

40 Days of Combat

A n d

One Day In Hell

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(Written around 1995)

FORWARD



The day of Hell was an unsuccessful attack on the town of Sessenheim in Alsace, France, on January 19, 1945. This prose is dedicated to all the men of Company L, 411th Infantry, 103d division who participated in this action, with special recognition to the members of the First Rifle Platoon and Weapons Platoon who were isolated in Sessenheim and spent 6 months of hardship in German Prisoner of War Camps; to Sergeant Joe Bowden, who was killed in this action; to Santos Garcia, who lost a leg carrying my message back to the Company Commander; and especially to my life-long friend, Jack Scannell, who gave me 50 additional years of life.

I doubt if these words have any historical value. As they used to say, we were out of touch with the “Big Picture.”

What follows is mostly a series of vignettes attempting to show the humor, the filth, the physical problems and in some cases, the emotional problems we encountered.

Much as I hate to burst any patriotic bubbles, few of us fought for God, mother and country. After the first few days, we fought to stay alive, to protect the men on either side of us and – yes – for pride.

World War II – Order of Battle

By Shelby L. Stanton

The following is an official description of the 103d Division Combat History “World War II – Order of Battle”, by Shelby L. Stanton.

Arrived at Marseilles 20th October 1944, relieved 3d Infantry Division at Chevry, France, 8-9th November, 1944. Attacked toward St. Die in Vosges Mountains 16th November 1944 and fought through strong opposition to clear the hill mass below the town. Crossed the Muerth River 20-24th November 1944 and took the evacuated objective of St. Die the next day with the 409th. The Division then outflanked Stiege Pass 22-23 November and followed in the wake of the 14th Armored Division toward Selestat which it helped clear in house-to-house fighting 2-4th December. The Division crossed the Zintzel River at Griesbach 10th December 1944 as it fought the Battle of Mertzwiller, overcame rearguard resistance at Climbach and crossed the Lauter River into Germany on 15th December 1944.

The Division then relocated to the Sarreguemines area to defend against the Germans' Ardennes counter-offensive, which never reached its sector. On 14 January 1945, the Division moved to Reichschofen to take over the zone of Task Force Herren (70th Infantry Division) along the Sauer River, which was accomplished by 17 January 1945. A Limited attack at Sessenheim was repulsed on 19 January 1945, and in view of the German force concentration, withdrawn to the Moder River. A German attack on 22 January 1945 forced the Division from Offwiller and the next day the Division was pushed back past Rothbach. Further German attacks on Bischoltz and Mulhausen were defeated 24-25 January 1945 and by 26 January 1945 the Division had cleared Schillersdorf and restored its lines. The Division then took over the zone of the 101st Airborne Division on 5 February 1945.

The Division went on the offensive 15 March 1945, and the next day took Zinswiller and Oberbronn and reached the outskirts of Reichshoffen, which fell on 17 March 1945. The Division fought the Battle for Reisdorf 19-21 March 1945. The Division reached Klingenuemster and mopped up west of the Rhine from 22 March 1945 until relieved by the 71st Division along the Rhine from Oppau south to Speyer 28-29 March 1945. It then engaged in occupational duty until it returned to the front. The Division started its offensive from Kirchheim on 21st April 1945 as it followed the advance of the 10th Armored Division and cleared bypassed resistance. By 23 April 1945 it had closed German escape routes southeast from Stuttgart and reached the Danube northeast of Ulm on 25 April, which it crossed the next day. Continuing to follow the 10th Armored, the 411th took Landsberg, the 410th reached the Lech River at Lechburg and the 409th cleared Schongau on 28 April 1945. The Division began negotiations for the surrender of Innsbruck as the 411th moved to Brenner Pass and affected the junction with Fifth Army forces from Italy. All hostilities ceased in the Division's sector on 5 May 1945 with the surrender of German forces in southern Germany.

THE FOLLOWING IS A DESCRIPTION OF SEVERAL OF THE CAMPAIGNS –
AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG, GREEN LIEUTENANT.

TRAINING

After my graduation from high school, my parents decided I should attend the best R.O.T.C. College that they could afford. This proved to be Ripon College, Wisconsin. During my first year at Ripon, my father, an activated National Guard Officer, was transferred to Atlanta. He decided I should become an engineer and continue R.O.T.C. Georgia Tech seemed to be the logical combination.

I entered Georgia Tech as a sophomore in R.O.T.C. and a freshman in everything else. Fortunately, I held up my end with R.O.T.C., because everything else was less than mediocre.

I was “rushed” by a fraternity whose name I can’t remember, but it was at one of their functions that I met Betty Jane Williams. I realized instantly that she was the fulfillment of all my dream fantasies. I was absolutely smitten by her 50 years ago and still feel the same way today.

For a short time I also went with a nice lady named Marion, however, I shot myself in the foot one day when I called Marion’s number and asked for Betty. Smooth!

About this time it was announced that my Georgia Tech class could enlist in the Enlisted Reserve Corps or be drafted. I was sick of school, but my dad said, “Go to the Enlisted Reserve Corps and stay in school.” He must have seen a lot more promise in me that I saw in myself. However, everything turned out all right because the Enlisted Reserve Corps was the first to be called up.

Our class headed to basic training at Fort McClelland, Alabama. This, to me, was heaven! No school – and I could play all those Cowboy and Indian games I’d always liked. It was here I picked up the nickname, “Nice”. I asked them why they had given me this name. They said, “Whenever you’re asked how it’s going – you say Nice.”

There was only one guy more gung-ho than I was. This was my good buddy George Sheppard. We were so nutty that “Shep” carried a football in his pack. On 20 mile marches, we’d get a 10 minute break every hour. Shep would dig out the football and we’d have a 10 minute throw around. Then back to marching.

It was at Fort McClelland that I first learned one of the methods the soldiers can voice their displeasure without the officers being able to pinpoint the offender. The scene is a long march – middle of the night – climbing a long hill under so called “combat silence”. One man would yell out “48”. Another would yell “49”, a third would yell “50”. Then we’d all yell out in unison, “Some Shit!” It was humorous watching officers running up and down the line trying (in vain) to spot the culprit.

Since our class was all college boys, the instructors didn’t know what to think of us. There were a lot of 3:00 o’clock AM inspections to try to keep us in our place. During the last week of class, we were finally told that when we were ‘right’ – we were the best company to go through the training session. But when our hearts weren’t in it, we screwed up worse than any preceding class.

I was 19 years old in basic training. On a “leave” home, my father asked me how things were going. I said, “No problem, but some of the older fellows did have problems.” He said, “How old do you mean?” I replied that we had people as old as 24. Ne never let me forget it.

I probably received my greatest compliment ever shortly after the training session ended. I was the only man in my class offered a job on the training cadre as an enlisted man. However, I decided to go back to Tech with my friends.

After our 17 week basic training, the Georgia Tech boys were returned to Tech. We didn't know what they intended doing with us. I was flunking most of my subjects. My friend George Sheppard decided he was going to volunteer for the paratroopers. I thought this was a great idea, but my dad said; "Wait a little bit. They have something in mind for you."

To break up the monotony, two of us R.O.T.C. boys were selected as 1st Sergeants to "control" the new A.S.T.P. imports to Georgia Tech. These A.S.T.P. men were Army veterans of 2 to 3 years, who had been selected to continue their schooling. I instantly acknowledged, they knew a hell of a lot more than I did. I never was much of a parade ground soldier, but they protected me, as all my friends have done.

