



About the Author

During World War II, John R. "Jack" Durrance served as a Staff Sergeant with the 103d Infantry Division in the European Theatre of Operations, and was later commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. He was awarded the Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts, three Battle Stars, Glider Wings, Paratrooper Badge and the Combat Infantryman's Badge. He is married to Janet Hiers Durrance and has four children and eight grandchildren.

He received his Bachelor and Masters degrees from the University of Florida where he taught as a faculty member while working toward a doctorate, which he did not complete.

He was employed by the United States Navy as a psychologist at the Jacksonville Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida prior to becoming a Special Agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the New York City area. He was an Alachua County Commissioner in Florida from 1954 to 1982. He has been retired since selling his ownership in a warehouse and trucking business in 1984.



John R. 'Jack' Durrance - 1945

Faces of Company "D"



Alfred Ayers



Donald Bailey



Elvin Beemer



Howard Bohmer



Chuck Ceronsky



Glen Clefisch



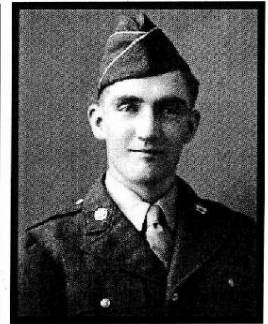
Victor Cuttitta



Bill Danielson



Jack Durrance



Ward Geier



Arlie Gray



Edward Gulick



Max Irwin



Paul Hiser



Ted Jenkins



Daniel R. Jarosek



Jim Kallod



Les Klie



Allan Kraft



Francis J. Los

Faces of Company "D"



Don McGregor



Doug Merrill



Louie (Michalski) Miles



Tony Maranto



Herb Morgan



Jack Niklas



Raymond Oberdecker



Stafford Patterson



James B. Price



Charles G. Rahn



Leon Ratliff



Keith H. Rees



Zack Sigler



Louis K. Smith



Wyman Smith



Al Sodman



Charles Wiedman
Medic



Philip Yates



103d Division



**409th Regiment
Company D**



"This war was a time when all of us in Company "D" were being tested.
We made discoveries about ourselves and each other.
A bond was formed that was fired in the furnace of this test.
There was a kinship born that lasts, even now, for all of us."

Dedication

In grateful appreciation to the 847 men of the 103d Infantry Division who made the supreme sacrifice on the battlefields of Europe during World War II. Their contribution is a part of our nation's history for which we will be forever indebted.



*“A Call to Duty”
103d Division Memorial located at TXDOT Center
North of Gainesville, Texas*

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A Tardy Telling



Looking Back

During World War II I experienced a few embarrassing moments that deserve explanation. The Germans once took my machine-gun away from me and shot at me with it. I mistakenly spent a night sleeping with German soldiers in their bivouac, and I had to jump out of an airplane because I failed to read carefully. These are not the kind of things you boast about to your friends and family.

I suspect some of these stories may puncture any romantic views my eight grandchildren may have had about their grandfather. They are meant to add an insight into the lot of the citizen soldier during World War II. Perhaps my grandchildren can be charitable. World War II forced my generation to live in both the best and worst of times. We had more exciting lives than we might otherwise have had. It was a time that united our nation more than ever before.

My five-year-old granddaughter, Bennett, climbed up in my lap one afternoon, looked me in the eye and asked with innocent curiosity, "Were you really a warrior Poppa?" I had to think about this word "warrior". This is not the word that I would have chosen to describe myself. I think of a "warrior" as a career choice performed by fearless professionals who love their work. I was not fearless, and I did not love this work. Like thousands of others in my generation, I did what I was asked to do, but I don't think of myself as ever having been a warrior. General Patton once said, "I don't want any dumb bastards who want to die for their country. I want men who will kill dumb bastards who want to die for their country".

The line between valor and foolhardiness can be very thin. A moral principle can make foolhardiness appear to be valor. In keeping with the spirit of General Patton's remarks, during World War II my goal was to avoid both foolhardiness and valor and still get this job done. There were heroes in this war, but I was not one of them.

In 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, I was a seventeen-year-old college student. I had a willingness to be led into mischief by any passing stranger. If temptation didn't find me, I was determined to hunt it down and insist that it have its way with me. I felt

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then, as I do now, that fighting and winning World War II was a necessary thing. The Reserve Officers Training Corps, in which I was enrolled at the University of Florida, was at that time training with "horse-drawn artillery" that pulled a rather small World War One 75 millimeter cannon. Can you imagine such a thing? A well-trained mechanized German army was slicing through Europe, and we were still training with horses as if we were going to fight World War One all over again. Our nation was woefully unprepared for war, and I later discovered that I was more unprepared for war than I thought I was.

In February 1943, when I was barely nineteen, I was asked, "Do you wish to be in the Army or the Navy?" For some reason the thirteen buttons on Navy pants came to my mind along with the mental picture of what a daily inconvenience this would present. This rather frivolous thought, not founded in fact, discouraged my choosing the Navy. I became a Private in the Army because of buttons on Navy pants. From this whimsical choice, my world took a fork in the road. I ended up in the Infantry. Infantrymen shoot people and they get shot. These are two things that I least wanted to participate in or felt qualified to do, but I did enjoy more convenient bathroom habits with army buttons.

I discovered that in war we tend to revisit what we once thought to be of value. The superficial and shallow diminish in importance. This was a time that quickly pushed more meaningful goals into an immature, unfocused mind. A commitment of some magnitude was called for. World War II became my "time of passage" from childhood into adulthood. Like it or not, I was forced into becoming an adult.



Hurrying off to adventure

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Seventeen Miles to Steige

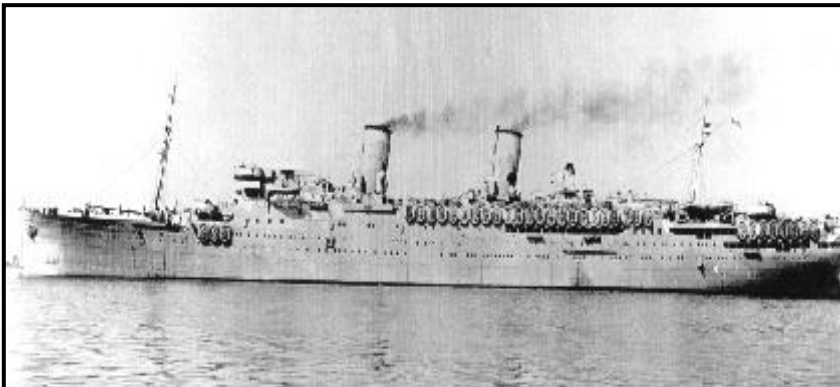


How can this happen?

How can an inexperienced young infantry Private find himself sleeping in a German bivouac by mistake? How can he get his machine-gun stolen by the enemy and used against him? How did he end up eating a sit down dinner prepared for German officers in the middle of a battle? Near the little town of Steige, France in November 1944 all of these events came to pass during one of the unheralded skirmishes of World War II.

Along with thousands of others in 1943, the government sent the then familiar letter that began, "Greetings, you have been selected by your friends and neighbors . . .", I was drafted! Student life gave way to glider training with the 666th Airborne Machine-gun Battery at Fort Bliss near El Paso, Texas. (*Thank Goodness I never had to fight as a Gliderman. Their combat losses were so great that the use of gliders was eventually abandoned.*) After earning my Gliderman Wings, I was sent back to college to learn to be an engineer at Oklahoma A & M University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. With a little more than a semester under my belt, the army discovered that it no longer needed engineers. The Army needed infantrymen. The entire student body was transferred to the 103d Infantry Division at Camp Howze in Gainesville, Texas. We soon found ourselves headed overseas on the USS Monticello.

The Italian luxury liner, *Conte Grandi*, became a U.S. Navy transport, USS Monticello. Whatever luxuries this liner had previously boasted were distant memories of the past. Lack of space and an erratically operating ventilation system made conditions aboard the vessel difficult, especially in some area housing enlisted personnel.



USS MONTICELLO (AP-61)
652 feet long
23,000 tons displacement
6,890 troops embarked
Built in Italy in 1928

We left New York harbor October 6, 1944 and on October 20, 1944, under cover of darkness, our troop ship was unloaded in Marseilles, France. During our voyage to France the weather was rough a good part of the way, and everybody, including the ship's personnel, suffered the torture of prolonged seasickness. A troop ship, packed with men in bunks stacked seven high, is an unsavory place to be when everybody gets seasick and you aren't allowed to leave the space assigned. With roommates using their steel helmets to hold last night's dinner in their lap, the quality of your accommodations hit rock bottom. Living and sleeping under these conditions took away my earlier thoughts about trading my job in the infantry for a job in the Navy. I was desperate to leave the stench and nauseous motion of the ship and welcomed the opportunity to be on dry land again. At the time I was desperately certain that anything would be an improvement. I had a lot to learn.

After a few days to assemble the men and equipment, we moved forward to participate in the Battle for Northern France. I recall when we, as relatively inexperienced troops, relieved elements of the Seventh Infantry Regiment of the Third Infantry Division. It was in a wooded mountain area with snow on the ground. The bodies of German soldiers were scattered all around, preserved by the cold and resembling wax dummies. We used the foxholes that were already dug amongst these dead bodies. Some had elaborate covers to protect against tree bursts (*Artillery rounds that detonated when they struck tree limbs*).

An infantryman's job is not one that is greatly sought in war time. Sleeping outside on the cold ground, in the snow tends to forever ruin "camp outs" as a recreation choice, and it requires you to frequently be cold, wet, and hungry for long periods of time while people are shooting at you. Not the kind of job description that attracts many applicants. Military experts say that no war is ever won until an infantryman occupies the land being fought over and the infantry is critical for a final wartime success. When you are the person being shot at, however, this flattering description of the infantry gives you little comfort.

All of us have at some point experienced challenging moments of self discovery. For me, infantry combat was such a moment. This was an unknown with dreadful consequences. Coming to terms with the likelihood of death is a sobering thing and killing people was out of keeping with anything I had ever done. This was a trial that required a choice of values. This is what determines who we "really are", not who we "think" we are. It

separates us from all other beliefs that we may have had about who we imagined ourselves to be. Could I kill another human being? I was fearful that I might not be able to acquit myself well as I struggled to do what I was being asked to do. For better

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or worse, at such moments I believe that a part of our fundamental character is being forged. Even now I have uncomfortable memories of my war years.

In late November of 1944, the German leaders must certainly have known that for them this war was lost. It is a cruel irony that so many German soldiers persisted in fighting and dying for a cause that was already lost. They were prisoners of their own self deception, and I had no enthusiasm about being the last person in this war to die. War, at this point, had become a senseless waste for Germany to pursue.

The Germans were pulling back to better defensive positions and one of the Third Division Sergeants was briefing us about what to expect. He sensed our feelings and said, "Don't worry it won't be as bad as you think it will. Yesterday I attacked a village with the five men that were left in my squad. I asked for reinforcements, they sent me two more men and we took the village." I was impressed. I felt it was exciting to be a part of such history making. I was to learn later that there is something about being a Private in the Infantry that takes a lot of romance out of hands on participation in "history-making". I discovered that there can be such a thing as too much "hands on". Generals have a much better job.

On November 24th, 1944 a large enemy force was pulling back toward the small French village of Steige in the Vosges Mountains with the expectation of using this town as a supply point. There was a need to quickly deny the German army control of this location. It was thought that American soldiers could infiltrate the thinly guarded German defenses, hike seven miles in the dark of night and capture Steige by surprise. This was the plan. It sounded simple, but from the outset the plan had little appeal to me.

The Plan



Sneak through enemy lines.

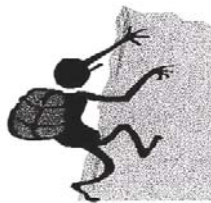
There is usually a difference in the way things are viewed between the fellow "making" the plan and the fellow "doing" the plan. Carrying heavy equipment, ammunition, guns and

supplies, up and down unfamiliar hills and valleys at night through enemy territory was not my idea of a fun-filled evening. Seventeen miles on a map is much longer when you're the one doing the walking through the hills and valleys occupied by the enemy.

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Concern for self-preservation and for creature comforts often distorts your view of a soldier's larger mission when you are a Private. At the time my mind was focused upon getting a warm place to sleep, a full stomach, dry socks and not getting shot. Any ideas about my contribution to world affairs were dwarfed by these considerations. I was not very motivated to be a part of this scheme. Nevertheless, I became a participant in this battle plan because my battalion was selected for the job. We left during a cold drizzling rain under cover of darkness November 24, 1944, with no Thanksgiving turkey, no rest and little likelihood of getting any sleep, let alone having a warm place to do it.

Body heat inside your shirt is a great place for keeping extra socks dry. When your feet hurt, you hurt all over and a periodic change of socks does wonders. We were eating K rations, which came packaged in small boxes about the size of a Cracker Jack box that were labeled "breakfast", "dinner" and supper". The supper K ration contained a chocolate bar and two cigarettes for a dessert. I gave the cigarettes away, but I had been saving these candy bars over a period of time. I had two extra pair of dry socks and a store of chocolate candy bars tucked inside my field jacket. I was prepared. These highly prized chocolate bars were my secret treasure. Privates learn this kind of personal survival very early. Such things as sleeping with your boots inside your sleeping bag to prevent them from freezing solid, storing toilet paper in your steel helmet, and keeping a spoon stuck in the top of your boot are quickly learned measures to make life easier.



