

# Retrospective View From a WWII Foxhole

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## Introduction

Why should this old guy who served as a rifleman in France and Germany during World War II want to write a book about his experiences? One reason is because I frequently recall some of these experiences some 60 years later. Another is to get these incidents on paper to help me better understand what happened, and then to interrelate wartime and subsequent events to view them retrospectively. A further reason is that writing about them serves as a sort of catharsis. A number of WWII veterans, now in their twilight years, are increasingly writing about their wartime experiences.

Some of my recollections are vague while others remain crystal clear. These memories, which range from the humorous to the horrible, are now recalled by a former 18-year old in a foxhole, and much later by this now 80-year old. I have found that veterans, when they relate combat experiences to others, tend to focus on humorous incidents; some memories are too distressing to relate. But here I try to relate the range of experiences, both good and bad.

Combat experience is much easier for me to write about than to talk about, except with combat veterans who have experienced similar events. Several fellow soldiers in the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division have written memoirs about their wartime experiences and they, and others, encouraged me to do likewise. Attendance at division and company reunions, two trips to the areas of former combat, the use of 100<sup>th</sup> Division documents and other research materials have clarified events. At times I still struggle to figure

out what happened. This book, “Retrospective View From a WWII Foxhole”, attempts to provide insight into my experiences before, during, and after the war from a four-score perspective.

You might think that an infantryman in combat would know what is going on during a war. Nothing could be further from the truth because a combat infantryman’s perspective is limited to his foxhole and its immediate vicinity. When a foxhole is dug in a dense forest, or when the frontlines are spread thin, other foxholes may not even be visible. So there you are with your foxhole buddy, often cold and wet, sometimes hungry, and wondering what will happen next.

Confusion reigns during combat and you hope and pray that those in power will make good decisions. Your survival and that of your comrades greatly depends upon decisions made by your squad or platoon leader and the effects of their decision often become quickly evident. Examples are the assignment of foxhole positions, or the selection of soldiers to be sent on a patrol to penetrate enemy lines and to capture enemy soldiers for interrogation.

At higher levels, officers determine the units that will lead an offensive and those that will be placed in reserve to follow the lead units. On a global level, national leaders such as Roosevelt and Churchill made decisions that ultimately affected us locally; their decisions continue to affect the world today.

## Specialized Training Programs

My involvement with the military began with the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). As warfare became more technological, troops were needed with more specialized training. The additional training did not begin with WWII. An earlier program SATC (Student Army Training Corps) was implemented even in WWI to prepare soldiers for commissions.

ASTP, established during WWII, was initiated in the spring of 1943. It emphasized training in specialty areas such as engineering, medicine and language, rather than in the production of commissioned officers. In 1943, about 100,000 men were brought

into ASTP from existing forces, with new inductees supplying another 50,000. Henry Kissinger, a former Secretary of State, was among the more notables in ASTP.

ASTRP (R for reserve) is a counterpart of ASTP that was designed for men who were underage for regular army duty. I entered ASTRP as a seventeen-year-old, and those of us in the program unofficially called the program ASSTRAP. Among qualifications for ASTRP was the passing of a test given in high school. I took and passed the test given at St. Mary High School in Portsmouth, Ohio. I then enrolled in pre-engineering at the University of Kentucky in 1943. Mastering the accelerated courses there such as math and physics required significant effort but we also took time for extra-curricular activities.

As I remember, there were about six of us in a basement dormitory room with a window well outside our room. We used this window in a little entrepreneurial activity that consisted of purchasing hamburgers in bulk from a local merchant. He delivered them to our window and we then sold the hamburgers throughout the dorm, making a fair profit. Our enterprise ended when a rumor reached us that the hamburger police were about to close in our extracurricular operation.

ASTRP was a very small program relative to ASTP and both programs were cut substantially in February 1944. Many of us in ASTRP were sent to the infantry and artillery after several months, with most going to the infantry—so much for highly specialized training. These academic programs ultimately provided an estimated 3000 or 4000 soldiers to combat units. Little did we know that the infantry in WWII would suffer 70% of the casualties, although it comprised only 14% of the service, or that fighting in Northern Alsace would cost over 25,000 American casualties, many from the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army that I eventually joined.

Following ASTRP, I entered active service on February 14, 1944 at Fort Thomas, Kentucky. My sister, Ruth, who was attending college just across the Ohio River in Cincinnati, wanted to introduce her soldier-brother to some of her classmates. I met her and her classmates just after being issued an oversize uniform straight from the shipping container. When I walked, my overcoat

would follow a step or two later. At this point I think she reappraised her invitation for me to meet her friends.

My sister Barbara served as a coast guard officer in Washington, D.C. during WWII. After the war, an enlisted man with a side arm accompanied her to the main post office where she witnessed the burning of secret codes in the post-office furnace. When I visited my sister, military protocol stipulated that as an enlisted man I walk on her left and several paces behind her. Now that the statute of limitations has expired, I can safely say that I didn't follow protocol.

As a full-time soldier, it was off to Fort Benning.

## Infantry Training

Fort Benning is a huge military base in Georgia that provides basic infantry training. Marching, kitchen police (KP), cleaning barracks and cleaning rifles were some of the activities there. I remember one very long march on an extremely hot day with the Georgia sun blazing down on my steel helmet. As I ascended a long rise in the road I experienced the very real feeling of walking off in space—no road necessary. Marching was often done while carrying a full field pack that was the weight equivalent of a Winnebago. As we marched, an officer would periodically drive by in a Jeep (derived from *GEneral Purpose*) and encourage us to keep going. The heat took its toll as soldiers collapsed and were picked up and placed in trucks that followed our columns.

During one session on KP, a fellow soldier and I were assigned potato-peeling duty. Upon seeing the huge number of potatoes involved, we held a conference to determine a possible alternative to conventional peeling. We innovated by making six cuts that yielded potato cubes. The very unhappy sergeant that viewed our efforts ordered us to peel the peels, which made for a very long day. Innovation became less appealing after this experience. We learned to do it the army way.

Cleaning up the kitchen after preparation of almost 200 meals is quite an operation. Cleaning the flatware the army way proved to be a surprisingly efficient and sanitary operation. After washing

and draining, the flatware was immersed in very hot rinse water, removed, and then placed on a folded bed sheet. Men holding opposite ends of the sheet that supported the flatware rapidly lowered and raised the sheet, thus drying the hot flatware quickly and in a very sanitary manner.

Cleaning the yellow pine floor of our barracks with a mop using a strong solution of lye soap was done so often that the water never quite dried out between the edges of the pine flooring. The trapped water became evident when it gushed from the cracks when someone walked across the floor.

After completion of basic training in Fort Benning, we were sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

## Additional Training

A number of us joined the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division at Fort Bragg to receive additional training that was to better prepare us for future combat. Rumors were abundant as to where that might be.

Whether it was the European Theater or the Pacific Theater, we knew that there was an urgent need for additional troops in both theaters. Six hundred men from the division were sent to Army Ground Forces Replacement Depots for overseas duty on March 4, 1944. The 4000 men who entered the division from the disbanded ASTP and ASTRP programs more than replaced these men.

C-47 airplanes based at Pope field near our barracks in Fort Bragg were used to tow large gliders for carrying airborne infantry. On one occasion, a chaplain rushed to the scene of a glider that had just crashed. No one in the glider was injured but the chaplain tripped in a ditch on the way to provide aid and proved to be the only casualty.

Father Burke, the 397<sup>th</sup> regiment chaplain, arranged a ride for me on a C-47 from Pope field to Cleveland Ohio to visit my uncle and aunt in nearby Ravenna, located east of Cleveland. En route I advised the pilot that oil was streaming from the left engine onto the wing surface. He abruptly told me to go back and sit down and let him worry about that, which I did.

In 1944 my Uncle John worked at the Ravenna arsenal, a huge military facility where they produced and stored artillery and mortar shells in WWII and in the Korean war. In the aftermath some 60 plus years later, there remains considerable controversy concerning reclaiming the land from this facility because of the residual toxic materials.

The men who entered military units in WWII represented considerable diversity. They varied in age, religious preference, and educational and economic background. Coming from different areas of the United States they brought with them a wide range of cultures that we were to experience for the first time. Enthusiasm to enter combat also ranged widely. Some men were gung ho to get into combat but most of us were less enthusiastic and just tried to do our job.

Meeting men from diverse backgrounds was an interesting experience. Three friends of special note were John DeAmicis (New York), Elliott Matthews (Texas) and Tim Downing (Pennsylvania). The photograph below shows DeAmicis and me, DeAmicis on the right.



The next photograph shows Matthews (Matthews left) and me during a visit to town while at Fort Bragg in 1944.



Downing was killed shortly after we entered combat in France; DeAmicis and Matthews survived the war and we stayed in contact till their deaths several years ago. Frank Rosse was one of my sergeants at Fort Bragg. On one occasion, I remember uttering something to him under my breath for some infraction or another. KP again. There is little tolerance for smart-mouthed teenagers. I later developed complete respect for him; his subsequent heroic acts and leadership in combat earned him a Silver Star and a battlefield commission. The need for discipline and training became increasingly apparent, as for example the running of an infiltration course.

In this activity, bullets from live machine gun fire are fired overhead while you crawl from one end of an infiltration course to the other. While crawling across the course, I encountered a pit with its periphery identified by a wire on small stakes. Strips of toilet paper hung from the wire made the boundary more visible. Out of curiosity, I crawled to the pit to investigate it. Not a good idea because, upon doing that, a charge in the pit was exploded to simulate artillery that we were to subsequently encounter in combat. The explosion nearly knocked my steel helmet off, gave me a headache, and more than satisfied my curiosity.

As we were to learn later, the training that we received at Forts Benning and Bragg prepared us for many of the situations we were

to encounter in combat. But it was deficient in areas such as aircraft identification, trench foot, and mines. We later learned about these areas in 'on the job training'.

Upon completion of training at Fort Bragg, we were transported to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey in preparation for going overseas. Being near New York City provided an opportunity to visit the city with John DeAmicis and to accept an invitation for supper at his mother's apartment. There are some meals that are remembered for a lifetime and this was one of them—homemade ravioli, along with homemade wine. In a September 29, 1944 letter to my parents, I told them of my pleasant experience in NYC and advised them that we were due to go overseas shortly.

## Overseas Bound

We boarded the George Washington, a ship with a colorful history, which was to take us overseas.



**The George Washington: Photo-U.S. Coast Guard, April 15, 1943.**

Built in Germany in 1908 and seized by the United States in 1917, it transported troops to and from France during WWI. Later it carried President Woodrow Wilson to the Versailles Peace Conference after WWI, the war intended to end all wars.

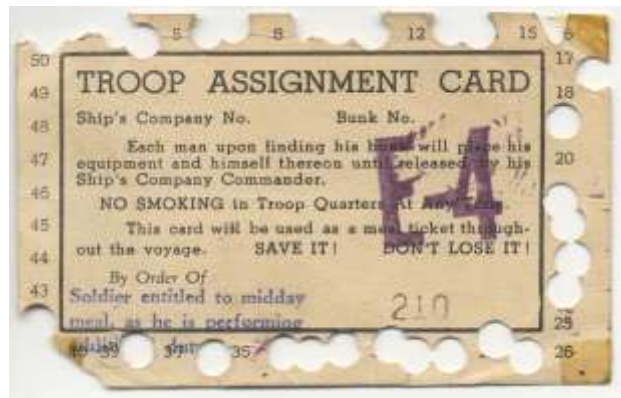
The 7000 men who boarded the ship on October 5, 1944 comprised about half of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. We soon learned that's a lot of men to put in the small quarters that we were assigned. Personal quarters consisted of the space above the bunk that was formed by stretching canvas in the interior of a rectangle of steel pipes. The bunks, stacked four-high, barely provided room



to roll over. Sharing that space with our equipment made for a cozy arrangement.

Our ship formed part of a convoy that consisted of other transport ships. Combat ships accompanying us included an escort carrier and destroyer escorts. Six days out of New York we encountered a hurricane that the ship's captain considered the worst he had weathered while transporting troops during the war. The mountainous waves tossed our 26,000-ton ship violently and raised its stern above the sea surface, as evidenced by the sound of the rapidly increasing speed of the propeller. When the stern reentered the sea, the propeller speed slowed to normal, a speed to which we had become accustomed. All of this vertical and rolling motion caused many of us to become very seasick, which made the thought of food abhorrent. During calmer seas when we did eat, meal tickets were punched at each meal.

My meal ticket was marked "Soldier is entitled to midday meal, as he is performing additional duties." Based on the number of numbers not punched, seasickness took its toll. This voyage taught me that it is indeed possible to become so seasick that you are afraid that you won't die.



Space at the ship's rail and in the toilet was at a premium. The ship's toilet, consisted a long row of seats attached to a semicircular trough. Seawater continuously flowed in one end of the trough and exited the other. One diversion on the ship consisted of placing a flaming ball of newspapers through the upstream seat

of the trough. This activity was quickly followed by the shouts of agony from the downstream patrons.

Our voyage continued past the Rock of Gibraltar to our destination, Marseilles, France, a deep-water port on the southern coast of France. The allies began using this port in early September, about a month before our arrival on October 20, 1944. Marseilles proved to be an extremely important port since more than one-third of the total supplies for the allied war effort were unloaded there over the period September through December, 1944.

Upon arriving in port we heard an airplane overhead that later proved to be a German reconnaissance plane. We disembarked the ship using cargo nets and descended about twenty feet into small craft that then transported us to land. This was no small feat because of the relative rise and fall of the craft as we descended with all our equipment on our backs. Some men were injured in the transfer when they lost their grip and fell into the smaller craft.