A disaster was averted when I took over for the cadet company commander at an annual review. I was marching in front of the company – with a 16 man front. My first recognition that there was a problem was a yell from the front rank: "For God's sake Bill, RIGHT TURN – RIGHT TURN". They finally made the right turn, without an order. Left to my own resources, I would have marched the company up into the bleachers. People always seem to come to the aid of a clown.

As it happened, "Shep" shipped out for the 'jump' school at Fort Benning. The rest of us left a week later for Officer's Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning, also.

OCS was a grind. You were under observation constantly. Our 'bird-dog' was called a "Tac" officer. They were totally fair and impartial with absolutely no sense of humor. They actually lived in our barracks and would give fatherly counseling at any time – night or day.

I continued my "Gung-Ho" attitude and got along well for about 5 weeks. Then my Achilles heel became exposed. While I talked constantly, I had never spoken to a group before. I got up before a class and butchered a lecture. The "Tac" officer called me in that night and told me bluntly that I had been doing well, but one more episode like that and I was history.

When we got to the 16th week, I thought I was going to make it. I found this was a false assumption when I was "selected" to be the Company Commander in a live ammunition problem. I was turned over to a major who said he would double-check my orders so we didn't kill anybody. I knew they had me.

The major described the situation; Live artillery on the hill, live mortar fire and machine guns. All I had to do is tell him when to stop the firing and send in the men. I had no idea what he was talking about. He suddenly told me to return to my unit.

I was thankful, but confused. I asked my classmates what happened. They said, "The artillery shot down the liaison (artillery spotting) air plane." It seemed the airplane (Piper Cub) had flown directly into the trajectory of a high explosive 105mm shell. Obviously, both pilots were killed.

Six months later, I was in Texas as a 2nd Lieutenant. I went to the Officers Club – had a couple of drinks – and to my great regret started telling the story of how I got through OCS. When I completed the story, a man I had only known for a month stated that he knew all about it. I was horrified when he said his brother had been one of the pilots. He made it easy on me, but the damage had been done.

After receiving my commission, I was assigned to the 103d Division at Camp Howze, Texas. It was amazing to me that the Lieutenants' bars could change people. Two of my classmates turned into the biggest horses behinds in the world. The rest of us knew we were just starting our education.

The sergeants now took over our education. My first lesson occurred about 2 weeks after I arrived at Camp Howze. We were out in the woods in a mockup of combat. Always the eager beaver, I ran around from fox hole to foxhole checking on the men. When I returned to my foxhole, I noticed the platoon sergeant lounging nearby. Although I was reluctant to comment, I said, "Sergeant, shouldn't you be checking on the men?" He replied, "I thought so Lieutenant, but you seem to be doing everything, so I thought I'd rest until I'm needed." Touche'!

My Achilles heel of poor lecturing, first exposed in OCS, followed me to Texas. About a month after I joined Company L, 411th, I was told to give a one hour lecture on "The Handling of Prisoners of War." I had a one hour notice and given 1 page from the field manual as reference. I had no idea what to say! I ran out of words in 10 minutes. I was told that this was the first time the company had a 10 minute lecture and a 50 minute break to fill in the hour.

Among my personal favorites – as a #1 character – was a fellow "shavetail" (2nd Lt) by the name of Bob. Bob came from Hawaii and much to the every G.I. Company Commander's consternation, he could be found in the enlisted men's barracks serenading them with a ukulele. It seems that he had been transferred from the Air Force to the Infantry when he landed his airplane behind his instructor, in a separate airplane, and chewed up the instructor's tail assembly with his propeller. We got along famously. He was a good officer, but couldn't stand the typical army crap.

One of my favorite recollections concerning my 6 months of training as an officer concerned a particular night field exercise. Three of us were selected to infiltrate a perimeter defense and just raise hell in general. I loved this type of assignment as long as nobody was shooting at me.

With my tremendous acumen for scouting, I was captured shortly after we started the exercise. Two young soldiers escorted me to the "Black Out" tent. It was pitch black and both of the guards were behind me. A portly major came into the tent and said, "Where's the prisoner?" Quick as a wink, I said, "Back there!" When the Major passed me, he blocked the path and I took off through the night. I think I was unconsciously following a white tape fastened to trees. I had run about 50 yards when I fell in a 6 foot deep hole. I pulled myself out – took 3 steps and fell in another. It seems I had set some sort of record as the first Lieutenant to fall into 2 latrines in 30 seconds.

I was still free – inside the perimeter – and did my dastardly deeds. These included taking a sleeping soldier's rifle and sticking it in the ground, bayonet first. I now knew the password, so decided to brazen it out and slip back outside the perimeter. Unfortunately, I somehow became disoriented. I was challenged and gave the password. The answer was, "You're right you S.O.B. We've been looking for you for an hour. This is where you came in."

They forced me to sleep outside – under guard. By the next morning, all 15,000 men in the Division knew about the shavetail who had fallen into two latrines.

After several months of what seemed to us as foolishness, several of us volunteered for the paratroopers. It was approved through the regiment, but stopped at the Division level when it was announced we were going overseas.

About this time – and I can't remember the reason – a prissy master sergeant in Battalion Headquarters became upset with me. He had the power though and I was selected to originate and run a live ammunition exercise for a 10 man squad.

Although I was angry at first, I suddenly recognized that I was in my element. No rules – just come up with something new. I came up with an exercise with two parts. I also decided to use loaded rifles instead of saying, “You’re now under fire.”

The first part concerned a hinged dummy in a tree. A rifle – pointed down range - was tied to the base of the tree. I would tell the lead scout privately to drop when the gun went off. We would then check the reaction of the second scout. The hinged dummy would drop and it was up to the second scout to shoot the dummy. We never had a problem in running 40 squads through the first part.

The second part was a little more complicated. A pill box was built in a hole in the ground surrounded by rocks. There was a 12 inch square window in the rock wall. A loaded rifle was tied inside the pill box with a long string on the trigger. Fortunately, I had two helpers to keep me out of trouble.

The “school solution” was when the squad would hear the gun fire; they would start firing at the pill box. The squad leader would send 2 men with hand grenades around the flank. When they were in position – the firing would stop and the flankers would stick the grenades in the window and release the lever. The grenades would go off and the squad would rush the pill box. I would jump in the pill box and put the safety back on the rifle.

I decided for safety reasons, I would accompany the flankers. Each time I would caution them, “Don’t throw the grenades, you can’t hit that little hole.” We had run 20 squads through the exercise without incident. Unfortunately, I may have become complacent. On our 21st run, both flankers threw the grenades. Both grenades hit trees and bounced back. Somehow, nobody was hurt, but I tightened up my lectures.

On the 30th run – things were going smoothly, the grenades went off successfully. I jumped in the pillbox, put the safety on the rifle and stood up just in time to hear the squad leader yell, “Assault fire on the pillbox.” Fortunately my man down below jumped in front of the men and stopped the threat of violence. I have never felt so naked.

From here on things moved fast; A “highly secret” move by train to Brooklyn and a cruise on a former Italian luxury liner to Marseilles. This highly secret move by train became a farce when Jim McCormick stepped off the train at Lima, Ohio and was greeted by his entire family. Call it American Ingenuity.

COMBAT BEFORE SESSENHEIM

Fifty years ago, I had one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Had I known that at the time, I would probably have quit. It has taken me 50 years to collect the facts.

