

Memoirs (WWII)

by Tom Tillet, 398-H

Although the big event seemed to have dated with Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, I saw my personal beginning for the war in March of 1943. That is when I was called up and had my swearing in ceremony at the Recruitment Center in Mechanicsville, Pa. I had said my goodbyes at home in Upper Darby and my Dad drove me first to see Betty and then over to Mechanicsville. But even then it did not seem real until after the long train ride down thru Virginia, Tennessee and into Alabama to Fort McClelland. This was an Army Base, training recruits for the Infantry. We did not get much sleep on the train and that morning as we arrived at the train siding inside the base and at the Parade Ground there was a much-sharpened sense that this was it. The Base Commander had a welcoming speech but the only message that I heard was when he called us all to attention, asked us to turn and look at the man on my right, then slowly we were to turn and look at the man on our left as he said now you must understand that this is very serious training. These men beside you will not be coming back and only YOU, the ones who are very serious about your training will be coming home.

Twelve weeks of Basic Infantry Training was to make me a man. Long hikes and then hikes with a full 40-pound pack would gradually get those muscles to another level. I started at 135 pounds and changed all that to muscle. We were introduced to live-fire, poison gas, bayonets, 81mm mortars, 30mm machineguns. It still seemed to me that everyone else was older and about twice my size. Most spoke a language that I had never heard before. Swearing was something I had never used before and soon it seemed as natural as if I had always talked that way. Life experiences were so different on the farm, in the big cities and on the bayou's of Louisiana that it seemed every night I heard another strange story. Most of my close friends had grown up much like I had and found this as strange as I did. This hot Alabama summer was tough but we were going to manage. In August the company was reassigned and most of those men went straight out and over to Italy where the fighting was hot and heavy. I joined a select few who were pulled out for the ASTP Program, a type of Officers Training and we were first to start with college and in my case to Atlanta and Georgia Tech. I was to learn to be an Engineer (at Tech this meant a hellewa, hellewa Engineer). No question that this delay in getting into combat was to save my life. Steven Ambrose has recently written a book called the Citizens Army and his research made it clear that those who were headed to the Infantry needed to have every delay possible to make the odds come around and then for those who might be slated to become an officer, you simply did not need the honor. My combat days lasted from October 1944 thru May 1945 and that was playing it close.

The assignment to Georgia Tech made me reconsider a career goal as different from my Liberal Arts beginning at UNC, that led to a decision after the war to become an Engineer, go to Drexel University but I still had two years to think about it. I am sure that it also saved my life. That six-month delay was a critical blessing. We wrote a lot of letters in those days and it felt awful to learn when a really close friend was killed. Jim Vauclain died at Monte Cassina . . . and James Tucker died at Anzio Beach. My friends and roommates, Ray Morris and Harvey Jagoe, were still in school in Chapel Hill when I went overseas.

After Georgia Tech, in March of 1945 I was sent on to Fort Bragg and joined the 100th Division as it was being finally prepared to go overseas as an intact Division. At that time the need for new replacements had grown and the Army simply shut down the whole ASTP program and sent our group of possible Officer Candidates right into the Infantry. From March to September we were formed into a fighting force and then sent into France. We had a stormy trip across on the *USS Gordon*, a large troopship, and really had some fierce stormy seas. This sent most to their hammocks, rocking and vomiting and to get away I had to find some other place to be so I joined the sailors and spent a lot of time in the mess hall with all the food I could eat. As our convoy made its way across the Atlantic we passed a tanker one night that had just been torpedoed. Despite all the threats our convoy got thru to the Mediterranean, past Gibraltar and the Coast of Algeria into the Harbor at Marseille, France. The sight first of the *Ille D'If* in the approach to the harbor and then the beautiful Cathedral on the heights above the town. It was beautiful that morning in late September but then we first heard the sounds of far off explosions and knew that this was real.

Marseille was a strange sight as we hiked on up the hill thru town. All the French words on the stores, shops and bars almost seemed romantic but those explosions in the distance kept a beat. That artillery must have been within twenty miles. We bivouacked in a field above Marseille and the Regiment had a few days to unload and get ready with supplies to move up to the front. The front was to the North, up the River towards Strasburg and we would travel by army truck. None of us was ready for the actual joining in combat which was now only a few days away.

We moved into combat in the Vosge Mountains near Raon L'Etape and that first night the temperature dropped to about 30 degrees and we simply had our light field jackets. Roger Witt and I were first and second gunner in the second platoon. We stayed up without sleep and kicked a tree all night. As daylight opened on to us there was an explosion nearby and a scream. Lt Reid had stepped on a foot mine and lost his foot thirty feet away. Medic!—was the cry and our first hero, a Medic, moved up to give him morphine and help carry him down the hill. We had arrived. The war for us had started. It would be a month before we had a shower, changed underwear and really felt warm. Toothbrushes and heavier boots were several weeks away and trenchfoot was the problem if you failed to change your socks at night. More important we began to learn how to keep our heads down when the shelling started. The scream of the German 88's coming in, burp-gun bursts, mortar shells that came in soundlessly were the main events. When the 88's were set with a timing cap they would burst in the trees over our heads and scatter the metal fragments thru the trees.

