

# What I Remember About the 100th Division

by James Pinson, 397-C

I took basic training and we were shipped out. Everyone I knew was aware we were to be sent overseas as replacements. For some reason I was pulled away from everyone I knew in basic, and was told I was going some place in the States. A group of us boarded a train, but no one would tell us where we were going. We wound up with the 100th Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This surprised me as I had a first cousin who was an orthopedic surgeon, stationed there with his wife and two little boys. We knew the 100th was getting ready to go overseas, East or West we did not know for sure.

I was assigned to Company C of the 397th. A young man from my home area that shared the same relatives as I did through marriage in his family, was in Company B. So we got a lot of visiting done before we shipped out to New Jersey to board the George Washington ship in New York. My cousin and his wife saw our friend in Company B leave on the train. They told me after the war that something told them they would never see him again. The next day they saw my Company C leave. When they saw me off they said for some reason they knew they would see me again. Our friend in Company B was killed in an attack in France.

When I was in New Jersey I had great fun going in and exploring New York City. I got to see places I had read about, such as the Stage Door Canteen where Katherine Cornell, whom I was certainly impressed with, was nice to me. I ate at the Automat where everything is displayed on a wall of tiny glass doors. There is a price on the door and if you want the item you slip in fifty cents in coins or whatever price it says, the door opens and you take out the item you have just paid for. I observed famous people entering The Stork Club. I saw Mae West in her show on Broadway that was really entertaining. Little did I know then I would know her after the war on the West Coast, or that I would be flying in to New York on business often and seeing all of the shows.

Boarding the ship, George Washington, the Red Cross was there and gave each soldier a Hershey bar. They had a band playing that was not very good as I remember.

My group was on the very bottom level and it was hot and stuffy there. Because of this, they let us go up on deck any time we wanted to, for air and to cool off.

My friend in Company B drew Officers' KP. I would stake out a place on deck for him and a friend so we could spend the night on deck in comfort. Our two so-called meals a day were skimpy. These two friends brought me food each day from the Officers' Mess, which made my day more pleasant.

Yes, we ran into an exceptionally bad storm at sea, and sleeping on deck had to stop. Many of the men got sea sick, as all ships rolled and tossed, never stopping for several days, until the storm ended. Someone, a long time ago, had told me how to walk a rough deck. I had no trouble getting around and felt fine. I knew safe places to be on deck from the storm, so I could avoid the stuffy air and heat down below. Small ships in the convoy really had it rough.

We passed the Rock of Gibraltar and Tangiers before sunset. From the ship we saw African cities well lighted, tree-lined streets looking beautiful with auto traffic. I knew I would like to return some time to visit. I did on one trip back to Europe after the war. I went to Tangiers and had great fun visiting people there.

Being on the lowest level, our group was the first to climb down the multi-rope ladder on the side of the ship to a boat that took us around sunken ships in the harbor to the city of Marseilles, France. Being the first to land, no equipment had been unloaded. We started walking to our destination, but we had to stop walking when there was an air raid. By word of mouth, information had passed among us at this time that the German radio had welcomed the 100th to France.

After walking about eighteen miles we arrived at a vacant area on the edge of a village near Marseilles. There were tents there, and we were told to put them up. I knew if the sky in West Texas looked like the sky I was looking at in France, it was going to really pour down. After the tent was up I packed dirt on the inside next to the edge very tight as well as the outside. I also dug a drain for water to leave the area around the tent. It really did pour down, but we had a dry tent.

Passes were given so you could go into Marseilles. We could catch a ride on the busy highway with the continual US Army trucks hauling the loads from the ships to our area. There was not much of interest to see in the shelled city of Marseilles, but there was a USO open, where I had coffee. It was September and my father had told me how great the grapes in France were in September. They had grapes for sale everywhere. I thought they were great and they agreed with me. I ate large quantities of them. When I went to school in France after the war I saw the street where we would get off of the truck rides into the city of Marseilles to walk the short distance to our tent city. Nothing had changed in the area.

Very soon we left for the front line where we made our first attack toward the Germans in a forest. They were very well dug in, and had cut down all of the trees on the side from which we approached. They knew the area well and were very protected in the forest. We had to turn back after losing quite a few men.

We fought through the Vosges Mountains and made fast gains of ground. I remember digging four deep fox holes in one day. After gaining ground we always dug in immediately for protection in case the Germans made a counterattack.