I was an infantry rifle platoon leader. The average life of a rifle platoon leader in combat was 3 days. One reason for this short life-span among second lieutenants (shavetails) was that their sergeants required at least 7 days to educate them. I listened carefully to my sergeants, so I lasted 11 days in my first “tour of combat”.

As I recall, I did have plenty of warning about the hazards of my trade, but I thought those warnings were for others. A grizzled combat veteran, 35 years of age, addressed our class at my graduation from the Infantry Officers Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning. He opened his talk with the comment “six months from now, two out of three of you will be dead”. This remark did not sit well with the mothers and fathers who had come to watch their sons become Officers and Gentlemen. On our 11th day of combat, I was shot through the foot. The men who were above me and below me on the OCS roster were both killed. Seventeen members of my graduating class, including myself, attended Georgia Tech. Two were killed on their first day of combat and one was shot through the jaw. Tech football star Jim Luck and I combined for a total of eight purple hearts.

So how did I get into this mess? It all started quite innocently when I was assigned to the 103d Infantry Division in the Spring of 1944. In the fall of 1944, we were shipped overseas. We were told the war was practically over and that we would be in the Army of Occupation.

The first hint we had that someone was pulling our leg was the radio greeting we received from “Axis Sally” when we got off the ship in Marseille. If you old folks recall, “Axis Sally” was the Milwaukee born bimbo who broadcast propaganda messages in English for Adolph Hitler. Sally said, “Welcome boys of the 103d Division. We will kiss you hello at the Belfort Gap on November 11th.” We all laughed. She hit the day right on the head but missed the location by 50 miles.

When we were about 4 miles from the “front” we were told to load our weapons in case the Germans broke through. As you might imagine we were all quite nervous and a number of weapons were discharged accidentally. After about 10 hours of this dangerous condition, the order was reversed. It stated simply, “Unload your weapons. We’ll gamble that the Germans won’t break through.” This order arrived early in the morning. In a “pup” tent near me, two men were sleeping side by side. Upon hearing the order, one of the men sleepily tried to take the cartridge clip out of his rifle. The muzzle was under his arm pit. The rifle discharged and the bullet went through his shoulder. His tent companion jumped up and draped with the tent, headed for the nearest woods on a dead run. Of course this was a combat introduction for our medics.

When it was announced that we would see combat the next morning, Nov 16, 1944 near St. Die Alsace, France, we were told to dig in for the night. I believe this was the last order I followed without question. Before I started digging, I removed my lined coat and laid it on the snow – lining up. I did not know it at the time, but the snow in the trees was thawing and in a short time my liner was soaked. I finished my foxhole after dark. I did note that there was about 2 inches of water at the bottom of my hole, but I had my orders, so I put on the coat and got in the hole. The temperature had dropped to below freezing. After an hour of this torture, with my teeth chattering so badly I was afraid I’d chop off my tongue, I decided there was no worse thing than freezing to death. I got out of the hole and started walking in circles to get warm. I encountered the company commander – who henceforth will be known

only as “The Jumper.” He suggested I share the hole he shared with the executive officer (second in command).

The mail arrived. In it was a letter from my future wife, the beautiful Betty. In a few words she described the warmth of the South Georgia Beach and how attentive the Navy boys were. My morale hit a new low.

The first thing I remember about our introduction to combat was a stray bullet flying overhead. After two years of training I remember thinking that someone was actually trying to kill me. Talk about a shock!

Our company was in battalion reserve so “The Jumper” told me that my platoon would lead off the next day. The lead companies disappeared in the fog after they had gone 50 yards, but we were told to stay in the woods. During this time we were issued our combat spare clothes, which consisted of an extra pair of socks. We would keep one pair inside our shirt and wear the other pair. The next day, we’d switch. Sorry ladies, ground combat is not for you. It’s not the danger – it’s the filth.

At dawn the next morning, “The Jumper” told me to lead off since I had been “watching” things the whole previous day. No compass bearing – no nothing. I didn’t even know from which direction the sun would be rising. As I led the 150 men across the valley, we encountered a fast moving stream about 25 feet wide. The weather was about 15 degrees Fahrenheit and cloudy. I decided to cross first and gauge the depth. The maximum depth I discovered was about 5 feet. About 2/3 of the way across it seemed to suddenly get shallow. Apparently I had stepped on an underwater tree limb. One more step and I really found a deep hole. I finally clambered out on the far bank and started searching for a shallower crossing. I searched for about 10 minutes. (I’ve been told numerous times since then that I stopped looking too soon.)

As I looked back across the stream, all I could see was 150 men strung out in the misty light of dawn and I could only imagine the Germans opening fire from their positions behind me. I told the men to come across. I apologized to each man individually as he came out of the water. There were no complaints, no swearing, just disbelief. Each one of them looked right through me like a zombie. They also walked like zombies when their clothes froze on them. I thought you automatically died when you got that cold. Even “The Jumper” didn’t complain, although he might have walked across on the surface of the water.

We had no fires and walked for 10 hours, up a snow covered mountain and down the other side. No colds or trench foot occurred from this incident, but nobody talked to me for three days. Because my semi-automatic carbine froze up, I discarded it and picked up a discarded sniper’s rifle with a broken scope. I wanted something non-automatic that might scare somebody. Per my schooling, Lieutenants never fired a shot in combat. I removed the scope and shouldered the weapon. (More later.)

The time between the stream crossing and the Maisongoutte (Maysa Goette) adventure passed quite quickly. The only things noteworthy were little items which are not listed in chronological order. This was, after all, only 11 days.

- The company’s first man was killed. He had both legs severed while on patrol. We could not get him out in time, so he bled to death. It hit me pretty hard because I had censored a letter of his applying for a job in the aircraft industry after the war.
- One night “The Jumper” called me over to lead my platoon to contact Company G. He said with assurance that if I followed a compass reading of 85 degrees, I would surely have

success. I said, “What if I miss them?” He said, “Start talking German!” We fell into a foxhole on top of 2 sleeping G-Co members as we were heading out of their perimeter.

- The longest night’s walk I ever had lasted 10 hours. It was done 10 steps at a time. Apparently scouts went out to check every 5 minutes. I had an arrangement with Sergeant Mike Hawkins. He would fall asleep and fall backwards; I would fall asleep and fall forwards. We’d meet at about a 30 degree angle with no damage done. “The Jumper’s” orderly, hit the ground hard, in a deep sleep, about six times that night. By dawn we had walked through the German lines without firing a shot.
- The strangest place we defended was a cemetery on a bare, round hill between to high wooded hills. We dug in between the grave stones. The first dumb thing that occurred was the regimental commander being driven in his jeep to the base of the hill. He would then crawl up the hill and shout to the nearest foxhole, “Everybody OK?” As soon as he got an answer, he’d run down the hill, jump into his jeep and speed away. Five minutes later, in would come the German artillery. He may have felt better – but we didn’t!
- The order to evacuate the cemetery came about 2:00 in the afternoon – broad daylight! I tried to talk “The Jumper” out of it and wait for dark. No luck! So we had one person run out every 15 seconds and collect their new sleeping bags and “K” rations at the bottom of the hill. By this time, I figured we were working for idiots.
- Another incident occurred when a young field artillery forward observer was introduced to me and said that he’d been ordered to level some buildings (hiding places) in front of us. The first shell landed about 100 yards beyond the buildings. He ordered the artillery to come down 300 yards. I asked him if that wasn’t a little too much. He informed me that it was none of my business. The shell landed BEHIND us! He disappeared to the rear shortly after that.
- I performed one of my “planned” morale boosting feats about this same time. We were trying to clear some German refugee women and children off the battle field. Escape lay across a 12-inch plank crossing a narrow ditch. Everyone crossed but a 6-year old girl. Like a big deal, I picked the kid up and fell off the plank half way across the stream. She never got wet, but here I was holding this kicking, screaming kid at my arms length. The men showed their respect by lining the stream – hooting and hollering and making no move to help.
- Thanksgiving was particularly remembered for the lack of food. They even ran out of our highly concentrated “K” rations. The cracker-jack sized boxes held items like a chocolate bar, fruit bar, a napkin and four cigarettes. Under these conditions we did not feel cigarettes were harmful to our health – unless a sniper saw the glow.

