

Memorable Experiences

by Mel J. Helmich, 925-C

The 100th Infantry Division disembarked in Marseilles, France on 20 October 1944. The Division was rapidly marshalled and moved by echeloned truck convoy over 500 miles to the front near the French crystal center of Baccarat. The Division relieved elements of the 45th Infantry Division. First contact with the enemy occurred on 1 November 1944. The 100th Infantry Division had entered the Vosges Mountains campaign. During the second half of November, 1944 the 100th took part in the VI Corps, 7th Army penetration of the heavily-fortified German 19th Army Vosges Winter Line, thereby, helping to accomplish something never before accomplished by any army in history—the breach of the Vosges Mountains when defended.

After practically destroying the freshly committed 708th Volks-Grenadier Division; the 100th wheeled north and pursued elements of the German 1st Army through the Low Vosges to the Maginot Line.

Overcoming stiff resistance by the 261st Volks-Grenadier Division at Mouterhouse and Lemberg; elements of the Division seized Fort Schiesseck; a fourteen-story-deep fortress, replete with disappearing gun turrets and 12-foot-thick steel-reinforced concrete walls, in a four-day assault, from 17 to 20 December 1944.

On New Year's Eve 1945, the Germans initiated Operation NORDWIND, the last major German offensive in the west. After giving some ground initially, the 399th Infantry Regiment tenaciously defended Lemberg in the face of a determined assault by the entire 559th Volks-Grenadier Division and parts of the 257th. On the left, the 397th Infantry Regiment refused to be pushed out of the village of Rimling, where it blunted the attack of the vaunted 17th-SS Panzer-Grenadiers, the "Gotz von Berlichingen" Division. Although the Germans had expected to surround and annihilate the 100th in two days, the Division's stubborn defense completely disrupted the German efforts to regain the strategically critical Saverne Pass. While the German offensive raged on throughout January 1945, on the Alsatian Plain, the 100th's defense in the snows of the worst winter of the twentieth century was the single most significant factor in blunting the last German thrust of the war in the West.

The 100th highlighted the Seventh Army's drive into Germany in March, 1945, with the seizure of Bitche, a heavily fortified town in the Low Vosges Mountains. Since the erection of the enormous sandstone Citadel there in the early 1700's, the town had been continuously fortified with concentric rings of outworks, including several major Maginot forts; of the "*Ensemble de Bitche*"; dozens of concrete pillboxes, and thickets of barbed wire and minefields. Although it had been several times, most notably in the Franco-Prussian War and in the 1940 campaign, Bitche had never fallen. From this point on, the Century 100th Division became known as "The Sons of Bitche."

After the 7th Army breakthrough to the Rhine in late March 1945, the 100th fought one of the last major battles of World War II in Europe with the assault river crossing of the Neckar River at Heilbronn, from 3 to 12 April 1945.

In the teeth of fanatical resistance, fueled by an errant RAF bombing raid which had mistakenly hit the city center instead of the intended German rocket-launcher school nearby, the enraged populace became enthusiastic helpers of the city's defenders. A scratch force of *Volkssturm* militia, veteran mountain infantry from the 2nd Mountain Division; infantry from the 553rd and 559th Volks-Grenadier Divisions, and the remnants of other units—backed by considerable quantities of rocket launchers, artillery, and anti-aircraft guns in the direct-fire mode—the defenders fortified the already highly defensible city on the right bank of the Neckar using hundreds of tons of rubble from the shattered buildings. During a brutal eight-day battle, the 100th wrested this, one of the last remaining German strongholds, from its tenacious defenders, in a street-to-street, house-by-house fight.

Two more weeks of mostly-motorized slashes through the ancient German province of Swabia to the south and southeast brought the 100th Infantry Division to the doorsteps of Stuttgart. On 24 April, the Division was officially taken off the line for the first time in 185 consecutive days. On the evening of 5 May, the Division received the order to cease fire unless fired upon; and on 8 May 1945, IT WAS OVER.

In the six months of its combat tour, the Century Division advanced 186 miles; liberated or captured over 400 cities, towns, and villages; captured 13,351 enemy soldiers, and decisively beat elements of eight German Divisions.

In the process, the Division sustained 916 killed-in-action; 3,656 wounded-in-action and lost 180 missing-in-action.

