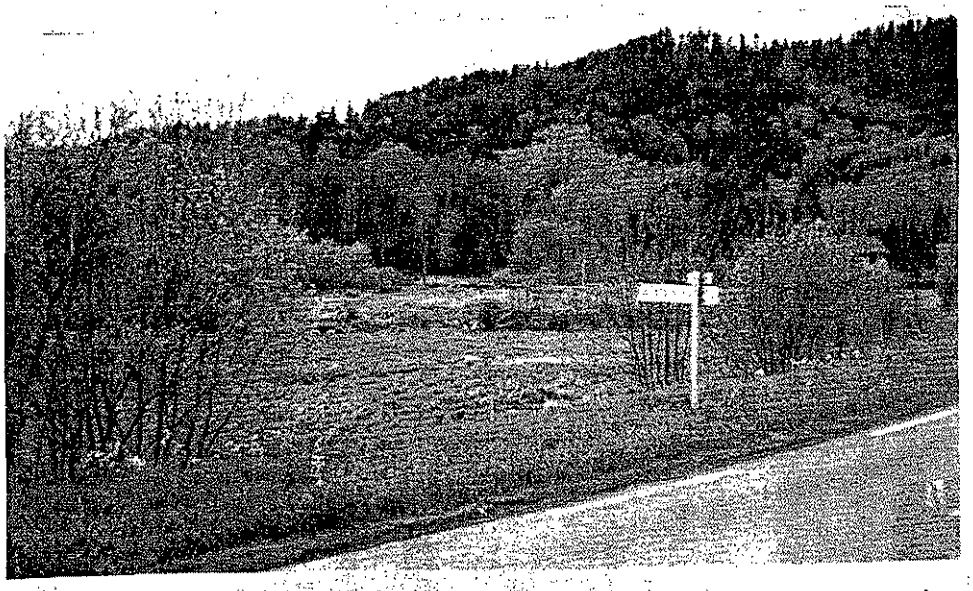
The next morning, November 18, the enemy obviously observed our movements and dropped in fairly heavy mortar fire directly into our positions. Sgt. King was killed in the shelling and I was fairly sure Joe Allen was also a fatality. They were both about thirty feet from my position. Others were wounded. By this time we had lost either three or four of the original five squad leaders in the Weapons Platoon.

Up until this time and for two or three weeks afterwards the Germans would not attack and provide us with a clear target. Whenever we fired we seldom had anything as a target better than a clump of trees, a suspected machine gun position or an unusual noise. It seemed to me that it was only "I" Company that moved forward on the attack and the only element exposed to the enemy. My attitude may be overstated and no doubt would be disputed by other men in the regiment who were in different situations. Further, it was my strong opinion at the time that the American forces were just not going to be stopped and that any kind of a setback was implausible. Our artillery must have been fearsome and overwhelming to the Germans. According to German prisoners, their words paraphrased, "The grinning Ami kept coming and would not quit. Why do they want to fight us anyway? What have we done to them?"

I do concede that a month later when we moved back from the front a couple of miles to set up a secondary line of defense that it crossed my mind how much worse it would be to be assaulted in a strictly defensive position than to be on the attack.

Following the loss of two squad leaders, Knobby Monahan and Al Widitz took over the machine gun squads. Meanwhile, the other companies of the battalion were to the left of Item Company.

Following artillery preparation the other companies crossed the La Plaine River down by a lumber yard and into an open field. During all this activity a Frenchman (Alsacian) was standing next to a tool shed half way between us and the river. First, he would look at us and then he would look the other way towards our enemy. I believe he rather enjoyed his front row seat to the combat that was about to go into the last act. He knew we were not going to shoot him and no doubt he had some friends whom he didn't fear on the German side up in the hills.



In the attack of Hill 578 "I" Company advanced from the woods in the background, came across a plank bridge over the LaPlaine River at the lumber yard next to the house in the background. The company found brief refuge in the bushes below the road.

Finally, "I" Company moved out from the line of trees and crossed the La Plaine on a little bridge next to the lumber yard. Interestingly, the bridge and lumber yard were still there fifty-four years later without any obvious changes in appearance. Without any kind of cover we all got across the bridge. To catch our breath we found cover in some bushes behind a small bank just across the river.

A few minutes later Item Company advanced across the open field for some six hundred yards while under small arms fire. All troops were weighted down in the rush across the open field with a lot of unnecessary gear. In order to move faster it was left in the field. I remember leaving behind my gas mask and an extra machine gun barrel.

We marched on and circled the nearest hill and into some woods where we dug in for the night. In spite of all the mortar fire and small arms fire, the weapons platoon got through the day with

only two Killed in Action (KIA), and no wounded. The gear I had left behind that day on the open field was nothing compared with equipment the other men had dropped. I saw raincoats, sleeping bags, weapons, ammo and food rations scattered for several hundred yards. The open field was something like an empty football stadium following a game.

Early on November 20 the 3rd Battalion began it's climb up Hill 578, the campaign objective. Item Company approached to the right of other attack forces. Hill 578, being about the height and shape of Kennesaw Mountain, was protected by enemy machine guns, burp guns and other small arms, but no artillery or mortars.

The previous day we allowed an enemy machine gun squad to surrender. With weapons drawn six or seven of us watched the Germans come out of their bunker with their hands clasped behind their heads. They knew better than to have their helmets on, for to do so would have indicated to us that they had some arrogance left in them. Lt. Raymond Snell threw a grenade into the dugout after all four or five of them had given up. If I had been Lt. Snell I doubt that I would have thought about using the grenade. A German soldier had a watch in his coat pocket that I was interested in, since for some reason, I did not have one. The soldier handed it to me following my recommendation that he do so. He immediately told me it was "kaput". I doubt that anything was wrong with it but handed it back to him without an explanation. In the back of my head I figured that if I were to be taken prisoner I wouldn't want to have a German watch in my possession. It was the first watch I had ever seen that was carried in a neat little silver and celluloid protective case.

Hill 578 was fairly steep, probably a 35 or 40 degree incline. Undergrowth was dense but tall trees were fifty or sixty feet apart. I had become separated from my ammo carriers due to the confusion caused by small arms fire and had no idea where my tripod was. Incoming fire was pretty intense at the time.

Our fearless Captain Bill Clepper and weapons platoon leader, Lt. Andy Androsco, were some twenty or thirty feet behind me as we scaled the mountain. Clepper ordered me to lay down a field of fire as we crawled up the slope. I responded that I would be glad to open fire, but that there were more of our own people who would be in my line of fire than the enemy, and besides that, I didn't know where my ammo was. That was the last time I ever talked with Clepper and the last time I ever saw him.

I learned in 1999 from a reliable source that Capt. Clepper returned to the rear that day due to a bladder problem. Lt. John Albright took over the company command.

An hour or so before dark we had taken Hill 578. A few enemy soldiers had been captured by our riflemen. About an hour after securing the hill I caught sight of two Germans climbing up towards us from their positions. I had no idea if this was the start of an enemy attack or just two men who had enough and wanted to give up. I fired at them without considering what they had in mind. A few minutes later they surrendered. One of our riflemen who could speak fluent German

literally lost his head in anger or rage, screaming and cursing them for what seemed to be for about ten minutes. The Germans claimed to be cooks.

A rifleman by the name of Mobley (can't remember his first name) in another platoon was assigned the duty of taking several prisoners back down the mountain to battalion headquarters. He would have to walk for a mile or more down the mountain through the woods and across the open field we had traversed two days earlier. A week or so after this episode Mobley told me that because of the danger he shot them all with his B.A.R. (Browning automatic rifle). I did not believe him at the time and still don't.

While atop Hill 578 we received sporadic sniper fire during the late afternoon and early evening, but no shelling. I could not determine the origin of the fire. With all the enemy resistance that day only Bill Callen died, so far as I know.

