

Zeke's Memoirs

by Herman (Zeke) Zederbaum, 325-Engineers

To anyone who is patient enough to wade through the following pages, let me say this to them. This was written mainly for my own benefit so that I wouldn't distort the facts too much as the years roll by.

Our ship left NY October 5 and we landed at Marseilles on the 20th of the same month after an uneventful voyage. We got off the boat as night was starting to fall. Instead of walking right from the boat onto the dock, we stepped over a sort of ramp that had been laid over half sunken ships. We must have walked for a distance of a quarter mile before we really hit land. So this was Europe. Nothing much to see. There were the usual docks and sheds one sees around any water front. There was a trolley car line and a few buildings. . . . We started marching along the tracks very slowly. Nobody seemed to know where to go to . . . or what we were to do after we arrived. We were equipped with a full field pack; rifle; gas mask and some ammunition (2 or 3 clips). We killed about a half hour and we only covered 10 or 15 blocks. We were at the foot of a steep hill when the order came to halt. Everybody was shaky.

Just then a smoke screen truck rolled by with the smoke pouring out of it. I don't know whether they were trying to hide us or the boats in the harbor. Soon the rumor started circulating that enemy planes were coming. I tried to think what I had been taught to do but all I could remember was a cold sinking feeling in my stomach. . . . So this is it. . . . Suddenly a low plane droned over. What's that smell anyway—Oh my God—It's gas! I couldn't get to my gas mask because I had stored chocolate and soap in the carrier to use for barter with the civilians. And the panic was on because 9 out of 10 soldiers had done the same thing.

There is no telling how much damage might have been done if one of the boys hadn't shouted—"God damn you Abernathy, you broke me bottle of hair oil with you rifle butt"!

Twelve hundred men started breathing again—my, how good the air tasted!

We dawdled around for another hour or so and then took off. We marched through all sorts of through-fairs—all of which seemed to be leading inland. After we had marched for about three hours we got our first mini-break. I can tell you it was a mighty welcome one at that! Most of the boys were still pretty weak from the 15 days on the water and the fact that we were only fed 2 meals a day. Three soldiers walked over to a ground floor window and tried to hold a conversation with a French girl. They tried all their high school French on her—such as—my Aunts cat has a house with green windows, but she just smiled at them and shook her head. Finally one soldier turned to the other two and said; "I wonder what she would charge for a good lay"? And then the French girl spoke up in perfect English—"Why don't you ask me and find out"?

Well we are on the march again. After a few more miles we had lost a couple of men by the roadside, and by the time we reached the area we had been assigned to (about 3 in the morning), we were about 25% under strength. We bivouacked on a bare hill that rose about 50 feet above the rest of the country side. It was cold and the wind didn't let up for a minute. There wasn't a house or three to be seen. Larry and I decided to bunk together. We unrolled our blankets but decided not to pitch a tent. We put one shelter half on the ground with a blanket on top of it. This was our mattress—for cover we had three more blankets and the other shelter half.

We were terribly cold and hungry, so we decided to make a fire, if possible, and heat up some C-rations that we had with us. We went hunting, and as luck would have it, we found a tool shed that belonged to some worker. One of the sargeants loaned us his hand ax and we soon had a terrific fire going. In a short while we had a willing crowd of 50 or 60 men looking for any firewood for our fire, but no more was to be found. We later discovered that shed was the only bit of wood for about a quarter of a mile—officers, non-coms and men—all ate their stew and dog biscuits and then rolled as close as they could get to the fire without getting singed and went to sleep. Nobody got up for breakfast which had been prepared at 5:30. The cooks had ridden up in trucks. We now learned what had happened. Instead of the six mile walk which we should have taken, we had walked 17 miles because the officer had lost his way directing us.

The rest of the morning was spent by the men in exploring the possibilities of the place—as I said before we were situated on a bit of a hill. All around us on the lower ground were other outfits. We envied them every time the wind blew. They were in a sheltered spot while we got the full impact. But we soon learned that we were more fortunate. It rained every day, and that land we had our tents bivouacked on was composed of clay and it was really miserable—walking through the gumbo, all day long. The poor fellows who were in the low lands were in a worse predicament—all the water drained down on them. If we lived in mud, they lived in the sea.

The first morning we lazied around doing nothing in particular. A few men were detailed to dig a latrine for the company and the rest of us did some exploring.

I went with some of the boys to a farm house about a mile away from our area. There we got a bottle of wine for 4 cigarettes. The wine was terrible but it was all we had so we drank it.

The next night we were taken down to the Marseilles docks to help unload supplies because the French men were on strike. We were told that we could keep any cases that got damaged in the unloading. Our loot consisted of two cases of salmon, one case of chicken, 3 of peaches and one of K-rations. I have to add that all the cases didn't get smashed accidentally.