30 December 1944–1 January 1945

Battery C (Charlie) of the 925th Field Artillery Battalion operated four 105mm howitzer guns in direct support of the 399th Infantry Regiment of the 100th Infantry Division. The battery comprised six sections; four gun sections, one per gun, and a 5th section which handled transportation and other supporting functions. I was in the 6th or Detail Section which established and ran the forward observation posts (FOPs) and maintained communication; both radio and telephone, for the battery. The Detail Section had the responsibility of “laying in” the battery guns on the target and was stationed up front with the infantry where direct observation of the target could be achieved. The most effective range of the 105mm howitzer is five to seven miles.

To maintain communication, the Detail Section “strung” wire between battery headquarters, a the gun emplacements and the forward observation post. Since I was the wire and radio man, my hands were loaded lugging a telephone in one hand and a radio in the other. My defense arm, a .30-caliber carbine, was found strapped to my back. Although I had several opportunities to use my weapon in the course of action, I couldn’t because it was always in its inaccessible location, on my back.

On the morning of 30 December 1944, I was assigned FOP duty with Sergeants Tom McAteer and Ed Kirsch. Our battery was located at St. Louis-les-Bitche, about three kilometers southwest of Lemberg. After “Jeeping” through Lemberg, we established our FOP with the 399th Infantry, east of Lemberg on Hockfirst Hill. During the afternoon of the 30th, we watched the Germans bombing some of our forward infantry positions with captured US P-47 Thunderbolts. Our FOP was in a well built-log lined German foxhole, and we were fairly comfortable with our K-ration tin-can gasoline burning heaters, even though the night was bitterly cold—below zero Fahrenheit.

Any movement was only on trails established by the infantry because we had heavy snows since before Christmas and twelve to sixteen inches were on the ground. Our only communication with our battery headquarters was by radio, since we were in a new FOP area and a wire net had not been set up.

In the morning, 31 December, New Year’s Eve, it was so cold that our collapsible radio antenna had frozen and couldn’t be extended. We each took turns urinating on the antenna to thaw.

About mid-morning, we observed a platoon of German soldiers, in full combat gear, and hand towing several 37mm anti-tank guns, come up the Bitche-Lemberg railroad. They bypassed our position and were headed into Lemberg. We were finally able to contact our battery by radio and learned that a heavy German offensive was in progress and that Battery C’s guns were being moved from St. Louis to Montbronn, about four kilometers further west.

The Germans had launched their NORDWIND offensive against the US 7th Army. The troops we observed were from the 559th Volks-Grenadier Division of German Army Group G.

Since our guns were out of action, due to their relocation, Kirsch, McAteer, and I left our FOP, and were able to make it back to Lemberg, late that night. We sought refuge in a French farm house. The French matron who owned the farm welcomed us and gave us her bedroom on the second floor of the house. Lemberg was being heavily shelled, at the time, and several cows in an attached stable were hit by shellfire. The stable was set on fire, by the shelling, and burned to the ground, killing more cows. The noise of the shelling and the cows bellowing was unbelievable. Even so, we were so exhausted, it being 0200 hours New Year’s Day, that we all fell asleep in that French bedroom. Sergeant McAteer and I were on the bed, and Ed Kirsch was on a couch.

I was suddenly awakened by the retort of a gun shot, in pitch blackness, the smell of cordite in the room and someone screaming at the top of their lungs! I could only think one thing; the Germans had entered Lemberg, found us, were in the room, and were shooting us, one by one. I rolled off of the bed, on my side, to the floor and was fumbling for my carbine, which was propped up against a chair, by the bed,

when Kirsch yelled that McAteer had been hit. Kirsch turned on his flashlight; no Krauts were in the room, but McAteer was writhing and screaming, on the bed, in extreme pain. “Mac” had taken his carbine to bed with him, and in his restless sleep, had kicked it against the foot of the bed. The gun was loaded, and fired; the bullet entered the ball of his foot and exited his leg at his knee. Needless to say, it was a messy injury.

While Kirsch tried some first aid on McAteer, I dressed, grabbed my gun, and went down stairs and out into the street. The Germans were still shelling the town and throwing *Nebelweifer* “screaming meemie” rocket shells every now and then. It was about 0630 hours and there was enough light for me to see an Infantry Command Post (CP) flag on a building about one hundred yards up the street.

I started to run to the CP, when I heard a “meemie” that had my name on it; thank God that you could hear them coming in. I hit the ground and the shell exploded on the frozen street about six feet from me. I was laying in the street gutter and the blast blew out a section of a rain drain pipe just over my head. I scrambled myself up and ran to the door of the CP, opened it and dived inside. All of the Infantry CPPer’s in the room were huddled together, on the floor beneath some large round tables.