That night was the worst night of my life. Oscar Strobel and I had dug in together behind the root system of a big evergreen tree that had been toppled over, probably due to a storm. We couldn't have a log and dirt roof that night, which Dutch usually provided, since we were under light sporadic fire until dark. Temperatures were just above freezing and rain was continuous. We were standing in water, our clothing was soaked and we shivered in the cold all night. There was no solution to the misery and fortunately we did not get any incoming fire after dark that night. We were literally frozen stiff. Fingers were useless to the point that we could not button our clothes, arrange any of our gear or load our weapons. With constant exercise we recovered in about an hour after dawn. I was thankful that the enemy did not counter-attack during that period of helplessness. I now have an idea what it was like when General Washington crossed the Delaware with his troops.

Item Company descended the opposite side of Hill 578 in the warm sunshine that morning down to Highway N-424 just west of Moyenmoutier. Germans in the out-flanked town of Raon l E'tape had either been killed, captured or escaped to the East. By noon of the 20th all of the Third Battalion had moved up the road to Moyenmoutier. Late that afternoon we got our first hot showers, the first since arriving in France three or four weeks earlier. Until recently I had always thought we marched to Senones for showers, but historical evidence has convinced me otherwise.

After a day of rest the 3rd Battalion continued its pursuit of the Germans northeastwards, pretty much along and south of Highway N-424 for four days, where we reached St. Blaise and Le Vermont. Although some elements of the 398th sustained moderate and heavy shelling along the way, the 3rd Battalion had very little.

On November 27 we gave up the chase and returned to Raon l E'tape, thence to Troy Fontaine, two miles south of Sarrebourg where we remained until December 1. We made our headquarters in a glass factory. It was a great relief not to be threatened with enemy fire.

THE BITCHE CAMPAIGN

On December 1st, 1944 the regiment moved by truck some twenty miles north of Sarrebourg.

As we marched up a road from Puberg to Rosteig we had to be extra careful since no patrols were out to spot enemy movement. While Item Company riflemen moved down into the town our machine guns guarded their approach from a sharp bend in the road from a high vantage point. Without enemy resistance we all finally moved into the town, where with others in my squad, we bedded down for the night in a basement coal pile. It was actually not an uncomfortable place to get some sleep. A few mortar shells dropped into the town that night; nevertheless, we felt fairly safe being in a deep basement.

The next morning I dug in at the north end of the town about thirty feet up a steep hill facing the main road and a railroad trestle. All that day and into the night the enemy dropped in a mortar shell over my position every thirty minutes or so from behind or from the top of the steep hill to my rear. It was strange that every shell would fall over the trestle and next to a single house 150 yards away. It was not much of a target.

The next morning shelling continued. Late in the afternoon I went out with others on patrol to search the top of the hill behind my position where another patrol had received heavy fire earlier in the day. We reached the summit in about an hour and just waited around without digging in. None of us really knew what we were supposed to do, but an hour later we received orders to return to our downhill positions. Being as dark as it was we were fortunate to find phone lines which we followed back to Rosteig. It was so dark we had to hold one hand out ahead to avoid running into trees.

We learned later from lineman Ted Bates, also an ASTP soldier, that while he and Sgt. Hyman Cohen were laying phone wire earlier in the day up the hill that they came under heavy machine gun fire and that Cohen had been killed.

These men, being linemen, were responsible for all phone communications between forward positions and elements to the rear. Linemen were exposed to enemy fire at least as much as platoon leaders who had to be "above ground" much of the time when the enemy was active. Even though each platoon had "walkie talkie" radios they were sometimes unreliable due to terrain interference. Further, the radios were awkward to use since they weighed three or four pounds and were about the size of a shoe box.

On December 5th Item Company climbed back up the hill at Rosteig and proceeded to a clearing where we found several German soldiers dead. I did not see any sign of shelling, so I assume they had been killed by small arms fire from another element in our battalion. Some of our men went over to look for souvenirs, but I did not participate because of the potential danger of tripping a mine or booby trap. A couple of the men collected some gold dental inlays, knives and other things.

Marching ahead up a narrow road with two-foot deep ditches on each side, and being led by a Sherman tank, the two columns came to a halt because of a large road block built with huge logs. I always stayed at least a hundred yards behind tanks when we were in the open since they were so visible and made good targets for enemy artillery.

While the tank crew and some engineers were trying to figure out what to do about the road block the Germans dropped in three or four mortar shells. Troops on each side of the road dived into the ditches. Directly across the road from me a soldier in another platoon landed on top of a schu mine which exploded. The soldier died almost instantly, after making a kind of muffled scream. Shrapnel went through his chest and out the back side of his jacket. Shortly after this experience the road block was cleared and the company continued about another mile to Meisenthal and then to St. Louis without more resistance.

I believe it was in St. Louis that we received twenty or thirty replacements. I did not make much of an effort to get to know them since new men usually didn't last long on the front. An exception to this was Fred Munson from Chattanooga. We called Fred "Paddlefoot" probably because of an unusual gait he had.

In St. Louis three or four of us spent the night in the back bedroom of a house while the owner and his family stayed upstairs. During the night a G.I. with another platoon picked up a German potato masher (a type of grenade) which had been rigged to detonate if it were moved. The soldier had one of his hands blown off at the wrist. He probably had other injuries that I was not aware of. The grenade had been left by someone just outside the house on a little workbench the night before. I distinctly remember that nothing was on the bench just before dark.

On December 7 or 8 my platoon moved several hundred yards up towards the enemy and received moderate incoming fire. At night we pulled back to the town. The next morning we took the same positions as the day before. The area was covered with brush and scattered eight to ten foot trees. We knew we most likely were under enemy observation. By noontime of that day Sgt. Anthony Bruno, a much respected squad leader of another platoon, accidentally tripped a wire connected to what was probably a "bouncing Betty" type of mine that exploded five or six feet above the ground. Bruno died immediately as a result of the explosion.

Due to frequent heavy artillery shelling most of us had time only to dig shallow slit trenches, about three feet wide, and probably less than three feet deep. After digging out just enough dirt to be relatively safe from surface explosions I scooped out more dirt from one end of the hole so that I could get my head and shoulders under a soil roof about 18" below the surface of the ground. I thought that if the enemy fired proximity shells or if there were some tree bursts I would have at least a little added protection.

The next morning a particularly well placed barrage came in, including one shell that landed about fifteen feet from my position and about the same distance from John Devereaux's hole. After the barrage I checked on John since he was dug in closer to me than anyone else. I found

him mortally wounded. He was lying face up without a visible injury. I suspect that either concussion or fright caused his death. We were pounded heavily that day!

I dreaded and feared artillery and mortar fire more than anything else, was always somewhat worried about stepping on a land mine of any kind, and had only cautious fear of machine gun or rifle fire.

I believe that front line G.I.'s would mostly agree that my following "Stress Scale" would be subjectively accurate: If overnight baby sitting or finding my new car's motor block cracked would rate a 1 or 2, and being under moderate small arms fire a 5 or 6, then being under artillery, mortar or rocket fire would qualify for about an 8 or 9. There could be things worse that would rate a 10, such as facing certain execution by being burned at the stake, waiting for the guillotine blade to fall or facing serious abdominal or brain surgery without anesthesia.

"I" Company of the 398th Source: Life Magazine, December, 1944
Infantry men hike through another forest near the point where the Seventh entered Germany above the Saar. Men were issued long underwear, warm socks and other winter clothing in record time during October.

After advancing past or around St. Louis, Item Company engaged the enemy in a couple of fire fights, I think around Enchenberg. I can't recall the locations or situations for sure.

On December 10 the 3rd Battalion moved off the line on a round-about route up a narrow road through Enchenberg to Highway D-37 which led north into Lemberg. Only one shell fell near us that day. I believe it was a mortar shell which exploded 150 yards to our left in a muddy open field down in a draw. No one paid much attention to it. It made a "ka-plop" explosion, scattering mud around.

