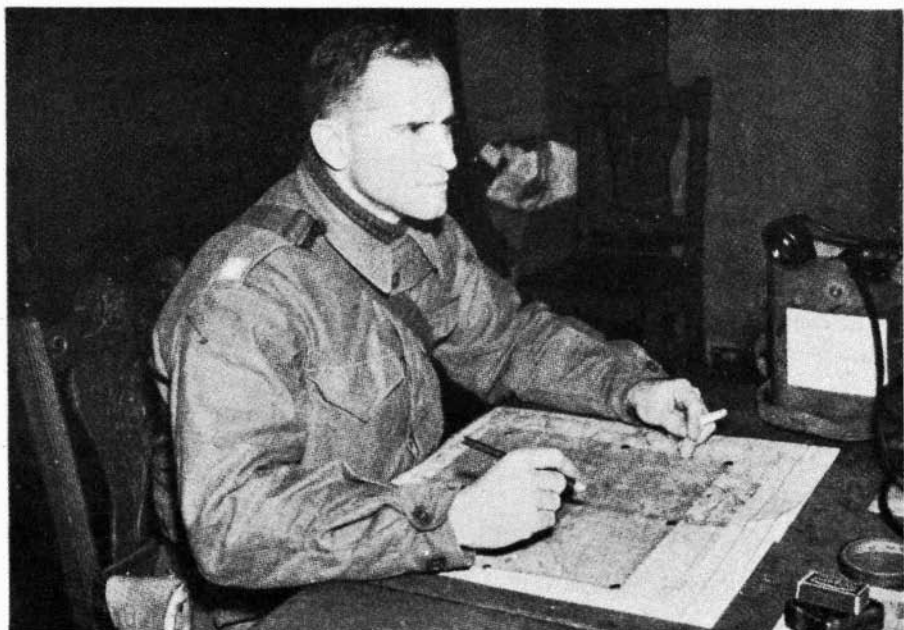


10: READJUSTMENT

Concern grew as the breakthrough assumed serious proportions but on the battlefield steps were already being taken to stem the Nazi flood. Every division that could possibly be spared to repulse the strained enemy effort was moved north. Seventh Army was obliged to spread out and hold lines vacated by units dashing to the north. The 100th Division, particularly the 398th Infantry, found itself sticking out like a sore thumb beyond the general contour of the fast-changing lines toward Bitche. It was in danger of being cut off. Without delay the attack on Bitche was cancelled. The Regiment and Division were called back from their precarious position into a defensive line. The 398th Infantry abandoned Forts Schiesseck and Freudenberg and surrounding high ground and withdrew to the line of departure prior to the assault on the forts. Before doing so Company B, 325th Engineer Battalion, blasted all entrances to the forts and tankdozers, in the daylight and under artillery fire, pushed tons of earth into the gaping holes. Schiesseck and Freudenberg would never again be used to defend Bitche.

Abreast of the 397th and the 399th Infantry Regiments now, the 398th extended farther to the left to plug the gap left by 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Division, as it too spread out to the north. As yet no specific dimensions of the enemy counterattack were known. Where the Germans would strike again gave rise to anxious speculation. Our lines were thinly held and an attack in our sector was a logical conclusion.

The period of 22 December 1944 to 6 January 1945 was one of continued strategic readjustment of lines and positions in which the maximum strength of a minimum of men and weapons were employed to counteract effectively any ambitions of the enemy. Roughly the Regiment was holding the sector in the vicinity of Siersthal, Lambach and Hottviller after relieving 71st Infantry Regiment. Thereafter, we jockeyed and maneuvered



CO at the situation map—Montbronn

constantly. As the Battle of the Bulge progressed the extent of our lines contracted and expanded accordingly. Supporting arms of Corps artillery, tanks and chemical mortar units were now in the north leaving us with little help in the event of an enemy thrust. Men and weapons were deployed to create an outward appearance of strength over the thinly spread lines. The rear was reconnoitered and plans were formulated for a withdrawal to stronger positions, if need be. Roadblocks were set up; roads, trees and bridges were mined.