Even in those days the Army worried about “bad press”. They day after Thanksgiving we were pulled off the line – trucked to a reserve area and given a meal of creamed turkey, with all the trimmings. Any nutritionist can tell you that concentrated foods and creamy, whole foods do not mix. The “G.I.s” (Aztec quick-steps) developed about four hours after the banquet. With a column of men on either side of the road, every few minutes a man would roll his eyes up and say, “Sorry, I’ll catch up when I can”, and fall out to the side of the road to answer nature’s call.

The 11th day was one to remember. At dusk we pulled into the little town of Maisongoutte (Maysa Goette). Since we'd been on the road for almost two weeks, the Regimental Commander took pity on us and let us sleep in houses. This proved to be a disastrous mistake.

“The Jumper” called me in and told me I would have the honor of leading the regiment with my “Point” platoon. Whenever you're told you have the honor of doing anything in the Army, it's the equivalent of being kissed by the Godfather on both cheeks.

The “Point” is probably the most dangerous job in the world. It's also the easiest to understand. One man with a rifle walks right down the white line in the middle of the road until he is shot at. He and the men immediately behind him are meant to draw enemy fire, thus exposing the German positions. The regiment slowly builds up behind him in numbers until there are 5,000 men on the road.

Gus Kyle had come to me first thing in the morning and told me that since everybody else had trench foot, he would take the “Point”. No volunteering, no by your leave, sir. Just “I'll take the Point.” I didn't argue.

As soon as we left the houses in the morning, an “88” shell fell just short of my platoon. I chased the men out into the open field and the next shell landed on the near side of our platoon. I think we were the only platoon in the regiment to have no casualties that morning. The shells walked right down the main street of the town causing unbelievable havoc and casualties. We had two platoon sergeants killed that day – Lawson Bynum and Mike Hawkins.

It was obvious that the shelling wasn't going to back up, so I followed the route chasing stretcher bearers out into the open to help. It was good for my ego because they paid attention to my threats on their lives with an entrenching tool. Jack Scannell and Bill Hughes spotted the German Artillery forward observer in a nearby tower. They fired in unison and both received credit for the kill. I was told later that the colonel's orderly dug a fox hole near the “88”. He called artillery in, by radio, on his location. The orderly survived, but the artillery wiped out the “88”.

After the initial fear of leading the regiment was over, I felt like King Kong – total freedom! Nobody was going to challenge me for this “honor”, so for the first time in my life, I became quite “cheeky”. “The Jumper” would send the word up by word of mouth to “push the point faster.” I would send the word back, if you want it pushed faster, come up and push it yourself.” No takers!

Our plan was that Sgt. Mike Magera, Santos Garcia and myself would roll over with the first shot – strip off our pack and get up running with only a rifle to try to out-flank the snipers.

By 4:00 in the afternoon, we'd been fired on six times without casualties. The three of us were pretty tired from our sprints up the hill in addition to just walking 16 miles. Also the diarrhea was taking its toll on us. At about 4:10 we were fired on again. After completing our sprint to the left of the road, I told Magera and Garcia to keep going on the left and I would run across the road and try to surprise them from the right side. Apparently the Germans didn't see me cross the road because directly in front of me, about 30 feet away, was a German looking around a tree up the road. I raised my sniper's rifle without the scope and pulled the trigger. The safety was on! I had never fired the '03 before. After what seemed an eternity, I got the safety off and pulled the trigger. It was very disconcerting to see the German still standing and still looking up the road. I fired again and he still didn't move. After the 3rd time he slowly walked away. Gus Kyle, our lead scout, said he found him later and I had apparently hit him several times.

I ran up to the road and noticed a man in a German fur coat thrashing around on the pavement obviously wounded. I almost shot him, but at the last minute I noticed the boots – they were American boots and the man thrashing wasn't a German, but was our B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) man. I called back for a jeep to evacuate him and was told only the Colonel's jeep was in the vicinity. With my new found bravado, I yelled that I didn't give a damn whose jeep it was. The jeep arrived shortly without the Colonel and we evacuated our man on the hood.

We formed up again and 5 minutes later a German machine gun opened up on us. As I rolled, I noticed the little dust jets kicking up – coming towards me just like in the movies. I suddenly had a feeling of being kicked in the foot. I froze – primarily from fear – and yelled for a medic. There was no pain, so I figured I was mistaken – and embarrassed. I felt much better when I saw two holes – one on the inside of my foot and an exit hole on the top.

There was no more firing since I had noticed, out of the corner of my eye that Magera and Garcia were quickly working up the left side of the road. I crawled a short distance to a trench where our medic, Paul Bealer was waiting. While he was bandaging my foot, diarrhea hit again. It was now my turn for a jeep ride and I was one happy dog-face.

There was some delay getting back to the aid station. When I arrived I encountered six men from the 2nd Platoon. They said that the 2nd platoon had replaced the 1st platoon at point shortly after I was hit. They had gone several hundred yards when they ran into a hornets nest. Our platoon only had two casualties in eight hours and the 2nd platoon had six casualties in 15 minutes.

Back in the hospital the doctors told me all I had was a good clean "Purple Heart". However, I couldn't walk for about a month because of the severed ligament. So I had a good rest. The important thing I remember about the hospital was finally getting enough to eat.

I returned to Company L and combat in early January, 1945. I had been shot with no pain and was an 11-day combat veteran. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was very good at my trade. I was soon to get a lot smarter.

When I returned, the company was in a defensive position in the hills overlooking the little Alsatian town of St. Nicholas. Since we didn't have much to keep us occupied, we started improving our dwellings. Fox holes were joined together and made into dugouts. The dugouts were fitted with stoves and mattresses "liberated" from neighboring houses. Most of us made log roofs for the dugouts and covered them with dirt. Our Weapons Platoon, innovative people that they were, put in a skylight and a vanity with mirrors. The minute any shelling started, they crammed into the corners or into our much safer dugouts.

One of our pastimes was to watch John Feldman negotiate a trip-wire. The trip-wires were our crude version of a house-hold electronic alarm. Two steel posts were driven into the ground about 50 feet apart. A hand grenade was wired to one post. A wire was attached to the pin ring and stretched to the other post. If a German patrol would approach at night, they hopefully would trip over the wire – pull the pin and BOOM! Back to John. John must have been the model for Bill Mauldin's cartoons. A heavy black beard – wool knit cap pulled low over his eyes and his steel helmet tilted back on his head. As we watched from the safety of a tree trunk, John would walk briskly up to the wire and at the very last minute lift his foot just enough to clear the wire.

Things were pretty quiet but we did send out a couple of patrols. The first patrol was performed in the snow, wearing white parkas. The white parkas reversed all normal patrol tactics. Instead of seeking

shadows, you remained in the open, since the white parkas would stand out in the shadows. The biggest problem with the parka was that hearing was diminished when the hood was over your head.

