

# Pete Mansueto

## as I Knew Him During World War II

by Arch Handy, 398-2d Battalion

*Pete Mansueto served with distinction in Headquarters Company, 2d Battalion, 398th Infantry, 100th Infantry Division. As an element of the Seventh Army, the 100th Division was in continuous combat in France and Germany from early November 1944 through VE Day, May 8, 1945. The 100th remained in Germany as part of the Army of Occupation until December 1945.*

When I was assigned to the 100th Division in August 1944, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Pete was an established veteran. He had been with the 100th at its station of activation, Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The 100th, along with several other infantry and armored divisions, participated in the famed Tennessee Maneuvers during the winter of 1943/44. Pete and many other veterans of the mock battles in Tennessee were later to compare the hardships, especially the unfavorable weather and rough terrain, with those faced in combat in France the following winter.

Pete was First Cook with Headquarters Company, 2d Battalion, 398th Infantry. In this capacity, with the rank of sergeant, he worked under the direction of the mess sergeant and supervised three other cooks, with lower rank and less experience.

My first impressions of Pete were that he always displayed a sense of humor. He had a quick and appropriate answer, always in his likeable manner, for us GIs who complained about the food regardless of what, or how good, it was—we could, and did, gripe about the food more than anything else. Pete not only tolerated us, but, I believe, as I look back on it, that Pete saw to it that we were one of the best-fed units in the whole US Army. Pete may or may not have enjoyed cooking and baking, but he gave us the impression that he did. He saw to it that we ate as well as available resources would allow.

We sailed into the war-damaged harbor of Marseilles, France, on October 19. We didn't have much time to prepare for the intense combat that was to come with the German Army. The 398th Infantry moved into the front lines on November 7, 1944—presidential election day back home. The Anti-Tank Platoon (with which I served) moved into the lines with the rifle companies. The men of the Communications Platoon laid telephone lines from Battalion Headquarters to the front lines and operated switchboards and field phones and radios. The Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon carried ammunition to the riflemen, cleared mine fields, and built and repaired roads (often just trails). The Recon Platoon went on patrols with the objective of capturing prisoners and getting other intelligence information for use by the battalion commander and his staff.

### **Baptism of Fire**

Pete and the other cooks had the tremendous task of preparing food under conditions impossible to imagine and trying to get it to these often widely dispersed platoons. Pete became a hero the first day. We were digging foxholes on the side of one of the previously impregnable Vosges Mountains. The cooks prepared our dinner in the rain and cold, and loaded it on a jeep. Although he could have assigned the task to one of his men, Pete chose to be the one to bring the food to our forward positions. Just about the time Pete was ready to begin dispensing the most welcomed hot food, the Germans began firing rockets on our positions and around Pete and the jeep. Pete not only stayed with us during our “baptism of fire,” but after the barrage ended and the wounded were aided and evacuated, Pete served hot “chow”—our first food that day—in the evening darkness and the ever present rain. We knew then that we would always be able to count on Pete to get hot food to us whenever it was humanly possible. And he did.

The thing that I believe concerned Pete the most throughout the war was that it was often not possible to get hot food to us, especially the anti-tank gun crews on the front lines, because of the tactical situation. It bothered Pete, a very kind-hearted man, that some of us had to eat K-rations and sometimes go without food.

Pete was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge, the most-prized award or decoration of a foot soldier. Pete and his cooks were frequently under enemy fire, not only when moving food up to us, but the kitchen site often would be shelled by German mortars and artillery.

### **Thanksgiving**

On Thanksgiving Day 1944, Pete performed in an exceptionally exemplary manner. The entire battalion was on the move as a special task force to try to cut off German forces retreating toward the Strasbourg Area. The US Army had announced that all troops would have a traditional turkey dinner. Pete had a big problem, though, in that the fast moving task force was 20 miles ahead and still moving. Nevertheless, Pete and his cooks prepared our turkey dinner. The three trucks and a jeep of the anti-tank platoon were dispatched to the kitchen areas of our company (and the four other companies of the battalion) while the task force was stopped for the night. I drove one of the trucks, due to the illness of our driver, and it turned out to be the vehicle that was sent to Pete's kitchen site—a tool shed at a former farm house.