Later in the day "I" Company moved carefully through Lemberg since it was known that German troops were located only a few hundred yards to the right of our advance. Late that afternoon we reached some World War I trenches that extended through a line of trees facing an open field. Across the field was a two acre patch of trees and a signal tower. To our right two hundred yards there was another wooded area that offered pretty fair cover as we continued our advance. We received moderate automatic weapons fire in that area for what seemed to be for about an hour. We returned fire without any particular target. Our artillery shells roared over our heads towards the enemy for a half hour intermittently. It was beginning to get dark by that time and since we were not making any progress we pulled back to the trenches for the night.

The next morning our artillery resumed firing at the patch of woods directly ahead. White phosphorus (wp) shells were dropped in first to get the Germans out of their holes. Two or three minutes later a barrage of anti-personnel (A.P.) proximity fire was delivered as the enemy was supposedly without the protection of shelter. We had no idea of the number of troops who were targeted.

A few minutes after the shelling an ex-sergeant, whose name I don't remember, walked out alone to the patch of trees and brought back two enemy artillery observers. The enemy had to be impressed by our soldier who risked his life to accept their surrender. The Sergeant had been recently busted to Private since he refused to spend nights out-of-doors in the cold weather. He was always able to find a house or barn to sleep in every night, claiming that he did not enlist in the Army to be a night fighter.

Soon after the capture of the enemy forward observers our people moved out of the trenches along the same route taken the afternoon before. We laid down a little rifle and automatic weapons fire in the direction of where we thought the enemy could be positioned. I do not recall getting any counter fire. Item Company advanced 300 yards or more to near the top of a ridge that overlooked the town of Reyersviller. There was only occasional incoming mortar fire. I remember how difficult it was to dig in through all the roots and rocks to get a hole just three feet deep.

Barely before dark J. B. Kitchens, the headquarters' Jeep driver, drove up to the clearing just to the rear of our positions with four or five big thermite cans containing the company's supper. Kitchens, from Jackson, Georgia was a real hero. He could get that Jeep to go anywhere, road or no road, and usually under dangerous conditions.

Since I was as near as anyone else to the Jeep I feared that Sgt. Jack Walsh would call on me to help unload the cans and bring them up closer to the troops. Fortunately, I was not drafted for the duty. Walsh and three others unloaded the cans and brought them up to a good spot about sixty yards to the rear of my hole. From a strictly selfish standpoint I did not feel good at all about my safety since the Germans had to know exactly where we were, when we would be in the chow line, and about the number of us who would be there.

I decided to be the first in line to fill my mess kit so that I could be in and out before any shelling started, so I hurried down towards the thermite cans. Twenty yards before I reached the area I heard, almost predictably, a distant hollow "klop" and knew with certainty that an enemy mortar shell had been fired. There was no doubt in my mind about what was about to happen. Instantly I ran fifteen or twenty yards back up the hill towards my hole, found a tree stump six or eight inches high and lay prone behind it away from the expected target. The instant I hit the ground the mortar shell hit and exploded dead center in the middle of the cans. Jack Walsh was seriously injured and Winfield Purdy, my assistant gunner, was killed outright. I believe there were other casualties, but cannot recall for sure. No one went near the cans that night for supper.

Walsh was immediately evacuated by the medics and was soon returned to the States. The next morning I saw Purdy's body lying out in the open field on a litter awaiting pickup.

Strangely, Purdy's family who lived in East Point, near Atlanta, did not particularly want to know any of the details surrounding their son's death. I had asked my father to contact the family, which he did, after I got censor's clearance some time later.

Forty-five years after the war I had correspondence with Jack Walsh, who at the time was Secretary of the 100th Infantry Division Association. I learned a few months ago that Jack had recently died. I regret that I did not get to see him before his death.

The next morning, December 13, Item Company and other elements of the 3rd Battalion moved down the northern slope of the hill into Reyersviller which had just been cleared of the enemy. My squad spent the night in a house along the main street where the company kitchen had been set up. In an effort to get under a table for protection one of the cooks lost his helmet and got a l little cut on his forehead when a couple of shells exploded nearby. He was awarded a Purple Heart Medal for his action "in combat". The award of a Purple Heart Medal was practically automatic if blood was let as a result of any kind of enemy action.

Early on the 14th the company moved up a narrow road or trail on the east side of the town towards the Maginot Line. A couple of years ago Loraine and I were on a bus with 12 or 14 100th Division veterans in the area. As we drove into Reyersviller I asked the driver to drive us up the narrow road so that I could look for holes we had dug a half century earlier. He begged off, claiming there would be no way he could turn around at the top or the hill.

To our left behind the town was an open valley littered with dead cattle. Two of our tanks were there firing shells over the hill ahead in the direction of the enemy. By dark we dug in for the

night just before reaching the top of the ridge and the heavily fortified forts and pill boxes of the Maginot.

It has always been a public conception that the Maginot Line faced towards Germany, which is incorrect. The pillboxes housed artillery pieces and automatic weapons which had the capability of swiveling in all directions and each firing station being able to provide overlapping fire from other stations. Each fort or pillbox was protected with steel reinforced concrete several feet thick on top and sides. Fields of land mines and entanglements of barbed wire, as well as anti-tank obstacles surrounded each firing position to deter infantry and mechanized attacks.

The Maginot Line was primarily a series of underground forts and above ground firing stations known as "ouvrages" extending along the French/German border a hundred miles from the Rhine River to just east of Sedan, France. In 1929, following World War I, plans were made to have the Line extend all the way westward to the English Channel but by 1939 France's treasury was dry and Germany had begun it's blitzkrieg against France through Belgium. The Germans had very limited success in penetrating the Line in the few places where attempts were made. The Maginot Line itself was never taken, the ouvrages held out and not a single artillery piece was neutralized. When the Line was handed over to the enemy, it was still intact. This network of ingenious fortifications and bunkers did what it was designed to do.

Early the next morning, I believe the 15th of December, I decided I had enough war for a while, so I walked back down to Reyersviller, where Battalion Headquarters was located. I told someone who appeared to be in charge that I needed to take a couple of days off to get some rest. My request was granted pronto. I did not feel badly at all by leaving my squad since others already had taken some time off at one time or another. Fortunately, I picked a good time to be away since my battalion spent the next day mostly in the open without cover while attacking the forts and pill boxes. There were many casualties. I transferred with about a dozen other G.I.'s by truck to a little town a few miles behind the front.

After a couple of days of rest without any noise of battle and after getting my teeth cleaned I returned to my unit which was then positioned in the heart of the Maginot
Line. This was on December 17 or 18.

Company headquarters was located in a captured fortification where I was instructed to check in. While inside the fort I thought it strange that two helmeted and well uniformed German soldiers were just hanging around smoking cigarettes with no one paying any attention to them. I assumed they had recently been captured or had surrendered and none of our people wanted to bother with them. Not wanting to appear naive or a square I just ignored them like our headquarters men were doing. I certainly didn't want to attract attention to myself by asking questions. Somebody could have ordered me to escort the soldiers back down to Reyersviller for safe keeping in the middle of the night. The vagaries of combat are beyond description! Those enemy soldiers possibly may have thought they had captured Battalion Headquarters and then didn't know what to do with their prisoners. I have heard of other front line events just as improbable. We'd all heard about the time when one of our G.I.'s captured some enemy soldiers

and fell in the snow as he was marching them to the rear. Our guy dropped his rifle and a German soldier found it and returned it to his captor.

At about dawn Lt. Lyle McDonald escorted three or four of us a few hundred yards through the woods and across open fields further into the Maginot. Lyle had just received his commission to replace one of the other platoon leaders who had been killed or incapacitated.

