DARK NOVEMBER

A Seekonk Boy Goes off to War

Albert Edward Drapeau

Cover Picture

Photo shown of Pfc. Albert Drapeau in late June of 1945 upon returning home from the war in Europe. Picture was taken from the driveway side of the family home at 85 County Street (later renumbered to 290), in Seekonk, MA.

DARK NOVEMBER

Albert Edward Drapeau

2nd. Edition, May 2002

Dedication of My Book

I dedicate this book to my mother, Grace Mullen Drapeau, and to my father, Albert Alfred Drapeau, who both suffered heavily during WWII with three of their older five sons off fighting in the war. My brother Jim and I were fighting in Europe, my oldest brother Dan was off fighting in the South Pacific. Numerous telegrams were being delivered to their home. Jim, fighting in Europe, was wounded in action three times causing four telegrams from our government; two of those telegrams came in a mix-up for the same incident. I was reported missing in action and later reported captured. This created two more telegrams. With the arrival of each telegram, my father, who was the recipient of all of them, would fear the worst had happened to one or more of his sons. The telegram deliveryman, Jerry Conyers, hated his job, as he knew practically all the boys and their families who lived in south Seekonk. Most of the time he would either meet my father in the yard or wait for him to come outside to speak to him alone. As was told to me later, my father's face would turn ashen and his heart would be in his throat whenever he saw the telegram deliveryman pulling up in front of our house. My father would very quickly and carefully relay the information contained in each of the telegrams to my mother.

My mother, who had strawberry blonde hair when I left home in 1943, had pure white hair when I returned in 1945. She was under doctor's care for nearly two years suffering from a nerve condition that caused her legs to break out with eczema. As soon as the war ended and her boys were all safely at home, the condition cleared and doctor's visits were no longer needed. A white electric Christmas-type candle burned 24 hours a day in the front window of our home until all their sons had returned home from the war.

Not only were the boys of our country who were fighting on the front lines suffering, there were also many heartaches and much suffering done on the home front by the mothers and fathers of these boys. It is for these reasons I dedicate this book to my parents, Albert and Grace Drapeau.

Introduction

In December of 1945, I returned home from the military service. Like many World War II veterans, after a period of readjustment, I went back to work, got married, helped to raise a family and grew older. All these happenings in my life from the wars end helped to push the "want to be forgotten" memories of WWII out of mind and life peacefully went along. Although some events of the tenseness and horrors of the war could never be forgotten it is only in recent years that such memories began to resurface to the point that I decided to put my story in writing. My wife and children have also encouraged me to do this so my family and future generations of my family will be able to read the happenings involving over two and a half years of my military service during World War Two.

During the war one could not carry a diary. In combat this was a positive no-no for fear of aiding the enemy if it was ever found. The events of some days had been so riveting that dates and places were securely locked in my mind and have aided me in recreating my days in the military. I have also been fortunate in locating two former combat platoon members who, through discussions, have assisted in some details that over the years became a little sketchy.

Also, I realize that a gulf usually lies between those who "were there" and those who were not, because no one who has not known war first hand can ever truly understand it.

DRAFTED INTO THE ARMY

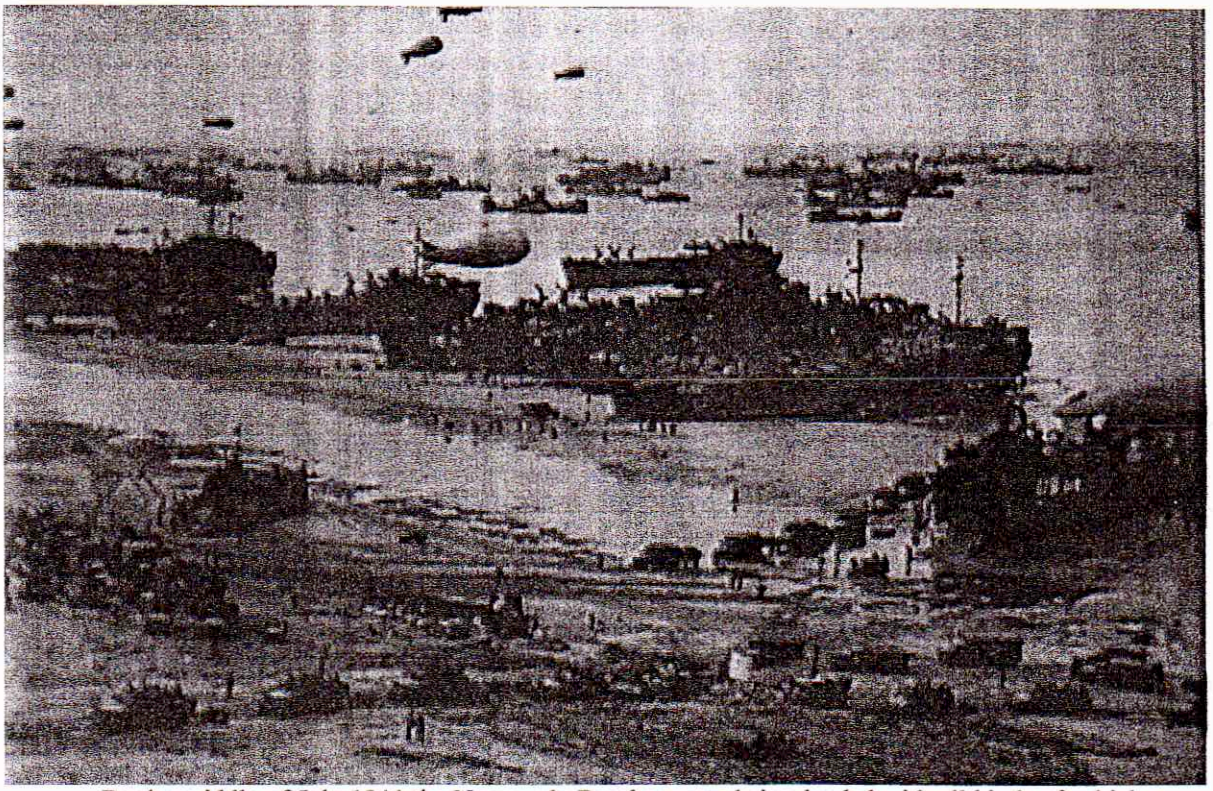
I was inducted into the service on March 26, 1943 at Fort Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts. My induction tests included an interview with a Corporal T5 where I explained that I was a country lad from an early age who loved walking, running and playing all kind of sports. I guess I cooked my own goose when I said that, because I was immediately classified as an infantryman.

From Fort Devens I was assigned to 13 weeks of infantry basic training, at Camp Croft, South Carolina. At the start of the war there was no branch of service known as the U.S. Air Force. Each military branch had it's own air force, as did the Army. During my basic training days, I discovered I was qualified to apply for the Army Aviation Cadet-Training Program. I applied, was accepted and upon completion of basic training; I, along with a few others from my platoon, was sent to Miami Beach, Florida where I was given tests and reclassified into the Army Air Corp. My other buddies, back at Camp Croft, were soon sent overseas as infantry replacements.

I spent three and a half months at Alabama University taking refresher courses in math, physics and 10 hours of training in a Piper Cub airplane. I then spent several more months at Army Air Corp Bases in Texas taking pre-flight training. I was to be a bombardier. However, as turn of events happen, it was at this point in time the army was in dire need of trained infantrymen for something big being planned in Europe. Thousands of men were being switched from other duties for training as infantry replacements. I was quickly shipped to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma where I spent the next six weeks in advanced infantry training.

D-DAY AT NORMANDY

Fortunately for me D-Day, June 6,1944, came while I was still in my advanced infantry training back in the States. This day, and the many days that followed, were plain hell. Normandy was a decisive battle that foreshadowed the end of Adolf Hitler's vision of Nazi world domination. It was the largest air, land and sea invasion ever undertaken, and included more than 5,000 ships, 10,000 airplanes, and 250,000 servicemen and women, as recorded in the U.S. Department of Defense records.



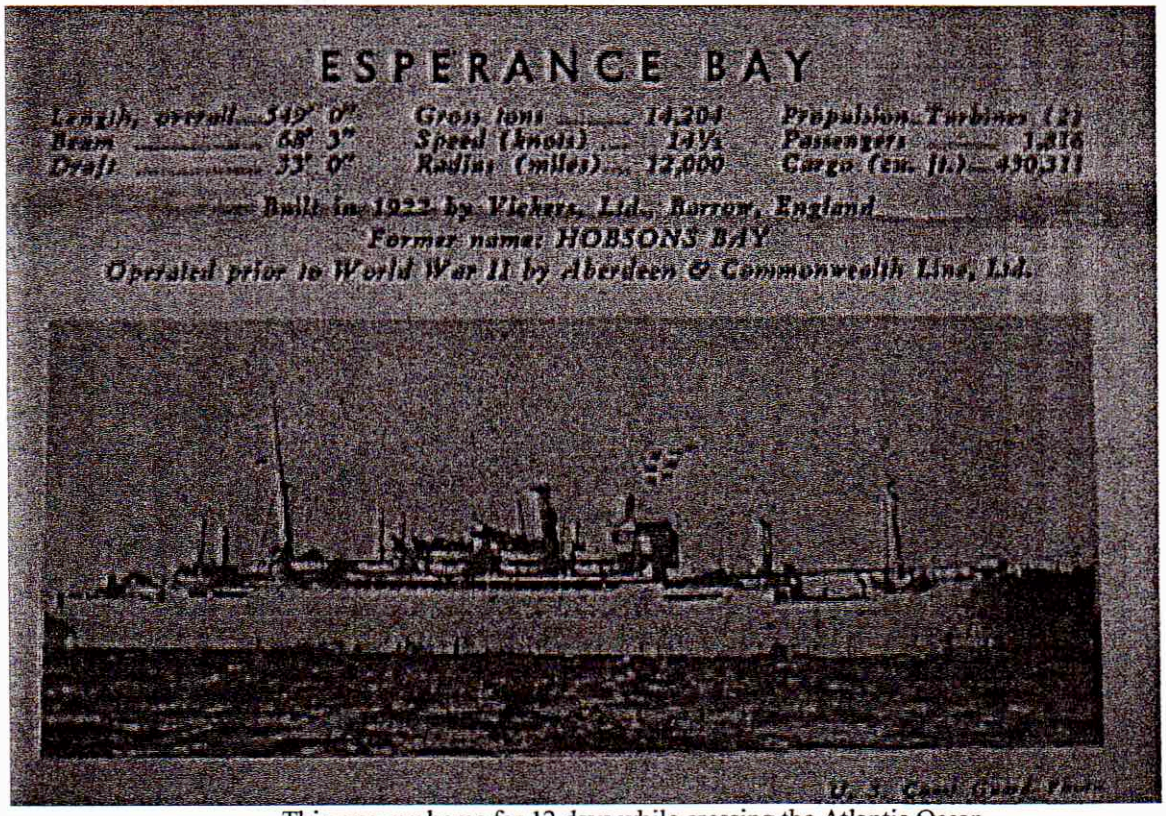
By the middle of July 1944 the Normandy Beaches were being loaded with all kinds of vehicles and supplies brought from the gigantic buildup of supplies in England.