For this patrol, I asked for volunteers. About five hands went up. Among the volunteers was a man named Shapiro. I was very proud of him, but I knew from experience that he couldn't walk 10 feet in the dark without getting lost. I was disappointed that our best man, Gus Kyle, had not volunteered. When we got up to go, Kyle put on his helmet and grabbed his carbine. I said, "Where the hell are you going?" He replied, "I'm going along to take care of you. You're not smart enough to take care of yourself." Again I never argued with Kyle.

Our objective was to find out where the German positions were. We were walking down the streets of Forbach behaving like a well-trained unit and arguing about what we were going to do next. This was quickly called off when a German – about 20 feet to our left and above us – called for us to halt and then commenced firing with a bolt-action rifle. We could hear every click. I fired one burst from my Tommy gun and was fascinated at the amount of flame that came out. I dove over three of the men to get away from the sniper. One at a time, each man got up and tip-toed across the road. Had one man run, it would have been curtains for the rest of us.

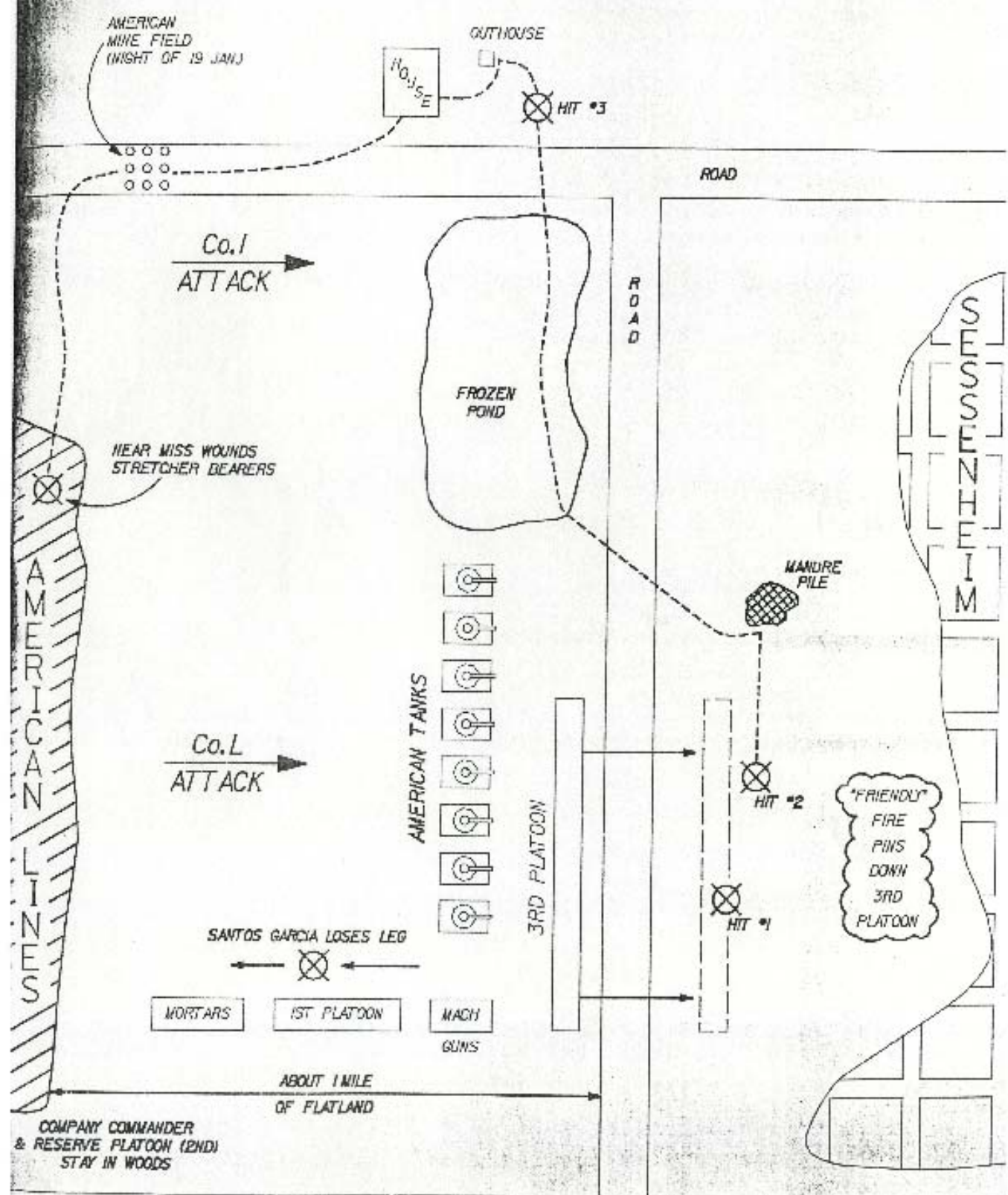
As soon as all of us were across the road, we ran madly for the middle of a field. When we started counting heads, we realized Shapiro was not with us and Shapiro had the radio. I went back looking for him without too much enthusiasm. When I returned to the group, I fell over them since their parkas were perfect camouflage. When we got back to the company command post, we learned that Shapiro had called in asking "Where am I?" Through the use of landmarks, they talked him back – in about 45 minutes.

Sometimes you do things when the results are quite different than you anticipate. As many times as we corrected them, our heavy weapons company would drive their communications jeep between two of their machine-gun positions. This of course pinpointed their positions to the Germans. I observed this while I was on the radio talking to "The Jumper". He said curtly, "Well stop them!" I was about 100 yards from them so I fired a burst from my Tommy gun over their heads. The driver didn't even hit the brakes. The two men just dove out of the jeep. The jeep continued down the road and eventually hit a tree. They were somewhat upset with me, but we never saw the jeep again.

We got little news except we knew we were spread very thin to allow Patton to move north and help eliminate the "Bulge". On the morning of the 18th of January, we loaded into trucks for a trip to the little town of Sessenheim.

ATTACK ON SESSENHEIM JAN. 19, 1945

NOT TO SCALE



SESSENHEIM

It all started about 5:00AM on January 19, 1945. Patton had recently helped beat back the German offensive at the “Bulge”, but in so doing had left his right flank spread very thin. The Germans, aware of this, attempted to make one last breakthrough just north of Strasbourg, France. During the morning of the 18th, we had been pulled out of our defensive positions near Forbach and trucked behind the lines to a woods about two miles west of Sessenheim, France, not far from the Rhine River. We slept in the woods that night.

At the early morning meeting with “The Jumper” on the 19th, we were told that little resistance was expected since scouts had entered the town of Sessenheim the previous day without incident. The plan for the Company L attack was for the 3rd Platoon (under Lt. Al Eagler) to advance in a line, as skirmishers; 1st Platoon (of which I was the Platoon leader) with the machine gun section, the mortar section and the 2nd Platoon following on the right flank of the 3rd Platoon in a column.

We were to advance to a road about 200 yards from the town and await the arrival of our supporting platoon of tanks, at which time the town would be thoroughly shelled for ten minutes. At 7:00, just at daybreak, the shelling would be lifted and we could walk into town and round up any prisoners.

We reached the road without incident having traversed the flattest mile of ground I had ever seen. The town was then given a thorough blasting by our artillery. The first inkling I had that we might be in for a bad day was the sight of many German gunners bellying up to their machine guns and 20-mm, like so many snakes going thru a field. What’s more, our tanks hadn’t arrived and the sun was coming up.

