

Irwin Smoler

*Company B
424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division*



Smoler's visit to the Ardennes, 1994

John, shortly after I joined the association, I sent you an after action report of my first day of combat, Dec. 16th 1944, with Co B of the 424th. After attending the reunions at Orlando and Roanoke and talking to many of my fellow veterans, I realized that the men of the 422nd and 423rd knew little of what went on with the 424th.

I thought, therefore, that I might write a detailed account of my last combat assignment which occurred early in the second week of March 1945, as well as a very brief account of what went on in our platoon, company and regiment between Dec 16th 1944 and the beginning of March 1945.

During a three month period from the 16th of December, 1944 to March 12th, 1945 the regiment, except for very brief one or two day periods, was in continuous contact with the enemy, either in the defense and slow withdrawal, or in the attack and advance.

Starting out the 17th of December we began a slow and orderly hill by hill withdrawal until we linked up with the 112th Inf. of the 28th Division, CCB of the 9th Armored Div. and CCB of the 7th Armored Div to form the "Fortified Goose-Egg" in front of St-Vith. We, along with the 112th Inf. formed the southern end of the goose-egg. To get to this point I remember wading the Our River at least twice in freezing waist high water, holding out rifles over our heads. As part of the "Fortified Goose-Egg," we had helped hold up the Germans long enough for reserves to be brought into place as well as to disrupt their timetable to get to the Muese River.

For this and some subsequent actions, the regiment, along with the other units involved, and all of its officers and men, later received the Belgium Fouregerre, a unit citation.

When the order came from General Ridgeway on December 23rd we began a long daylight withdrawal from the goose-egg into and through the lines of the 82nd Airborne Division, which had come in from theatre reserve. We dug in with them, and, as I recall, they didn't look any better than we did, and frankly, I didn't think they were any better soldiers than we were, especially after our recent experiences.

A couple of days later, the 2nd Bn. went over to engagement at Manhay, Belgium, and within a few days, at year end, the westward retreat ended and we began the long road back with plenty of fighting to come on the way.

By early March we were in bivouac in a clump of woods near Berk, Germany. We were dug in at the edge of a tree line facing the Siegfried Line. This position, incidentally, was not too far from the positions of the 422nd Inf On the morning of Dec, 16th 1944.

Our company had suffered a great number of casualties during this two-and-a-half-month period, as well as considerable loss of men due to combat fatigue, frostbite, trench foot and even self-infliction. We had received a large number of replacements, but somehow they were always the first casualties in any engagement. I remember that every time we went back to the line in 1/2 ton trucks, after being in reserve a few days, I used to look at the replacements and wonder which ones would not be with us the next time we went back.

As for myself, I was the only one left of the 41 men of my platoon who had, on Dec. 16th climbed aboard the Service Co. 6x6 to counter-attack the German penetration. As I noted in my first report, we lost Sgt. Arvold's whole squad on the 16th of December; we lost Lt. Bailey and Sgt. Roden's whole squad when they failed to return from a patrol in early January. Sgt. Jones's squad had taken casualties early on and he himself received a field commission in early February and left the company soon thereafter. Sgt. "A", our platoon Sgt. and Sgt. Byrne our platoon guide, had both succumbed to battle fatigue and were evacuated. As a matter of fact, I, as the platoon messenger, was in a foxhole with Sgt. "A" when he went off his rocker. He kept asking me to find people who were either dead or missing. When he insisted on my taking a message to Sgt. Arvold I knew it was time to call for a medic. The remnants of Jones's squad were all gone for one reason or another.

By this time in early March I was a Staff Sgt. and squad leader, having been promoted twice during the battle. My squad consisted of eight or nine replacements and I had no assistant squad leader.

Because my platoon had ceased to exist, I reported to Lt. Brown, the first platoon leader and acting company commander. He used my squad as sort of an I and R squad, as it seemed to me we were catching a recon or contact patrol almost every other day. Most were three man patrols, some five man and some full squad.

From the point of view of casualties, the company had fared little better than my original platoon. We were down to 2 officers, having Lt. Capt. Peyser, our C.O. and Lt. Slutzky, our Exec to wounds. Lt. Bailey was lost on patrol and Lt. Woolcock, our weapons platoon leader, was killed during the attack on Ennal on January 13th. The only two left were Lt. Brown and Lt. "N", the 3rd platoon leader. I'm not sure, but Capt. Peyser might have recovered from his wounds and returned to the company about that time.

