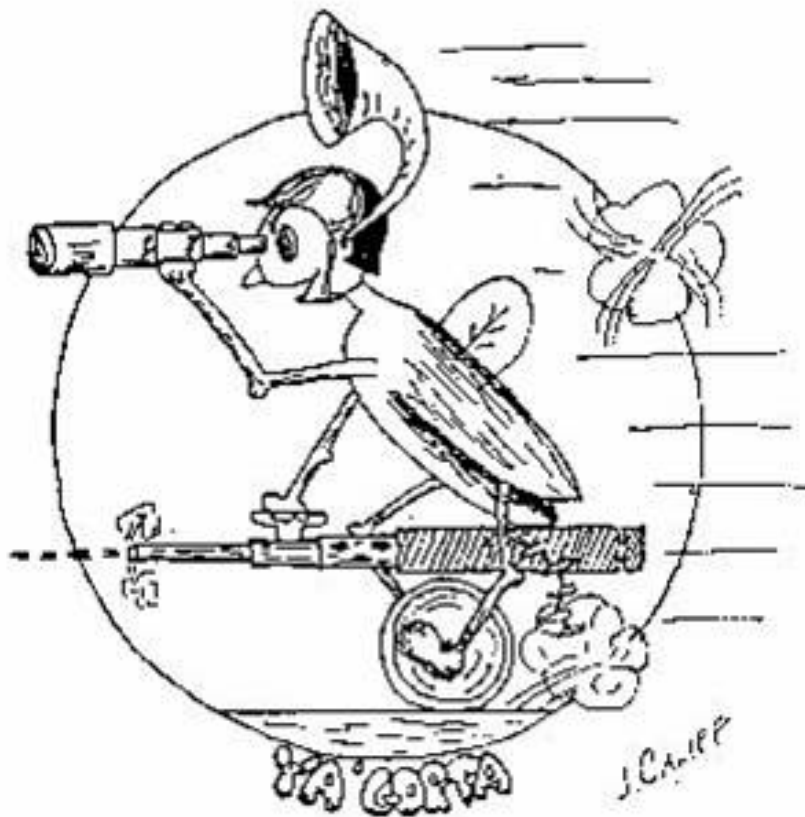


"A Walk Through The Woods"
by Richard Sparks
106th Infantry Division



A WALK THROUGH THE WOODS
Revised Edition



An Illustrated History of the infamous
I & R Platoon
423rd Infantry Regiment
106th Infantry Division

Richard D. Sparks
2003

DEDICATION

This account
Is dedicated to the memory
of

William D. Morris, III

Killed in Action

Ferrieres, Belgium

December 23, 1944

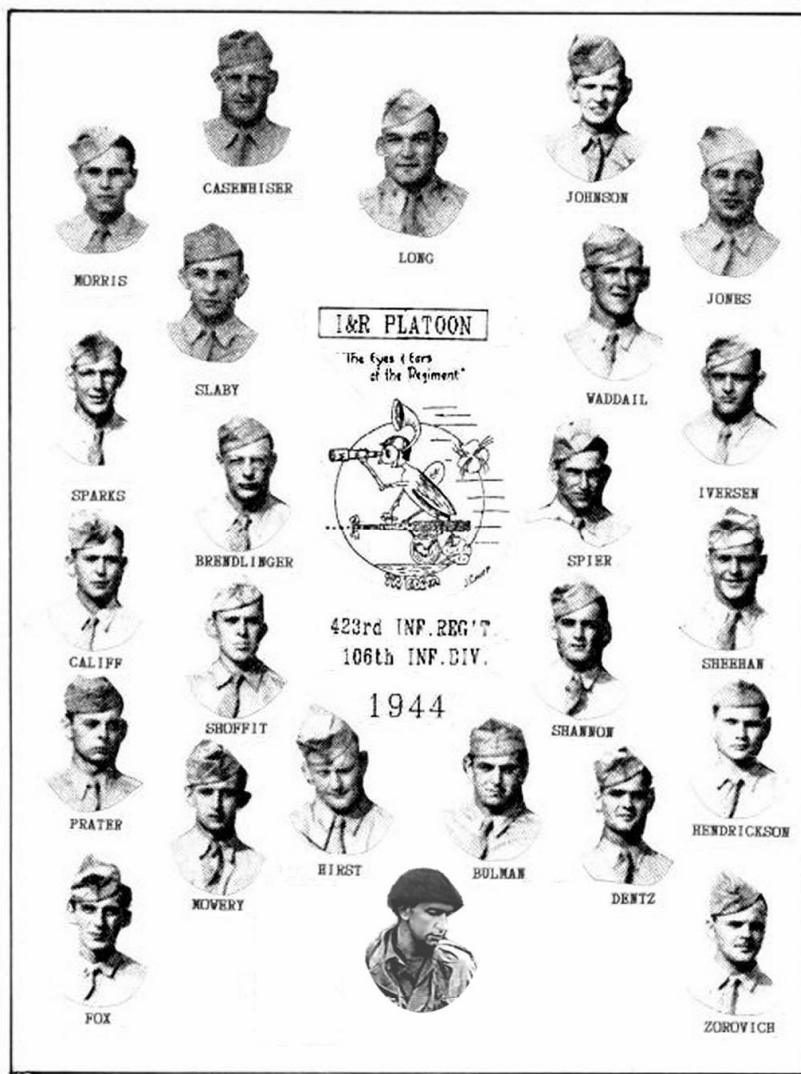
-and-

To all the other men of the platoon

that have been called

to a higher

headquarters



Author's Notes

Regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoons are the operational arm of the S-2 (Intelligence) staff of an infantry regiment. Their mission is to collect information about the enemy that will assist the Commanding Officer in making his combat decisions. They are known as "*The Eyes and the Ears of the Regiment*." They receive normal infantry training coupled with training in specific skills related to their mission. Their main work is done before an attack is commenced so that the regiment has the latest information about the enemy. For administrative purposes, they are assigned to Regimental Headquarters Company.

Actually, there were three I&R Platoons of the 423rd Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division. The original I&R was formed when the division was first activated on March 15, 1943 at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. In the spring of 1944, after Tennessee maneuvers, many of the platoon were drafted out as overseas replacements, leaving a

cadre consisting of Bob Casenhiser, Bill Morris, Bob Jones, Ted Slaby and Bob Waddail to receive incoming replacements, many from the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), a college based program. This second I&R trained at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. This unit went overseas and into combat together and is the group about which this account is written. The third I&R was formed when the division was reconstituted in March 1945, its duties consisting of occupation duty in Germany after hostilities ended. The division was deactivated on September 1, 1945 and the I&R officially ceased to exist. Bob Casenhiser was the only soldier to serve with the I&R for its entire existence.

In 1946, shortly after discharge from the Army, I wrote a short account of the I&R entitled "*As We Lived.*" Forty four years later, at the urging of Sam Davis, former CO of the 423rd Headquarters Company, I dug out the manuscript and took it to Chicago for the 43rd Reunion of the 106th. One night in a barroom bull session, John "Irish" Sheehan volunteered to put on tape, his memories of our combat days if I would agree to expand upon my original document. Thus this story was born in its present form. Subsequently, I received a similar tape from Sam Bordelon and these two tapes, along with extensive correspondence and conversations with Ivan "Ike" Long, formed the basis for the narrative. I also received a copy of a letter that John Califf had written to Sam Davis in July, 1945 in which he tells of our trip back to St. Vith. This letter clarified a number of details and added authenticity to the memories of all of us.

Two exceptional books provided me with an understanding of the overall background of the campaign. They are "*St. Vith - Lion in the Way*" by Col. R. Ernest Dupuy, the official history of the 106th commissioned by the 106th Division Association (1949), and Charles B. MacDonald's "*A Time for Trumpets*" published by William Morrow and Co., New York (1985).

In 1990, at the 44th Reunion in Sacramento, I had the opportunity to talk at length with Bob Jones, Johnny (Chris) Johnson, Bob Casenhiser, Irish Sheehan, and Ivan Long. These conversations helped immensely to clarify the sequence of events I have written about, and are the source of additional anecdotes that can only come out of such informal sessions. Ted Slaby, who was a close neighbor, jogged my memory of even more stories. Sam Davis was of invaluable help, supplying information of the early days on the "Battle of the Bulge."

And lest we forget, John Califf is responsible for the platoon logo, drawn way back in 1944. That little guy has gone everywhere with everyone of us ever since. John has also been of immense help to me in bringing the facts contained in this revision up to date. His extensive research, particularly of the events that occurred in St. Vith, brought out facts that I had not known of when I wrote the original account. For even more detail and pictures of the battle scenes, I refer you to his account written in 2002 - "*Return and Remembrance - An Album of War and Two Winters in the Ardennes*"

I have included a number of pictures following each chapter, hoping that their inclusion will help humanize the stories I have tried to tell about these men. Some are from my private collection. Many are pictures that members of the platoon have allowed me to use that were taken in 1944. Obviously, pictures from our days in wartime Europe are almost non-existent. To help fill in those blank spaces, John Califf has allowed me to use a few of the pictures he took on his trip to Belgium in the late fall of 1998. They look

almost as if they were taken in 1944. In the spring of 1999, I, also went to Belgium with two of my sons. With the help of three dedicated Belgian citizens, Henri Rogister, Anne Marie Simon and Karl Heinz Noel, I was able to take a number of pictures of the places where the men of the I&R had left their footprints. Even though the snow was absent, these places exist almost as we saw them in 1944. A few other pictures have been taken from various archives and are reminiscent of those times and places of the past. The maps that are included trace the route the platoon followed in their journeys.

From all this material, I decided to include only those events that could be substantiated by at least two of the platoon. Thus, in spite of the problems posed by a fifty nine year old recall, I believe that this account is fairly accurate --- at least to the extent of my organizing ability. If individuals remember it differently, so be it. At least I have prodded some memories..

I have not tried to portray us as heroes. Our experiences were unusual and worth knowing about. Our buddies that were in the POW camps suffered much worse. In a way, we were just lucky --- but maybe some skill, training and innate "smarts" had something to do with it. I've preferred to think so.

RDS - 2003

Note: To complete the saga of the I&R, I wrote "*Over and Out*" in 2001 that traces, through anecdotes, the events of the reconstituted third I&R during their time in Europe from the breakup of the platoon in 1945 until discharge. To complete my mission, I compiled and edited a document in 1998 entitled "*La Guerre Fini*", the individual stories submitted to me by members of the 423rd Headquarters Company that tell of their lives, families and civilian endeavors after they were discharged. Those of you that have this trilogy have a pretty good idea what the I&R was all about.

Wars, in their never ending sequence, have brought forth many stories -- stories of gallantry, stories of heroism, of suffering and of conquest. They deal with individuals or groups of individuals who fought for a cause.

This is the story of such a group of individuals; not individuals in the true sense of the word but rather individual lives running so closely parallel in every respect that they, in essence, were one. This is the story of men who also fought for a cause. Some call it patriotism, some democracy, some freedom. They called it personal happiness. They saw action with all it's destructive fury. They saw a few of the group leave them, some permanently, some only temporarily. Individually the stories of these lost men may never be completed. But in spirit they lived with the group, fought with the group, continued on with the group until the common goal was reached -- for they were one.

This could be called a story of their experiences, but actually that is a secondary issue. Rather, it is a story of the reactions of war on a group of typical Americans -- what they talked about -- how they laughed together and believed in each other. For that was their outstanding characteristic. They were humans to the "nth" degree, and they proved that not even war, with all it's hatred and destruction could make them forget that.

Collectively they were like any group of soldiers. They admired pinups, talked about girls and sex, ate everything and anything, played practical jokes in scores and got out of

as much work as they could. Their mission in combat was a dangerous one so, in style, they acted rough and tough. But too, as a group, they were highly individualized. They had their own vocabulary, rebelled openly against regulations, argued constantly over some trivial matter far from the minds of all, laughed equally as much at equally trivial issues built up and over emphasized in a way only their style of thinking could understand. Most of all they were proud -- proud of the outfit, proud of each other, proud at the slightest excuse for anything they offered for any purpose. Their pride was something that was always with them.