A marked pitch of tension was noticeable during this period also. Patrol activity was unlimited. Friend and foe did not dare be guided by speculation but rather continuously sent out patrols to determine specifically what the other was doing. The Germans were probably bewildered as to why we hadn't pressed the attack on Bitche after completing a breakthrough of the Maginot Line and securing dominating positions. We didn't intend letting them



398th doughs, Goetzenbruck

know of our circumstances, a result of the counterattack in the north, and severe clashes flared up along the line as our alert outposts and patrols intercepted the curious Krauts. Our patrols, operating more aggressively, were more successful. Primarily our position was one of defense but we definitely took the initiative. The doughboys stealthily probed deep into enemy lines to gather information and generally harass and create confusion among the enemy. The initiative paid dividends. Boldly, enemy mess areas and outpost towns were entered. Unsuspecting Krauts caught napping or during chow-time found themselves wide-eyed and looking into the muzzles of tommy guns and either went back to our lines as prisoners or remained where they fell.

On 31 December a raid patrol from Company G was organized and after being thoroughly briefed raided the town of Dollenbach. The patrol succeeded in slipping past enemy outposts and into the town. At a prearranged signal hand grenades were thrown into house windows and as the completely surprised Germans opened doors to investigate the commotion they fell under automatic-rifle fire. Windows and buildings were sprayed with small-arms fire and, just as silently as it entered, the patrol made good its withdrawal without a casualty, leaving many dead and wounded enemy. The same day the 1st Battalion conducted

a raid in their sector, equally surprising, and captured fifteen Germans.

However, it became increasingly apparent the enemy was building and preparing for an attack along the southern extremes of the Maginot Line. The drive into the Ardennes had been contained and the greatest effort the Germans made since Normandy had been pushed back to its starting point. Remnants of the huge army escaped and made their way south to reinforce the already numerically superior enemy forces around Bitche.

On 1 January strong enemy patrols preceded a powerful thrust from Bitche, hitting the 399th's sector on our right and driving down into Wingen exposing our flank. Our lines were further extended to seal the opening. Heavy artillery fell along the Regimental sector but no seriously threatening gesture was made in our direction. For the next few days the enemy continued to pound our positions with artillery and rockets. Our men got little



Battalion CO and patrol



Foxhole chatter during a lull

or no rest. From behind machine guns and rifles they peered out toward the enemy lines waiting for the sight or sound of Jerries. Theirs was a constant, nerve-wracking vigil—observing, waiting.

The 6th of January brought relief. The Regiment, with the exception of the 2d Battalion, moved into a secondary line of defense in the vicinity of Etting and Kalhausen, with the mission to occupy, organize and defend along a section of the Maginot Line. The 2d Battalion remained in position at Lamback attached to and holding a flank position of the 399th Infantry. On the second day, under 399th control, Company F of the 398th was ordered to attack a strongpoint a thousand yards away, preparatory to a Regimental counterattack. But the Germans, in their counterattack in this sector, strongly fortified and consolidated their newly won positions and held this line throughout the winter. Company F was driven back with heavy casualties from a position strengthened with approximately a regiment of Germans.

Mounting pressure around Rimling in the 397th Infantry sector cut short the 1st Battalion's tension-relieving period in the secondary positions and alerted it for hurried movement to the hard-pressed front. A day later the battalion moved up to Rohr-



Air view of Citadel de Bitche

bach, directly behind Rimling, to intercept a flanking head-on armored enemy drive. The terrain before Rohrbach was open, flat and under observation. Movement in the day over the open fields was a certain invitation to artillery fire and with nothing behind which to seek cover, any such operation, including patrols, would have been disastrous. At night the battalion silently moved up into position and early the next morning smashed into an enemy column supported by tanks which was in the process of circling and cutting off units of the 397th Infantry. The enemy had already reached a point from where he commanded the open terrain behind Rimling, preventing supplies and ammunition from being brought up. And if the 1st Battalion, 398th Infantry, had not moved up during the night the situation would have been serious.