We eventually were able to contact the medics and they came in a Jeep and evacuated Sergeant McAteer with his “million dollar” wound. When they took him away, it was the last we ever saw of him. About noon, we were able to get in contact with our Charlie Battery in Montbronn and “Kentuck.” Lawrence Thornberry came in a Jeep and took Sergeant Kirsch and me out of Lemberg, to safety. “Happy New Year 1945.”

The German offensive stalled on 7 January 1945 after penetrating about nine miles between the 100th and the 117th Recon Squadron on our right flank. The 399th’s hold at Lemberg and the 397th’s hold at Rimling saved the day and completely defeated the attack of the German XC Corps, which had been ordered to envelop and annihilate the 100th Infantry Division and drive through the Saverne Gap.

Although I experienced some other harrowing experiences while on the FOP, this series of events during the start of NORDWIND is the most memorable.

Aftermath

In 1984, during a business trip to Germany, I was able to spend a weekend back in the Bitche/Lemberg area. I visited the town of St. Louis-les-Bitche, where we had lived in a crystal factory and one of my French *amis* (friends) was able to get me in the sales office, where I bought some St. Louis crystal. During the Christmas season of 1944 we had decorated our Christmas tree with crystal chandelier baubles and then shined a flood-light on the tree to create a spectrum of color.

I was able to take photographs of many of my old stomping grounds, which caused a flood of memories: the farm house and the CP house, still in Lemberg (by the way, the rain drain pipe had been repaired)—our home-away-from-home in Enchenberg was still there; the stone wall in Glassemberg where another screaming meemie encounter occurred—the monastery in Siersthal—the tank attack up le Steinkopf—with “Pappy” West, the 399th’s sniper, on le Kirschscheidt—the shelling of the church steeple in Reyersviller with Lieutenant Hale when it took fifty seconds for our shells to arrive (in 1984 I attended the “new” church for Sunday service)—evacuation of a wounded German soldier, shot in the chest, from le Kirschscheidt, on a basket litter in very deep snow, he was dead when we reached the road at the bottom of the hill—the house in Schwangerbach, which we observed from Wolfsbrunn Farm, where the stupid Krauts came out each morning to relieve themselves in their slit trench, located on our side of the house where they were in our direct view, one of the times I could have used my carbine—the awesome mine fields, with the *ACHTUNG MINEN* signs still in place thirty-nine years later, around the Maginot forts of le Petit and le Grand Otterbiel—the magnificent Citadel in Bitche, commanding the entire center of the city—the “rat” house in Hanviller—the abandoned area between the Maginot and Siegfried Lines where you could walk the five miles without your feet touching the ground; that is, if you stepped from one dud artillery shell to another, laying on the ground, unbelievable!—the Polish soldiers using wooden bullets; and so on.

While eating dinner at the Hotel des Vosges, in Lemberg, I bought a local newspaper dated Sunday 10 March 1984. In the Bitche section was an article "*Une plaque pour rappeler la liberation de la ville*" commemorating the liberation of the city of Bitche on 17 March 1945 by the 100th Infantry Division.

No city in France or Germany is so inextricably connected with the history of the 100th Infantry Division as this ancient fortress city, protector of the gates of Lorraine, and bastion of the strongest section of the Maginot Line. From the time the 100th Infantry Division began closing in on the outskirts of the town in mid-December 1944, through the brutal defensive combat to halt the German NORDWIND offensive in January (during which the Division threw back elements of three German Divisions), to the final liberation of Bitche in March 1945, the 100th Infantry Division lost more men around Bitche than it did in all other sectors combined in its six months of continuous combat. In September 1984, the 100th Infantry Division Association and the people of the city of Bitche jointly posted the plaque on an interior wall of the great early eighteenth-century red sandstone Citadel that towers over the town.

It reads:

This plaque is dedicated by the city of Bitche and the 100th Infantry Division to the nearly 3000 soldiers of the Division who were killed, wounded, missing, or captured during the battle for the Maginot sector known as the Ensemble de Bitche between December 3, 1944 and March 17, 1945. This plaque is also dedicated to the 34 citizens of Bitche who lost their lives during the battle and the 199 persons who were injured as well as the 41 members of the resistance who were deported to Germany during the war.

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