## On Land Again

Once on land, we hiked inland for about four hours in the rain to a staging area, after which we set up pup tents in the mud and rain. After cleaning our weapons and performing other duties in the staging area we were considered ready to go into combat as a unit

Upon going into combat in November 1944, keeping a record of events was not a high priority. Rather it was to do my job as best I could and to survive. As an 80-year old now, I am interested in reconstructing incidents experienced in combat as an 18-year old infantryman. To do this, I jotted down notes after WWII that described events during and after combat. Photographs taken during and after the war supplemented these notes. Here is one of me wearing a helmet somewhere in Alsace.



Little did I realize at that time that I would later marry and have two helmet-wearing sons, John (left) and Stephen.



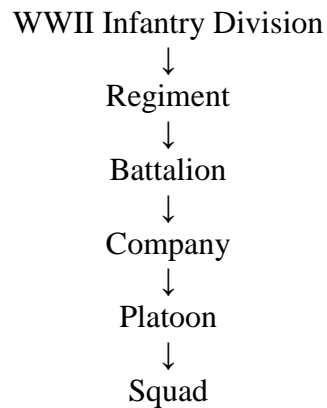
Then followed John's helmet-wearing daughters. Catherine (left) and Haley.



Additional information acquired over the years that greatly supplemented my notes included: attendance at Division and Company reunions, conversations with fellow soldiers, company operations reports, published individual-, regimental-, and division-histories, along with fairly extensive research. The Co. F morning reports and operations reports of the 397<sup>th</sup> Infantry were especially valuable because they permitted constructing a chronology of events that would have been impossible without their availability. Using this material, my objective is to try to understand both combat events and subsequent events and then place them in context.

You might think that front-line soldiers would have a fairly good idea of what goes on during a war. Nothing could be further from the truth. An infantryman's perspective is limited to the immediate area of his foxhole. Foliage and a wide separation between foxholes often limit a soldier's view. Soldiers ordered to move forward usually have little idea of what to expect because very little information filters down from above.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division that was part of VI Corps of the U.S. Seventh Army. The 15,000 men in the division were organized according to the following chain of command:



I earlier learned at Fort Bragg the true meaning of the above organizational structure. When attending movies at the base theater there, we were required to wear a necktie. General Burrell, our division commander, observed me leaving the theater without one. He took my name, rank, and serial number and sent this information down the line of command. I liken this action to a snowball rolling down a hill. By the time I was called into company headquarters, the reprimand I received was a really big snowball.

Overseas, I was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> squad, 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon, Company F, 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, 397<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. As would be expected of a hierarchical organization like the above, 12-men squads were the last to get top-down information when the enemy attacked.

## Entering Combat

Our regiment departed Baccarat France on November 5, 1944 and relieved Company F, 179<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division the next day. After the seasoned 45<sup>th</sup> soldiers exited their foxholes, we green troops occupied them without much fanfare. Their foxholes were located in a relatively open area, an area that contrasts sharply with the forest-covered Vosges Mountains that we were soon to enter.

Little did we know at that time of the extent of the enemy's prepared defenses, nor the fact that no army had ever crossed the Vosges Mountains. The Germans had good reason to believe that we wouldn't successfully cross the mountains, especially considering the rapidly approaching winter. During our entry into the Vosges, we learned the sounds and characteristics of the German weapons that we encountered. These sounds included small arms fire from rifles and machine guns, mortars, as well as fire from 88 mm artillery.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division ultimately crossed the Vosges Mountains against bitter resistance for the first time in history. Throughout that crossing, it was a contest as to whether enemy fire or the steep, soggy slopes and the constant wet and brutally cold weather would be the most bitter to endure.

Our regiment attacked on November 12, with Co. F on the left flank. The difficult terrain favored the enemy who were very familiar with the territory and had well-prepared defenses. As we advanced up a mountainside in single file on our first day in combat, a bullet hit a tree several feet to my right. The intense sound of its impact surprised me because the noise from the impact was as loud as that of a firing rifle.

This incident along with heavy incoming artillery consolidated in a split second the meaning of all of our earlier training and the reality of combat. It further convinced me the enemy was indeed intent on killing us by any means possible. Logic and training tells you this is the case; experiencing the shells and bullets aimed at you introduces another dimension and serves as an epiphany.

Each infantry company keeps records, called Morning Reports. I obtained copies of the morning reports for Co. F from the George C. Marshall Foundation in August 2005 and they have provided informative and useful information. The report of November 12, 1944 stated, "Departed assembly area 2½ miles southwest of Baccarat France at 0900. Advanced 1 mile east against moderate small arms and artillery fire Reached objective 1400 and proceeded to dig in Killed: 1 EM (enlisted man) Wounded 9 EM Weather snow morale good."

The morning report of December 1, 1944 lists Tim Downing as KIA (killed in action) near Bertrichamp France. As we progressed up a mountainside in single file, Tim was marching several men in front of me when a shot rang out to our left. He had been caught in the crosshairs of a German sniper. To the sniper, he was a randomly selected target; to those of us who knew him, he was a good friend.

Artillery and mortar shells are used mainly to kill or maim. But from an objective military view, maiming can be more useful to the enemy because maiming ties up more personnel in evacuation and treatment activities than dealing with a corpse. These same weapons are also used to deliver non-lethal information.

Both the Germans and the Americans used artillery shells to deliver multilingual safe-conduct passes that encouraged their respective opponents to surrender. First shown is the German leaflet to us.

Both passes were worded similarly and state that a captured soldier is to be well looked after. The German pass further states that the chances for American victory may be more than 50%. But the chances of your being killed in action are still greater. The chances of being wounded or crippled are even four times greater than of being killed.

The reverse side of the German pass stated that the captured American soldier is to receive food and medical attention as required, and to be removed from the danger zone as soon as possible. The German passes, signed by the Supreme Commander of the German Vosges Armies were not without value because toilet paper was generally in short supply in the front lines.



General Eisenhower signed the American pass, shown below.



Being constantly on the go often meant moving from one partially completed foxhole only to start digging another in a new location. The command, 'move out', is not popular with infantrymen. It often meant leaving one ill-defined area for another. A move could involve marching on a road or hiking over difficult terrain while totally exhausted. I'm sure now that only our collective misery enabled us to endure.

Constant wetness, cold temperatures, digging foxholes, marching, etc., necessitated an enormous calorific intake. The infrequent hot meals brought up to the line by the company Jeep partially helped meet this need. But most of our food consisted of K-rations, with less frequently issued C-rations (C for combat). K-rations, the fast food of WWII, were supplied in cardboard containers and were named for their inventor, Ansel Keys. The breakfast K included biscuits, egg and meat products, a fruit bar, water purification tablets and toilet paper. Lunch and supper included biscuits meat and cheese products, a candy bar, drink powder, sugar, cigarettes and salt tablets.

C-rations, supplied in cans, were intended for consumption either hot or cold. The D-ration was a processed hard chocolate bar that provided about 1800 calories. The high fat content of these rations caused widespread diarrhea among us, hence the synonym 'GIs' for diarrhea. Diarrhea was so prevalent that someone who farted was often congratulated. Tension, associated with activities such as going on patrol, aggravated diarrhea.

Because K and C rations were mostly consumed cold, the heat energy required to digest them was said to be about equivalent to the energy they provided. Hence, there was no net energy gain from these cold rations. I remember remarking to my foxhole buddy at one time that I would trade a months pay for a cup of hot coffee.

Patrols are sent across no-man's-land into enemy territory to determine the location of the enemy and/or to capture prisoners for interrogation. Matthews and I were sent out on a two-man patrol one dark night to capture a prisoner for interrogation. Upon penetrating enemy territory and hearing more soldiers speaking German than we cared to, we established their location and



prudently decided to go back empty handed. With Matthew's excellent sense of direction we made it back and reported our findings. On another patrol with more men, we encountered the enemy and captured a soldier. He fell to his knees sobbing because he was erroneously convinced we were going to shoot him.

In the woods on a dark night, finding your way back to your foxhole after a patrol is not easy. Darkness distorts perception of direction and distance. Further, your fellow soldiers may perceive you as the enemy with disastrous results.

The photo below shows men marching in two-column through the Vosges, with the columns staggered to minimize casualties in the face of enemy fire.



Photo: Signal Corps, U.S. Army

Mines were another problem for both vehicles and foot soldiers. On one occasion, our battalion was in reserve following the advance of the other two battalions in our regiment into a field containing shoe mines hidden by snow. These mines, in small wooden boxes, are designed to detonate when stepped on and blow off a combatant's feet. Being in reserve, we watched a number of GIs on Jeep-mounted litters being brought back with stubs. Why them and not me?

S-mines, also known as 'Bouncing Betties' were small anti-personnel mines that were activated by a passing foot or by a trip wire. Activation caused them to rise about a yard above the

ground, explode, and spray the area with metal that inflicted the intended wounds.

The job of the engineers was to sweep areas for mines. But sometimes they were a bit late. As we marched down a road in a double column, we saw the engineers follow us while sweeping the road with mine detectors, not a warm and fuzzy feeling.

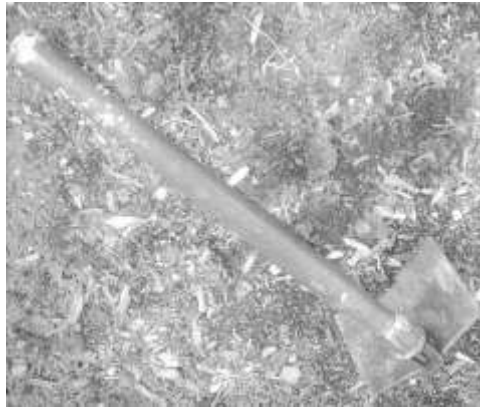
Moving to another area often meant digging a new foxhole. A number of factors determined the foxhole location and the difficulty in digging it. Location was determined partly by unit staffing. If the squad or platoon was at or near full strength, foxholes could be placed closer together. Other factors that affected location were: terrain in front of, and adjacent to a foxhole, and slope of the ground.

Absence or presence of trees significantly affected foxhole construction. In an open or non-forested area, we dug holes about four feet to six feet wide by six feet long. Your state of exhaustion, the absence or presence of incoming shellfire, the availability of tools for digging and the time available were factors that determined the depth. (One corporal who had allegedly dug too many foxholes suffered from corporal tunnel syndrome).

Infantrymen discarded some of their equipment, for example gas masks, to reduce the weight they had to carry. Mobility is paramount. After the rifle, the entrenching tool or small shovel (shown below) would be one of the last items to go.



The versatile entrenching tool could be used as a shovel (above) or as a pick (below) by unscrewing a locking sleeve and rotating the blade to place the blade and handle right angles.



The good news with this entrenching tool was it could be relatively easily carried due to its lightweight and small size; the bad news was that its small size meant slow digging. A full-size shovel, only infrequently available, was worth its weight in gold. The same is true of an axe, which we sometimes acquired from unofficial sources.

Exhaustion didn't keep one from digging a foxhole; recollection of the most recent deafening artillery or mortar barrage served as an effective motivator. The absence of tree roots made it much easier to dig a foxhole in a non-forested area than in a forest. The dirt dug from a hole, mounded around the periphery of the hole, provided some lateral protection.

I recall one incident when Dodson and I had time to dig only a shallow keystone-shaped hole in an open area before shells from mortars rained down on us. The narrowest part of the hole wasn't deep enough for both of us to spread our feet horizontal and get our heels below ground level. So, we took turns, with one guy's heels up, the other down. Shrapnel from mortars tends to hug the ground in a pattern like an upside-down, open umbrella. Fortunately, neither of us was hit.

The nature of shellfire varies substantially. We experienced an intense artillery barrage during a black night in the Vosges with shells that exploded with the release of pieces of white-phosphorous. The phosphorous from these shells, which scatters and spontaneously ignites, causes severe burns to those unfortunate to be hit with it. We helped evacuate the severely burned soldiers off a slippery steep mountainside in the dark. It was a nightmare because we had insufficient water in our canteens to keep their clothing sufficiently wet to suppress the burning phosphorous. Eventually we got the wounded down to a location where they could be evacuated to the rear.

The use of phosphorus in flares to illuminate the night sky is another memory. Shells fired from a mortar explode overhead, at which time the phosphorous in them ignites. The burning phosphorous, suspended from a parachute, illuminates a large area as it descends. We were trained to freeze in place when a flare ignites because a moving object is much easier to detect than a stationary one. When caught in the flare's light, standing upright and motionless is counterintuitive to a strong instinct to instantly hit the dirt. Standing motionless and thinking about being a target is the difficult and correct action to take, although it is quite frightening.

Tree bursts from artillery are much feared by infantrymen because of the hot jagged shrapnel they deliver from above. If you are fortunate enough to be in a covered foxhole, you hope and pray that the cover over the foxhole protects you from both the shrapnel and splinters and branches blown away from the trees. The German 88 mm cannon was the most dreaded artillery piece. This high-velocity, all-purpose weapon was effective against the infantry, as well as against tanks and airplanes.

The deadly sound of incoming 88s prompted us to instinctively hit the ground and hug mother earth. Even many years later, 88-like sounds prompt a similar response. Tankers feared the ability of 88s to penetrate and disable their Sherman tanks; the Sherman's 75mm cannon was relatively ineffective against the German tanks. Flak from 22 pound shells, fired by 88's at heights up to 5 miles, caused numerous casualties to allied bomber crews.