Yes, they were exceptional because they were common. They put forth the principles in their actions that men have often tried to write about, but have failed. They were human in every respect. They understood humans. They loved life. They lived life fully.

This story will not do justice to them, for nothing so fragile as a few words scribbled on a sheet of paper will ever truly portray what they knew of each other. This is written, rather, in the hope that it will provide pleasant memories for those who know these men as I do.

RDS -1946

RDS - 1946

1

Camp Atterbury

April—October 1944

All the lights went out. Citizens closed and bolted their doors. Children cringed, terrified, in their mother's arms. Even the animals stayed out of sight. It was the night of October 5, 1944 and, unknowingly, the small town of Columbus, Indiana was to be witness to one of the great events in history. No, it wasn't an invasion - not a manhunt - not even a convention. The I&R were having their "Farewell to the States" party.

At eight o'clock sharp, a rumbling 6x6 rolled to a screeching stop in front of the local armory. Upstairs in the drill hall, everything was resplendently laid out, including two of the bartenders, in preparation for the biggest problem the I&R had yet faced - how to leave the States in the most rundown condition possible. The band was set up, the floor waxed, the bar opened and food on the tables. Everything was perfect, except that GI's hate to dance with themselves, and at the time, there was no one else to dance with. Someone had goofed. Finally individual recon units were sent out and, in a surprisingly short time, returned with beaucoup objective

The band played - we danced - the liquor flowed - we sang - the liquor flowed - we laughed - and the liquor flowed. In the midst of all the mad confusion, Giboob Spier tried his best to impersonate F.D.R., Churchill and many others, not excluding our invited guest Captain Sam. A good time was being had by all. Everyone was busy picking out

his prospective date for the evening, and no one, wallflower or not, was left with nothing to do. One of the men, Aunt Minnie Brendlinger, was even heard to say, "C'mon baby! Lesh take a walk!" to which the buxom lass replied, "Oink, Oink!"

There were two incidents that night that will never be forgotten. The first centered around John "Rat" Califf. For the first time in military history, a private chewed out a captain. It seems that Captain Sam and Rat had both attended Clemson College in the good old days where "Rat" was the handle given to first year students. Captain Sam was a senior and thus outranked him in the military tradition of the university. But, while reminiscing that night, Rat decided that they should reverse rolls and he put Captain Sam through an imaginary manual of arms, chewing him out for the slightest mistake.

And then there was Willie Bulman. He was known as the man who could drink more in less time and, still stay on his feet, than anyone in the platoon. But his buddies determined that the record was not to go unbroken, so, with a few spiked drinks of the weirdest variety, he was enticed over the cliff. Halfway through the evening he was seen jitterbugging - he didn't dance - and toward the end, he was found lying resplendently in the arms one "stunning" brunette. Willie made the trip home in the prone.

And so the affair ended. Men were stacked in the trucks under supervision of the the loading crew of Shoffit, Hirst, Prater and Sparks and 1st Sergeant Jim Spencer acted as a capable chauffeur all the way back to the barracks. Ike Long seemed a little worried, however. He had requisitioned the truck saying it was for a range detail.

After Tennessee maneuvers, the 106th moved, in March 1944, to permanent quarters at Camp Atterbury Indiana for final overseas training. Soon after arriving however, many of the men in the division were transferred overseas as replacements leaving many units with only a skeleton force serving as cadre for a new influx of men from basic training centers, transferees from other branches of the service and those that had been assigned to the Army Specialized Training Program. (ASTP), a college program that was supposed prepare them for reconstruction assignments after the war was over.

The I&R was no exception. The cadre was composed of T/Sgt. Bob Casenhiser, 1st Squad leader Sgt. Bill Morris and Assistant Squad leader, Cpl. Ted Slaby, 2nd Squad leader Sgt. Bob Jones and Assistant Squad leader Cpl. Bob Waddail. 1st Lt. Ivan Long was assigned as Platoon Leader, and by his admission, wasn't completely sure just what an I&R Platoon was supposed to do. They had the unenviable task of shaping up a bunch of ASTPers into a fighting unit. Eddie Shannon and Mike Zorovich came from the Air Corp. and Al Shoffit was transferred in from Company L to round out the new outfit. Supposedly members of the I&R were selected because of higher than average Army IQ scores and the ability to apply their "smarts" in an outfit that would have a special mission in combat. Most were nineteen and twenty year olds with no special attachments back home.

The I&R was quartered on the second floor of the barracks directly across from the Orderly Room, Company Headquarters and the Supply Room. The bottom floor housed the Medical Detachment as well as various Headquarters personnel such as drivers,

clerks, supply personnel, etc. In the barracks on the left was the Communications Platoon (Commo). The Mess Hall was on the right.

The first task for the non-coms was to get their motely crew into some kind of physical condition and there were many hours spent on physical training. Of course there were the long marches that were reminiscent of basic training. In one of his letters home to his mother, Al Shoffit describes it this way:

June 28, 1944

"We had our twenty-five miler all right last night. What a hike! We left at 6:00 PM and got in somewhere around 2:00 AM this morning. The hike had to be taken in less than eight hours. Let me tell you, that twenty five miles is no joke. You should see the way the guys have been limping around today. Even though I have no blisters, my feet are plenty sore, especially the insteps. I console myself that I came through in as good shape as almost everyone else and better than a lot."

"We were singing most of the way. I like an outfit that will sing on a march. It helps a lot. and this is the singin'est bunch I've been in yet. You get everyone singing and they forget their feet and everything."

Some said that the I&R was cocky and considered itself above regulations. Its men recognized that most regulations were to be obeyed, but those regulations that interfered with their sense of individualism, were meant to be broken as often as possible. As a result they acted in a different manner than most outfits and took pride in doing so. They would let no one reflect badly on their reputation. So it would be expected that there would be a larger than average number of "characters".

Most notable of all the "characters" was Eddie Shannon. His Irish imagination and sense of humor set the tone for the rest of the platoon. He was responsible for many of the nicknames the guys went by - Ozzie "Giboob" (GI Boob) Spier, Jim "The Gnome" Mowery, Bob "Aunt Minnie" Brendlinger and Eddie "The Dreaded Terror" Dentz among others. And when one would ask why we had to carry out a seemingly stupid order, Eddie would reply, "just because ya gorta". "Ya Gorta" became the motto of the platoon for ever after.

Eddie Dentz remembers Shannon in another way.

"When we were at Atterbury, three or four of us were in the habit of going into Indy the weekend after payday - Bulman, Eddie and I and one or two others. Eddie was almost always the first to buy a round or otherwise to treat. This might happen for a week or two. After that on a number of occasions, Eddie would say that he did not feel like going into town. It appeared to us that he was angry at us for some reason, but we couldn't figure out why."

We finally figured out what the real reason was. As you know, Eddie was one of twelve kids, whose father had left. Little as we earned, Eddie sent money home. What was happening was that in his generosity, Eddie would spend whatever he had

on us, send some home and be out of money for the rest of the month. He didn't want to admit that, and when we suspected it and offered to treat him, he pretended to be "mad" as an excuse for not going with us. We finally realized that it was Eddie's fierce pride at work and that he was not the least bit angry. What a great legacy!"

Ozzie Spier loved a good practical joke. In his words:

"One night we woke up Prater 'round midnight and told him he had to drive the Major. We had changed the time on his watch and some other clocks to 6:00 AM or so. Doug uttered the memorable phrase "y'uns are pullin' ma wire" followed soon after by, "Ah cain't find ma leghorns."

Doug was from the deep south as was Rat Califf and Ozzie would constantly remind them that they talked "funny English".

There was one guy in the barracks that seemed averse to soap and water. After a hot and sweaty day in the field, everyone would head for the showers as soon as they hit the barracks. This one individual would always collapse on his bunk upon returning, and we all assumed that he would shower as soon as the rest of us finished and headed for town. After a few days, however, it became apparent that this was not so. The noncoms tried their best to straighten him out but the situation didn't improve to any extent. Finally the platoon had enough. One night about ten o'clock they held a GI party - GI soap and water applied liberally in the shower with the help of a typical stiff bristled GI scrub brush. The problem ceased to exist after that session.

Our big challenge was trying to outguess the noncoms. After a night in town, the guys would smuggle in bottles of beer and hide them in the barracks. After lights out, the bottles would appear for a nightcap. But what to do with the empties. We soon found that, if we were quiet, we could stash them over the ceiling through the trap door at the end of the barracks. We felt we were real clever. Later, Corporal Ted Slaby told us that he was aware from day one what was going on but what made him the maddest was that he never was invited to have one.

Most fellows would have been happy to be able to have a car available on base. Not the I&R. Casey Casenhiser and Hank Iversen had motorcycles.

It seems that Huck Jones from New Castle, Pennsylvania and Casey, from Wadsworth, Ohio, had a furlough together. When the time came to report back to camp, Huck hitchhiked to Wadsworth to meet Casey only to find that Casey had acquired a motorcycle that day and hadn't really had the time to learn much about how to operate it. According to Huck, the ride to camp was full of adventure to say the least.

Hank Iversen, though, had been riding one for years. He had ridden his from Seattle, Washington the first day he had to report to Camp Atterbury. One of his biggest thrills, after a few beers at the PX, was to ride full speed down the middle of a rail line that ran from the center of the camp down to a small lake at the perimeter of the reservation all the time laughing at the top of his lungs. Most everyone in the platoon, at one time or another, were coerced into riding shotgun behind Hank on one of these

excursions. To Hank's credit, we all survived. Rumor has it that he tried to run the obstacle course on the bike after dark shortly before we left for the unknown.

On June 15, 1944, the Division was invited to march in the Infantry Day parade in Indianapolis. The city had adopted the Division as its own and so it was to be a special day. Most of the troops were trucked to the starting point but the I&R rode in its jeeps as a motorized unit with Regimental Headquarters. After the parade, the troops were trucked back to camp but the 1st Squad decided to take a detour and do some sightseeing. We had always wanted to see the Indianapolis Speedway even though it was closed for racing for the duration of the war. We pulled up to the front gate and found a guard stationed there to discourage trespassers. We could see the old brick raceway through the gate and couldn't resist saying how much we'd like someday to drive the course. The guard must have felt sorry for us and, as a patriotic gesture, opened the gate to let the three jeeps squeeze through and take one lap around the oval. At the speed that we could go, it was all we could do to hold the track on the steeply banked curves. No track records were set but we went back to camp happy.



Top to Bottom, L to R

Jones, Brinkhaus, Prater, Barrett, Hirst, Alloy, Shoffit, Sparks, Bulman, Casey



Top, L to R - Bulman, Barrett, Sparks, Adams

Bottom, L - R - Shoffit, Hirst, Prater, Alloy



Ten Minute Break



Front Seat—Waddail, (driving) Zorovich

Back Seat –Iverson, Spier



Jones, Sheehan, Morris



T/Sgt. Casenhiser

2

Training

April—October 1944

Contrary to a fairly popular opinion within the Company, the I&R did not play all the time. The training was hard and intensive. Actually, they are one of the most highly trained units in the mInfantry. They were experts in foot and motorized reconnaissance

patrolling as well as being trained in the manning of observation posts, basic radio operation, interpretation of maps and aerial photos, hand-to hand combat and other more minor subjects. For this reason they were not the expendable type of infantryman. Their combat mission was to search out and report back information about the enemy for interpretation and use by the Regiment.

Our Army training in the States was routine and sometimes boring.

[Al Shoffit] - June 6, 1944 - "....today has been pretty much like yesterday. P.T.first, then the rest of the day with classes in the day room. Stuff on military intelligence and map reading mostly. Also some stuff on the work of the I&R platoon the medics downstairs call our platoon the "suicide squad". We are supposedly always the first ones in the regiment to contact the enemy. That's our job. I won't say much about the invasion news this morning, except that it's on everyone's mind. It sounds pretty good now but I'm afraid there's going to be some pretty rough going before it's all over."