A bad night to mountain climb

There was no moonlight, and darkness seemed to surround and isolate each of us in our own private black hole. A good night to sneak about, but a bad night to mountain climb. We were loaded down. The .30-caliber water-cooled machine-gun was carried in two pieces. Six of us took turns carrying either the tripod that forked over our shoulders or the gun. I think the tripod weighed about sixty pounds. The gun itself, in its water-encased jacket, must have weighed almost as much. Both were awkward to carry. In

addition, there was ammunition for the machine-gun, our individual side arms, its ammunition, rations and personal gear. All of this, in mountainous terrain on a dark rainy night surrounded by the enemy, dampens thoughts you may have had about re-enlistment.

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An improbable route

Three German-speaking American soldiers were placed at the head of the column. We hoped that these men could "fast talk" their way past German sentries. This "fast talking" effort drew some small arms fire on occasion. Miraculously no one was hit, and also miraculously, the size of our unit escaped detection. There was no realization that an entire battalion of American soldiers was attempting to slip through German defenses. I couldn't fault the German sentries. Given the mountain terrain, the lack of visibility and the number of American soldiers involved, this plan was an improbable thing for the Germans to expect. The plan ignored the advice of the French military experts who were knowledgeable about previous battles in this area. This mountainous terrain on a dark night was an unsuitable choice for an attack. The mind that conceived such a plan must rank right along with the same mind that thought it made sense for Santa Claus to come down a chimney.

In the darkness we sometimes had to hold on to the belt of the man in front to keep from becoming separated from one another. It was a long miserable night of falls and bruises, and when you limit profanity to a whisper it just isn't satisfactory at all. After probing the German defenses in several places with moderate success and taking most of the night to do it, we stopped for a rest.

The "Buddy" system is used in the infantry, two to a foxhole, one man to stay awake while the other slept. Private Herbert Morgan from New Albany, Mississippi and Private Joseph McCrory from Kosciusko, Mississippi paired up and found themselves a place to rest. The total darkness brought a new understanding of what blindness means, and made it very difficult to know exactly where it was suitable to settle down. Morgan stood guard first. He sat down and leaned against a tree. In spite of efforts to stay awake, he was immediately overcome by sleep. He woke to find himself hurtling down the side of the mountain, helmet and carbine sailing off into the darkness. He was now

separated from his unit by a seventy-foot tumble down hill. While not seriously hurt, he had the problem of how to find his way back in the darkness. After struggling for a good while and using McCrory's loud snores as a guide, he finally located his helmet and carbine and arrived back to the campsite as men were starting the new day.

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I paired off with Jim Kallod from Fargo, North Dakota. I hoped he was as serious about staying awake as I was. My feeling was that you should never share a foxhole with anyone that is braver than you. He might think it safe to sleep. The need for silence prevented our digging of the customary foxhole. Usually this was something automatically done in a combat zone each time we halted. We each had a little collapsible shovel that came to rank in importance along with our personal weapon, and it was used much more frequently than my pistol. I did much more digging than shooting during my stay in Europe.

Not very long after Kallod and I had located a spot away from the others and settled down, we heard the voices of German soldiers. This is something that will grab your attention rather quickly when you are wandering about at night in a countryside occupied by the enemy. They seemed to be only a short distance away and unconcernedly strolling towards us. These sounds, from out of total darkness, unleashed the fear that had been lurking in the back of my mind all the while. I first thought we should capture them. After all, I knew about them, but as yet they apparently didn't know about Kallod and me. This was an advantage. The trouble was I couldn't see them even if they were only a foot away. The night was ink black. I wouldn't be able to tell whether they held their hands up in surrender or aimed their weapons. A frightened man with a weapon tends to shoot first and ask questions later. A rifle shot would bring chaos in a camp full of nervous men with loaded rifles. At this point, I had not yet killed anyone, and I was not at all attracted to the idea of stabbing or choking somebody to death. My enthusiasm for prisoner taking began to rapidly dim and disappear. This, I decided, was a task best performed in daylight hours. I stopped toying with any thoughts of capturing or killing and set about establishing a world championship for keeping quiet. *(I never realized how noisy it is just to breathe while trying to hide from someone standing almost on top of you.)*

Adopting this new policy now, however, did not solve my immediate problem, as they continued to move closer and closer toward me. I began to believe they were actually going to step on me. I froze in place, afraid to move a muscle. One of them came so close that I was fearful the luminous dial on my watch would give me away. I was thinking, "Please Lord, let these guys go on by and go some place else, any place else!" In the emotion of the moment I was prepared to promise most anything to get out of this predicament. My promise of "religious commitment" in the hope of survival was

somewhat extreme. There seems to be a direct relation to fear and religious commitment. The greater the fear the greater the commitment. Unfortunately, when fear goes away, commitment seems to weaken.

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It's one thing to decide not to capture or kill someone, but it's quite another to get stepped on by the fellow you were thinking about "not capturing" or "not killing". Until now, killing people had been rather an abstract thing that movie heroes did to villains. I now began to view fighting a war in an entirely different light. It is one thing to drop a bomb or fire a torpedo at some faceless unknown enemy, but to look a person in the eye when you shoot or stab him to death gives it a new meaning. This situation presented an altogether different notion of what a war is all about. Killing suddenly becomes a much more difficult, unappealing and abhorrent thing. Whatever romantic views I had about war were suddenly gone.

Reluctantly, I began to plan just what I would have to do if one of them actually did step on me, which now seemed very likely. Getting stepped on calls for somebody to do something. In truth, it calls for everybody to do something, and the quickest one to react has the greatest advantage. I needed a plan. The thought of grabbing some stranger who would try to kill me before I killed him was not on my list of anything I really wished to do. I grew up believing in fair play, but whether it was fair or unfair, I wanted an advantage if a killing was going to take place. My father used to say, "Son, if you know you are going to a knife fight, take a gun." Sound advice to live by even today.

With the feeling I was being driven to a poor solution, I slowly and carefully raised the holster flap and eased out my Remington U.S. Army issue .45-caliber pistol and made sure the safety was off and it was ready to fire. The pistol is not a weapon that I would choose to shoot someone who was any distance away. Pistols are accurate for the cowboys in the movies, not for me. This target, however, was one that I could reach out and touch. I tried to remember whether I had placed a round in the firing chamber. The noise of pumping a round into the firing chamber of a .45-caliber automatic pistol would be almost as "action provoking" as getting stepped on. Our officers discouraged carrying rounds in the firing chamber for safety reasons. In spite of this, I had started putting one in the chamber of my pistol whenever there was a chance of my being surprised. Now I was glad my "Nervous Nelly" attitude paid off. The pistol was ready. I was not.

The German soldiers stopped talking and halted when they were almost standing directly over me. There was a long period of silence. In the darkness I could not see them, but this silence lasted long enough for me to finally believe they may have heard something

and decided to withdraw. After a considerable period of time, I was finally convinced that this must be the case. For whatever reason, they had left. Kallod apparently had left also. After quietly feeling around in a careful search I could not locate him. He seemed to have grasp the situation more quickly than I and found a better solution.

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Now though, I couldn't sleep. If you can almost get stepped on once, you can almost get stepped on again. I lay there, holding my pistol until morning, unable to relax. My caution was warranted. With morning we discovered that there were German soldiers mixed in among us in our encampment. They were as surprised as we, and fortunately surrendered quickly without shots being fired.

(Can you imagine an attack that includes an "overnight camp out" with the enemy? This is no way to run a war! This is the kind of thing that gives Generals a bad reputation.)

The Attack



Surprise was the key

An Infantry Division, like the 103d Division, is made up of three Regiments. Our Regiments were the 409th, 410th and the 411th. A Regiment is made up of three Battalions. An infantry battalion, like my First Battalion, was comprised of three rifle companies and a heavy weapons company. Thus, this mission included the riflemen of Company "A", Company "B", and Company "C" along with the machine-gunners and mortar-men of Company "D", my company. As I recall, there was about one hundred and sixty men to a company. Over five hundred men were involved in this attack.

The riflemen's success in controlling the enemy's land area is what determines the outcome of wars. Every military unit in the United States has as its ultimate objective the support of riflemen to enable them to gain control of this. Riflemen regard all other military units in the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force as "rear echelon", and machine-gunners regard everyone but the riflemen as "rear echelon". The intensity of this feeling cannot be understood by anyone outside the Infantry, and certainly not by other combat soldiers who also risk their lives for their country. However, if you are not within bayonet distance of the enemy, you are not "at the front". All else, is something "in support" of the rifleman. The Infantry absorbed 80% of all the Army

casualties killed in action in the European Theatre. Riflemen accounted for 95% of these. (Order of Battle, U.S. Army World War II by Shelby L. Stanton)

My Heavy Weapons Company "D", consisting of two platoons of .30-caliber water-cooled machine-guns and one platoon of 81 millimeter mortars, was the first line of support

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behind these riflemen. A machine-gun platoon, consisting of four machine-guns, is usually assigned to a rifle company in an attack. My platoon was assigned to Company "A". During the afternoon, we approached the village of Steige cautiously until it was within gun range. Above the town on a knoll, we put our machine-guns in place looking down upon Steige's main street. We had good fields of fire covering the center of the village and located our guns to provide overhead fire support for the riflemen of "A" Company. It is the practice to coordinate machine-guns in a battle. Their crossfire is very deadly. Company "A" continued down the mountain to the edge of town, keeping themselves hidden from view as they sought a place of concealment from which to launch their attack. We kept ourselves hidden behind the ridge and waited. We were waiting for Company "A" and Company "C" to position themselves to attack. During this interval I began to think about what was getting ready to take place.



Is this really the time to make trouble ?

Here we were, undiscovered and completely surrounded by the enemy. In a few moments we were going to attack them by surprise with our machine-guns. Very shortly we would no longer be "undiscovered", and it seemed certain to me that the German Army surrounding us would do something about this. Wouldn't it be better to attack the enemy by surprise when they didn't have us surrounded? The way I saw it, this didn't seem the right time to start making trouble. Again, my strong desire to enjoy a "fair advantage" surfaced. For me, there is an uneasiness about the enemy being able to sneak up behind you. This seemed to tilt the playing field in favor of the Germans. Maybe, in addition to being ready to fight, I should also be prepared in case of capture. This is not a very courageous thought of course, but there are times when confidence in your military leadership runs a bit low. Earlier, we had been instructed to discard anything that could be of value to the enemy, which we had done. (*Such orders do not raise your spirits on the eve of an attack, by the way.*) If captured now, what would the enemy take from me? My thoughts focused upon the cache of chocolate bars stored in

my field jacket, currently my most cherished possession. They took on new and greater importance in the scheme of things. They were not something you want an enemy to take. My life maybe, my chocolate bars, "Never"! For Privates, the strategy of war pivots on such small things. While we waited, I began to hurriedly eat my cache of chocolate bars as fast as I could, one after another.

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There was a cow pasture between the woods and the town that we looked down upon. We could see the riflemen of Company "A" when they left the forest and crossed through this pasture in their attack. We waited for them to charge the town from the woods where they were concealed. When they started across the pasture, it was our signal to open fire. As the rifle company advanced, we would also advance by "leap-frogging" our machine-guns behind them. Always keeping two machine-guns ready to fire while the other two advanced with the riflemen.



Where is everybody ?

Where was Company "C"? It was not in the position called for in the battle plan. The entire company was nowhere to be seen. That afternoon, its mission had been to protect our open right flank and be in reserve for our Steige attack. I later learned that it had unexpectedly hit strong enemy resistance and was delayed. At the time, with such a dark night in mountainous terrain, I thought they must have gotten lost. In the absence of Company "C", we were without reserves. Where was our artillery support? We couldn't locate any. Where was our Company "D" 81-millimeter heavy mortar platoon? I expect our mortars were still struggling to get across the rough terrain with all their heavy equipment. We only had two rifle companies and two machine-gun platoons in place and prepared to attack. More than half of the resources we planned to have were either absent or unavailable.

Our commanding officer, Lt. Colonel Teal Therrell of Bennettsville, S.C. felt the attack needed to be before nightfall or be delayed another day. Waiting would risk the loss of the surprise we had spent a miserable night climbing mountains in the dark to achieve. In the absence of artillery and heavy mortar support, the Colonel decided to attack using only our only our machine-guns to lay down a covering fire for the rifle companies. My gun section was assigned to cover the area of a roadblock consisting of a car turned over in the street. I think the other machine-gun section was kept with the battalion.

Thus, the attack was begun with only Company "A" along with our machine-guns. There was no reserve Company "C" in position, no 81 millimeter mortars, and no artillery. This was our best alternative in the face of the men and material that were ready for an attack at the moment.