American artillery pieces ranged in diameter from 105 to 240mm (4.1 to 9.4 inches). Prior to one offensive, shells from these were fired over our heads as we advanced into the enemy lines in the Vosges in a tactic called 'roving artillery'. This tactic is intended to soften resistance and immobilize the enemy while you advance. While advancing, you hope and pray that none of the rounds passing overhead fall short into your lines.

The effect of this high-intensity shelling with large-bore artillery can be envisaged as being in a powerful earthquake, while simultaneously experiencing intense rolling thunder. The thought of a shell falling short becomes even more frightening after advancing into the enemy lines and seeing the resulting carnage.

DeAmicis and I had experienced and survived much shelling from artillery and mortars. But we were about to experience something new and different as we sat on the edge of our uncovered fox in an open field on a clear day. Looking across no-man's land, we observed a flatbed truck with a large box mounted on its rear pull up to the enemy lines. Our curiosity about this device was soon satisfied when we heard a very loud grinding and screeching sound. The sound was the launching of rockets that saturated our area with a number of exploding shells. We again missed an encounter with shrapnel as we fell forward to safety in the bottom of our foxhole.

I later found that this weapon is called a nebelwerfer (nebel-fog or mist, werfen-throw or cast). The device was a 150mm (about 6 inches diameter) multiple-barrel rocket launcher that was fired electrically and referred to, not too affectionately, as the screaming meemie. A tank-mounted American version (4.5 inch diameter) was later developed that could fire 60 rockets in about 30 seconds.

DeAmicis and I experienced another unusual sound from our foxhole in the Vosges. It turned out to be a Me262 German jet, the first jet airplane we were to ever hear. Later, I was to find that the 540 mph Me262 was much faster than American fighters like the P-47 and it accounted for the downing of more than 500 American aircraft. The American P-47 with its reciprocating engine was more commonly heard and seen in our area; on one occasion we welcomed the sight of a P-47 as it flew to one side of our foxhole. Our welcoming was short-lived as the plane reversed direction,

then flew over and strafed our line of foxholes. It was a captured P-47 as evidenced by the German crosses on its wings. As with our nebelwerfer experience we dropped into our foxhole just in time.

In another airplane incident, a German fighter swooped down and strafed us when we were in the center a small village in France. As it did so, a soldier jumped into a jeep and fired its post-mounted 50-caliber machine gun at the plane. Because the machine gun was not secured to its post with a pin, the machine gun jumped off its post and fired randomly as it fell. Amazingly, no one was hit either by fire from the Jeep or the fire from the German plane. I took the photograph below of a post-mounted machine gun several years ago at a museum. The rudders of a P-38 airplane are seen in the background of the machine gun.



The Germans had small weapons that were more mobile and capable of firing much more rapidly than ours. One of these was a machine pistol, called a burp gun, which was one of the most unwelcome sounds a GI could hear.

On one occasion when DeAmicis and I were dug in an open field, I left the foxhole to answer an urgent call from Mother Nature. While in a squat position at a respectful distance from the foxhole, a huge artillery shell burst overhead. The airburst was followed by the deadly whooshing sound of a large piece of

shrapnel rapidly approaching our area. DeAmicis stuck his head out of the foxhole and shouted, "Look out sleepy!" (my nickname). As I jumped around in a very uncompromising position, the shrapnel hit the frozen ground next to me with a loud KLUNK and I chalked up another one to my patron saint, St. Joseph.

A foxhole in a forested area required considerably more effort to construct than one on open land. First, there was the required cutting and removal of tree roots. Frozen ground and the availability of only the small entrenching tool greatly increased the difficulty. While digging, we mounded the dirt from the hole around the periphery of the foxhole, for holes dug in both forested and open areas. Depending on the time available, we cut down trees (usually pine trees from the thickly forested Vosges) and removed their branches and boughs.

We then cut the bare trees into lengths and used these to span the mounded dirt on opposite sides of the foxhole. Next, we placed pine boughs or leaves in the cracks between adjacent logs so that a layer of subsequently added dirt didn't fall between the cracks. Then, boughs placed on the logs formed a dome that was intended to progressively drain water from the dome to the periphery of the foxhole. Boughs placed in the bottom of a foxhole helped insulate us from the cold wet ground. After completing a foxhole, it was tough to hear the command 'move out', only to leave and repeat the exercise.

So called 'portable foxholes' designed by Major Albert Cameron, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Headquarters, offered improved foxholes. Equipped with a wooden floor, they were fit into a hole that needed to be at least five feet deep. I learned of the existence of 'portable foxholes' only after returning home. Had they been more universally used, I'm sure they would have significantly reduced the occurrence of trench foot.

Foxholes were prepared with an opening facing the enemy, and during the night foxhole occupants would take alternative shifts to stand guard duty. The foxhole opening provided a place for surveillance as well as a protective site from which to shoot. Infiltration by the Germans was not uncommon.

Being in the Vosges at night taught me the meaning of absolute darkness and the problems it can cause. I shared a foxhole with

DeAmicis most of the time during combat and one intensely dark night I had to pee. Rather than use my helmet, I opted to leave the foxhole. Because of the darkness and concern about finding my way back, I walked only a short distance from the foxhole. I realized I had walked in a small circle only after I heard the laments of DeAmicis because I was peeing in the foxhole—talk about testing a friendship.

Trees that provided cover and protection for a foxhole were also problematic. The enemy used roadside trees to stretch a taught wire across a road to decapitate Jeep occupants as the Jeep drove into the path of the wire. To protect the occupants, a notched vertical angle iron attached to the front of the Jeep was developed that snared and broke the wire.

Performing guard duty on a moonlit night in the snow-covered mountains could cause an infantryman's eyes to play tricks. When I viewed trees under these conditions, the trees sometimes appeared to move and even to dance together. I thought I was losing it when this first happened, but I then found out this was a relatively common experience. Stress and exhaustion amplified and distorted sounds and on occasion they caused the needless awakening of your foxhole buddy to confirm everything was OK.

At times when you felt like your sanity was balanced on the edge of a knife, prayer helped immensely. The photograph below from Stars and Stripes shows our Chaplain, Father Burke conducting Catholic Mass in the woods.





The tree stumps seen in the left side of the figure are probably the remains of trees that were cut to provide cover for foxholes. I served Mass several times for Father Burke in the Vosges and greatly admired his courage. During one service when artillery came in, those of us in attendance hugged the ground. Father Burke continued to say mass, standing calmly at the altar. I One of the many ironies of combat is having the altar surrounded by rifles and carbines.

The Germans had their own version of Stars and Stripes, titled “Front-Kurier (Front-Courier).” It was subtitled ‘Field Newspaper for Our Army’ and the cover page of the November 29, 1944 edition appears below:



The photograph shows a young German soldier on his motorcycle. The caption states that he can’t get through to deliver messages because of the mud, which is considered as bad as that in Russia. However he remains cheerful despite his difficulties.

On several occasions, one of our tanks would position itself by our foxhole or an adjacent one, fire a few shells into the enemy lines, and then quickly withdraw. We then waited in our foxholes and anticipated the arrival of German artillery that generally followed shortly after the enemy got a fix on our location. Hence, having friendly tanks around was a mixed blessing.

Small spotter planes like the Piper Cub proved very effective in spotting tanks and artillery. During a visit to the Piper Museum in Lockhaven, Pennsylvania, I was surprised to see a framed picture (photograph below) of a spotter plane that was part of a unit assigned to the 100<sup>th</sup> Division.



Germans, when firing at these planes, risked revealing their position and initiating an American artillery barrage. Spotter planes annoyed the Germans to the extent that furloughs were given to German infantry for downing one.

In his book 'Janey' Alfred Schultz describes his many missions as a spotter pilot. One of his unusual missions was to clear a pasture of sheep because the Americans used the pasture as an artillery range. While flying low to clear the pasture of sheep, an enraged shepherd threw his staff at Schultz's plane, hit the right wing, and nearly downed the plane. It is very unlikely that a

shepherd's staff is listed as an antiaircraft weapon in military manuals.

The continuous exposure to cold and wet conditions that we experienced in the Vosges Mountains made our feet very vulnerable to trench foot. This condition caused major problems, with 15,000 casualties attributed to trench foot in the Battle of the Bulge alone. Trench foot caused an estimated 45,000 men, approximately the equivalent of three infantry divisions, to be pulled offline during the winter of 1944/45. One report stated that trench foot caused amputation of so many soldier's feet that an oil drum full of amputated feet was seen in a military hospital in Liege.

Trying to keep socks dry by pinning an extra pair on the inside back of our field jackets didn't work well when sleeping in cold water in the bottom of a foxhole. The design of our boots, called shoepacs, favored cold-foot injuries. The boots functioned well for men who could keep their feet dry but not for troops on the move who were constantly exposed to cold and wet weather. These waterproof boots were insulated well. Being waterproof, they sealed in sweat and the resulting wet insulation became ineffective. Even if dry socks were available, being caught in your foxhole during an enemy attack with your boots off was not conducive to longevity. Also, boots were difficult to get on and off over swollen feet.

K. E. Bonn, in his book "When the Odds Were Even," discusses different types of disabling injuries associated with cold and wet conditions experienced in the Vosges: immersion foot-twelve or more hours contact with moisture or water at temperatures under 50°F; trench foot-48 to 72 hours exposure under the same conditions; frost bite-exposure to 32°F or less for times that vary with humidity and wind velocity.

As my squad climbed a snow-covered slope in mid-November my feet became increasingly swollen and painful. I was wearing the largest size boot available, but because of the swelling—they weren't large enough. When I told my sergeant I could no longer keep up, he told me I had to because our squad was so short of men. I tried to keep up, but with the intensifying pain I fell back further and further until I saw my squad disappear in the distance.

Upon walking rearward to get to an aid station, I encountered an officer and his driver in their Jeep. They drove me to a battalion tent hospital where I was diagnosed with trench foot, immediately ordered onto a cot, and told to stay there. The medic told me I got there none too soon as gangrene was not too far away. After being given hot coffee and a Spam sandwich, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Then followed a deep sleep that was to be short lived.

A captain on the adjacent cot awakened me and repeatedly said “give me a problem in calculus.” I told him several times I didn’t know calculus, after which he eventually backed off and let me fall back asleep. I found out later that the captain, colonel Ellis (our regimental commander), and their Jeep driver were ambushed on November 16 while visiting the first battalion area. Machine-gun fire killed the Colonel according to the ‘Story of the Century’ but the other two escaped. Apparently the captain next to me had reached his limit as a result of the ambush. The ‘Story of the Century’ (SOC) that was published in 1946 by the Century Association, 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, has proved to be a valuable resource in compiling the present book.

Ambrose in his book ‘Citizen Soldier’ mentions that it was unusual for higher-ranking officers to go into the front lines. This agrees with my experience where it was rare to see an officer above the rank of first lieutenant in the front lines.

After three days of being horizontal, dry, and warm in the tent hospital, a truck returned a group of us to our respective units. Artillerymen, the first men delivered to their units, said “Welcome back to the front”. We then drove to my company area, which led me to believe that the term ‘front’ has multiple meanings. I arrived back at Company F with improved, but still painful and swollen feet. Fortunately, our squad was housed under roof at that time in a small village home; so being able to again stay dry and warm for a short time was a welcome experience.

Once, when billeted in a French house we were dry but not warm because we had burned the available firewood. DeAmicis and I knew that the mortar squad located to the rear would have extra increments. Increments are wafer-shaped plastic pieces that explode in the mortar tube and propel mortar rounds from the

mortar tube into enemy lines. Sufficient increments are supplied to mortar crews to provide maximum range; hence, there are usually excess increments.

We took their extra increments and returned to the house where there was a small pot-bellied stove. We had socks on the open stove door for drying. We threw the increments into the stove, slowly at first, and then faster to warm the room. Because the temperature increased slower than we wished, we threw a bunch of increments in the stove. Not a good idea! The resulting explosion bent the stove, scorched our socks and taught us another of many things not to do.

On another occasion our squad was assigned to stay in the small basement of a French home. I must have drawn the short straw because I ended up sleeping on a pile of sugar beets, which is roughly equivalent to sleeping on bowling balls. While not the most comfortable arrangement, it was wonderful being dry and under roof.

In a November 27, 1944 'V' mail letter to my parents, I wrote that I had seen the Free French shave the heads of some French women who collaborated with the Germans. The letter stated, "It was really funny because they were going around waving flags and talking very fast, none of which I could understand."

A similar event is documented (see below) in the 'Story of the Century', accompanied by the caption "French women who collaborated with the Germans have their hair cut by members of the FFI." They were later stripped and marched out of town.



By late November, the 100<sup>th</sup> Division had crossed the High Vosges, and for the first time in history, an entrenched army failed in their defensive efforts.

In early December we advanced toward Mouterhouse where the Germans occupied both the town and the high ground to its north. During the advance, with Company F in reserve, we encountered the usual German artillery and mortars, plus a weapon new to us, a 20 mm flak gun. I remember being puzzled by the flak shells because they exploded upon impact in contrast to the machine gun bullets that we previously encountered.

As a sergeant and I were in Mouterhouse, we saw a German soldier trying to scale a wall outside the schoolhouse. A well-aimed shot caused his limp form to fall to the ground. Upon entering and moving through the schoolhouse, we encountered no further enemy. The two forward companies in our battalion had apparently cleared the schoolhouse.