After much planning and endless training, for most American soldiers going in on the amphibious landing craft, it finally came to jumping, swimming, running and crawling toward the base of the cliffs at the Normandy beachheads. The seasick and over whelmed young men, many of them not yet 20 years old, were unloaded into deep water carrying 80 pounds of equipment. Some drowned in deep water over their heads while others were caught in crossfire of explosives and bullets.

Tales of loss and heroism are as countless as the grains of sand on the Normandy beaches. When D-Day was over, the Allied Forces had suffered 9,758 casualties and 6303 Americans were dead. Yet, due to planning, preparation, sheer courage and determination, they won. This day forever changed the course of history throughout the world.

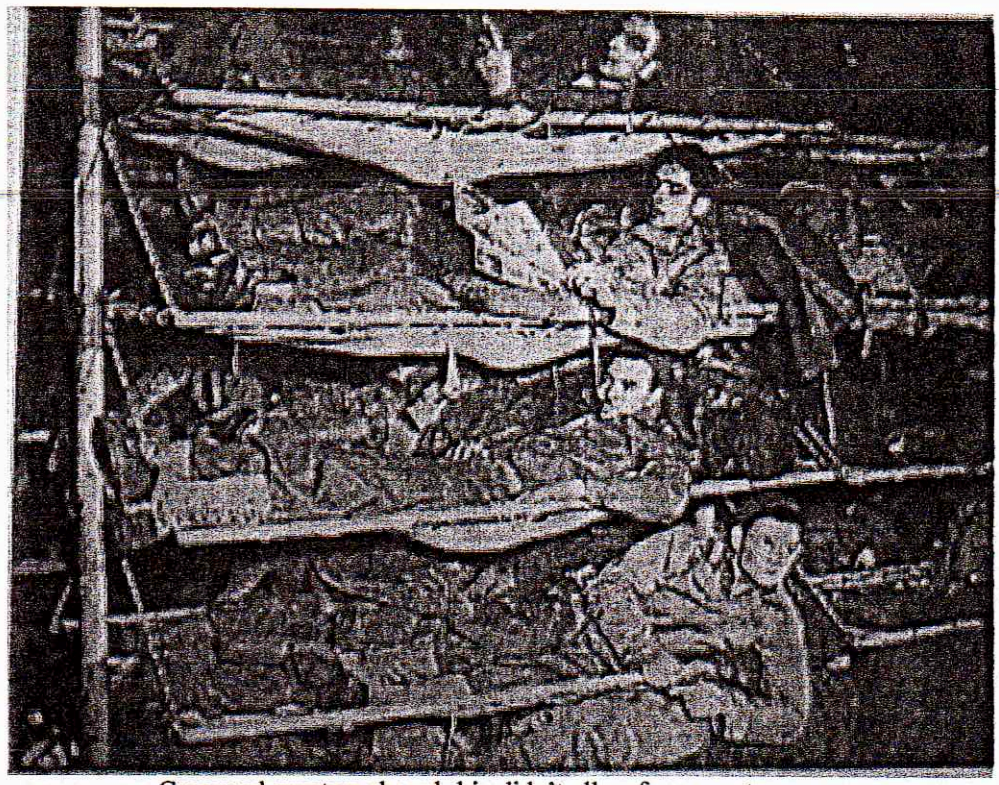
SHIPPED OVERSEAS

Upon completion of my advanced infantry training, I was shipped overseas to England. I spent twelve days at sea on the troop transport Esperance Bay before arriving in England. Troopships used during World War Two included passenger liners, Liberty and Victory ships and foreign ships taken over by the USA. The U.S. took over various foreign passenger ships and freighters that were in U.S. ports and used them as troopships and cargo ships. Many of these ships were under flags of foreign countries such as French, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, German and Italian. In addition, many British-flag troopships carried American troops overseas.



This was my home for 12 days while crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

Once out of New York Harbor the ships entered the war zone. German submarines had been wreaking havoc on allied ships and convoys crossing the Atlantic. Life boat and abandon ship drills were held each day until the ship, if she were struck by a torpedo, could hopefully be abandoned in a few minutes. Many of the men aboard the ships were generally quiet and their eyes had far away looks, for they knew that for many it was a one-way trip.

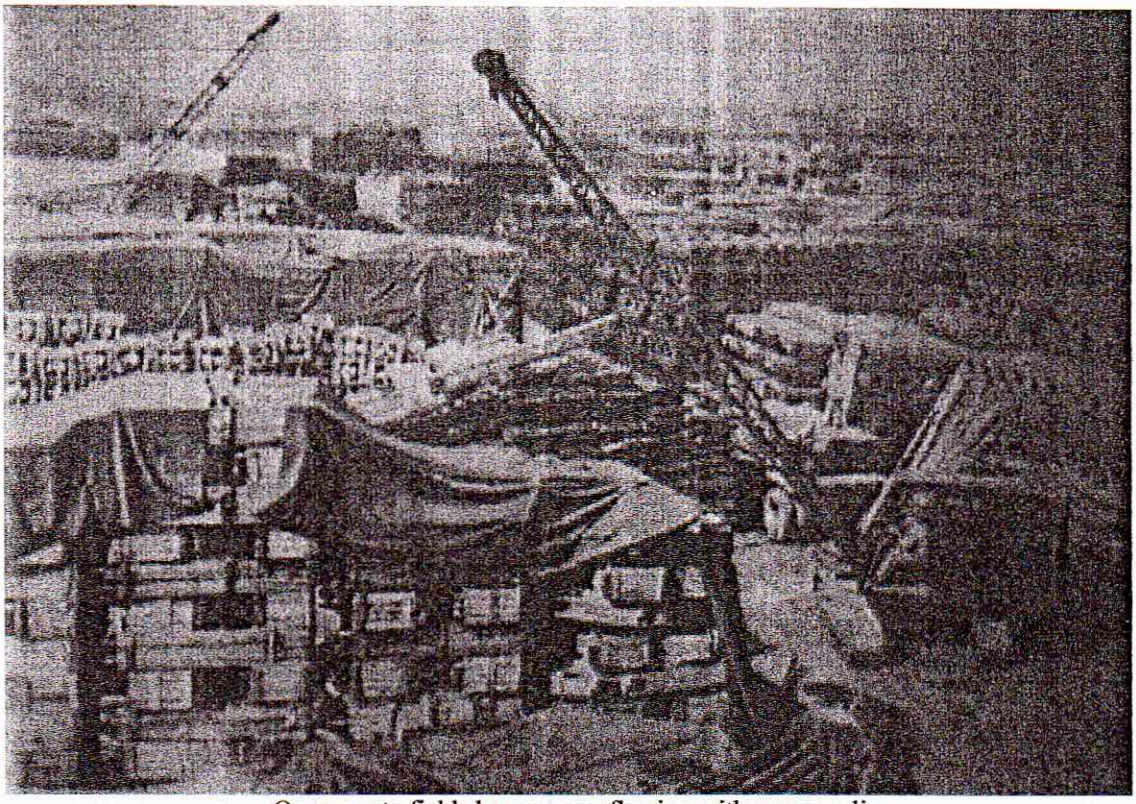


Crammed quarters aboard ship didn't allow for any extra room.

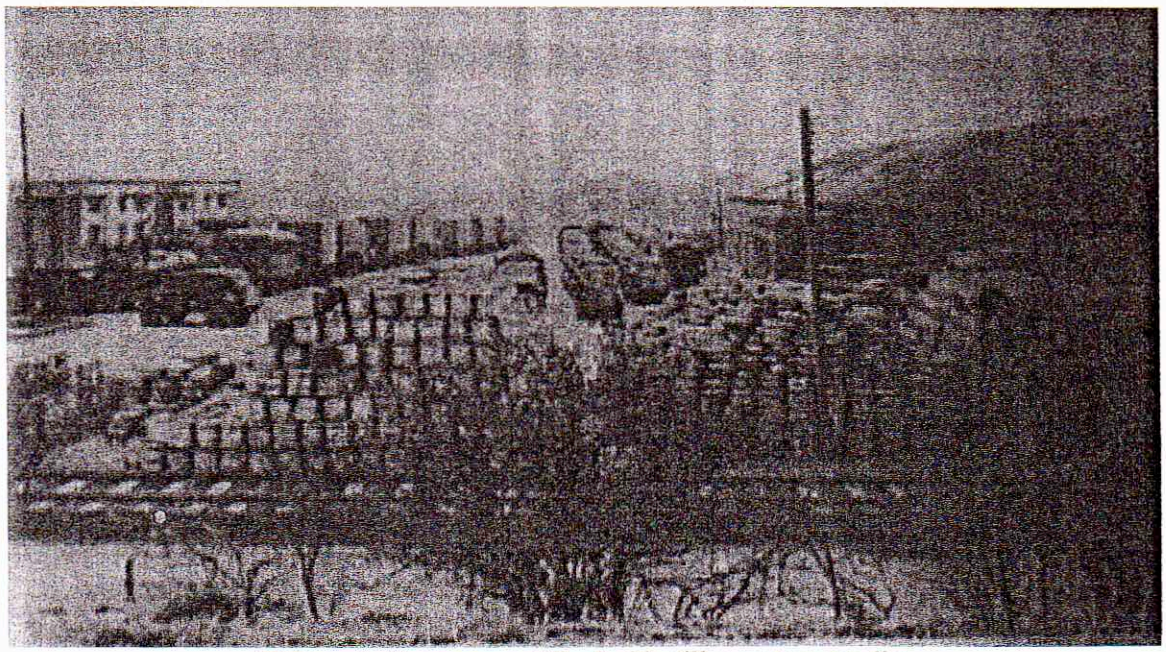
Each man carried and cared for his own army pack that was to be his equipment once on the front lines. While aboard the troopship, the army packs were either stored in a rack above the top bunk or on the floor under the bottom one. Each pack included a blanket, shelter half with pole and pegs, condiment can, bacon can, two suits of underwear, one O.D. shirt, one pair O.D. pants, four pairs of socks, one poncho type slicker, one overcoat, one mess kit, one folding trench shovel, one kit containing toilet articles and whatever personal effects each soldier wished to carry, such as stationary, cigarettes, etc. The men wore their fatigue outfits aboard ship.

Allied troops and equipment were being amassed all over England to fuel the Normandy beachhead. I was one of those being readied for this massive battle as an infantry replacement. Where and when I would be called upon, or what role I would play was the big question. I was one of thousands of Americans waiting in reserve in the South Hampton area of England. Four days after our arrival in England, we were told to pack-up. We were being shipped to France.

The entire south and southwest of England was a vast armed camp, with military vehicles parked wherever there was space. Since May of 1944, the crammed fields caused the vehicles to be parked in suburban side streets in town after town, behind pubs, and around homes and factories. Camouflaged trucks and armored cars waited the day they would go to France. Gliders and airplanes lined up on runways; in the harbors there were thousands of landing crafts and warships. This massive build up of supplies and arms was only the beginning. The United States was building further reserve supplies to replace these when they were moved out for the Allied invasion of Europe.



Once empty fields became overflowing with war supplies.



Cities and villages were utilized with still more war supplies.