For the first month we followed a pattern each day, as dawn came up our own artillery would start and follow a barrage for about an hour just ahead of us about a half a mile. Next we would shake out and have our package of breakfast and then for me it would be swinging a machine gun tripod over my shoulders, part of a 30 caliber water-cooled weapon, and step out with the rifle platoon to hike up the mountain and over to the next one. We would have these short encounters with the Germans and hear a short fire-fight before they moved on back towards Germany and the Rhine River. Our first victory was for Raon L'Etape, a small village. As we marched thru town the locals were all cheering and waving except for a small group of women standing to one side in a group stripped to their underwear and shaved bald as collaborators. We were soon on thru town and up a small road thru the woods to climb another hill. One thing for sure was that with our firepower, planes and troop superiority it was better to be where we were than to be a German. We stopped briefly in a glass factory. The Captain made arrangements for us to ship home some of their very expensive glassware. I learned much later that I tried to put too many in the case that I sent home and much was broken on arrival in Upper Darby.

Coming off the line we went into reserve and were brought to a rear area village where showers had been set up in a large khaki tent. We stripped and walked thru for the hot shower, it was ecstasy. After a month of dirt and grime we were clean and normal. Clean clothes at the other end and then hot food and a barn with a sleeping bag. On the line it was easier not to smoke cigarettes. First there was a danger of a German sniper spotting your glow and second we did not want to carry the carton with us as added weight. We each had a new carton after the shower and back to the dependency that these Lucky Strike Golds and Chesterfields that "had gone to war" so generously and to affect each of us for the next twenty years with a new addiction.

In early December I had pneumonia and got shipped way back to a hospital for shots. The hospital was in Strasburg and I was there less than a week. As quickly as I could get discharged from the hospital I took off as a hitchhiker to get back to Company H. Late that night and after a number of rides and moving back to the 398th Regimental Headquarters, then Battalion Headquarters, then Company H, and I found our group. They were in bad shape. There had been an ambush that morning and three men were killed from the first platoon. Al Moon, John Riddle and Joe Vraniski plus several wounded. The war was getting serious.

We continued thru Alsace Loraine on our way to Bitche but got sidetracked in late December when the German Army counterattacked thru Belgium about 200 miles North of us. As they fought at Bastogne our own lines had to stretch and the 398th, Company H settled there in Goetzenbruck just fifteen miles from our goal for about six weeks. This time we had confiscated quarters in a house there at the edge of town and would be able to get warm meals and a warm sleeping area. We posted our machine gun in the barn and kept a round the clock watch from there. Barbed wire was stretched in the pasture but the Germans were in the woods nearby. As we were changing guard one day and just about to step out the open door a mortar dropped 30 feet in front and shrapnel was everywhere. Three from my squad were hit and within a few feet from where I was standing. It was

ugly but no one was killed. These five-inch long jagged strips of steel were sticking out from the face of Henry Starr, Pat Zicari had more from his leg and looked ashen. Someone ran to get a jeep and a medic. There had been several feet of snow on the ground since we arrived and then there was a warming period. As the snow melted we found dead bodies of German soldiers lying there near us and it was an ugly scene.

The village had chickens running around and we found lard so one of our treats was to fry some chickens as a supplement to the hot meals we were getting from the mess. At this same time in early February we began to spot new virus, yellow jaundice. It was assumed that our diets caused this but maybe something else, the water perhaps. Roger came out one morning for roll call and it was really strange to see him standing there with yellow eyes and a pasty complexion feeling weak and ready to drop. Dick Good our Section Sergeant was there too. It happened so quick but after being that close for almost a year Rog was gone, back to the hospital and because of the seriousness of his infection then sent still further back and on to the states. Windy Windham took over Rogers' squad and became a very good friend for both Dick and I. By the end of the war jaundice and trenchfoot were the cause of most of our casualties.

In Goetzenbruck we had time to write letters and I have shown a few typical letters. One scary event was a night that I pulled the duty to go out beyond the wire and scout the Germans. Our big fear was mines out there but we had another surprise. As we moved out about 200 yards the Germans heard us and sent up flares. It is very uncomfortable to be in a wide-open field with a bright flare overhead. The question is? Do you drop to the ground or stand very still and you need to react instantaneously or faster. I was frozen out there for fifteen minutes in the snow and then when the flares stopped I ran back thru the wires and to the shelter of the barn. I did report that the Germans were there and closer than I had imagined.

In late February we went on the attack to break thru the Seigfried Line and into Bitche. We started about 3AM and were led around a concrete fort then down thru fields past scenes of fierce fighting, a body was stretched across a wire fence at one point. Our detachment missed the fighting and walked right into town. There was a German Kaserne or Headquarters facility in town that we first occupied and we found a still burning still with the hot schnapps coming out from copper tubing. It really had a bite on a cold morning. We were soon off in a race to the Rhine River at Mannheim. The whole US Army was racing to the bridges and the Germans were racing to get to the other side of the River. From Bitche to Sarreguemines to Saarbrucken and then to Ludwigshafen on the Rhine. It was a shocking scene along the way. Our planes had caught the Germans in retreat and there were burned out tanks with German bodies hanging over the turrets but most of all the dead horses lying out there near the road in rigor mortis, their legs stretched from swollen bodies. The stench was powerful.

In Ludwigshafen we soon found a wine cellar and by evening we had our fill. It was several days there before the Engineers were ready to take us over the Rhine on a pontoon bridge that they had just put up. Trucks, tanks and jeeps were piling across as the Army spread out moving the Germans on back. Our 398th second battalion was lucky as we next went into the fighting. We were on the northern flank near Bad Wimpfen above Heilbronn and the next day fighting was hardest in the center of Heilbronn. We were to fight across the Neckar then the Jagst.

This countryside is unchanged in 60years and I have found it very easy to identify every step taken on April 5, 1945. I said that we were lucky and yet the fighting that day was the worst that I would see. Nevertheless the casualties were much, much worse down in Heilbronn when the Germans really tried so hard to hold that ground under Hitler's specific orders.