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Battle plans are like family budgets, neither of them works out as you expect they will. With both, you just do the best you can and pray a lot. Family budgets seem to always have unplanned surprises, and battle plans change the moment the first bullet is fired.

Jack Niklas from Lansing, Michigan was our Squad Leader and Charles Rahn from Holly, Michigan was our gunner. I was on the gun beside Rahn waiting for the signal to fire, still feverishly eating chocolate bars. Whatever the outcome of this war, no German was getting my chocolate bars! We were all focusing our attention on the town below where German Soldiers were out in the streets in large numbers. The gun was positioned so that the part of Rahn's body most exposed to enemy fire was his backside. He was not at all happy about this. It really worried him and he insisted upon correcting it in some way. The fact that his head had to be exposed was something he took for granted, but having his rear exposed was too much. It took considerable twisting and turning and repositioning of everything before Rahn finally felt satisfied about the safety of his backside. This was now protected. We were ready. *(I suspect this concern stemmed from Rahn's attitude toward the "body parts" involved with his ability to have children.)*

The German Soldiers were oblivious of our presence. Afterwards, we discovered they were lined up in the street in a chow line being served their evening meal.

The surprise was complete and total when Company "A" came pouring out of the woods. Our tracers appeared to float down into the German chow line and it was devastating. After each four rounds in a belt of ammunition there is a tracer round, hence the appearance that the bullets are slowly floating. When machine-gun fire is observed from a distance, there is an eerie illusion that the battle is being fought in slow motion. Our tracers set several houses on fire. At one point, two German military vehicles drove desperately down the road in an attempt to escape. They attracted our fire. You could see our tracer bullets resembling water droplets from a stream of water out of a garden hose targeting these vehicles. They were stopped, and the German soldiers that were not killed or wounded fled as best they could. Our tracers revealed our location. Return fire was minimal, however. Enemy tracers appeared to slowly float toward our gun position, but they were not accurate. We suffered no casualties.



One third of the town was secured

Company "A" secured about one-third of the town and we advanced into the edge of town in their support. By now it was getting too dark to continue the attack. We located our gun to protect against a counter-attack and two of the crew and I went to explore a nearby house. The house was located at an intersection. We were told to secure it for our squad's sleeping quarters that night. "Secure" meant for us to shoot or capture the people who were in the house. Little chores like this seem to have kept cropping up throughout this war, and they reminded me of how much I would rather have been somewhere else. Apparently though, the Germans occupying this house had fled out the rear as we were taking over the front. The dining room table in the house was attractively set. It even had a tablecloth on it, and there was hot food untouched. We had surprised them right at meal time. It's not often you get to fight a battle and eat the enemy's "sit down" dinner at the same time. We took advantage of it and savored the trappings of a "civilized" meal for a change. The menu was a rabbit dish of some kind as I recall. The intermittent small arms fire outside, punctuated with an occasional explosion of a large round, was ignored while we dined in unaccustomed elegance. This was a big improvement over the K rations we had been carrying for our daily meals for many days. For a moment the battle was forgotten and we savored the simple pleasures of what almost approximated a normal meal. A gourmet dinner at a French restaurant could not have been appreciated more.

At this time Privates First Class Bill Downs from Wichita, Kansas, Donald Hoy from Berkley, California and Joseph McCrory from Kosciusko, Mississippi, were assigned duty on our machine-gun. I'm not sure who else made up this skeleton crew. I think Al Sodman from Antioch, Illinois and Paul Hiser from Dearborn, Michigan, were there also, but not necessarily on the gun. Later, when I became a sergeant, Sodman and Hiser were gunners with me. After the war, I understand Hoy became a medical doctor.

Our sit down dinner was interrupted before we could finish it. Bill Downs came rushing in to tell us that a large round had exploded nearby and apparently caused a burning wall to fall on our machine-gun. His coat was smoldering and Bill was distraught.

About this time, a woman who appeared to be the owner of the house my squad was occupying returned. She said she was concerned about her belongings. I now realize

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that she was a German Sympathizer serving as a spy for the enemy. They were less than a block away. She distracted our attention. We had not yet been issued our winter field jackets and she sneered at our light clothing, which was inadequate for the mountain cold. It did not occur to me that this woman could be a spy until years later. My best thinking is often done after I don't need it. (*Later, I learned that we had not been provided proper clothing because it was thought the war would be over before there was such a need. Wars are hard things to plan when you have an uncooperative enemy.*) At this early point in combat, our lack of experience brought a consuming fear that permeated the atmosphere and slowed our effectiveness. A few dumb things were done. Later, although fear is always present in battle, experience lessened this considerably. We became more seasoned soldiers.

When we went out to see about the machine-gun which the crew had left, we discovered that the Germans had retrieved it from under the collapsed wall and were using it against us. The rate of fire between the German automatic weapons and ours was markedly different. The German weapons fired at a much faster speed. It was embarrassingly easy to recognize the familiar sound of our very own machine-gun being fired at us. The familiar rhythmic "chug chug chug" was unmistakable. This is a hard thing to explain to friends and family after the war. "What did you do during the war, Daddy?" "Children, your daddy let the Germans shoot at him with his own machine-gun."

In the darkness, a wave of Germans poured down the street toward our house with covering fire from their 20-millimeter cannon along with our own captured machine-gun. The confusion was tremendous because we didn't know where our other troops were located. They yelled and screamed as they charged us. Our small arms fire finally stopped the charge, and the remaining Germans pulled back leaving their dead and wounded. Sporadic firing continued. At one point, a panzerfaust round (*a German anti-tank weapon*) exploded into the house. Lieutenant Keith Rees from Teton, Idaho, our Platoon Leader, had his helmet blown off. The Rifle Company with us lobbed 60mm mortar rounds into the street directly below the house we were in. The range was shorter than the minimum distance for which the mortar was designed. It was necessary to fire the mortar without the bipod and estimating the correct angle of elevation needed. This is risky business when friendly troops are so close. However, I

later learned that this mortar fire was very effective. At the time I didn't know whether it was German mortars or American mortars.

Our other Company "D" machine-gun platoon was across the street from the house I was in. Don McGregor from Waco, Texas, C.A. "Jeff" Jennings from McAllen, Texas, Les Klie from Tinley Park, Illinois and several other of my friends were with this Platoon.

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Their single machine-gun was put to good use during the big German charge. My platoon, without our machine-gun, was relegated to using only our side arms and some hand grenades. The hand grenades were quickly used up, and attempts to get more from nearby riflemen were unsuccessful. Jeff Jennings told me later that their platoon Lieutenant hid under the bed during this attack. I heard this from other sources also. The men under his command performed well in spite his poor example.

I posted myself at the downstairs living room window to look for another attack. I remember knocking out the windowpane with the barrel of my pistol, just like cowboys did in the grade "B" movies of my childhood. Combat was still a new thing to me and I had some foolishly romantic ideas about my role as a soldier. I pictured myself as a principal character in an unfolding story. For the moment, this attitude seemed to delude me into thinking I wouldn't be killed. Before the night was over though, reality set in, and this delusion was punctured. It was my night to realize that I was very likely to get shot in this war.



The enemy ?

In the darkness, I glimpsed movement off to my left near a tree. It looked like a cluster of German Soldiers. I carefully took aim with my carbine and fired an entire fifteen round clip of ammunition. The next morning I discovered I had killed a poor unfortunate farm animal. I think it was a horse. It happened to be moving at the wrong time in the wrong place for a nervous "G.I." who had just experienced one counter-attack and expected another.

I discovered that as for my becoming a professional soldier, I best keep my "day job". If the army actually hired people based on the qualifications of the applicant and what the job called for, I don't believe they would have given me a job in the infantry. I did not feel I was cut out to kill people. I even suffered pangs of guilt about the poor horse

I had imagined to be German soldiers. It was many years before my disturbing memories of war weakened. These memories have never entirely left my mind.

After the unsuccessful counter-attack, a German officer stuck his head around the rear corner of our house and said in English, "Come to us. It is useless to resist." Herbert Morgan from New Albany, Mississippi asked, "I see him. Shall I shoot him?" There was

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so little time between the question and the shot; I thought Morgan's question had been rhetorical. I thought Morgan shot the officer through the head before anyone responded. I later learned that Lt. Rees had said, "Shoot him!" Morgan's shot was quick and accurate. The officer pitched forward, killed instantly.

Our house was somewhat protected in its location between the two adjacent houses. Apparently, unbeknownst to us, we were in the key forward defense position in this counter-attack. The Germans brought our own machine-gun up between our house and the one next door. They began firing between the two houses. I think they were attempting to retrieve the body of the dead officer that had failed in his attempt to get us to surrender. Lieutenant Rees emptied a fifteen round clip of his 30 caliber carbine ammunition in an attempt to ricochet bullets off a masonry wall into the space between the two houses where the Germans were located.

When we examined the body of the dead German officer, we discovered he had a letter of commendation from "Der Fuhrer" and was armed with a sub machine-gun.

Joseph McCrory from Kosciusko, Mississippi was posted at a window. McCrory was looking across the street at a house where a window showed movement. He was repeatedly firing at this movement. McCrory could be heard firing a shot every few minutes. It sounded as if there could be an attack in progress and help moved in to aid McCrory. It turned out he was firing at a window drape that caught the wind every now and then and moved like a person was there. There was nothing wrong with McCrory's marksmanship, however, the drape was riddled. Dead window drapes don't count in battle, though. They're like dead horses. Both are things you would really rather not admit to or talk about. With me shooting horses, and McCrory shooting window drapes, we could have kept the battle for Steige going at least an extra day.

Lt. Rees was assigned to us as our platoon leader just before we went into combat. He had little time to train with us or to learn much about infantry fighting. He was trained originally as an artillery officer on large coastal guns and was given only a brief infantry training course before joining our unit. Fortunately, he was intelligent and candid enough to announce that he would defer to the leadership of the non-commissioned

officers. He was wise in this decision. Platoon Sergeants Charles Ceronsky, Max Irwin and Zack Sigler were capable leaders. I was with Lt. Rees and Sergeant Ceronsky in the downstairs living room of the house through most of the fighting that night.

After the German officer failed in his surrender demand, things quieted down. With morning, we discovered that we had been firing across the street into a house that was

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occupied by some riflemen from Company "A". It was the home of a Catholic priest. Fortunately, we didn't hit anyone, though such poor marksmanship is a little embarrassing. Company "A" captured 121 prisoners, and there was a detail assigned to recover the bodies of German soldiers. No civilians were killed or injured. Almost all had fled the town immediately after our initial attack.



A deserted ghost town

When morning finally came, Steige was like a deserted ghost town. We had the entire place to ourselves. The German soldiers and the German civilians had all hastily left during the night. Their departure had been so quick that there was no time for anything to be packed and taken with them. Everything remained in place. It seemed as though the occupants had gone to the corner store and would be back in a moment. It was a spooky feeling to go through these recently vacated homes. We played like children with the abandoned German cars and military vehicles.

We cautiously explored the town that was now so ominously empty. We poked about the deserted homes viewing personal effects and guessing about the kind of people the occupants had been. The recent and rapid departure of the homeowners gave the illusion they would momentarily walk back in the door to re-claim their home. We filled our canteens from wine barrels stored in some of the basements. We ate what food we could find as a welcome relief from K rations. We found our machine-gun that had been captured the night before. Aside from a big dent in the water jacket, it was in good working order.

There was a supply depot with a large cache of arms, ammunition, and other supplies. I took a machine pistol from the captured supplies for my future use but our captain advised us to use only American weapons to avoid being confused for the enemy. I also

took a German sniper jacket that was much superior to my own field jacket. It was reversible. One side had the usual camouflage, and the other was white for snow-covered terrain. I was hoping to keep it as a memento, but it was later replaced when our new winter clothing was issued. By then it had shrapnel holes in the right shoulder.

Although the town was captured November 26th, we were still surrounded by the enemy
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and in need of supplies. Our Company "D" jeeps had to fight through enemy defenses to bring us these supplies. Our First Sergeant, William T. Hollis, of Lapeer, Michigan won a Silver Star for his leadership in his struggle to get these supplies to us. Sergeant Hollis was about 6 foot 3 inches tall and weighed 225 pounds and was not a person to mess with. If provoked, he could make a Private regret a moment of misconduct for the rest of his life. The Germans, of course, were not aware of this. When his convoy was fired on by an enemy patrol, Sergeant Hollis charged the enemy spraying them with rapid fire from a Browning .30-caliber automatic rifle. He killed three, wounded one and routed the rest. One of our drivers was killed. Later, Sergeant Hollis was given a commission as Second Lieutenant.