Part 1

COMBAT DAYS

LANDING AT OMAHA BEACH

July 28, 1944

Fifty-three days have gone by since D-Day. We had just crossed the English Channel in a LST landing on Omaha Beach, still no docks or piers to unload at. We disembarked from our landing craft at waters edge, a lot quieter now than it was on D-Day. This was the bloodiest site of all five beaches the Allied Forces landed at on that day.

Troops are shown disembarking from their landing craft and wading through water to shore.

As we prepared to scale the bluffs I turned around and scanned the beach and seascape. I couldn't help but think how lucky I was not to have been here on that unbelievable day that took so many lives. I thought to myself, "It was perhaps the

I AM SURE THAT MOST OF THE MEN WHO HAD BEEN IN BASIC TRAINING AT CAMP CROFT WITH ME, HAD BY NOW BECOME CASUALTIES OF WAR

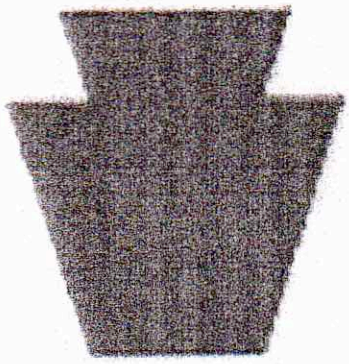
8 months I took for training in the Army Air Force and the six additional weeks of advanced infantry training at Camp Gruber that saved my hide~~, from landing on that beach on D-Day.~~" Wreckage of destroyed landing crafts, tanks and other vehicles where still strewn over the area. Craters made by exploding shells and bombs pockmarked the entire area around us.

As we were climbing the bluffs, German prisoners were being hurried down the same narrow path. They were to be loaded onto boats and taken back to England. As they passed us by, even the wrong look would have given me reason to shove or whack one of them. I thought to myself, "Oh how I hate you, go ahead and brush against me you Hun and see what happens to you." My training had brought my feelings to this point. There may have been two hundred German prisoners coming down the path, not one brushed against me even though I edged my shoulder toward several of them; hoping … just hoping. They stared down at the ground and would not even make eye contact with us. For them the war was over; for us it was just beginning.

During the next few days we bivouacked at the top of the bluff, not far from the beach area. The front lines were 15 to 20 miles inland. An occasional German plane would make a quick nightly appearance, however the hundreds of barrage balloons, dangling long wire cables aloft over the beach area, were a great deterrent to the enemy planes and kept them at a high altitude. On one evening a German bomber did drop a bomb perhaps a half mile away killing a few men. It now came our turn to be assigned to combat units. One soldier who protested being classified as a machine gunner claimed that he had never fired one. "Well, you are going to be a God dammed expert in a few days or you are going to be dead," was the officer's reply.

ASSIGNMENT

I was assigned to the 28th Infantry Division of the 1st Army and placed in Company L of the 3rd Battalion in the 112th Regiment.



Insignia of the 28th Infantry Division
"Keystone Division"

August 7, 1944

Early in the morning, we moved forward 15 to 20 miles up to the front line located near the small towns of Vire and Mortain. My Unit was situated near the 112th Field Artillery. We dug in for the night and soon found out our location happened to be on the northern edge of the German "Mortain" counter attack. Unknown to the Germans, the American forces had broken the front at St. Lo and were driving toward Brest attempting to encircle these very troops the enemy was throwing against us in a desperate and vicious attack to drive us back to the sea.

This was my first night "sleeping" on the battlefront. None of us knew what to expect in the blackness of the night, which seemed blacker than I remember of the nights before. Even though it was August the night seemed chilly. An inner feeling most of us never had before crept through the troops; scared wasn't the word for how we felt. Our artillery pounded the German positions continually throughout the night. None of us slept too well that night. Word was circulating that there could not be too many of the enemy left alive out there. We awaited daylight to find out just how weakened their forces would be.

BATTLING THROUGH THE HEDGEROWS

Normandy is a countryside of wooded lanes and thickly hedged rural roads, and was not easy for the infantry to advance through since there was a sniper behind practically every hedgerow and barn.

The hedgerows were a dirty place to fight. Those that weren't careful didn't make it out.

August 8, 1944

It was early morning and all replacements are hurriedly being assigned to platoons and squads. My assignment was to the 2nd Platoon of Company L. A briefing of our situation by Company Commander Captain O'Malley, who turned to our platoon leader for a more detailed briefing of what was expected of us. "Our artillery has raked the fields and hills you see to our front. There cannot be too many of the enemy alive out there. If we keep pushing into what's left of them you will discover that they are yellow." It sounded good. We were glad to hear this.

There was another artillery barrage then silence fell over the area. We were ordered to move out and push forward. We had advanced only a short distance. Rifle fire erupted to our front. A couple of our men fell and the cry for medics was being shouted. More firing erupted from the same spot. He was spotted by one of our men who returned the fire and then came the shout of "Kamerad." After nailing some of our guys, the S.O.B. was now surrendering. This was happening all along our front lines whenever they were spotted or their position became untenable. Kamerad was their way of greeting us when they surrendered. While these prisoners were being escorted to the rear, other shots were quite often heard repeating this whole scenario over again and again. I thought to myself, "Oh Lord, what kind of insanity is this?"

Between sniper fire and enemy machine gun fire, our advance on this day was limited to only a few hundred yards, but our flank protection could not advance even that far, so that evening we were ordered to withdraw to our original position at the start of the day. Some of the men I had only known a day or two were already casualties. Our Platoon leader, the one who briefed us earlier in the day, was dead. I never did know his name. We pondered over the remarks made by him earlier that morning "the enemy is yellow."

It did not take long to realize that if the enemy sees you first, you were probably dead. In the hedgerows of Normandy, much of the firing was done at around fifty yards, which made everyone easy targets. We had not yet encountered much in the line of machine gun, mortar or artillery fire, only rifle fire. The night passed fairly quietly with thoughts turning to what the next morning would bring.

August 9, 1944

Our attack began early this day following a heavy artillery barrage. Something had already gone wrong. Our artillery fire had been coming in really close and had been hitting our own forward positions. We had not moved over a hundred yards. Casualties were being carried back on stretchers. "How could this be happening," I wondered? This was only the beginning of one of those days I would never forget.

We were advancing across a large field that skirted a hedgerow area and moving toward a wooded area perhaps 500 yards distant. We had gone about 50 yards when enemy fire commenced from the woods. We immediately sought concealment in the

high grass that was all about us. The firing had ceased and the entire platoon remained in our high grassy seclusion. More than an hour had passed and we had not moved. Four American P-47s fighter planes appeared overhead, they were bombing and strafing the wooded area where the enemy gunfire was coming from. At that moment someone gave us the order to "Get the hell out of here." We broke to the rear and quickly leaped over a hedgerow as a few shots were fired at us. I do not know if anyone was hit. Our attack resumed relocating to our right and moving quickly into position with the rest of Company L. We were once again advancing into the hedgerow country.

Most hedgerows were around five feet in height and four feet thick. We quickly developed what was called the "hedgerow crouch." Hedgerows usually give a great advantage to the defenders. At times however, these positions became untenable for its defender when by-passed. The answer then for a by-passed defender was often a quick retreat, death or surrender. The defender could not see what was going on around him in fields which were usually about fifty yards or so square.

We advanced through several of these fields when fire suddenly erupted from our left. Two men in front of me were hit and went down. A soldier on my immediate right spotted an enemy sniper in a tree just in front of me and fired one round, hitting his target, sending the sniper plummeting to the ground.

Firing had ceased and several of us cautiously approached the fallen enemy sniper. His eyes were glazing over. He was an amazingly handsome young lad, not over 18 years of age. A search of his pockets revealed a letter. One of our men who could read German looked at it then after a few moments read it to us. It was from his mother and read "Dear Hans, and went on to say we love you and miss you so much, we pray that God is watching over you and cannot wait until the day that we shall see your smiling face again." I thought "My God, don't tell me that these people are human after all." Hans would not be going home to see his mother or anyone else. He was dead. Suddenly I was aware of a sharp popping sound, like the crack of a whip, near my right ear followed by two more. Ducking for cover, I realized that those were shots and the bullets had to be very close to me. To hell with enemy dead, lets stick with cover and concealment. Remember those words, "cover and concealment" as I repeatedly drilled them into my head. Unless necessary, never show your head above a hedgerow. A trained sniper could pick a person off at 500 yards, without any problem. And now there was one out there aiming at me and waiting for me to pop my head up again. No way, as I reminded myself, "cover and conceal … and stay alive."

Soon, our advance resumed. The terrain was now turning steeply upward, later to be identified as Hill 288, a commanding point in this area. The entire battalion had been advancing to a point perhaps half way up the hill when enemy rifle and machine gun fire erupted to our front. We quickly scurried for cover and began digging in. Orders quickly came for us to push on with the attack. There would be an artillery barrage and then we were ordered to move out. Again, rounds were coming in too close and hitting trees above our hedgerow. We were forced to withdraw to a safe point while our artillery fire

was adjusted. We then moved forward to our original position. Enemy fire resumed. We raked the area to the front of us with rifle and machine gun fire.

I was now getting to know the names of members of the 2nd Platoon. Sgt. Hall, Sgt. Bertoldi, Corporal Picket, Demo Stathis (our platoon medic) and a very tall sergeant whose name I can not recall. A discussion took place about whether a bayonet charge preceded by machine gun and rifle fire was feasible. A grenade would be thrown first, but it had to be tossed over the hedgerow in front of us. Who could toss one that far? It was only about 35 yards but uphill. Knowing my throwing arm capability, I suggested to the tall sergeant that I could try it, but needed to get a little closer. His reply was, "Well God damn it, there is a draw to our right work your way through it until you are close enough. Two men will be behind you to cover you. When you toss it, yell, 'grenade.' Then we will open fire and attack. Then get your ass back in here with us." I began to wonder what had I gotten myself into? What happened to that great idea I had of "cover and concealment." A hand grenade cannot be tossed in the haphazard manner shown in many war movies. All your men must be notified. It can throw shrapnel for a radius of 150 yards. It can be tossed over a wall, into a building, or into a hole. Supposedly, it will explode seven seconds after the pin is pulled and the grenade is released, but not always. Sometimes the enemy has been known to toss them back, as we have done with theirs.

About 12 to 15 yards up the draw, I spotted a former (I hoped) enemy foxhole. The hole was quite large and empty. I would pull the pin on the grenade, yell "grenade," toss it and the three of us would jump into the hole until after the explosion whereupon we would retrace our steps and join in the attack. Things seemed to go according to plan. I was quite certain that my toss had cleared the hedgerow to the front. The attack proceeded but not without casualties. Some of the men did not join in the attack and there was considerable yelling and swearing. The term yellow bastard was tossed around toward some of our men. Corporal Pickett seemed to be the one who took over our platoon. The attack dubbed "Pickett's Charge" proceeded; the enemy had fled leaving some dead behind. By nightfall the battalion had completely taken Hill 288. Our casualties were mounting.

After securing the hill, we prepared for the usual enemy counter attack. There was none. To my amazement Corporal Pickett walked amongst us shaking hands and congratulating us as though he were a high-ranking officer. He had information that another battalion would relieve us tomorrow morning and we would be placed in regimental reserve. Only a corporal, but he proved to be right

My God, we had been in combat only two days; how long can one live through this? My friends, Sgt. Bertoldi, Stathis, the Medic, had been in this type of action for a week now. I quickly developed a great admiration and respect for these two men. The tall sergeant had become a casualty and I never saw him again. Amongst others whom I did not get a chance to know were our new platoon leaders. Two platoon leaders killed in two days. That job was not for me!