Companies A and C immediately assaulted the approaching superior force but drew intense automatic and heavy-tank fire. The battle mounted in fury as neither side would give. The doughboys, fighting from behind rocks, trees and much in the style of Indian warfare, held the enemy infantry and tanks at bay. The severity of the engagement was emphasized by the fact that Company B, although in reserve, suffered heavily too. Twice the tanks, rumbling out from the woods, tried to break this new source of resistance and twice they were turned back, but not



Cannon Company shell casings, Bitche area

before they had scored heavily. Compelled to dig in under the treacherous artillery supported attack, the doughboys hacked away at the frozen ground amid the crack of 88s and rockets. They held, and acted as observers for their own supporting artillery, directing accurate fire on the tanks and sending them scampering away into the cover of the woods. Dealing only with infantry now, the task was less difficult in proportion. The German positions were assaulted and under the relentless drive the enemy was forced to withdraw. The mission had been accomplished. The 1st Battalion had stopped the push intended to cut off friendly units. The 397th Infantry was able to re-form its lines and recover sufficiently to push the Germans back farther. Helping their casualties to the rear, the 1st Battalion moved out of Rimling. They will always remember it as they saw it then, its streets and surrounding hills littered with German dead.

With its ranks shattered in the short but severe fight, the 1st Battalion proceeded to its next assignment in the vicinity of Guising. The 3d Battalion which had moved up to the Rimling sector behind the 1st Battalion and prepared for action joined the 1st, and the 2d Battalion now returned to its parent outfit.



Getting ready to move out

By 12 January the Regiment was intact and the battalions were holding positions abreast of each other in the vicinity of Guising and Rohrbach along the Maginot Line. With the 3d Battalion on the left of the Regiment, the 1st Battalion in the center, and the 2d Battalion protecting the right flank, the 398th Combat Team prepared to function again as a unit.

There was still no evidence of the German winter offensive slackening. Only the location of the attacks differed. The southern extremes of the Maginot Line were the sites of the enemy thrusts instead of the north. Although not as forceful as previous attempts, there was more than enough behind the enemy's efforts to warrant our remaining in a defensive position. The usual system and plans for defense were put in motion. Roads to the rear were blocked and mined and to the front rolls of concertina wire were spread as an added precaution. Heavy machine guns were set up to provide effective cross-fire and antitank guns guarded possible tank approaches.

With defenses established, information which might lead to an indication of the enemy's plans, was sought. Patrolling became the keynote of the operations. Exact enemy strongpoints and locations had to be known and charted. His disposition, number



Camp de Bitche shambles

and type of weapons, supplies, and even an inkling as to his morale governed our planning. Artillery and mortar flurries fell along the Regimental front, but the aggressiveness of the enemy foot troops was showing unmistakable signs of wear. Our bull-baiting combat and reconnaissance patrols reported little activity, suggesting imminent attacks were not likely. Gradually the enemy was changing his tactics and resorting to defense until it was finally evident it was he who awaited attack.

The Germans had spent their remaining resources and accomplished little in their winter offensive other than prolonging the war and embittering the home front by leaving them little food of their own. This was borne out by statements from prisoners of war who were swelling our cages. They claimed the fuel shortage was so acute that during the offensive in early January tanks were given gasoline and the crews told to continue forward until fuel was exhausted, indicating the desperation with which the German commanders were committing their weapons and resources in a last-minute hope of a resultant miraculous development. Our reconnaissance patrols and air force substantiated these claims with reports of hearing and seeing large numbers of horse-drawn

wagons used by the enemy to carry supplies and ammunition up to the front.