One day I was selected for guard duty. My tour was two hours on and 4 off. It wasn't bad in the daytime but got pretty lonely at night because almost everybody in camp was visiting Marseilles. I spoke to Sgt. Garfield and he promised me a pass for the next day. When it wasn't forthcoming—I went AWOL for a few hours—while coming home that night I jumped over a wire fence guarding the railroad tracks. My foot got caught on the top strand and I fell on the rails, breaking a couple of ribs. I had a couple of run-ins with this same sergeant, because of this escapade.

On the 29th of October we started out on a 300 mile trip to the front. It took us three days—and we all were a bit beat by the time we arrived. That night we spent in a field near a small town. We burned grapevines to cook our food and to keep us warm. The next night we slept in the National Park of Dijon. During the night a jeep ran over one of the boys while he was sleeping in his bedroll. I don't know how bad he was hurt but I do remember all the fellows envying him because he was going right back to America.

Our last night before the time we hit the line, we bivouacked in an old German camp. The Americans must have caught them there because the few bodies laying around weren't near their weapons and didn't have their complete uniforms. The bodies didn't arouse any fear or sorrow. They were more like wax images in some cheap museum. They didn't even look too real. One of the corpses had been shot through the temple and the bullet had come out of the rear—there was a tiny hole where the cartridge had entered.

We stayed here for a few days and then we moved up on the line. It was the first of November. We camped in the woods outside of the town of LaSalle. Not far from where we were dug in were the bloated bodies of four cows. We were fortunate that the weather was cool. Otherwise the smell would have been terrific. Every day we were issued two cans of C-rations with biscuits and put out on some job. Shift usually took from early morning until long after the sun went down to complete. Most of the jobs were routine. For instance—one of them was to dig a corduroy road for a quarter of a mile through a sea of mud so the jeeps and ambulances could carry the supplies to the front and the wounded to the rear. There wasn't much danger, but it was very hard work, and most of us were pretty nervous listening to the firing that went on.

The morning of the fifth, we went out as usual with our rations and we stopped at a little town called St. Remy. To tell you about this incident I will have to describe the terrain a bit. The town was the usual cluster of buildings of stone with the barns connected to the houses. There must have been at least two dozen of them on the main street. The town was built on a hill and when we stood looking out of our hiding places we could see the valley sloped downward about 300 yards and then rose gently into another hill like the one we were standing on. There wasn't a tree or a shrub in that whole valley, except for a clump in our extreme left about a quarter of a mile away. On our side of the valley—about 30 feet from the top of the hill—was a small stream about 10 foot wide. We were told to put a bridge across this so jeeps could go over and pick up the wounded. All this time the Germans were dropping light mortar shells

around our bonns, as yet no one was hit. The lieutenant called Bottoms, Dunbar and me over to his doorway. He told us that some Tiger tanks were in the vicinity and that we should go out as a frontal and flank guard.

Bottoms was the bazooka man, Dunbar was his armor bearer, and I carried an M1 to give them protection against foot troops. (Boy were we green.) We were supposed to run down through this valley and into this clump of trees off our left and station ourselves in a strategic spot. Later Lt. Bell would come down and see how we were doing. We waited until there was a lull in the shelling and then we started running down the hill. I ran until I thought my lungs would burst but I finally made the clump of trees. I had been the last of the three to reach the trees. Bottoms remarked that it was very odd that all firing had ceased while we had been running. We found a spot that looked like a good one. We could see across the valley, while they couldn't see us. Suddenly someone opened fire on us, with a rifle. The sniper couldn't see us, but he knew the vicinity we were in. We debated whether I should shoot back but decided against it since it might give away our position. By this time we were wet through and as the rain was coming down in torrents, an hour or two went by and we started to get worried. We were in strange country—it was starting to get dark and we didn't know the password. Lt. Bell had not showed up and nobody else knew where we were. The shelling had intensified in the valley and our sniper friend let loose a volley at our grove just to let us know he hadn't forgotten us. Suddenly we heard a wild yell. Looking backwards from the way we had come, we saw an awe inspiring sight. There—charging down the hill—with fixed bayonets and looking like they were coming for us—was a company of doughboys. We were in no-mans-land. If they saw us, we were goners. They would shoot first and ask questions later. After all—they didn't expect to find friendly troops ahead of them.

Luck was with us and we weren't seen. After the first wave went by, we decided to leave. We were about half way back when we ran into a searching party. They were looking for our bodies. The lieutenant had heard the sniper firing and since he didn't hear us fire, assumed we were casualties. After we had gone out, they had started work on the bridge, but hadn't gotten too far because small arms had been brought to bear on the side.

Now the work was being resumed. Slinging my rifle, I grabbed a stringer with Bottoms and started walking down the hill. While we were occupied with this, the second wave of infantry poured down in the valley. They were spread in a thin line as they moved. It looked like a football team going down after the kick off. They forgot everything they had learned. Nobody tried to seek cover—hit the ground—or throw the enemy off. They just kept going—down into the valley and up the other side where the Germans were waiting for them. We finally got our bridge finished and the jeeps started rolling across to pick up the wounded. The Jerries on the hill had quit by this time and GIs were straggling back with prisoners by this time.