I always dug deep foxholes because of my 6'2" height, and tunneled forward at the base. I had talked with a seasoned soldier who told me he always did this as it saved his life when a shell hit at the edge of his foxhole one time. They knew my foxhole was always large and if any one was injured they would put them in my hole until the medic could take them to another place of safety.

We got to Senones, which was a factory town. As we entered the town we moved individually forward in open areas as much shelling was taking place. It became my turn to run across a vacant area. Mid-ways in my run I heard a shell and felt the force from it. It came to me to double up and make myself into a ball. I could hear the metal falling off of my helmet. The guys said I was lifted twelve feet in the air, and much to their surprise I jumped up and ran to safety where some of them had gathered. They said, "We thought you were gone." The next thing they said, "You are really bleeding, get the medic." The medic said, "You have a cut across your face and there is a piece of metal lodged in your face. I will have to remove it and will get something to help stop the bleeding.

You need stitches, but that can't be done now. I want you to hold perfectly still when I tape your skin together." That was all that was done.

The French people dug up sugar and things they had hidden from the Germans and fixed food for us that evening at the factory.

I went around with tape on my face, and it finally fell off, leaving a huge scab and scar. Everyone said, "Pinson don't worry about it, after the war a Plastic Surgeon can take care of that." Later one day the entire scab and scar fell off of my face on the left side and left new baby skin under it. The medic did such a perfect job of taping me together and the tightness of the scab, you today cannot see where the cut ran across the left side of my face.

We went through a lot of small villages and open country. I can look at a map and tell where we were. I do not remember all of the names, but recognize them when I see them in print.

I never say very much about the war as it brings tears to my eyes. I do remember one day as we were getting ready to make another advance, a high ranking officer appeared in a jeep with a young driver. The officer told the driver to turn down a road where we were. We said, "Sir the Germans are down that road filled with bushes and trees."

He looked at us like we were idiots and said, "They are not, you don't know what you are talking about."

I thought, "You fat, arrogant pig, you are going to get yourself killed." Sure enough later we heard the Germans had killed him and his driver. I felt sad that the nice-appearing driver got killed.

The town I remember the most of all towns is Rimling. This is where we were cut off, and my feet got frozen. We moved into the area on Christmas Eve. There was a barn with no roof on it to the right of town. The barn was full of hay and we were told to spend the night in it. The upper loft looked like there was a lot of hay there, so I climbed up there. That night I could not get comfortable. I dug down to discover why. I was trying to sleep on top of a bath tub filled with packages of shredded wood packing. I opened one and found very nice bisque angels in the packages. I had a very long gray silk cord I had

removed from a German map they left in a house we went through. I wrapped some of the bundles together with the cord and addressed them home. I gave the package to the cook and all the money I had on me and asked him to mail the package for me. There were only three broken upon their arrival. After the war when I returned home I framed the two different size angels in shadow box frames and have them hanging at my home. Every time I see them I think of Christmas Eve at the edge of Rimling.

We were to the right of the town of Rimling. I was placed way out on open ground, no trees or bushes. The ground was frozen and it was hard digging until we got below the frost line. They told us to dig for a tank attack which means a narrow fox hole. By the time we were dug in the front line in front of us gave way as the Bulge to the left of us was on, and we were the front line. Our foxholes were much too far apart as we had lost a lot of men. It had snowed and did I ever eat the snow. We did get our white coats—since we were living in snow the coats helped hide us. The sound of tanks arriving in the village across the valley in front of us was very, very strong. The Germans did attack us and got us cut off completely. The guys had always kidded me and said if we got captured since I was so blue eyed and such a blonde the Germans would not hurt me. They were going to tell the Germans they were my brothers so maybe they would not hurt them. It looked like this might happen.

Being cut off, food was not available, as the kitchen could not get to us. Those Nabisco crackers in our K rations that had tasted so bad that we had thrown in the corner of the foxhole tasted good with snow. I ate worlds and worlds of snow when I was in France. A lot of the guys would not eat the first snow, but I did and it did not hurt me. They thought it might have impurities in it.

One day one of our planes with a German uniformed pilot bombed our area, and did we ever bounce in our foxhole. Then the Germans began three days of non stop shelling. One shell hit right by my foxhole and destroyed my rifle.

We did not dare get out of the foxhole in the daytime, since they could spot us and climb upon us with mortar shells. Our sergeant would check on us after dark, he had outside radio contact.