The combat assignment I referred to previously began in the early evening when a runner came down from the company C.P. telling me to alert and prepare my squad for a night recon patrol. I, along with Lt. "N" of the third platoon, were ordered to report immediately to the Battalion S-2 for briefing. I was not particularly happy to report to the Bn. S-2 as firstly, I never considered him to be an adequate replacement for Lt. Huddleston, our original S-2, who had also been killed during the battalion attack on Ennal and secondly, I had some words with him a few days earlier when I felt he was nitpicking about the amount of detail that I had brought back from a recon patrol in daylight to investigate a clump of trees in our company front, close to the dragon's teeth.

In addition, I thought the patrol itself was stupid; what it did was to require us to go out in broad daylight, over an open field without cover, in plain view of the people manning the pillboxes. As it was we came under automatic weapons and mortar fire and we were lucky to get back in one piece. To top it all off, one of the men with me, a recent replacement, froze when the mortar rounds started falling and he wouldn't move. I knew I couldn't leave him, so, in desperation, I took out my trench knife, put my thumb a half

inch from the tip and jammed it into his rear end; he moved.

When Lt. "N" and I arrived at the Bn. C.P, the S-2 showed us a map of the area which indicated a road in our front starting at the pillbox line and going straight back to the German rear. He told us that the 87th division of the 3rd Army, which was on our right, had advanced that morning and were to stay south or to the right of the road. He indicated that we were going to move out soon and that if we encountered any resistance and had to call in artillery, we didn't want to fire on friendly troops. As such, we were to cross the open field, go through the dragon's teeth and go at least a mile down the road to see if we saw any sign of the 87th Division. During the briefing two things hit me at once. One was that with my squad dug in at the extreme right of the company front, I was commanding the unit guarding the right flank of 1st army; the second was that I now knew why he had ordered the daylight patrol a few days earlier. He was probing to see how well defended the positions in front of us were. What I didn't appreciate was being the tip of the probe.

What I couldn't figure out was why my squad was picked for this patrol and not from Lt. "N's" platoon. I assumed that it was either because neither Lt. "N" nor any of his squad leaders had much patrol experience or because the S-2 knew that I had been over some of the ground a few days earlier and therefore requested me.

Upon arriving back at my squad location and after checking them for equipment and making sure that they carried no letters or such, we were ready to go.

I asked Lt. "N" if he wanted me up front with him or if he wanted me to bring up the rear. Much to my surprise, he ordered me to take the lead and told me that he would bring up the rear to make sure that no one chickened out. The one thing I thought then was that for sure he was no Lt. Bailey.

The trip out on the patrol went by absolutely without incident. We covered the 800 or so yards of open field went through the dragon's teeth, found the road and went down the road at least a mile and a quarter to a mile and a half without seeing or hearing a soul.

I checked with Lt. "N," who agreed that we had gone more than far enough and I asked if he wanted me to lead the squad back in. Again he surprised me by saying that he would lead the squad back in and that I should bring up the rear. He said that everyone should just turn around and we would go back the way we came.

We had gone back about two thirds of the way on the road when I heard a challenging "halt" coming from a pillbox just to the left of the road. My two scouts who were just ahead of me and I hit the dirt immediately and I noticed that the rest of the squad, which had become strung out was continuing on its way.

After what seemed like a long time, I couldn't think of what else to do, so I yelled out "raus mit der." Again, after a very long pause, I heard a voice yelling back "Nicht shiessen, Kamerad, Mir kommen" and out came seven Germans with their hands up. By their uniforms I could see that they were regular Wehrmacht and by the white piping on their epaulets I knew they were Infantry. They were led by a soldier who appeared to be a Non-Com. I later found out he was Feldwebel or Sergeant, and spoke some English.

After checking them for weapons and finding none, I was ready to start back. The Sergeant had told me that the main body had pulled out and that they were part of a rear

guard. He also told me that one of his men was some kind of field policeman who was there to make sure they didn't leave their post, and asked me to watch him carefully. Before we could move out, my lead scout, who was tall farmboy from Nebraska, said to me "Sarge, we can't take them in." When I asked him why, he said, "They don't have any pistols." I started to laugh, but kept a straight face and told their German Sgt. that if he had any pistols in the pillbox, he was to go back and get them. He must have thought we were nuts, but he turned back to the pillbox and came back with a Walther 6.65mm pistol in a holster. I gave it to my scout and got ready to move out when the German Sgt. said we couldn't go that way as the road was mined. Instead he pointed to a dirt path at the side of the road and we took that route.

On the way back he asked me what would happen to them, and I told him that after interrogation he would probably be on his way to prison camp in the States. I told him not to worry as he would most likely go to a prison camp in Florida and drink orange juice for the rest of the war. I had told him that I was also a Sgt. and for some reason he confided in me, and told me that he was from Baden-Baden and asked that if he gave me his wife's name and address would I, if I got to Baden-Baden, find her and tell her that he was safe. I told him that I couldn't do that but that I was sure that she would be notified in the normal way. Just before we hit the dragon's teeth he told me that he had some friends over to the right, who might also want to surrender and would I take them too.