On the way up I recognized the body of Lt. John Albright who had been hit the afternoon before. The body was in bad condition and was lying without any kind of cover on the barren landscape. Almost positively, he had been hit by direct grazing fire from an artillery piece. Albright was the company commander at the time and had replaced Capt. Clepper who disappeared from the scene about a month earlier. Lt. Albright was a first class platoon leader and company commander. I wish I had known him better.

Battalion CO on the objective

Lt. Lloyd McNally, another platoon leader, who later became the Company C.O. fitted the same high standards of courage and ability as did Albright. I recently had contact with McNally who is presently retired and living in Sandersville, Georgia. He continued his military affiliation and reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the reserves after the war.

I thought it strange that I never had any grief or other strong feelings when my close associates or friends were cut down in battle. If anything, I would have a vague attitude of being separated

from a friend's terrible misfortune or somehow had been given a special exemption from harm which they had not been given. I did not consider that luck had anything to do with my own survival. Admittedly, I knew better than most when to take cover and when it wasn't necessary.

Lyle McDonald led us past Fort Freudenberg fort #10 to Schiesseck #11 where I found a good sized shell hole and dug in. A few hours later a Pvt. Gooch from another company showed up and shared my position for a short time. We were located only thirty or forty feet from a pill box that was perched almost directly over the fort's heavily fortified supply entrance. We were at no time absolutely sure if there were still enemy troops inside the fort or not. We were shelled heavily that day.

100th Division World War II veterans inspecting Maginot Line disappearing pill box (above) and stationary pill box (below). There were no trees within a mile of fortifications during war years.

All the fortifications had been or were being bombed and shelled with tons of explosives. The only damage inflicted on the structures would be nothing more than dents and scratches of a cosmetic nature. Heavy artillery pieces were brought up to the front where they were fired point blank, as if they were oversized rifles, at apertures and doors of the fortifications. Damage to the enemy positions was effective only occasionally. A few shells would hit and explode in the cracks of the armor perfectly. "Perfectly" meant hitting within four inches of an opening from a firing distance of several hundred yards. The most effective way of penetrating the forts was with the use of high explosive satchel charges taken by hand to the steel doors where they were detonated. The Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon and Engineers were responsible in large part for neutralizing these emplacements. Obviously, their casualties were high.

For some reason Gooch decided to leave me the next morning. I believe he wanted to be with some of his buddies in "M" Company. I recently read in the History of the 398th Infantry Regiment that a Pfc. Virgil J. Gooch was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross Medal for heroism in action in the vicinity of Heilbronn, Germany.
For the next three or four days I was in this exposed position and was armed only with a .45 caliber pistol without knowing where my platoon or squad was located.

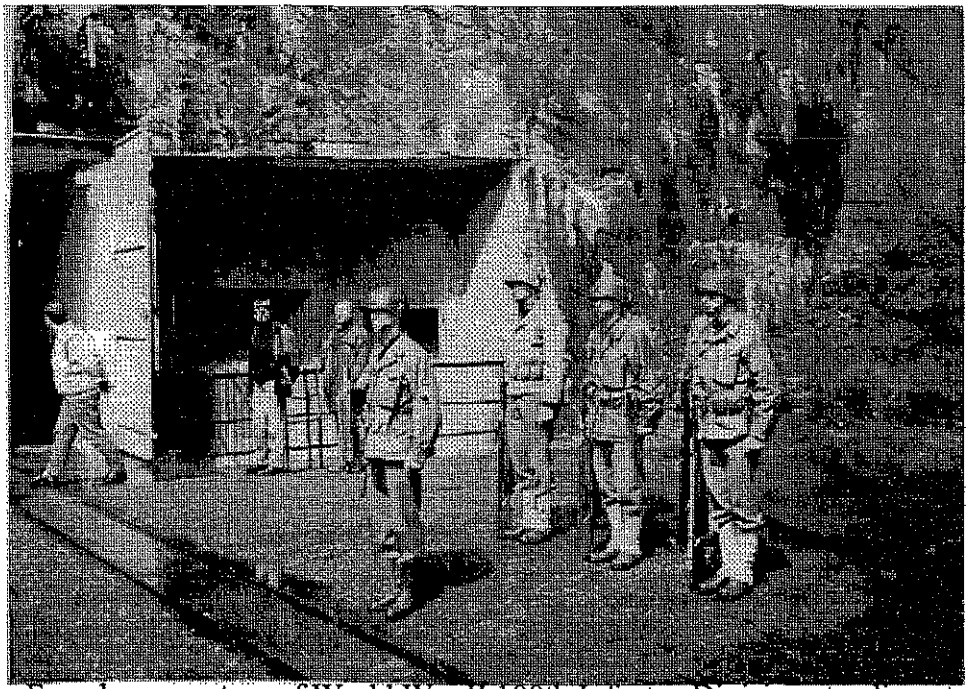
The shelling was incessant, with seemingly only twenty or thirty minutes between barrages. The most dreaded time each day was for an hour or two after dark, during which time a battery of German 210 Nebelwerfer rockets were fired from somewhere down the hill in Bitche. Salvos were fired in either sixes or nines, according to the configuration of the launching tubes. Our troops called the rockets "Screaming Meemies" because of the screeching noise they made when launched. I never heard a rocket barrage explosion except for those that fell in the area of my position. I expected and became accustomed to dirt and other debris falling in on top of me at the same time every night following each barrage.

On the third night in the Maginot, well after dark, I was getting desperate for some company after having been mostly alone for three days and nights. For all I knew my company could have pulled out of the line without finding me. With this in mind I left my position to hunt for Battalion Headquarters in another captured fort several hundred yards away. While on the way back I heard some people coming my way, not knowing if they were friend or foe. As they passed me a short distance away one of the soldiers somehow spotted me in the bushes and asked another soldier what they ought to do. I determined that they were friendly and immediately said "Mac, its me, Skelton". I had used the right name since Lt. McDonald was leading the group which was out on patrol. The G.I.'s continued their patrol and I returned to my dugout. That short two minute visit was enough to reassure me that I wasn't the only American out there on the line. I was lucky not to have been shot by my fellow troops that night.

There were other interesting episodes during our siege of the forts. One foggy morning I stood outside my hole; watched brave engineers cover the entrance to my fort with the help of a bulldozer. Another time, just before we pulled out of our positions I caught sight of Harry Perrin walking around among the shellholes, I assume for the purpose of locating wounded troops. Harry was a medic in another company. We visited out there in the open for ten or fifteen

minutes. Harry had been at Georgia Tech with me in ASTP. Another time I stood out in the open with a Maj. Brinkerhof to watch our artillery pound a nearby fort. Brinkerhof told me it would be a lot safer for me to be out in the open than in my hole which was located only a few yards from an intended target.

During these outings I could make out the church and other buildings down in Bitche from my vantage point, but for some reason, maybe due to fog, I could not see the huge citadel at the far end of the town.



French re-enactors of World War II 100th Infantry Division standing at attention for American veterans about to inspect Fort Simserhof near Bitche, France.

Beginning the night of December 21 the 3rd Battalion abandoned the hard won Maginot positions in order to shorten battle lines which were overly bowed out to the East. We could have been encircled had the Germans realized how lightly our zone was defended. I suppose they thought we had infantry manpower commensurate with the volume of artillery fire we were unleashing on them.

Standing: Old vets of the 100th Division at Bitch, April 1997.
Seated: French re-enactors of WWII who hosted the veterans.

For the days I was dug in next to the enemy pillbox I turned my safety over to the Lord since I knew I could not handle it alone. Even though I was completely vulnerable I had almost complete peace and incredible calm for the first time under heavy fire. It was interesting that my comfort during heavy shelling could never last for more than about fifteen minutes. After that I quickly learned to ask the Lord for another period of "time out". I sincerely believe I could have held out for a longer period of shelling if I had to, knowing that the outcome was not in my hands.