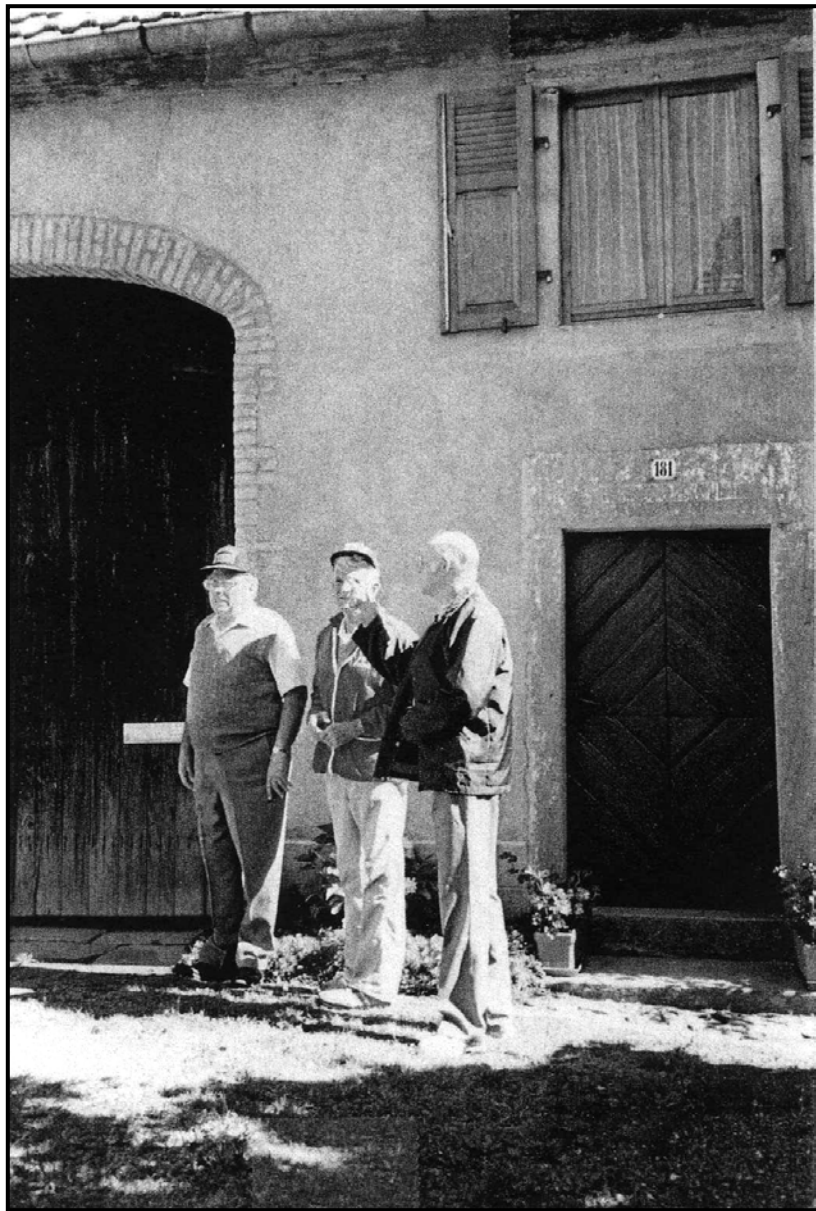
As November closed, the 103d Division was no longer considered a "Green" unit. They'd been tested and successfully passed into the column of seasoned veterans, but not without a price. The November 409th Casualty Statistics: Killed in Action - 36, Lightly Wounded in Action - 156, Seriously wounded in Action - 20, Lightly Injured in Action - 23, and Missing in Action - 17.



General Custer's Battle Plan ?

I had thought this battle plan was about the worst plan since General Custer said, "Let's all go over to Little Big Horn and shoot us some Indians." The French military advisers regarded the path we took as militarily impossible. Never in the history of the many wars in this area had such a path been chosen. We were without artillery and mortar support at the time of attack, and about one third of our unit was unable to be present as planned. In spite of all this, the plan had succeeded. Thanks to the fact that the enemy was completely surprised, we fared much better than General Custer. We lost only one or two men from Company "D". I don't know what casualties Company "A" suffered, but they were light. Our mission was accomplished.

My personal concern that we were surrounded by the enemy turned out to be unwarranted. Maybe this is why Privates don't get the big bucks. No doubt, the fact that the German Army was at the time hastily pulling back to prepared positions better suited for them to defend, contributed to this success. Later, we were not so fortunate. Our losses were much greater.



Jim Kallod, Jack Durrance and Doug Merrill

**Taken September 1985 in Steige, France in front of the house
Jim Kallod and Jack Durrance were in on November 25, 1944**

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.30-Caliber water-cooled machine gun
was used by the Heavy Weapons Companies.
The air-cooled was used by the Rifle Company
Machine-gunners.



We were the first to cross the Vosges Mountains in battle

Selestat



First Battalion's Worst Losses

The tactical mission of the 103d Division was to cut the German supply lines to their 19th Army in the Colmar Pocket, South of Strasbourg. In order to do so, Selestat was the next objective. The 409th, my regiment, would move south from Dambach-la-Ville on December 1st, through the town of Scherwiller.

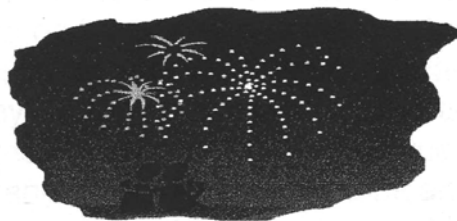
On December 6, 1944, *The Stars and Stripes*, a newspaper of the U.S. Armed Forces in the European Theatre of Operations, succinctly reported, "The U.S. 7th Army won the three day bitter battle for Selestat today, squeezing Allied pincers still tighter on partially encircled German positions west of the Rhine on the central Alsatian Plain."

For many of those who fought in the battle for Selestat, there was more to be said about those three days than was told by the cold terse facts reported in *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper. I believe the battle must have been much longer than three days. Many things take place in the course of a war that never get told. Military reports are not intended to mention the hardships and personal experiences of those who must do the killing and be killed. After you separate the politics from war, though this is mostly what the daily business of a war is all about, people killing and being killed. Here are a few unreported stories from this point of view.

For one thing, on December 2, 1944, only fifteen men out of about one hundred and fifty-eight from Company "B" escaped capture or death that day, and only about six or seven from the First Platoon of Company "D". The loss of these men happened within a very few hours in the early morning of December 2nd. This loss was from the First Battalion of the 409th Infantry Regiment, my Battalion, and from Company "D" of that Battalion, my company. Many of these were my friends and people I had come to know well. Good friends were lost that day.

Also, although it was a minor incident by military standards, the shelling these men suffered as they marched toward Selestat will live in their minds for the rest of their

lives. This was not significant enough to mention in news reports, and fell short of anything that history books would include in telling what happened in this war. However, an afternoon spent as a target for German artillery is no small thing when you are the target.

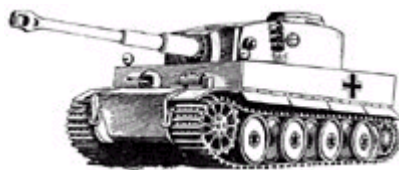


Incoming artillery is no small thing

There is a feeling of terror in listening to incoming artillery fire as it screams toward you when it is being directed by soldiers proven to be some of the best in the business. The terrain in our march to Selestat was flat and provided no place for protection. There was no time to dig the usual foxhole we had so often dug and not needed in the days before. Lying on the ground and keeping as low as possible afforded the best chance for not getting hit. After the first few rounds that it took the Germans to adjust their range, the screams of our wounded and dying could be heard. It was unnerving. We had to lie there listening to their cries and the sound of each round as it began its whistling, screaming journey. Until the shells stopped raining down on us, we were unable to give aid to these casualties. The whistling noise that each incoming round made, came toward us with growing intensity as it neared, creating a frightening feeling of suspense. Each time the sound seemed to last an eternity. Each time I was certain I was its final target and would momentarily be blown to bits. Each time an exploded shell left me unhurt, there was overwhelming relief that I had been temporarily spared. Then the sound of another could be heard starting its long screeching trip toward me. As the shells continued to come, I felt as though the small area I was lying on was the highest point in the valley and I was the most conspicuous target to be seen. I had stuffed the front of my field jacket with several K ration boxes and as the shells continued to explode all around me, I desperately dug out these ration boxes in order to get a few additional inches of protection closer to the ground. Each additional fraction of an inch of safety became a precious thing to have. As I mentioned earlier, fear and religion seem to go hand in hand. You don't need a war to know about this of course. Fear and religion seem to be frequent partners in situations like this. By military standards the shelling was brief, but it will live in the minds of those who were there. Our Platoon Sergeant, Chuck Ceronski, was one of those wounded, and I believe Corporal Francis Los to have been one of the men killed here.

Infantry on the move in the field must eat rations they can carry on their person, and they sleep on the ground where they happen to be at the end of the "workday". This "workday" may sometimes last all of the night. After this very long day, with the march from Dambach la Ville to Selestat and the ambush, we reached Selestat that night ready for some rest. It was almost midnight, and we were tired and a bit anxious about being in enemy territory. Our squad members had been taking turns carrying the barrel and base of our water-cooled machine-gun all day. Each of these pieces weighed about sixty pounds and was awkward to carry. This extra chore had been dutifully, if reluctantly, shared all day. We were loaded down like pack mules with our own weapons, its ammunition, rations and personal belongings plus ammunition for the machine-gun. We were pleased, but apprehensive, when our Sergeant designated a house that we could capture for our use and occupy for the night. No one was enthusiastic about attacking the occupants of a house at that hour, but shelter from the weather has a new importance after you have slept outside on the cold wet ground for a while. Fortunately, no one was in the house and we entered it and settled in without having to fight to secure it. This was an unexpected bonus. There was little time left for much rest. We knew our orders called for more fighting at dawn. Fighting a war is bad enough, but it seemed we were always fighting this war at a time when we were hungry, tired and on the verge of exhaustion. Under such conditions, thoughts of being a hero give way to thoughts of simple survival.

The Giessen River, (*more of a small stream than a river*), that ran along the northern border of Selestat came to play a "life and death" role for many of us that night. The bridge over the river had been destroyed, and Company "C" along with me and my platoon were assigned to occupy houses in Selestat that did not require us to wade across the river that night. This perhaps saved our lives. Unfortunately, Company "B" and the First Platoon of Company "D" were ordered by Lt. Colonel Teal Therrell, commander of the First Battalion, to cross the river. They occupied the first six houses across the river, using up their bazooka ammunition to capture them.



Tanks gave an advantage to the Germans

German infantry supported by tanks counter-attacked them about three-thirty a.m. There was no more ammunition left for the bazookas, which was their only weapon designated to defend against tanks. They were defenseless. As the cannons from the

tanks leveled the houses occupied by American troops, the buildings became death traps, and the men that were not killed were captured as the tank fire forced them out of the houses into the waiting arms of the German infantry. All this was happening without the knowledge of those of us who were only a short distance away on the other side of the river.

After the war, my friend Don McGregor, who was captured here on December 2, 1944 in Selestat, visited with me about what happened to the men of Company "D" who were with him in the same house that day. I also talked to C.A. 'Jeff' Jennings, James Price, Les Klie, Doug Merrill and others who were there. There were six German tanks in the attack. Three rounds were fired into the house they occupied. The first two rounds destroyed their machine-gun and opened a large hole, and the third caused parts of the house to collapse on those left inside. After the tank fire, Privates Jeff Jennings, Les Klie, Robert Peterson, Robert Kokensparger, Ted Jenkins and Donald McGregor went out of the house through a rear window and the hole. Unfortunately, McGregor and Jenkins, the last two men to climb out, found German soldiers waiting for them and were captured. Those ahead of McGregor and Jenkins escaped to temporary safety back across the river.

The tank fire wounded Private McGregor, Private James Price, Platoon Sergeant Zack Sigler, Staff Sergeant Louie Miles and Private Frank Harding. Sergeant Vernon Swanson was killed immediately and Tech Sergeant Zack Sigler died of his wounds hours later. The Germans captured the remaining men in this First Platoon of Company "D". After this, German infantrymen entered to inspect the house and Doug Merrill, who was comforting his dying friend, Zack Sigler, pretended death. He laid very still until the German soldiers left the house. When the Germans left the house, Doug carried Jim Price and Zack Sigler to a place of hiding in the basement. They all hid there until American troops began their attack at daylight that morning. Price was then taken to the rear for medical treatment where his leg had to be removed, and Doug Merrill rejoined the remnants of Company "D". I have always felt Doug Merrill showed unusual courage in remaining with his wounded friends, Jim Price and Zack Sigler. After the Germans left the house, he could have waded the river to certain safety for himself. Instead, He remained and assisted his wounded friends who were unable to help themselves. This was at great personal risk, and in my view was deserving of a Bronze or Silver Star.

While this was happening, the house I was in experienced intermittent artillery fire that was falling on the nearby road intersection. Our house shook with each explosion. I believe this intersection must have served as an artillery "check point", a landmark used

to adjust artillery fire. With each explosion an old grandfather's clock, lying on its side in the room I was in sounded its gongs. Sleep consisted of intermittent dozing, not very restful. I finally gave up the couch I was sitting on to seek better protection on the floor. Moments later, a large caliber shell passed through both walls of the room making a hole where Al Sodman and I had been seated on the couch. Survival in the infantry has a lot to do with time, chance and circumstances.