I thought about it, and considering that there were only three of us, and seven of them, I felt I didn't need anymore, and I certainly had no great need to be a hero. After we had gone back through the dragon's teeth and about two thirds of the way to our lines, I began to get giddy with relief and decided to give them close-order drill all the way back to the company C.P.

All I knew was Rechts, Links, Vorwart and Halt, but somehow I managed it, with some English thrown in, so ended my last combat assignment.

Within a very few days we were relieved from the combat zone and boarded trains made up of "Forty and Eight" box cars for the trip to St. Quentin, France. At no time after I got back or until I left the regiment at St. Quentin did Lt. "N" ever come to talk to me to tell or ask what happened. He made his report, I made mine and that was it.

Within a few days of our arrival at St. Quentin Lt. Brown called me in, shook my hand and handed me orders from Regiment which ordered me to proceed to the ground forced training center at Fontian Bleau, France for an eight week officers training course. Included in the orders was a 24-hour pass to Paris, where I was to change transportation.

I was very surprised, as I had completely forgotten that in mid-February Lt. Brown had sent me back to regiment to be interviewed by Col. Hewitt, the Regimental Exec, as well as to take a physical exam. After handing me the orders, Lt. Brown told me to see the Supply Sgt. and to draw a fresh uniform. At supply, I was issued a brand new Eisenhower jacket, new O.D. pants, a set of Staff-Sergeant stripes, some division patches and two dark green felt strips to around the epaulets of my jacket.

This was a new regulation that called for all infantry unit commanders down to the level of squad leader to wear these strips around the epaulets of their jackets.

I had never worn stripes before, as I didn't make PFC until we were on the ship crossing the English Channel en route to France and I certainly didn't wear them in combat. After I had sewn on the stripes, patch, and felt tabs to the jacket on as well as pinned on my C.I.B. and put the jacket on, I felt as if I was King of the World, and certainly ready to go to Paris. I was much prouder then I ever was when I finally put on Pinks and Greens and pinned god bars on my shoulders.

Incidentally, I had read enough about Paris to know to go directly to Montmarte where I found the Bal Tabarin night-club. I drank in the scene like a taller Toulouselautec and spent a great 24 hours.

The course in Fountainbleau was routine enough, except that all of the lectures and field exercises were in the forest of Foutainbleau. I found it difficult to pay attention at times as I would daydream and was constantly expecting D'Artagnan and the three musketeers to come careening by on horseback looking for Cardinal Richelieu's men.

I did run into Lt. "N" late one night in July at an officers club in Cannes, France. We were both on leave, he from the company and I from Camp San Francisco in Chateau-Thierry, France where I was awaiting orders for redeployment to the Far East. Now that I was an officer, we were able to have what in diplomatic language is called a frank exchange of views on the subject of the patrol in which we had jointly taken part. I must say that I took a great deal of satisfaction from the conversation.

It turned out, as I wrote before, that I never did go to the Far East, as a few weeks later Harry Truman ordered the bomb dropped at Hiroshima.

To this day, and every year since its inception, I send a \$25.00 donation and membership dues to the Truman Library in Independence, MO.

In so far as I am concerned, he saved my life, as I never thought I could make it through a second time. I should add that every officer at the camp felt exactly the same way.

When the Japanese finally surrendered, five of us officers, one of whom was tank platoon leader from the 9th Armored Division, who was among the first to cross the Remagen Bridge, broke into the company kitchen, liberated a case of GI. soap and traded it to a French farmer near Chateau Thierry for two cases of champagne.

Even though the French Farmer, by the then rate of exchange, skinned up on the deal, we had found a wonderful way to celebrate the end of the war.

Respectfully, Irwin C. Smoler, 424/B



Staff Sergeant Irwin Smoler (l) and Corporal Al Vitali 424/B in the Ardennes 1944. Smoler received a battlefield commission from his actions in the Bulge.

Editor's note: Irwin C. Smoler, 1st Vice-President for the year 2004-05.

Irwin was just getting ready to attend the 59th Annual reunion of the 106th Infantry Division Association, when he became ill and was sent to the hospital for care.

Irwin was looking forward to a good recovery, attending the annual reunion and accepting the "Association Presidency" for the year 2005-2006.

Just before the 59th annual reunion was called to order in Arlington, Virginia, our comrade, President Elect, had a turn for the worse, He died on November 18, 2005.

His death is listed in the "Memoriam" of this CUB magazine.

As editor I had promised Irwin I would publish his story on one of the many actions of "B" Company 424th Combat Infantry Regiment. This is to fulfill my promise to Comrade Irwin to print his story.

John Kline, Editor

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**INDIANA
MILITARY**
Organization

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