According to our regimental commander's citation of the 3rd Battalion's combat activities, there were 730 men who took part in the five-day action. 16 men were killed in action and 120 were wounded. This amounted to a casualty rate of 18.6% for a five day period.

The Germans had 150 casualties according to the best estimates we could get from prisoners and body counts.

The German propaganda radio personality, Axis Sally, named us "The Butchers of Bitche" in her broadcasts. She did not reveal that we had nearly as many killed and wounded as the Germans had.

RESERVE POSITIONS

For about three weeks the 398th prepared reserve positions, a secondary line of defense, and moved around a lot to fill any slot when our forces up ahead spotted enemy build-ups or where we developed weakness. The 398th had replaced the 44th Division's 71st Infantry Regiment which had to move north to strengthen our lines involved in the Ardennes conflict which was called "The Battle of the Bulge". It would be accurate to say that General Patch's 7th Army was considered to be the southern anchor of defense during the massive German counterattack through Luxembourg. It could not be said we did not give an inch; however, it was true that we were pushed back a mile or two from our previous positions on some parts of the front.

Our battalion sector at this time was in the vicinity of Guising, Holbach, Siersthal, Singling and Guisberg. Most of these places were located on open terrain which was covered by a foot of snow most of the time. Troops had just been issued new white parkas for camouflage purposes.

On one occasion Dutch Strobel and I guarded the company at a position 200 yards up a hill from company headquarters where we stayed for two or three days. The weather was calm and cold, below freezing temperatures prevailed, but at least we were not wet; received no incoming fire.

Down below us about half of Item Company was staying in a big farmhouse. The cooks slaughtered an "indoor cow", providing the company with steak dinners for several days, as I remember.

Strobel came down with pneumonia on January 2 or 3 and was evacuated to England, thence, to the States. Dutch was just too old to take all of that continuous cold weather even though he was as strong as a horse. Dutch was 32 years old at the time. He taught me how to persist.

The front was quiet a lot of the time; nevertheless, there was some enemy infiltration, a little small arms fire and occasional artillery shelling at other times. Patrolling at night was infrequent by both sides from my perspective.

On one occasion, just north of Singling, my company was trying to dig reserve line fox holes through six or eight inches of frozen soil when one of our own P-47 fighter planes flew over and spotted us. Without hesitation the plane started to dive-bomb us. The pilot must have been a real hot shot, judging by the maneuvers he put his plane through, just like in the movies. He did some theatrical flips and turns while in a 90 degree dive and then dropped two bombs from about a 300 foot altitude before he pulled up and went back home, no doubt to brag about his brave accomplishments and heroism. I was outside my partially dug hole when I saw the plane drop the bombs. Believing that my hole was not going to give me much protection I ran around to two other partially dug holes that didn't look any better. By that time the bombs had already fallen and exploded sixty or seventy yards away. No damage was done. My lesson from all this was that I was not good at making good decisions during an unexpected attack. Some of the guys near me thought the episode was funny. One of them asked me if I was trying to catch the bombs before they hit the ground. Another asked if I was showing off by not diving for cover. The next

day all supply trucks and other vehicles in the area had large orange reflective panels mounted on their tops for identification purposes.

On about January 9th Item Company occupied Guising and Holbach. The terrain was open and generally level, and covered with snow. This was not a reserve position at the time, but more like a front line position. The situation changed almost daily during this period. Out ahead of us nothing was visible except for snow and sky, with no distinct horizon.

At this time I was assigned the job of going out ahead of the company on a one-man recon patrol about 800 yards to see if I could observe any sheep moving around. I hadn't done any patrol work in some time, so I didn't object, knowing it was my turn. After all, it was a hazy day and sheep would be hard to see in the snow from a distance, and I had heard that the Germans used flocks of sheep to set off land mines. The duty seemed to be at least half way justifiable. I went on out the designated distance armed with either a rifle or carbine, sat down in the snow, observed the landscape and sky for what seemed to be for two or three hours and then returned to company headquarters. My patrol was uneventful; however, in retrospect I am certain that sheep had nothing to do with the mission. I sincerely believe the real reason I was sent out there was to draw enemy fire so that our own artillery could pick up the enemy's source of fire and location. In effect I was the sheep (or goat) that day. If the Germans noticed me, which they probably did, I can understand why they did not want to waste expensive shells on one man and give away their position. I should have demanded a high classification medal for my dumb bravery. I believe it would be truthful to say that I alone was positioned deeper into no man's land than anyone else in the 7th Army on that particular day. I may have been closer to Berlin than anyone else in the active U.S. ground troops that day.

OPERATION NORDWIND

The events described here took place beginning nine days after my regiment, the 398th, pulled out from positions in the Maginot Line. The ferocious German attack, which the enemy had labeled "Operation Nordwind" was centered primarily in the 100th Division's line of defense. Many of the details of engagements were related to me by Dr. Bill Glazier, who at the time was a cannoneer, observed enemy activities while he was on line with the 399th Regiment.

At midnight on December 31-January 1, a few days after the 398th had pulled back from it's Maginot Line position to set up a back up defense, the Germans, in multi-division strength, attacked all along the 7th Army front. According to prisoners and captured documents Adolph Hitler had personally told his generals that American troops would be celebrating the New Year and would not be capable of defending themselves. Hitler was correct only to the point of realizing that there would be a celebration somewhere on the American side, but was wrong in assuming that the front line troops would have access to hard drink. Contrary to Hitler's assumption, the Americans were sober and ready for any kind of attack. It turned out that the Germans were intentionally liquored up for the purpose of making a fearless assault. They fought like maniacs from Panther or Tiger tanks, and on foot, and were mowed down by the hundreds.

The 397th and 399th Regiments took the brunt of the attack while the 398th was deployed three or four miles to the rear as a defense team attached to the 44th Division. We in the 398th knew little about the ferocity of the enemy's drive; however, we did learn that something big was going on in and around Bitche, the Maginot and Lemberg. The attack ended on January 10 after the Germans had taken back a mile or two of landscape in several areas.

One new friend whom I met for the first time in 1997, Tiges Martin, of LaRose, Louisiana, was seriously injured during the attack while he was in the area of Rimling and Epping. Tiges has spent many years in and out of hospitals as a result of his wounds. His attitude and disposition, as it appeared to me, was not one of needing revenge or "getting even", but more of an acceptance of a bad situation.

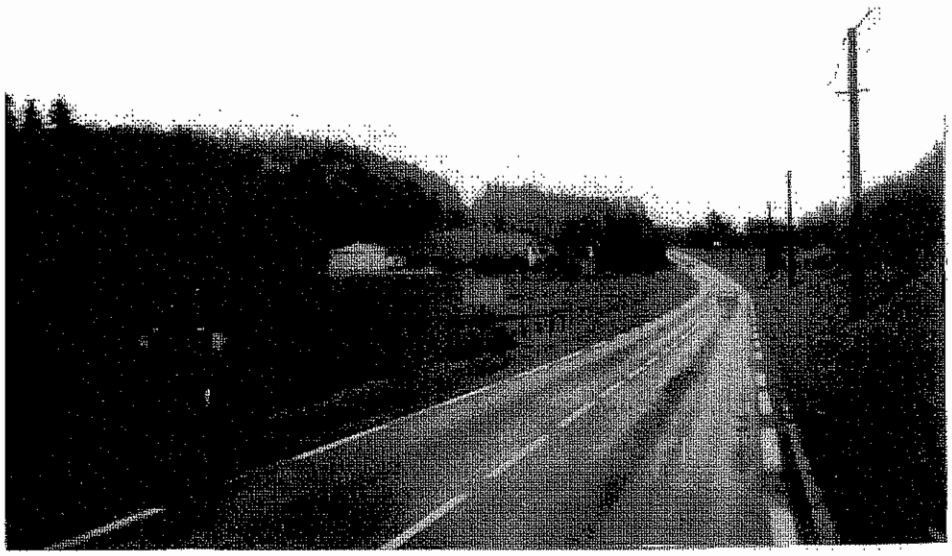
Another new friend, Pete Edwards, from Mississippi, was a machinegunner with the 397th. Pete told me last year that he fired his gun so long and without let up during the first German attack that the barrel melted. He was also in the Rimling area. Pete probably fired at least four belts of ammo before his gun became inoperable. He told me that because of darkness and overcast conditions he could not say for sure if he hit a single German; nevertheless, he could have killed or wounded dozens.