With daylight, we began our attack. The scene we faced that morning did not encourage us to move forward, but we reluctantly left the protection of our house to dutifully move forward in the attack. We met a wounded sergeant from Company "C", the rifle company ahead of us, crawling back towards us unable to walk. He was pulling himself forward on his stomach. We spoke to him as we passed and he returned our greeting with no complaint or cry for help. There were other wounded and dead as we moved across the river that morning, mute evidence of the danger we could expect. One of the riflemen, who was carrying a hand grenade attached to the lapel of his field jacket, was uninjured when a German sniper's bullet struck the grenade and dislodged it from his jacket. It did not explode. I would never have thought this a likely thing to happen. I have come to believe anything can happen in a war.

Progress was slow as the Germans tenaciously clung to each house they occupied. We methodically fought from house to house. Where there was resistance, hand grenades and rifle fire were used by the riflemen to rout the occupants. Each house was sometimes a battle within itself. After taking one house we would move to the next.



Each house a battle

German sniper fire was effective and many of our casualties came from this. After we secured a house, our practice was to locate a table that allowed our machine-gun to cover the street from a window and prepare to give supporting fire to the riflemen as they advanced. With the gun manned by two men, and in place ready to fire, the rest of us searched for anything we could find to eat or drink while the battle was in progress.

Once, we were greeted at the door by a woman who appeared to be the owner of the house we were entering. This house had not suffered extensive damage yet. She

followed us around to make sure we did not scratch a valuable table or break anything. It was like fighting a war under your mother's supervision. She even offered us refreshments. We respectfully tried to honor her requests as long as we could. The absurdity of this was beyond imagination. What a way to fight a war! As the fighting became more intense, however, there were no civilians to be seen, and the damage to the homes and their contents was too great to worry about scratched tables or broken china. In one home there was broken glass covering the whole floor. We took turns manning the machine-gun, and during our turn away from duty on the gun, Sodman and I found protection by sitting on the floor behind a large buffet. We sat there eating from jars of food we had discovered in the pantry. Suddenly the house began to shake from nearby incoming artillery rounds. With each explosion the house shook and Sodman and I were bounced up and down on the broken glass we were sitting on. *(Things like this take a lot away from the ambiance of a dining experience.)*

Al Sodman, my First Gunner, was from a small rural community with an interest in becoming a mechanic and owning his own garage or maybe farming. He was not one to get lost in a maze of large words in order to express himself. He could say in plain words whatever needed saying. Paul Hiser, my Second Gunner, was a college student and had the vocabulary with the sheltered temperament that college students often have. I believe it was late in the day on the second day of fighting when we took over a new house. After positioning the gun, Sodman and Hiser manned it in preparation to fire when a target presented itself. Unbeknownst to us, a tank was located adjacent to our house with its gun muzzle inched from the window we had selected to place our machine-gun. I was sitting across the room from our machine-gun when the tank fired its cannon. The muzzle blast was so powerful it rolled Sodman and Hiser across the room as though they were rag dolls. Sodman came up swearing like a sailor. He was frightened but unhurt. Hiser was also frightened and unhurt, but all of his frustration and fright at this unexpected explosion failed to produce a violent reaction. Hiser's exclamation was, "Oh dear me!" My own feelings of fright were best expressed by Sodman, and I thought Hiser's, "Oh dear me!" was ridiculously inadequate. It struck me as the funniest thing I had heard all day. When you think of the caprices of combat that place you near death, "Oh dear me!", is an understatement beyond belief. I started laughing, and we all joined in. We laughed uncontrollably. It was a time when there was little to laugh at.

I have never been sure whether this muzzle blast was from a German tank or an American tank. The confusion of combat made sorting out the friends from the enemy a constant problem. Death from friendly fire is a frequent thing in battle. At one point, we were in the same with some German soldiers and could hear their talk through the wall of the room next to ours. It was an unplanned happenstance for both of us

apparently, and before we could act the Germans had disappeared. There is often no clearly marked line separating the "good guys" from the "bad guys".

Troops in an attack rely on field rations that each man must carry on his person. This means that food and ammunition must frequently be brought forward from the rear to supply units involved in active continuous combat. Most of the rations we were issued when we began our march from Dambach-la-Ville had been eaten by now and we were short on supplies. We foraged for food as best we could from the homes we were in as we fought. This only partially fed us, of course, and food was constantly on our minds.

By radio, we were told that if we needed supplies we would have to send someone back from our squad to get them. It was very risky for men carrying supplies to our position, which explained our radio message. Not only was there artillery and mortar fire, but the damaged and partially destroyed houses between us and our supply depot gave the enemy cover in which their snipers hid. No one had much enthusiasm to risk life and limb to make such a trip for supplies just to eat better. However, hunger can eventually change your views. After a while, fighting a war only partially occupied our thoughts.

Paul Hiser found some eggs, and you would have thought he had discovered gold. The war was forgotten, and this prize captured our complete attention. The decision as to how they could best be prepared became controversial. In Hiser's view, none of our suggestions measured up to the menu these eggs truly deserved. Hiser felt he needed to delay using the eggs until he could properly compliment their preparation with our overdue food supplies.



Priceless eggs

As we fought the battle, Hiser carried his eggs in a little basket similar to those used by small children on Easter Egg hunts. He went from house to house with his little Easter Egg basket decorated with colored ribbons. He carefully held them as he dashed from cover to cover to escape enemy fire. He looked like a well-armed little boy on an Easter Egg hunt rather than an American soldier fighting a battle. This did not present a picture likely to be seen on any recruiting poster. Finally, Hiser could stand it no longer, and volunteered to go back to get supplies. First though, he made us all solemnly swear not to touch his eggs while he was gone. We agreed. After a time, it became apparent that we had no way of knowing whether or not Hiser had by now been killed or wounded. How long should we wait?

Once, our spirits were raised when we discovered there were tanks in the nearby apple orchard. Tanks had been giving the Germans a considerable advantage in this battle, and the Giessen River had been blocking our tanks from coming to our rescue. Our joy was short lived. When they got closer we could see the tanks were German tanks, not American. After a while one of the tanks moved down the street and put three rounds at floor level on the second floor of the house we had just left. Had we been there, we may not have survived. All at once we realized the possibility that neither Hiser nor any of the rest of us may live to eat these priceless eggs. They could be wasted or maybe even eaten by the enemy. This made waiting for Hiser a greater risk with each passing moment. Our intentions were good, but a point had been reached when it seemed likely that Hiser had not survived the trip and we needed to eat the eggs. By a hasty consensus, we agreed that Hiser must be dead, and the eggs should be eaten or no one may live to eat them.

Someone discovered a jar of English peas and we all agreed to cook the eggs mixed in with the English peas. As you can tell, we were better at shooting a machine-gun than we were at cooking. By the time we got the unappetizing mixture of peas and eggs ready to eat, Hiser appeared. Our relief at his having survived his trip for supplies was dimmed by Hiser's exasperation at our failure to honor our promise to save his eggs for him. In addition, Hiser was much more of a cook than any of us, and had an egg menu planned far superior to our own "peas and egg" concoction. Our rather hasty judgment cost us some properly cooked eggs and Hiser's wrath at our unforgivable breach of trust.

It is my recollection that we were in Selestat several days longer than the three-day victory period described in the *Stars and Stripes*. I recall December 5th as our departure date. I may be wrong about this, however. This is the date the 36th Division relieved the 103d. When you are a Private doing the fighting, you are sometimes the last to know when the battle is over. Sometimes you are unsure about who won or lost what. In this case, enemy resistance just seemed to diminish and fade. Suddenly, orders came for us to pack up and pull out. We had survived! No matter what was "won" or "lost", the homeowners of Selestat did not "win" anything. Few of their homes were left that would not require major repairs to be habitable again.

Fear over an extended period, slows time and distorts your awareness of its passage. An hour of stark terror can seem like a day. Battles are not fought by an eight-hour workday; they are continuous without regard to day or night. Time becomes a difficult thing to judge. The three days of December 1st, December 2nd, and December 3rd, mentioned in the press release, were stamped in my memory as though they had each

been a month. Our losses in Selestat resulted in my promotion to Staff Sergeant. The surviving members of the two machine-gun platoons were combined to allow new replacements to be led by the more experienced soldiers. I was supposed to be a Section Sergeant commanding two squads (fourteen men), but more replacements were needed for me to have the full compliment. Until Christmas, only six men were available. This meant I had no partner to share a foxhole with. On December 20th, my twenty-first birthday, I spent the night alone with shrapnel in my right shoulder. There were snipers in the rear of us between me and the aid station. I was safer in my foxhole. When I reported to the aid station two days later, I received a Purple Heart.

The 409th Regimental casualties during December 1944 were 588 men. A high price to pay, but now the 409th was regarded a seasoned fighting unit.

After Christmas 1944 there were many new faces in Company "D". On one occasion, I remember thinking I had wandered into the wrong company area.



Is this Company D ?



**Al Sodman and Jack Durrance (Left to Right)
Selestat, France**

Taken September 1985 in front of the house both were in on December 2, 1944 when most of Company "B" and all but seven men in the First Platoon, Company "D", 409th Infantry Regiment in the neighboring houses were killed or captured.

Adventures In No Man's Land

Pfaffenhofen



Children Are The Unjust Victims Of All Wars

The Moder River winds through rolling hills and between the villages of La Walk and Pfaffenhofen, France. A bridge over the river divides the town of La Walk from the town of Pfaffenhofen. The Germans were on the La Walk side of the river on high ground some distance away from the town and the Americans were on the Pfaffenhofen side within part of the village itself. Neither had troops fully occupying these towns. Both villages were a virtual "no man's land". Most of the residents had wisely left for safer places to live even though it required leaving all their worldly possessions deserted and unguarded. I cannot properly describe a war that uproots and destroys the lives and fortunes of so many people on such a large scale. Terror, starvation and death were a way of life for thousands of families. Where battles were being fought, many families often had nowhere to flee to find safety.

Sunday December 31, 1944 at 11:00 p.m. the German Army's XIII Corps began "Operation Nordwind" which was attributed to be the brainchild of Adolph Hitler himself. The plan was for an offensive effort through the lower Vosges Mountains, which would break through American lines and relieve the German troops in the well-known "Battle of the Bulge" of the Ardennes. This was very nearly successful. The divisions of the American VI Army Group were protecting 15 miles rather than the usual 5-mile area. The assault broke through the 44th Division's positions. This second "Bulge" is one of WW II's best kept secrets. It came so close to succeeding it was only revealed on a "need to know" basis to Allied commanders.

My 103d Division was involved. The area of the fighting I was in moved back about twenty miles and gave the Germans territory we would later have to fight to regain. After this, we assumed a defensive holding action between January 22 and March 12, 1945.

Now, aside from occasional patrol activities for scouting purposes, there was only

limited military action required of my Battalion. We dug more permanent machine-gun emplacements in the frozen ground with jackhammers. This, along with the use of landmines and barbed wire, were defensive measures that we had previously not used. From our gun emplacements we had an unobstructed view across the valley and over the Moder River to the German lines. We could see the Germans and I am sure they could see us. This Alsace-Lorraine region with its Lower and Higher Vosges Mountains and Alsatian Plains has been alternately both part of Germany and part of France at various times in history. There was serious doubt as to which country the loyalties of these people belonged.

It was very cold, and snow and ice blanketed the countryside. A skeleton crew took turns manning our machine-gun around the clock. Care had to be taken that the cold did not freeze the gun and disable it. With only a skeleton gun crew required, the rest of us waited our turn and kept warm in a large two story house about two hundred yards away from our gun positions. We were in the suburbs of Pfaffenhofen. This house, like most, had been vacated by its owners well ahead of our arrival. From the upstairs we were often able to sit and watch the American planes bomb and strafe the Germans. Once, a forward observer from an artillery unit lived with us for a while. He spotted targets and directed artillery fire on the Germans. We could sit comfortably in our house and watch the war being fought. The Air Force and the Artillery were doing all of the fighting now, and this was a welcome change as far as we were concerned.

When we were not on duty in our machine-gun emplacements, the temptation to explore the deserted towns was too great to resist. We now and then sneaked into this no man's land to explore the almost completely deserted buildings and homes. It was exciting to wander about and view belongings that had been hastily left behind. We did this unbeknownst to our officers.



True Friends

Friends will bale you out if you get in jail, but true friends are sitting there beside you saying, "Damn, that was fun!"

Doug Merrill and Jeff Jennings were true friends. While on one of these unauthorized explorations, the three of us discovered a small German family comprised of a mother,

two small children and a grandfather. They were among the very few that had chosen to stay in their home. I suspect they had no other place to go. Although we felt there was little danger, considerable risk was probably present. German soldiers would sometimes also be reconnoitering the village. The phrase, "Curiosity killed the cat", leaps to mind.