After Mouterhouse was secured, a shower unit was set up in a tent. We looked forward to showering and getting clean clothes after many days in the field. While showering, heavy mortar fire knocked down the tent that housed the shower unit. Standing barefoot and naked in the snow was a memorable experience. We chose clean clothes from the pile of clothes provided for us and considered ourselves lucky if we got a near fit.

Most GIs tried to minimize concerns that their parents and loved ones might feel as a result of letters sent home. In contrast, news releases supplied by the army to soldier's hometown newspapers provided information that could only aggravate concerns. An example is an article that appeared in the December 30, 1944 issue of The Portsmouth (Ohio) Times, my hometown newspaper. The article stated, "In addition to a fanatic enemy who fought with the ferocity of a trapped rat, the 397<sup>th</sup> faced innumerable land mines, booby traps, and well-prepared defense installations. The weather was cold, it rained frequently and mud was ankle deep. The forest, covered with a heavy undergrowth, provided cover for Nazi snipers." This article, which named two local soldiers and me in the 397<sup>th</sup>, did little to alleviate concern.

Letters were sent home via 'V-mail' and regulations required an officer to censor them as shown by the following letter dated December 21, 1944 sent to my parents. The censoring officer blacked out my reference to the date we departed the U.S. and a reference to our location.

Print the complete address to which blank letters in the present format, and your return address in the space provided. Use typewriter, dark ink, or pencil. Write plainly. Very small writing is not suitable.

No. PASSED BY U 48811 S ARMY EXAMINER <i>Adler</i> (CENSOR'S STAMP)	To MR & MRS JOHN G SOMMER 502 ADAMS ST. PORTSMOUTH, OHIO	From Pfc. John G. Sommer, 1st Regt. (Sender's name) Co. F, 571st Inf, APO 997 (Sender's unit) 76 PM New York, NY Thurs. Dec. 21 1944 (Date)
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Dearest Mom & Dad,  
 Received two letters from you yesterday. One was dated Nov-8 and contained the funnies and the other was dated Nov-20. In the letter of the 20th you seemed to be in the dark about a lot of questions I have already answered in previous letters. I will try to answer them again though in case this letter should beat the others or in case they were lost. We left the States on [redacted] and arrived directly at Marseilles, France, so I didn't get a chance to see either ~~the~~ England or Scotland. I am on the [redacted] I have received the bracelet, fountain pen (which works swell) but as yet have not received the knife or the two packages other than Christmas. Will continue on another piece of V-mail.

**V-MAIL**

## Concrete Fortresses

Moving into the area of the Maginot line provided a whole new environment for us. Named after Andre Maginot, a hero of WWI, this defensive line was constructed over the 1929-39 period.. Bitche is located in a dominating position in the Maginot line; hence many fortresses were built in its vicinity. The Germans annexed Bitche in 1940 as described in a one-hour documentary *The Siege of Bitche* that was released in 2005 by Chimères Productions.

A number of Bitche residents were interviewed in the documentary, as were Mike Escalero, John Day, and John Sommer from the 100<sup>th</sup> Division. These interviews provided both a French and American perspective of wartime activities in and around Bitche. Extensive bombing and artillery fire killed and wounded many residents during the siege and forced about 600 residents to take refuge in the Citadel, a massive several-hundred-year old fortress in Bitche.

A bicycle that was fitted with a generator was suspended from the ceiling in the cellar of a home in Bitche. It could be pedaled to produce a light. A newborn infant entered the world in this dim light during the siege.

Another part of the documentary told of Dr. Jenny treating incalculable wounded. After the war, as the respected local physician, he was asked to provide two lists of residents: those who should be punished as Nazi sympathizers, and those who should be decorated. He responded by turning in a blank piece of paper.

The Maginot line is several hundred miles long and runs from Belgium eastward to Alsace, our location. One fortress in the line, Fort Simserhof, had a depth of 98 feet. The area around Simserhof, considered the strongest part of the line, consists of interconnected massive fortresses with 12-foot thick reinforced concrete walls. Subterranean electric trains hauled ammunition and supplies among fortresses to keep them supplied.

The ineffectiveness of artillery and bombs to significantly damage these fortresses is evidence of their robustness. Five-



hundred-pound bombs dropped by P-47 aircraft, and 240mm artillery shells, essentially bounced off the fortresses and only scarred walls as shown below (SOC, p. 93).



To effectively destroy the fortresses, the equivalent of ‘Dora’ was needed. Dora was a huge cannon that the Germans used on the Russian front. Its 107 foot long barrel could fire a seven-ton, armor-piercing shell 19 miles. One of these AP shells penetrated 90 feet of solid rock, after which it exploded and destroyed an ammunition depot. To clean powder residues after firing, men climbed into its 31.5 inch diameter barrel.

Artillery, ordinarily used to destroy, has occasionally been used for humanitarian purposes. Howitzers (short-barreled cannons) are fired at a range of several miles to control avalanches at some ski runs.

After the 100<sup>th</sup> captured the fortresses, I remember being fascinated by the considerable mechanical and electrical equipment they contained. On one occasion, I was in a deep sleep on my back

on the concrete floor of a bunker. I woke up to see the back of a just-captured German soldier standing at my feet. I haven't awakened that fast since.

On another occasion, DeAmicis and I wondered what was in the lower levels of the bunker we occupied. We descended the stairs to the lowest level that terminated at the electric-train track. We walked in the dark around the track area because we had only a few matches remaining in a book of matches. As we walked, we felt something rolling under our feet. Upon lighting a match, we suddenly realized that we were walking on detonators for concussion grenades. The detonators were about the size of cigarettes and they had fallen off the train cars that also contained many broken boxes of concussion grenades. Glancing at each other in the flickering light, we very gingerly walked to the base of the stairs and again counted our lucky stars.

The M1 semiautomatic Garand was the standard rifle issued to infantrymen in WWII. Weighing 9.5 lbs, it could rapidly fire a clip of eight 30-caliber bullets, after which it ejected the empty clip with a ringing sound. Its use continued into the Korean War. It was very important to keep the rifle clean—not an easy task considering the ubiquitous mud we encountered.

To determine if the bore of the rifle was clean, the bolt was pulled back and a thumb was inserted in the open cartridge chamber. While looking down the rifle bore, light reflected from the thumbnail helped with the inspection. Sometimes the bolt released unintentionally and mashed a thumb, a condition known as 'M1 thumb'.

An infantryman's helmet was his constant companion. Helmets saved many a soldier's life, as evidenced by the one worn by Ed Kulas, Company F. Ed was hit and knocked out while jumping into his foxhole. He was wounded a total of three times and both Ed and Ray Klund later became POWs.

Reunions are held at the company and divisional levels as well as in certain regions such as The 100<sup>th</sup> Mid-West Chapter that meets in Decatur, Illinois. Company F reunions are typically held near Chicago. Ray took the photograph below of Ed Kulas at our Division reunion in 1998:



American helmets were a separate unit from, and worn over, a plastic helmet liner whose headband could be adjusted. The German helmet in contrast was a single-piece unit with an integral adjustable headband; it provided better frontal vision. A bullet-creased German helmet that I sent home is shown in the next photograph. It no doubt left its wearer with a substantial headache.



December 25, 1944 was the most intense Christmas that I ever experienced. DeAmicis and I were in a foxhole on the down slope of a hillside near Erching when we heard a muffled explosion from the adjacent foxhole occupied by Johnson. The blast and grenade fragments tore away his midsection and blew him out of his foxhole. Johnson had a habit of prematurely loosening the pins of his hand grenades to make the pins easier to pull when the grenade was needed. We concluded that he accidentally removed a pin and activated the hand grenade that blew him out of his foxhole. He died within a few minutes from his severely wounded midsection as DeAmicis and I held him.

Communication in the chaos of combat is understandably less than optimal. The morning report of December 28, 1944 lists Johnson as MIA, three days after his death. A subsequent morning report dated April 4, 1945 corrected the record by changing his status from MIA to KIA.

Shortly after Johnson died, the Germans set up a machine gun and attacked us from the higher ground they controlled. We were ordered to withdraw to the main line of resistance and had to leave Johnson on the hillside.

Streams of bullets from the machine gun hit the ground next to us as we ran down the hillside to a small wooded area. Miraculously, only one man was hit in the hand as we exited the hillside. We had been issued new fleece lined coats that were white on one side and tan on the other, with white side serving as camouflage in the snow. Many of these, including mine, fell into German hands because of our withdrawal.

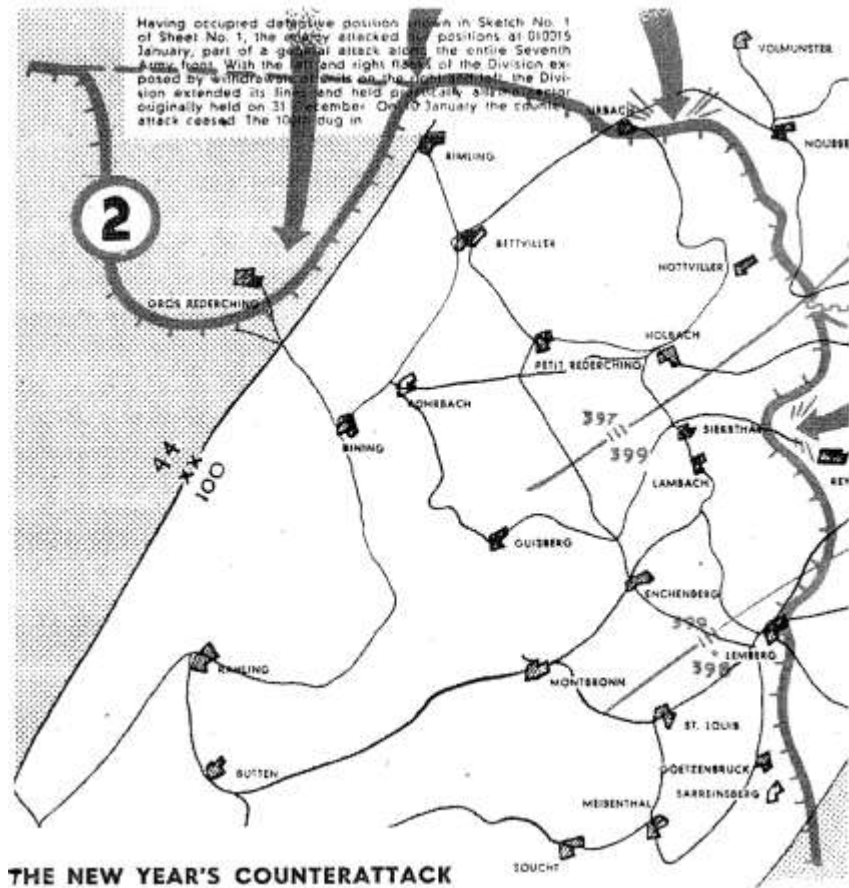
Those of us who survived the Vosges campaign hoped the worst of combat might be over, but we soon learned that this was not to be. The 'Battle of the Bulge' that started in mid-December north of us caused Patton's Third Army to pull back. This action required our army (the Seventh) to extend its lines to fill the void.

Colonel Quinn, an intelligence officer in the Seventh Army, predicted the Germans would start a major offensive in our area on New Year's Eve. As predicted, the Germans attacked us in an operation called Nordwind (Northwind) that was to threaten the entire Seventh Army front. Northwind significantly affected Company F and adjacent companies in the 397<sup>th</sup> infantry. The

'Story of the Century' and the morning reports for the 397<sup>th</sup> provide considerable information relevant to Northwind.

## Northwind

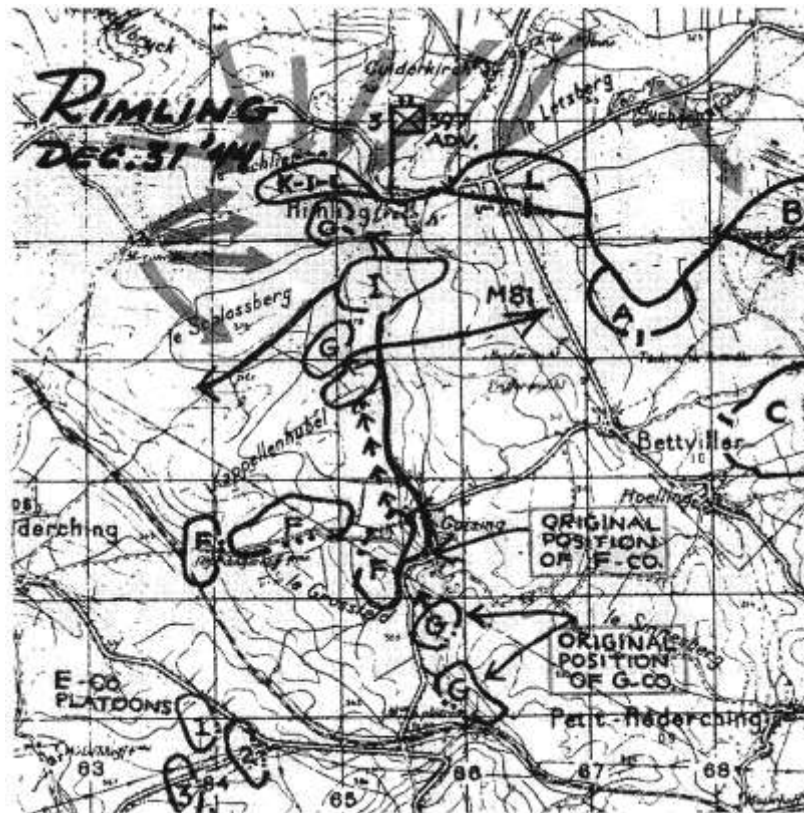
The next figure (SOC, p.98) shows the relative positions of the 397<sup>th</sup>, 398<sup>th</sup> and 399<sup>th</sup> regiments of the 100<sup>th</sup> Division before the German counterattack. The 44<sup>th</sup> Division is shown on the western flank, adjacent to the 100<sup>th</sup>.