Obviously, in the I&R tradition, we found ways, that were sometimes not too orthodox, that would liven up the day. By far our favorite exercise was motorized patrolling. The drill went something like this. Each squad had three jeeps, each manned by the driver and two or three scouts. The jeeps would travel down a road in single file with a reasonable interval between jeeps, constantly observing both sides of the road for any signs of enemy activity. When the lead jeep would approach a hill or a curve where activity ahead could not be observed, it would come to a stop and the scouts would dismount on either side of the road and scout out the terrain ahead on foot. Meanwhile the driver would position his jeep at the side of the road at a ninety degree angle to the route of travel, prepared to take off in either direction. The remaining two jeeps would do the same with the scouts deployed on both sides of the road to protect the convoy from any surprises from the sides or rear. When the scouts from the lead jeep judged that all was clear ahead, they would signal for the jeeps to proceed.

At that point the second and third jeeps would head out, the scouts mounting on the fly, and leapfrog the lead jeep which provided covering protection for the other two and then fall in at the rear. This rotation continued until the objective was reached. In case enemy activity was spotted, the squad was to avoid any engagement, immediately head for the rear and get the information back to appropriate commands.

It was a hot morning in the middle of August when the "jockeys" taxied out the vehicles and we all loaded up, clad in all sorts of battle regalia and looking fit for the Normandy invasion. We all liked a motorized patrol. It was interesting work and you never could tell what would happen. The morning went according to the book. We leapt and bounded and at noon invaded a small crossroads town, obtaining suitable accessories for the bag lunches the mess hall had carefully slapped together for us. By four o'clock the problem was finished and, caked with dust, we started back to showers, food and relaxation. Number 5 and "Ike" were in the lead, Waddail's number 10 was second and "Terror" Dentz and number 11 brought up the rear. The road back was one Indiana's dirt jobs and, if any speed was made, it necessitated all behind the first jeep to "fly blind" through the dust storm. That was the case this day.

Everything was moving along smoothly and the last two jeeps were doing a terrific job of instinct driving, when they hit a sharp "S" turn in the road. One has often heard racing cars zoom down the stretch and noticed the sharp roar of the exhaust as they passed. This day, our drivers made the speedway drivers look like pikers. The first curve went OK, but the second ... !! On the outside of the road, near his mailboxes, sat a picturesque old Hoosier enjoying the peace and quiet of a summer's afternoon. He was a good seventy-five and his face, indeed, reflected the pleasant memories of his past. Little did he dream that he would be disturbed in such a manner. The first jeep made it all right, but the second went off course a bit and took up a sequence not unlike a football at kickoff. The third, not to be outdone, did a knife act on the three mailboxes, causing our Hoosier friend to forget all about his rheumatism and arthritis and take off like a ruptured duck for parts unknown. When the dust had settled, rifles, jeeps and men were seen all over the immediate landscape. Finally a weak voice asked if everyone was OK. No one was screaming with pain and soon everyone was laughing fit to kill. After the first spontaneous burst of laughter had subsided, the slightly disgusted voice of Waddle broke through with, "Hey! Take this jeep off my leg. It's pretty heavy!" Soon everything was righted and our Hoosier friend seemed to look normal again. It was rumored that he was just a bit upset the next day when Terror again took down a mailbox not five minutes after he had put it up.

[Al Shoffit]- July 28, 1944 - "This morning we went on another motorized patrol. Our rendezvous point was a little town where we had not been before. A very nice little town and it apparently is not much bothered by soldiers. We created quite a bit of interest therein running up and down the streets in our jeeps. The Lieutenants who were in charge gave us a break there and we practically bought out a store of it's cakes and drinks. I like my job as a driver, but I may not like the care and cleaning of the vehicle that goes with the job."

[Al Shoffit] - June 19, 1944 - "...first day of our (nine day) bivouac ... had to

walk out about 12 or 15 miles been hoping that Hq. Co. would ride but we didn't this time. ... got up at 3:30 this morning and were on our way by four. We had no breakfast -- someone had gotten mixed up on their time. We were camped in a pretty thick grove of trees, rather a whole woods, so it's shady and cool. We had awfully good hiking weather today. The wind got up and it rained last night and this morning it was cloudy with a good breeze. As soon as we got here, we pitched our tents and have been fixing up the area all day.

[Al Shoffit] - June 24, 1944 - "... apologize for not writing last night ... don't have much excuse except that I took so much time getting myself cleaned up ... as well cleaned up as is possible out here, that is. Try taking a bath in a steel helmet sometime with mosquitoes as big as horse flies all around."

"C'est la guerre!"

The Army Ground Forces Tests were one of the final activities used to judge the readiness of units for active combat. They were designed as mini-maneuvers and pitted one regiment and its individual units against another. Each individual unit was judged and rated on a point scale of 0-100 on it's effectiveness over the three day period. As we all expected, the I&R came through with a score of 99 plus. Our only deduction was for

not having one five gallon gas can topped off to the proper level. Ike sure was proud of us.

[Eddie Dentz]- (Letter to Becky Waddail Pissanos, July 19, 2003) - One time when we were on what I recall were "Red & Blue Maneuvers", Bob and I managed to get behind "enemy" lines. It poured rain all night, but we eventually found what appeared to be an abandoned shack. Then the search was on for a dry cigarette. One of us had some semi-dry KOOLS. Dry matches were a problem, but I believe we found one of those, too. After a smoke, Bob strapped his 40-pound radio on his back and shinnied up a tree. From that vantage point, he proceeded to radio back sightings of the "enemy". We thought we were heroes until an authoritative voice screamed back "get the hell out of there - you're in an impact area." (into which they fire live artillery.) We just laughed until the voice (of a senior officer) came back: "Get the hell out of there right now before you both get killed." Our brief moment of heroism ended right there.

One of the exercises was designed to test the defenses of Headquarters Company and the effectiveness of it's I&R platoon in infiltrating the "enemy" company's compound. This was a night problem and referees were to be positioned to judge whether penetration had been achieved. As a matter of pride, each I&R platoon would try to bring back tangible evidence of a successful mission.

Our "enemy" that night was the 422nd Regiment. We had heard by the grapevine that one of the 423rd regimental officers had a steak dinner bet with his counterpart in the 422nd on which I&R could bring back the enemy guidon that flew in front of regimental headquarters. That was all we needed.

At about ten o'clock we assembled, faces and hands blacked and ready to go. Each squad had been assigned a different mission that involved approaching the command post, about a mile away, from a different direction. Additionally, each squad had designated groups of two or three men for specific objectives, some playing diversionary roles with others taking on the job of penetration in depth. We were to assemble back at the regimental command post at three o'clock in the morning. Anticipating the problem, we had been able, the day before, to learn the password that was being used that night by the "enemy".

Between three and four AM, we all checked in at the command post. No one had been captured. One group had brought back the guidon and had left a message for the CO. Another group had gained access to the motor pool and brought back a listing of each vehicle number showing the row and order in which they were parked. A third group brought back the grand prize. They had made their way into the kitchen tent and walked off with a ham, a case of eggs and a number of loaves of bread that were meant for the officer's breakfast the next morning. We could but imagine the look on the faces of the cooks about five o'clock, when they reported to the mess tent ready to start breakfast. Soon the phone lines to our command post were burning up with threats too numerous to mention being directed at the I&R. The referees made us take everything back - but declared us winners.

And so mid pleasant memories and shakedown inspections, we prepared to leave the States. Salvaged clothing was turned in for replacement, duffel bags issued, statement of

charges signed, and many indulged in last minute celebrations followed by pills, aspirin, preventative, headache, white. All was in such a glorious state of confusion.

[Al Shoffit]- October 7, 1944 - "I don't know if I'm awake enough to write a sensible letter. I'm sitting in the telephone room at the PX ... been here since one o'clock this morning. It's now 0400. My mission here is to spy on the telephone conversations to make sure no one says where or when we're going. The I&R has been given that job so they have two of us at a time here. Sparks and I volunteered to take six hours instead of the usual four so the other fellows wouldn't have to get up so early".

On October 10, we loaded aboard trains for the two day trip to the embarkation center at Camp Miles Standish near Boston. There were more lectures, shots, new issue, shots and of course inspections.

[Doug Prater] - (Letter to Dick Sparks May 27, 1991) - "Yes, I do remember the last night in Boston - the dinner at some nice hotel and later the concert in Symphony Hall. Do you remember Oswald Spier sitting by some girl and "falling in love" during the concert, and it taking all of us (you, Califf and me) to drag him back to base at Camp Miles Standish in lieu of going AWOL with that girl."

And then, suddenly, men of Headquarters Company coming off pass at midnight of the 15th, were told to get their gear together and be ready to board the train for New York as advanced party for the 423rd Regiment. By five AM, we were in cabins M-111 and M-112 on the luxury liner, *Queen Elizabeth*. Our adventure had begun.



Johnny (Chris) Johnson

Platoon HQ Radio Operator



Dick (Sparky) Sparks

Radio Operator

1st Squad



Bob Waddail

Ass't Squad Leader

2nd Squad

Hank Iversen

Radio Operator

2nd Squad

[Both Waddail and Iversen were awarded Battlefield Commissions in recognition of the leadership shown during the campaigns with the 424th Inf. Reg't. in the spring of 1945.]



Waddail/Pissanos]

L to R

Dentz (seated)

Slaby, ___, Sparks, Prater,

Casey, Waddail

Casenhiser, Waddail



[Waddail/Pissanos]

L to R

Shoffit, Shannon, Dentz, Slaby, Johnson,

Waddail



Waddail/Pissanos]

Clockwise from bottom left

Barrett, Zorovich, Dentz, Fox,

Sparks, Spier, Shoffit, Waddail

Slaby, Jones, Califf

3

Queen Elizabeth

October 10 - 16, 1944

"Hey - 20% !"

"Name, rank, serial number! Here's your stateroom and meal ticket."

"Somebody help me off with this damn pack."

"Who's got something to eat?"

"Ah, blow it!"

The staterooms were crowded, twenty one men per room. It was almost necessary to breath in shifts. Men were full of wonder and anxiety. What will the future bring? There was tension in the air. Tempers were high strung. Some boisterously sung and shouted while others lay on their bunks, lost in thought and sentimentality. And all had the feeling that they were just a little bit closer than before.

"Is anyone seasick?"

"These Limeys can't even cook a decent meal. No wonder they haven't got a sense of humor!"

"How many pounds to a dollar?"

"The promenade deck? Go three bulkheads aft, cross to the starboard side and go to the stern. You cawn't miss it, old chap!"

Most famous proponent of the ship's language and customs was Jimmy "Gnome" Mowery. We found out many things from him that trip. A submarine was chasing the ship. The Post Exchange was two bulkheads aft. Barracudas follow large ships for days. "Philly" was all the world in a gold plated nutshell. No one doubted him - none but Rat Califf.

"Shut up, Gnome! Oogatz!"

"Why you nigger lovin' rebel!"

"You South Philly bum!"

"Quit stuttering!"

"Aw, grow up, Gnome!"

"Crash - Bang - Boom !!!"

'Born like a vapor, on the summer air.' The sweet strains of Stephen Foster's immortal melody being slowly inhaled and exhaled through Al Shoffit's harmonica. Thoughts were of home and someone back there. There was an almost reverent silence while men reminisced and dreamt. Tears shown dully in some eyes. All lay motionless. And then "Stardust" and "Begin the Beguine".

"OK! Let's snap out of it. Who's got a deck?"

"What's the limit?"

"Gimme some change. When's payday?"

"Pay the I!"

And so we traveled. Six days and we were in Greenock, Scotland 'mid medieval castles and beautiful scenery, filled with an ecstasy new to all of us. So this was the British Isles!

RMS Queen Elizabeth

The *Queen Elizabeth* was built by the Cunard Line in the late 1930s. Before it was finished, war had broken out in Europe and construction was stopped. It was decided that the *QE* could be refitted as a troop ship and, in great secrecy, sailed for New York on March 3, 1940. After refitting, she was put into service as a troop ship on November 13, 1942. She was certified to carry 15,000 troops and over time, carried a total of 750,000 troops from the United States to Britain.