Realizing that we were about to get caught in an exposed position, it was decided to make the advance without the tanks. We had pushed about halfway to town when the tanks came out of the shadows behind us. They were now to my left and providing supporting fire for our attack. Sgt Chester Czopek, the weapons platoon sergeant, suddenly came running to tell me that the tanks had mistakenly fired through the 3rd Platoon, killing several men and pinning down all the others.

We decided that the only possible plan was to swing the remainder of the company behind the tanks and continue the attack. The tankers, by this time, had become confused and they stopped in their tracks. We were finally able to get the attention of one of the tank commanders to point out the disadvantage of our position with the sun coming up. He headed for town; but when he found the other tanks weren’t following, he beat a hasty retreat. Within 10 minutes, all eight supporting tanks had been destroyed. I was about 20 feet from a tank when it was hit. It had the appearance of being struck by lightning. The crew cleared the hatch in about 10 seconds and ran off through the field.

Because of the increasing daylight and the burning tanks, I was able to see the men of my platoon more clearly and realized that we had no choice but to run for the town. Supposedly to set an example, but actually to build up my own morale, I started firing my Tommy gun and moved toward town. I had gone about three steps when a tremendous force picked me up and slapped me to the ground. I was numb from the waist to knee but felt no pain – only nausea. I was to find out about an hour later that a bullet had entered the front of my left thigh and exited between my legs.

The men around me seemed to stop, so I told them to get into town while there was still time. The last thing I saw of them was their white helmets bobbing as they ran. A blanketing snow had fallen several days before which prompted an order to paint the helmets white, but the snow melted on the 18th, one day prior to this action.

I sensed, rather than saw, somebody at my side; it was my runner Santos Garcia. Santos pointed out that I-Company, on our left, had broken and was running to the rear, so I decided to stop what was left of L-Company and sent them back. I told Santos to go find "The Jumper" and tell him what had happened. (I learned later that Santos lost a leg on the way back.)

Just after Santos left, two mortar shells dropped nearby. Fragments from the first one hit me in both knees and I can recall seeing my feet outlined against the gray sky as I was thrown in a near-vertical position onto my shoulders when a second shell managed to deposit a fragment in the right cheek of my fanny – all this in a matter of seconds.

I was not really calm – probably just in the first stages of shock – but seemed to have a feeling of resignation. I decided to try to take stock of where I had been hit and attempted to remove the canvas pants I was wearing over the wool pants. I got the pants as far as my knees and was unable to go any further. However, I didn't have the strength to raise them again. By inadvertently sticking my finger in it, I discovered a large hole in my inner thigh, caused by the first bullet. Though my knowledge of anatomy was limited, I thought this should be near a main artery, but since there didn't seem to be excessive bleeding, I decided to concentrate on crawling.

By this time, I felt that the only reason the Germans hadn't finished the job was that they were laughing too hard to shoot accurately. It must have been quite a sight to see a "shavetail" crawling with his back end high in the air and his pants around his knees.

About this time, I heard a voice at my left. It was Sgt. Jack Scannell checking to see what the situation was. He asked me what my problem was and I said I was hit but that he would just draw fire to me by trying to help. Jack told me to "Go to Hell" and after sending his men to the rear, slipped off his pack and rifle and crawled over to me.

We decided that going straight back to the woods was out of the question since there was absolutely no cover. Our burning tanks had created some smoke so we headed toward a small mound to our left. Jack, with his 5'6" – 135 pound frame, somehow hoisted my 200+ pounds on his back and ran, bent double, until the whistle and sap of the German machine gun bullets indicated that they were getting close. Then he hit the ground and pulled me along for 10 yards or so until he figured that he had thrown them off target. He repeated that process about five times before we reached our first objective.

We took a breather at what appeared to be a protective mound, which turned out to be a pile of horse manure. Jack pointed out that this pile was not going to help us for long since he could see shells going through a farm house about 500 yards to our left. We continued in this same manner from the manure pile to a frozen pond, a distance of about 100 yards. The weather was about 20° F and cloudy – a typical Alsace winter day.

When we reached the frozen pond, Jack found a piece of telephone wire and wired my hands together. Treating me like a sled, Jack towed me over the ice, running, slipping and sliding in such a manner that he seemed to be dodging the bullets. The pond ended at a gravel road about 200 yards from a house. We crawled across the road where Jack again got me up on his back and ran toward the house.

We'd traveled about 50 yards when I felt that we had been hit by a freight train. Jack flew through the air and landed about 15 feet away. I was sure he was dead. I called and asked him if he was all right. After several seconds, he turned over and said, "Yes, I guess so, but how about you?" He crawled back to me and was shaken at what he saw. All he could say was, "DAMN!" Had I not been in my first stage of shock, the view of my torn bicep sticking through the sleeve of my coat would have been far more

frightening to me than it was. Then Jack asked me if I ever prayed. I assured him that I had been working quite hard at this for the past two hours.

Apparently a 20mm anti-tank shell had exploded in our vicinity. The concussion blew him out from under me before the shrapnel reached me.

Our next objective was the stone outhouse on the German side of the farmhouse. Jack propped me against the seat of a “two-holer” and ran inside the house to see which side was in possession. I’ll never forget the few minutes I spent alone, sitting on the floor of the outhouse overlooking the German lines. I remember wondering why anybody would go to all the trouble of building an outhouse out of stone. With time to reflect, however, I was strangely relieved Jack had gotten me this far and now anything seemed possible.

Jack come running back to tell me that a medical aid man and six wounded I-Co men were in the basement. He carried me to the top of the stairs and told me that, due to the narrow stairway and our weight differential (60+ pounds), I would have to help him get me down the stairs. To assist us, he had found a bottle of Schnapps.

One good belt of the Schnapps enabled us to get down to the basement without too much trouble. It was now 11:00AM. We had been through three lifetimes in the past four hours. We were temporarily safe, so with that relief and the Schnapps, I promptly went into shock. I slept most of the day. The medic had cut away most of my clothes and finding no excessive bleeding, applied sulfa powder and bandages.

During the day, a wounded GI kept calling incoherently from outside the house. Jack wanted to go out after him. We asked him if he could see where the man was hit. Jack said he was shot through the head. We told him that seven of us were depending upon him to get us out and that sulfa and bandages could do nothing for the man outside. It was obvious that Jack wasn’t convinced, but he finally had to agree to the logic. Throughout the day, Jack kept going up the stairs and crawling to the window to look for him.

Just after dark, Jack prepared to head back for help and the medic announced that he was going along. Jack at first suggested that his place was with the wounded men, but the medic persisted. After further argument, Jack told him that he would be more hindrance than help and that he didn’t have time to argue. He then told him that if he didn’t stay, he would shoot him. Jack went alone and headed west toward where he assumed the American lines were.

The clouds kept the moon well hidden, which was a help since he knew he was a target for either German or American patrols. Once he was out in the open he could outline the American lines by the flashes of the German artillery shells. After traveling about a mile, he noticed what appeared to be lumps of mud on the road. A closer check proved these to be a hastily arranged minefield, obviously left to delay attacking German tanks. Knowing that he’d have to bring stretcher bearers through the area, Jack gingerly moved the mines to the side of the road. He had just reached the fork in the road near our jumping off point of the previous morning, when a sixth sense told him to hit the ditch. Sure enough, a shell fell on the road junction.