The southward German drive along this flank forced the 44<sup>th</sup> Division to withdraw. The Germans took advantage of the withdrawal and bypassed forward positions to enter Rimling. A simultaneous German attack exposed the right flank of the 100<sup>th</sup>. Hence, the 100<sup>th</sup> was in danger of being encircled.

During the period December 31 through January 4, Company F maintained a defensive position near Guising. There we were constantly shelled by mortars and 88 mm artillery. Morning reports for the period January 1 through 4 list morale as ranging from good to excellent. Fortunately, we occupied the Guising area long enough to dig deep foxholes and cover them with logs. This protection no doubt kept our casualties to minimum.

The next map locates Company F near Guising on December 31, 1944, located in the lower central part of the map. Meanwhile, Companies K, I, and L were under attack from the north and west.



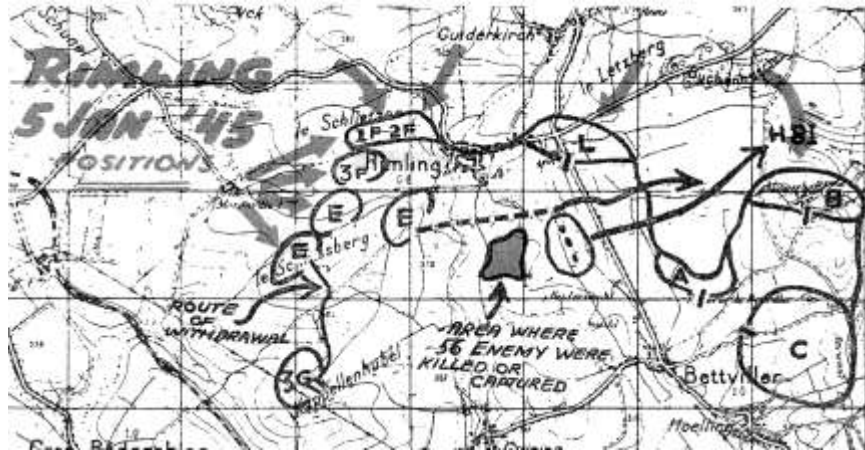
About 200 men from the 17<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Grenadier Division (see arrows showing southward and eastward thrust) repeatedly and fiercely attacked Company K in attempts to take Schlietzen hill. These attacks forced Company K to withdraw from the high peak it occupied to a lower position on the hill. This peak, a short distance northwest of Rimling, was very valuable real estate because it was the highest in the area. It controlled the ground to the north and west of Rimling.

There are discrepancies among records about dates and activities for Co. F during the hectic early period in January. The SOC (p.109) states that Co. F moved into positions along the ridge south of Schlietzen Hill on the morning of January 2. The morning report for January 5 states that Co. F departed its position south of Guising at 1800 and marched approximately 3 miles in a northern direction, taking up positions west of Rimling at 1930.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon of Co. F marched up snow-covered Schlietzen hill shortly after midnight to relieve Company K. Upon arriving there, I immediately knew we were in deep trouble because the K-company men exiting the foxhole we were to occupy were like zombies. They said not a word, which was atypical for this situation. Usually the departing men familiarized the new occupants about the local situation. There was no exchange. At first light the next morning, we looked over our position to see one of the K Company men near our foxhole, on his back, frozen with his arm upraised. Co. K had taken a terrible beating defending their position from repeated attacks.

DeAmicis, Sergeant Sussman and I shared our newly occupied foxhole, located on the downward slope of the hill (I was to learn later that is referred to as a reverse-slope defense), a defense intended to provide protection from long-range enemy shellfire. This location didn't prevent German tanks firing directly at our positions.

The next map locates the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> platoons of Company F in their reverse-slope positions. Arrows show the direction of attacks from the north and west.



During our first night there we decided to dig our foxhole deeper for better protection. This proved to be a big mistake because the dirt thrown on the snow essentially provided a bulls-eye for German fire. During one of these shelling episodes, Sussman was hit just below an eye by a small piece of shrapnel. The shrapnel was easily removed, indicating it was nearly spent when it hit. Shelling in our vicinity and in Rimling was constant; white-phosphorous shells from German artillery set a number of houses on fire in Rimling. Following all this shelling, the town church was about the only structure that remained intact, although it was heavily damaged.

The Co. F morning report of January 8 states that our defensive position west of Rimling was attacked at 0330 by ten tanks and infantry preceded by intense artillery shelling. Co was forced to withdraw to outskirts of Rimling Casualties: 1 Off and 2 EM KIA, 12 EM WIA (wounded in action). Prisoners captured 41. Weather cold and snow Morale Good.

Following the shelling, when German infantry and tanks attacked, I was asleep in our foxhole. DeAmicis woke me up because of the increased intensity of shelling that preceded the attack. I was unaware that he awoke me till he told me about it during a visit to our home after the war. Sleeping during this deafening noise sounds impossible but total exhaustion can do strange things. I owe DeAmicis a debt of gratitude because I later

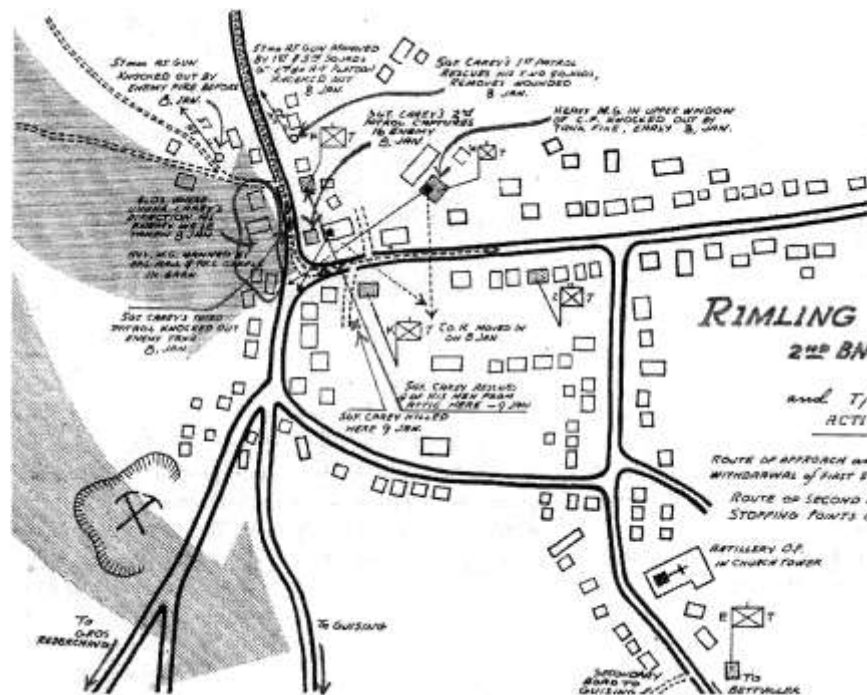


read in a 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division publication about a soldier being captured in Rimling because of falling asleep, as I did.

As the German tanks approached from the north and west, they set up a cross fire of tracer bullets that converged over the road leading into Rimling. Lt. Rosse ordered us to withdraw as rifles are no match for approaching tanks. He then led us off the hill down the road into Rimling, where we were to join the other three platoons in our company who were in Rimling.

Running southward down the hill in the dark, I vividly remember seeing intersecting streaks of deadly light from tracer bullets converging on our escape path. The bullets apparently were over our heads, as I didn't see anyone hit. I later learned that the Germans first fired tracers high above the ground after which they would fire lower with non-tracer ammunition, a tactic that could be used with deadly results.

We continued down the road leading into Rimling and followed it to the major intersection on the northwest side of town shown on the map below:



The large upper arrow on the west side of town shows the Germans entering this same intersection. Intense shellfire, probably both American and German, fell on us as Americans and Germans converged at this intersection. Illumination from exploding shells acted like a strobe light giving an eerie stop-action effect. When one of these shells exploded, I was astonished to see the back of a German soldier standing immediately in front of me. In this nightmarish confusion, intermingled Germans and GIs did not fire at one another.

The remnants of our platoon regrouped in a partial basement that had about three stair steps leading from the street to its dirt floor. We took turns standing guard outside the door to give an alert if a German were to throw a hand grenade into the basement. A sergeant in our platoon refused to enter the basement because of this danger.

After standing guard outside the door and reentering the basement, I sat on something that felt like a couch. To my surprise, the couch moved. My resting place turned out to be a live 4-legged couch, namely a cow. It was common for people in Alsace to keep livestock in partial basements under their home. Part of our platoon then regrouped in a house near the intersection.

At daybreak I looked out of a front upstairs window to survey the situation. As I did, a soldier from the first floor of the house across the street fired at me. The bullet narrowly missed my head and entered the ceiling behind me. Later, an older soldier (in his mid-twenties) and I occupied a back room that was behind a street-facing room. A GI in the front room fired a bazooka through the front window at a German tank coming down the street. The tank stopped and we heard the frightening grinding sound of the tank's traversing turret from the back room. Fortunately, the tank crew abandoned their effort to fire into the window because the narrow street prevented the tank's long cannon from traversing into position to fire into the window.

DeAmicis, several other GIs and I moved to the attic to cover an open field behind the house. A fellow soldier who had lost his glasses fired a shot at a man who was carrying two buckets while walking through the field. We immediately told the GI to stop

firing when we saw milk streaming from a hole in one of the bullet-penetrated buckets.

Because intense shelling had destroyed the roofs and portions of the end walls on the buildings in our location we could look directly from our attic to the one in the adjacent house. As we did, we saw a door begin to open in the adjacent attic. Fortunately we did not fire into the door as several GIs entered through the open door. Soldiers in combat must often balance their actions against survival instincts.

In retrospect, I think one of the soldiers in the adjacent house was Sergeant Charles Cary, who went house to house with several other soldiers and captured many Germans. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism in and around Rimling.

Later that day, I went into a courtyard-like area adjacent to the house; there I found grain in a burlap bag and ate several handfuls. Looking toward the street and just to the right of the open gate to the courtyard, I saw the body of Lt. Rosse. He apparently was shot as he started to enter the courtyard from the street. I think the sniper that killed him was likely the same one that had fired at me earlier from across the street. Lt. Rosse was an outstanding platoon leader who had received his battlefield commission only a short time earlier. His death was very depressing for us.

At this time we were unaware of plans being made for a night withdrawal from Rimling southward toward Guising, our earlier location. Our withdrawal of January 9 was preceded by intense artillery fire around Rimling that enabled us to leave without further losses. The Co. F morning report of January 9 lists weather cold and freezing and morale low. This is the only low-morale entry in the morning report that I found. Other entries are generally good to excellent. Since company commanders are considered responsible for their units morale, the latter ratings are favored. On January 10, Company F took up positions west of Guising and reorganized.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon was on Schlietzen hill, men in the other three platoons of Company F were in Rimling engaged in fierce fighting that took a heavy toll. The January 12 morning report lists 5 officers & 74 enlisted men as MIA as a result of this fighting,

with the majority of them captured. After their release from POW camps at the war's end, they typically weighed only about 90 pounds. One of these soldiers was Gerry Daub who was later interviewed about his ordeals as a POW. Another was Ray Klund who supplied the following anecdote about Rimling.

During capture, an American soldier surrendered, shouting "Nicht Scheissen!, Nicht Scheissen!," which means "Don't Shit". He intended to say "Nicht Schiessen!, which means "Don't Shoot." The Germans laughed heartily over the mangled language, with the favorable result that no one was shot.

I found it interesting to later review the German perspective (translated) of the action in and around Rimling as documented in a January 10, 1945 daily report by SS-Sturmbahn Leader to the General Commander XIII. SS-A.K. It read, "In the night from January 9 through January 10, we were able to take the Division Rimling by concentrated efforts but the enemy's main troops were able to get through and escape our circling attack. We were able to confiscate material and weapons which were left behind by the enemy or were destroyed." A story in the Oak Ridge paper reported later that units of the American 44<sup>th</sup> Division retook Rimling in late March 1944.

Following the intense activity in Rimling, Company F relocated near the towns of Rohrbach and Holbach where we established defensive positions, road blocks, and manned pillboxes in the area. The January 28<sup>th</sup> (my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday) Operations Report for the 397<sup>th</sup> lists the weather as cold with snow flurries and poor visibility—the bad news. The good news in the report was that there were no casualties for the day and 777 prisoners had been taken to date by the 397<sup>th</sup>.

## Defensive Positions

Company F then manned defensive positions and suffered occasional shelling by mortars and artillery in the Hottviller/Holbach area. We also occupied pillboxes on the regimental reserve line, rested, and took advantage of the relative quiet. We also trained in the use of individual weapons, interrupted

by occasional shelling. Activity in the lines increased as evidenced by Company F capturing five enemy soldiers on patrol. In mid-March, the company moved out in early morning and sustained casualties in capturing a hill.

On March 23, we advanced eastward along a road and observed many dead and bloated horses that had been killed by air attacks. Until then, I had no idea a horse could inflate like a balloon. The war took its toll on other animals as well. In another theater, the vocal cords of thousands of pack mules in Burma were severed to prevent them from braying and giving away jungle positions. Dogs with explosives on their backs were trained by the Russians to run under approaching tanks.