The *Queen Elizabeth* and her sister ship, the *Queen Mary* were fast enough that they never sailed as part of a convoy, zig-zagging across the Atlantic in four to five days. They both earned the nickname of "Grey Ghost". No damage was ever inflicted on either ship.



The *Queen Elizabeth* as a troop ship



The *Queen Elizabeth* (bottom) in New York Harbor

4

Cheltenham

October 16 - November 30, 1944

The next morning we stepped on foreign soil for the first time. The train was there, on time for a change, and again the barracks bag ordeal began. But by this time we were used to this and soon were comfortably seated in the coaches of the seemingly miniature train.

It wasn't long before we started and everyone began to wonder where we were headed and what the deal was to be. Out of Glasgow, the scenery grew in magnificence. Long rolling hills developed into tall mountain ranges, sprinkled at intervals with typically picturesque Scottish farmhouses with plastered walls and thatched roofs. In the broad valleys sheep and cattle grazed, tended often by a small boy who seemed rapturously at peace with the world and all that was in it. The train sped through small villages all immaculately clean and neat and children and adults alike would appear in back yards and along the tracks, waving and proudly holding their fingers in a constant flow of "V's". The people were robust and healthy looking and showed a spirit of happiness that made it seem impossible that such a thing as war had in any way affected the country.

About six at night we took a breather with coffee and donuts at Carlisle, near the English-Scottish border. It was only a short stop, some fifteen minutes in length, but as we glanced up at the large clock in the station, many minds went back five hours and life at home took on a split second reality.

With darkness came card games and, behind blackout curtains, American currency passed back and forth for the last time in quite awhile. But soon we became sleepy and sprawling bodies absorbed card tables, the lights dimmed, and we slept.

At one AM we were awakened. We had reached our station. On the platform a large sign said Cheltenham and, with typical American inventiveness, it was immediately nicknamed, in the ultra British manner, "Shelterhalf-on-the-Tentpole". And then the barracks bags again, but this time they were handled by a baggage detail. The trucks took us through the darkened streets of a fairly good sized town and, ultimately, to a small concentration of Quonset huts that was to be our home for a month.

Life in Cheltenham was pleasant. Our huts accommodated about sixteen men and in the center of each hut stood a small pot bellied stove, flanked on either side by a row of double decker bunks. These facilities were new to us, actually the most uncomfortable garrison life we had been subjected to. But before long it had become, to us, our new home. We had

lights, tables, chairs and even a public address system which broadcast the latest American jazz. And, too, this was our first look at the British people and their country. The mornings were rather depressing for it was cool and consistently foggy, but by ten o'clock the sun was up and the fog had burned off and all were in better spirits. We had the afternoons free for passes and most everyone took advantage of it to see some of the beautiful countryside from the seat of a Red Cross bicycle or explore the local shops in search of the first souvenirs. We tried athletics, too, and succeeded in holding our own against the powerful Communications Platoon team through the passing of Dad Hirst and Bill Morris' running.

Britain is known to be a country rich in natural beauty and we took every opportunity to see some of this picturesque countryside. Our many bicycle tours provided us with memories of this beauty that was unparalleled in our experience. There were rolling farms, surrounded and interwoven with a characteristic pattern of stone fences. And there were large manorial mansions, they too fenced in, but with an elaborate iron grillwork. The large gate at the entrance was supported by massive stone pillars that were symbolic of the power and strength of the old nobility.

Then we'd come upon a camouflaged factory defying the elements with its many anti-aircraft guns pointing skyward. And we'd awake again to the realization that Britain was at war, and the easy going, carefree yet staid life it led would override any threat to its existence, and that its stubborn will not to be beaten was one of the great attributes of the race.

Duties were lax. There were occasional classes - German uniforms, German language, radio and security - but most of them were presented in an interesting manner and we didn't resent the few hours we had to spend in the "schoolhouse". It sometimes

seemed that the most abusive duty we pulled was to have to go after coal for the fire late at night or clean out the stove in preparation for a new one. We didn't worry about building one in the morning for 1st Sgt Jim Spencer was always up ahead of us and had a good one going by reveille.

As might be expected, one of the duties we did not escape was KP. The facilities were fairly good and it really wasn't too bad, especially if one could work out a racket to get the work done in an easier manner. About halfway through our stay at Cheltenham, Eddie Shannon was serving one of his frequent days at KP. We noticed that he was visiting the hut quite regularly during the morning and his only comment was that he had something going and that we'd see what it was at noon.

It so happened that Eddie had the outside job of keeping the stoves going under the water barrels that were used to clean and sterilize our mess gear when we had finished eating. It also so happened that the kitchen was subject to frequent visitation from quite a bunch of the British kids in the neighborhood. At noon when we went to the mess hall to eat, we found Ed sitting peacefully by the fire and about five young fellows ranging in age from about nine to fifteen scurrying around doing his work for him and having the time of their lives. It provided quite a laugh for us and we admired Ed for his ingenuity. After we had finished, we stepped outside to wash our gear and to our surprise, there, one by each barrel of hot water, was an exceedingly polite youngster, brush in hand and insistent that he be allowed to wash our mess kit for us, very politely refusing any compensation we offered him. Finally one of the fellows asked a small lad why they wouldn't take some small gift as pay for their work. "Oh," he said. "We couldn't do that. Mr. Eddie has promised us some Yank pennies when we're through, so we're working for him!" Those kids captured everyone's heart and, through their loyalty to "Mr. Eddie", saved him a lot of work.

The company latrine was located in a field about seventy-five yards back of the huts. This consisted of an oblong pit, six feet in depth, over which was placed a box about 6x3x2 feet with six holes, three on a side, cut in the top with a hinged lid for each hole. All this was surrounded by a four foot high screen made of a canvas tarp to afford a little bit of privacy.

Latrine duty was rotated among all the units in the company and occurred about ten o'clock each morning. This duty entailed removing the tarp, setting the box off the pit, pouring gasoline in the hole and quickly tossing in a match to touch off a spectacular burn-off. After the fire burned itself out, lime would be scattered over the residue and the box and tarp put back in place ready for the next occupants.

On one bright and sunny morning, Bill Morris' first squad was scheduled for latrine duty. This wasn't a hard job and could be stretched out to take about three times as long as it should thus keeping us out of sight for assignment to other more unpleasant duties. We gathered at the site on time and had removed the tarp, set the "throne" aside, and started to pour in the gasoline, when we heard a frantic voice hollering at us. One of the Commo platoon was sprinting down the path at full speed yelling, "Wait a minute - wait a minute! I've got a case of the GI trots!" Being sympathetic to that ailment, we set the box back over the pit for him and stepped aside waiting for him to finish. After a few seconds, breathing a sigh of relief and thanking us profusely, he unconsciously reached in his pocket for a cigarette, quickly lit it and dropped the flaming

match down the hole next to him. The result was predictable. The next we saw of him, he was running as fast as he could back up the path, pants down around his knees and screaming at the top of his lungs for the medics. We never knew whether the incident cured his trots, but, for the next three or four days, we noticed that he ate all his meals standing up.

Memorable to all, were the evenings we spent in town meeting the British and strengthening our friendships over a pint of Stout. There were WAAFs, RAF pilots, Scots and just the common Britisher. They were as we expected them to be, rather conservative and engrossed in their traditions, only a part of which we could understand. But yet, in their peculiarities, we found a certain element of friendship that made us feel secure and at ease in a different country.

[Doug Prater] - (Letter to Dick Sparks - May 27, 1991) - "I have remembered many times the three day pass we had in London - the concert in Royal Albert Hall - the half day taxi ride about town - the Odeon Theater where we saw "State Fair" - another visit to another theater near Piccadilly Circus to see a George Bernard Shaw play called "Strike it Again". (Doesn't that name sound so very British?) I also remember a V2 bomb falling a couple of blocks from our hotel in the suburbs and going down the next morning to see the apartment house that it had hit.."

Our barracks lives were happy ones. We learned more about each other and tied together the loose ends that hadn't been bothered with before. At about this time, Ted Slaby, Assistant Squad leader of the first squad, came down with a serious mastoid infection and had to be sent to the hospital. We didn't hook up with him again until after the Battle of the Bulge was over and the 423rd was reconstituted in France. After leaving the hospital, Ted spent his combat time with the 424th Regiment in their regimental I&R platoon.

One great everlasting feud started in those barracks. That was between Casey and Dad Hirst who were both beginning to get a little thin on top. It all started one day when Dad said, "Hey Casey. How about cutting my hair"?

"Cutting your what?" said Casey.

"My hair - and no wisecracks, especially from you."

"What do you mean, especially from me, you eightball?"

"Now don't start talking! You're the only guy I know who gets a trim and a polish instead of a haircut."

"Maybe so, but flies don't use my head for a landing field." Then we all would start contributing our comments and they in, turn, backed up each other in a most fraternal manner like "birds of a feather ---!"

Our life in Cheltenham went along in this manner with a new experience coming along each day to make it more exciting. Our stay was climaxed by a magnificent Thanksgiving dinner. A day or two later, Sam Bordelon joined the platoon, transferring

from G Company, 2nd Battalion, of the 423rd. And on November 29th, we paid a last visit to Ted in the hospital.

Then, on November 30th, we got orders to move to Weymouth for our move to the continent.

5

Up To The Front

December 1 - 10, 1944

It was cold and damp at five-thirty on the morning of November 30th when we got up. Breakfast was eaten in the dark and, excitedly, we rolled our bed rolls, loaded them into the jeeps and mounted the .50 calibers. By seven-thirty we were ready to roll and, in spite of the boisterous, confident spirit that existed, deep down inside all of us there was a nervous tension that told us that on this morning we were starting on a new adventure that only the future could know.

Soon we pushed off and during our last day in England, had a chance to see more of its sights through the eyes of a cold and nervous convoy, arriving after dark at a transient camp outside Weymouth near Southampton. We spent the night there and talked a little more seriously than usual and remembered a little more plainly of home and all it meant.

The next morning we traveled the few miles to the port and soon were loaded on an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) ready for the reportedly quick trip across the channel. Late in the afternoon we started out and the next day, December 2nd, anchored in the harbor at Le Havre, getting our first look at France. The trip across the channel hadn't been bad so far but soon, after we had anchored in the harbor, a storm started to come in, the wind came up, the seas got rough and there was a constant line at the rail. Sometime during that night, we broke anchor and floated around the busy harbor much to the consternation of the crew but, at the time, unknown to us. These weather conditions lasted for the next two days.

The living quarters to which we'd been assigned could be entered directly from the deck and were also connected to an inside passageway that ran the length of the ship. The showering facilities were off the interior corridor part way down the passage. Casey had decided he needed a shower that day and proceeded down the corridor, past a bulkhead to the shower area, clad only in a towel. The bulkheads, of course, had waterproof doors that could be shut and dogged down in case of an accident.

The trip, so far, had been too quiet - at least in the tradition of the I&R. So, as soon as Casey had gotten safely in the shower, a couple of the guys proceeded to lock the door in the corridor bulkhead so that Casey had no way to return to our quarters through the interior of the ship. This, of course, forced him to find his way up on deck only to realize

that someone had also dogged down the hatch from the deck into our quarters. To say that Casey was angry, would be a gross understatement. His voice rose easily above the howling wind and the language he spoke certainly wasn't French. After a few minutes, we took pity on him and let a half frozen Casey back into the quarters. The atmosphere livened up a bit then, and the tradition of the I&R was upheld - don't ever let life become boring.

Hank Iversen and I, radio operators for our respective squads, found our way up to the radio room of the ship. We wanted to see their gear and learn a little bit about their operating procedures. We had been to Division radio school and thought we were pretty good operators being able to send and receive about twenty words per minute using a standard telegraph type key. We soon realized what novices we really were. As we were sitting around talking with the Navy radioman, he nonchalantly picked up a pencil and began copying a message coming over his earphones at about fifty words per minute, all the while continuing to carry on the conversation with us. As he was copying this message, another was being flashed to him visually, from another ship. He casually handed a pencil to one of us and asked us to copy down the letters of the new message as he called them out. So he was simultaneously handling one message over his earphones, calling out the message being received by flasher for us to copy down, and carrying on our conversation during any pause. We left the radio room with a right humble feeling.

