

MY OWN WAR BATTLES:

Morbid Yarns
of a Timid Warrior

by
Ray Klund

100TH DIV



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HIGGINS, HOWARD HUNTER, OTIS WOOD, WILLIAM SCHROEDER (DIED HERE) ED KLUMP

WALTER COMITA. CAN NOT RECALL NAMES OF THE OTHERS

13. Sickness or injuries WILLIAM SCHROEDER DIED OF MENINGITIS AND FIVE OTHER WERE
TAKEN TO A HOSPITAL, GUARD SAID THEY ALL DIED

14. Events or happenings in this camp WE WORKED 6 DAYS A WEEK LAYING R.R TRACKS ON THE
strafing, deaths, Red Cross packages, food, work, escapes
GROUNDS OF A BRIQUETTE FACTORY. RECEIVED 1/4 RED CROSS PARCEL

15. **THIRD CAMP**
date arrived number town or city

16. Describe trip to 3rd camp
date left date arrived transport food

17. Barracks number Others with you from your unit

18. Sickness or injuries

19. Events or happenings in this camp
strafing, deaths, Red Cross packages, food, work, escapes

LIBERATION AND RETURN TO THE STATES

20. Liberation APR 13, 45 ARMORED STOPPED AT A FARM HOUSE SEE PAGE 29-30
date by whom what exactly happened
OF MY STORY

When and how did you leave the camp

21. Were you hospitalized NO
dates and places

22. Trip Home APR 27, 1945 MARINE ROBIN NY MAY 13, 1945
date left Europe ship's name or plane arrived US - date and place

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Entering Service, Basic Training and Advanced Basic Training

Jan, '44-Apr, '44

Jefferson Barracks, MO, Fort Benning, GA, and Fort Bragg, NC

Graduation day from high school was Thursday, January 27, 1944. This was also the date I was to report for physical examination for the draft at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. At the urging of my mother, sister, teachers and partner in graduation exercise, I called the draft board. They gave me a reprieve until Monday. I never made any plans for after graduation as I knew the service awaited me. The thought of not passing the physical and not getting into service never entered my mind. I really did not want to go, but I did not want to be called a 4F or a draft dodger, either. I was accepted, all 108 pounds of me; if you were breathing, you were in at this time of the war. After being accepted, I was given the choice of immediate swearing in, or take a twenty-one day leave. All my friends were in school. I did not have a job and had little money, so I elected to be sworn in on that day, Monday, January 31, 1944.

While in high school, the services gave a series of tests for seniors. If passed, after graduation the candidate would enter into the Army Specialized Training Program. The service needed engineers, doctors and dentists. This program was to fulfill that need. After twenty-one weeks of basic training, the candidate would proceed through four years of college training. I passed this test and headed for this program.

After a very long week of KP at Jefferson Barracks, I found myself on a train to Fort Benning, Georgia. When I arrived at Fort Benning, it was the first time I was out of the state of Missouri and the first time away from home overnight. I awoke the first morning, not sure where I was, to the sounds of the barracks's sergeant, screaming as only a sergeant can, "Get up, hit the floor!" It was still dark and I was unsure where I was or what I was doing there. Homesickness struck me hard. Thoughts of returning home and getting out of the army swept my mind. However, desertion was severely punished in this time of the war. I also realized I had little money for return fare to St. Louis. I did not want to desert. I really wanted to do my part in this war. But first I had to fight this homesickness, so I pushed myself to get busy and get it out of my mind. I immediately made my bed and cleaned up around my bed, then ran to the showers and shaved. My homesickness passed and I never felt homesick again. Here at Benning, I cleaned barracks and grease from rifles while waiting for the remainder of the trainees to arrive.

We started with marching, close order drill, and physical exercise. We also received shots and more shots. The third week rifles were issued and we started with the manual of arms. During this third week of training the program was canceled. The government decided the war would be over before our training could be completed. We stopped training and prepared for the closing of the barracks and awaited reassignment. Gen. Leslie McNair nullified the ASTP program. Ike told the Joint Chiefs of Staff he could not invade the European continent successfully unless he had at least fifteen more infantry divisions. McNair was in charge of manpower procurement. The draft was not producing enough men, so he turned to the ASTP and the Air Force washouts. Henry Kissinger was an ASTP student when the program closed. He was sent to the 84th Division as a private in the infantry.

All the ASTP trainees were shipped to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There we were dispersed throughout the 100th Infantry Division. About half the divisions well-trained men were transferred to replacement depots to fulfill the immediate need for trained men for the front. We were to replace these men. Someone forgot, we were untrained raw

recruits. A few days later, we were joined by other ASTP men who had been in college, some only months from graduation. Also joining us were men who washed out in the air corps as pilots, bombardiers, and others. Most of the ASTP trainees and the air force personnel already had basic training. Others like myself were virtually untrained raw recruits, with only three weeks of mostly close order drill as our only training.

The veterans of this division objected to the newcomers and we were to receive all kinds of verbal abuse because of our lack of training. A four week "Refresher Basic Training" was begun for us. Everything other soldiers learned in twenty-one weeks of training, we were to learn in four. A lot was missed or shortened to a one-hour lecture instead of weeks of practice. Some of us had never fired a gun before. We had a target practice for one day with six rounds of ammunition and then given the order to "qualify." Those that did not meet the army's requirement to qualify qualified by adjusting their score sheet. Experts were the top, then sharpshooters and marksmen just getting by. I made sharpshooter without help.

At the end of our Refresher Basic Training, I was given my first stripe and four dollars more per month in pay. Fifty-four dollars for a PFC, but when they took out life insurance, laundry, war bonds, and dependent's pay, I was left with about twenty dollars a month.

On the company bulletin board was a notice for volunteers for the machine gun and mortar squads. I certainly did not want to be a machine gunner. Those are the first ones the enemy wants to knock out. The mortar I heard a little about, but not much. I thought, why should I submit myself to carrying that heavy weapon? However, my buddy pointed out the mortar crew stays two hundred yards behind the riflemen. That sounded good to me. I broke the golden rule and volunteered for the mortar crew.

The mortar crew is made up of a sergeant, a gunner, a second gunner, and two ammunition bearers. The mortar is basically a tube with bipod legs and a base plate. Ours was called the 60mm, as the tube was 60mm in diameter and about three feet long. The gun was disassembled into four basic parts. The sergeant carried the sights, the gunner carried the tube, and the second gunner carried the bipod. I, as ammunition bearer, carried the base plate and ammunition. The last man carried just ammunition.

Advance Training

May, '44-Aug, '44
Fort Bragg, NC

After our "Refresher Basic Training," I still knew little of being a soldier or how to survive in battle. Our advance training began. It was more to test the proficiency of the officers and non-commissioned officers.

I started my relationship with the mortar section as a runner. The runner's job was to transmit orders between the section sergeant and the three squad sergeants. The intended plan in battle was for the section sergeant to go with the lead riflemen. When mortar fire was needed, order to fire was given to the section sergeant. He in turn would order the runner to bring up the mortar squads to a suitable firing location.

My first day in this job and first assignment happened when we were being tested by the Corps proficiency experts. We had a company exercise to take a hill defended by a make-believe enemy. We were using live ammunition. The riflemen requested protective mortar fire as they advanced. I was told to bring up the mortar crews. When I found the

mortar squads, farther back than they were supposed to be, they were unprepared to advance. They were resting with their packs and ammunition bags off. One of the squad sergeants had his shoes off. I was frantic, being new at this and only a PFC, trying to give orders to the three sergeants to get their butts moving. In no way were they going to hurry for me. When we did arrive, it was too late. If we fired our mortars now, the riflemen would be in danger. The captain was furious. We failed the test. My buddies called me "Flash" after this for being so slow in bringing up the mortar squads.

When we returned to the barracks, the three sergeants put the blame on me. However, an investigation was held at battalion headquarters. Two of the squad sergeants were demoted to private. I was reassigned to an ammunition bearer. I was a runner just a week. The two former sergeants were drinking buddies with the section sergeant. Now these two could no longer get into the NCO club for their drinking. The section sergeant was now furious at me and assigned every dirty detail he could to me.

Our division had many more tactical exercises in the months ahead. One battalion was hurled against another in simulated battle. Sometimes we were the invaders, other times we defended. I did a lot of hiking and moving about, but I learned nothing of the mortar. No one seemed to know what they were doing. I knew we were in for trouble.

When the combat tests were over, we thought we would get some rest. However, the Corps experts now checked our individual files. They found many required individual achievements needed for overseas assignment were not complete. I had many activities and tests to complete. Mortar and carbine firing, which were my basic weapons, I had yet to fire. Bazooka firing, grenade throwing, bayonet and obstacle course were just a few of the blocks on my chart to be filled in.

A new flurry of activity was enacted to complete these requirements. We were taken to the field and demonstrated how to fire the mortar. Then I was allowed to fire one shell into an open field with no target in mind. I was rated sharpshooter for this one shot on the chart. The same test was given for the bazooka and hand grenade throwing. The obstacle course and village fighting course I passed while doing KP. The bayonet course, I passed while on guard duty. Ship embarking I passed while on some other detail the section sergeant put me on.

The infiltration course everyone feared. Here we were to crawl across a field with barbed wire strung across and a machine gun fired live ammunition overhead. At first I was very frightened, but after turning on my back to go under the first barbed wire, I could see the shells were hitting high over our heads. Unless I stood up, there was no way for me to get hit, so I hurried through without further worry.

A twenty-five mile march was another requirement. This hike was sprung on us one evening, when we returned from the field, practicing setting up the mortar. We had chow and then started on our hike with full field packs. During the night we had a lunch break. Some of the men found a field of watermelons and helped themselves to a few. The farmer complained to the post commander. We were all fined a dollar. Over five thousand dollars was collected for the farmer for a few watermelons.

Prepare for Overseas and Move to New York

Sep, '44-Oct 3, '44

We completed our training and the Corps approved the 100th Division for overseas assignment. A round of inspections, lectures and shots was scheduled. Every piece of

clothing and equipment underwent minute inspection. It had to be in A-1 condition — no sign of wear or it was replaced. I thought the overall quality of the new equipment was inferior to what we had to turn in for replacement. My carbine, which I found shot straight and did me good on the firing range, but the new one was untried and untested. The new carbine's bolt worked hard and the wood stock looked like it was made of fir wood. The old one had a beautiful wood grain stock and the bolt action was smooth.

Rumors ran rampant and I believed only the ones I wished to believe. One was we were going to police the French villages that had been liberated. Another rumor had us going to Norway and another to the south seas. But we really did not know where we were headed. The army really planned for us to land in England, but that was changed just before we embarked.

We got lectures on how to conduct ourselves to the natives of a foreign country. Lectures on identification of enemy and our own airplanes. Lectures on eating and drinking water in a foreign country. We were told not to reveal our troop movements to anyone, even family. All our 100th Division patches had to be removed from all our clothing. We received shots for everything from tetanus to distemper.

When it came time to leave Fort Bragg, we fell out at 4:00 a.m. and turned in our bedding to the supply sergeant. All our belongings packed in our duffel bags we lined up outside the barracks with our field packs, gas masks, rifles, and duffel bags. Then we cleaned the barracks and cleaned them again. We had breakfast, then cleaned the barracks again. Then we waited. We waited until 7:00 p.m. before we marched off to the troop train, loading into special troop cars that looked as if they had not been used since World War One. Curtains had to be drawn at all times while traveling to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

At Camp Kilmer we received a quick physical examination. No one failed the physical. We had another equipment and clothing inspection. Some more lectures. Then we got a twelve-hour pass for New York City.

Buses took us into town. Some buddies and I visited Times Square and the Empire State Building. We wanted to go to the Statue of Liberty, but never got there. Too young to go to bars, we wandered the streets until time to return to the base.