I was in great pain with freezing feet. I had taken my boots off very fast a couple of times and removed the ice between my toes, putting the boots back on immediately.

The sergeant came up after dark one night and told us to check our watches and get up and quickly walk back immediately at the specified time. They were breaking through behind us with tanks to get us out, and just a minute or two after that time our side was going to start shelling to destroy everything in our area. It was hard to walk at the specified time, but we rushed back, and sure enough when we got on back, there were two solid rows of tanks to protect us. Some of us had to lead the shell-shocked guys from the three-day shelling. I was really numb in my feet and legs. After we got back far enough they had trucks to take us. Immediately we could hear the intense shelling start. I went to the field tent hospital and started my transfer to other areas.

I was told at the field tent hospital I was going to the States immediately. That didn't happen, a high-ranking officer had me bumped in favor of his wounded brother.

Next I went to a resort hotel turned into a receiving hospital for one night. A French actress who had made some American films was at this hospital working. The next afternoon we were put on a train for Paris. They could not move because they had no coal, and another train had already pulled in and taken our beds. We spent the night on the train with ice on the ceiling. No meal, they finally got each one of us one piece of bread with a super thin covering of jelly on it and coffee. Today when I see jelly and bread I think about how hungry and cold I was in France on that train. When I do break down and have jelly and bread I put a very thick layer of jelly on it.

The train got some coal the next day and got us to Paris. I was worn out and got in bed and went to sleep immediately, you could see my ribs sticking out I was so thin. I needed to relax and rest. Some nurse woke me up telling me she knew who I was from the States. I was in such a daze I hardly remember it. She told me I had slept two days, and I must get up and go eat. I made the effort and it did hurt to walk. That day in the afternoon they put me on a transport freight plane that had benches going down the sides for you to sit on. It was a smooth flight (no seat belts). We landed at Bath, England. The nurse at the airport saw me struggling to get off of the plane and said, "We have stretchers and help over here, put this

man on a stretcher.” We went to a hospital built in a pasture out from Bath, England. We could hear the German buzz bombs going overhead here. I had heard them some times on the front lines.

I had an Oriental doctor who checked me into his ward. He said, “I can send you to the States tomorrow, but I would like to keep you here for a while. A lot of the Doctor’s back home don’t know enough about frozen feet and are amputating toes that do not need to be removed. I think we can save all of yours. I agreed to stay. He and the lieutenant colonel in charge of the hospital checked my feet every day. I did everything they told me to do. I walked on my heels and the side of my feet for comfort.

One evening when everyone around me was gone the nurse came to me and said, “Do not tell anyone but you are leaving for the States in the morning.” So many in the ward had been waiting for passage much longer than I had. They were all surprised when they saw them come in to pick me up.

The nurse had a husband fighting in France. After I left I understand he was injured and wound up being brought right into our ward. They did not say anything about it at first, but they discovered her husband was there and transferred her to another ward.

I returned on a hospital ship, they said unescorted. There were several amputees around me. I could walk on my heels and the side of my feet and could gladly run errands for them. The guy across from me had lost a foot, and he had the best attitude. I admired him.

We landed in Boston, spending one day there and could call home. Since it was Sunday I knew my Mother would be at the drug store. It was quite a shock for her to hear my voice. Of course then I had no idea where I was going to be sent. In Boston they served us a steak meal. The ice cream they gave us was what I enjoyed most of all.

I went on a very comfortable nice looking hospital train to Colorado Springs, Colorado. I liked this as this is the place that I first learned to ice skate.

After checking me they immediately put me in a hot whirlpool bath and soaked my strange colored feet for a very long time. Then I experienced the most pain yet. They brushed my feet with soft steel brushes to get all of the thick layer of dead skin off. I was pleased not to loose any toes.

After I could get around, we were assigned to different units. I got in the Entertainment Group. Some of us were at the radio station in Colorado Springs to give a radio show when it came in over the tape that Japan had surrendered, and the war was over. The radio station absolutely went wild.

I was in the final therapy by this time. I had an exercise to be able to pick up a marble with my toes on the floor and put it in my hand with each foot. I also had to pick up a towel on the floor with my toes and put it in my hand. I had to be able to do this before my discharge. I received my discharge a week after this occurred.

I really enjoy the Association newsletter even though I don’t know anyone. I appreciate everyone that makes the publication possible.

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