On the morning of December 4th, a French pilot came aboard and we slowly made our way up the war-wracked Seine river to Rouen. It was here that the destructiveness of war was first deeply impressed on us, for all along the banks of the river we could see the mechanical remnants of the passing armies, abandoned because of their uselessness. But, too there were still some of the original French structures in the form of large chateaus high on the hills that flanked us on either side.

Rouen, at first, seemed like a confused mess of rubble and uncertainty, but soon it's operating efficiency became evident as one LST after another moved up to the crude docks to unload. We were landed about seven o'clock that night and formed into a tight blackout convoy on one of the main streets of Rouen.

In typical GI fashion, everyone had to try out his "book larnin'" of French his first fifteen minutes ashore. Someone in the end of the convoy yelled wolfishly at the dark form of a French girl passing by, "Comment allez vous, Mademoiselle?" to which she disgustedly replied in perfect English, "Blow it out your barracks bag!" or something to that effect.

Soon we were on our way again, and within an hour or two, arrived at our new bivouac area at Yerville, one of the lousiest, dirtiest, coldest, wettest, muddiest holes we'd ever seen. Someone said, "Now where's the bag lunches?" - but we got C rations instead.

The three days we spent in that bivouac area were days of misery. It constantly rained for those three days and was constantly cold. It was impossible to keep our shoes dry and our three pairs of socks didn't go very far. Many got a good start toward trenchfoot. There was the constant hubba-hubba so characteristic in the ground forces when a move is about to be made. A few supplies came in, not much though, and not

what we needed. Our pup tents were pitched in the mud and in spite of some small branches and a little straw we were able to scrounge to put under our ponchos, our blankets and clothes stayed wet and we got very little sleep. Of course our spirits were low for, in addition to our physical discomfort, there was that overall feeling of indecision as to what our future was to be. Rumors ran rampant through the 1st, 3rd, and 9th Armies but we still had no definite dope. Captain Sam said, "You'll be on the line in a week so don't get anxious."

Then about 1600 on December 6th, Ike called Casey, Bill Morris and Huck Jones over to his tent and we knew something was starting to happen. Bill came back in a few minutes where the first squad were waiting by his jeep.

"This is it, guys," he said. "We're to be the advanced point for the regimental convoy, work about fifteen miles ahead of them, recon for bridges and road conditions. Here's the strip map. We're headed for a place called St. Vith - never heard of it before. We go to 1st Battalion tonight and start at 0700 tomorrow, so load up. This should be a good deal."

And a good deal it was. At 0730 on the 8th, we started out and we must have made quite a sight for our vehicles were carrying more that they were meant to. One would have thought that we were heading for a weekend at the beach rather than the front. Since the I&R was a motorized platoon, we were expected to carry all our gear with us rather than to have it transported in six-by-six trucks along with all the barracks bags of the other companies. This, of course, gave us more freedom of movement but hardly left room for the occupants particularly since we had a tendency to scrounge a variety of souvenirs along the way. Our route of march took us through the northern part of France through Amiens, Valenciennes and Marche in Belgium, then cross country through Houffalize to Clervaux, in Luxembourg and then north to St. Vith. At Valenciennes we hit our first American Red Cross club and the coffee and donut complex became more of an established habit. We were fortunate in having Sam Bordelon along. Sam spoke fluent French and through him, we managed to get hot food from the French civilians and a warm place to stay in a courtyard and barn of a large French farm. It was an interesting but cold trip. We had our first real look at the French; their picturesque small villages with its prominent landmark, the local church. All these churches were magnificent structures and surpassed the other buildings in architectural significance.

As was to be expected with the I&R, we ran into some difficulties, slightly hair raising but humorous after we got things straightened out. On the second day out, our number two jeep with Al Shoffit as driver, took center stage. We were going up a steep hill on a typically narrow French road which was flanked on the right by a row of fairly large sumac bushes, past which was a drop of about seventy-five feet almost straight down. The hill was covered with ice and, part way up, Al's No. 8 began to slide sideways and finally came to rest in a nearly horizontal position supported, at the brink of the drop, by only a few of these bushes. Everyone really unloaded - everyone but Johnny Califf in the back seat. It was not that he didn't try, but all the luggage got the best of him. For twenty minutes we worked on the jeep, but couldn't move it without the danger of it getting away from us. Finally a maintenance truck from the convoy came along and, with the

help of his winch, it finally rolled to an upright position on the road. Califf "enjoyed" the whole affair from his position in the back seat.

Meanwhile the second squad was moving with the convoy proper. It wasn't very exciting for them for they were stuck under the watchful eyes of the staff. When they started, it was reported that Irish Sheehan crawled into his sack and later communiques have it that he never moved from it's comfort once during the two day trip. Irish was the master when it came to sleeping.

On the second day of the move, December 8th, we came to the vicinity of St. Vith and moved to a small concentration of farmhouses about two miles from the town proper. An evacuation hospital was set up there and we pumped them for information about the activity up front. Of course it was a bivouac again, but this time it was under combat conditions, so to speak, so it was different.

Different? In typical 106th style this bivouac was lousy too, for we hit one of the worst blizzards we'd ever seen and this continued for the next two days. About the most miserable of us all was Gnome Mowery. He'd lost his cartridge belt on the trip up and deep was his consternation with the Germans only fifteen miles away. Doug Prater didn't help the situation out either, for Gnome never got a moments peace while Doug was around. Gnome was really beginning to get pretty upset so Doug backed off and we all tried to make light of his concerns and help him calm down. Gnome was a great guy and we didn't want to add to his naturally nervous character.

A couple of days later, on December 10th, we got orders to move again, this time across the German border to the front line positions held by the 2nd Infantry Division.

[Ozzie Spier - (Letter to Dick Sparks - October 30,1991) - "I carry a distinct recollection of our first moving up to the front, being surprised by a salvo of incoming artillery fire which caused our bunch and the rest to Headquarters Company to dive to the ground seeking cover. Soon after, we all got up rather sheepishly and remounted our vehicles after it became clear that the artillery heard was our own outgoing from just over the hill."

Our objective was the town of Buchet, a small cluster of houses located about fifteen miles east of St. Vith at the edge of the Seigfreid Line and the Schnee Eiffel mountain range.

6

The Schnee Eifel

December 1944

St. Vith, a town that was to play such an important part in our lives, was an important transportation hub. Major highways from all directions met at St. Vith. The highway from the north ran roughly from Aachen through Malmedy to St. Vith. Another road came from Prüm, through Auw and on to Bleialf. From the east, the major road ran from Bleialf to Schonberg to St. Vith. On the south, a highway ran from Luxembourg north through St. Vith. Heading west, the highway from St. Vith went through Vielsalm and, ultimately, connecting to highways leading to Liege and Namur. A major rail line ran generally northwest to southeast through the town. Even though it was relatively small in size, St. Vith was of major strategic importance.

This region of the Ardennes is formidable. It is made up of densely wooded hills and valleys with numerous streams following many of the valleys, eventually flowing into the Our river which bisected the area between St. Vith and the front line and proved to be a serious impediment to troop movements. The highways mentioned above, followed the major valleys and the small farm roads connecting them were few and far between. Logging trails tended to cross the ridges but were usually almost impassable in good weather to say nothing of their condition in the winter weather the platoon was encountering. The major ridge of hills running generally southwestward, is called the Schnee Eifel and closely follows the Belgium-German border. Along its crest was the Siegfried Line of fortifications, a series of concrete pillboxes, built by the Germans as a defense barrier. Tucked into the folds of the hills were a scattering of small villages and hamlets, usually the sites of various unit headquarters.

The 106th Division was assigned to take over positions occupied by the 2nd Division along a twenty-two mile front lying about ten air miles east of St. Vith. This territory was looked at as a good place to station new troops for a period of combat indoctrination since the overall rugged terrain was not conducive to large military operations. Using the road network, however, the distance from St. Vith, where Division Headquarters was located, clocked nearer eighteen miles to the front line rifle company positions. The 423rd Regiment was assigned the center portion of the sector, a stretch of about ten miles, with the 422nd on our left and the 424th on our right. We were to take over the exact positions used by the 2nd Division which, in turn, were the positions originally used and developed by the German troops. It was easy to see how they so accurately had our positions zeroed in for their artillery.

On the morning of December 10th, we loaded up the jeeps and, taking the point for Headquarters Company, proceeded into St. Vith and then eastward on the St. Vith-Schonberg road. A mile out of the town, the dense Ardennes forest enveloped the road. Tall dark evergreens, coupled with the still falling snow, made an eerie setting for the convoy. After crossing the Our River near Schonberg, we turned southeast along the Schonberg-Bleialf road, shortly reaching Bleialf and, from there, over small secondary roads, into Buchet where Regimental Headquarters was to be located. Other units were, at the same time, on the move over alternate roads, to their assigned stations. Service Company was in Halenfeld, Cannon in Oberlascheid and Anti-Tank was in Bleialf. The 1st and 3rd battalions were stretched out a short distance to the east of us along the original front line with the 2nd Battalion held back as Division reserve. Two Battalions, spread out over a ten mile line, made for a very tenuous situation - but, after all this was supposed to be a "training" area with very little chance of serious combat. A major gap between the 423rd and 424th was defended by the 106th Recon Troop.

In Buchet, Regimental Headquarters and the main elements of Headquarters Company, occupied buildings in the village proper. The I&R Platoon was assigned a two story, four room schoolhouse at the southern edge of the village. Buchet was an old village and the houses were constructed of stone and mortar and, really, represented pretty good fortresses if they were ever needed as such.



St. Vith Online

Sometimes the sun did shine



John Califf

John Califf's classic picture of a road through the Prumerberg Wald taken on his trip to the area in 1998



Vith Online

Typical logging road in the Eifel

7

BUCHET

December 10 - 16, 1944

When we saw our quarters, we figured we really had a deal. The main floor was made up of two large rooms, one of which was set up to be the platoon command post. The other contained a pot bellied stove of the type that could be used to cook on or warm up such things as C Rations. Upstairs there were two more rooms, each of which contained a large feather bed and plenty of space to spread out sleeping bags on the floor. One room was assigned to each squad for their use when off duty. There was also a basement in the building, divided up into small storage rooms and root cellars.

Our mission, at present, was to operate two observation posts, OPs, one about one hundred yards behind the Regimental Command Post, and the other some three hundred yards further south at the edge of the Headquarters Company area. These OPs, developed by the 2nd Division, were assigned one to each squad and were manned in shifts of four men at a time around the clock. The OPs themselves were pieces of art. They were solidly built shacks constructed of logs and sandbags and dug into the side of the hill. Each contained a cot, stove and a couple of chairs. There were

camouflaged slits at ground level that offered an excellent view for observation and a large field of fire if we were to ever use them as a temporary fortress. Platoon Headquarters was responsible for Command Post duty at the schoolhouse and stood watch over the phones that were out to the OPs. The three radio operators periodically contacted other units in the regimental net using the radio that was mounted on one of the jeeps parked along side of the building, making sure that such communication was functional if needed. Ike cautioned us to be extra watchful, especially to the southeast, for there was a thousand yard gap between our outpost and those of Anti-Tank Company headquartered in Bleialf. Regimental Intelligence, S-2, stressed the possibility of strong enemy patrol activity in that sector.

From all indications, we expected to live a pretty good life in Buchet, hopefully for the next couple of months. The past months had been quiet ones and we really didn't expect to see any meaningful action until the weather improved in the spring. Our first letters home were filled with talk of what a good deal we had and how happy we were. We were already planning for Christmas. The large school room on our first floor was to be used for a party for the company and we were even putting together some acts that would provide the entertainment. We were the ones to put on such an event since, after all, the I&R were noted for their parties. During our second day there, Hank Iversen disappeared for a couple of hours and, when he returned, he had a nice plump chicken under each arm. He'd seen them wandering around in one of the fields below. We helped him pen them up and took a lot of pride in watching our Christmas dinner grow day by day.