Our continued advance resulted in the taking of an additional 46 prisoners, raising the total to 949. Later while we marched down a road, a malodorous, half-starved man, dressed in black-and-white striped concentration-camp clothing gave me a big hug. He had just been liberated and I will forever remember his toothless grin and expression of thanks.

We moved fairly fast in our continuing advance toward and into Germany, occasionally riding on top of tanks. Once, when doing this, we encountered a road with an abrupt turn in it; there we saw a barn-like wooden building immediately ahead of us. As we approached the building closer we saw a circular opening directly facing our path of travel. Getting still closer, we were looking down the bore of a cannon. This weapon was a cleverly disguised part of the Siegfried line, a line of defenses facing the Maginot line.

As we continued our advance into Germany, several of us infantrymen were assigned to ride atop the lead Sherman tank for a long column of vehicles. Riding into a German town, we saw sheets hung from the upstairs windows of many of the houses. When our tank encountered a blind right turn at an intersection, several of us dismounted to scout the intended route for enemy because of the tank's vulnerability to a panzerfaust (German antitank weapon). Before leaving the tank, I exchanged my M1 rifle for a sub-machine gun.

Walking down the street at dusk, I heard the sound of hob-nailed boots approaching from the opposite direction. I ducked into a doorway to see an old man approaching. I said schnell (go

quickly). His feet hit the ground with the rapidity of machine-gun fire. Then I heard a door slam.

We remounted the tank and continued our northeasterly advance into Ludvigshafen. Upon entering a large chemical plant there, we captured a man who was wearing a white lab coat over his German uniform. He began crying profusely, much like a prisoner we earlier captured, because he thought we were going to shoot him. After taking him to the rear, we moved deeper into Ludvigshafen.

One of the bedrooms of a house I entered there had a vase of flowers on a nightstand; underneath the vase was a paper napkin with American flags on it. I thought that was a nice welcoming gesture until I found a Gestapo uniform hanging in an armoire in the same room. I still have the swastika armband that adorned one sleeve of the uniform. Other items that I liberated and sent home included two belt buckles, one with a swastika on it.



Inscribed above the eagle and swastika on the buckle is, “Blut und Ehre (Blood and Honor).” Hitler chose the swastika symbol, derived from the Runic Cross, because of its use by Aryan nomads who were considered to be Nazi ancestors. This symbol is also used on the Gold Honor Cross for prolific German Mothers.



Dated 16 Dezember 1938 on the back, it was awarded for mothers that presented eight or more children to the German Reich.

The belt buckle shown below is inscribed, "GOTT MIT UNS" (God with us).



Joe Lewis, a former heavy-weight boxing champion, stated during a discussing of WWII, “Were going to win because we’re on God’s side.” And then, there is Allah. It intrigues me that so many warring nations claim God is on their side. I wonder what God thinks about all this.

About this time, I was diagnosed with hepatitis and sent to a hospital in Dijon, France to recuperate. After effective treatment there, I returned to Company F near Stuttgart. The hospitalization caused me to miss the intense combat in and around Heilbronn.

GIs crossed the Neckar River in boats in early April in their assault on Heilbronn. Among those killed in the intense fighting in Heilbronn was Staff Sgt. Harold Poeltzig, a selfless soldier and friend who shipped over with the 100<sup>th</sup>. By April 29, the 397<sup>th</sup> had taken 6794 prisoners. Then came the news that we had awaited for months—the war in the European Theater of Operations had ended. .

WASHINGTON HERALD EDITION  
 Friday, May 7, 1945  
 Volume 1, Number 1

# THE STARS AND STRIPES

Daily Newspaper of U.S. Armed Forces in Europe  
 Official Organ of the American Forces in Europe

The War that made this...  
 is covered in detail in the War...  
 and... in...  
 ...

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# E T O W A R E N D S

Unconditional surrender of all German forces was announced yesterday by the German radio at Flensburg. Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, successor to Adolf Hitler as Fuehrer of Germany, ordered the surrender and the German high command declared it effective, the German announcement said. No immediate confirmation came from the capitals of the Allied powers, but President Truman and Prime Minister Churchill will broadcast at 3 p. m. ETO time today, and King George VI will broadcast tonight at 9 o'clock.

**U. S. Celebrates Victory  
2nd Time in Ten Days**

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**Ave S and S Is Off  
To a Rising Start**

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However the news was not all good because intense fighting continued in the Pacific. When we heard a rumor that the 100<sup>th</sup> was to be part of a force to invade Japan, our intensified training convinced many of us that the rumor would likely come true. Estimates of the number of anticipated American deaths for an invasion of Japan ranged widely. They seemed to settle around several hundred thousand American lives, a number that only increased our concerns about survival. The Japanese had refused to surrender even after massive bombings of Tokyo caused 100,000 deaths on March 9 and 10, 1945.

But for now, being an occupying army, there was time for more trivial activities. One of these was the issuance of certificates to those who fought in the battle of Bitche, as shown by the card below:



The back of the card certifies that (name) is a legitimate “Son of Bitche” duly inducted into the Ranks of Exalted Society of “Sons of Bitche” for his part in the Storm and Capture of the proud Citadel in the Maginot Line on March 16, 1945. The Grand Exalted Biggest signed the card.

An anecdote has it that the granddaughter of a cardholder was thoroughly reprimanded when she proudly showed the card to her

teacher. A parent later provided a satisfactory explanation to the teacher and resolved the issue.

## Stuttgart

With the termination of active combat, 100<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters moved to Stuttgart, an industrial city that was heavily bombed. Most of us moved to small towns around Stuttgart. Shown below are several photos I took of the substantial bomb damage to buildings in Stuttgart.



The Opera house survived the bombing and I attended a July 12, 1945 program there. Lacking printing capabilities, hand-written programs of the opera were distributed to the attendees.

OPERA-EVENING D7

on Thursday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1945  
at 7 p. m.

Leading: Alvin Lombardi  
Musical leading: Konrad Baumer

(1) Mozart: Overture to "Abduction from Seville"	Orchestra
(2) Mozart: Air from "Abduction from Seville"	Olga Moll
(3) Mozart: Belmont's Air from "Abduction from Seville"	Fritz Barth
(4) Weber: Air from "Freischütz"	W. Lucas
(5) Rossini: Cavatine from "Barber from Seville"	Engelbert Gyntok
(6) Verdi: Air from "Trionfador"	Anton John
(7) Verdi: Air from "Trionfador"	Paula Kapper
(8) Puccini: Tosca's Air	Paula Kapper
(9) Lortzing: Overture from "Armourer"	Orchestra
(10) Mozart: Air from "Magic Flute"	Olga Moll
(11) Mozart: Duet from "Magic Flute"	Maria Magym-Engelbert Gyntok
(12) Puccini: Duet from "Bohème" 4 <sup>th</sup> act	Fritz Barth-Engelbert Gyntok
(13) Lortzing: Air from "Armourer"	Paula Bauer
(14) Offenbach: Orpheus in the Shades below"	Orchestra

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Evidence of strict Military Government control is noted at the bottom of the program; the note states, "Published under Military Government Information Control License No. 5001."

Company F was located in the general Stuttgart area in small towns that included Wissenhorn, Leonburg and Schwetzingen. We were reminded of recent combat by the debris of war. For example, the next photo shows the remains of American P-47 airplane on the side of a road near Leonburg.



Our main activities consisted of continued training and serving in the army of occupation. The following picture shows several of us with a German artillery piece that we found during a training session near Nesinger Germany. The late Sergeant Joe Mitchell sent the picture to me in 1988. Left to right in the picture are: Mitchell, Sommer, two unidentified, and DeAmicis.



Several of us, transferred to the 253<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineering Battalion, were housed in substantial brick barracks near Schwitzingen that were formerly occupied by a German tank unit. An on-site electrical generator and water supply unit supplied water and electrical services to the barracks. The next photograph shows the generator on the left and water pumps located over the water well on the right.



One of my assignments there was measuring and controlling the chlorine content in the water for the facility. Controlled dripping of a strong chlorine solution into the well, using a simple gate valve, did this. The diesel engine that powered the generator was essentially identical to the ones that I saw earlier in the Maginot Line. The engine was started with compressed air, as were those in the Maginot Line.

Other duties at this post included checking passes of the local citizenry, shown below:



Accompanying one of the ladies was a budding young firewood salesperson.



Religious services were held in the post chapel and the following painting adorned one of the chapel walls.



Our main activities consisted of continued training and serving in the army of occupation. Our major topics of conversation at this location were our possible involvement in the continuing war in the Pacific and the likelihood of our going home. The thought of being involved in the invasion of Japan was very depressing for all of us.

An announcement made in late May stated that men could go home with an accumulation of at least 85 points. The point system was based upon the length of service, decorations received, and other factors. Unfortunately, I was to wait almost a year before acquiring the required number of points to qualify for the coveted trip home.

Although combat was officially over in Europe, German fanatics, mines and a large cache of weapons that endured the war remained potential threats. The army initiated an extensive operation to minimize these threats. The operation consisted of a 48-hour inspection that ultimately resulted in the jailing of 80,000 Germans including SS officers in Wermacht uniforms. Quantities of rifles, artillery shells, and small arms ammunition were apprehended.

Each company was assigned a specific search area to collect contraband. On July 21, Company F covered an area near Leonburg where we were housed. The picture shows (left to right) McCarthy, Sommer, DeAmicis and Cross with some of the contraband we collected in the trailer behind the Jeep.



McCarthy is holding a sword, DeAmicis and I are giving the Nazi salute, and Cross is looking over the contraband in the trailer behind the Jeep. I wonder where all this stuff ended up. Did the army have a gigantic garage sale?

Following the area wide search, events were relatively uneventful until we received news about the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. This event set the stage for the unconditional surrender of Japan as announced in the August 15 issue of 'Stars and Stripes' shown below:



An August 11 letter to my parents stated, “Boy the war sure does look good, doesn’t it. It sure will be wonderful when this whole mess ends. I can just imagine how happy those guys in the Pacific will be when they hear that it is all over. I can remember reading about Uranium 232 when I was taking chemistry back in high school and it is supposed to be the stuff in this new atomic bomb.”

Controversy remains today—and probably forever—about the morality of the dropping the atomic bomb. To a foot soldier that was likely to be directly involved in invading Japan, the rapid ending of the war was welcome news. Glen Seaborg, an eminent atomic scientist, stated “The proposition that it might be immoral to end the war as quickly as possible did not occur to many of us.” After the war was over in Europe, army policy initially prohibited all fraternization with Germans except on a business basis. When



the rules were eased, I contacted relatives that my grandfather had corresponded with in Germany before the war. At that time I was in Schwetzingen, a town located fairly close to the relatives' home in Sandhofen, Germany. In a November 19, 1945 letter to my parents, I wrote "Big news! Saw all the cousins in Sandhofen yesterday, stayed at their house all afternoon and talked with them. I met a Kraut on the streetcar who took me to his house where I was then taken to the Diehl home. They live on a small farm and have a typical German house along with one cow and a horse. When I arrived they immediately showed me all your old letters and photographs, which I got a big kick out of. One calendar she showed me was dated 1922 so that's quite a while ago. Adam Diehl is a little sick but he looked good to me. They all wondered whether or not you and Mary were among the living and I told them all about you Grandpa. Told them that you had a small garden and that you, Aunt Mary, Uncle Adam and Aunt Kate played cards often." My relatives showed me quite a few photos, including one of my grandfather's hardware store in Portsmouth.

## Travel Opportunities

Overseas duty provided time to visit local historical cities such as Heidelberg, and more distant cities such as Paris and London. While crossing the English Channel from LaHarve, France to visit London, we encountered seas so rough that the ship began to break up, necessitating our return to France. The next day, with the ship repaired we made the voyage on much calmer seas to Southampton, England, where the vestiges of war were much in evidence. The next photo shows portions of sunken ships in the port at Southampton.

After arriving in London, I stayed in a facility operated by the Red Cross that was not quite up to five-star standards. GIs slept on



cots there and pillowcases that were hung on the wall cautioned us that wallets were not safe, even if located in a pillowcase while sleeping. AWOL soldiers would slit the pillowcases with a razor blade to steal wallets as evidenced by several slit pillowcases displayed on the wall.

The British were very courteous and friendly. They were constantly reminded of the war by bomb scenes, like the photograph below that I took from St. Paul Cathedral in January 1946. Another reminder was the severe shortage of some food items such as sugar. It took years for England to recover from the effects of their long and valiant defense of their country and I'm still amazed they survived.



As wonderful as these trips were, they were no substitute for being home. Finally, with enough accumulated points, I departed France for home on the Vassar in early March 1946. My ocean trip home differed significantly from the one to France eighteen months earlier. The ship was much less crowded, the food much better, and limited on-board entertainment was provided. The ship's newsletter 'Vassar Viewpoint' chronicled the activities and news.

The ship traveled slowly during the first several days out of port; only later were we told why. The area around the port contained many oyster mines that were nearly impossible to detect and destroy. After these mines settle to the sea bottom, sounds from the ship's propeller can detonate them. Thirty-seven sunken hulls of ships in the area, one sunk only a week earlier, offered convincing proof that proceeding slowly was the expedient procedure.

A later edition of the ship's newsletter provided detailed information concerning government benefits that we could expect upon being discharged; it also listed the requirements to obtain the benefits. The GI bill was to include free tuition, books, plus \$50/month (\$75/month if you have a dependent), less if you have a job. This information significantly helped in planning one's future. Arrival in New York was followed by my discharge at Camp Atterbury in Indiana on March 19, 1946.