He finally arrived at the Company CP. Two hours had already passed. “The Jumper” agreed to a rescue patrol. Just as the patrol was to leave, the Battalion Commander called to say that the 3rd Battalion was withdrawing immediately. “The Jumper” told Jack that the patrol would be canceled and all the men, including Jack, would withdraw with the company. Jack told “The Jumper” that he would “catch up” with the company when he could, but that he was not leaving without the men who were waiting at the house. A number of things were said in hast, including the word “court-martial”, but Jack took off.

The woods were lit up with tree bursts from German shells when Jack started looking for other American troops. He finally ran into the 1st Battalion and was directed to the battalion commander. A patrol was organized immediately and sent to the house under Jack's leadership.

During the night it had been fairly quite at the farmhouse. We were all nervous, expecting a German patrol to pop through the door any minute! The medic, of course, had the most to lose since he was healthy. He kept voicing his doubts as to Jack's ability to return with help. I kept reassuring him that Jack would get us out.

At 5:00AM, just before dawn of the 20th, the patrol arrived. I recall passing out several times as they carried me up the stairs. However, within a short time, I had no sense of direction at all, lying on my back, but I felt very secure with the knowledge that we were safe at last.

Shells continued to drop some distance from us, but after my previous close associations, these seemed harmless. My attention, however, was directed toward one particular shell that landed about 150 yards from us. I became even more alert when one landed 150 yards on the other side of us. I remember thinking, "Oh hell, here we go again!" The next shell was a direct hit.

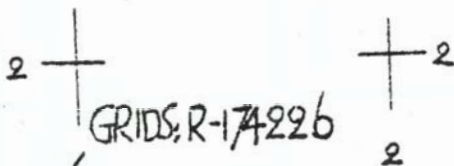
Fortunately for me, it exploded upon contact in the branches overhead. When the flash of light went off in my face, the shrapnel mushroomed all around me. The litter bearers dropped me and ran for cover. I discovered later that the man at the head of my stretcher had his leg broken by a shell fragment. I later discovered that I was completely deaf above 250 cycles.

Realizing that I had come through this one without a scratch, I started to call for Jack. In a few minutes he appeared, running through the woods. After reassuring me, he disappeared to return with help from the nearest foxhole. By 7:00 in the morning, we were in the Battalion Aid Station; 24 hours had passed since our ill-fated attack began.

I had no clothes except a wool knit cap, a pair of boots and the collar and right sleeve of my shirt. All the rest had all been cut away by the medic while dressing my wounds. I did have my life, a million memories and the best friend a man could ask for. They kept asking me why I was so happy when I was so full of holes.



MASS GRAVE 16 AMERICANS

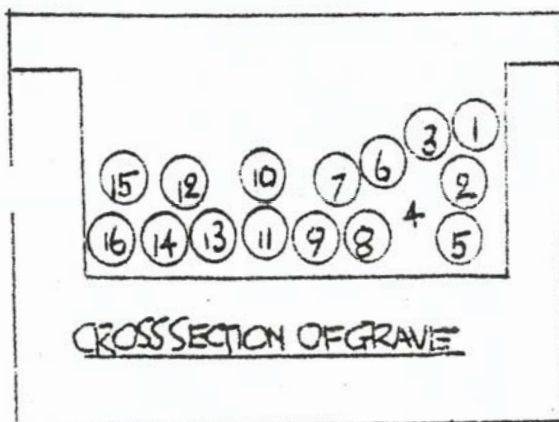


MAP REF. 1: 200,000 VERDUN WISSEMBOURG - SHEET 57

ORDER REMAINS REMOVED:

1. REX R. WRIGHT - 39290184
2. RAMIRO AGUILAR - 38454580
3. UNKNOWN X - 997 (H4081) ←
4. GERALD M. KOBES - 38352082
5. UNKNOWN X - 992 (G7450)
6. WILLIAM B. HUDSON - 39920961
7. UNKNOWN X - 995 (B-1595)
8. JOHN VAN SCHAICK - 31358378
9. UNKNOWN X - 994 (M1496)
10. FLOYD R. SHERRELL - 37510978
11. UNKNOWN X - 993 (SGT. E 1955)
12. JOE B. BOWDEN - 34581954
13. THADDEUS E. STASIAK - 53425592
14. JOHN A. GAUBAS JR. - 36718460
15. WENDELL F. LELAND - 36967136
16. UNKNOWN X - 996 (5762)

H 4081
Blaine



OVERLAY BY PFC JACK BUTTELL & T/5 WILKINER
 610 GRAVES REGISTRATION CO.
 1ST PLATOON 21 SEPTEMBER 1945

- Others -
- Gerald L. Erb (33501955)
 - Blaine M. Hollopeter (33574081) - #3
 - Henry Altergott (36715962)
 - Clarence L. Huston (35087910) - #9
 - Donie Blea (17091595)
 - Ralph W. Hulbert (31301435)

* Ramiro Aguilar (38454580) - #2 - 781st Tank Battalion

SESSENHEIM – AFTERMATH

The “empty” town of Sessenheim was truly empty on January 18. However, it had filled with German paratroops, infantry and artillery that night in preparation for an attack. This I found out from a German while I was stationed at a war criminals interment center in Garmish after the war. Scholars of World War II state that this was to be the start of the 2nd “Bulge”. (Operation Nordwind)

For six months, we did not know the fate of the men who reached Sessenheim, but expected the worst. One day just prior to the end of the war, we heard that John Feldman, a member of the 1st Platoon had walked away from a German prisoner work detail and kept walking until he reached American lines. John announced that, to his knowledge, everyone reaching Sessenheim had been captured without loss of life.

The conversations at our Company L, 411th Infantry reunions, held every two years, constantly return to what happened at Sessenheim and why. The “why” although not obvious at the time, is that our aborted attack bought about three days time. This allowed an orderly withdrawal and reorganization of the American defenses.

Gus Kyle, one of the squad leaders in my platoon, was the only man to get in and out of Sessenheim on the 19th. Gus received a Silver Star for knocking out an “88” with a bazooka before he left town. After Gus returned to the American lines, he read the riot act to the entire Battalion Staff. After receiving his Silver Star, he was transferred to the 45th Division in less than 24 hours. Gus was killed in Korea, as a 2nd Lieutenant, and received the Soldier’s Medal and then the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously.

As was true of most of us, Jack Scannell had his problems becoming adjusted to civilian life. After four years of trying to settle down, he finally married a wonderful girl named Norma in 1950. Jack and Norma are now the parents of 12 fine children and are living in Allen Park, Michigan.

Jack and I had not discussed Sessenheim in detail in the intervening years. There seemed so little that I could say, though he has always known how I felt.

About 20 years ago, I called Jack in Detroit. We finally got around to discussing “That Day”. In the course of the conversation, he asked me how many men had been removed from the house. I said, “Seven, including the man who was shot through the head. He died on the stretcher next to me on the hospital floor.” He said, “My God! That’s been bothering me for 26 years! I thought I’d left that man out there.”

In 1988, I “volunteered” to host the L Company reunion in Wilmington, Delaware. The reunion was advertised in most of the “Service” magazines. I received a call from a Bucky Moreland from New Jersey. After a long discussion about the L Company reunion, he mentioned that he was from C Company of the 1st Battalion. After further discussion, he mentioned that he had been wounded on January 20, 1945 while carrying a stretcher containing a wounded Lieutenant. I said, “Do you know who was on that stretcher?” He said, “No.” I said, “ME.”

