

The 100's Most Decorated: Elery M. Zehner

by Robert Stegmaier, 100-G-4 and Franklin Gurley, 399-A

Lt. Col. Elery M. Zehner seemed to appear out of nowhere that morning of May 12, 1944 to assume command of the 1st Battalion. The men had assumed that Major Bernard V. Lentz had a lock on the job, particularly in view of the fact that the 399th CO, Colonel Andrew Tyhsen, had served for several years under Lentz's father and had been requested by the father to take young "Barney" Lentz under his wing. Until that May morning, morale in the 1st Battalion was not particularly high. This had nothing to do with Major Lentz but was simply due to discouragement on the men's part about the prospects of ever getting overseas. However, when the men learned that Col. Zehner was a West Pointer, they interpreted this as a sign that they might be overseas-bound after all. Zehner's all-business, no-nonsense training methods reinforced this belief that the 100th was combat material waiting for a chance to show what it could do. The only note of whimsy in Zehner's otherwise stern comportsment was the red silk scarf which he wore tucked in behind his silver oak leaves. Someone said that Zehner had dubbed the battalion "the Red Raiders", of which his scarf was the symbol. Before combat ended, dozens if not hundreds of men in the battalion would sport this same red scarf.

Less than six months later, on November 4, 1944, Zehner had his first real chance to prove or disprove the prediction of the West Point 1937 Year Book that "this gentleman will bear watching." Zehner's battalion received the mission of capturing the village of St. Remy, situated in open rolling ground 4 km west of the Meurthe River. Following a successful foray into town by Lt. Jack Jenkins of C Co. and his large combat patrol, B Co. received the order to assault the town from the south across open fields. The attack progressed well until the enemy suddenly unleashed a coordinated hail of machinegun, mortar, artillery and rifle fire against the oncoming GI's. The B Co. line hit the dirt and was not overly anxious to continue the advance until something was done to eliminate the enemy fires.

At that moment, Col. Zehner, who was observing the attack from a few hundred yards behind, strode forward to where the advancing line was pinned down. "Follow me!" he cried and set off toward the distant farm houses of the village. The men regained their feet and followed. When Zehner reached the first farm house, he went around and entered the front door from the street side. To his surprise he found himself in the same house with the German machine gun crew that had pinned down B Co. Zehner quickly exited from the house through a window and escaped.

When word of Zehner's "opening day performance" in combat circulated around the battalion during the following days, it gave the men a feeling that they were under competent, daring leadership. Zehner was later awarded the DSC for his action.

There followed what General Burress later referred to in his Infantry School lectures as the "Battle of the Baccarat Woods." In an imaginative effort to penetrate the enemy's defense line behind the Meurthe River, Burress sent both the 397th and 399th regiments across the bridge at Baccarat, which General Leclerc had seized several days previously. While the 397th's presence could be detected by the enemy through use of recon patrols, the 399th's move across the river was kept shrouded in secrecy. Burress's plan was to double team the enemy by having the 399th attack through the 397th's lines at the appropriate moment. The moment came on November 15, when the 399th's 3rd Battalion broke through the fixed enemy positions in heavy woods and captured Hills 409-431 straddling the highway leading south to Raon l' Etape on the Meurthe.

That was the signal for Zehner's battalion to move through the 397th positions to the right of the breakthrough point. Zehner's men quickly reached the Raon l' Etape road, but instead of pushing east beyond the highway as 3rd Battalion was doing, Zehner's line companies headed south on both sides of the highway in the direction of Raon l' Etape. The Gennans' 708th *Volksgrnadier* Division, the best unit facing our VI Corps, was not expecting such a sudden breakthrough and lost a mortar platoon with its ammunition to the advancing doughboys.

"There are no Jerries down there," Zehner announced at one point. One listener wondered whether the CO really believed that or whether he simply wanted the men to believe it. In fact, the woods were full of

German infantrymen who reacted like a swarm of angry hornets at Zehner's sudden incursion into their rear areas. Captain Richard Young of A Co. was shot squarely in the midriff at close range by an enemy rifleman, but the buckle of his ammo belt absorbed the blow with only slight damage. Young, wielding his carbine with one hand, killed his assailant.

As the early Vosges twilight began settling in, Zehner and his staff caught up with the advance units at the point where the American line consisted of C Co. to the left of the road, four Sherman tanks on the road, and A Co. on the right of the road. D Co.'s Sgt. Rudolph Steinman was present with a machinegun section. Col. Zehner was engrossed in studying his map. "Well look here," Zehner announced to Capt. Park Brown and the other staff officers present. "We're 1,000 yards in front of the 7th Army. We're sort of a "Lost Battalion." Of course we're not really lost, since we know exactly where we are on this map."