Shipboard

Oct 4-20, '44

We boarded a train at 4:00 a.m. for a short ride from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, to the Brooklyn docks. Curtains on the train were drawn at all times. Unloading was done inside a warehouse on the pier. We marched with full field packs, rifle and gas mask to the gang plank. At the base of the gang plank we were checked off by name and serial number. I told the officer I could not go as I did not bring my passport. That did not matter; we were under government orders in war time. Passports were unnecessary.

We climbed the steep gang plank with our eighty-five pound load and immediately led through narrow passageways, then down steep steps around and down some more, until I thought we would be under the ship instead of in it. We finally arrived at our assigned area. My bunk was fourth from the bottom, third from the top. The bunks were iron pipe frame with canvas stretched by ropes between the pipes. It was pandemonium as we all tried to get rid of our heavy burden at the same time. There was not enough room to stand, let alone struggle out of a pack. We finally got untangled and stacked our

packs at one end of the bunks. Rifles were laid on the bunks and had to be slept with, as well as the gas masks and life jackets. Life jackets had to be worn at all times. We could go nowhere until we were well out to sea. We would not see the Statue of Liberty. The ship we were on was the U.S. George Washington, a 26,000 ton ship that was a German luxury liner. The ship was unfortunate to be in New York port as war was declared on Germany. The U.S. government took control and refitted it as a troop ship. Operation of the ship was by merchant marine, the anti-aircraft guns were manned by the Navy, but the Army was in control of personnel and its destination.

Meals to the troops were served only twice a day. Eating was off chest-high shelves while standing. Lines for the chow lines were two to three hours long for every meal. Food was poor and little in quantity and variety.

My section sergeant volunteered me for KP which was to be for the entire trip. When I arrived at the mess hall, it was filled with other "volunteers." I hung back believing they could never have need for all these men. They took large groups and assigned them to tasks such as food preparation, serving, supply carriers (from the hold of the ship), washing trays, cleaning decks, garbage detail and guard duty. They were down to about twenty-five. Twenty were assigned to the officers' mess. By this time I was sure I was home free from duty, but the last five were assigned to the seamen's mess. As we were led to the seamen's mess, I wondered what my sergeant got me into this time.

In the seamen's mess we found we were to be waiters and bus boys for the seamen. They ate very well; the best restaurants would be hard to keep up with the food served here. A war on? Not here! Breakfast was eggs any way you wanted them, pancakes, waffles, cereals hot or cold, biscuits, rolls and donuts every morning. Lunch was equally good and plentiful. Every evening, dinner was a choice of five or six entrees. Chicken, steaks, prime rib, turkey, pot roast, pork and fish — everything was here and all they wanted. Desserts were great, too. Cakes, pies, and ice cream. The troops got peanut butter sandwiches and an apple for dinner and lumpy oatmeal or powdered eggs and an orange for breakfast. I ate with the crew and made sure my sergeant heard what I had for dinner each night. My section sergeant was furious, who thought he was going to punish me. At one time he wanted to trade places with me, but, of course, I refused. I did bring "doggie" bags to guys in my squad who swamped me when I returned to my bunk.

During the day, between meal servings, I spent on deck. I only returned to my bunk to sleep at night. On deck, I watched the sea and the ships in our convoy. Being from Missouri, I was fascinated by the waves. There were ten other ships in our convoy, but they could not all be seen. There were four other troop transports, one small aircraft carrier, one destroyer, and four destroyer escorts. The aircraft carrier was loaded with bombers on deck; there was no room for takeoffs or landings.

After we were at sea for six days, we ran into a hurricane. We rolled and pitched in the heavy sea for forty-eight hours. The convoy closed in to a very close group and one of the other transports almost collided with our ship. Another ship was reported to come within five degrees of turning over during the storm. It looked like I could almost touch the ship ahead and behind. One day I looked forward and all I could see was the mast of the ship ahead, and then as the waves passed, I was looking at the screws of that same ship as they spun in the air.

In calmer weather the navy gunners had target practice with the four anti-aircraft guns. Using balloons as targets, they fired as the balloons drifted away. None were hit.

One day we sighted a burning freighter. I don't know what caused the fire, maybe a sub, maybe some accident on board. Many a night we were kept awake by the sounds of depth charges being dropped around us by our destroyers. Sometimes they vibrated

throughout the ship. We were never allowed on deck at night, so we could not see what was transpiring around us.

One day, as I was cleaning up after dinner, the cook told us to go on deck and see the "Rock." It was a beautiful sight. The sun was just setting behind some clouds. We had just passed through the Strait, the Rock of Gibraltar was just like its pictures. It loomed above us. Lights were coming on in the buildings on the shore of Spain and Africa. The red sunset reflected off the porpoises that were following the ship. Some small fishing boats were passed. All looked so serene, it was hard to believe a war was going on, and we were headed for battle.

During the night we headed north. Depth charges increased in frequency. We were restricted below deck for the remainder of the trip. The following night we anchored in Marseilles harbor. The harbor had been bombed by both German and American planes. Docks and piers were unusable, so landing craft came along side. We climbed down cargo nets to unload into the smaller craft. Carrying full field packs, gas mask and rifle we struggled to stay upright under the weight. We unloaded at night. Going down a cargo net was part of the training I lacked. Swells were coming in at eighteen to twenty-five feet and the landing craft was going up and down like an express elevator. The fellow before me let go at the wrong time. The landing craft dropped out from him and he broke a leg. I learned from his mistake and waited until the craft came up to me, then I stepped off the rope net. After fifteen days at sea we were going ashore.

Landing on the Beach of Marseilles

Oct 20, '44
Marseilles, France

The landing craft headed for the beach, dropped the landing gate, and we marched ashore. We were now on French soil. It was dark and little of the country could be seen. Tall turbaned Gurkhis were walking around directing operations. We were glad they were on our side. When all the battalion came ashore, we put on our eighty-five pound packs and headed for the staging area. We marched through the harbor and city of Marseilles and uphill into the countryside. After fifteen days at sea with little activity any march would be tough. But with the extra weight plus the elevation gain, this was the most rugged hike we had yet to endure. It was brutal. By the time we neared the town of Septemes, twelve miles distance, we were crawling. We continued to a huge plateau where we were to camp. We dropped and got what rest we could that night.

In the morning we set up our tents in neat rows and had inspections. The first night it started to rain and continued for three days with a heavy downpour. The wind came to near gale force. The ground became a lake of shin deep mud. The wind blew our tents down as fast as we could put them up. The tent pegs floated away and the shelter halves disappeared under the mud. We gave up and moved to higher ground in some wooded area adjoining our mud lake.

Our kitchen was still to be unloaded from the ship and would not be unpacked until we arrived in the forward area. We were introduced to K-rations. Boxes 2 x 3 x 8 inches contained a complete meal, it said on the label. The box was heavily waxed to provide sufficient heat for a canteen of water or to heat a can of food.

The breakfast box contained a can of scrambled eggs (sometimes with sausage), a fruit bar, a package of crackers, and an envelope of instant coffee. The lunch box

contained a can of cheese, crackers, and lemonade powder. The dinner box contained a can of pork loaf (sometimes beef was added), crackers, bullion powder, a chocolate bar, and toilet paper. The breakfast and dinner food cans contained so much fat everyone got diarrhea every time one was consumed. These we threw away. We lived on the cheese, fruit bar and chocolate bar and crackers. Not much of a diet, but that is all we had.

Those who had been issued a different gun from the one we had practiced and qualified with on the firing range were marched away from the camp area. There we were given six rounds of ammunition to zero in our guns.

All excess clothing and equipment was to be stored away. We wanted to keep our load as light and uncomplicated, yet everything to make living bearable. Every item we were to carry was a burden on long marches but also when under attack. We also wished to stay as warm as possible in the coming winter months. I put on shorts and tee shirt, then two pair of long underwear. Then I added two pairs of wool pants and two wool shirts. I topped this with the field jacket.

Our feet had to be protected from trench foot. I put on a pair of cotton socks, then two pairs of heavy wool socks, then the shoe packs. I carried a complete change of socks which I shoved down between my two pairs of pants and looped the tops over my belt. This was to allow them to dry by body heat. We had to sleep at all times in our clothes and boots, as we may come under attack at any time and had to move out at a second's notice. Raincoats were too cumbersome and were discarded. Personal items, tooth brush, razor, soap, paper and envelopes were stored in the plastic bags saved from the crackers in the K-rations. I lost my toothbrush and gloves even before we got to the front lines.

Move to the Front Lines

Oct 29, '44
France

After nine days in the staging area near Marseilles, we loaded into Army two-and-a-half-ton trucks. I kept wondering how I got into all of this, and how to get out. Was this just a nightmare or for real? I was caught in a raging river, being carried away toward a huge waterfall. I felt inadequately trained for the task that lay ahead.

Up to this time, I was holding on to the rumor that we came to Europe to do police work in the French villages. I could not bring myself to believe we were actually going to the front lines. I felt I lacked so much training to go against a hardened battle-experienced enemy that I believed the German army to be. After all, they started this war in Poland. I worried how I would react when facing the enemy. I was scared, but vowed to myself not to be a coward and run. I would do the best I could.

There were many who refused to go to the front lines. You never hear reports of this, but our company had four or more who refused to subject themselves to gunfire and shellfire from the enemy. Yet they received the same battle stars and medals. These men were kept at the company staging area doing KP and moving supplies.

Each man had a barracks's bag stored there. Any equipment or personal possessions that were not needed or could not be carried on his person during battle was kept here. Also, gas masks were stored here for quick issue if needed. Each time the company advanced, the staging area moved with it. When a man was killed or missing, his personal effects were returned to the next of kin. Only a few of my possessions were returned to my mother, the rest lost or stolen.

Our convoy was huge, miles long. The roads were narrow by American standards. For the first fifty miles, the concrete roads were cut diagonally with two-foot wide gaps across the road. The cuts were every fifty feet and were made to remove mines the retreating Germans had laid to slow the American advance. The cuts were filled with asphalt, but not a very good job. Each time the truck tires crossed these cuts, it caused a jolt. What a washboard. The uncushioned wood seats of the truck caused us loose teeth and saddle sores. We passed through many French villages. There were no country homes as in the United States. The French lived in small villages which were two to five miles apart. The farming villages had no sidewalks or paved streets. The farm buildings were built right on the edge of the road with barn and house in one unit. Manure was stacked outside the buildings on the roadway. How would you like manure outside your bedroom or kitchen window?

We stopped at night near Lyon and again in Dijon. At Dijon we camped in a former zoo. My squad slept in an African antelope compound. The third night we arrived near Bacarrat in the Vosges mountains. Here we were warned of enemy patrols and possible artillery fire. At night guard duty was performed. We walked patrol around the company area, but we were yet to be issued ammunition. Were we supposed to say, "Bang! Bang! You're dead"? That's the army for you. Maybe they thought we would kill our officers or ourselves to get out of what was before us.

We camped in a forest awaiting all the units and all our equipment to be transported from the beach. We did get some artillery fire but it was far off target and no one was in danger. We witnessed a dog fight between some planes high overhead. They were too high to identify the winner as one went down in flames.

November 4, '44

We moved southwest of a town called Baccarat and took up positions on the front lines for the first time. We were replacing the 45th Division men who had been fighting since they started in Africa and then made a beach head in Southern France. Now nothing was between us and the German guns. None were seen, but they were out there some place.

I was to take over a foxhole that was dug beside a foot trail. The trail led to a spring, the "Baccarat Fountain of Youth," the plaque read in French. We were camped in some resort park.

A work detail was called for to put up the captain's tent. I was chosen by my section sergeant. The captain had a four-walled two-room tent. A cot was placed in one room, the other had a portable desk and radio equipment. All this was carried in the trailer of the company jeep. I think this was the only night the captain spent on the front lines. Each evening, while the company was digging in, the captain headed for battalion to report. He did not return until morning. I think he spent the night in the nearest town in some house.