After arriving home, and before really greeting anyone, I remember running through the house in disbelief that I was really home. Many years later, I think I behaved like our family dog when we brought her home from the kennel after being on vacation. As soon as the car door opened she ran around the outside of the house as fast as she could, till I thought she would drop.

Home was followed by a degree in chemical engineering, marriage to Nancy, four children, and later, opportunities to travel back to Europe.

## Europe Revisited

During a trip to France and Germany in 1985 Nancy and I visited some of the locations that held many memories for me from some forty years earlier. The most memorable was a visit to Rimling. While there, and after some inquiry, we met Mr. Gambs, who kept the records for the local area. He and his wife lived in Rimling during the war and they graciously invited us into their home. The picture below shows the Gambs' family and their four children in their home, with Nancy on the left, and their four children on the right.



The open book on the table is copy of 'The Story of the Century' that lists the names of the soldiers in the 100<sup>th</sup>—quite a surprise to see this so far from home.

A picture in this room (next photo) shows the extensive damage to the buildings and the church in Rimling.

As we visited, I mentioned to Mr. Gambs that I heard a woman gave birth during the Rimling battle. He replied, "That was my wife", followed by a short silence. Nancy and I could only conclude that their child did not survive because of the terrible conditions in Rimling at the time.

Mr. Gambs then took us to the church, still scarred by many bullets and shrapnel.



Below is picture of the church tower:



After entering the church and demonstrating his considerable organ-playing skill, Mr. Gambs invited Nancy to play, which she did. Listening to both of them was a real treat.

The trip proved less informative about our battle in Rimling than I had hoped. First, we were pressed for time and I had not brought maps that would have been of considerable help in making past associations. This was corrected in our next trip there.



### May 2004 Visit to Europe

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association sponsors periodic trips to Europe for former soldiers, family members, and guests. Rev. William Glazier, a former antitank gunner with the Division, and Lisa Pommois, a French military historian, led our group's visits to the old areas of battle. Most travel was conducted from our hotel in Bitche, a beautiful city located in the Vosges Mountains. The local press covered our activities as shown in the next photo from the May 12, 2004 issue of LeR´epublic Lorrain.

On the left is Bill Moseley, Company G, on the right is Shep Rilovick whose father fought with the 100<sup>th</sup>, and I'm in the middle. The translated caption reads, "On the occasion of their sojourn in the Bitche country, these veterans of 100<sup>th</sup> U.S. Division, having liberated the sector, or the descendants of the soldiers who were part of this division, consult documents from that era."

*A l'occasion  
de leur séjour  
au Pays  
de Bitche,  
des vétérans  
de la 100<sup>e</sup>  
division US  
ayant libéré  
le secteur  
ou des  
descendants de  
soldats ayant  
appartenu  
à ce corps  
consultent  
un maximum  
de documents  
d'époque.*



Our touring group consisted of GIs from the three regiments of 100th Infantry Division and their support units, sons and daughters of Centurymen, in addition to the grandson of a Centurymen. Traveling by bus provided ample time to exchange stories (some even true) about our varied experiences during combat.

We first visited Wingen where we met Cal Norman, Co. A, 398<sup>th</sup>. He was badly injured there by a concussion grenade in December 1944. After capture, he recuperated in German hospitals until the end of the war and it was not until about 1974 that the remainder of the fragments from the grenade worked their way to the surface.

Wingen was very valuable real estate as evidenced by its changing German-American hands three times, each with intense fighting. Because of this, significant military equipment remains in and around Wingen. Linda Bergmann and her husband display some of equipment (next photo) they collected in their small private museum in Wingen.

As Linda showed us different items, she told my wife, "I keep these so people will not forget what you do for us." Casings from 88 mm German artillery shells and camouflaged tent fabric were among the items displayed. The fabric, visible below the case, was

in surprisingly good condition considering its many years of exposure in the field.



The Bergmanns operate a bed and breakfast (Relais Nature) and have a motorcycle shop on their property. Upon seeing my interest in the collection, Linda introduced me to her husband who had additional military items stored near his motorcycle shop in a building to the rear of the museum. Two very rusty hand grenades were in his collection. When he tried to hand these to me for inspection, I politely, but firmly, refused to handle them because grenades become unstable and shock sensitive after long-term aging; I strongly encouraged him, and later his wife, to dispose of them for the safety of all.

The next day we were bussed to Lemberg. Because of the mud and the absence of a road, we had to walk a long distance in the



cold and rain to a memorial site located deep in the woods outside Lemberg. The memorial honors Maurice Lloyd (399<sup>th</sup> Regiment) whose skeletal remains were found in his foxhole 37 years after his death—still clutching his Browning automatic rifle. The picture shows a wreath of flowers being placed at his monument, which reads VII ARMY: US CENTURY.



We walked back in the rain to the road where we were met by our bus that took us to a very warm reception. The local people again were very friendly and expressed appreciation for their liberation. Nancy and I took advantage of an opportunity to ride in restored WWII vehicles with 100<sup>th</sup> Division markings on them—a half-track and a staff car. I waited 60 years to get my first ride in these unique vehicles.

Next on the agenda was a several-hour bus trip from Bitche to Raon l'Etape that allowed our tour leader, Bill Glazier, to point out several locations of his 37mm anti-tank gun during combat. He mentioned that this gun, with its small bore, was relatively ineffective against a German tiger tank unless its shell hit in between the turret and the tank body, or impacted the tank track.

One anecdote mentioned during this trip involved a GI marching a recently captured German soldier to the rear. The GI's shoelace came untied, and as the GI tied it, his rifle fell in the snow. His prisoner picked up the rifle and handed it back to the GI. The GI said 'danken' (thanks) and the prisoner responded with 'bitte' (you are welcome).

This experience contrasts sharply with one I had while marching a prisoner through the woods to the rear. As I followed him while holding an M1 rifle with fixed bayonet in place, he walked slower and slower, and then looked over his shoulder with an arrogant grin. As a skinny 18 year old I concluded I was physically no match for the prisoner, who had the size and build of a lineman for a professional football team. I said 'schnell' (quick) in my best German in an effort to get him to walk faster—but it didn't work. I then repeated the 'schnell' exercise but still got no response. A louder 'SCHNELL', accompanied by a poke to his butt with my bayonet, worked.

We next visited St. Avold Cemetery, the largest American WW II cemetery in Europe. The French government donated the ground for this cemetery in perpetuity without charge or taxation. The more than 10,000 soldiers buried in St. Avold include four Medal of Honor recipients whose headstones are inscribed in gold relief.



This visit represented closure of sorts for me because I found the grave of Ed Johnson and placed a white rose (foreground) in front of the cross that marked his grave. Johnson died next to our foxhole on Christmas day 1944. We left his body on the hillside because we were ordered to withdraw shortly after his death. Some sixty years later, it was a relief to find that he had a dignified resting place.

We then returned to our base of operations in Bitche, The photo below was taken from the Citadel, a huge fortress located atop a hill in Bitche.



The citizens in Bitche named a street ‘Rue de la 100<sup>th</sup> Division U.S.’ in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. In the next photo, Bill Moseley (Co. G) is on the right; your author, the left. Upon returning to our hotel in Bitche, the hotel manager (Michele), displayed an American flag made by her aunt (seated) as shown in the photograph:

The flag, made during the war, was hidden from the occupying Germans because of the obvious risk of being caught with it. With its vertical array of eight stars and its horizontal rows of six stars, it is most likely one-of-a-kind.



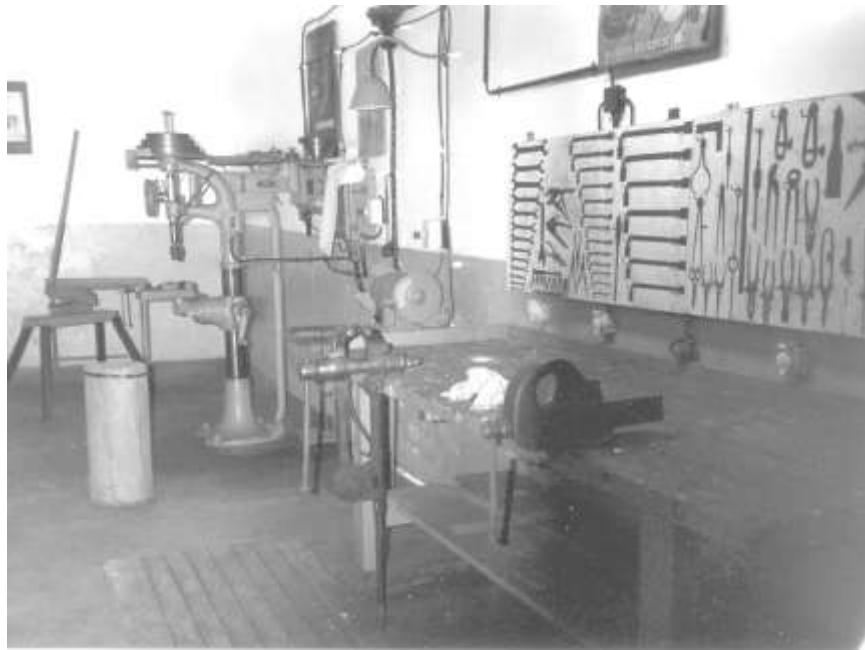
Next, we were treated to a joint French-American commemoration in downtown Bitche.



Following the commemoration, we toured a number of fortresses in the area. Having been in the Maginot line during combat, it was a real opportunity and pleasure to tour the Maginot fortresses under peaceful conditions. Our group first toured Fort Simserhof, one of the largest artillery emplacements on the Maginot Line. Some facilities there are more than 90 feet underground. Simserhof was able to provide protection for the smaller fortresses around Bitche for more than a month but ultimately was forced to surrender on June 30, 1940 on the orders of the French High Command.

We entered the open doors (next photo) to Simserhof on an electric train that provided a roving commentary, special sound effects, and 3D films on the history and operation of the fortress.

The subsequent walking tour afforded an opportunity for a much more detailed inspection of the various facilities (see below) in the fortress, such as the maintenance shop—a place for everything and everything in its place.



The large number of soldiers occupying the fortresses necessitated extensive air handling and purifying equipment. The air filters shown below were a necessary part of this equipment.



One can only imagine the depressing effect of living multiple stories below ground for long periods. Bare concrete walls did little to brighten one's spirits—so an enterprising artist painted a number of cheerful scenes from Disney to brighten spirits. The photograph below shows snow white and her entourage.



Next was a visit to the kitchen with its elevated sink



The sink was elevated to prevent soldiers from using it instead walking to the latrine. The Maginot Line is essentially a small underground city that contains a small hospital and a dental facility, shown below.





The dental facility included a pedal-powered drill that looked like a spinning wheel. In the interest of his patients, I hope the dentist was a conditioned bicycle rider who could pedal fast enough to quickly finish drilling. Next seen is the hospital.



We next toured Fort Schiessek and the restricted area surrounding it. A colonel in the French Army led our tour and highlighted many of the fortresses' interesting features. Pictured below is a sharp spike protruding about six inches above ground level, adjacent to the colonel's left foot.



Spikes were placed in the general fortress area to puncture shoes of enemy soldiers. Posts (see arrow) supported barbed wire that was strung around the fortress. The next photo shows a spike removed from the ground, along with a short length of barbed wire removed from the post. It is quite remarkable that the barbed wire and the spike survived sixty years of outdoor exposure. The pure air in this region no doubt contributed to their longevity.



Some of the pillboxes in the Maginot line are freestanding but others are interconnected. Some are equipped with turrets that can be raised and rotated for firing, while others are fixed. Our group is shown inspecting one of moveable turrets.



Explosives placed inside the fixed turret destroyed it. The turret was subsequently rebuilt and stabilized with concrete.



A periscope can be raised above the surface of some turrets to observe the enemy. The dog-bone shaped object shown in the middle of a turret below can be rotated to provide an opening through which a raised periscope can reconnoiter the local area.



Upon returning from Fort Schiessek to our hotel, I was given a note offering to arrange a personal tour of Fort Casso the next day. Shep Rilvick and I accepted and the next photograph shows Shep (left) a retired colonel in the U.S. army and Ludvico, our tour guide, standing outside the entrance to Fort Casso.



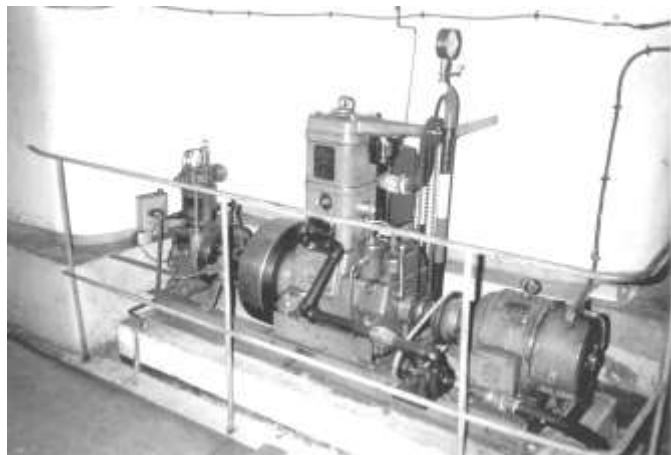
A radio antenna for communication among pillboxes is located above the entrance. Telephone, rather than radio communication, was preferred because it offered greater security. A floodlight encased in a thick steel box is located outside the fortress. It can be remotely operated from inside the fortress to survey the surrounding area and to direct artillery fire.