BREAKOUT

August 10, 1944

The early weeks of the breakout in Normandy were immensely costly in American lives. We had moved back into Regimental Reserve, perhaps two miles to the rear. We were actually breathing a sigh of relief. We thought we were going to sit back in reserve where we could rest and relax, or R and R. Until now we had not faced too much enemy artillery fire. It was early morning and although well entrenched, we were soon subject to intense enemy artillery fire. In an open field perhaps 100 yards to our front and partially hidden in grass, we spotted reflections from a mirror. It was in the hands of a civilian. What was he doing? Was he signaling our positions to the enemy? Some men quickly went forth and brought him in. The fire lasted for some time. We found it wiser to retreat about 100 yards and dig in again. Heavy fire resumed later in the day. We were learning to dig very quickly and very deeply. More casualties. "Some place this Regimental Reserve," I thought, "not as good as it sounds." We quickly found out that Regimental Reserve does not stand for R&R.

August 11, 1944

We again resumed our attack, but not for long, as we soon came under intensive artillery fire, including 88 mm fire, the greatest artillery piece of any army in WWII. We were now being hit with mortar fire also. Enemy artillery spotters had us in their sights and we could do little but dig and dig. I must have dug four or five foxholes that day. Once after hearing a nearby explosion, I looked up and a piece of shrapnel rattled off my helmet. "Keep your head down, boy," I quickly thought. We suffered heavy casualties on this day and again gained very little ground. When one is alone in a foxhole and being shelled it is quite easy to recall all the prayers you had learned. Plus, you can make up a few of your own. Oh, how I long for those lazy summer days back in good old Seekonk. Things however were about to change for us.

August 12, 1944

In early morning we resumed our advance. Things were going along smoothly. Where was the enemy? There was no opposition and soon we were on open roads and moving forward at a good rate. We gained about 14 miles. It was late afternoon when we began to encounter some enemy rear guard fire.

Typical scenes in Normandy indicate the amount of destruction suffered by French villages. In many cases not one house was left standing and many people who had sought refuge in basements were buried alive.

August 13th to 19th, 1944.

The enemy was now in full retreat. Its forces were attempting to escape encirclement at Falaise by the American Third Army pushing up from the south and the British attacking from the north. We were pursuing from the west. Destruction along the roadside was unbelievable. The Germans had suffered huge losses in their attempt to escape, but still managed to extricate large forces from our closing pincer movement. We were being greeted by growing numbers of celebrating liberated French civilians. Where had they stored all this wine and cognac that was being offered to us? For the first time we felt like a liberating army. We were moving toward Paris and anticipating the entire liberation of France shortly.

On August 13th, Brigadier General James E. Wharton became Division Commander. Later that same day an enemy sniper killed him.

On August 14th Brigadier General Norman D. Cota became the Commanding General of our 28th Infantry Division.

German prisoners caught while being outflanked by Americans are being led back to the beaches of Normandy to be sent to England for the duration of the war.

August 20th to 27th, 1944

We were advancing very rapidly now. Heading east through towns we had never heard of. Sourdeval, Ger, Conches, Le Neubourg, Elbeuf, Claville, etc. the Division succeeded in trapping the remnants of the German 7th Army. We were being greeted daily by huge numbers of liberated people. They were shouting "Boche kaput" and "Vive Les Marique"...Long Live America. It sure sounded good. We sometimes rode in trucks. What a difference from just two weeks ago.

August 28, 1944

We were bivouacked on the outskirts of Paris and were informed that we had been selected to march in the Paris Liberation Day Parade tomorrow. Another First Army Division had preceded us to the city and a parade was attempted on August 25th but was broken up by Germans still in the city. We showered, shaved and cleaned up as much as possible. The following day was to be one of the most memorable of my life.

PARADING THROUGH PARIS

August 29, 1944

Marching toward the Arc de Triomph and gazing at its majestic grandeur gave me an indescribable feeling of history in the making. I vividly recalled the photos in the movie newsreels and newspapers of German troops parading in this same location as they occupied Paris in June of 1940. Civilians were openly crying and weeping. Today as we entered there was a feeling of joy and elation. This was history in the making with memories that would be embedded in my mind for the rest of my life.

This famous photograph of American troops before the Arc de Triomphe, are men of the 28th Infantry Division marching down the Champs Elysees

The division consisted of about 15,000 men, all with moist eyes as we paraded past the Arc de Triomph and down the Champs Elysees while being greeted by an estimated half million jubilant and wildly celebrating Parisians. Wine, cognac, calvados, you name it, and it was all flowing freely. Young women, and some not so young, were trying to break into our ranks and they quite often succeeded. They were riding in Jeeps and sometimes being carried by soldiers. Junior officers were becoming frantic and yelling, "Let's have some order." We would soon be passing the reviewing stand where the brass stood. Some semblance of order was temporarily restored.

On the reviewing stand stood Charles DeGaulle, head of all French forces, General Omar Bradley, General Hodges, General Norm Cota (the 28th Division Commander), General Leonard Gerow along with French leaders and diplomats. General Eisenhower was not in attendance nor was British Commanding General, Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery. Bands played continuously. The stirring French National Anthem (Le Marsielle) was played over and over again. To this day it sends shivers down my spine just hearing it. Oh, what a glorious day, can the war be nearly over? Wow, we certainly needed this. As it turned out later, this Paris parade and the flag raising on Iwo Jima were the two most published photos of the war.

The reviewing stand left to right: M. Le Tracer, Commissioner of Liberated France; French General Le Clerc; French General Charles de Gaulle, who later became Premier of France; Brigadier General Norman D. Cota, Commander of the 28th Division; General Omar N. Bradley, Commanding General of the U.S. Ground Forces in Europe; and Lt. General Courtney Hodges, Commanding General of the 1st Army.

The parade continued and once past the reviewing stand the festive air of the day resumed. We moved on to St. Denis on the northern edge of Paris where we bivouacked for the night. Guard positions were set up. I and another soldier, who told me that he was the nephew, of the United States Representative Albert Gore from Tennessee, were obliged to deter a couple of young local girls from entering our area. It took us some time to explain in our broken French that we were on guard duty. One was 22 and the other 16 years of age. We had them write down their names and addresses so we could come back to see them at a later time. We never saw those two French girls again.

Hundreds of thousands of jubilant Parisians jam-packed the Champs Elysees and the streets of Paris, while bands played and people cheered the 28th Division as they marched through Paris. Bouquets were thrown at the passing soldiers. Impulsive girls ran through the streets to kiss whichever Keystone G.I. might be available. Frenzied men and women cheered above the sounds of the bands playing. It was a great day for the men of the 28th and people of France.

LIBERATIONS, WINE AND "RITA HAYWORTH"

August 30 to September 7, 1944

Early in the morning of August 30th we were on the road again leaving St. Denis and Paris behind us. Advancing swiftly to the northeast, we occupied Senlis and, in the evening of September 2nd, we were in Compiegne. Resistance up to now had been sparse. A bridge that had been blown up was now delaying us. It had crossed over a river near the center of Compiegne.

We had been on the go since about 5 AM and it was now around 3 AM the following morning, September 3rd. Some of us began to doze on the street when a local priest who could speak good English began talking to an officer quite close by. "May God forgive me," he said, "those Hun sons of bitches pulled out several hours ago. They destroyed my church before they left." Some of us began to chuckle in hearing the Priest speak that way, however we quickly stopped when we noticed the priest was sobbing. Seeing this quickly brought back to mind our early training "To hate the enemy and regard him as the devil."

It may have been nine or ten in the morning of September 3rd before a pontoon bridge was erected and we were able to continue our advance. Several of us were sent forward to reconnoiter the area and do a little patrol work. A young man with a rifle approached. He explained that he was a member of the Maquis (a French underground resistance group.) He pointed to an area ahead and cried out "Boche" and motioned for us to follow him. Not knowing what he was up to we declined. Trust no one who you do not know. He went forward on his own. A flight of P-47s appeared overhead and began strafing the area to our front. We were glad we had stayed put and couldn't help but wonder what happened to the young Frenchman? Ten minutes or so later he returned with two German prisoners. We relieved him of his captives, but not before he kicked them around a bit.

We escorted the two prisoners back to the rear. We also received congratulations on a job well done. "Nice going men," was repeated to us several times. "You men did your job." The young French lad said nothing at the time but did request to join us for a few days as he said he knew the territory well. The next day we moved forward about 15 miles. He told us that it was too much walking and he was going to return back to his home.

The next few days we liberated more towns. Church bells rang as we entered. People always sang "Le Marsielle." The going was easy. Before leaving the Normandy hedgerow country, Company L's 2nd Platoon had been led by 2nd Lt. Woodward, 32 years old from Cleveland, Ohio. An incident stands out in my mind where we experienced a slight delay passing through a village. Private DeAngelis was having his canteen filled with water by a civilian. Usually they filled it with wine. Lt. Woodward demanded that DeAngelis pour the water out. The private refused stating that it was common practice. In combat, one obtained water from whatever the source. Woodward ordered him at gunpoint to pour it out. An unbelieving DeAngelis glared at the Lieutenant while emptying his canteen.

We were soon to move on. I am sure that DeAngelis managed to refill his canteen shortly afterward. Before many days had passed Woodward was beginning to be just one of the boys. He began taking advice from our more experienced noncoms.

Scenes like this were commonplace in the French countryside as American troops rid farmhouses and barns of German snipers.

September 8, 1944

In the previous few days we had advanced from Compiegne to Noyon, relocated again toward Compiegne and were now moving eastward into Belgium. Now on September 8th while the column advanced along the main highway, several of us were deployed to advance through a wooded area to our left as flank protection. We came to an isolated farmhouse and stopped briefly to check it out. An elderly man opened a door, bottle in hand and gave us a joyous welcome. He invited us in. While we explained that we had to move on quickly, his wife and daughter soon joined us. They seemed overwhelmed with joy. Cognac and champagne were quickly guzzled. The daughter was beginning to look like a young Rita Hayworth. We had to depart quickly before we forgot our assigned duties.

We had entered Belgium near Sedan, a town in France where a major German breakthrough had occurred in May of 1940. This brought back memories with the battalion strung out in columns of companies my squad was acting as a connecting link perhaps 100 yards between Company L and the company to our rear. Civilians poured into the street and celebrated as though the war was over. My squad had pictures taken with the Belgian civilians. More wine was passed around. Again we promised to return when the war was over.

Later in the day, we began running into the enemy rear guard's delaying action. Our Regimental Commander, Colonel Hodde, went forward to investigate and was shot in the abdomen by an enemy sniper. He recovered and years later went on to command all the American occupational ground forces in Europe.