There was little doubt now that the Germans were definitely on the defensive. Although their big offensive did not result in territorial gains, they did succeed in radically upsetting plans and strategy devised to slowly strangle them—slowly, because prior to their drive they had supplies and equipment to last indefinitely. Now they were very much weakened. Plans for the inevitable defeat of Germany were altered to coincide with her present physical condition. It would be impossible for her to stand up to a sudden powerful blow which the Allies were preparing to administer. A period of reconversion followed. Armies, corps and divisions had to be reorganized and regrouped. Divisions and units lifted from one sector to be placed in another to contain the drive into the Ardennes had to be re-formed and returned to their original zones of operation. Now that lines assumed a more defined and stable state, food, supplies and ammunition were brought up to depots close to the front and prepared to follow closely the thrust that would not stop until Germany had been overrun. The drive was to be taken up where it was interrupted prior to the enemy counterattack but it was to be considerably strengthened this time. Added to the fact that the enemy was considerably weaker, the Allies loomed up before the Germans as a brute force.

On 20 January the 398th Infantry Regiment relinquished its positions in the vicinity of Guising and Rohrbach to the former occupants, the 71st Infantry Regiment, and moved to a new line at Sarriensberg, Goetzenbruck and Lemberg. Regimental headquarters was set up in Montbronn. This sector in Alsace-Lorraine was familiar to those who passed through en route to Bitche and Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck. At the time we did not know we were to hold this line for almost two months as the Allied armies marshalled their strength for the decisive and unrelenting drive that was to crush the Germans.

The towns of Lemberg and Goetzenbruck were atop hills looking down into a wooded draw and the enemy. On the reverse



Barracks area

slope of the hill the battalions dug in for a prolonged defense of this sector, and as time went by, the men improved what they came to regard as their winter "homes." They made them deeper and dug to give protection against any kind of fire. The tops of the holes were covered with layers of thick logs for protection against the incessant mortar fire. Only the small hole for the soldier on guard was left open.

As soon as it assumed control of this new sector the Regiment went about preparing for its defense as no sign of a push into enemy territory was in the offing. As was the case in previous defensive positions, the Regiment's lines were extended beyond the limit of its available riflemen strength, necessitating antitank platoons being sent to man rifle positions. To offset the critical shortage of men holding the extended lines, every day newer and more elaborate forms of precaution were taken to insure total and absolute coverage of the thinly spread lines. The ammunition and pioneer platoons laid countless rolls of barbed wire across the Regimental front, planted mines and set up trip flares at night. The towns themselves were organized into zones of defense with strongpoints prepared. Sandbag emplacements concealing antitank guns were built up at street intersections. Machine guns looked out of houses down into the draw. Roadblocks and anti-tank barriers were constructed and automatic weapons were advantageously set up covering all possible approaches to the towns.

With Lemberg and Goetzenbruck established as a strongpoint the Germans made no attempt at regaining the territory but instead rained artillery and showers of mortar shells down on the towns. They had good observation on the small villages from positions in higher and adjoining hills to the north and northeast and enemy observers, at the slightest movement in the streets, directed showers of mortar fire. In a short time they were well zeroed in on almost any point at all, which was proven in the accuracy and quickness of falling shells. When moving through the town's streets the GIs learned the many and different spots which necessitated running or crawling.

In the early part of February raider groups were organized within the Regiment with the mission of infiltrating past enemy outposts and into rear areas to destroy installations, shoot up chow lines and areas the Germans thought safe from actual physical enemy contact. Each battalion formed a platoon of its most aggressive men, each with nerves of steel and fully experienced in combat. These men did yeoman work hitting the enemy time and again when he least expected it and at places he never thought likely. Because of the hazardous duty the men were given special privileges but rarely had time to take advantage of them. The majority of the raids were carried on during the night, but in the daytime raiders went into enemy territory to become better acquainted with the terrain and enemy positions at night. Each night the raiders, armed with tommy guns and other automatic weapons affording a maximum of fire-power, slipped past our forward outpost positions Indian style and made their way through treacherous minefields to look for and kill the enemy in close-up combat. Gradually the Germans showed signs of uneasiness and became wary of the destructive patrols. They planted more mines before their lines and set up more defensive weapons to combat our night marauders. But the more positions they created, the more targets and objectives they afforded the raiders opportunity to eliminate. The operations of these men weakened the enemy over an extended period of time equal to that of a