As we entered the home, the children were playing a familiar board game called Parcheesi; you roll dice and advance a token to win. The mother greeted us cautiously with some apprehension. She obviously did not wish to appear unfriendly, and had anxious reservations about what we might do. Her concerns for her safety and the safety of her family were obvious. We smiled and tried to indicate we intended no harm. It was refreshing to watch the innocent joy shared by the children as they played their Parcheesi game. In this childhood innocence, the fear and hardship of war was momentarily absent. It was infectious. After a while Doug Merrill used gestures to indicate that he wished to join the children in their game. The children were pleased to include all of us, and signaled us to join them. There was a language barrier, of course, but they overcame this with lively imaginative hand signals. Soon the mother joined us too, and before long three homesick American soldiers and this small family were sharing a happy time together in the middle of a battlefield. What a paradox. Here we were the conquering soldiers invading a foreign country, and we were down on our hands and knees playing a children's game in the middle of no man's land with an enemy family. As we played, we discovered that part of the fun from our game was from catching each other cheating. The mother playfully started cheating in an obvious fashion first. Soon, everyone began trying to cheat, and we all laughed with delight when a culprit was caught. We were silly, and we giggled and laughed. This was an outlandish happening under such hostile surroundings, but it was great fun. None of this met with the approval of the old grandfather, however. He distanced himself from this undignified behavior, and sat silently in the corner. We were the enemy, and we were in the middle of a war. For the rest of us, the war was momentarily forgotten and a sanity was briefly returned to our lives. For me, the meaning of such simple pleasures was enriched in ways that I cannot describe. We take so many of these moments for granted. We forget they are numbered and deserve to be savored.

Doug Merrill was a person who adjusted to life wherever he happened to be. His independent attitude kept him from relying upon the military to control his life style. This was particularly true with regard to his eating and entertainment pleasures. He was cheerful, venturesome and fun to be with; A good man to have as a "true" friend. Exploring no man's land was his idea.

Our rations were adequate but uninteresting. Food was an ever-present thought in our

minds. Although our company kitchen followed behind us and prepared hot meals when it was at all possible, such a treat was rare. It took time for the kitchen to set up, cook and then deliver the food to us from their distant location. After several days, we were still eating the usual rations that had become a bit boring. Now however, for the first time, we had the freedom and the idle time that allowed us to do something about menu choices. Doug had ideas about this. Although he lived with his squad in a different house from ours, our free time allowed us to socialize. The German resident in Doug's house had chosen to remain with his home and belongings. Doug was obsessed with the desire to have some good old American French-fried potatoes.



Precious French Fries

Perhaps it brought back memories of home. After considerable effort, he was able to locate the grease and a few potatoes. He cooked a plate full of these hard to come by French fries, which he shared with us. Also, he politely attempted to share some with the German resident. At first the German declined, but Doug, who sincerely wished to share, insisted. After several persistent offers, the German finally accepted Doug's offer, but instead of taking a small sample, he took the whole plate and quickly departed. Doug stood dumbfounded as all of his priceless French-fried potatoes disappeared around the corner in the hands of the enemy. As I look back, I now realize that the families that were trapped in the middle of a battlefield like this had no way to get food. The act was not so much one of bad manners as it was a desperate need to feed his family.

Several rabbits were once spotted near our gun emplacement. Rabbits are edible, and these rabbits seemed almost tame enough to catch. It was Doug's plan to use the stock of his .30 caliber carbine to club one of these into submission. There followed an entertaining few minutes in which a bundled up clumsy looking Doug Merrill chased an agile rabbit around and around in the snow and on the slippery ice. He held his rifle like a club by its barrel in readiness, but kept slipping and falling. After a few desperate lunges that missed their mark, and some spectacularly funny pratfalls, Doug was out of breath. The rabbit effortlessly evaded him. Doug never got within serious striking distance of the rabbit, and the idea of having rabbit for dinner began to seem less and less appealing. Doug's clumsy antics brought tears of laughter to a war weary gun crew. We had an entertaining example of slapstick comedy that bested most of those seen in

the movies. The rabbit hopped off to find a friendlier neighborhood, and Doug conceded defeat.

Jeff Jennings once thought he would add to our limited menu by "liberating" a chicken for us to cook. He discovered a chicken coop behind one of the houses that appeared to be forgotten and unprotected. It looked like it would be very easy to capture one of these for an evening meal. It didn't turn out to be that way. Chickens do not stand still to be stolen by strangers. Jeff discovered that when frightened, chickens can make enough noise to be a burglar alarm suitable to protect the nation's gold in Fort Knox. The noisy chickens brought the lady of the house out in time to catch Jennings red-handed. He sheepishly returned his catch to its rightful owner and we once again ate K-rations that night.



Children's Games In No Man's Land

During our stay in Pfaffenhofen we took turns weathering the cold and snow to man our machine-gun emplacement and keep our gun from becoming ice bound. After taking our turn manning the machine-gun, we could return to the warm comfort of our house and watch our Air Force and artillery do all of the fighting. The burden of the war was now on someone else. The Infantry rarely gets to participate in war as a "spectator sport". From time to time we went exploring in the deserted buildings of no man's land and played games with the children.

Reisdorf



The Unhappy Camper

Near Reisdorf, Germany in March of 1945 I was reaching the limit of my ability to withstand the physical and emotional demands required. A numb, wooden feeling of hopelessness was taking over my mind and body. I had already been wounded in December, and many of my friends had been lost. Now I was a Sergeant with two squads made up of mostly new replacements who were strangers to me. We were not allowed any free time that afforded relief from the stress of around-the-clock combat conditions. After long tension filled days exposed to the constant threat of death, sleeping on the ground in rain and snow offered little rest. Hot food and clean sheets were a distant memory and unlikely to be experienced any time soon. Living in filth for days on end gave an importance to bathing beyond imagination. Body odor in a combat infantry unit is seldom described as the kind of hardship it can become.

Infantrymen are expendable. They are like the chess pieces that are exposed and sacrificed in order to win in the game of chess. In the strategy of war, this has always been the role of the infantry. During World War II, the U.S. Army deployed 68 combat divisions to the European Theatre of Operations. Those infantry, armored, airborne and mountain divisions suffered 78% of all Army casualties sustained in the Theatre. The infantry, by far, absorbed the greatest percentage of casualties, 80% of the Army's men killed in action were infantrymen. While only 14% of the Army's total overseas strength, the infantry suffered 70% of all total casualties. (*Order of Battle, U.S. Army World War II* by Shelby L. Stanton, Navato, California: Presido Press 1984.)



Pawns On A Chess Board

Unless you have a death wish or are an avid collector of Purple Hearts, you may prefer duty in another branch of the military. The 103d Division was late in participating in the fighting compared to that of many other infantry units in this war. Still, with only a hundred and forty seven days of combat time, the 103d Division suffered sixty-six percent casualties. Men of the 3d Division, who participated in combat 233 days, joked that their unit had one division on line, one division in the hospital and one division in the cemetery. Statistically, this was very nearly the truth. Their casualty rate was 201.6%. After ten days in combat, infantrymen were awarded the Combat Infantrymen's Badge and given hazardous pay of an extra ten dollars a month. From the casualty data of World War II, this sum seems rather small. The Combat Infantryman's Badge, however, is one of the more coveted awards by career soldiers. It is proof of battle experience, and important to career advancement.

From October 1944 until March of 1945 the 103d Division had been mostly chasing a retreating German Army through northern France into Germany. From time to time the retreating Germans would stop and fight for a while before continuing their retreat. In March near Reisdorf, Germany, the enemy reached the prepared defenses of the Siegfried Line. This was their best position from which to defend their country, no more retreating.

After more than fifty years, my recollections may be somewhat exaggerated, but this is what I recall the men of the First Battalion of the 409th Infantry Regiment faced in March 1945. The high ground was controlled by the Germans. They occupied small forts made of reinforced concrete, which we called "pillboxes". These small forts were connected by zigzagging trenches dug to a depth of about five and a half or six feet. The pillboxes had small windows to allow automatic weapons to cover the ground over which we had to go. This resulted in a devastating cross fire for us to suffer as we climbed over obstacles up the sloping ground. The obstacles consisted of fallen trees, land mines and a barbed wire designed to entangle and slow down an attacker. The Germans could cover all of this open area we had to cross with grazing machine-gun fire and mortars as we attacked. We had to advance slowly over these obstacles a good distance in order to reach our objective, which was the trenches. It seemed to me that this attack, over such a well-prepared defensive position, offered certain death to any attacker. We could clearly see what lay ahead and think about what we were getting ready to experience. I was thankful that it was not my lot to be a part of the first wave. To me, it seemed that survival would be an improbable thing for this first group. They would attract the full force of all this firepower. It would be concentrated upon them at a time when they were most defenseless.

I became convinced that I would not survive this war, and the certainty of death became fixed in my mind as I looked at what lay ahead. As I mentioned earlier, coming to terms with the probability of death is an unpleasant experience. For me it was a gut wrenching affair. I did not want to die. Other worldly problems diminished into no importance as I tried to accept what now appeared to be the inevitable. Now that I am over eighty years old, I view death a bit differently. Some of us die too young and some of us die too old. The truth is, I think there is such a thing as the "right time to die". I can now accept the reality of this. If you fear death too much it is impossible to enjoy life. At age twenty-one though, I was not happy about the thought of dying. Descriptions of fear are very difficult to write. They must walk a narrow line close to the yellow shadow of cowardice. An admission of cowardice is unacceptable to both myself and the military. I kept remembering the view that I had come to accept early on, "You are not going to live forever anyway, and few people have a chance to die for a worthy cause. Most people live for a while and then they die without making much of a worthwhile contribution to anything." Even so, I was not a happy camper. My father used to say, "You don't overload the wagon and then beat the mule." This seemed to be my predicament. My wagon had been overloaded for some time. My choices were narrowed to a very few alternatives, none of which were appealing.

Most of the group I was with succeeded in reaching a part of one of the trenches. Our losses were not as great as those that went before us. Our troubles, however, had only just begun. We now found ourselves in trenches barely wide enough for two people to pass without turning sideways. As nearly as I could tell, a good many of our officers had been killed or wounded. Leadership and command had in some instances fallen to enlisted personnel. There were German prisoners mixed in among us with portions of the trenches still held by the Germans. The dead and dying of both the Americans and the Germans were forced to lie along the edge of the trenches. They were exposed to small arms and mortar fire. As you traversed the trench you were face to face with these casualties with their helplessness. They were in a state of fear and pain without likelihood of any immediate relief. Most often these men stoically accepted their fate. I found this to be the case with few exceptions. There was no relief that we could give them and they knew it. Up to this moment, we had been in an attack mode several days with little or no sleep. Although sleep was out of the question now, from time to time it overcame me while I was standing or leaning and the falling sensation woke me as my knees hit the ground. Even in the middle of a sentence, I could sometimes find myself falling asleep. I learned that my body would not let me stay awake if it needed to sleep badly enough, no matter how frightened I was.

We were forced to make the enemy prisoners stand outside of the trenches because we

would lose control of them as they mingled with us within the trenches. The German prisoners were desperate to get out of this unprotected area, of course. On one occasion an unarmed aid man with only his Red Cross arm band took a group of about sixteen German prisoners to the rear with him. They were eager to get to safety. Unfortunately there were instances where the wounded and dying were again wounded from being forced to lie exposed to fire in such an unprotected area outside the trench. It was chaos. This intermittent close combat fighting lasted about two days (*I lost track of time*) and it appeared to finally reach a stalemate. Neither side gained ground. After we occupied a good portion of the trenches, there were pauses and extended waiting periods. The active fighting was not continuous. Once, when the Germans threw hand grenades into our portion of the trench, we quickly picked them up and threw them back before the grenades could detonate. Lack of sleep, and this lengthy close combat took its toll. A numbed battle weary state of total exhaustion took over my body. It craved sleep.

At one point, in this tension-ridden climate, a rumor spread like wildfire that we were being subjected to a gas attack. Early on, we had discarded the cumbersome gas masks that we had been issued, and panic began to take hold. Platoon Sergeant Max Irwin, without regard to his personal safety, stood up and scotched this rumor, preventing what could have led to a disaster. On another occasion, I recall Tech Sergeant Irwin falling asleep and dropping to his knees while he was giving us instructions. He had slung his carbine over his shoulder with its muzzle down to keep the rain out. He was jarred awake as his knees hit the ground and his carbine muzzle was jammed into the mud.

I suffered my most ghastly and disgusting experience of World War II when a mortar round struck a nearby German prisoner and splattered me all over with fragments of his body. He was killed, and I was faced with scraping portions of his bloody flesh off my face and clothing as best I could. With no way to really get clean in the absence of any soap and water, I had to suffer the revolting experience of living with grisly pieces of human flesh stuck all over my clothing until I was finally wounded and taken back to the hospital in Dijon, France. If there is such a thing on earth that is worse than Hell, war must surely be it.