September 10,1944

The day was bright and clear. Under a cloudless sky we were advancing into the city of Arlon, Belgium. The Germans had withdrawn a day or two before. Masses of people had been attending church services that morning and were just departing from church as we approached to their surprise. A joyous celebration ensued. It seemed that within minutes several thousand people were in the streets. We all felt that the war had to be nearly over. Some civilians told us that the Boche said they would return. In the distance very high in the air we could hear the approach of planes. Looking up we saw masses of American B-17 bombers, perhaps over a thousand. They were on the way to targets in Germany. Pointing to the sky I asked a civilian, "Do you think the Boche will return again?" "No way," he replied. (During the Battle of the Bulge the Germans did advance to within a few miles of Arlon but did not retake the city.)

This was a day to be remembered second only to the Paris parade. (Minus the refreshments). We had no time to dally. By the afternoon we were being trucked into Luxembourg and moving quickly toward the German border. Does the enemy have anything left? We felt the worst was now over and the end would soon be in sight.

GERMAN RESISTANCE INCREASES

September 11th-12th, 1944

On September11th 1944, the 28th Division claimed the distinction of being the first American unit to enter Germany in force. It was on the following day, September 12th, that my Regiment crossed the German border and for our first time, we dug in on German soil. This is the first time a foreign army had troops in Germany since Napoleon Bonaparte's army swept across the continent nearly 150 years before.

The Americans did not always have things their own way. This picture shows three captive American soldiers being led to the German rear.

September 13, 1944

The 112th Regiment attacked the town of Wallendorf with the 3rd Battalion in reserve. We spent a quiet day and evening not knowing the problems facing the 1st and 2nd Battalions. The enemy, during its withdrawal, had been reorganizing and now struck a stunning counterblow causing heavy casualties to these two battalions. The entire division was now running into very heavy resistance. The enemy was still very much alive and was now desperately fighting to protect their homeland from the invading forces. Our army was about to revise its plan of advance.

September 15th 1944

We withdrew to an area near Luxembourg City in the town of Sandweiller where Company L established a defensive position. In general things were quiet. For over a week we remained in position. My squad was housed in a barn, which was much better than our usual sleeping arrangements outdoors.

One evening, a few of us were offered a ride into Luxembourg City by a driver of a Jeep. With our rifles and some hand grenades we entered a bar. The bartender greeted us but seemed quite nervous. He did not even check our ages. We had a couple of beers and left. I don't even know if we paid him.

September 22, 1944

I was selected as a member of a ten or twelve man patrol. We would ride in two Jeeps and probe the town of Remich on the Moselle River bordering Germany. Cautiously, we drove approximately twelve miles to the western edge of Remich. It was here that we saw someone approaching. It was an elderly man who was signaling us to halt. He told us that there were several German soldiers in the village. He said that if we followed him up a path to our right we could see them from the high ground. It was decided we dismount, turn the Jeeps around just in case a speedy withdrawal was needed. Several of us would follow him up the path while keeping a close eye on him. Others would cover the road. We followed him up the path where he pointed out several Germans down below near a building. They appeared to be moving around unsteadily. Disregarding our element of surprise, one of our men foolishly fired at them. He missed and now they quickly took refuge in the building. At this point our patrol spread out along a path to where it ended, near a stonewall. From there we could see across the Moselle River into Germany. A newcomer to the squad, whose name I cannot remember but will call Fred, and I advanced to a point near the stone wall. On the opposite side of the river we watched about fifty of the enemy soldiers performing close order drill in an open field. I told Fred to run back to our patrol leader and tell him that we could probably cut down half of them and get the hell out of here. Fred soon returned and said not to fire on them as they probably had our position on top of the hill zeroed in and we would take casualties. So much for that idea, I thought.

Looking down the hill to our left we saw something that commanded all our attention. A German soldier and a civilian were exiting a building and beginning to climb a path directly toward us. I whispered to Fred, "Get back and stay down, when they get near us, I will grab the first one, you get the second, if they try anything shoot to kill."

When they had gotten to within 25 feet or so, we jumped up, rifles pointed at them. I shouted "Hands up" and motioned them forward. The man in civvies quickly responded, raising his hands and ascended to where we stood. I actually backed off a bit so as to keep him at a safe distance. He was at gunpoint perhaps twenty feet away. I yelled at him to get going in the direction I pointed to with my rifle. At this point he seemed to make a threatening move toward me. My back was to the embankment and I prepared to fire. He knew it and quickly departed down the path toward the rest of our patrol. I followed him watching for any quick moves and was wondering if he may have a pistol or some other small weapon hidden on him? At this point Fred joined me and I asked, "Where is your man?" He replied, "He took off through the bushes and with his back turned, I just could not shoot him." "You stupid fool," I replied. "He could have

gotten into the bushes and shot both of us." Within seconds we were back to our Jeeps where I had ordered the civilian to go.

The local village people came out and began beating on our civilian prisoner. We had to order them away from him. I had procured a beautiful pair of binoculars off him. A few days later I gave them to a Mortar Platoon Officer, who I thought had a greater need for them than I did.

We returned to Sandweiller with this prisoner and another who was also taken by our patrol. In a return visit to Remich in 1992, I discovered a popular wine cellar very close to where the German soldiers were seen in 1944. Could this have been the possible source for their intoxicated appearance back then?

I have often thought about the civilians who ever so often greeted our advancing patrols to furnish us information on the enemy whereabouts, only to later see our withdrawal and the enemy return to where our civilian informants remained. It happened a lot in Europe and made me wonder what the Germans might have done to them.

While in Sandweiller, a teenage girl riding a bike approached. We stopped her and asked where she was going. "Into Luxembourg City," was her reply. "We cannot let you through our lines," we told her, "stay here." We detained her for questioning by others as we departed moving a few miles south to a town called Itzig. We remained there a few days and then began a movement to the north.

We established positions east of Elsenborn and the Division was involved in detailed planning to assault the Siegfried Line. My personal assignment was now for carrying a flamethrower. I spent some time in training tactics on the use of this weapon and learned it could throw a flame up to 75 yards if wind conditions were right. It was fueled by what we called a sticky gas, so called because it stuck to anything it landed on. Our training tactics included practice attacks on an abandoned German bunker that we had captured earlier. Two dead enemy soldiers lay outside of it and in practice I had no hesitancy about using the flame on their bodies. I had to see the effects to realize its capabilities for future use. My assistant carried a five-gallon container of gas, weighing over 40 lbs.

While receiving training instructions from an officer he suggested that I carry a pistol in place of my M-1 rifle. I asked him why I needed a pistol when my flamethrower has a greater range and deadlier also. Someone nearby said "Drapeau, I would not even want to be near you if an enemy tried to sneak up on you. Oh, you would get him all right, even if you had to whirl around with your flame and take half of us with him." "Well, you had better be damned sure to cover me," I replied. After a chuckle, the officer agreed that I did not need a pistol. At this point he procured a training manual from which he was reading. "If hit by enemy fire, the operator of the flamethrower will drop to one knee, releasing the flamethrower in such a manner that his assistant can immediately procure it and etc. etc." Now one does not usually talk this way to an officer but I had to interrupt. "Come on sir, what kind of bull crap is that? If I get hit that God damned flamethrower and I could be a mess of crap 50 yards away." At this point he

took the manual and slammed it on the ground "You're right," he said. "How can they publish such bull?"

September 26,1944

Word came down from Headquarters that Brigadier General Norman D. Cota, Commanding General of the 28th Division, was promoted to Major General on this day.

October 9,1944

In the previous few days, the division had advanced against light opposition to a point where a major attack would be launched by our forces. Footholds into the Siegfried Line had been secured. The division was to attack on a narrow front with flank protection.

We waited in our foxholes. It was early morning. This is the day that we were to overwhelm the enemy. Dozens of American P-47 fighter planes appeared from nowhere, bombing and strafing enemy positions. This lasted for ten to fifteen minutes. We had a birds-eye view. The planes departed and there was a pause for a few minutes and then a steady increase of high intensity volume of an ear piercing, shrieking sound approaching from our rear. Sixteen battalions of artillery (105 MM and 155 MM) were firing. It's a serenade or T.O.T. (time on target) in which all firing is done so as to hit enemy positions instantaneously. This would inflict heavy casualties on the enemy. It was performed a number of times by American artillery. The artillery then pounded and continued this pounding for what seemed like 20 minutes or so. A problem soon developed. One of the guns had been firing short rounds; it had been hitting near one of our company command post areas to our rear. Casualties were inflicted and confusion developed. All firing soon came to a halt.

Would this be the day that I had recently been trained for? Would I have to use my flamethrower? Could there be any formidable resistance left after the pounding they had just taken? Our attack was now ready to begin, but we were told to wait as new orders came in. The attack has been canceled. That is all we were told.

THE INDESCRIBABLE AND BLOODY HURTGEN FOREST

For the 129,000 G.I.s that fought there, and especially the 25% who became casualties, it was a scene "only the devil himself could have created," according to a former company commander, Charles Macdonald. The Hurtgen Forest receives little more than an asterisk in the history books of WWII. It wasn't a battle in the traditional sense, with a distinct beginning and ending. And, it can hardly be called a victory ... a stalemate is a better description. It was one of the longest and bloodiest campaigns of the war that would take over five months, from September of 1944 into February of 1945, of brutal fighting, which peaked viciously in early November. It cost the Americans 30,000 dead or wounded with 9,000 lost to battle fatigue or disease. The battle was largely

interrupted in mid-December when the battle of the Bulge took place just to the south of the Hurtgen Forest. It would be continued later. Schmidt was recaptured on February 8th. The Germans had destroyed the dams at the same time, flooding areas to the North and severely hampering British, Canadian and American attacks in that area

October 12, 1944

We relocated to a town named Krinklet near Elsenborn in Belgium and remained there for nearly two weeks. We were in reserve there and had a chance to relax. While at Krinklet, our divisional commander, Gen. Norman Cota, one of the heroes of the D-Day landing with the 28th Division, gave us a much needed pep talk.

By October 25th we were transported by truck to a new assembly area. It was east of Rott, Germany on the fringes of the Hurtgen Forest, some 15 to 20 miles south east of Aachen.

During the afternoon the squad was sitting in a circle cleaning and checking our weapons. We knew each other quite well now. Most of us had been together since Normandy. Names I can recall are Sgt. Bertoldi, Corporal Wright, Lininger, Joyce, (The B.A.R. Man); I was the assistant BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man. Frank Hacke, Fred, DeAngelis, Davis (a tall lad), and others whose names now fail me after all these years since the end of the war. Lt. Woodward was still our platoon leader; Sgt. Wilson was the platoon sergeant.

It was very interesting in the diversified knowledge that a group of men like this could have. We were from various parts of the country. Whether the subject was farming, raising cattle, coal mining, building construction, sports or what have you, one could cover a lot of territory and learn a lot. Someone could fill in the missing piece of much that was discussed. Politics was brought up. The presidential election was just around the corner. Only a week away Lininger had a strong liking for Thomas E. Dewey and thought that he might well win the election. I disagreed, saying that at a time like this Roosevelt would be difficult to remove from office. At any rate we made a ten-dollar wager and handed the money to Cpl. Wright to hold for the winner.