The company kitchen was set up in the village proper. When mealtime came, we would send a detail down to bring back the rations for the platoon, divide them up and then send them out to the OPs. After a couple of days the mess staff got enough supplies to cook up a hot meal or two, but most often, meals consisted of warmed up C Rations, those canned delicacies of hash, beans or franks. We were able to also obtain some K Rations. These were meant to be used as field rations and were in a cardboard box small enough to be carried in a jacket pocket. They contained a can of Spam, processed cheese or sardines along with a package of hard crackers, dehydrated coffee, a pack of three cigarettes and a rock hard bar of vitamin enriched chocolate. We always hoped to get a package that contained the cheese for it, by far, was the tastiest of the gourmet selections. The chocolate bars were usually squirreled away to nibble on between meals or to shave up to use as a base for hot chocolate.

Mail, of course, was a very important item. We hadn't had a significant mail call since we'd left England. During the next couple of days, Arthur Blon, the company mailman, came up to the school house with a few letters that had finally caught up with us. One of the fellows received the only package to come through. It contained what remained of some home baked cookies and we all shared the crumbs. What few letters we received before we left England and in these few deliveries, promised that Christmas packages, that were mailed in October, should easily arrive by Christmas and we all, of course, looked forward to them.

Supplies and ammunition, in addition to the mail, were slow in reaching the regiment. Maybe it was because our sector was considered a quiet zone, but all supplies seemed very slow in arriving. The artillery had a minimum of shells for their howitzers. The troops had only the small arms ammunition that they were carrying when they moved to the front. The barracks bags with the changes of clothing had not yet

reached the rifle companies. No one had yet been issued overshoes. Food, with the exception of field rations, was delayed. All in all, most of the troops could do nothing more than wait impatiently and try to dry out their wet clothing as best they could. The I&R was lucky in that we could carry our barracks bags with us containing our overcoats and extra clothing. We too, however, lacked overshoes and the only gloves we had were the thin brown cotton variety that quickly got soaked and usually were colder than no gloves at all. We were warm enough when engaged in everyday duty with our long-johns, olive drab woolen pants and shirt, fatigues and field jackets as outer garments, along with a wool cap, helmet liner and steel helmet. The problem was, that with any amount of exertion, we would be soaking wet with sweat after only a short time and, unless we could take a break to dry out down to the bottom layer, the dampness made us feel increasingly colder as time went on. Overcoats were OK for wrapping up in when we could be inactive, but were cumbersome and constraining and stayed in the barracks bags most of the time.

Even though the blizzard of the 10th had passed, it continued to snow intermittently every day. It was the wet sticky kind and made it hard to get around as well as stay dry. It also seemed to be consistently foggy especially in the folds of the hills where the villages were located. This kind of weather made our new operations confusing at times. Directly below OP No.1, there were three bushes that, at exactly 0300 every night, would go slowly across the field below and out of our range of vision, and just as punctually at 0400, they would creep back and appear to head for the German lines again. It was hard to believe that they were only bushes, but after a thorough daylight investigation, we were convinced. Jittery? -- Yes, we were!

One night Casey woke us all individually at about 0300. "Get up quietly and dress," he whispered. "Get your weapon and ammo and wait for me to call you. OP No.2 reports someone outside our door. They may be on the first floor, so be quiet. The door was unlocked. The line to No.1 is out so we can't get in touch with them to verify." In a few minutes he lined us up in the upper hall and, silently, we crept down the stairs. We found no one on the first floor and we spread out at various points while Casey and Hank checked out the basement. "They must be outside yet or in the barn. I'm going to call up No.2 and see if they can still see them.""Huck! Is there still someone around our door?"

"Just a minute - I'll check. No! No one in sight. Was there someone there?"

"You told me half an hour ago that there was."

"Oh, my God, Casey! You must have misunderstood me. There have been some noises outside our door and we've just figured out that it is an old black cat trying to salvage something to eat out of old empty C Ration cans. We've tried throwing snowballs at him to scare him away, but he always comes back. One of the guys is taking a bead on him right now. He's too scary to have around."

Soon we heard the shot and there was no more cat. But there was something else. Some of the Commo platoon guys on guard duty in the village had heard the shot, and were soon blazing away down the valley in the general direction of No.2. It wasn't very long before we heard the worried voice of Terror Dentz over the phone pleading,

"Hey! Tell those damn guys to quit shooting. They've got us pinned down and are coming too close. Hear that one?" Casey quickly called Regiment and soon everything was quiet again and we went on with our routine, yet somewhat nervous existence. Why the line to No.1 picked that time to go out is something we never could figure out.

The days of December 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th followed pretty much this same routine. Occasionally, some of the fellows would be detailed as drivers with Regimental Headquarters for the day, generally running errands or serving as drivers for officers performing liaison duties to the other units of the regiment. These were temporary assignments and they usually were back at the schoolhouse by nightfall. Judge Stein, draftsman, and Norm Barrett who was assigned to personnel work, were on our roster basically for administrative purposes, and were quartered and performed their assignments at Regiment.

The weather continued to be foggy, damp and cold with small snow squalls occurring occasionally that added to the accumulation already on the ground. The 1000 yard gap between us and Anti-Tank Company continued to be of concern to those at Headquarters since it was the most vulnerable spot in our lines. Every once in awhile, enemy patrol activity would be spotted in that area trying to probe behind our lines, but a few well placed rounds of small arms fire would make them scurry back to the safety of the German lines.

During those days, Ike decided that we should get more of a reading of the area, and he sent out small patrols from OP No.2 during the day, to see if we could find out something about the enemy strength in front of the gap. The patrols were not to patrol very deeply into no man's land for they were designed primarily as training and familiarization exercises.

[Ozzie Spier] - (Letter to Dick Sparks - October 30, 1991) - "Soon after our settling in the school house, Long sent us on a patrol. We were to cross the concrete teeth of the Siegfried Line, go behind the fortifications and reconnoiter - see if we could discover what the Heinies were up to. Iversen was on that patrol and I can't recall who else. I was

scared shitless! We got as far as the concrete tank obstacles and found the ground between them and up to the bunkers, was laced with trip wires. It made passage through there perilous. Fear, terror, cowardice and discretion overcame valour and we turned back. Iversen was fearless; he wanted to go on, but I was sore afraid. The patrol was a failure but it was an event I remember."

Sam Bordelon and Irish Sheehan paired up on a couple of these patrols. On one occasion, they were spotted and drew some small arms fire and a mortar concentration that landed almost on top of them. On the 14th after one of their forays, they reported back to Ike that they had heard, what seemed to them, the sound of a major movement of vehicles including the distinctive clatter made by tank treads. They reported they could even smell the odor of gasoline and diesel fumes. Ike immediately reported this to S-2 and the information was sent on back to Division and, presumably, to higher Headquarters. This was the only reporting of major activity on the German side of the line which had been very quiet since we came to the front. There had been occasional small arms fire and small mortar barrages directed at the rifle companies, but were

nothing to be really concerned about. In a few days, Ike got a reply down from S-2 that pretty clearly indicated that we were green troops unaccustomed to combat noises and we were probably in error. We were directed to limit our activities to OP duty until we were more battle hardened. Future events proved us right.

On December 15th, things seemed to perk up a little. We noticed noise of increased small arms and mortar fire from the direction of the line companies. At times the distinctive sound of high explosive rounds fired by German .88s indicated they were using them against strong points in the rifle companies in front of us. And sometimes, a booby trap or mine out in no man's land would explode, probably set off by the weight of the snow and ice. Enemy patrol activity substantially increased with probes at our weak spots all along the front. As darkness fell that night, we had eighteen men actively with the I&R. Ed Shannon had been sent back to Division sometime during the day.

[Doug Prater] - (Letter to Dick Sparks - May 27, 1991) - "I had been sent to Regimental Headquarters to stay with Major Hubert Johnson, 423rd S-2. My job was to keep the S-2 Journal which meant listenening in on all radio and phone conversations from the field and recording everything in said "S-2 Journal"

[Al Shoffit] - (Letter to Dick Sparks - October 7, 1991) - "I had been assigned as a driver (temporarily, I thought) for Lt. Weeks who was liason officer between Division and Regimental Headquarters. We had made one or two trips between headquarters, but on our last attempt, probably on the 16th or 17th, we were cut off from the Regiment. I remember standing by our jeep at a high place in the road and watching some town between St. Vith and the Regiment being shelled. We returned to St. Vith and spent a day or two there, somewhat in limbo, waiting for a chance to get back to the outfit."

Shortly before midnight, S-2 called us to say he had fourteen prisoners that had been captured infiltrating our lines and asked us to house them in the basement of our building. A provisional detachment Captain Sam had put together, was assigned the duty of guarding them. There were everything from thirteen year olds to men pushing forty, really a sad looking bunch. They told us many patrols had been sent out that night with orders to get back of our lines by morning. They promised a big surprise for us by Christmas. We tended to laugh that off at the time, but our tune changed a bit later on when we got some more prisoners, one of which had a copy of the German flare code. No sooner did we have that in our possession, than the sky was filled with flares of every conceivable color. We knew then, without a doubt, that something was up and that the Germans were maneuvering their troops toward our weak spots. Obviously we didn't sleep much that night. We watched for flares, listened to the sporadic small arms fire, observed the glow in the sky from burning buildings in our rear, set on fire by artillery fire from the Germans, -- and began to realize that the easy life of the past few days would likely not continue.

BAPTISM OF FIRE

December 16

At 0500 all hell broke loose! Flares of red, green, amber and white lit up the night skies. A coordinated artillery barrage fell on the line companies, unit command posts, road intersections, artillery batteries and all strong points that the German's had zeroed in from their previous occupation of our positions. It seemed that we experienced some of every type of artillery the German's possessed -- .88s (powerful tank mounted guns firing armor piercing shells), mortars, long range artillery shells bursting at tree top level that cut out the tops of the dense forest, and most terrifying of all, "Screaming Meemies" (nebelwerfer). (These were anti-personnel rockets that were fired from banks of tubes electrically detonated to fire all at one time. The fins of the rockets were altered so that when they were fired, they emitted a high pitch scream that seemed not of this earth.) Schonberg and St. Vith were being hit by 14 inch railroad guns fired from well to the German rear. Bright searchlights reflected off the low hanging clouds adding to the eerie feeling on this foggy, snowy, cold morning. During the first few minutes all wire communications had been disrupted or destroyed and radio frequencies were being constantly jammed. Fires could be seen from buildings that had been hit. The noise was constant and the ground literally shook from the impact of shells. This bombardment went on for forty-five minutes. There was no breakfast that morning! Our good deal had come to an end!

Regimental headquarters in Buchet experienced occasional shelling but communication between individual headquarters units in other outlying villages was only accomplished by runners dodging between the frequent shell bursts. In the schoolhouse we were awakened rudely by the noise of the bombardment and the explosion of shells landing within a short distance of us. We all scrambled from our sleeping bags, jumped into our clothes, grabbed our weapons and ran downstairs, assembling in the command post on the first floor. A runner was immediately sent down to headquarters to see what was going on. Lines to the OPs were still operational and Ike ordered those manning them to report immediately to the CP.

At 0615, the bombardment suddenly ceased and the resulting silence was almost as scary as the shelling. Small patrols were sent out in the direction of Bleialf and the 1000 yard gap that separated us from Anti-Tank Company which was occupying the village. They immediately reported back that Bleialf was under attack by masses of tanks supported by what looked like battalions of infantry dressed in white camouflage suits and screaming at the top of their lungs as they attacked the town. Cannon and Service Companies and available support troops from Headquarters Company were immediately ordered to proceed to

Bleialf to assist in the defense of the town. It was apparent that the Germans considered it imperative that they take Bleialf thus opening up access to the road to Schonberg and the branch, known as Skyline Drive, that ran through Radscheid and Oberlascheid. Communication with the 422nd had been knocked out in the initial barrage. Colonel Cavender told Ike to take a couple of men and try to establish a link with them.