It started to rain during the night and became quite heavy by morning. During the night the trail became a stream and poured water into our foxhole. I awoke in a pool of cold water and mud. Everything was wet. It took me months to dry out. My first and continuous enemy was the cold and dampness.

It was a necessary chore to build a foxhole every time we stopped for a night. We divided into groups of three, so one man could be awake for enemy patrols while the other two could get some sleep. In that way we could get two hours of sleep at a time. We changed every hour. The building of the foxholes was performed by two men digging out a hole six feet by six feet and three to four feet deep. The depth depended on the hardness

of the ground, darkness, rain, and how tired we were. Meanwhile, the other man cut down trees and cut them into lengths of eight feet. When the hole was considered finished, the logs were dragged to the hole and placed on three sides of the hole and then logs were laid across the top. Pine branches were added on top of the logs and then the dirt from the hole was thrown on top of the pine branches. All this was protection against artillery shells that burst in the trees overhead. Deadly shrapnel would rain down on us.

We got proficient in making these temporary homes every night. If we stayed at a spot longer than one night we would always spend some time in improving the foxhole by digging deeper or whatever to make it more comfortable.

We did not stay at this spot but one night. We rolled up our wet sleeping bags, which weighed a ton, and proceeded to Baccarat, through the town and then into the hills and woods toward Raon L'Etape. Being an ammunition carrier for the mortar squad, I had little to do but to follow the riflemen around and try to keep from being shot.

There was no "Front Line" in the mountains. It was more like pockets of resistance. It was necessary to seek out these pockets of enemy troops and eliminate or force them to withdraw.

Meeting the Enemy

Nov 5, '44

We withdrew from our muddy foxholes and set out looking for the German positions. It was raining heavily. We followed the riflemen through the woods. The mortar men were told to stay back and let the riflemen do the fighting. That was all right with me. The forest was heavily wooded with pine trees and very hilly. The enemy could hide anywhere and the rain made visibility very limited.

After a while shots were fired on us and everyone hit the ground and crawled for the nearest tree. Our troops returned the fire, which became quite intense. I could see no enemy but several men were wounded and the medics were called to help them. One wounded man lay near a footpath we were following in the woods. No one could get to him as a German burp gun kept up a steady fire over the area, keeping everyone away. The mortar squad was called in. We looked around frantically for an opening in the trees to fire our weapon. One squad found a small opening and set up their gun. They waited for the wind to part the tree limbs overhead to get clearance. Just as the shell was dropped in the tube, the wind died. The shell hit the limb over our heads and exploded. Deadly shrapnel rained down all around us. Lucky no one was hit. The officers decided that was too dangerous to do again. Thereafter we would not fire the mortar in the forest.

The riflemen outflanked the German gun and rescued the wounded man. The enemy fled down the other side of the hill. One of our riflemen was killed.

While the company reorganized, my sergeant told me to check the dead man for gloves. I had been asking him to get me some since I lost mine. The last place I wanted to get some gloves was off a dead man. The sergeant insisted. He told another man to get his wool cap. We both went over to the dead rifleman, but neither found what we were supposed to get. We were thankful for that.

As I looked at the dead man, just a kid of nineteen, like myself, I felt miserable and so alone. It was nearing Thanksgiving and this man would never enjoy another. His family would not know for maybe weeks that he was dead. No one would mourn him as he laid on the wet ground in the rain. As I turned away, I suddenly started to shiver and I could

not stop shaking. I thought, what if this happened to me. What a shock to my mother, who was not well, to receive such news. I prayed for God to protect me. Suddenly, I seemed to be inside a white haze, like a cloud. My shaking stopped and I felt safe. From that moment I knew I would survive this war. I never told anyone of this experience.

Replacements came to replace those killed or wounded, but I never got close to anyone anymore, as they might not be around long.

The first enemy soldier I saw was a wounded one. My sergeant said, "Come see what we are fighting." The young German had a chest wound. He was wide-eyed and fear was evident and his whole body cringed as we approached. As the medic knelt down beside him to check his wound, he pulled a knife from his belt. He attempted to slash the medic. Some riflemen wanted to shoot him again, but the medic waved them off. He was just frightened, he said. The riflemen then overpowered the wounded German, taking away his knife and holding him down while the medic gave him morphine and attended his wound.

We could easily tell the difference between our own artillery going over our heads and that of the enemy. Our shells (outgoing mail we called them) passed slowly with a whistling sound. The enemy shells (incoming mail) passed over very fast as if jet-propelled, with a swish sound. If you were under the impact area, you heard neither before the explosion. If incoming mail passed we immediately hit the ground as they might shorten their range as they covered the area with a barrage. A whole grove of trees would lose their tops as explosions ripped through the tops of the trees.

Due to the almost constant rain, I never saw the sun the whole time I was in France. I have a poor sense of direction, so I was never sure what direction we were attacking. I assumed to the east. We were told not to mention in our letters home any town or place until two weeks after we had been there. We could not carry on our person any such information in case of capture. In two weeks' time I passed through so many other towns that I forgot where we were two weeks ago. So all my letters went home, "Somewhere in France."

We did most of our troop movements at night, using the cover of darkness. This was done to confuse the enemy as to our strength, size, and experience of his opponent. I too was always confused as to where we were or where we were going next. Many times during these marches I felt near exhaustion. I felt I could not take another step. However, I also knew if I stopped and dropped out of the line, I would be lost. The enemy could be anywhere, and losing contact for a few minutes with the rest of the troops could be fatal. I forced myself to take another step, and another, until I no longer had feeling, but plodded on with persevering determination. Others had the same exhausted feeling, as some found themselves in the ditch beside the road as they fell asleep while marching.

Under Shell Fire and Lost

Nov, '44

The rain turned to snow, but quickly melted. Our company was searching the woods for the German defensives. We suddenly came under heavy fire from German 88 artillery. Shells were bursting in the trees overhead. We had no cover. Explosions were faster than you could count. Shell after shell poured in on us as all hell broke loose. The explosions were terrifying, the noise unbelievably horrible. Fear and panic struck us all. Shock and fright quivered through our bodies. Volley after volley tore into the tree tops,

showering us with branches, bark, dirt and shrapnel. One shell exploded directly overhead. The concussion lifted me off the ground and my helmet flew twenty feet away. I scrambled after it, when I saw a white hot piece of shrapnel hit the trunk of a tree near me. The shrapnel bounced off the tree and headed directly toward me. I rolled over as it whizzed by me, hit another tree, and came toward me again. I rolled over again as the white hot piece fell a few inches from my foot. The jagged piece of metal five inches long struck in the ground. It turned to cherry red and then to dull gray as I looked at it. I was momentarily stunned as I realized how close I came to death by that one. I thought what a great souvenir that would be, but realized it would be still too hot to touch. I retrieved my helmet. The ferocity of the attack subsided as quickly as it started. Cries of my companions made me forget souvenir hunting. I ran over to one, but he died before I reached him. Another man's badly mangled body lay on the other side of me. Death was all around me. The cries of another mortar man nearby was loud and frightening. Others ran to him and got there before me. They found a shell fragment had hit his mortar bag and penetrated one of the shells in his bag. (The mortar bag is similar to a newsboy's bag, over the shoulders and carries six mortar shells in front and six in back.) At first we were afraid the mortar shell might explode, but we had to help this man. Carefully the bag was cut at the shoulders and lifted off the back of this man. The shrapnel had not penetrated the man's skin, but he would have a bruised shoulder for a while. He was grateful to be alive.

While all this was going on, the remainder of the company pulled out without us. We were stranded and did not know which way the others had proceeded. We wandered around and found some riflemen, also lost and left behind. Now there were about twenty of us. A sergeant took charge and decided to send out a five-man patrol to look for the company as we waited.

A short time later we heard mortar shells hit near by, then the screams of someone calling, "Mommy, Mommy," in the voice of a small child. One man from the patrol came running back, his arm covered with blood. He reported everyone in the patrol was hit, two were dead, and the others were wounded, one seriously. The medic and sergeant went to look. The screams continued. When the sergeant, medic, and the other wounded man returned, the sergeant said, "Let's get out of here, fast!" I grabbed the arm of the medic and asked about the man screaming, are we just going to leave him. The medic said he gave the man all the morphine he had and, for all practical purposes, he was already dead, as nothing could be done for him. The sergeant thought the cries would bring a German patrol. We headed off in another direction, leaving the man crying for his Mommy.

We found the remainder of the company after dusk. They thought we were all killed in the artillery barrage or we were captured. I found my squad. They complained I was not doing my share of the foxhole building. I did not try to explain. I grabbed an ax and started to chop trees. I could still hear in my mind that fellow calling for his Mommy. I did not sleep that night.

French Village People

Nov 22, '44

We did not always fight in the hills; occasionally we took to the roads, while other units did the hill fighting. Citizens would come out and welcome us. They brought out

their best wine and schnapps. Old ladies would hug us, others would be crying with joy. The French villages had only old people and young children under ten years of age. Anyone able to work were shipped away as slave labor to help in the German war effort. There were no beautiful young French girls to meet as in the movies. Children would dance along side us as we marched down the road. They had not learned of chocolate, but were soon to learn. One such occasion we captured three towns in one day. Senones, Vieux Monline and La Vermont were liberated. One town we liberated, all the citizens had blue skin, the creases of their skin was dark blue. We hurried through this town and turned down anything offered. Afterwards we joked that these must be the French bluebloods. It may have been their water. A few times we were billeted in the homes of the French people, but only with their permission. We had orders not to take any food offered, as these people had little for themselves. We gave them extra K-rations when we had them. We never took their bedroom, but laid out in their living or parlor rooms. Finally, we were able to get somewhat dry and shave with hot water. Our own kitchen usually brought us some hot food, which was a welcome change.

The furnishings of these people reminded me of my aunt's farm house in Missouri in the late 20's. Kitchens were heated and cooking was done on wood-burning stoves.

On many of the roads we traveled, the Germans tied explosive charges around the trees alongside the road. The Germans had intended to set off the charges to drop the trees on the road. This was to slow our progress. However, we got there before they were exploded. Sometimes these explosive charges were miles long, on both sides of the road. Some mines were also buried beside the road. We stayed on the asphalt to keep from blowing off our legs. The engineers came behind us and located the mines with metal detectors. They marked the mines with white tape until they could be cleared. One place we came upon where the trees were blown across the road. A half mile of road was blocked by the fallen trees. The army brought in a tank with a bulldozer blade on the front end to clear the trees. The tank was harassed by German infantry firing at it. We were called in to remove the Germans firing on the tank, so the tank could complete its job.

I believe everyone was tired of the fighting and the danger, but mostly of the cold and the liquefied air. The rain never stopped. I prayed for a wound to get someplace away from the front. Anything to get out of these muddy clothes, get a shower, and sleep between clean sheets in a warm bed. I was ready to trade an arm or a leg for a dry place to sleep the whole night through. It did not happen. I continued to plod along behind the riflemen, carrying the useless mortar ammunition and the mortar base plate.

Thanksgiving in France 1944

Nov 26, '44

Thanksgiving day began at 3:00 a.m. I had roadblock duty with the machine gunners. I had fired the machine gun only once in training. I did poorly. The tracer bullets I thought were hitting the intended target, but they told me I was shooting too low. I never learned to load the gun or how to clear it if it jammed. However, I was sent on this duty because the staff sergeant thought the mortar crews were not doing enough. This was not the time nor place for me to learn. The rain was very heavy and visibility was limited to ten feet. Silence was important as the enemy could be very close and might try to come through our road blocks. There was a tank parked off the road a short distance from our

position. It was guarding another approach to town. All night long the tank was firing its heavy machine gun. We did not know what he was firing at, maybe raindrops. But this tank's firing kept us from falling asleep.

I made frequent looks at my watch, wishing these three hours would pass so I could return to town and more repose. The remainder of my squad was sleeping in a nice warm room in town. I wanted to join them. We had fifteen minutes to go before we were to be relieved, when a messenger came and said we were moving out.