One doughboy came back with five of them. One had been shot through the stomach and the others were half carrying, half dragging him by his arms and legs. His groans were mingled with the GIs threats to blow their asses off if they didn't hurry up.

Our officers had departed and Sgt. Garfield decided to stick around despite our mutterings. After it was dark we were told to load up. Garfield went in the Lieut. jeep while we got in our respective trucks. The three trucks moved off in the dark. Everybody was confused. We got to a crossroads and a guard stopped us and told us to turn around and go by a different road because this one was under heavy machinegun fire. We turned around, and after a few minutes, we decided we were lost.

My seat was up against the cab of the truck. I took off my helmet and hung it on my rifle which was standing between my legs. I put my head on my helmet and tried to sleep. I was hungry and my broken ribs ached from the cold and from shaking so much from fright.

I must have dozed off, for the next thing I remember was a terrific crash, and everybody was all tangled in the truck. I couldn't feel my legs and I felt something hot on my hands. My first panic over—I thought very calmly—I wondered how bad I had gotten hit? First I reached down and felt for one foot. It was all there. Then I inspected the other one—seemed alright. Where was the blood coming from? I touched my face—yep—it was covered with blood. I wondered later what kind of a plastic surgeon hands I would fall into. Would he be a considerate one or would he be just another army doctor? By this time I

noticed the truck was almost empty and that it sloped down over to the front left side. I moved my way to the tailboard and got ready to jump down. I was told to be careful how I climbed out. Don't step on a mine. It hadn't been artillery or mortars, but a mine field we had blundered into. The jeep had gone through safely and so had the first truck, but we hadn't been so lucky. We carried out our driver who had a shattered ankle and Sgt. Johns—who was suffering from a cut on the head when he fell out of the cab. We went into a farm house and waited around until our Lt. got back from Headquarters. Infantry medics who were stationed at this farm fixed up our wounded and told us that 100 yards down the road we were traveling was enemy territory . . . how lovely.

A tall GI from the infantry was telling us his father had been in this same territory in the last war. The Frenchman upon hearing this showed us where the first AEE had written their names on a big beam. The soldiers fathers name was seventh on the list. The fellow was so excited he could hardly hold his trench knife straight as he added his name to the list.

“Lets roll, boys”, said Sgt Garfield. The boys from our squad loaded up with the first and third, and we were off again. We got back to our bivouack area without any more incidents. (If you can call being scared to death, normal.) We had eaten nothing since early morning and when we got back it was raining and dark, so most of us just crawled in our improvised shelters (holes) and went to sleep. We stayed here a few days and then moved on again. We stopped in a place called Baccarat. This was the first town we hit, when we were permitted to sleep in the houses. Our squad took over one place that still had electricity. It was quite a hovel. Wright, Bottoms, Wallace and I took the first floor. The rest of the squad split up in two rooms over us—the first thing we did was to throw all the bedding into the barn, (the other half of our room). We swept the floor, sprinkled DDT around and then spread our bed rolls on the floor. We were already to go hunting. We searched the whole town, but not one civilian did we see. We dug our latrine in the middle of the gutter because we were afraid to go in the gardens for fear of booby traps. Can you picture this? The next morning, there were three or four of the boys straddling the trench with their pants down while the civilian population walked by, men, women and children.

We stayed three or four days and the most important thing that I can recall was the fact they gave us the new 10 in 1 rations. It was my turn to make supper (for the four of us) and we had a big meal of bacon (American), eggs (French), bread (French), cake (my own concoction made from K-ration biscuits) and hot chocolate. So far—routine jobs and no more casualties in our platoon.

Our next objective was Reon l Etape. We got there about 11o'clock at night. Our truck rode as far as it could and then we were stopped by a little stream—about 18 feet wide—that divided the city in two. Abernathy was still in charge. (Sgt. Johns hadn't returned from the hospital as yet.) He directed us to unload our belongings and to take them into a church school, that bordered the river. When we were set he made us come out and start work on the bridge. We could hear the infantry on the other side of the river, so we felt pretty good. A squad from the 2d platoon was there and they started working with us. While we carried up stringers they put up some flood lights. We worked for about two hours before they called a halt. The infantry must have been getting ready for an attack because they continued moving around all night. The next morning when we awoke we were told to hurry up with the bridge because our boys wanted to get after the Jerries. The noise we had heard last night had been German troops pulling out. They must have thought the whole sixth Army was there the way we walked around with all those lights on.

Can you imagine what they would have done to us at 18-foot range? Yep—there we were—all twenty six of us—holding down a whole town (and scaring out a company of Germans).

From here it was a hit and run affair—we stopped at Moyermaten—Semones—Po and Shemach—and that was the end of our fighting on this front. We were called back and assembled near Moyermaten.