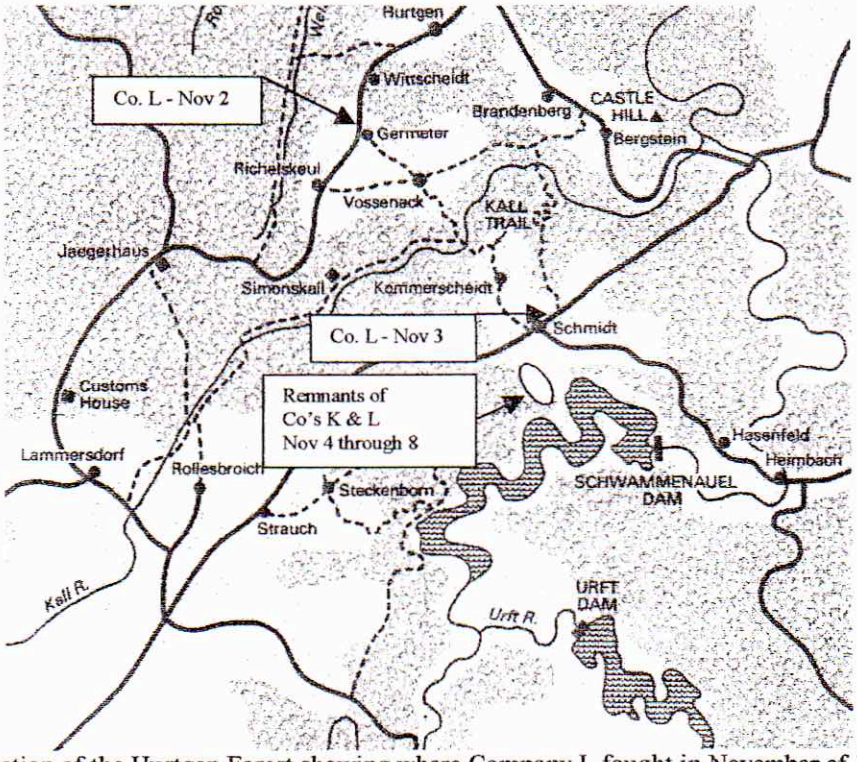
We were soon moving into the Hurtgen Forest. It was decided that controlling this area was a necessity in that it would protect the right flank of the British and Canadians and also the US Ninth Army to the north. Its attack into Germany was given a high priority status. This area encompassed part of the Siegfried Line. It was largely a forested, hilly terrain area, which the enemy had marked by firebreaks. The Germans had every inch of the forest plotted. This enabled the Germans to easily zero in on any quadrant of the forest. No matter where we were; they knew exactly what the distance was and easily dropped shellfire in on us. There was no hiding. And, as the Americans were soon to find out, that's where they took advantage of us with the so called "tree bursts." The Germans sucked the Americans into various parts of the forest and began pouring artillery shells into that area. The shells would burst at treetop showering

shrapnel down on you and there was no way to protect yourself. The tree bursts took out men by the hundreds, with shrapnel and treetops falling on you simultaneously.

In most areas of the Hurtgen we were soon to discover there were no roads, only paths, which our headquarters had mistaken for roads. Tanks and heavy vehicles could not use these paths, as they were too narrow. The Americans were also deeply hampered with enemy mines, ambushes, bunkers and booby traps, and the never ceasing shelling. At night in the forest one could not see more than a few feet ahead of him, if that. It was total blackness. The Hellhole of all Hellholes.

Thursday, November 2nd, 1944

It was on November 2, behind an artillery barrage of 7,313 rounds that my 28th Division entered this man-made hell to replace the 9th Division. They had just been mauled by the enemy. The 28th was to follow the same route as that of the ill-fated 9th Infantry Division. The 28th fought its way through Germeter, Vossenack, across the Kall River Gorge to Kommerscheidt and finally into Schmidt, amid savage fighting, but was finally pounded back out of Schmidt with staggering losses.



A section of the Hurtgen Forest showing where Company L fought in November of 1944

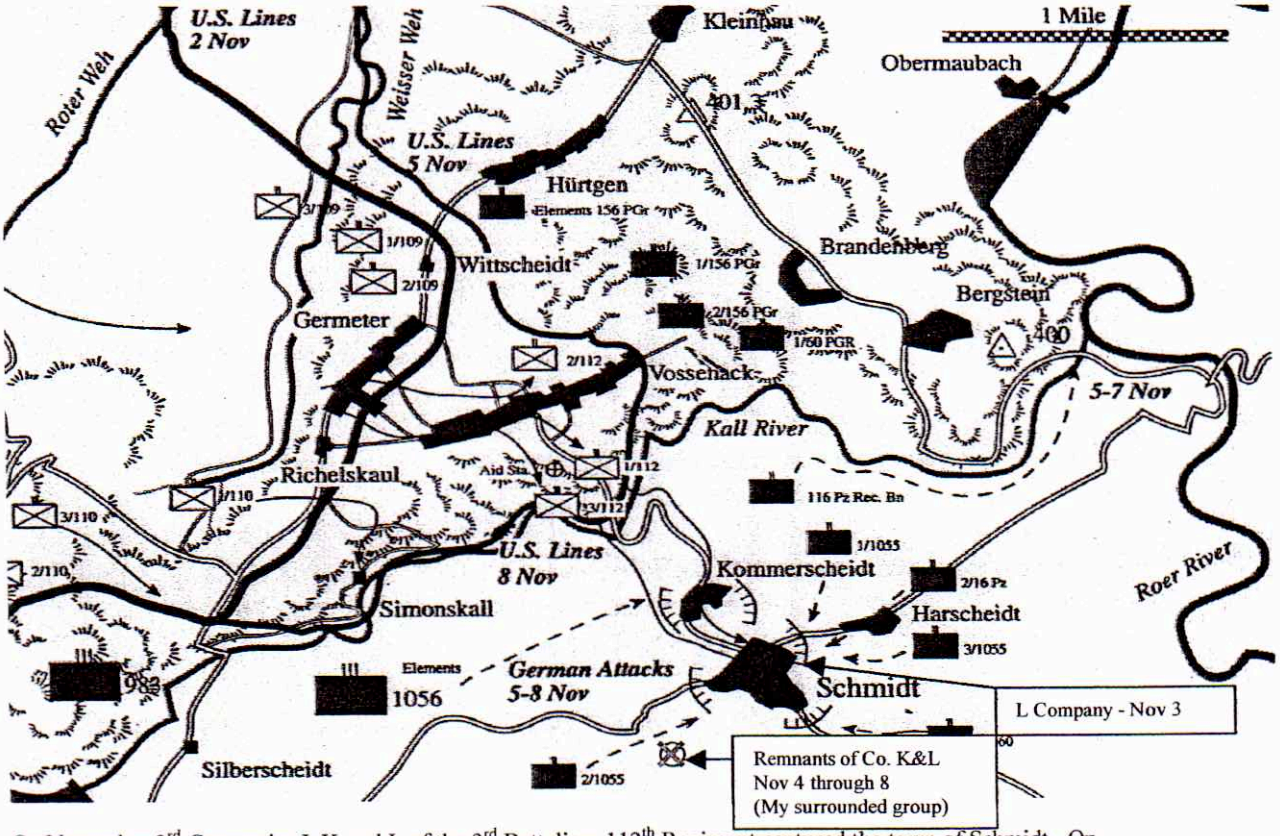
The 3rd Battalion of the 112th Infantry Regiment was en route to the town of Germeter. We would be in Regimental Reserve. 1st and 2nd Battalions had been on the attack during the day. Approaching Germeter, we were brought into the grim reality of what may lie ahead. Dozens of vehicles were approaching us enroute to the rear. They were loaded with dead and wounded. Some of the wounded, heavily bandaged, just

stared ahead, not speaking. Some Jeep vehicles had stretchers laid out on them, carrying the severely wounded. We were getting a message of what was to lie ahead. We dug in well that night. Tomorrow was soon to come. It would be another one of those days that one never forgets.

OBJECTIVE: SCHMIDT

Friday, November 3 1944

Our objective on this day was to capture the town of Schmidt. Nearby dams controlled the waters of the Roer River. Our obtaining these dams intact was very vital to the success of the Allied drive to the north. The 3rd Battalion of the 112th Regiment advanced through the town of Vossenack, which was captured the previous day by the 2nd Battalion. Moving through fields just outside town we were subject to a barrage of artillery fire but, fortunately, the deep muddy ground seemed to muffle most of the shells and actually turn them into duds.



On November 3rd Companies I, K and L of the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment captured the town of Schmidt. On November 4th we were driven out of Schmidt. I Company was driven back to Kommerscheidt. Remnants of K and L Companies fled Schmidt to the point marked "X" on the map. The map depicts the front lines of the 28th Infantry Div. as it advanced through Vossenack and Kommerscheidt battling to gain control of Schmidt during November 2 thru 11, 1944.

(NOTE: MORE THAN HALF OF K AND L COMPANIES ALSO RETREATED TO KOMMERSCHEIDT.)

Joined by the 2nd Battalion, we turned southeast toward the Kall River. The 1st Battalion was to our rear. We bypassed the Kall River Bridge by crossing the river about

100 yards to the north, wading waist deep in its waters. An attached chemical battalion had blanketed the hills beyond with smoke shells and no enemy resistance was encountered. At the time, I was wondering why this tactic was not employed more often as it seemed to be such an effective method. We ascended the steep embankment toward the town of Kommerscheidt. I was told to fire a few rounds into a window of a house nearby just for the sake of safety. I was the BAR man now. "Where was Joyce," I wondered? With K company on our right we pushed on through Kommercheidt and another half mile toward Schmidt. Only a few shots had been fired and now we were in full possession of the town. Just prior to this German units had passed through the town enroute to a rear position. We were able to capture forty prisoners, some taken completely by surprise.

Darkness was fast approaching. The battalion dug in on a perimeter defense around the town. Company L basically faced eastward and southeast, with I Company to the north and northwest. Company K was to our south and southwest.

The night was fairly quiet. Perhaps we had been lulled into a false sense of security. This would not have been the case had we known that on this very day the German high command had been staging a rehearsal; planning counter measures for an attack of this type, which they assumed, would include our capture of the Roer River Dams. German reaction would be quick and violent. The 89th German Infantry Division and 116th German Panzer Unit were preparing for early action.

While we were digging our foxholes, engineers strewed anti tank mines, casually laying them on top of the roads. There was no great sense of urgency, after all, we would soon be solidly reinforced with tanks and heavy weapons.

Overnight, the Germans extended their encirclement of us. Little did we know at the time our only supply route into Schmidt, and Kommerscheidt was the Kall Trail. This Trail was so narrow and winding that it was difficult to get supply trucks through, let alone tanks. The enemy now had control of the other three roads leading into town from the northeast, southeast, and southwest.

Outposts were set up and most of us slept that night in nearby buildings. This gave us a feeling of warmth and security but probably not very wise. The morning arrived quite soon however.

SURROUNDED BY THE ENEMY...A HELL ON EARTH!!!

Saturday, November 4, 1944

The rumble of exploding artillery shells bombarding the town of Kommerscheidt and Schmidt sent us scurrying to our foxhole positions. For a few minutes our front lines were not being hit directly. Feverishly, we resumed digging in an attempt to enlarge our foxholes while there was still time. Fred, my pal from Remich on September 22, came running up to me saying that the lieutenant wanted us to dig two man foxholes. That way we can work better together. Two men trying to dig in the same hole together at one time

was a problem in itself. Fred said to me "Al, why don't you just let me dig, I can out dig any SOB I ever saw." To which I replied, "Go ahead and do it." I never saw a man dig so quickly and told him so. We were in the hole, and just in time, covering a hill to the east. German artillery fire had been creeping back toward us. Artillery fire was especially heavy to our south. Because of a hill and sloping terrain between us, we could not fully detect the problems K Company was facing. In addition to the artillery fire, they were also drawing enemy tank fire.