I watched Pete and his cooks put the finishing touches on our Thanksgiving dinner. When we were ready to go, Pete approached the mess sergeant and volunteered to go forward to serve the Thanksgiving dinner. He could have sent one of his men, but he went himself. We drove in complete blackout conditions—no headlights, no “parking” lights, just total darkness and the ever-present rain of the Vosges Mountain winter—over roads that were narrow and treacherous. We could have driven off a cliff, been fired upon by Germans, or gotten completely lost and perhaps captured. Pete knew this when he volunteered to go. He also knew that I was not the regular, experienced driver and, thus, presented him with an extra point of apprehension. Pete was an exceptionally dedicated soldier, however, who did his duty and more.

Somehow we made it. Pete was a religious man, and I'm sure that his prayers help get us safely over the hazardous 20-mile route. We arrived well after midnight. By the time all the men could be brought out of their foxholes and served it was 3:00 am. Pete stood in the darkness and the rain during this entire period serving turkey, dressing, sweet potatoes, and so on, to the men that he loved so much. None of us ever forgot, or will forget, Thanksgiving dinner of 1944 and Pete's meritorious achievement in the face of tremendous adversity.

We left the Vosges Mountains in early December and were sent to attack the Maginot Line in the vicinity of Bitche, France. When we were just about to break through the fortress area, the Germans attacked in what was to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. We had to pull back and spread out as other divisions were sent north.

### **Christmas**

At Christmas 1944, we were in a holding position facing German forces in superior numbers, but we were served Christmas dinner—turkey with all of the trimmings—thanks to Pete and his assistants. My anti-tank gun crew was on top of a hill in a position exposed to the enemy, and we hadn't expected to get a Christmas dinner. After dark, though, Pete and his men came up the hill carrying the containers that had kept our turkey dinners warm. What a treat!

The Germans counterattacked in force on New Year's Eve, but we held, although another regiment of the 100th was badly mauled and had to retreat with heavy casualties.

We were in defensive positions during January and February 1945, the anti-tank guns being on the front lines with the rifle companies. When the tactical situation permitted, though, Pete and his men brought hot food to us, driving up a road that was always a target for German artillery and serving us dinner in a shed, with mortars and artillery often hitting the area.

### **Bitche and Beyond**

The 100th Division broke through the Maginot Line on March 15, 1945, captured the fortress city of Bitche, and headed for the Rhine River. After crossing the Rhine we were back in heavy combat again at the Neckar River in the vicinity of Heilbronn. Fighting was intense and the entire Battalion area, including Pete and his cooks, were under heavy artillery fire for several days. After breaking through this

last major German defense line, we moved rapidly into south-central Germany. When the war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, we were moved to Waiblingen, near Stuttgart, for occupation duty. The kitchen was set up in a school building, and Pete and his men were able to serve all of us three meals a day for the first time since we entered combat.

It was in Waiblingen, in the summer of 1945, that Pete was promoted to staff sergeant and designated mess sergeant.

For “Meritorious Achievement in Ground Operations Against the Enemy, European Theater of Operations in the Rhineland Campaign,” Pete was awarded the Bronze Star. The first day of combat and Thanksgiving Day, discussed above, were during the Rhineland Campaign.

Pete and all of the men of Headquarters Company, 2d Battalion, 398th Infantry were awarded the Meritorious Service Unit Plaque for performance of duties in “an exemplary manner” during the “period of combat operations.” Only a few units of the 100th Division received this coveted award.

I left the 100th Division in October 1945 for assignment to another unit in Germany. Pete, having been in the Army longer than I, had more points toward discharge. He was able to stay with his beloved Division on its return to the USA in December 1945. Pete and I were to see each other several times at annual reunions of the 100th Infantry Division Association; the last time was at a Hartford, Connecticut reunion. He attended several, often at considerable personal sacrifice, but this was typical of Pete, a beloved and dedicated friend, a real soldier, and a hero, in every sense of the word, to those of us who had the pleasure to know and serve with him. May he rest in peace. May his family take comfort in knowing in what high esteem he was held and how well he served us and his country.

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