An Infantryman's Vacation

On March 22, 1945 we left the trenches and began moving to our left. After going down the hill we were on and getting almost to the top of another, we started getting our machine-gun in position to give fire support for our riflemen. Although all three of us held the same Staff Sergeant rank, there had only been replacements enough for two squads made up of the replacements and survivors. Jeff Jennings and I were now serving as squad leaders. Doug Merrill was serving as our section sergeant. As I sat down and turned back to watch Al Sodman get our gun ready, a mortar round exploded in back of me. Three of us, Doug Merrill, Al Sodman and I were wounded by this same mortar round. Shrapnel tore through three layers of clothing on the right side of my back and exited the left side. It felt like a giant hand had tugged me by my field jacket. My wounds were not great, however, compared to those received by Doug and Al. They suffered the greatest wounds by far. Along with many other shrapnel cuts, Doug's leg and Al's wrist and hand were badly hurt. We all started down the hill to the aid station, but neither Doug nor Al was able to walk. I went on and stretcher-bearers came up the hill to carry them back. I was taken to the rear in an ambulance. One of the occupants was a wounded German soldier who had been hit six times previously. A Chaplain at the aid station took a picture of me and a rifleman, Ed Schulman, as we were getting in the ambulance. I have framed this picture and hung this in my office.

The degree of happiness and unhappiness that life brings is measured from our moments of greatest misery. Whatever troubles I have suffered since World War II have paled in comparison to this period of my life. However modest my material wealth and successes have been over the years, there is a deeper appreciation for the blessings I now have when I compare it to this point of my life.

I never saw Doug Merrill until May when he and I rejoined Company "D" in Innsbruck, Austria. I saw Al Sodman on a stretcher in a train depot in Strasbourg where we were both waiting to be transported to different hospitals. I was able to walk over and briefly visit. I discovered that Al had lost a finger and among other things the stem of his wristwatch was now imbedded in his wrist. Our conversation revolved around things the lost finger would now keep him from doing and the fact that the wristwatch had been borrowed from a friend. Al felt he was responsible for having damaged it. He was

guilt ridden about this. For my part, I felt getting hit with a mortar round was an acceptable excuse for damaging a borrowed watch. (*Years later at our annual Company "D" reunions, neither of the three of us remembered the exact details of this incident the same way.*)

The exact nature of my own wounds has always been somewhat of an embarrassment to me. When I am asked, "Where were you wounded?" I give the deliberately evasive answer, "In Germany." To be factual and appropriately responsive to the question, however, I should admit to having been shot in my backside. Although small shrapnel fragments still remain in my back and neck, the surgery required was on my left buttocks. Even though I was in a sitting position when the mortar round exploded, a large fragment requiring surgery was embedded there. The Chief Justice of Florida's Supreme Court, Jimmy Adkins, was a friend of mine. We both grew up in Gainesville, Florida. When I attended his retirement party, Chief Justice Adkins chose to introduce me as, "The only person I know in World War II who was shot where he sits down when he was sitting down."

The First Battalion casualties suffered on March 22nd were 8 officers lost, 99 enlisted men wounded and 16 killed in action. I am surprised the casualties were not much greater.



A Bond Was Formed

This war was a time when all of us in Company "D" were being tested. We made discoveries about ourselves and each other. A bond was formed among us that was fired in the furnace of this test. There was a kinship born that lasts, even now, for all of us.

A Good Place To End The War

A Ski Resort



Innsbruck Austria

While I was hospitalized in Dijon, France, the war was quickly reaching its end. German resistance was crumbling, and my 409th Infantry Regiment moved rapidly into Germany through Worms and Hanau, as far north as Fulda before turning south and ending up in Innsbruck, Austria on May 2, 1945. This is where I rejoined Company "D" after my hospital stay. It was a few days before the war ended in Germany.

My friend, Jeff Jennings, had an interesting incident during this last rapid push to Innsbruck. Sniper fire had caused him to take cover in a shallow ditch. He was lying with his head peeking out trying to spot the sniper and the sniper fired first. The sniper's bullet traveled the length of Jennings's body. It started with cracking the wristwatch crystal on his left wrist, went down his left sleeve, passed through his shirt, went through his left rear pants pocket and didn't wound him at all, not a scratch.



The Sniper And The Handkerchief

The watch still worked, however, when he took out his handkerchief from his left rear pants pocket, the handkerchief was riddled with holes. The sniper escaped and Jeff had a handkerchief with a war story.

It was my Battalion that moved into Innsbruck and occupied it. At this point, although the war was not over, there was no one left for us to fight. Our job now became one of occupation. After the war ended, we assumed patrol and police duties. When our guard detail took over the Innsbruck police barracks, to live there and serve as policemen, they were surprised to discover there were women living in the barracks with the policemen. These women now seemed happy to share their same arrangement with the American soldiers. Those of us assigned to patrol duties in the rural countryside felt a bit slighted.

The Austrian people were friendly and this duty was almost like an extended vacation. It was rather strange. We were technically at war, but most of them seemed very unhappy with the Germans. Company "D" was dispersed from Innsbruck, and was located in private homes in nearby Hall, Austria. The home in which my squad lived was shared by a mother and a daughter, who was approximately eight years old. Before long, there was a friendly relationship in spite of our role as conquerors. We shared some of our food and on occasion the mother would even fix a salad or some extra little treat for us. Ironically, it was this young Austrian daughter who, on May 7th, was the first to tell me that the war was over. As I was returning to the house, she came dashing out shouting excitedly, "The war is over!" in German. Her unusual enthusiasm made it easy to interpret what she was saying. Although this had been expected for some time, this official announcement lifted a long-standing cloud and gave my life a-new and happier outlook. I never thought it would be a German, with feelings of joy so similar to my own, who would be the one to announce and share this wonderful news.

Contrary to our orders, we fraternized with the local residents. I even remember a couple of us going to a private party one evening. This, of course, was not something we were supposed to do at all. Not only were we forbidden to fraternize with the citizenry, but there was a curfew prohibiting travel at night for everyone. We risk getting shot by our own guards when we ventured out like this after nightfall.

Private First Class John Baumgartner was one of the few men in Company "D" that could speak fluent German. This was a tremendous advantage when it came to getting acquainted with a civilian population that was virtually all female with only a few old men. I remember an occasion where John's fluent flirtatious German dialogue was able to get him an invitation into the home of an attractive young lady. She lived in a farmhouse some distance from town. After John's verbal advances, she beckoned him to leave our jeep and indicated she wanted his help in the house. The rest of us watched with some envy as John followed this very attractive young lady into her home. After sorting out some minor communication problems, the young lady stood on a chair with a full bucket

of water and a mop. She pressed the handle of the mop against the bucket of water holding it against the ceiling. She signaled John to hold the handle of the mop, thus keeping the bucket of water pressed against the ceiling. Although a bit puzzled, John of course jumped at the chance to be helpful. He stood there below the bucket of water holding the mop handle to keep it in place. With this, the young lady stepped off her chair, removed it some distance and laughed at John who was now trapped. If he removed the mop handle he was holding, the bucket of water would spill all over him. Without the chair, he had no way to reach the bucket of water to prevent its spilling. He was helplessly trapped. The young lady now joined us in a good laugh at John's expense.

A nearby ski resort was taken over and we were given passes to spend time there. Beer and snacks along with skis were provided. As a lifetime Florida resident, where snow is a novelty, this was my first experience with skis and snow.



Skis Are Dangerous

I was under the misconception that skiing was a rather simple thing that any child could easily do. I viewed coasting down a snowy hill as childlike fun and saw no reason to bother with the "beginners" slope to learn how to do such a simple thing. Beer, skis and the male ego is a dangerous combination. They cloud your judgment in such matters and invite unsuspected risks.

I was able to attach the skis to my boots, I managed to get to the starting place and I began my "coasting" down hill. Then it became apparent that this was not as simple as I had thought. Here I was, looking at a steep ski run that seemed to stretch for endless miles almost straight down. I did not know how to turn to the left or right or stop, and I was already going over fifty miles an hour with miles of the steep mountain slope left to cover. I was gaining speed by the second. I now understood why I had been encouraged to try the "beginners" slope first, but it was too late now. I had a desperate, helpless feeling. I felt as though I was on a runaway freight train gaining speed by the second that was headed toward certain disaster.

My choice for getting out of this predicament was either a "voluntary" fall while traveling at a rate of speed fast enough to threaten life and limb, or an "involuntary" fall later, at a speed that would surely mean death or permanent disability. There was little doubt that I would be better off to end this foolishness as slow as possible. Immediate action was called for. I started my "voluntary" fall, and it seemed to me that I rolled and tumbled forever. I plowed up enough snow to build my own ski slope. When I finally stopped rolling, and determined I was bruised but unhurt, I recovered my skis, hiked back up the mountain. I spent the remainder of the afternoon drinking beer and reflecting on the advantages of the absence of snow in Florida. I discovered that I was much better at drinking beer than I was at skiing. I believe a fellow should stick to what he is good at.

Now, when people who ski tell their usual anecdotes, I am able to join in and preface my own comment with, "The last time I was skiing at Innsbruck in Austria" I never explain that this was the first, last and only time I was ever on skis and have no intention of ever going near a pair of the darn things again. They are dangerous.

From Innsbruck, a good many of us were reassigned to the Fifth Infantry Division and returned home. We were to be used in the invasion Japan. While awaiting assignment, the atomic bomb was dropped.



Should we have used the atomic bomb ?

There are some who now criticize President Truman for his decision to use such a devastating weapon. It's massive destruction extended well beyond normal military targets. This 'after the fact' idealism may now seem a judicious thing, but when you are up to your neck in alligators it is not the time to drain the swamp. Each passing day of war brought more loss of life. President Truman's decision was a necessary course of action. I believe this decision shortened the war and saved both American and Japanese lives. Idealism like this seems to increase in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem.

The use of the atomic bomb and other weapons capable of such massive destruction has signaled the beginning of a new era in warfare. Technology has multiplied the

consequences of violence. A few people can now destroy an entire civilization. The world now has more and better destructive devices than we have the wisdom to manage. Not only is this a frightening fact, but the magnitude of this problem is growing with each passing day. It will never be less of a threat than it is at the moment. It is a burgeoning uncertainty that looms over our future. "Security" has taken on a new meaning and requires new measures. When you mix violence with zealots and such powerful weapons, survival of the world as we now know it is at risk. This combination is like striking matches in a dynamite factory, and we seem Hell bent on doing it. More destructive implements of war will continue to be developed and perfected as long as violence decides who the winners are. History supports this. It is a dismaying thought that the actual decisions of when and how to protect the world is in the hands of political leaders. Watching politicians respond to public need is much like watching the baby play with a loaded pistol.



Is there intelligent life on this planet ?

We have met the enemy and he is us. It appears virtually impossible to ever over estimate the ability of mankind to be foolish. The appeal of selfish goals has such a driving force that their final consequences are overlooked. Like the monkey who reaches into the cookie jar, he has trapped himself. Until he releases his greedy hold on the cookies, he cannot get his hand out of the jar. Mankind appears to be trapped like this by his own cupidity.

Perhaps the last best hope for the future is "enlightened" self interest, and this does not appear to be a goal that has a popular following among the religious and political extremists who have hijacked worthy causes and perverted them to such horrific ends.

The Volunteer ?



How can you accidentally jump out of an airplane ?

My service record and combat experience prompted my being given a reserve commission as a Second Lieutenant in 1948 while I was in college. Each summer I was required to do a tour of active duty, however. As usual, I gave this matter little thought until the last minute, and in the course of running some personal errands one day, I stopped by the U.S. Army Reserve office to hastily select a summer duty that would not conflict with my other summer plans. The duty whose dates were most convenient for me was a course at Fort Benning, Georgia on airborne transportation. I chose this only because of the dates it was offered. By its description, which I only hastily scanned, I envisioned this as classroom instruction on military logistical matters using things like gliders. I had been trained as a gliderman in 1943. It sounded like an easy way to spend the summer, which I assumed would be spent in an air conditioned class room. This turned out to be a miscalculation of gigantic proportions.

As my taxi drove me to the location where my orders instructed me to report, I found Fort Benning to be an interesting place. Fortunately, my taxi driver was familiar with the post and so I gave him a copy of my orders to allow him to take me to the correct place to report for duty. As we passed by two very tall towers, men in parachutes were jumping from their very top. It was a spectacular sight. I asked the taxi driver if he would mind stopping, and together we watched these men parachute from these towers for a while. I later learned they were two hundred and fifty feet high. I was in awe, and marveled at the courage such a jump must take. As I talked, the taxi driver began to look at me rather strangely and finally said, "Aren't you aware that in two weeks you will be doing that yourself? Didn't you know this? Didn't you know that you volunteered to be a paratrooper? Didn't you read your own orders?"