We marched through several towns that day in a continuous heavy rain. Even the citizens stayed indoors and waved as we passed. Mid afternoon we were told to secure a steep hill. This was a seventy-degree climb, almost straight up. I took off my pack and ammo bag and threw them up the hill; if they stayed, I would follow. Pulling myself up by grabbing rocks, twigs or anything to pull myself up. After about three hours, I reached the top. We were told to dig in. I still had not caught my breath when the word came we were moving out again. I got down in ten minutes, sliding on my backside.

Our mess crew had just arrived with a trailer on back of the jeep. In the trailer was our turkey dinner. However, we could not stop to eat. We marched off to help the third battalion. They had a large German force cut off in St. Blaise. We were to go to their help. Marching through the forest and on roads, we sometimes could not see our hand in front of our face. Sometimes we had to put our hand on the shoulder of the man in front and follow along blindly. Silence was important as the enemy could have a machine gun guarding the road. At one point we saw a glow ahead. When we got closer, we found a four-story building fully engulfed in flames. Must have been a Kraut headquarters. They set it afire to destroy any information we might gather there. As we passed the burning building, I thought what a perfect silhouette we made for any German guns in the woods. However, we passed safely.

When we neared St. Blaise, a group of five of us turned off the road. We traveled through the woods, circling the town. There we set up a road block hoping to prevent the enemy from escaping this road. Meanwhile, the remainder of the company continued into town to help with the fighting.

We settled down to a quiet night. Then we heard German voices that were quite close. None of us wanted to be a hero or leader to engage this group in a fight in the darkness. We agreed to wait until daylight to engage the enemy. However, they pulled out before daylight.

In town, the company entered one side and set up a machine gun at the edge of town to stop any retreat attempt through this road. In the darkness the gun crew heard a clop-clop-clop coming toward them. To the gunners it sounded like a group of German soldiers running in step. They shouted "halt and surrender," but the sound continued toward them. They opened fire and the sound stopped. Next morning they found a dead horse. The enemy had escaped by another route or may have left before we got there. Daylight we were pulled off the road block and joined the company. I immediately found a place to sleep.

More Hills to Capture

Nov, '44

Some hills were heavily fortified and defended by a determined and persistent enemy. They took a substantial toil on our troops. One day our battalion attacked a hill, strongly

defended by the Germans. Within the two companies leading the assault, eight men were killed. Four officers and fifty-six riflemen were wounded. I was called in to assist carrying the wounded down the hill to the battalion aid station. It was dark by the time we got there. I remained there for the night and rejoined my squad the next morning. Other hills were defended by young kids, eleven or twelve years old. They were handed a rifle, sometimes just a .22 hunting rifle, and told to be a hero for the fatherland. They usually would give up when the Americans fired back. Other times we would capture old men of sixty and even seventy. They too would surrender after return fire was received. These troops were used for delaying tactics. The regular hardened troops would have more time to prepare better defenses on the next hill or town. We never knew what the next hill would bring, when the next shot would be fired. Death was so much around you, you became hardened to it or you went crazy.

After a while you get hardened to seeing the dead, even if in an American uniform. Soldiers are expendable. Death is final, it's over. Just another discarded piece of equipment. However, seeing a victim bleeding and in pain, that is another matter. You see fear and horror in their face. You avoid their eyes. The unasked question on all their faces, "Am I going to make it? Am I going to be a whole person again?" You never get used to seeing bleeding and suffering.

Sometimes the enemy would hide and allow us to pass through and then fire on us from the rear. One time one of the mortar gunners was walking back and was confronted by seven Germans, heavily armed with burp and machine guns. They appeared from their camouflaged foxholes immediately before him. His thoughts were, "I'm dead," but he pulled out his pistol and pointed it at the seven heavily armed Germans. They threw down their weapons and raised their hands above their heads. It was reported to his local newspaper in New Jersey and he was a hero. Another time I found myself the primary target of a German burp gun. I found the nearest tree for shelter. Every move I made brought more shots and the tree lost more bark. I squirmed around so my back was against the tree. Then I opened a K-ration and had lunch. Whenever the riflemen wanted to know if the sniper was still there, I removed my helmet and held it out from the tree, just like in the movies. A few more shots would explode around me. The riflemen finally flushed the sniper out and we could continue.

One of the riflemen who returned from the hospital informed us the clerks in the rear were wearing the Combat Infantry Badge. They got theirs first as they type up the order for them. We would get them in a month or two. This badge would give us ten dollars a month more in pay for as long as we stayed in the service.

One rainy day, coming out of a heavy forest area into an open field, the point man moved out across the meadow. He was followed by the remainder of his squad. Suddenly shots rang out and two men fell. One was dead and the other wounded. The remainder of the company quickly returned to the cover of the trees. No one knew exactly where the shots came from. The medic was sent out to care for the wounded man. The medic was immediately shot right through the red cross on his helmet. Everyone began spraying the trees with rifle fire, but it was such a large area. Some were firing at the woods across the meadow; others were even firing into the trees above us.

The company again started to cross the meadow. Another man was shot, and again we fell back to the trees. Artillery was called for. When notified a medic was shot and killed, they responded with a vengeance. The heavy barrage pounded the woods in front of us for twenty minutes. When the artillery lifted, a white flag was seen in the woods ahead. Three groggy Germans came out with their hands over their heads. Some wanted to kill these snipers for killing our medic, but cooler heads prevailed. I was not one of the cool

ones.

When we crossed the field, we found the enemy had built a platform between four trees on the edge of the forest. It was about ten to twelve feet off the ground and well camouflaged. One German had fallen out of the perch and two others were also killed by the artillery.

Assault on Bitche

Dec, '44

With the Vosges mountain campaign over, we were moved to the Saarbough Area. While our regiment (397th) was still fighting, the other two regiments of our division were in reserve. But they were not resting. They were getting special training for the assault on the fortresses of the Maginot Line. The 398th and 399th Infantry regiments were conducting training on bangalore torpedoes, bee hive and pole charges.

We continued our assault toward Mouterhouse, this an important town leading to Camp de Bitche. Mouterhouse was a fight to the last man with the Germans. The riflemen fought house to house for two days. There were German snipers in the church clocktower. They controlled the view of most every street and road with deadly rifle and mortar fire. Artillery fire was called for with time fused shells (they exploded in the air). The shells knocked the hands off the clock and the snipers from the tower.

My closest buddy was wounded here with mortar fire. We had been together since "Basic" in Georgia. He was a Swede from Minnesota with an accent that always brought him kidding from the other troops. I was told he had only a slight wound and probably would be back from the aid station in a few days. I did not make the effort to see him off to the aid station, because of this news. Later I learned he was headed for England in a chest to ankle cast. I was angry at being so misinformed and sorry I did not see him before he left.

After the houseclearing in Mouterhouse, we moved outside of town to the woods again. We relieved elements of the 45th division, taking over their foxholes. My foxhole was only twenty feet from a frozen German soldier. He was shot as he was pulling on his boot and was still in that position. The quartermaster grave unit came by the next day and threw the body like a log into the back of a two-and-a-half-ton truck. They said they take better care of our boys and treat them with more respect.

Other units passed through our lines and now we were in reserve. While in reserve we were not in immediate danger of rifle fire except for patrols and artillery. But we still had the snow and cold to fight. Our company cook carried up a portable stove and served us breakfast with eggs any way we wanted them. We all lined up in the usual chow line, until the artillery started to fall nearby. We returned to our foxholes, but the cook continued to cook the eggs. We shouted in our order, then when ready, ran over to the stove for our order. I gave the cook credit for braving the danger.

The assault on the fortress by the other regiments was awesome but still less than successful. The fortresses were built by the French to keep the Germans out; now the Germans used them to keep us out of Germany.

Heavy concrete pillboxes with five-storied deep caverns with a small railroad to supply food and ammunition under ground. Disappearing gun turrets were built into this fortress. Direct fire of artillery, even our "long Toms," 240mm cannons had little effect. Fifty-four tons of 500-pound bombs by our aircraft just bounced off the hard concrete.

The attack had to be withdrawn when the "Battle of the Bulge" started. Other

divisions were pulled off the line to move north and our lines were stretched out to fill in the gaps.

Christmas in France 1944

Dec, '44

Christmas eve was like most every other day. It was cold, with some snow flurries. The Battle of the Bulge was still being fought many miles north. Our division, the 100th, was holding the entire front line of the Seventh Army. Caution was given to our leaders from intelligence that a large force of German tanks and infantry were seen heading our way. These were believed to be survivors of the Battle of the Bulge, who escaped the pincers of the American counter attack. These forces might try to break through our lines.

Our company took control of a snow-covered hill on the French-German border, overlooking the town of Baden Baden. Two platoons of riflemen and the weapons platoon were to secure and hold the hill. Meanwhile, the other platoon and the company CP (command post) with the Captain were billeted in the town below. We relieved another company who presumably had already dug in. The spot I was assigned was hard ground. The foxhole was only inches deep. I proceeded to dig out the hole deeper to get out of the wind. I hacked at the ground with my shovel, but the tip of the shovel just curled over. The ground was frozen hard as a rock. It was already dark, so my companions and I said to hell with it. We rolled out our bags on the snow and crawled in. I took my canteen inside my bag to keep it from freezing. It started to snow again. Too cold to sleep, I laid there trying to hug the ground to get out of the wind.

Christmas morning, there was no Christmas tree with bright lights nor any gifts to greet me. However, the landscape did suggest Christmas and my first thought was to get a nice hot cup of coffee. Retrieving my canteen out of my sleeping bag, took the cap off, turned it upside down. Nothing came out. It was frozen solid, even inside the bag. One of the riflemen came by and informed everyone the Lieutenant and Sergeant had a fire in the cabin where they stayed. We headed for the cabin.

Later the supply sergeant brought snow parkas for everyone. A nice Christmas present. Nice warm white coats to protect us from the wind and snow. Christmas dinner would be coming later, our first hot meal in a long time. We missed Thanksgiving dinner and looked forward to this meal. Everyone was standing around in the cabin enjoying the warmth of the fire and coffee, wishing we were home with our families. It got warm inside so I removed my parka which I'll later regret. While we were warming ourselves in the cabin, someone came in requesting a medic. Someone was thought to have hit a mine while enlarging his fox hole. It was not a mine he hit, but his own grenade that exploded. He had loosened the pin of his grenade that he had fastened to his jacket. While digging, the grenade came loose and fell under him. The explosion tore out his groins. He remained conscious and talked of being able to get out of the cold and even return to the states and his girlfriend. The medic had no heart to tell him he was dying.

A messenger came in to inform us the chow wagon had arrived but it would take a little while to set up. He also told us of an enemy patrol seen in the valley below. The lieutenant suggested the mortar crew get some practice and fire on the patrol. We rushed out and the gun crew set up and began firing. I, being an ammo bearer, set the charges and passed the shells to the gunner. All the riflemen began gathering around watching as this was the first firing we were able to do since we hit the front lines. After a number of

shells had been fired, the German patrol displayed a white flag. Our sergeant wanted to continue until we killed them all. We were arguing about this, when another German patrol emerged out of the woods and took everyone by surprise.

The German patrol started firing as they backed into the woods again. However, the lieutenant in charge of our company ran down the hill as fast as he could, taking the riflemen with him. We in the weapons platoon were left stranded. Everyone was yelling for the lieutenant to come back and fight or at least give us some cover fire to withdraw. But he kept going. He said the captain told him to withdraw into town if any resistance was met. I grabbed our squad's mortar, as no one else did and ran after the rest of the company. I guess I was the last to leave. My thoughts were on my new parka I had left in the cabin and our Christmas dinner as I ran down the hill with the heavy mortar on my shoulder. My feet were spread wide apart under the sixty pound load of the gun. As I ran, I could see the snow being kicked up between my legs by the bullets of the German burp gun that was being fired at me. One of our machine gun crews stopped and gave me cover fire. I reached the town and ducked behind the first building and safety.