As said before, troops of the 3rd Battalion of the 398th knew almost nothing about the ten day enemy attack and the huge number of enemy troops involved along the 7th Army's forty mile front. Soldiers in the battalion had received only the usual incoming artillery and practically no small arms fire. We did not see enemy tanks in operation even though we could hear them in the distance. By this time the German air force was practically out of business, except for "Bed

Check Charlie", an enemy plane that about this time would fly over the lines most nights an hour or two after dark; I assume the flights were for observation purposes.

From my standpoint our own fighter aircraft were practically useless since they never were around to help when they were needed. I was more afraid of them than I was concerned about an enemy air attack due to "friendly" bombing described earlier. On about January 3 or 4 we did see two or three P-47s strafe enemy positions one clear morning, however.

To give credit as it is due, our B-17's could be observed on many clear days as they returned from bombing runs. Contrails were all over the sky. This should have been the appropriate and logical time for the Germans to surrender. The American forces had proved that they could invade across the English Channel, that the Germans did not have adequate supplies to sustain their Ardennes campaign nor to make a success of Operation Nordwind. And now they were being bombed without Luftwaffe defense.



Both photos of an intersection along the Lemberg-Bitche highway where G.I. Skelton averted a heavy barrage of "friendly" U.S. 105 howitzer shells at dark on about January 24, 1945.

THE WINTER STALEMATE

Beginning January 20 Item Company moved back into positions on the west side of the Lemberg-Bitche highway. The enemy was just across the road on the east side.

I had dug in just inside a row of trees in a forest about 60 or 70 yards from the highway while the enemy was positioned about the same distance from the highway on the other side. My squad and the Third Platoon took turns of about four days manning this forward area and then would go back to Lemberg for three days to enjoy R & R. After that we would take positions about 300 yards to the left of the highway location for four days, followed by three days of leisure in an old broken down guesthouse to our rear which we called "The Chateau". We and two other 3rd Battalion companies went through this rotation several times. The "Chateau" was located about a mile or so forward of Enchenberg where a lot of our artillery was positioned. I do not remember the reasons for my trips from the front back to Enchenberg, but clearly remember thinking of what a good deal the artillery guys had in being in their rear echelon station.

During this period Lt. Andy Androsco went out from his position on an unexplained one man mission and while away from his command was shot in the shoulder. A patrol was sent out but no enemy troops could be found in the area. Tech. Sgt. Joe Tuccillo accepted a commission and took Androsco's weapons platoon command.

While in the woods up the hill from the Chateau the enemy would fire a burp gun at us several times a day to let us know they were still there. I believe they did this also to tell us that there was no need for us to send out night patrols. We never bothered to fire back, which we should have done, if for no other reason than to test our weapons. I suspected that my machine gun was frozen up some of this time of stand-off. Having an inoperative weapon in a combat situation was completely inexcusable since many lives could have depended on it for survival during an attack. It never occurred to me that the Germans would seriously threaten us.

It was at about this time that regimental headquarters posted a bulletin on the front door of the Chateau requesting volunteers to apply for 2nd Lieutenant's commissions after completing a short preparatory course back in Paris. There were no takers to my knowledge.

There were three interesting events I recall from this month-long rotation.

One night a little after dark it was my turn to go from our house in Lemberg up to my highway position dugout. I didn't like the idea of going alone, but anyway, I walked down the road for about 150 yards, actually in the direction of the German lines. I intended to leave the highway at an intersection with a dirt road and then walk another 500 yards up through the woods. Before reaching the intersection another 100 yards ahead I discovered some of my gear was missing, at which time I turned around to go back up the hill to Lemberg to retrieve it. Just after returning up the hill our own artillery over in Enchenberg dropped in a barrage of twelve or fifteen 105 shells directly on the intersection where I would have been if I had continued two minutes earlier. After loading up with my supplies I retraced my route down the highway and soon reached my gun

position to relieve the assistant gunner. I could smell the sulfurous odor of the exploded shells when I walked back through the targeted area.

During my walk up through the woods to my position I warned others along the way that I was a friend by using my cricket. A cricket was a little tin toy, that when squeezed, sounded exactly like a real cricket's chirp. Crickets were a fad for a month or two. I suppose the Germans finally caught on to them. No one considered the fact that crickets don't chirp during the winter.

I remember another event that is still vivid. While in the same position as above I left my dugout one morning to visit the platoon WC, which was nothing more than a slit trench with logs over the top. After finishing my business and while returning to my hole I heard a quiet "pzeet" noise next to my left ear, and a half second later, the crack of rifle fire. As it turned out a German rifleman had crawled up to his side of the road and had taken a shot at me. He must have been an awful marksman since any rifleman could hit me from a distance of only 80 or 90 yards.

I never did see the sniper because I dropped to the ground as soon as I heard the shot, but some of the other G.I.s who were dug in near me did see him as he got up off the ground and ran. After what seemed to be about two minutes later a Sergeant in a rifle platoon fired a rifle grenade to a spot where the sniper likely would have been; however, it was unlikely that the grenade did any damage unless the German just happened to be within a few feet of the explosion. We should have called back for artillery or a few rounds of mortar shells. We had ammo to spare.

On another occasion while my squad was dug in up the hill from "The Chateau" I ran out of drinking water, so I walked down a deep ravine to my left to a little creek full of clear running water in order to fill my canteen. I was armed only with a pistol and knew that the enemy was somewhere on top of the opposite forested hill some 150 or 200 yards away. After getting a fresh water supply I climbed back up the ravine through the snow to my gun position without incident. In my opinion, this mindless escapade probably affected the course of the rest of my life. I can discuss this later in detail.

My squad leader at the time I believe was Al Widitz, who was a great deal more cautious than I. We were "roommates", dug in together, at our position just described. He would never consider going down into a ravine in the direction of the enemy to get drinking water. Al's big thing was to get as far back into our dugout as he could and read comic books day and night using a flashlight for illumination. I don't have any idea where he got his reading material and endless supply of batteries. Our bunker was fairly spacious, being about 4' by 10' and over four feet deep. The top was covered with logs and. could withstand shrapnel, but obviously, not a direct hit by artillery or mortar shells. There was a third fellow with us some or all of this time. I can't remember who he was.

The ground was covered with snow at this time and as a result, tanks, trucks and other gas powered supply vehicles could not move well except on hard surface roads. Nevertheless, we could hear horses hooves clopping up and down the Lemberg-Bitche highway at night.

During this static period 7th Army searchlights would be turned on facing the enemy at about midnight on a few occasions. The searchlight beams were trained on low overhanging clouds to illuminate all of the 7th Army's forty mile front. While the lights were on every available artillery piece fired barrage after barrage of shells into enemy lines. We called this our "Moonlight Serenade". The intimidation factor must have been devastating. Someone, I don't remember who, reported that two artillery observers or officers on the other side had somehow managed to get through our lines near our "Chateau" to surrender just before breakfast one morning and asked to see our automatic artillery pieces. Obviously, there were no such weapons. This could have been just a tall tale without a basis of fact.

The 3rd Battalion organized "Ranger" patrols which went out into enemy territory three or four nights a week for the purpose of creating havoc in enemy meal lines, for taking prisoners and for locating their positions. Patrol members were promised the reward of being rotated back to the safety of Enchenberg between patrols as payment for their hazardous duty. As things turned out they got this time off only a few times because "emergencies" came up regularly.