The 2nd Platoon was dug in on a forward slope facing east with the town of Schmidt being directly to our rear. Through an early morning haze I discerned what appeared to be about fifty enemy coming over a rise about 600 yards to our front. They were descending a slope from which the terrain would rise toward our position. They advanced to a point where they had no cover in at least 100 yards in any direction. Our orders were to hold our fire until they had gotten closer. It was tough holding back our fire, we could have gotten most of them, but orders are orders.

At about 500 yards distant, the enemy column made a turn to our left, toward and into a wooded draw. We did not fire on them. My attention was focused on this area. I paid little attention to what was going on at our rear.

A rising crescendo of yelling and cussing was enveloping our rear, along with increasing enemy fire. K Company was breaking, some units fleeing to our rear through Schmidt and toward Kommerscheidt. Orders for them to hold were being refused as some of the men claimed that they had orders to fall back. Although I personally shouted and cussed some of these men, I am sure I did not fully understand their previous predicament. Only an overhead view of the entire scene would have truly depicted the horror that befell the 3rd Battalion on this day. Some of these men actually passed in front of my position and one was severely wounded about 10 yards in front of me. Despite his pleas for help he was not getting much sympathy. He was actually drawing fire upon us. Shells were exploding everywhere. At this point a soldier staggered toward him cussing everyone out. He was bleeding heavily from a leg wound. His helmet was creased from a bullet or shell fragment. He picked up the wounded man, carried him a few steps, fell and picked him up again. Who was this man? He reminded me of Jesus carrying the cross. It was Private DeAngelis; the man who on September 7th filled his canteen and was ordered to dump it by Lt. Woodward.

I do not know whether DeAngelis was wounded in his attempt to save this man's life or just prior to this time. We were not personally close but I vowed to myself that if I got out of this mess, I was going to report this event of supreme bravery to Lt. K. Woodward or Captain Walker. I never saw DeAngelis again, nor had I any information regarding his fate.

To our front, I now noticed a lone figure taking the same path toward the wooded draw that the fifty or so enemy had taken previously. Without hesitation I drew a bead on him and fired a short burst. He went down. Shortly afterward two Germans waving a banner (we first thought they were surrendering) left the wooded area and approached the

man who was down. They were medics but even so someone fired a few shots at them but missed. Firing ceased. At about this time I could hear someone close by. He was weeping. It was Sgt. Bertoldi. His best buddy, Pfc. Pipino, who he had taken training with was dead. I said, "Come on, Bert. Get back in your hole or you are going to join him." His reply was, "God damn it, we are all going to get it sooner or later anyway. So what difference does it make?"

Once again my attention was focused on the wooded draw to our left front. Time passed and things seemed to be getting quieter. Fred stood up and looked around. "Al," he said, "we are all alone, everyone is gone." I stood up, looked around and saw no one. I said, "What the hell is going on?" I thought to myself, "What a hell of a mess. We are on a forward slope with the enemy down below, we have to get out of here now."

Prior to the enemy counter attack, as historical accounts of this battle later proved, the 3rd Battalion, 112th Inf. Regiment was the most advanced of any unit, in its penetration into Germany. Through circumstances unknown to us at the time Fred and I were now alone … at the most advanced point in our front line.

I scanned the area to our front, in particular the wooded draw. There was no sign of enemy movement. I told Fred, "You make a dash to the shed. (The one we had slept in the previous night.) I'll cover you. Then I will join you." Fred took off in his dash for cover. It was about 40 yards distant. My sights were trained on the wooded area. If any shots were fired, I was going to rake this area with two or three magazines of my 30 caliber BAR ammo. Fred made it. No shots were fired.

In all honesty, various thoughts had been running through my mind. If Fred cannot make it, should I even try? Should I try a different route, directly to my rear? Should I just stay put in my hole and wait for darkness, which was still a long way off, or do I later surrender? Perhaps a counterattack would drive the enemy off? Quickly realizing I was in a predicament such as never before; my mind raced. What should I do?

Events allowed me to run for it the same as Fred had. As I leaped from my hole my helmet fell off. I picked it up, put it on and ran. I joined Fred behind the shed. From there we headed toward the church in the center of town. Behind protective cover we found the remaining men of the 3rd Battalion had gathered there. All others had retreated to Kommerscheidt. Most of these men were from K Company. Some were from L Company. "Let's get the hell out of here," someone ordered and about 200 men began a flight downhill toward a hilly wooded area several hundred yards to the southwest to seek shelter.

It soon became apparent that we were surrounded. We aimlessly milled about waiting for orders. Who the hell was in charge? An unknown sergeant, probably from K Company, was organizing a patrol party to probe toward Kommerscheidt to see if we had an escape route. I was one of the five or six men that he selected for the patrol. At this point, Lt. Woodward, who was nearby, told me to stay with him, and another patrol member was selected by the Sergeant as I stayed behind with the Lieutenant.

Seemingly out of nowhere an American P-47 plane appeared. I caught a glimpse of it before seeking some cover. It swooped in making a pass at us, diving and strafing the area around us with machine gun fire. It then departed. How could they do this? Well, we were behind enemy lines and I guess could easily be mistaken by fast moving planes as the enemy. Later, I was told there was some wounded along side the tree line with German blankets covering them. Whether they were Germans or Americans, I did not know. Germans were reportedly in this area earlier.

There was considerable yelling and screaming. Someone yelled at us to spread out and dig in. Having a BAR I dug in on the forward slope within the tree line. I had a good field of fire on any enemy who might attack from the direction in which we had previously fled. Approximately 200 of us were in this group and we may have covered an area of about 200 yards by 60 yards. We covered open areas to the east and west and the shorter wooded areas to the north and south.

Heavy firing commenced to our south. An enemy attack was repulsed and a prisoner was taken. Firing was also heard to the north. It involved men of the patrol I was previously picked to take part in. Two men came running back to us. One of them was Corporal Pickett who I remembered from the Normandy hedgerows, now a sergeant in another squad. He said they had been ambushed and lost some men. I was later told that he never left his foxhole after he returned.

While digging my foxhole, Demo Stathis, our platoon medic, came to me with the news that Lt. Woodward had been killed. He was the victim of the strafing attack earlier. Asst. Squad Leader, Corporal Wright, holder of the election wager, was also dead. We dug even faster. I was within ten feet of Lt. Woodward when he got hit. He may have saved my life when he pulled me off the patrol.

I thought sometimes next of kin did not get full details of incidents such as this. Lt. Woodward was 32 years old from Cleveland, Ohio and died on November 4, 1944 from an American P-47 attack. He was the last officer remaining in our surrounded group. Company L Commander, Captain Walker, had fled to Kommerscheidt. Captain O'Malley of Company K had been wounded earlier in the morning. As there were no other officers with us the non-coms took over.

We spent much of our day just digging in. We had no anti-tank guns and few, if any, bazookas. We did have machine guns, BAR's, rifles, plenty of ammunition and a good supply of hand grenades. Our food rations had been issued on the previous morning and were consumed yesterday, November 3rd.

A hand grenade can normally be tossed up to 35 yards. The German grenade called a potato masher was attached to a handle and could be tossed further. The American grenade however could be attached to an adapter mounted on the end of a M-1 Rifle which enabled it to be fired up to a distance of 150 yards. When fired this way a grenade could have quite a deceptive explosion impact. It may confuse the enemy into thinking that we had mortars.

One of the Sergeants in our group claimed to be an expert in the art of firing a hand grenade from his rifle by using a special adapter made for that purpose. We had a pretty good supply of grenades, as probably none were used in the previous day's attack. Many grenades were furnished to the Sergeant (I'm not sure if it was Sgt. Stanick or Sgt. Wilson) for use when he saw fit. It did not take long for him to prove his abilities to us when the Germans, who were sighted and in range, were kept at bay, by selective firing.

The Germans attempted attacks from the woods to our south, but were beaten back. We took one prisoner. I positioned myself just inside the forest facing open ground to the east toward Schmidt, expecting an attack from that direction. What would we have done if German tanks approached us firing into our positions? I do not know. At some point they brought in and camouflaged two tanks to the west of us. They were parked at the wood line, just across an open field no more than a hundred yards away.

It did not take us long to realize we were surrounded. Sit tight, keep digging, it won't be long until division knows of our plight and breaks through, or so we believed. Darkness came early in the forest. What would the night bring? What about tomorrow? Would we be rescued?

HELP NOT COMING!

Sunday, November 5th, 1944

Our prisoner taken the previous day had escaped overnight. While with us, he was not even allowed to dig a foxhole for himself. The enemy continued their probing attacks, with occasional mortar fire being thrown in. The two German tanks on our west would fire a round or two into the trees above us sending shrapnel down upon us. At this point we not only dug downwards, but also at an angle underground for more cover. It would take almost a direct hit to get us. We had no complete overhead protection. One would need an axe to cut trees and lay logs across our foxholes for this kind of protection, and no frontline infantryman carried an axe, nor would he use one if he had it. We could see no signs of relief action coming from the vicinity of Schmidt. Two days now without food, but our main concern was, help did not arrived and there was no sign of any help coming. Hope was that tomorrow would be different. If only we could hold out till then.

Monday, November 6th, 1944

Morning dawned along with intensive artillery fire erupting a few hundred yards to the north. Was this a prelude to an American attack that would get us out of here? We did not know it at the time, but it was the preparation of a German attack to drive our troops from Kommerscheidt. The Americans there held on and later during the day quietness resumed in that area. We again received occasional tank and mortar fire and could not venture far from our positions. Some more prisoners were rounded up and this time they were allowed to dig their own foxholes, but were kept under guard at all times. Now it has been three days without food. Our hope still stood out that tomorrow would be different.

Tuesday, November 7, 1944

Dawn approached and with it, just to our north at Kommerscheidt, came the thunderous roar of artillery bombardment. Just as well that we did not know what was happening as the Germans were launching a very powerful attack and American lines at Kommerscheidt were breaking with troops falling back to Vossenack and beyond. Before long, our surrounded group was more than a mile from any other friendly forces. However, our immediate concerns had to be with our own problems.

There was some discussion of an attempted breakout. I left my foxhole and roamed a bit, talking to a few others. I visited Sgt. Bertoldi in his foxhole to get his thoughts on our situation. Before leaving, and trying to lighten the moment, I asked him how he would like to have a large platter of spaghetti and meatballs. His rather curt reply was, "Aw, Drapeau, knock it off."

I quickly returned to my own trench, but not quite soon enough. A German tank shell exploded into a tree nearby. A hunk of shrapnel struck me on the right side, digging into a fuel-heating tablet I carried in a magazine pouch. The force of it sent me tumbling into my hole where I landed on my back. I lay stunned for a few seconds and then felt for the shrapnel, which was embedded in my belt. I quickly discovered that it was too hot to touch, but I did manage to shake it loose. When I recovered my senses, I astonishingly realized that I was not injured. The piece of shrapnel had hit broadside against the fuel-heating tablet, which had absorbed the impact; but, nevertheless, felt like a wicked blow to the side. Being surrounded, a severe wound would quite often result in death, as only temporary medical aid was available.