The company reorganized in town and then marched away to another location. The mess crew dumped over the food into the snow and escaped, but barely. Later, we learned a couple of reconnaissance half tracks captured the German patrol, all twelve of them. Made us feel very stupid and ashamed, but most ashamed of our stupid leaders. We did not get Christmas dinner, not even K-rations, that night.

Packing Case Shelter

Dec 26-31, '44

After our fatuous efforts Christmas day, we marched all night to another location. We arrived at an area that was rolling hills with groups of trees here and there. At day break we could see on the hills to the east German tanks roaming back and forth. If we kept close to the trees, the Germans could not see us. We were told to dig in, but again the ground was too hard. The wind was blowing and it was cold and very unpleasant. My sleeping bag was left on the hill where we were run out by the German patrol. I set out looking for something to protect myself from the elements. I roamed around the trees and found some very large sections of packing cases. Some machinery was shipped in these cases, but what they were doing here in the woods was a mystery. I dragged several to our area with the intent to make a wind shield for our group. I also passed some clean straw, so I went back for that to protect us from the cold ground. Other members of my squad asked where I found this and proceeded to get more. Soon we had a nice hut that protected us from the wind and cold. I laid down and took a nap. Having been marching all night with no sleep the night before, I soon fell asleep. I was awakened by the section sergeant kicking me, demanding who was responsible for this. I said I had started it. He said it must come down, it was too good a target for artillery. He ordered it dismantled. It was concealed from the air by the trees and could not be seen from the hills, but that did not matter. Then he ordered me to go into town and pick up the mortar squad's mail at the CP. The rest of the squad was to dismantle the hut.

As I started to town I joined with another man going to town to pick up the mail for the riflemen. We walked together down the road into town looking for the CP. Incoming artillery made us move closer to the buildings for shelter, but we continued on. Entering the CP, which was inside a house, we found my section sergeant hiding under the sink.

"Get down," he shouts, "every time someone walks down the road the Germans send in artillery." The riflemen looked at me and smiled; we both knew we had caused this barrage. We picked up our mail (none for me) and headed back to our post. We laughed at the sergeant under the sink and then marched down the center of the road again. We just got to the edge of town and turned into the trees when the artillery began again.

To my surprise, the hut was still standing. It also had grown three times as big. The other mortar crews saw its possibility of warmth and added more sections, so our entire crew was billeted in this shelter. We stayed here until New Year's Eve. The sergeant remained in town, presumably near the security of his sink.

One of our riflemen left his fox hole to get a cigarette from another man in another nearby foxhole. The Germans fired one shell which landed in the foxhole he just left. It's a case of a cigarette that saved a life. His buddy was not so fortunate.

Our artillery were so short of shells they could not fire on the tanks and the clouds were too low for aircraft to help. I guess the Germans were in the same situation or they could have run right through our lines. Beyond the clear area where the German tanks were roaming was a hill with trees on the top. On the other side of that hill was the town of Rimling. Unknown to us at that time, two companies of our troop were surrounded there and we would be going there next.

Move to Rimling

Dec 31, '44

Before our hike to Rimling, we were given K-rations to take along. I grabbed two dinners. The mess sergeant complained that is all we wanted was the dinners.

Under the cover of darkness, we crossed the area where the German tanks had been roaming. Using gullies and hills to hide our advance, we crept single file across the open area. Occasionally a parachute flare would illuminate the area as if it was day. We froze in position until the flare burned out before continuing. I kept wondering, "What are we doing? Why are we putting ourselves in this situation?" We must be crazy! We did it because the army says to do it, that's why. The battalion we were relieving met us about half way. Complete silence was compulsory, but as these weary men passed, some would whisper, "Good luck." We successfully crossed the valley and began climbing the hill. On top of the hill was a wooded area and we could see German tanks parked there, not twenty-five yards away. The town was on the other side of this hill, the town of Rimling. To the north around Rimling, foxholes were dug and most of our company occupied these. I was lucky and got assigned to the command post in town. We were billeted in a farm house, the barn in the center with living quarters on both sides. There was a trap door at the rear of the barn with steps leading down to a room under the house. This room was used for the farm animals; one pig was still there. A door to this room opened to some corrals and beyond that was the German main front line. On the west side of the building the barn opened directly into the dirt road, now covered with snow. On the other side of the road was a fence of another corral for the barn and house that faced the road as it curved around to the west. The ground rose sharply beyond this fence and rose up to the wood where we passed the German tanks as we came in. There was another building to our south on the east side of the road and then another at the corner where the road made a ninety-degree turn. There were more barns and houses on this road to our west. To the north, a short distance from us, the road divided, one going around the hill where

our company was dug in. The other road lead to the German border. There were houses on both sides of this road. An anti-tank gun was set up at this fork, but it was pointed north and was knocked out before it could be turned around.

My squad was assigned to the room on the north side of the barn. It was a kitchen at one time, but now was void of any furnishings. It was to serve as the bedroom, living room, and whatever for twelve mortar men. However, after the sergeant pointed it out to me, I never got back to it. On the other side of the barn was a hallway with stairs leading to rooms above. Adjoining the hall were more rooms where most of the riflemen stayed.

An American medium tank arrived and parked outside our barn door. He parked it against the fence on the other side of the road. The tank commander said he was out of gas. He and his crew left to get some. They never returned.

My section sergeant posted me to guard the barn door. I was never relieved of this duty until the last day by the captain. Other members of the mortar section were not given any assignment as far as I could determine. The other crew members stayed in the assigned room and waited out the battle.

When darkness came, the Germans attacked. I thought we were in some western movie. The Germans came screaming into town like Indians. They must have been on drugs. One German tank came around the corner to our south. The tank promptly put two shells into the American tank and then knocked out the anti-tank gun down the street.

Daylight came and the Germans withdrew. We came out of our building. The riflemen went from house to house flushing out German soldiers and taking them prisoner. This process was repeated every day and night. We never got any sleep. After several days, I was requested to give up my two hand grenades for the riflemen needed them more than I did.

Our company jeep would try to rush across the open area we had come. They would take wounded and bring back ammunition. There was no room for food, so we starved.

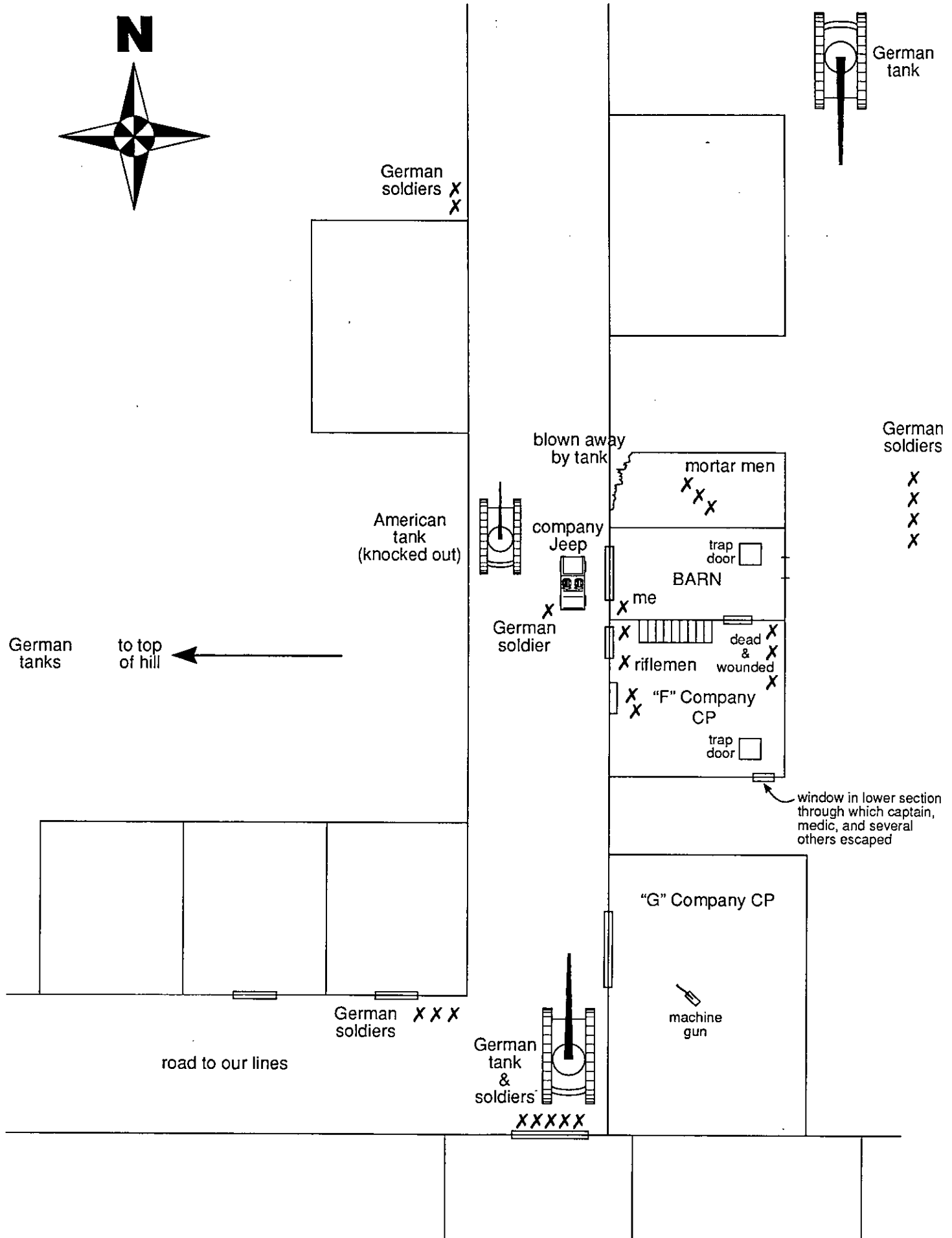
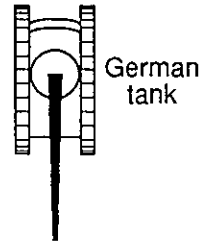
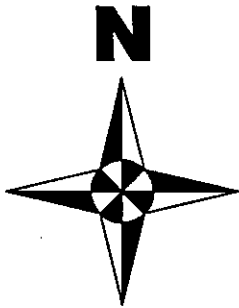
The third day the jeep was fired on by a German tank. It barely made it back. They lost all the ammunition except for one box of grenades.

Battle of Rimling

Jan 7-8, '45

It had been many days since our supplies got through to us. We were out of food days ago and low on ammunition. We melted snow for water. Medical supplies were all used up and wounds were tied up with whatever the medics could find. The battery of our company radio no longer had power to transmit to battalion headquarters for help. Units to our south had been overrun or pulled back, leaving us surrounded. I had little sleep in the past week. I could not remember the last time I had anything to eat. It was freezing and I should have been frightened out of my skin, but I was numb. I did not feel hungry, cold, nor tired. I was so exhausted I was going on instinct. I had been standing guard at this barn door for six days and nights without letup.

The mortar section sergeant and another man loaded four of the most critical wounded into the company jeep. They headed for the town of Acken where our battalion aid station was located. As they proceeded, the falling snow turned to a blizzard. Their visibility was limited to the length of the hood of the jeep. They located the communication line along side the road and used the wire to find their way to the aid station. Relieved of the wounded, they headed back following the same communication



line. They parked the jeep just outside the barn door I was guarding.

Another night was approaching and so did the enemy. The German tank took its nightly parking place at the end of the street, less than two hundred feet from my position. Screaming down the hill came the German infantry. A parachute flare lit up the road as if it were daylight. Artillery (both ours and theirs) was exploding all around. Small arms fire and machine guns were firing everywhere. It was a full scale attack.