The Rangers did their job well and kept the enemy off balance for several weeks. Two of my friends, Jan Johnson and First Sergeant Swede Larsen, made many trips into German lines. On one occasion Larsen tripped over or stepped on a Schu mine which exploded and blew off his left foot. He managed to crawl most of the way back to friendly positions where he was picked up by our people. Swede was hospitalized and later recovered. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his endeavors that night of January 28th. Upon reflection, I believe Larsen had received his battlefield commission a few days before this accident. Only one other man was awarded the DSC who served in the 3rd Battalion, and that medal was awarded posthumously. There were two Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to members of the 100th Infantry Division. I had been closely associated with both of the DSC recipients in earlier combat.

During my last rest rotation at the Chateau someone noticed that my skin was turning yellow. I felt a little washed out and not too perky, but my condition was not alarming to me. One of the medics had me moved to the rear where I was put on a train and sent down to Epinal, some twenty or thirty miles behind the front. During the trip I looked out the window at one point and saw a group of several dead German soldiers sprawled out along the railroad right-of-way. It must have been close to three months since they had been killed. I wondered how the French or American burial details could have left the bodies unburied for so long.

At the hospital in Epinal my condition was diagnosed as hepatitis, which could have originated with contaminated food or water or possibly an injection of some kind. After bedrest and fat-free food I recovered in five or six weeks.

With a good deal of certainty, I believe I can attribute my illness to the trip I took down into the ravine to get some drinking water three or four weeks earlier. At that time the snow had begun to melt, and without my knowledge, there were a lot of German corpses hidden under the snow around my position and down in the ravine. The runoff more than likely precipitated the hepatitis. There were a lot of G.I.s in the hospital with the same infection.

After being judged ready to return to duty I was given the choice of being sent to a "Repple Depple", which, being translated, meant replacement depot, or of being returned to my original outfit. I decided on the latter since I had many friends in "I" Company and could predict how they would react in combat situations.

It is my firm belief that the time I spent in the Army hospital in Epinal saved my life, or at least kept me free of wounds.

I returned from Epinal in good condition on about April 12 or 13 and finally reunited with my company a day or so later at Murrhardt. This was a couple of days after the furious battle at Heilbronn, which was located just East of the Neckar River, Southeast of Heidelberg about 25 miles. This was the last determined stand of the Germans, where the enemy had huge losses, as well as the Americans. The "eight day war" for Heilbronn was awful, even though it was lightly covered by the media.

Al Collier, Rommie (Whitey) White, Richard Lloyd and two or three others from "I" company were killed, while eight or ten others were wounded in the open field east of the Neckar. According to 398th Infantry Regiment records there were 906 men of the 3rd Battalion in the Heilbronn action. Twenty-two were killed in action, forty-nine were wounded and sixty-two were listed as missing in action. In the latter category, most, if not all, were captured by the Germans. The enemy suffered 430 men killed or wounded and 359 were captured.

Lt. Sam Rosenberg, a close friend of mine who had received his commission just before I was sent to the hospital, was shot by a sniper only one day before I had rejoined Item Company. He could have been alive today had he been able to survive for just a couple of more days.

I remember running across Sam who was dug in about 50 or 75 yards from me while we were under heavy fire in the Maginot Line. I was up and out of my hole one day scouting around for some company when he spotted me. From 30 feet away he said to me "What would your Daddy think if he could see you now?" Sam had been a rifle platoon squad leader back at Fort Bragg and had met my father on a visit several months earlier.

A few days before Sam's death hostilities gradually subsided since many thousands of enemy troops were surrendering daily. There was no grand final battle "to the death" which ended the war, but rather, a mostly disorganized collapse of the German war machine. In my opinion the war was finished by about April 25th pursuant to formal surrender on May 9th, 1945.

There was no celebration of the surrender by American combat troops, primarily because they had long since been desensitized in showing emotional response to either good or bad news.

From a force of 3000 front line 100th Infantry Division troops, the ones who did the fighting, nearly 900 were killed and close to 2500 were wounded or captured. These casualties included replacements.

Quoting General Omar Bradley: " The rifleman fights without promise of either reward or relief. Behind every river there is another hill and behind that hill is another river. After weeks or months in the line, only a wound can offer him the comfort of safety, a shelter and a bed. Sooner or later, unless victory comes, this chase must end on a litter or in a grave. Although the infantry comprises 6% of the U.S. Army- that is 6% of 3,000,000 soldiers, or 180,000 men, accounted for almost 85% of the ground forces killed in the European war. The actual count was 90,636 killed and 296,957 wounded in action. Actually, only 20 to 25% of the Army personnel, or about 750,000 men, were involved in the shooting war. Riflemen made up about 11% of the typical infantry division and their sacrifices were way out of proportion to their numbers. Within the infantry units were the men whose lives were the most miserable, the very toughest soldiers whose job is to kill, maim and destroy. It is just those men who are the most gentle, considerate and moved by feelings of sympathy for others."

In a similar vein of thought, Napoleon Bonaparte was known to state that the foot soldier's need of courage does not compare with the importance of his unending perseverance during the dangers, hardships and hopelessness during battle.

As hostilities wound down, beginning April 20, 1945, Item Company occupied Bachnang, Unter Urbach, Esslingen, Murrhardt and one or two other towns.

While in Bachnang I was on an "I" Company mission to search homes for hidden weapons. I never found any weapons, but did run across jewelry, watches and other valuables. I made it a practice to gather up the valuable items and put them all together on a dresser top where they could be easily found by the owners. I don't know exactly why I went through this routine. I should have liberated everything in sight as partial payment for the "inconveniences" the German people had put me though.

In spite of the above personal peculiarity, during combat and immediately afterwards I did take a Mauser pistol from a German officer, and later, a couple of silver spoons and three or four other inexpensive souvenirs. I suppose this latter activity qualified me as being only moderately true to my ideals.

ARMED OCCUPATION

While "I" Company was billeted in a schoolhouse in the town of Esslingen, located only ten or fifteen miles east of Stuttgart, a new company commander was assigned to my company. I believe his name was Captain Fuchs, but I'm not sure; nevertheless, he was a spit and polish graduate of West Point and wanted to impress his men with his importance and power. He had never been under fire and likely had never dug a fox hole or slit trench. The old timers in the company made fun of him behind his back.

On one occasion three of us had broken a rule of some kind and had been caught. The infraction was so insignificant I don't even remember what it was. All three of us were called into the Captain's office and were warned that anything we had to say would be held against us - not could be held against us, and that we were being court martialed on serious charges. It would have been a serious matter to laugh, or even grin about the charges since the Captain could have put us all in the stockade for insubordination.

My punishment was to walk guard duty up and down the sidewalk next to the school, two hours on and four hours off, for something like two or three weeks. The other two convicts had received the same sentence as I. After walking guard duty that day and night, the next morning at about dawn someone came around and told us to please call it all off and go to bed. During the night while on duty we would scream "HALT" or call for "CORPORAL OF THE GUARD" as if there were an emergency. The noise we made had kept some of the company awake part of the night. We left our guard post before breakfast and nothing was ever said about our completing the punishment assigned.

On another occasion in another town nearby I was pressing my clothes with an electric iron when I was called to meet outside the house for a company formation of some sort. We marched off for a few hours and when I returned my platoon Sergeant, J.D. Mishoe, of Loris, South Carolina was about to have a stroke. J.D. accused me of leaving the iron on while I was away and insisted that I could have burned the house down. I did not understand why he was so upset since it was just a German's house and there were any number of other houses we could occupy if needed. Mishoe got over it by the next day and I didn't hear any more about it.

A week or so after these events I completed my service with the 100th Infantry Division.

U.S. MILITARY GOVERNMENT

My uncle, Carey Skelton, who had been a Major with an artillery outfit in Guadalcanal and other places in the Pacific, was transferred to the E.T.O. and had just been assigned to head up the 2nd U.S. Military Government Battalion with headquarters in Wiesbaden. Carey managed to find me somehow and arranged to get me transferred to Military Government in Wiesbaden.