The Colonel's ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of C Co.'s Captain Ronan Campion from the woods on the left. Campion was screaming and gesturing at Zehner as though he were a man on fire. "My men are being cut to ribbons down there!" he shouted. What he was obviously seeking was Zehner's approval to halt the advance.

"Okay, dig your forces in where they are," Zehner said calmly, and Campion quickly disappeared. Steinman's machine gun crews dug in for the night to protect the tanks. Zehner and his officers went back to the rear for the night, but returned the next morning to launch the final phase of the Divisional strategy of cutting off Raon l' Etape from the rear. This meant the capture of the hill mass *Tete des Reclos* ("Top of the Wilderness"), which lay approximately one mile ahead of Zehner's lines.

Zehner, wearing his red scarf and making no effort to conceal his silver oak leaves, gave instructions to the rifle company commanders and the tank commander. The attack began without artillery preparation in order to preserve surprise. At the foot of *Tete des Reclos* several GI's were hit by sniper fire, but the attack proceeded after the capture of the German noncom in charge. Zehner interrogated the prisoner and then led the four Shermans off to the right flank to deliver supporting fire up the mountain. From up above the sounds of battle drifted downward like the explosions of thousands of fire crackers being set off at the same time. Despite several fierce counterattacks by enemy mountain troops, Zehner's rifle companies still held the summits when darkness came. However, Zehner was furious at the tank commander for refusing to carry out a fire mission, declaring, "That's the last g.d. time I'll ever use tanks." (A statement that he would disregard many times later.)

When news of the 100th's breakthrough reached Corps HQ, Gen. Edward Brooks made a decision to pass the 3rd Infantry Division through the 100th's Baccarat bridgehead in order to accelerate the race toward Strasbourg. However, a day later Brooks changed his mind, after reports that the 100th was having trouble getting across the La Plaine River. If Brooks had maintained his initial decision, it is entirely conceivable that VI Corps would have been able to advance promptly toward Schirmeck and capture Strasbourg before French General Leclerc arrived there in the vanguard of XV Corps on the left.

In any event, Leclerc was in Strasbourg by November 23 and was in danger of being surrounded by enemy forces. Brooks decided to send the 3rd Division forward from the Saales Pass and the 100th Division from the Hantz Pass, the two divisions to operate on opposite banks of the Bruche River toward Strasbourg and relief of Leclerc. Col. Zehner's offer to lead the 100th's advance was accepted and the 399th jumped off the next morning. One GI in Zehner's battalion wrote home: "Our ambitions West Point Lt. Col. has volunteered us for a special job tomorrow."

Word was passed that whichever division won the race for Strasbourg would receive three days rest. Zehner's men in 48 hours raced through Rothau, Schirmeck, Wisches, Lutzelhouse and Urman as far as Oberhaslach, against spotty resistance and occasional artillery fire. On November 26, Zehner's men learned that although neither division was supposed to use motorized transport, the 3rd Division had "cheated." The 100th was halted and ordered to move north to the Sarrebourg area. What had happened was that General Eisenhower had just visited the area and rejected General Patch's request to put 7th Army's VI Corps across the Rhine. Instead, Eisenhower said that Patch should shift the bulk of his forces toward the north in support of Patton's flank. Thus did the 100th join XV Corps with Bitche as its new objective.

Zehner's battalion went into action in the new northern sector on the third anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1944. As often happened, the plan from topside made it all sound easy. Zehner's men would outflank Lemberg on the left while the 3rd Battalion went around the right side. Corps artillery would provide overwhelming marching fire which would advance across the fields into Lemberg just before the line companies made their move.

At the "worm's" level, however, things did not look so rosy. Capt. Altus Prince of B Co. (West Point 1943) confided to his 1st Sgt. that "nothing in training would justify sending our company across that open ground." Prince was right. Waiting for Zehner's battalion were elements of the 25th *Panzer Grenadier* Division supported by an entire Flak battalion attached to the *Wehrmacht's* 90th Corps. The flak wagons, concealed in the folds of ground across which Prince's men had to pass, riddled the GI's mercilessly, killing or wounding dozens.