I could see several German soldiers on the other side of the road, about two hundred feet north of me. They were shouting to the tank commander that was south of me. I remembered we were told to let the riflemen do the fighting, but that was in the woods. They were short of ammunition and the situation was critical. I thought I better help out if we were to get out alive. Up to this time I had not fired a shot. I attempted to fire at the Germans north of me. My carbine would not fire. I ejected that shell and tried again. Still nothing. I removed the magazine and put in another one. My thought was I better clean my equipment better. I fired at the German, but he still was shouting to the tank. I fired again. He disappeared from view in the darkness. My captain and sergeant came up behind me and said to quit firing my carbine. He did not want the enemy to know we were so short of ammunition that we had to use carbines to defend ourselves. He said he would put a rifleman on the other side of the barn door. If any target presented itself, I should point it out to the rifleman. The rifleman would do the firing. A man appeared at the right of the barn door. I did not recognize him in the darkness. The noise of battle was so intense we had to shout at each other. I would watch the road to the north and he to the south. The battle raged on. We were really getting the business tonight.

A flare lit up the street again and I pulled back out of the light coming in the doorway. Looking across the doorway I could see the rifleman was no longer there. How long ago he had departed I did not know. I quickly glanced out the door to the south. There stood a German soldier on the other side of the jeep, not twenty feet from me. How did he get so close? Why did the riflemen in the other part of the house miss him? If I shouted into the barn for help the German would surely hear me. He was closer. I raised my carbine at him. I took another glance at the other side of the doorway. Still no one was there. The enemy raised his arm. In his hand was a potato masher (a German concussion grenade). He was about to throw it at me. I knew I had to kill him. If he was just wounded he still could throw the grenade at me. I fired. Above the sound of the battle, I heard him grunt. He collapsed in the snow. The grenade went off. Suddenly everything was quiet, but only for an instant. Then all hell broke loose. The tank fired its 88 cannon at me and blew off the north end of the building. I backed away from the doorway fearing another shell would take out the whole doorway. A heavy machine gun sprayed shells into the doorway from atop the hill. My section sergeant and another man (I assume the one who was supposed to be at the door) came running up to the door. They both ran into the line of fire of the machine guns and both were hit. Others dragged them out of the line of fire. The sergeant was mortally wounded and the other man was already dead. The captain asked what happened. I told him. I asked what happened to my rifleman who was supposed to be helping me. He did not answer. He then pulled me from the barn door and told me to take up my position at the trap door in the rear of the barn. No one guarded the door now. The battle subsided quickly and the enemy withdrew.

When daylight came, we went outside. The German I shot was lying there beside the jeep. The grenade blew off his leg and the tire of the jeep. The captain looked at the dead man and said, "That was too close." Someone else said, "A mortar man got him." I started to say that I shot him, but held back. I was not proud of what I had done. I felt no glory, but I felt no remorse either. I did what I knew I had to do. What was left of our

company followed the captain looking for stray Germans to take prisoner. I stayed behind to check on my sergeant. He had died during the night. Other wounded men were suffering in the hallway and other rooms of the house. There were no medical supplies to help them, and we had no way to get them out. There were more dead and wounded in our company than there were alive. I could not stand the sight of all that suffering, so I left. I returned to the barn and went down through the trap door. There I collapsed in the stall next to the pig.

Night of Capture

Jan 8-9, '45
Rimling, France

After searching the town for stray German soldiers, the company returned with a few prisoners. The captain said all our riflemen who were in foxholes north of town had been killed or captured. (Later, when I talked to one of these men in POW camp, he said about fifteen tanks rolled up to their foxholes. They lowered their 88 cannons at them and told them to surrender or die.)

When our captain returned to the building he told the lieutenant to collect all the ammunition from the riflemen and redistribute it equally among them. There were only seven rounds per man. Not enough for a full clip for the M1. It takes eight. And not enough to beat off another full scale attack such as we had for the last seven nights. The captain said he was going to battalion headquarters for help and more ammunition. He never returned. Instead he got as far as the CP in the house we were holding and went down through another trap door. It was reported he stayed there until the Lieutenant surrendered the company. He then crawled through a window and escaped. I was informed the Captain later stepped on a mine and severely damaged his foot. He later committed suicide.

I always had the assurance of God's protection in the back of my mind. I always felt I would get through the fighting alive. Certainly I had many moments of fearing for my life, but now when everything seemed lost and hopeless, I felt no anxiety or fear. Maybe I was so exhausted from lack of sleep I was numb. I had no apprehension of what was going to happen. Never did the thought of death or of being taken prisoner ever enter my thoughts.

As darkness came, so did the German attack. We were fatigued and battle weary. We had no armored support or antitank weapons. It was rifles against tanks. We were almost out of ammunition and ill equipped both mentally and physically for another battle. The enemy had all the armor and artillery support they needed and it seemed an endless supply of replacements to throw into the battle. My section sergeant was dead and I had not seen my squad sergeant for days. I took my place at the trap door in back of the barn, as that was the last orders that I received. I could see no one was there guarding it as I had done for seven nights. The battle was ferocious, but did not last long. Suddenly one of the riflemen came charging at me and pushed me down the stairs and closed the trap door. He said the lieutenant surrendered the company. We were out of ammunition, and to prevent any more loss of life, he surrendered the whole company.

There were six of us in this basement room. We were praying the enemy would not look here for us. I suggested we try to go out the back door and make our way to G company. They were supposed to be in the building south of us where the German tank

was parked outside. Two of the men ran out the door. I was right behind them. Suddenly they reversed direction and knocked me over as they reentered the room and slammed the door. A grenade went off against the outside wall. We were trapped. Shortly, a German opened the trap door and called for us to come out. I hid my carbine under some straw in one of the stalls and removed my cartridge belt and let it drop. I followed the others up the stairs. We lined up against the outside of the building with our hands on our heads. As we were lined up against the wall of the building, I was just a few feet from the German I shot. I was thankful few knew who had shot the German and hoped our captors would not ask. I kept hoping the men from G company would come out and rescue us. The German soldiers began searching us, taking watches and anything else they desired. I pushed my watch up my arm as far as the stretch band would allow. One German grabbed my arm, looking for my watch. I pointed to another German and said, "He took it." The German went on to the next man. I kept my watch, which was a graduation present from my mother. The Germans then proceeded to go through our pockets. I thought of the pocket knife my brother-in-law had given me. I did not want them to have it, so I quickly removed it from my pocket when they were not looking and dropped it into the snow. I then stepped on it, burying it.

There were approximately twenty of us captured, all that was left of our company of 250 men. The Germans pushed us into the middle of the road to form a column of two's. Suddenly, a machine gun opened up on all of us. It was the gunners of G company. In the darkness they thought we were all German soldiers. Several of our men were killed and three were wounded. I felt a powerful sting on my left cheek. A bullet had burned the skin on my cheek. We all yelled to stop firing, that we were Americans. The firing stopped and the Germans reorganized us and led us up the hill. At the top of the hill we entered the woods and into the center of a group of German tanks. I had not heard of the massacre at Malmidy where prisoners were gunned down, but others had read it in the Stars and Stripes. They were very frightened. However, we were led through the tanks and down the north side of the hill.

Hitler was commanding this assault on our position. He was unhappy about the failure of the Battle of the Bulge, so he took full charge of this offense. By this time he had planned to be fifty miles to the west of here. We had upset his schedule and destroyed his offense.

On January 10th the skies cleared and our planes destroyed many of the German tanks in this area. If only we could have lasted two more nights.

Prisoner of War

Jan 9-11, '45
Germany

Being taken prisoner was the most humiliating experience any soldier is forced to endure. There are no words to describe my shame and embarrassment. How could such a monstrous, unthinkable event happen? We were the most powerful army ever assembled and we were let down. I believe we were a decoy set out as bait, a lure to draw the enemy away from the main defensive line. This line was thin and weak because most of the troops were still mopping up from the "Battle of the Bulge." I felt cheated by the Army's indifference to our needs for more ammunition, medical supplies, and food. Why did they leave us out there unprotected and without supplies. I felt so let down and despondent.

I prayed we would be rescued. Each step I knew took us farther away from liberation. We marched through German towns. We passed along a narrow road crowded with enemy tanks ready to move to the front. The exhaust fumes were choking me as we were led past them. Seeing these tanks made me more despondent, as they stand between me and freedom.

It was dark before we reached a town and hustled into a large house. I was tired, hungry, and frightened. Another group of prisoners was already there. Some were from my company who were in foxholes outside the town. Others were from G and H company. All were captured in or near Rimling. There were almost a hundred of us. We were here to be interrogated by the German high command. Separated into different rooms of the building, I was taken into the kitchen area with five others. The furnishings were all removed. I leaned against the cabinets and fell asleep standing there. The next thing I knew, two German soldiers grabbed me and dragged me to another room. There, a group of officers was seated at a table. I was pushed in front of them. Three soldiers with rifles stood directly behind me. They asked me my name, rank, and serial number. That is all they are supposed to ask and all I am supposed to tell them. However, they wanted more. They wanted to know when we left the states, when and where we arrived, when we started fighting. At each question the guards behind me kicked me, hit me with the rifle butts. They jabbed me with a bayonet in the ribs and put the gun to my cheek. I was too tired, too humiliated to resist any further. I thought, what good would this information do them anyway. They were almost beaten. We were at their borders. They knew all these answers anyway.

Finally, they asked me what was my nationality. Boy, I thought, if I say I was German they would consider me a traitor. I did not answer. I received a rifle butt to the back of my head. It knocked me almost to my knees. As I got up, the officer shouted, "Are you a Jew?" I shook my head, yes. Why I did that, I don't know. I was still stunned from the last blow. The officer slammed his fist down and said, "Take him out and shoot him." Two soldiers grabbed me and dragged me out into the hall. I did not know what was going to happen to me. In the hallway, they pulled a ladder out and put it to a trap door to the attic. They told me to go up there. I would be shot in the morning, they said. I crawled up the ladder and they locked me in. I was so tired and I hurt all over. I did not care anymore. It was dark and as I tried to move around I stepped off the rafters. There were a few cupolas the moon light came through, but they were too small to get out. Even if I could get out, what way do I go. I had no idea. I sat down and prayed.

After three or four hours the soldiers returned and told me to come down. One said, "The officers forgot about you." They led me to a large room filled with the other prisoners and pushed me inside. The other prisoners were given something to eat, but I got there too late. I tried to lay down on the wood floor but I hurt too much, so I moved over to a wall. There I sat down with my back to the wall. I tried to sleep. It was so hot and suffocating because of so many men in this one room that it was hard to breathe. I could not sleep.

At day break we were loaded into trucks and then into railroad box cars for a trip to POW camps at Bad Orb.

Bad Orb

Jan 15, '45

The prisoner of war camp we were taken to was Stalag IX B or Bad Orb. It was a good name for the prison, but Terrible Orb would have been better. The camp, built on a plateau, had prisoners from every country the Germans fought against. There were Poles, French, British, Italians, Russians, Austrians, Hungarians, and Americans. Each were kept behind a separate barbed wire fence and separate barracks.

When we arrived, we were stripped. Then the guards threw a bucket of kerosene on us. "For lice," they said. Then we could take a cold shower and get dressed. No soap or towels were provided. I was amazed at how thin I had become, and all the bruises.

The last food I had was the two cans of K-ration cheese I took with me into Rimling on New Year's Eve. I was weak and got dizzy at every fast movement I made. It was almost two weeks since I had last eaten anything.

Our barracks was a large warehouse-type building which housed two to three hundred men. Two woodburning stoves were the only furnishing. Everyone slept on burlap bags filled with straw and no blankets. At one end of the building was a cold water tap that ran all the time to keep from freezing. There were several old and dirty toilets behind a screen.