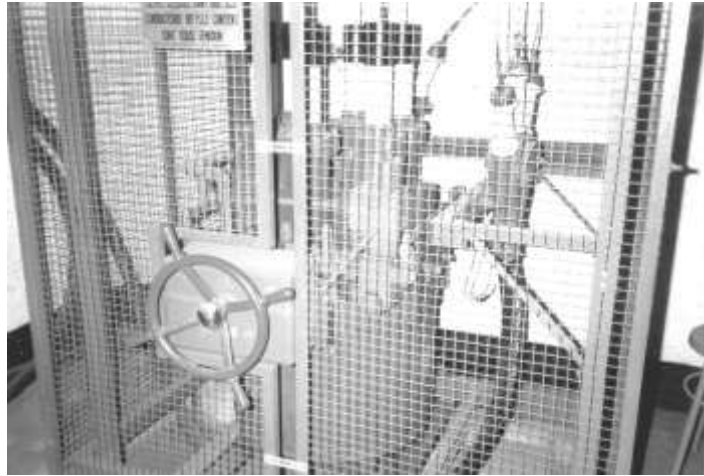
The level of technology incorporated in the Maginot line is indeed impressive, especially considering that the line was mainly constructed in the 1930s. Large diesel engines powered electrical generators that supplied the substantial electrical requirements of the fortress. The generator is in the foreground, the diesel engine in the background.



Compressed air started these engines. If air pressure was inadequate for the next start, a separate smaller engine-compressor unit served as a backup.



The next photograph shows associated electrical equipment behind its protective cage.



Armament size in the fortresses ranged from small caliber machine guns to large artillery pieces. The arrangement below allows a machine gunner to aim and fire a gimbal-mounted gun, while being protected from enemy fire. Other fortresses were equipped with openings through which hand grenades could be deposited outside if the enemy got too close.



The cabinet below displays artillery shells (lower left) and periscopes (upper right) and a plaque describes their characteristics.



Our guide told us that gunners placed wine corks in their ears to provide hearing protection when firing artillery shells in the tightly confined areas of the fortress. I suspect there was never a shortage of hearing protection.



Lower ranked personnel slept in hammocks slung from steel poles, shown above. This sleeping arrangement is similar to the one provided on the troopship that transported us to France. The major difference is that the vertical spacing between the fortress bunks is significantly greater than that provided on our troopship. The quality of sleeping quarters in the fortress varies substantially—rank always has its privileges.



Intermediate-rank soldiers slept on bunk beds with mattresses and their occupancy rotated on a 12-hour basis. Ludvico surveys the arrangement of the beds in the photograph above.

The ranking officer occupied a private bedroom with painted walls and other amenities, such as a desk and chair and a hanging picture. The painted walls and the picture below no doubt provided a welcome relief from the stark concrete walls prevalent throughout most of the fortress.





The toilet consists of two imprints in its base for locating feet and a critically located opening. Its use required the aiming accuracy normally associated with the Norton bombsight that was used on American bombers. The pages hanging on the left wall serve a dual purpose—first as reading material, after which they met their ultimate fate.



After WWII, I had hoped someday to return to a specific fortress that we occupied in 1944. I remembered several of its features, one of which was the continuous rail track at the base of the stairs that descended to the lowest level of the fortress. Upon descending to this level in Fort Casso, termination of the track convinced me that this was not the fortress I was in during the war.

With the completion of our tour of fortresses in the Maginot line, we next visited Rimling.

Our visit to Rimling was the highlight of the trip for me as it held the most intense memories of any location we visited. Cordial officials and residents hosted us at both indoor and outdoor ceremonies. The weather during our Rimling visit was a real bonus, being much better than the rain and cold that we experienced in previous locations.

Upon visiting different locations, infantrymen that had been most involved in action in the immediate location were selected to carry ceremonial flags. In Rimling, Bill Moseley carried the American flag and I carried the 100<sup>th</sup> Division flag to a wreath-laying ceremony.



Firemen, gendarmes, and the local band participated in the ceremony. The Mayor of Rimling (standing) and Bob Alcorn (anti-tank company) are holding wreaths.



The next photo shows Steve Walker at the dais on the left reading a list of names of soldiers from the 100<sup>th</sup> Division who were killed in Rimling. Steve, from York, England, lives in Rimling and teaches English in Germany. The deceased included Lt. Frank Rosse (my platoon leader) and Tech. Sgt. Charles Carey who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor as a result of action in Rimling on January 8 and 9, 1945.



During the outdoor ceremony, Bob Alcorn and the Mayor placed wreaths beneath the plaque in the city square. The next figure shows the plaque, which reads. “To the memory of the soldiers of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division who died in their fight for our liberation. Honor to all those who have fought for our liberty.” Rimling, Sept. 29, 1996.



Following the outdoor ceremony the mayor hosted us at a reception in the town hall, where we were introduced to a local girl named Marie-Louise Krese. The photograph below shows Marie shaking hands with Bill Glazier beneath the American flag.



As a young girl in Rimling, she climbed into the church tower at great risk. From this vantage point she provided information of considerable value to the Americans during the intense battle at Rimling. Her Croatian-born husband was held at a camp by the Germans and had to work on a farm in Rimling. He escaped from the camp in late 1944 and took refuge under Marie's kitchen where he avoided detection because Marie's father had placed pepper in the area to fool German search dogs.

The next photo shows members of the Gambs' family with Nancy and me on the right. Nancy and I had met them during our earlier visit to Rimling in 1985.

We also met Anais Schoendorff, a young lady whose subsequent letter concluded with the comment, "I'd like to thank you too for keeping this important friendship between our two countries and hope we'll have the occasion to meet us one more

time again. We'll never forget you and your 'band of brothers' who suffered a lot, to liberate us."



Following the reception and dedication, Armer Alcorn, Bill Moseley, Steve Walker and his son, Shep Rilovick, and Nancy I set out on a walking tour of Rimling, with the ultimate goal of finding my old foxhole on Schlietzen hill. Armer is the 9-year old grandson of Bob Alcorn. Hence, our entourage represented three generations. During our walk through Rimling, Bill Moseley quickly found the area he fought in, shown below:



Bill then talked with some of the local citizenry who remembered details about the battle, e.g., the position of German tanks during the fighting. Bill's platoon and the two others that constituted Company F were positioned in Rimling during the battle. Our platoon, the second, was dug in on Schlietzen hill north of Rimling. Our continuing trek to Schlietzen hill took us to the backyard of Steve Walker's home. The photo shows him standing on the site of a foxhole in his back yard that he had filled in only two years ago.



We continued our walk through tall grass on the hill and located the very likely site of the foxhole that DeAmicis, Sussman and I had occupied on Schlietzen hill. We then descended south to the road leading into Rimling, the same path we took on that fateful day in January 1945.

Walking down that road into Rimling, we passed Mme. Lucie Beck's home on the east side of the road. Aged 82, when I photographed below, she told us she was evacuated from her house because of the severe wounds she sustained during the battle. Her present house was rebuilt on the site of her former house, which was destroyed.



Our next trip took us from France into Germany where we visited a salt mine located 600 feet below ground level. Used during the war to build rockets with slave labor, a chart on one wall of a chamber in the mine depicted the location of labor and extermination camps located throughout the area. The chart acknowledged past horrors, and it will hopefully serve as a reminder for the future.

We then visited the very interesting Sinsheim museum in Germany, where we were greeted by Germans wearing American uniforms decorated with the 100<sup>th</sup> Division patch. Additionally, we saw a number of refurbished American military vehicles from WWII, some of which were painted with Division, Regiment, and Company identification as shown below:



The eclectic and interesting holdings at the Sinsheim museum range from juke boxes to tiger tanks to the Concorde airplane. As with other places we visited, our time in Sinsheim was much too short.

## Retrospective

The long time period between combat and writing this book has provided ample time to revisit wartime memories and to hopefully put them in perspective. Combat experience causes considerable stress that derives from several sources. The most obvious source of stress was endangerment from a range of enemy weapons that included rifles, machine guns, mortars, artillery, strafing by airplanes, mines, etc. At times it seems the whole German military was trying to kill us. And it took only a day or two in combat to fully realize they were. Adding to this stress were exhaustion, and day and night exposure to cold and wet weather for long periods. Unchecked, this stress leads to combat fatigue.

So, how do men tolerate these hostile conditions? Looking back, it was our mutual involvement in, and the sharing of the ordeals of combat—we were all in the same boat. Also helping us to deal with the stress was the comradeship and the bonds formed among us.

It is likely that nearly all soldiers will succumb to combat fatigue given sufficient exposure time in combat. Combat fatigue caused a significant number of all casualties in WWII. Longer times in combat and more intense combat increased this number. Some GIs suffering from combat fatigue were sent to the rear where they received therapy in the form of sodium amytol injections that enabled them to express their experiences. When these men could minimally function, they were sent back to the front. Hence, they often were often prematurely returned to their units.

Even very effective and stable sergeants and platoon leaders eventually reach their breaking point, not only from the direct exposure to enemy fire, but also from having to make decisions that affect the lives of their subordinates. To send a young man out



on patrol and not have him return has to be an agonizing experience.

Many of the soldiers in Company F were captured in Rimling and then subjected to horrible treatment in German POW camps. Ironically, following their release after the war, a few of these POWs developed mild resentment of those who escaped capture. Perhaps the bonds formed in POW camps were even stronger than those formed during combat—hence the division.

On the other hand, a few soldiers who escaped capture have hesitated to attend reunions because they were made to feel guilty. Generally, strong bonds remain among all combat soldiers. The photograph below shows those of us who attended the Company F reunion held in Mt. Prospect, Illinois in 1998.



The picture was taken in front of the house of Chester and Dorothy Pestrak and those pictured are mainly POWs and their wives. Chester regularly displays the POW flag in his front yard. Company F is indebted to Ray Klund (pictured far left) for organizing this and other Company F reunions and for publishing

the Company newsletter, 'Fox Tales'. Nancy and I are pictured right.

POWs from Company F were treated very harshly, worked extremely hard, and suffered malnourishment in POW camps; Jewish-American soldiers were selected for especially harsh treatment. Many POWs suppressed their horrific memories for over 50 years, not even revealing them to spouses or other family members. Illness and non-nourishing food that was in very short supply accounted for typical weights of 90 pounds for released prisoners. The bread recipe for POWs listed 20% tree flour (sawdust) and 10% minced leaves and straw among its ingredients. Additionally, the POWs were worked very hard while on their sub-marginal diet.

## Other Conflicts

Many conflicts and wars have occurred before and after WWII. Upon reviewing some of these, similarities and differences emerge. For example, when attending a civil war program several years ago, I was 'volunteered' to put on a rebel uniform. It occurred to me at that time how little things had changed for an infantryman in the eighty or so intervening years between the Civil War and WWII. Infantry ground troops in both wars were essentially two-legged pack animals, as they have always been and will likely be in the future. Basic civil war equipment included a rifle, bayonet, canteen, blanket (later a sleeping bag in WWII), and rations, similar to WWII equipment.

A general characteristic of all wars is the need for a nation's leaders to find a purpose and a theme that will persuade their citizens to commit to war. The attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan in 1941 initiated the support and cemented the resolve of the American people. Support and resolve for the many subsequent conflicts and wars have been less clear.

The trend in the military is to change from the large infantry divisions of WWII to much smaller units that are intended to be essentially self-sufficient. So, it doesn't appear that wars will

vanish—only the manner in which we conduct them and the nature of the weapons used.

Unique approaches have been made over millennia to stop wars. Lysistrata led the women of Athens in an effort to end war by refusing sex with their husbands until achieving peace. Even this didn't work. Wars continue as evidenced by the many U.S. military engagements.

Some benefits arise from the tragedy of war. Technological advances, originally intended for use in weapons, were later adapted to peaceful applications that benefited humankind. The GI bill was another indirect benefit of WW2. Congress implemented it partly for benevolent reasons, and partly for self-protection. Congressional members probably recalled the bonus march on Washington by veterans after WWI and wanted to avoid a recurrent march after WWII. Ultimately costing \$5.5 billion, the GI bill produced over a million professionals that included 450,000 engineers and 91,000 scientists who have made many contributions for decades.

American Citizens often take their freedoms for granted. It's easy to forget that these benefits were first obtained, and then maintained, at great sacrifice by genuine heroes such as Abraham Lincoln, Jonas Salk and the men who stormed the beaches of southern France on D-day. In contrast many Americans today select and sometimes adore, athletes, film stars, and entertainers as their heroes.

The writing of this book has permitted me to gain a limited historical perspective of the events that occurred during combat. I'm thankful for this opportunity, an opportunity many of my fellow soldiers didn't get. I feel fortunate in having gone full circle from living in a foxhole to living well these many years in a country that continues to provide countless freedoms and opportunities about which others can only dream.

Just as September 11, 2001 permanently altered the perception and perspective of fear and well being for residents of New York, being subject to fire from rifles, machine guns, mortars, rockets, artillery, tanks and strafing airplanes at a young age has no doubt altered the perspective of fear for my fellow soldiers and me.

Combat experience provides a baseline to judge fear and well being for a lifetime.

American Legion Post 464 in Hudson, Ohio created a Commemorative Wall in 2005. The wall consists of engraved bricks in its entrance to honor a loved one or create a tribute that serves as a permanent reminder. The brick shown below is a tribute to Company F.