Next day, December 8, Col. Tychsen changed tactics, sending 2nd Battalion on a wide sweep to the right of town and 3rd Battalion on a tight sweep. When Tychsen told Zehner of the plan, Zehner offered to attack the town straight on. Tychsen, well aware of Zehner's heavy casualties the day before, replied gratefully, "Would you?" All three battalions succeeded in their coordinated missions, but not before 90th Corps' flak wagons had chewed up the 2nd Battalion along the railroad tracks behind the town. After that the 25th *Panzer Grenadier* Division was pulled back to Bitche to defend the Maginot forts Freudenberg, Schiesseck and Simserhoff and to hold the Bitche road junction in case the *Wehrmacht* decided to counterattack (as it soon would do in Operation Nordwind.)

On December 14 the 398th attacked Fort Freudenberg one mile west of Bitche. Zehner was told he would attack the city and its central citadel on December 15. However, the attack was postponed a day, and then was further postponed without date. Word went around the battalion that Zehner had refused to attack as long as the Maginot forts dominating the city to the west remained in enemy hands. By the time Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck were finally taken on December 20, the plan to take Bitche had been dropped as the 100th prepared to extend its lines westward to Rimling to free Patton's forces to go the Ardennes.

On December 27 Zehner was named Acting Regimental Commander as Col. Tychsen was promoted to Assistant Division Commander. On December 31st, shortly before midnight, Zehner was celebrating New Year's Eve at 1st Bn. HQ with the new commander, Barney Lentz, and Dick Young of A Co. Hearing enemy fire from over the hill where Bitche lay, Zehner returned promptly to his HQ at Enchenberg, and Dick Young jumped into a jeep (he had never driven before in the Army) to return to the A Co. CP on the ridge overlooking Bitche.

Zehner's old battalion, holding a line due south of Bitche from the Maginot forts in the west to Wolfsgarten farm in the east, repulsed all enemy attacks during the first night of Operation Nordwind. However, the 117th Cavalry Recon Squadron had withdrawn from the battlefield and enemy troops were able to outflank the 100th's positions with ease on the right flank. By daybreak on January 1, the enemy already held the commanding ground behind the 1st Battalion, between Reyersviller and Lemberg. Zehner, maneuvering his three battalions masterfully, wheeled the 1st Bn. around 90 degrees from an east-west alignment to a new north-south line facing the open flank. Similarly, the 3rd Bn., which had provided a defense-in-depth behind the 1st, was also wheeled into a north-south configuration from Spitzberg hill to Lemberg.

The enemy's 559th *Volks Grenadier* Division struck hard against Lemberg, where L Co. was able to hold them off until relief came the first evening by the 63rd Infantry Division and later the same night by the 36th Infantry Division. One Texas Division man heard a 100th man say he was happy the "first team" was being sent in. Leaving Lemberg to the 36th, Zehner sent 3rd Bn. units to shore up the lines on the hill mass Signalberg north of Lemberg and below Reyersviller. The acting battalion CO did not endear himself to the men when he told them to "follow that contour line" as though it were printed on the snow. The night redeployment of forces became a gigantic snafu. Zehner told the L Co. CO, "I'm relieving you right now. You are not fit to be an officer."

The German advances against the new "Zehner line" were finally stopped and on January 8 the 399th went over to the attack again. The objective was the Signalberg hill mass which dominated the entire

Bitche area. The 100th, anticipating a long winter war, wanted to get off the back slopes and seize the dominating summits. Sherman tanks received special whitewash treatments the night before the attack.

I Co. on the right seized Spitzberg hill, killing an estimated 150 enemy with a company numbering 52 men. K Co. in the center reached the Signalberg summit and found in an enemy foxhole Capt. Frederick Batrus's monogrammed stationery lost in Operation Nordwind. On the left L Co. supported by three Shermans advanced toward Signalberg from the Steinkopf hill area. Zehner, anxious to have the attack succeed, jumped into one of the Shermans and ordered it forward up the frozen slope. When the tank got hung up on a tree stump, Zehner leaped free and continued advancing on foot. An enemy shell struck the inert tank, killing the crew. Waving his Thompson sub-machinegun, Zehner shooed some 15 Germans out of their foxholes and led them back as prisoners. At the end of the day, Zehner discovered he had neglected to install an ammo clip in his weapon.

For more than a week, the 559th VGD attempted to force the 3rd Bn. back but it managed to hold all the ground gained on January 8th. On January 12th, Zehner was told to return to command of the 1st Battalion, that Colonel Edward J. Maloney was the new CO of the 399th Infantry succeeding Col. Tyachsen. Scuttlebutt at Division HQ suggested that Zehner had been relieved of his temporary command of the 399th because it was felt that he should direct rather than personally lead his troops and that he should spend more time at his CP replying to topside requests by telephone for information rather than up front with the troops. For his actions on January 8, Zehner was awarded an Oak Leaf Ouster to his DSC.