In mid afternoon, a German officer with his German soldier escort approached our lines. Under a flag of truce, someone nevertheless grazed him with a bullet. He was given quick medical care and presented surrender demands to us. They were refused and muttering something in German, he went on his way. Darkness came early again, and things had become so quiet again. We were completely on our own.

AN ULTIMATUM TO SURRENDER

Wednesday, November 8, 1944

A light cold rain had been falling since dawn. Intermittent tank and mortar fire kept us pretty much confined to our holes. Casualties had been mounting. Pitifully, some wounded had died where under normal circumstances, evacuation and proper medical care would have saved them.

When conditions allowed, we would often mix with other men close by. We expected new surrender demands soon. Talk circulated about launching an attempted breakout after dark. But did we have that much time?

It was early afternoon when a second German patrol under a flag of truce approached our lines. Their demand was firm; we would surrender by 4 PM this afternoon or be annihilated. Our leaders again made no decision other than to poll the men. The German officer would be detained until we could reply. He was allowed to return one of his men to their own lines suggesting they were to withhold fire until our answer was given. He was informed that we held 14 of his men as our prisoners, and this we hoped would be a safety factor for us.

My vote was to not surrender. I had five or six men who agreed to stay with me in case the going got real rough in an attempted breakout. We would try to slip out to the northwest where things seemed to be quietest. If we came under fire, we could take it from there. Another soldier, unknown to me, was circulating around the area. In a very loud and clear manner, he was making his own thoughts known. "I'll tell you one thing: I have ammunition and two grenades, and if any yellow bastards want to surrender, go ahead. I'm staying here and taking 30 of those goddamned Huns with me. They are not taking me alive," he shouted. Very impressive, but scary, I thought. No one argued with him.

I was told that the vote was about fifty-fifty. The German officer was told that no decision had been made, and he was allowed to return to his lines. He then repeated, "You have until 4 pm," and left.

Were they bluffing? Would we soon be under an all-out attack? A discussion was underway. Should we try a quick breakout? What about our dead and wounded? A decision would have to be made very soon.

Part 2

PRISONER OF WAR

Later the same day of
Wednesday, November 8, 1944

CAPTURED!

Exactly at 4:00 pm German mortar from the south and southwest began a bombardment, firing salvo after salvo. Tank fire from across the opening to the west was shelling the trees above, sending shrapnel and splintered trees down upon us. Within seconds, we were undercover in our slanted foxholes, but for some, it was too late. The bombardment may have lasted for 7 or 8 minutes. A short pause followed by screaming and yelling in German as they came swarming from the woods to our south and west. There was also yelling in English. Our men at the top of the hill facing them were beginning to surrender. The word of surrender was quickly passed amongst us. Discarding our weapons and ammunition and with hands raised, we ran uphill and into the open field to the west. We were quickly lined up in four columns. Perhaps initially after what I had been through, being captured seemed to offer a slight sense of relief, but wait. Two camouflaged tanks along the far wood line were only 50 yards away. Swarms of enemy soldiers, some very menacingly, milled about. One German soldier asked in English, "Where are your British comrades when you need them? Back in Caen?" A monocled German officer approaching from one of the tanks removed his gloves and slapped the face of Pvt. Davis on my right. Davis quickly had tears in his eyes, but fortunately made no response.

A number of German soldiers had been searching the woods from which we had just exited. There were cries of, "Karl, Hans, Helmut, etc. as they had discovered their own dead and wounded. The monocled officer strutted in front of us shouting orders. Other soldiers pointed rifles toward us while feigning pulling a trigger. Some shouted "Roosevelt kaput" and "the war is over for you." Their own men regarding our treatment of them were now questioning the prisoners we had previously held.

We may have been standing in rank for 20 to 30 minutes, the officer barking orders like Hitler himself. Artillery fire from an unknown source (probably our own) was coming from the west and hitting close to our location. Some shells hit very close. We were ordered to stand in position while some of the Germans who had been guarding us began to search for cover. At this point the unfazed bravado of the monocled officer seemed to take a turn toward normality. He gave orders to have us moved from the area and quickly. I counted 100 walking men with 25 wounded that we carried to a certain point.

The first snow of the season now began falling. Our combat days were over. We were prisoners of war. A light snow continued falling as we were marched back through the town of Schmidt and beyond. In German Army tradition, it did not take long until our numerous guards began singing their marching songs. They seemed to sing pretty well, if one was interested. Surprisingly, one of their songs was "Tipperary," which they were singing in German. A guard to my right asked if any of us would like to join along, while singing in English. I replied, saying, "I don't think so." He said he understood.

We trekked for perhaps two or three hours. The wounded, who could not walk, were separated from us, the walking wounded remained in our group. At one point during our march I had been walking alongside Demo Stathis, our platoon medic and was asked by him if I wanted to try to slip away from the group and attempt to escape. I mentioned that we had all been counted, and it might not be too good for the others, if we did, in fact, escape. I certainly admired his courage, but I also felt as though I had had enough and just as well, as later events would turn out. He told me later, that he had asked Sgt. Bertoldi the same question, but Bertoldi suggested that his medical abilities might be needed to treat our wounded.

We arrived at a large farm building in a village a few miles northeast of Schmidt, where we were to spend our first night as prisoners. Not long after we had settled in, and to our amazement, we were escorted to a large bench, which contained bread and honey, and plenty of it. I am sure we all gorged ourselves with this food. It was our first meal in five days. Thanksgiving could not have been better.

With a full stomach, a warm room, and no shots being fired, we even took the liberty to remove our shoes, which had not been off in some time. On the morning of November 3rd, we had waded waste deep in the frigid waters of the Kall River before attacking Kommerscheidt and Schmidt. Our feet were badly in need of some care. I slept rather well on this night considering the circumstances. I guess we were all exhausted after having been through these extremely tough and tiring last few days.

November 9, 1944

We were awakened early. When attempting to put on my shoes, I discovered a problem. Frostbite was beginning to set in, and my feet were swelling. I was not alone in this situation, and some others had it worse.

We were given some bread for breakfast and soon ordered outdoors and lined up. A former squad member, Frank Hacke, quipped, "Is this where they shoot us?" I hoped not. After being counted, guards walked amongst us and seemingly at random selected a number of men for interrogation. I was one of them to be chosen. We were taken into a nearby building which we entered three or four at a time. We waited until being called upstairs individually for questioning. A German corporal partway up the stairs asked us a question, "Whose army has the best camouflage?" Before anyone could reply, he blurted out, "The (expletive) Russians have the best camouflage. In the winter you cannot even

see them until you are on top of them." At this precise moment a woman in German Army uniform entered the room shaking her head at his comment and proceeded up the stairs. The guard covered his face and half turned away. We all began to chuckle.

It was now my turn to be interrogated. I was escorted upstairs into a room, where a German officer greeted me and cordially asked me to please have a seat opposite him. He asked me if I was properly fed last night. In all honesty, I replied in the affirmative. He then asked, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" (Did I have a choice?) He asked my name, rank, and army serial number, which under the Geneva Regulations is all that a prisoner is supposed to divulge. I quickly answered those questions. An assistant soon handed to him a sheet of paper. "Most Americans love baseball, have you ever watched the Boston Red Sox play?" he asked. My curiosity forced me to ask, "Why the Red Sox?" "Because, you were inducted at Fort Devens in Massachusetts around the end of March, 1943." He was right, but how did he know? He told me that all this information was quickly gathered from our army serial number. I was not about to question this.

He told me what my division, regiment and battalion were. I gathered that he was trying to find out what company I belonged to. He asked if I knew a Captain Mallory or Millory or a similar Captain's name, which he was informed, had been wounded. I knew a Captain O'Malley who had been with L Company and transferred to K Company, however, I told him the name was unfamiliar.

"Why did you Americans hold out so long, did you not know that we could have annihilated you?" "Because we are American Soldiers," I not too smartly replied. I quickly continued, "I am sure your men would have done the same thing." He seemed to nod in agreement, but said nothing for a few moments.

"Do you think American Intelligence is superior to ours?" he asked. I replied that I did not know. He then proceeded to have a non-com uncover a large map showing the entire western front.

The map clearly indicated the location of each army, corps and division, as well as names of commanders. I was told that two American divisions had landed at Le Havre just yesterday. One of them was the 42nd Rainbow Division with which I had trained briefly at Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. I scanned the map quite closely, and I am sure the officer noticed. The map was covered and put away. The interrogator had just one more question. "How long do you expect the war to last?" "Not long," I replied, hoping that I had not said the wrong thing. Upon departing, the officer told me that he had a relative living in Chicago, and that he had visited him once. He said that he would like to return there someday, and I nervously replied, "That would be nice."

The German interrogator was well mannered and intelligent; however, I do not see how he could have obtained any useful information from me unless it was about baseball. A Private First Class does not normally know too much about military strategy.

By mid-morning, all interrogation had ended, and we were recounted and assembled to depart. Under close guard, we trekked for hours through towns and villages toward a destination unknown. A prisoner near me was describing an incident prior to his being interrogated in which a German soldier on a stairwell used the "F" word in front of a woman while describing Russian camouflage. I looked at him and said, "You were not with me when I heard exactly the same thing." We then decided that this type of humor was just a ploy in an effort to loosen us up a bit prior to questioning. I still doubt that they could have obtained any useful information.

The Germans marched us until darkness arrived, and then we settled, once again, into a barn for the night. Food was becoming scarce.

November 10, 1944

In early morning our march resumed. As we moved farther from the battle lines, we noticed that more civilians had been gathering along the roadsides. Most seemed merely curious and had little to say. That would soon change. While entering one village, we were brought to a halt. The guards informed us that two Royal Air Force Pilots, who had been recently shot down, had been held in one of the houses under tight guard. They felt that some of the people in the village knew this. They were to be placed in the middle of our group as we moved along. The civilian population did not take too kindly to air force "murderers" as they put it. We concealed them as best we could, but civilians soon discovered them in our midst and the crowd became ugly. They showered us with garbage and we were spat upon. The expression "Schweinhund" was heard repeatedly. The guards did a good job of moving us out of the area and keeping anyone from harm.

The pilots told us that when shot down; their initial fears were more from enraged civilians than the German Military.

November 11-13, 1944

We were on the road again, marching all day. The Germans changed guards quite often and some of them were criticizing what they termed the limited walking abilities of American soldiers. They told us that they heard while in training, we took a short break every hour, (which had been the case in some basic training hikes). We replied that lately we had been walking up to 20 miles day, and that they, the Germans, had been relieved by other guards halfway through their walk. Their answer was, "Let's just see who can walk."

At one point, seemingly from nowhere, and just over the treetops, a plane zipped over our column. I could not recognize the type, but thought it may have been an American A-20, the fastest fighter plane we had up till then. I could not imagine it being a German plane. I had not seen one since August in Normandy. Someone nearby said that recently he had read about a new jet plane, which was in the works. Sure enough, it was a German jet, the fastest plane in the air. Fortunately, they did not have many. Late in the day of November 13th, we arrived in Bonn. Germany.