By this time, day had begun to dawn and Ike and his driver, Lamar Wills, and with Johnny Johnson on the radio quickly took off over some back woods trails aiming for Skyline Drive and north to Radscheid where the 422nd was last known to be in the vicinity. As they came over the crest of a hill within sight of the main road, their way was blocked by a telephone pole that had been knocked down across the trail on which they were traveling. As they looked down at the main highway, all they could see was a long column of German tanks that had by-passed Bleialf and were headed toward Schonberg. Along side the road were a couple of American vehicles afire. The jeep was immediately spotted and small arms fire made them quickly high-tail it back to Buchet

At the schoolhouse, one of the SCR 193 radios had been brought into the command post along with the hand cranked generator. Sticking the antenna out the window and with members of the platoon taking turns cranking the generator, the radio operators tried desperately to gain contact with any adjacent outfits they could get to respond. It was an exercise in futility.

In the continuing fog, we could hear the periodic sound of German "Buzz Bombs", which later would prove, to us, to be "friendly fire", heading for Liege and London. These were the first attempts by the Germans to use self propelled rockets to spread terror and destruction in distant cities. They were not noted for their accuracy and were just randomly fired in the general direction of their targets. From the ground, we could hear them approaching a good distance away - they were powered by a small engine that sounded, to us, like the old washing machines we had at home. As long as the engine was running, we knew we were safe. Once the engine cut out, it meant that they were gliding in for a landing somewhere in the vicinity. Even though they were meant for long range bombardment, an occasional one would malfunction and land somewhere near the battlefield. It was just one other thing that added to the stress of the morning.

At 0900, Ike was directed to take a dozen or so men to a hill to the north of Bleialf to observe and report back on the battle that was occurring in the town. From our perimeter defense, we could see down into Bleialf and observe the intense house-to-house fighting that was the order of the day. The Germans were approaching along three roads from the south and east with tanks and self propelled .88s supported by hordes of infantry. On the American side, one of the artillery batteries was firing in support of the small provisional battalion that was trying to hold the village.

At about 1200, Lt. Col. Nagle, regimental executive officer, was sent down to Bleialf to take command of the forces fighting there. During the fighting, he was wounded but continued to command the troops. Toward mid afternoon, the Germans seemed to tire of the attempt to take the town, and the defenders mounted a counterattack that restored the town to American troops. They set up defensive positions in the uneasy stillness wondering what the night would bring. Anti-Tank Co. had almost been wiped out and casualties among the rest of the defensive force were heavy.

Sometime near 1600, the I&R returned to the schoolhouse at Buchet to again assume OP duty and provide security for headquarters. After seeing the carnage at Bleialf, the few rifle shots we fired from the hillside made us feel that we were lucky in our "baptism of fire." We warmed up some C Rations, our first meal of the day, and tried to catch some sleep, somewhat apprehensive about what our role would be in the morning. It was

readily apparent that we were in the midst of a major operation and were, at least, partially surrounded.

December 17, 1944

The night started off quietly. The men had been pulled in from the OPs and we set up a perimeter guard around the schoolhouse. Everyone checked his weapon and stripped his combat pack down to the bare essentials. It had begun to snow again in the evening and, as usual, the fog socked in so that visibility was near zero. The noise of occasional small arms fire and bursting artillery shells were the only things to break the silence. The rifle companies reported scattered German patrol activity probing for weak spots in their lines.

At 0300, the German artillery fire, which had been sporadic up until that time, increased in intensity with the heaviest concentration in the direction of Bleialf. Buchet, Halenfeld, Radsheid and Oberlasheid also took additional hits. At 0630, a massive attack hit Bleialf and within minutes the town was overrun. Whatever troops that could get out, fell back toward Buchet. German troops continued to pursue them to the edge of Buchet before breaking off to join the main thrust up the Bleialf-Radsheid road. Company B, 331st Medical Battalion was attached to the 423rd in Buchet and continued to treat casualties in the midst of the fighting. The I&R remained near the schoolhouse as part of the security forces for regimental headquarters.

Along about 1200, Ike came back from S-2 at headquarters and reported that the Colonel would soon be moving his command post to Oberlasheid. Even though communications were not dependable, word had been received that the German forces attacking up the Bleialf-Schonberg road had linked up with forces coming from the north, occupied Schonberg, and completed the encirclement of the 422nd and 423rd. In one of the few successful attempts to contact Division headquarters in St. Vith, Col. Cavender requested that an airdrop of food, ammunition and medical supplies be made in a field in the vicinity of Halenfeld. He was assured that this would happen the following day. He was also told that an armored column would be attacking from St. Vith to relieve the regiment. These two events never occurred.

By this time the fog had lifted slightly. The platoon got in their jeeps and moved to the outskirts of Buchet to take up its assigned position as rear guard for the company. Shortly after reaching the intersection of the road leading to Halenfeld, we heard the noise of planes. From the north, a German ME-109 appeared out of the fog starting a strafing run on the road. Right on his tail were two American fighters, guns blazing. The German pilot peeled off to the east and over a range of hills into the fog, the Americans right behind. We soon heard a loud explosion from that direction and assumed that our pilots were successful since we were bothered no more.

During the day the buzz bombs continued to fly over heading in the direction of Liege. Out of boredom, we started taking pot shots at them with our rifles knowing they were really out of our range. It was fun until Willie Bulman decided that maybe a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on one of our jeeps might do a better job. In no uncertain

words Casey reminded him of what the result would be if he should accidentally hit one. So we continued to sit there and wait.

Headquarters started their move about 1600, but by that time, the Colonel had decided the I&R should stay in Buchet for the night, as a security platoon. Back we went to the schoolhouse and, after scrounging around in the village, found enough food to have some sort of an evening meal.



1999 Photo

Bleialf as seen from O.P.#2 looking across the 1000 yard gap



1999 Photo

The Toys of War

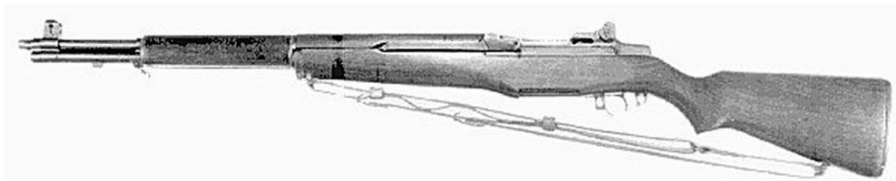


1942 Jeep equipped with a "wire cutter" welded to the front bumper and a .50 cal. machine gun mounted on the floor in front of the back seat.

The platoon leaders jeep was equipped this way as well as one jeep per squad, usually the No.2 jeep



The remaining jeeps in the platoon looked like this



M-1 "Garand" .30 cal. Rifle. This was the basic infantry rifle carried by the majority of the platoon.



M-1 .30 cal. Carbine usually assigned to officers and senior non-coms



M3A1 .45 cal. submachine gun, popularly known as a "grease gun". Each clip held 30 rounds of .45 cal. ammunition. It was effective only at short range and most often was used to provide covering fire in close combat. One per squad was standard issue for the I&R.

9

ROADBLOCK

December 18, 1944

Again the night was fairly quiet. Occasional artillery fire and the sounds of small arms, probably from patrol skirmishes in the area of the front line companies, were the only things that disturbed our light sleep. The I&R posted sentries around the

schoolhouse and, throughout the night, kept in touch with the small security force that had been left in Buchet proper after the headquarters move to Oberlasheid.

We struggled out of our sacks at dawn - the usual foggy, snowy, cold dawn - to find that Casey had been up early and put together a hot breakfast from the leftovers we had at the schoolhouse. It certainly wasn't ham and eggs, but Casey, using his imagination, made it taste better than breakfast at the Waldorf. Packs, weapons and ammunition were checked and our barracks bags were stacked in the command post on the first floor. In the meantime, Ike had taken off for headquarters to find out what the situation was.

Our combat packs, usually carried in the jeeps, had the bare minimum for survival for a couple of days. They contained a blanket, a change of socks and underwear, what food we could locate - an occasional K ration or extra chocolate bar - a small first aid kit and any extra ammunition we could pack in. Our weapons consisted of M-1 rifles or .30 caliber carbines, two jeep mounted .50 caliber machine guns, and two .45 caliber "grease guns", those crude inaccurate submachine guns with 30 round magazines that threw a lot of lead and were particularly good for covering fire. Overcoats were packed in the barracks bags - they were too cumbersome for fighting. We had not yet been issued overshoes.

By the time Ike returned, we had all the jeeps loaded and ready for whatever we had to do. He called us all out around his jeep and told us that the regiment had been ordered to abandon its positions on the front line and proceed to attack westward across Skyline Drive and then turn northwestward to attack Schonberg. The 9th Armored was supposedly moving on Schonberg from St. Vith in relief of the 422nd and the 423rd. Again the information was faulty, since no American armor was ever seen. The I&R was to fall in as rear guard at the end of the regiment to protect against any German attacks from the rear. He then pulled a bottle of White Horse Scotch from his knapsack. "This could be a mess we're getting into," said Ike. "Above all, stick together and we'll make it some way or another. Here's to the best." He then passed the bottle around and everyone had a swallow with a double ration going to Johnny Califf. It was his birthday. Irish passed out some cigars he had been hoarding, - the birth of a new adventure? We cranked up the jeeps and moved out.

We found the end of the column about three quarters of a mile outside Buchet on the road to Halenfeld. We could hear that the fighting had intensified over near Skyline Drive and the column had ground to a halt. We were told to hold our position and be alert for any enemy movements in our rear. And hold we did -- for five or six hours. During our wait, Hank Iversen had found an abandoned 2 1/2 ton truck and, taking three of the fellows with him, went back to the schoolhouse and loaded up all our barracks bags rejoining us a short time later. We had hated to leave all our possessions and were bound and determined to get them out if we could. Some of the second squad also went back into Buchet to check out the headquarters buildings for any classified material that might have been overlooked when they moved out. They found quite a lot of papers laying around and, to be safe, had quite a bonfire.

Late in the afternoon, the convoy got moving again, the troops having fought their way past Skyline Drive, suffering heavy casualties in the fighting. The 1st Battalion had been nearly wiped out with the exception of A Company that was serving as their rear

guard. Lt. Col. Nagle came to Ike about this time and told him to have the platoon establish a roadblock at the crossroads south of Radsheid near a corduroy road called "Engineers Cut-off" that had been built by the engineers to serve as a shortcut between the Bleialf/Schonberg road and the Bleialf/Auw road. ("Skyline Drive") Half of our little force was to hold the roadblock at all costs and the other half were to occupy a hill overlooking the Ihren valley. The 1st squad, in charge of the roadblock, had a backbreaking job during most of the night. We succeeded in felling one tree across the road using a rusty hatchet we found in an abandoned truck and one or two entrenching tools from our jeeps. We would work two or three at a time while the others kept watch at our rear.