AFTER SESSENHEIM

My three months spent in the hospital after Sessenheim offered me a time for reflection. I marveled at what Jack had done for me and the others. I felt it was a true Congressional Medal of Honor performance because most truly heroic feats in combat are results of spur-of-the-moment decisions – possibly moments of temporary insanity. An entire incident may be terminated in a matter of minutes. The rarity is the man, who through some great inner strength, is able to force himself to return again and again to fight against incredible odds. Our particular ordeal lasted almost 24 hours. This Congressional Medal of Honor performance was turned into a Silver Star, through the incompetence of the person who wrote up the citation.

As far as I was personally concerned, it was obvious to me that I'd had enough of gunfire. I had pointed for a career as a rifle platoon leader for several years. I entered combat with fear, particularly since I was adverse to physical-contact sports as a teenager. My confidence built up through my first four weeks and I was convinced I was at the top of my game as a rifle platoon leader. But with the physical and mental anguish associated with Sessenheim, I was back to ground zero. I was a has-been at 21 after a four week career.

Shortly after I reached the hospital, I received a letter (attached) which has been my most important keepsake. It certainly helped heal the emotional problems I encountered after Sessenheim.

I did keep one secret though – I didn't play "Eager Beaver" going out with the patrol. I was requested by the patrol leader to accompany him in an advisory capacity. I never volunteered for anything. I must confess as a 21-year-old rifle platoon leader that I had many fears, but the overriding fear was that I might be responsible for the death of someone under my command.

I have never discovered who authored this letter. My best guess would be that it was someone not associated with our first day of combat and the river crossing experience. If I live to 110, no one will ever allow me to forget that fiasco.

It took about three weeks to get to the point where I could wear pajamas and hobble around. My first surprise was that Santos Garcia was in the same hospital. Santos, of course, was going through the painful rehabilitation of recovering from his amputated leg. I only heard him complain once and that was because the nurses babied him. Santos was 18 at the time, but looked no older than 14.

I finally got the story from others on Santos' survival. Because of the panic that existed at Sessenheim, Santos was forced to save himself. After his leg was blown off, he applied his own tourniquet and crawled about 500 yards. When he was carried to the aid station, he had apparently turned black from loss of blood. His performance made my survival look very secondary. The lack of a medal for Santos' bravery was another example of incompetence.

After 3 months in the hospital, it was decided that I would be placed on limited service – no combat. I was sent to a replacement depot to await assignment. It was then that I made one of those insightful decisions that I've become famous for. I decided I could outsmart the Army.

I received word that the 103d Division was in reserve – never to fight again. We knew the war was almost over. I decided the combat troops would go home first so I went AWOL (Absent without Leave). Back to the 103d I went. As I checked into the Division, they said, "Good to see you back, but you screwed up the paperwork again."

I was welcomed back by the cleanest G.I.s I'd ever seen. No more fighting! They even smelled good. Three days later, we were back in action. I spent the majority of my remaining combat time kicking my own butt. I was essentially useless. Every time I'd hear gunfire, I'd hit the ground and in one case, one of my fellow officers had to kick me in the foot to get me up.

One day "The Jumper" came down with combat fatigue – or something. Since I was now the executive officer, I inherited the Company. Typical action: a column of men on each side of the road. I was walking back and forth cheering on the troops. As we approached the top of a long hill, one of the scouts suggested we take a break. Checking my watch, I turned around and made the "break" sign. We dropped to the ground and the Germans opened up. I couldn't even move a finger. Finally our tank destroyer people came up with their armored cars and 50 caliber machine guns and got us out. The black troops had gained fame and a unit citation for their actions at Climbach, France in support of the 411th Infantry, while I was back in the hospital.

Returning to the rear of the column, I walked into the worst and most deserved tail-chewing I have ever received. That battalion commander called me every thing under the sun because I had gotten myself out of position to command the company. It was another day of learning.

One reason I had no resentment for the tail-chewing is that I had great respect for the man. This respect was further justified when he pulled one of the smartest moves I've ever witnessed. The regimental commander was trying to out do George Patton. We were worn out, but the Colonel said, "Keep moving." The battalion commander decided to quickly "take" six towns. In the sixth town he told us to get some sleep. Each hour he would call in our arrival at one of the preceding towns, thus buying us six hours of sleep. As I look back, I feel that our battalion commanders were our strongest leaders.

Approaching the city of Landsberg, site of one of the infamous Holocaust camps, we were told that 700 Hungarian troops in the east side of the city (Landsberg is divided by a river) wanted to surrender. One hundred German soldiers on the south side of the city didn't want the Hungarians to give up. While the rest of the regiment was liberating the concentration camp, Company L was assigned the job of mopping up the Germans.

The plan was to be trucked up-river, go through a tunnel inside the dam and walk down-river towards Landsberg to get the Hungarians. As we started walking north in a single column, we received some harassing fire from the Germans in the hills. The company became split up into five parts; no one part knowing where the other four were. Obviously we had radio silence, so all communication was by word of mouth. Jack Scannell spotted a jeep like vehicle filled with Germans. He initiated the message; "Stop that jeep – pass the word." The message kept moving up the line – as the jeep disappeared in the distance.

We finally became consolidated behind a dike on the bank of the river near Landsberg. We couldn't get over the dike because the Germans were shooting at us from the wooded hills. Jack Scannell went through another tunnel under a dam and brought the Cannon Company to the west bank of the river. As soon as the cannons started firing over our heads, we assumed it was safe enough to climb the dike. I looked back to see a large explosion at the location of one of the cannons. I first assumed it was counter – battery fire. I found out later that this particular cannon had been setup behind a tree in their haste to help us. The explosion occurred when the cannon fired a shell and hit the tree in front of them. Casualties, but no deaths.

When things calmed down, we did see some of the concentration camp survivors – gaunt people in striped prison clothes celebrating their release. Company L did not enter the camp, but we later saw photos of the stacked bodies.

As we headed south to the Austrian-German border, we knew the war was just about over. We did feel, however, that the taking of the Brenner Pass would be bloody. It was difficult to find volunteers in the last two weeks of the war. “What, ME become the last person killed? No way!”

We were in the town of Mittenwald, staying in houses. As I went back in to turn off the radio (don't ask me why) a BBC newscast said the war was over in the south. Our big problem was to convince a gung-ho barracks of German officer candidates that this was true. Their radios were dead. After a day of negotiating and with discussions with their commanders on our radios, they finally gave up. To say we were happy would be putting it mildly. Unfortunately we couldn't find anything to drink, but even that seemed to be secondary.

When we got to Innsbruck, Austria, it was decided to send two jeep loads of G.I.s south to the Italian border to link up with the 88th Division traveling north through Italy. A major task force, including company L and the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion would follow at a leisurely pace as back-up.

In those days, before the super highways,, the road south from Innsbruck was very dangerous. About 30 miles south of Innsbruck, two of the tank destroyer half-tracks – towing 3” guns – lost their brakes. Both drivers decided to drive into the hill instead of going over the edge. The 3” guns caught up with the half-tracks throwing the entire assembly high in the air. The half-tracks were both filled to overflowing with black & white soldiers. This was the single biggest incident of carnage I ever witnessed. There were broken backs, fractured skulls – one driver had his arm amputated, but no one was killed. All we had was an aid man with bandages. The road was so narrow we had to bounce a jeep around to send it back to Innsbruck for help. **AND THE WAR WAS OVER!**



washed from a truck

house in woods

grave

Sessenheim, France