Food was brought in late in the afternoon. It consisted of a thin potato or turnip soup and some black bread. We had to scavenge for something to eat with and out of as everything was taken away from us. A loaf of bread was divided for four men. We made a rule. The one who cuts the loaf gets the last piece. The cutter made sure every piece of bread was as close to the same size as humanly possible. In the morning an herb tea was brought in. It tasted terrible, but we drank it anyway. It was also used for shaving and washing out the soup dish. No hot water or soap was provided.

We spent most of our time talking about food. If we could not fill our stomachs, we could fill our thoughts and reminisce of good food we had in better times. Card playing was second in time consumption. A few played for money or cigarettes, but most played to pass the time.

Those who had the nicotine habit had a bad time. They traded watches or anything of value and even the clothing off their backs for a cigarette. We had to sleep with our clothes and boots on for fear someone would steal them to trade for some cigarettes. They traded with the other foreign prisoners who received American Red Cross parcels.

The Red Cross was not yet aware of our capture, so we did not receive the parcels. I helped break up a knife fight between two of my buddies. They were fighting over a drag on a cigarette. They stumbled all over, being too weak for such activity, but they went after each other. One thought the other had taken too long a drag on a cigarette they agreed to share. I decided right there I would never let myself become an addict to cigarettes or anything else — well, maybe chocolate.

Occasionally we would be selected to go on a firewood detail. We marched outside the compound to the forest to cut wood for our stove. It was a real chore in our weakened condition.

Dangers and Problems in POW Camp

Jan-Feb, '45

Everyone thinks after capture that the prisoner is free from danger and sits back until the war ends. This is not so. As a prisoner you are still the enemy of your captor, and they are in charge.

There are other dangers. One day two fighter planes were having a battle overhead. As one plane dove down to get away from the other on his tail, the plane doing the chasing fired its guns at the other. The shells entered the compound. Two Americans and four Frenchmen were killed and others were wounded. Funeral services were held and the men buried outside the compound.

One morning at 4:00 a.m. we were roused out of our building and forced to line up in the snow. Floodlights lit up the compound as if it were daylight in spite of the possibility of aircraft flying overhead. Machine guns were set up all around us and in the guard towers. Guards heavily armed walked through our ranks. They inspected our clothing and hands. Daylight came and we were still standing there, shivering in the cold. The Germans went through our buildings turning over every burlap mattress and in some cases ripped them open. They came out and checked us again. Then they began counting off preparing to shoot some of us. Their logic was, after killing some of us, someone would come forward and confess. Our camp leaders persuaded them to let them help find the guilty person. Finally one man was dragged away by four guards. We were allowed to return to our barracks. Later the American in charge came to our barracks and explained. One of the American cooks had been stealing extra food from the kitchen. This night he was surprised by a German guard. The cook killed the guard with a knife and hid the body under the kitchen sink. He then returned to his barracks and tried to wash the blood out of his jacket. The wet jacket with blood still on it gave him away.

Another danger was the compound was built on top of a hill. Under the hill was a rail line into a tunnel. The Germans hid a huge railroad gun in this tunnel. The gun could fire a shell for thirty miles. They fired the gun and then ran it into the tunnel under the compound. Allied planes came looking for the gun, but could not drop any bombs for fear of hitting the prisoners.

Time moves ever so slowly when you are in confinement. Each day you hope this day the war will end. Each hour you think of your family, how they are and how they will react to your capture. Each minute you wish you had something to fill your empty stomach. When fighting, the cold and dampness was our tormentor; now, as prisoners, hunger racked our bodies and controlled our thoughts.

Post cards were handed out to everyone to write to their family. The post cards were provided by the Red Cross. At first I did not wish to write. I was embarrassed of being a prisoner. Just the thought of my mother saying her son is in prison did not set with me. However, the veteran prisoners, those who had been here a longer time, convinced me to do otherwise. The cards were the only way the Red Cross or the Army will know for sure you are a prisoner of war. Otherwise, you will be listed as missing in action or maybe even declared dead. The Germans would not bother to notify the Red Cross or anyone else who they had captured.

The next problem, what to write. The Germans will censor our mail. Anything unfavorable in our treatment or adversity to them would cause the enemy to destroy the card. So you lie. Say you are treated good and ask for food parcels of your favorite foods. You hope the family will be able to read between the lines and know all is not good here.

You know too that a parcel will never get here before the end of the war.

It seemed like I was here for years, but after about three weeks some Red Cross parcels arrived for other foreign prisoners. They knew the Americans were used to better things and they volunteered to give their Red Cross packs to us. We were most grateful. However, there was only enough for a quarter of a box per man. At least for a little while we could get some good food in our stomachs. We divided up the contents between four men. I could have consumed the entire share and still been hungry. However, I knew I had to ration it out for a little while, at least for my own survival. Once opened, any canned goods had to be eaten right away as no refrigerator was provided. Thievery was also a problem. Everyone was out for his own survival. I rationed it, hiding my cache inside my clothing when I slept. Try sleeping with several cans inside your shirt on a straw mattress. The food did not last long, but it sure was good.

Transfer to Work Camp

Feb, '45

Ninety American POW's were to be moved from Bad Orb camp to a work camp deeper into Germany. I was to be part of that group. I was startled and fearful as I thought of moving farther from the American lines. It would be a longer time before rescue, maybe even closer to the Russian lines. Other prisoners said we might get better food at a work camp, but that did not happen.

It was supposed to be an overnight train trip to the new camp. We were given a partial loaf of bread, about four inches thick and a slice of sausage, similar to bologna, about two inches thick. This seemed like a feast, having only thin potato soup and black bread since capture. Little did I know, this would be the only food we received for six days. We were loaded into two box cars, forty-five to a car. The guards accompanying us had another box car. The German box cars were much smaller than the American cars, about five-eighths of ours. There was no water or toilet facilities provided, and not enough room for everyone to lie down at the same time. After two days and nights we were unlocked from our cars and marched through the city of Wiesbaden. The citizens shook their fists, spat and cursed us as we moved through the streets. We were led to a section that was in ruins from the bombing. In the middle of all this rubble, we were told we could take care of our toilet urges, while the citizens looked on. We were glad to get back to our box cars after that.

Asking why we were so long in getting to our camp, the guards told us the planes were bombing the railroads and the tracks had to be replaced or we had to detour around them. This news of course did nothing for our anxiety of we ourselves being the next target.

The very next day these fears were realized as we heard air raid sounded as we were sitting on a siding beside a town. The guards took off into town, presumably to an air raid shelter. We could see very little through the few cracks in the wood siding of our box car. If we pushed on the door, there was a crack we could look down the track. To our horror we found our three cars were connected to a train of flat cars with tiger tanks on board. There was no engine to our train. The Germans had a shortage of engines, so they ran the engines into tunnels or sheds to hide them from air raids. We heard the planes approaching. Some men began running from one end of the car to the other like frightened animals that were caged. Others knelt down and prayed. I stood there viewing

this crazy situation and thought of all that we had been through to have it end this way. I prayed, too.

We heard the whistle of the bombs just before they hit. The first bomb struck the far end of the guards' car, it went into a crater, forcing our car up, throwing everyone off their feet. We all ended into a tangled mess at one end of the car. The second bomb hit just beyond the other prisoners' car. It was thrown off the track, too. A hole the size of a basketball was blown in the second car. In all we had only bruises and a few cuts; our prayers were answered. Other bombs fell further up the track, but I could see no damage to the tanks, although there may have been.

Just as we were celebrating our safety from the bombing, our safety was again threatened, as some citizen of the town came running up to our cars with a gun. He was screaming in German something I could not understand. Someone translated his daughter was killed by one of the stray bombs and he wanted to kill all Americans. Our guards, just returning from the air raid shelter, restrained him and lead him back to town. We were then unloaded from our cars and marched down the tracks to another town. There we waited on the tracks as arrangements were made for the continuation of our trip. It was two more days before we arrived at our work camp.

Work Camp

Feb 28, '45

In the town of Tribnilz, Germany, was our work camp. It was north of Leipzig and south of Dessau. We arrived about February 28, 1945. All ninety of us were housed in a two-room building, surrounded by a ten foot barbed wire fence. There were some improvements over Bad Orb. We had bunk beds — no sleeping on the floor. The mattresses were the same, burlap bags filled with straw. There was a park bench type table on which to eat instead of sitting on the floor. Food was a little better at first, but after several weeks it became worse than the other camp. At first we had a loaf of bread for three men; but shortly it went to four men to a loaf. As time went on the loaf became smaller and smaller, the soup became thinner. The planes are bombing our supply lines, we are told by our captors.

Between our two bunk rooms a small room which held a large tub was placed. This was to serve as our toilet during the night when we were locked inside. In the mornings and before we were locked up for the night, there was a pit toilet outside to use. Every morning two men would have to empty the honey bucket.

We worked six days a week, from sunrise to sunset. Starting in the morning, we had our herb tea. Then we marched about a mile to our work site. Our job was laying track for a railroad to haul peat. The peat was used to make briquettes in a nearby factory.

Arriving at daybreak, we were put to work with shovels to level a roadbed for the train track. At sunset we returned to our barracks. Soup and bread was distributed. Sometimes I was so tired I could hardly get the spoon to my mouth. I immediately went to bed after the meal. Sometimes I would need help to get into my upper bunk. The work was hard for a healthy man, but in our weakened condition, it was cruel. My weight had dropped below a hundred pounds.

Civilian workers were our supervisors on the job, but our armed guards were always with us, shouting to work harder. No work, no eat, they kept repeating in German. Sometimes the guard would shout, "No food for this man tonight. He is not working hard

enough." However, we always shared the food equally with everyone. If anyone could slack on the job, he was praised in our group.

When we got too tired to go on, someone would try to get the guard or the supervisor into conversation. As the conversation progressed, others would stop work and get involved. We would try to converse on anything. With our limited German and their limited English, it was mostly a pantomime type conversation. We talked about our family or asked about theirs, about the war, or anything else. Suddenly the German would realize no work was being performed. They started to yell to get back to work, but we got a little break.

The Germans planted vegetable gardens everywhere. Land was not to be wasted. When harvest came, they piled the produce into a pile and covered it with dirt to protect it from frost. We would find these caches where most of the produce was removed (mostly potatoes, sugar beets, or turnips). A few sugar beets or turnips were mixed with the soil and forgotten. When we found something, we put it in our pant legs or inside our shirt to take back to the barracks to eat. If we were caught, we were beaten. One old guard (in his seventies) loved to make us think he did not see what was going on. Then when we got back to the barracks a search was conducted. The commandant knew who to search and the man was beaten. The old guard would laugh.

Our civilian supervisors and the guards got their lunch break. They carried their tin buckets with some stew or soup. We got nothing for lunch, so we rested. I tried to save some of my bread to eat at this time. One day I found some turnips. I had been beaten before, so I thought I would eat the turnips. I could save the bread. I would not be beaten. There was a search that night. The commandant went through my pockets and found the bread. He screams, "You all say you don't have enough to eat and this man has bread left over from last night!" I got a blow to the face with his fist and then another with the butt of his pistol. Another prisoner came to my rescue by saying, "He has been sick, so he could not eat his bread." The commandant hit me in the stomach and said, "Sick! Humbug!" and he left.

The commandant thought we were getting to look too ragged, so he ordered everyone to shave every week and get a haircut. One of our mortar men was a barber before service. He could stay back in the barracks and keep it clean. Then at night he could cut our hair. Thus he did not have to go out and work on the track during the day. This man wanted us to pay him for our haircuts by giving him part of our food. We all said no. He then refused to cut our hair. We thought that was okay, but what is the commandant going to do when no one has their hair cut? The barber thought a minute and said he would cut our hair.

Little by little the poor food took its toll on some of the prisoners. Six were so bad they were taken to the hospital. One of those taken was one of our mortar crew members. He was an older man of 38; we called him Pops. He bunked across from me in the prison camp. The guard said he died of spinal meningitis. The others taken to the hospital never returned either. When we asked about them, "They died," was the answer. One fellow slipped away from the work crew and disappeared. When we asked about him, they said he was shot. We did not know for sure of the fate of these seven men.