On one occasion Carey and I took a long drive through the country, mainly for the purpose of spending time with each other. During our day-long tour we passed through what was once the town of Crailsheim. I had never seen such complete destruction. The town once had a population of possibly six or eight thousand people. It was completely destroyed, with not a single building standing more than ten or twelve feet high. The odor of death was still there and the town was nothing more than a 250-acre brickyard.

After spending a few weeks in Wiesbaden I found another job down in Stuttgart with Military Government. The duties, as I remember, were mostly busy work a few days of the week. On off days, among other activities, I acted as a chauffeur for a real nice fellow who was a Warrant Officer. I drove him and his girlfriend around Bavaria and Wurtemberg on two or three day-trips.

Eight of us in Military Government lived in a large two story home about a mile or so from our office in downtown Stuttgart for about eight or nine months. We had daily maid service and had meals in an elegant upstairs dining room in a mansion a block from our living quarters. Meals were superb, waiters were trained professionals and music was furnished by an excellent orchestra most evenings and parties were common on Saturday nights. Even by modern standards, this was really living it up.

One evening after work I was escorting a lady friend home on a street car. The car was crowded so we stood near the front, next to the operator. About everyone was talking; however, about three rows back I heard the voice of a male teenager mocking the "Ami"(Americans) in a kind of squaking voice tone, which was the way some young people spoke to insult the American troops (and still do). In a voice just loud enough for him to hear me I told the girl I was with that the boy did not realize that I understood German perfectly (which I didn't) and I thought it would be appropriate for me to sink my knife into his stomach. I had no intention of using the knife on him, but to make my point, I discreetly pulled my knife (it was really a small dagger with a beautiful handle) from my boot so that it would be barely visible to my tormentor. Instantly there was complete silence on the street car. The girl thought I was serious. After we got off a few blocks later she tried her best to assure me that I did not need a knife for protection since I was completely safe. She also thoroughly missed the point of the episode, thinking I could go through with the suggested execution. Due to my various infantry insignia, colorful ribbons and Combat Infantry Badge which I wore, she no doubt believed I could be crazy enough to be a threat to her as well. She absolutely vanished, never to be seen again. On two or three occasions German girls had asked me how many kills I had made to qualify for the infantry badge. I always side-stepped a direct answer.

I do not remember going to church services while living in Stuttgart except for one time when I was asked to pump the air pressure pedals for an organist during Sunday services.

I had many opportunities to go to operas but attended only once. I thought it would never end.

On another occasion several of us spent a winter weekend at a ski lodge/guest house down in the Schwabish Alps where I attempted to ski for the first and only time in my life.

During the early Spring of 1946 several of us drove up to Brussels through Luxembourg where we did some sightseeing for several days. We stayed at the Metropole (or Metropolitan) hotel which was next door to a theater that featured dance routines a little like those done by the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall in New York.

After this great eleven month vacation my turn came to return to the States. My departure date was around March 20, 1946. My ship sailed from Antwerp and into the English Channel and then across the Atlantic to New York. The Army de-activated me at Fort Dix in New Jersey on April 1, 1946, after which time I caught a train home to Georgia.

This will conclude the story of three years of a man's life which was spent experiencing a lot, or most, of the heights and extremes of life which only a few know or would ever know.

Pinnacle experiences of danger, hopelessness, observation of sudden death, stress, peace, despair and even a luxurious life style had been compressed into an eighteen month period.

Even though the front line soldier was seldom thanked any more than a rear echelon truck driver, mechanic, WAC or cook for his contribution , a "thank you" was not necessary. His reward was the experience.

In retrospect, the wartime period of the Fall of '44 and the Winter and Spring of '45 was the "Main Event". Except for family events which followed, everything else paled in importance and amounted to little more than footnotes of a lifetime.

And all of this happened to the front line G.I. at just about the time he was old enough to vote.

Amen

APPENDIX

PRESIDENTIAL CITATIONS

THE 398TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

14. FIRST DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION

3D BATTALION, 398TH INFANTRY

General Orders
No. 27

WAR DEPARTMENT
Washington 25, D.C., 10 April 1945

The 3d Battalion, 398th Infantry Regiment, is cited for outstanding performance in combat during the period 17 to 21 December, 1944 near Bitche, France. On 17 December, 1944 the 3d Battalion was assigned the mission of breaching the formidable fortifications of the Maginot Line west of the town of Bitche, France. The main line of enemy defense was Fort Freudenberg, a large fortification, and Fort Schiesseck, which had eleven adjacent units, each unit with a gun emplacement or a series of guns ranging from 47mm to 135mm which were mutually supporting and extremely difficult to attack. The walls of the fortifications were from three to ten feet thick and constructed of reinforced concrete. Some of the units had as many as five stories below ground level with underground railroads which were used for supply. With no terrain features for protection and only shell craters for cover, the 3d Battalion, taking advantage of a 45-minute barrage, moved into the attack. Under intense enemy artillery, mortar, automatic weapons, and small-arms fire, the 3d Battalion pressed the attack and, after fierce fighting, captured Fort Freudenberg along with units 10 and 11 of Fort Schiesseck. At this point the enemy increased their artillery and mortar fire, forcing the battalion to dig in for the night. At 0930 hours the following morning, 18 December, 1944, the attack was continued behind a rolling barrage laid down by supporting artillery. Fighting their way up the steep, barren slope of the difficult terrain, through heavy wire entanglements, the assault detachments, despite harassing enemy fire, rapidly wrested the remaining units of Fort Schiesseck from the enemy. The fighting aggressiveness, courage, and devotion to duty displayed by members of the 3d Battalion, 398th Infantry Regiment, are worthy of the highest emulation and reflect the finest traditions of the armed forces of the United States.

* * *

By Order of the Secretary of War:

G.C. MARSHALL,
Chief of Staff

Official:
J.A. Ulio,
Major General
The Adjutant General

THE 398TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

SECOND DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION

3D BATTALION, 398TH INFANTRY

General Orders
No. 11

WAR DEPARTMENT
Washington 25, D. C., 30 January 1946

The 3d Battalion, 3 98th Infantry Regiment, is cited for outstanding accomplishment in combat during the period 3 to 12 April 1945 in the vicinity of Heilbronn, Germany. After crossing the Neckar River by assault boat, the battalion secured a bridgehead and prepared to hold its position when intense enemy artillery and mortar barrages landed with almost pinpoint precision on the crossing site, making further use of assault boats impossible and isolating the battalion. Simultaneously wave after wave of hostile troops, an entire regiment in strength, counter-attacked, and the weight of the numerically superior foe forced the battalion to withdraw to the river's edge. Despite heavy losses, remnants of the battalion reorganized and, when the Germans stopped to dig in, attacked again and re-took most of the lost ground. Every night for 5 nights the enemy attacked, trying desperately to regain the east bank, but each time they were thrown back. On one occasion, after a 3-mile-long column of enemy troops and vehicles poured into the lines, the Germans charged with reckless and fanatical zeal, and succeeded in making a slight penetration. Committing its reserves, the battalion stopped the attack and reestablished its lines. By the individual heroism and intrepidity of the officers and men of this command, the depleted battalion held the bridgehead for 8 days and nights under continuous and savage shelling, enabling the division to push other troops across the river and insure the success of the vital operation. The accomplishment of the 3d Battalion, 398th Infantry Regiment, reflects the highest traditions of the Army of the United States. (General Orders 277, Headquarters 100th Infantry Division, 9 November 1945, as approved by the Commanding General, European Theater (Main).

* * *

By Order of the Secretary of War:

Dwight D. Eisenhower,
Chief of Staff

Official:
Edward F. Witsell,
Major General
Acting The Adjutant General