This was my first realization that I had unwittingly volunteered to be a paratrooper. It became my "Summer from Hell". The terror I felt at the thought of jumping out into space from an airplane with just a small bundle strapped on me, however, was dwarfed by the torture of the physical training that preceded the parachute jumps. We

suffered through an almost constant exercise program under Georgia's hot summer sun. At the end of each day I collapsed on my bunk in a weakened state of total exhaustion with only enough energy to eat, shower and go to bed. Sitting around a college campus reading books and drinking beer does not put you in very good physical condition for the kind of training paratroopers are subjected. Before being allowed to jump, we were required to run a certain distance in a specified length of time, perform so many pushups and chin ourselves so many times (*I forget the exact numbers involved here*). After weeks of physical torture getting into shape to take these tests, only about two thirds of the class passed and were allowed to jump. (*Several times the thought crossed my mind that failure in this physical test would not be all bad.*)

Gainesville, Florida had a number of World War II veterans who distinguished themselves in the war and were highly decorated. I was surprised to learn that my paratrooper training Company Commander was Captain Tom Pollard, who was one of these veterans from Gainesville, Florida that had been recognized as a local hero. In high school, Captain Pollard was a year or two ahead of me but I knew him then. We shared a mutual friend, Ed Brown, whom I knew from the first grade. Ed Brown had been stationed with me at Fort Bliss, Texas in 1944. Both of these friends followed my struggles to become a paratrooper with interest, and arranged to be present at my first jump. With an audience like this, it is very difficult to find a graceful way to give up this foolish idea and go home, but I did give it some thought.

My fears about jumping were compounded when I discovered I had to pack my own parachute. Think about this for a minute. How would you feel about it? Is this the time you really want to trust a beginner?



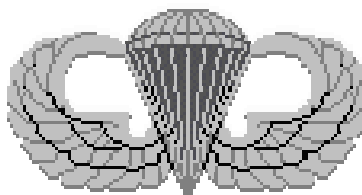
Should amateurs pack your parachute ?

If ever there was a job that, in my opinion, needed to be done by a "proven professional", the packing of my parachute was it. This is no time to use an amateur. You don't get a second chance if these things don't work, you know. I suspect the military viewed the practice of packing your own 'chute as being a "reassuring" thing for the first time jumper. It wasn't reassuring to me at all. I am not handy at doing little jobs like this. After more than fifty years of marriage, my wife prefers I call an

electrician rather than have me replace a light bulb. She is convinced that I will somehow do it wrong and the house will burn down. Her fears, unfortunately, are founded on some fact. She has spent her married life watching me try to put the children's toys together unsuccessfully (*I always end up with extra parts*), ruining vacuum cleaners and causing lawnmowers to mysteriously fall apart. My track record for "do it yourself" projects is very poor. I was not the kind of person I would choose to pack my parachute. I have the mechanical aptitude of a retarded two-year-old child. In spite of my protestations, though, I had to pack my own parachute. I believe I would have continued the whole day and all night packing and re-packing that one parachute if I had been allowed to stay longer in the hanger. I have never been so highly motivated to do a job correctly in my life. The instructional staff finally made me stop so they could go home.

It defies common sense to step out of an airplane flying over a hundred miles an hour a thousand feet high. Your mind can conjure up a million things that could go wrong. It only takes one mistake. It's not the kind of thing you can just do over and write failure off as a "learning experience". My first jump almost frightened me to death. When the Jump-master said, "Stand up, hook up, check your equipment, shuffle and stand in the door", I tumbled from the airplane door with my mind paralyzed by fear. The practice of hooking the parachute ripcord to the plane beforehand probably saved me. Otherwise I may not have had the presence of mind to pull my ripcord. I discovered after the first jump, however, that parachuting is not such a bad thing after all. Suspended high above the earth and out of the summer heat at ground level, there is a peacefulness and serenity that is pleasant. The sensation of falling is not very noticeable until you are close to the ground. There is an illusion of hanging in space. There is an emotional rush that is strangely pleasing. I came to look forward to jumping before the summer was over.

The human mind is a strange thing in its ability to adapt to such an irrational act. The fact remains, though, had I known what I was doing, I would never have become a paratrooper! Not in a million years!

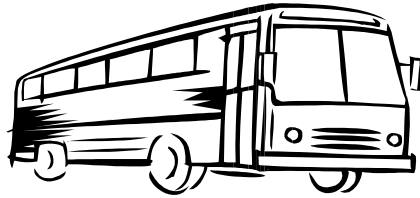


Not in a million years !

Selestat Revisited

Forty-One Years Later

September 1985



Why are we doing this ?

After forty-one years, in 1985, some of the men of Company "D" returned to Selestat and to the other places they had fought in France, Germany and Austria. Allan Kraft, who was with us in Company "D" during the war, was owner of Kraft Travel Agency in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and arranged the trip. It covered our battles from St. Die, France to Innsbruck, Austria. For those who were able to participate, this tour was an experience beyond anyone's wildest expectations. Including wives and friends, there were thirty-five of us who shared wartime memories at their place of happening.

We briefly stopped over in London and Paris, and then for about two weeks our group traveled France, Germany and Austria in our private chartered bus as we visited the areas in which we fought.

Among many places we spent some time are the following:

France -	Nancy, Taintrux Valley, St. Die, Steige, Selestat, Strasbourg,
Germany -	Mannheim, New Ulm, Heidelberg, Garmish-Partkenkirchen, Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Dachau, Weisbaden, Cologne
Austria -	Innsbruck, Ingles
Netherlands -	Amsterdam

My wife, Jan, was unable to make the trip. I was pleased that one of my four children, my twenty-nine year old son Jim, accompanied me and was able to share in the renewal of old friendships and the stories from my past. Jim was quickly accepted by everyone on the trip and made to feel welcome. One group of my buddies insisted he go with them on a tour of Amsterdam one night while I spent a sober evening playing cards.

Also, some new found German friends that he met in a bar in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, West Germany took him on a two day tour of Austria while I was in Innsbruck. I am sure he has memories of this time in our lives that will last a lifetime, with some extending beyond what was scheduled on the tour.

In September of 1985 we were surprised to learn that St. Die had a World War II museum in which our 103d Infantry Division was featured. We received a special tour from the Museum Director and gave him one of our Company "D" hats, prepared especially for our trip, to add to the museum artifacts. St. Die was our first taste of actual combat, but my memory of St. Die is one of sleeping in a hayloft before we did any fighting. When we were following a retreating German Army through the rural area of northern France, we often used barns and haylofts as warm dry places to sleep at night.

At that time, I had thought it a handy thing to attach a hand grenade to the lapel of my field jacket. Thus, a hand grenade was easily available at all times. The theory was good, but invariably the grenade pulled lose from my jacket during the night, and I found myself frantically searching through the hay each morning looking for a hand grenade and worrying whether or not the pin could have been accidentally pulled, activating it. Searching for a live hand grenade each morning will wake you up faster than a strong cup of coffee.



Quick Wake Up

As you might expect, I soon gave up keeping hand grenades handy while I slept. At St. Die, while I was doing my "grenade search", I watched Les Klie lose his balance and fall out of the loft directly on top of our Lieutenant, who was standing below getting the day underway. Early in our basic training we were taught that officers were one step removed from God and even thinking of striking an officer was something Privates never do, under penalty of death. Falling on top of an officer seemed almost as bad as hitting one to me. I could see Private Klie put on Kitchen Police duty for the rest of his life. After Klie's effusive apologies, though, both Klie and the Lieutenant brushed off the hay and went about the business of fighting a war. I later learned that combat changes the army's thinking. There is a world of difference between combat duty and garrison duty. The focus changes from "spit and polish and ceremony" to the no nonsense of "kill or be killed" and forget the rules.

The deserted pill boxes near Reisdorf stood forgotten in a rural area. It seemed inconceivable that they could have ever been so worthy a thing that men would die to possess them. At Steige, where we had spent our 1944 Thanksgiving hiking through the enemy's defenses the house we were in had been remodeled. The Catholic Church, however, remained unchanged making it a landmark identifying one of my more memorable experiences.

Although there was varying amounts of interest in the towns and the places we visited, like St. Die and Steige and Reisdorf, there was an intense interest in visiting Selestat and the house where so many of Company "D" had been captured, killed or wounded. Elvin Beemer from Bedford, Iowa was able to help us find this house where so much happened. Staff Sergeant Beemer was a forward observer for our "D" Company 81mm mortar platoon that night in Selestat, and many of the machine-gun platoon members had no idea he was in the house with them until after the war. At Company "D" reunions after the war, we learned that a mortar barrage that fell on the captured men in Selestat immediately after they were taken prisoner was actually the work of Staff Sergeant Beemer. He had called it in before he was captured, and intended it for the Germans who at that time were gathered at the spot where the American prisoners were later taken. When things go wrong, they really go wrong. With Staff Sergeant Beemer's knowledge of the maps of Selestat that he had used during the war, and asking a few passing citizens, we finally found our house. The difficulty came from the nearby bridge having been rebuilt differently. The bridge was the landmark we all had been using. Beemer had recalled other landmarks that he had used in directing mortar fire that night.

After the war, the widow of Platoon Sergeant Zack Sigler married an old friend of Zack's, Charles Wall. Both Mary and Charles were present with us on this trip and saw where Zack was killed. They listened to the men who were with him when he died as they recalled the details surrounding his death. We spent an afternoon looking for Zack's gravesite, but unfortunately incomplete records kept us from locating it.



*Platoon Tech-Sergeant Zack Sigler,
like many others, was buried in France.*

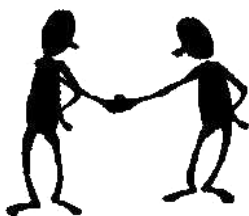
When our large tour bus pulled up in front of the house that played such a role in all our lives, we did not know exactly what to expect. The front of the house had been remodeled, but there were still shell marks from December 1944 in evidence over most of the rear and outside walls. Questions flooded our minds. How would the residents of this attractive looking home regard us? How would we be received? Would there be hostility? Would we be turned away after coming such a great distance? For most of us, why we had even returned was still unanswered in our minds.

With the help of our bus driver, Wilbert van Stuivenberg from Amsterdam, who acted as our interpreter, we identified ourselves as the American soldiers who occupied this house in 1944 when Selestat was captured by the Americans. With this, we got the surprise of our lives. The present owner and occupant of this house at 78 Rue d' Ebersheim, Selestat 67600, France was Marius Jehl. He announced that he was living in this home on that fateful day of December 2, 1944. His brother had been killed during this time and he obviously shared emotional feelings as intense as our own. He was well acquainted with the events that took place when we were there. His reaction was one of spontaneous warm cordiality. He welcomed us all into his home and recounted his version of the events that night. He was just a young boy at the time. It seems he was hiding from both the Germans and the Americans. The Germans sought to make him a German soldier; the Americans of course, were attacking the town. We spent most of the afternoon with each person sharing their personal recollections of the events each had experienced.

It was somewhat eerie, as the men who had been wounded and captured here in 1944, each recounted his experience in the presence of family members and friends. Such stories, standing where it all took place, gave an added meaning that is hard to describe.

Jim Price told the details of how he lost his leg here and Doug Merrill had carried him to safety. Zack Sigler's widow found closure in learning the details of Zack's death. We were all here sharing this time forty-one years ago when Company "D" had one of its worst nights during World War II. We recaptured the events of 1944 and the emotions of that time. Feelings ran high for all of us. We were allowed free access to almost every area of the house and encouraged to go where we wished. Everyone asked many questions of each other and walked through the house examining where their husbands and friends had been wounded or killed. The homeowner's interest and enthusiasm added to our own. As various ones of us told of the events of that day and pointed out where and how each person died or was wounded, there was an intense tearful emotion that gripped us all. This also included our French host, Marius Jehl, and his family. Time had brought forty-one years of change in the lives of the men who fought here

with Company "D", but the memories of Selestat remained vivid. For some, this place had been a turning point in their lives. Al Sodman and I walked a short distance to the house we were in that night. We took pictures of ourselves in front of the house and recalled incidents, which we had shared in nervous expectation of what the next day would bring. The large round that had passed through the room leaving holes in the walls was a reminder of how capricious and unpredictable life can be. Our host concluded this afternoon of memories by presenting all of the women in our group with a small bouquet of flowers from his garden. He then solemnly approached each man and gravely shook each hand as though bringing closure to the shared memories of the past.



Friend And Former Foe

Here we stood, friend and former foe, survivors in a war that had been costly to all of us. War has no real winners. Everyone loses something no matter who prevails. We had each once believed we had a cause worth dying for. Life is not complete unless you believe in something more important than yourself, but stopping a war is a more worthy cause than starting one.

These are the people of Company "D" who were on the 1985 tour:

Ben Keil & (wife) Lee	-	Denver, Colorado
Allan Kraft & (wife) Donna	-	Tulsa, Oklahoma
Robert George & (wife) Jean	-	Attica, New York
Donald Montgomery & (wife) Clarice	-	Waukegan, Illinois
Albert Sodman & (wife) Jenniev	-	Antioch, Illinois
Doug Merrill & (wife) Bizz	-	Battle Creek, Michigan
James Price & (wife) Louise	-	Concord, North Carolina
James Kallod & (wife) LaVerne	-	Fargo, North Dakota
Gordon Harding & (wife) Sarah	-	Attica, New York
Donald Bailey & (wife) Lillian	-	Godfrey, Illinois
Elvin Beemer & (wife) Margaret	-	Bedford, Iowa
Mary (Sigler) Wall & (husband) Charles	-	Spring Hill, Florida
Louis Miles & (wife) Betty	-	Wyoming, Michigan
Jack Durrance & (son) Jim	-	Gainesville, Florida