Good Krauts, vicinity of Bitche

large-scale attack besides filling him with a constant dreaded expectancy. From the prisoners taken much valuable information was gained which formed the basis of future raids.

During this time our artillery poured volumes of fire into the enemy lines. Just before or after the raiders went out on their nightly calls of destruction, the sky over enemy territory flashed and lit up brightly as the shells found their targets and exploded. How anyone managed to exist under the terrific pounding was hard to imagine. Some that did could not bear the thought of going through any more, and voluntarily made their way over to our lines and surrendered. Through a powerful amplifying system, brought up to the front lines, other Germans were enticed and directed to give up the fight. Pamphlets were shot into and behind enemy positions relating to the soldiers the progress of the war and the futility of further fighting. Some Germans did make their way to our lines but the majority summed up their decisions and answered our request with mortar fire.

The pitch-black nights at Lemberg and Goetzenbruck gave birth to another idea. Our partols found normal darkness an ally but intense darkness proved to be a hindrance. Artificial moon-



After the battle

light was created through the use of batteries of antiaircraft searchlights whose subdued beams, playing off overcast skies, cast an eerie light over the enemy held territory to the front. Guided by this light, the raiders could more easily pick their way through *Schu*-mine fields and other numerous obstacles the nervous enemy established to combat infiltration. The revealing light clearly defined enemy positions and, added to the aggressive tactics of combat patrolling, gave the Germans little rest.

February passed by quickly. March saw Lemberg and Goetzenbruck battered beyond recognition. The two villages had been the target of enemy artillery and mortar fire for over a month, leaving as much of a single house littered in the streets as there was still attached to its foundation. There was a noticeable decline in the snow and cold. The foxholes were not as stable under the warmer conditions and as the ground thawed the walls began to crumble. Water ran and settled in the holes and soon the men were splashing around in deep mud. The care of weapons became a problem and caused more concern than the miseries of life in a foxhole. The raider patrols continued to probe enemy territory



Searching for Jerries, vicinity of Bitche

wiping out strongpoints and creating confusion behind his lines but operations grew increasingly difficult as the Germans extended minefields and heavily guarded the much used and known approaches to his lines.

The fact that the Regiment endured the hardships of the front throughout the winter months and since its entry into combat began to reveal itself in the haggard faces of the men. The strain

of holding a line in excess of its manpower added to the belief that a rest was needed. With the advent of the Allied drive in the north, which was rapidly progressing towards the Rhine, the 398th Infantry was considered for a well earned breathing spell. On 13 March a regiment of the 71st Division began relieving elements of our Regiment in position at Goetzenbruck. The 2d Battalion was the first to be relieved and started for the rear and Saare-Union and ten days of an existence out of foxholes, beyond range and sound of mortars and other deadly fire.

But on this day the greatest drive in history was developing out of the north and gaining momentum. The Americans had driven to the Rhine and crossed a bridge at Remagen before the enemy could destroy it. This break was the signal for the entire Western Front to push and push hard. Armored columns raced to objectives on the Rhine, cutting the enemy's defenses to ribbons. Orders for the Seventh Army to attack immediately were received.

The 1st and 3d Battalions were relieved of their position but were not on their way to a rest. The 2d Battalion, on the road to Saare-Union by motor convoy, was intercepted and sped back to rejoin the Regiment and the attack. Orders came in fast. The 398th Infantry was to attack and seize Bitche, keep moving and destroy the enemy.