Beginning of the End

March, '45

Toward the end of March we could hear the thousands of plane raids flying overhead. All night long the drone of many planes high over head would keep us awake. By the time the last flying fortress passed going, the first would be coming back. Dessau to our north and Leipzig to our south, we could hear the plumb, plumb of the bombs hitting. We knew the next day we would be in for it, forced to work harder. After every nearby bombing raid the guards and civilians would be frightened and angry. They would take it out on us.

On Saturday, March 31, we were told we would have to work half the crew every Sunday. I was not in the half that worked the next day. The following Sunday, April 8, was Easter. Nobody worked Easter or Monday. Easter Monday was a national holiday also. I thought it was strange, as Hitler was supposed to be an atheist, yet he allowed two holidays for religious observance. We did not protest; the rest time was most welcome.

We knew the armies were getting closer and the bombings were more frequent. By Wednesday, April 11, we could hear the artillery in the distance. We were getting excited. The German families were dropping notes into our compound. Translated, these notes stated the writer's name and said they were not Nazi and were against the war, but could not speak for fear of reprisal. They wanted to be treated more favorably.

Thursday, April 12, the guard did not come in to wake us to go to work. They did not bring our tea, either. All day we waited as to what was going to happen next. That night several of the prisoners wanted to break out. They broke open a window. They waited at the window ready to leap out, climb the fence, and escape. I told them they would be shot, if not by the Germans, by the Americans in the darkness without the proper passwords. They would not listen to me. However, before they could leap out, our German guards came in. We were all hurried out into the road. The guards had their rifles in their hands, not slung on their shoulders as before. They marched us eastward, away from our work place and the people who supervised and beat us. Also, we were going away from the advancing American army. We delayed as much as possible, walking as slow as possible without getting a rifle butt in our back. At this time, I too thought of trying to slip out of line and disappear in the darkness. However, the guards kept close watch on us, running all around our column, urging us forward. We walked all night; by daylight we were out into level open farm lands. A British Spitfire came diving down at our column. We all hit the ditches as we were not sure if the pilot knew who we were. As soon as the plane passed, the guards hurried us onto the road again. We stalled as much as possible. We were reassembled on the road. The airplane dove at us again. After the third time, we decided to wave to the plane instead of lying flat in the ditches. The next pass the plane wiggled his wings. We felt he knew we were POW's on the move. He kept us pinned there for some time, then he flew off. Low on fuel, we thought. We reassembled and marched off. Shortly another plane appeared doing the same thing. We were stopped there most of the day. Our guards finally got us as far as a farm house and marched us into the courtyard. We stayed here for the night, sleeping outside. The guards were inside.

In the morning the guards put out white sheets on the fences around the house and courtyard. The guards no longer carried their rifles. We were at a standoff.

Liberation

Fri, April 13-Sat, April 14, '45

Mid-morning we could hear the tanks long before we could see them. A few German soldiers were wandering around aimlessly outside the farm area. Some had weapons and others had discarded them. They seemed not to know what to do. Shortly after noon we could see the tanks, thousands of them, creating a dust storm across the fields. As far as we could see in both directions were tanks. They circled around and bypassed and kept going. Some tanks had the American flag flying and the flag never looked so beautiful. We waved and they waved back, but kept going. Friday, the thirteenth, was not unlucky for us — we were ecstatic. Finally, a jeep stopped and asked if everything was all right. We said we needed food and weapons. They gave us some Hershey bars and took our guards prisoner. They did not have any weapons to give and promised to send someone to pick us up. The tanks disappeared and we were left alone. We waited all day and night. The family of the farm prepared some stew for us. We ate until we all threw up; the food was too rich for our stomachs. Then we went back for more. The second time around I took it easy and was able to keep it down. We rejoiced that night, expecting to be taken away to some American base. Next day no help came and we began to get discouraged.

One of my buddies found a French Renault automobile in one of the sheds. Five of us climbed in and we took off to find food and help. We followed the road in the direction the tanks had gone and found a forward aid station. However, they received orders to move forward and could not help us. They gave us some gasoline for the car and some directions to the main supply line. We set out for that supply line. Following the road the aid men had indicated, we approached a small village. In the village was a small band of German soldiers, bypassed by the fast-moving tanks. They did not know what to think of five Americans in a French car driving into this village. We had gone too far to turn back. We hurried through without a shot being fired. We could not go back now, so we continued on. At the next village we did not see any soldiers, but we stopped and asked some civilians. They did not know, but said some Americans had passed through and requested all arms and weapons be turned in to the Bürgermeister (mayor). We went to his home to get some of these weapons to defend ourselves in case of another village like the last one. I got a pistol and a German sword and was looking for a rifle and ammunition when my buddies said they were leaving. We continued on the same road and finally found the supply line. None of the trucks had time to stop. They had to keep going to deliver the supplies to the fast-moving front. We followed the trucks. Somewhere along this road we could get some help. However, our car broke down. The gas was too rich for this French car. We could not get it going again. Trucks whizzed by but none had time to stop. Finally, one repair truck stopped, pushed our car off into the ditch and gave us a ride. He dropped us off in a large town. There we found an MP directing traffic and he gave us directions to a POW collection point. We walked there. They gave us some food and a place to stay for the night with about two hundred other ex-POW's.

The next morning we were loaded on trucks and headed for an airport. Here we were cautioned about possible snipers, German diehards who might still be around. The airport was just cleared less than an hour before. We waited another hour before twenty or more C47 (DC3) planes began landing. Unloading of drums of gasoline began as soon as they rolled to a stop. In a short time we climbed on board and the plane immediately took off. We sat on the floor. I asked the crewmen where they had started this trip. He said, "England." Then I asked how long a flight was it from England. He replied, "Four

hours." These planes had taken off two hours before this airport was captured from the Germans. The plane flew us to Le Havre, France.

Return to America

April 15-May 13, '45

From the Le Havre airport we were trucked to Camp "Lucky Strike," a rehabilitation camp for ex-POW's. We got showers and clean clothes, the first clean clothes since leaving the states. A short physical was given and we were put on a "get fat" diet. Red Cross had a canteen there giving milkshakes to us. Some men overdid, taking too many and almost died. So they limited us by making us wait an hour before we went back for seconds. We also got haircuts (I never got mine from the mortar man in POW camp). We rested between walks to the canteen and looked for buddies we left at the farm house and those separated when we changed camps.

We were separated in groups as to geographical location of our home town. This way it was easier for the army to arrange immediate transportation to a camp nearest our home. We were questioned on any atrocities or violations of the Geneva Convention and who did them. I did not know the names of any of the violators. If I did report these, I would be held in Europe for the trials. I just wanted to get home, so I let it pass.

Saturday, April 28, we were trucked to the harbor for ship loading. The truck I was on broke down and the other trucks went around us. We waited for a long time until another vehicle was available to pick us up. When we neared the ship, it blew its horn. We hurried on board and the gang plank was raised even before I got to the top. The ship set sail immediately.

Stopping in Southampton, England, for fuel, we joined a forty-seven ship convoy for the States. The ship was the M.S. Marine Robin, much smaller than the ship I came across the other way. They asked for volunteers for KP. I had good luck on the other ship, so I stepped forward. I wanted to get near the food. I stood back until last again. I was assigned to the bake shop with two others. We cleaned up the pots and pans after the baker made delicious pies, cakes, and donuts. The troop mess was right next door, so I could get all I wanted from them without standing in the long mess lines. Of course, I ate too much everyday. That caused an unforeseen problem. The diet the troops were on had something added to add weight and fill out the ex-POW's before they returned to their families. I got too much of that chemical that was added. I bloated out to unnatural proportions. My face was as if I had been beaten.

During the voyage, we heard of Roosevelt's death and the surrender of Germany. A German U-boat surrendered to our convoy, which caused quite a curiosity that the whole convoy came to a halt in the middle of the Atlantic. I could not see the U-boat; it was beyond our sights.

Sunday, May 13, just one month from liberation, we entered New York harbor. This time I did see the Statue of Liberty, but at a distance. The weekend boaters were out on this spring day and we were surrounded by many well-wishers to welcome us back.

We were taken to Camp Kilmer, the same camp we had left from. Here, for only twenty-four hours, we were given a physical and our personnel file brought up to date. (My records were lost.) Pay was brought up to date. When you are "on the line" you have no need for money. We just signed our pay to be sent home. I could not remember the last time I had done that. They gave me four hundred dollars until they could check

to the time of capture, or others until the war's end. Survival was a lot of luck and up to God.

I often wondered what changes in the events of the battle for Rimling would have happened if I had not fired the three shots I did. If I had not tried to fire the first two shots, I would not have had clean ammunition in my carbine to fire that third shot. If my gun was useless to fire that third shot, I would not have had time to change clips before the German hurled his grenade at me. Would I have had my leg blown off as he did or would I have been killed? Would the German and his squad rush the barn after the grenade exploded and killed more of my company's men or captured them a day earlier? These are questions I pondered many times. I never considered myself a hero, but just a timid warrior trying to save himself.

further for my records. I went to the dentist. Without a toothbrush for six months, it's no wonder I had seven cavities. They filled them in one sitting. Twenty-four hours in the country and we were on a train to the nearest base to our home town. For me it was Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Two hundred and nineteen days out of the country — a lifetime for a nineteen-year-old warrior.

Reflections

This is the story of the war from my viewpoint as I saw it. Going through the battles of war is like going through hell. However, I went through battles more as a spectator than as a fighter. Let the riflemen do the fighting, I was told many times, and that was fine with me. I felt I was not trained sufficiently to be a good rifleman and did not desire to get the training under fire. Certainly I made the right decision to become mortar crewman, so I could stay somewhat behind the firing line. If ordered I would have become more involved in the fighting, but the aggressive attitude to attack and kill the enemy was not in my upbringing.

I was glad to let the riflemen do the fighting. Still I felt useless and unproductive. The dangers were always there, whether firing a rifle or carrying a mortar. Shell fire, bombs, machine guns, mines and booby traps and snipers were threats and dangers we faced every day. We could never get away from the cold and almost constant wet rain. I cursed the rain and cold more than the Germans.

I received the Bronze Star Medal for the battle of Rimling. The certificate reads, "For meritorious achievements in ground combat against the armed enemy during World War II in the European, African, Middle Eastern Theater of Operations." I am very proud to have received this medal and would never give it back. However, I feel I did not really merit it. I fired only three shots at the enemy. There are some who died that deserved it more.

While in POW camp, I tried to come up with an explanation to my mother and friends. How can I explain my being taken prisoner; surely they would think I was a coward to give up. I was embarrassed and humiliated of becoming a prisoner of war. Also, I was worried about the shock of my capture and its effect it would have on my sick mother. I was not sure if she would still be alive when I returned. My mother, however, took it quite well. She had heard on the radio news about my outfit in a bloody battle on the front. She anxiously awaited a letter from me dated after that battle. None came. About three weeks later she received a telegram stating I was "Missing in Action." Later she received a letter from the War Department of the possibility of my being a prisoner of war. They would wait until the Red Cross confirmed this. It was not until almost the time I was released at the German farm house that my mother received my post card I wrote in Bad Orb. About a week later, by the time the War Department notified my mother of my officially being taken prisoner, I was already on my way home. She was to contact the Red Cross for any questions or help. Then about three weeks later I knock on her door. I was welcomed with tears of joy and hugs.

It's hard to say how many of my company survived. The wounded did not always return to the same company or even the same division. When their wounds healed they were sent wherever needed at that day. The more seriously wounded were sent to the States for limited duty or discharged. Replacements came, some fresh to the front; others, wounded and healed, were sent to the front again. Some replacements only lasted a few days and had to be replaced and replaced again and again. Some, like myself, survived up