After the excitement of the Vosges breakthrough and Operation Nordwind, Zehner found the static warfare of the winter line somewhat tedious. On the night of Feb. 1-2, he and 3rd Bn. CO Barney Lentz launched a coordinated night attack aimed at capturing the part of the enemy's MLR extending from Freudenberg Farms southward approximately one km. However, I Co.'s assault force was treated savagely by the German defenders at the Farms, while A Co. to the south found itself pinned down in front of enemy positions as bright flares exposed their presence to German gunners. As A Co.'s walking-wounded came back through friendly lines, Zehner could be heard saying "I'm sorry" to the wounded men.

Zehner gave his name to a contraption for firing mortar shells from an inclined sheet of corrugated metal by a battery hookup. The device, similar to larger Russian rockets, was called "Zehner's Zany II."

Zehner had less luck experimenting with an antitank grenade on Signalberg. Placing a bullet (instead of the required blank cartridge) in the chamber of a rifleman's M-1, Zehner pulled the trigger, wounding himself and the rifleman in the ensuing explosion. Another officer, commenting on the incident, suggested that a man as busy as Zehner could easily fail to grasp some do's-and-don'ts which every rifleman knows by heart.

Finally, winter ended and the 100th captured Bitche on March 16, 1945. That afternoon Zehner's battalion found itself a fight at Camp de Bitche, a *Wehrmacht* tank training center. A few minutes after listening to an A Co. officer's exaggerated report about routing six tanks (A Co. had actually met and destroyed one tank), Zehner found his forces under attack by a column of more than six enemy tanks. After causing several casualties, the enemy force withdrew.

During the last week of March, the 100th waited to be sent across the Rhine. 1st Bn. men chuckled at learning that Zehner had volunteered his Bn. for special missions beyond the river, but Division had turned him down. Finally, the Division crossed on April 1st and by April 4th Zehner had caught up with the enemy again. Near the city of Schwaigern on the road to Heilbronn, the 1st Bn. ran up against a German defensive line that had been put together after the passage of the 10th Armored Division. All efforts to move out of woods onto rolling terrain leading to the city were met by enemy machinegun fire.

"Come on, Lieutenant D'Arpino," Zehner told an A Co. platoon leader, "Let's get going. The enemy has nothing." Just then a shell exploded between the two, men, causing Zehner to reconsider. "Sir," D'Arpino said, "I refuse to move unless you give me tanks." Two scouts accompanied Zehner back to the next town where the tanks were. On the way back Zehner spelled his radio man by carrying the heavy sound power radio. When enemy shells began to march along the valley near the little column, Zehner declared, "They're always after me like this." The remark surprised his listeners who had assumed he was oblivious to risk and insensitive to danger.

Zehner continued to provide his usual brand of competent leadership during the battle for Heilbronn and the ridges beyond the city. When the 100th finally ceased combat operations on April 23, Zehner had earned two DSC's, a silver star, three bronze stars, and two purple hearts. An overwhelming majority of battalion members were wearing red scarves by that time. Some fellow officers thought that if Zehner had been assigned to a more aggressive unit such as Patton's 4th Armored Division, his deeds and proclivities for action would have received wider appreciation. When the time arrived for the 100th's redeployment to the U.S., Zehner was bitterly disappointed to learn that his name was not on the list.

From 1946 to 1949 Zehner served as a tactical officer at West Point where he was promoted to Colonel. In March, 1949, he attended a reunion of his old battalion held in Queens, N.Y. in a 77th Division hall called "Lost Battalion Hall." It probably reminded him of his own temporarily "lost" battalion in the Vosges the day his unit had broken through the enemy's winter line. His later assignments included Venezuela, Argentina and the Inter American Defense College at Fort McNair. After a disability discharge in 1967 at age 55, he worked as an engineer at Potomac Electric Power Co. He died in the District of Columbia on May 9, 1978.

Editor's comment: Colonel Stegmaier served as the Division's G-4 officer from 1942 to 1945 and was a fellow member with Elery Zehner of the West Point Class of 1937. Frank Gurley, our historian, served as a rifle scout throughout combat in Colonel Zehner's 1st Battalion, 399th Infantry.

February 1991 Association Newsletter