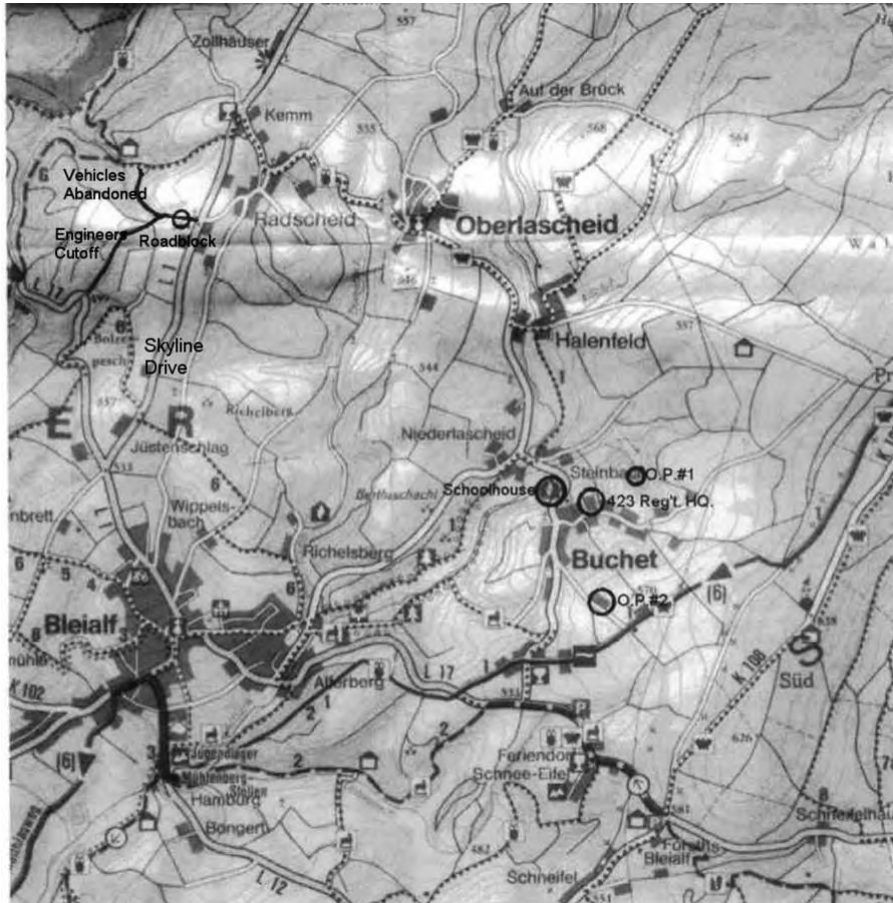
During the night, the fighting continued, more intense than before. Ike, trying to keep in touch with headquarters, found that Col. Cavender had moved the headquarters contingent to 3rd Battalion CP on a hill overlooking Schonberg. All the vehicles had become bogged down in the mud of the logging trails leading into the Ihren valley and had to be abandoned. The supporting artillery had been ordered to withdraw to St. Vith, and thus was not of much help to the regiment. The troops spent one of their most miserable nights ever, not being able to see the enemy and being constantly fired upon and shelled in the muddy and mainly exposed positions. Ammunition was extremely scarce, food and medical supplies had run out and the regiment was only at about fifty percent of full strength.

The I&R was comparatively lucky. The Germans had not tried to come down our way and had not, obviously, spotted our positions so we received no artillery fire. Toward daybreak, spelling each other, we were able to get a few winks of sleep.

In some of our bull sessions stateside, we had often wondered how we would react under combat conditions. We knew we had been trained well. We had proven ourselves in tactical exercises. We knew we could count on each other. We knew we wouldn't panic. Would we be scared? Could fear be controlled? Or even be made to work for us?

Yes, we found as any combat soldier did, that we were scared at times. If we could see and identify what was happening to us, we could do something about it and fear was minimized. But in the middle of an artillery barrage, we could well experience a terrifying, shaking fear. We couldn't see the shells. We couldn't do much about them. We had to have faith that we could duck down far enough to keep from being hit. We also had to have faith that someone somewhere was looking after us and trust that, unless our name was on that particular round, we would be safe.

During this night, with the noise and fighting just a few hundred yards from us, we began to feel some of this trepidation. Tomorrow we would be in the middle of things we couldn't forecast and this knowledge transformed our feelings into a cocky, fine edged attitude that said we would make it --- God willing.



On December 18, 1944, the I&R moved from Buchet through Halenfeld, Oberlascheid to Radsheid.

That evening the roadblock was established near the intersection of
Engineers Cutoff and Skyline Drive.

The next afternoon, December 19, 1944, the platoon had to abandon the vehicles on a logging trail in the area.



Scene from the area of the roadblock. Engineers Cutoff went to the left just over the crest of the hill. In the valley, left center, the troops of the 423rd had to surrender on the 19th of December

In 1944, this area was heavily forested. Over time, it has been cleared for farming.



Another view of the area of the roadblock. Engineers Cutoff went to the left near where the white car is seen.

ON OUR OWN

December 19, 1944

As dawn arose, the squad holding the hill overlooking the Ihren valley, were relieved by remnants of Fox company of the 422nd, who had somehow wandered out of their assigned area in all the confusion. The squad returned to the roadblock and reinforced our small group that had been there throughout the night. The weather continued snowy and foggy, the fighting continued in the valley to our west and it was evident that the troops were being severely battered.

Shortly, we moved our jeeps and the 2 1/2 down the hill a few yards and lined them up on a small dirt road within sight of the fighting, all the while maintaining the roadblock at the crossroads. In an attempt to establish communications with Division, Ike sent two of the radio jeeps, with Johnson and Sparks as radio operators, up onto Skyline Drive, the highest point in the terrain without the encumbrance of trees, to try to get a message through to Division. The message was something like this -- "Regiment surrounded. Send ammunition, food and medical supplies." Skyline Drive was under direct observation by the Germans and was zeroed in by mortar and .88 fire. One at a time the jeeps would progress down the road for a few yards and stop while Johnny and Sparky would try to key the message on the radios. Usually the message could not be completed before shells started dropping around the jeeps. Then it was down the road for a few more yards and try again. After a couple of passes back and forth, it became impossible to make any more attempts. Both jeeps came back to the platoon position with holes in the back of the radios and one of the drivers had a nice dent in his helmet from shrapnel. We assumed that the message never got through.

Meanwhile, Ike had headed out to find Regimental headquarters to see what the situation was. From our semi-concealed positions on the road, with the valley on our left and a hill and tree line on our right, we saw, at about 1000 yards, a group of American soldiers of about company strength under a white flag of surrender. They were probably remnants of the 1st Battalion that had been so severely mauled during the night. So far the I&R had not been spotted in our position on the hillside and we had not been fired upon by the tanks and infantry we could so plainly see across the valley. Ike returned about 1200 and said Col. Cavender had indicated, in a meeting with his staff officers, that he would be surrendering the Regiment to the Germans at 1600 and that any troops who wished, had permission to take off and try to work their way back to American lines. There was no question of what the I&R would do. As we started to move the jeeps and the 2 1/2 further along the road, a terrific barrage of .88s landed all around us. We had been spotted. We hit the ditches, and, between shell bursts, we'd pop up and grab any ammunition we could, fired rounds into the radios, threw grenades under the hoods of the jeeps and took off over the crest of the hill to our right. The last and most painful thing we did was to throw an incendiary grenade into the back of the 2 1/2 and, from the top of the hill, looked back and saw the truck and all our personal belongings enveloped in flames and black smoke.

After reaching the crest of the hill, we proceeded rapidly eastward across Skyline Drive, skirted Oberlasheid, then across open fields for about a mile, crossing a small stream on the way. We assembled in some heavy woods at the top of a small hill and stopped to rest and get organized. We had escaped the .88s with just the clothes on our

backs - field jackets - no overcoats or overshoes. We were in good shape as far as ammunition was concerned since everyone had grabbed all he could carry from the jeeps. All cartridge belts were full. Sparky, who was carrying a "grease gun", had about ten magazines stuck in the pockets of his field jacket that became quite uncomfortable as the time went on. Gnome Mowery, who had the other one, had a similar amount. Irish, in his inimitable fashion, had removed his gas mask and had stuffed the carrier with a dozen or so K ration bars, our only source of food.

As we rested, Ike and Casey went back to Oberlasheid to reconnoiter and soon called us down to the village. Assembled there were about 150 - 200 American GIs, the remnants of various units, under the command of Major Helms, Regimental G-3. After identifying the group, Casey motioned for the rest of us to join them. In the bunch, was a Lt. who had his jeep loaded with all his Officer's gear and other booty that he was bound and determined to get out. It took a direct order to get him to abandon his precious possessions. Capt. Nauman was there with what was left of the men from A Company, and also Lt. McKinley with men from 1st Battalion Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon, plus a few other stragglers. Seated on the hood of a jeep were two captured German officers with their hands clasped behind their heads. What a motley looking crew we were - dirty, wet, tired - with some that only could be classified as walking wounded. Major Helms insisted that we try and mount an attack on Schonberg. Ike tried his best to convince him the it would be far better to abandon the few vehicles and try to infiltrate through the German lines back to St. Vith. The major would have none of this and ordered the I&R, along with Nauman and McKinley's groups, to fall in as rear guard for the attack. The column had no sooner started out with the German captives on the hood of the jeep in the lead, than .88s started to hammer the column. One of the Germans dived for the ditch and the other crumpled after a well placed shot to the head. The I&R and the other two groups in the rear, dropped down into a small ravine and made their way into a patch of woods out of sight of the enemy. Here we reorganized with Capt. Nauman and A company in a column on the right, and the I&R and McKinley's group on the left. Ike designated Sam Bordelon as lead scout because of his knowledge of French. Ozzie Spier, who spoke fluent German, was to follow Sam. Bill Morris' 1st squad was next in line, with Sparky and his "grease gun" near the head of the column to provide covering fire if necessary. Huck Jones and the 2nd squad followed, with Mowery near the end providing for the same covering fire to the rear. Ike and Casey moved along the column to where ever they were needed. Thus, in that single file fashion, the I&R started their little hike.

We moved out in a easterly direction into a patch of woods to get out of sight of the enemy. Directly in front of us, we saw the small German village of Schlausenbach. For some reason, Cap't. Nauman and A Company immediately took off to attack the village that seemed to be swarming with Germans. Knowing that to try and to help A Company would be futile, Long and McKinley's groups made a hard swing to the northwest away from the village and pulled up to the edge of the patch of woods.

[Sam Bordelon] - "As I went to the edge of this woods to reconnoiter, I saw in the distance, about a quarter of a mile, a farmhouse. Between the woods and the house was what had been a field or pasture which had recently been used by German Panzers. They had churned it up into a sea of slimy, half frozen mud. Standing outside the house was an elderly German couple talking to two German soldiers. I reported back to Lt. Long and we decided our only recourse was to go ahead since, obviously the Germans were coming right behind us and we had nowhere to go. I started my way through this frozen mud

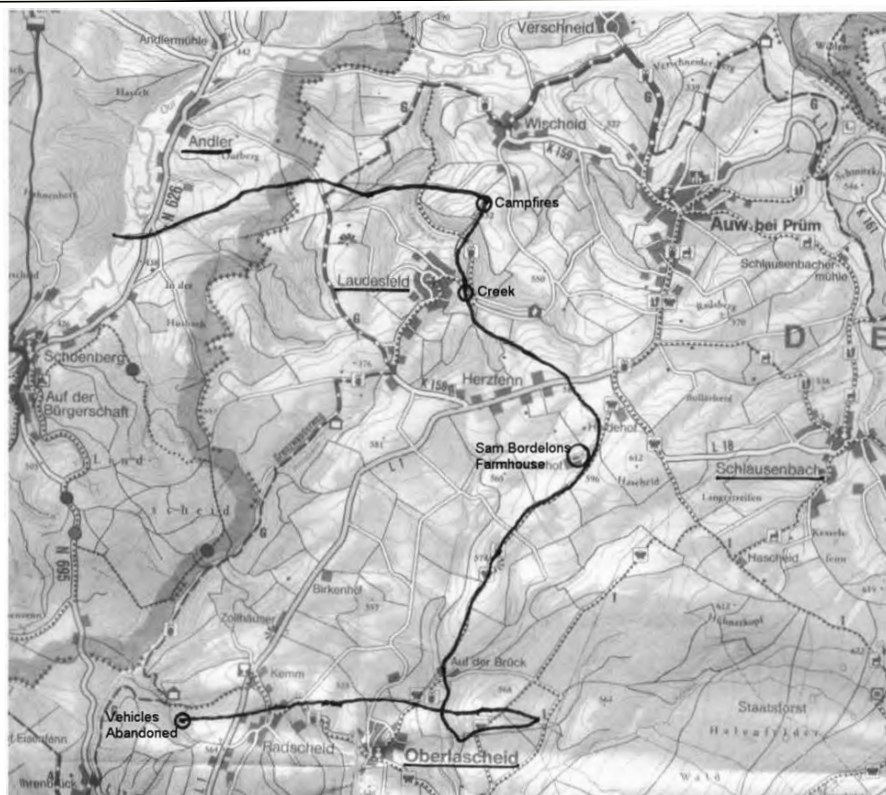
thinking any moment I would hear the clatter of machine guns from the farmhouse. As I walked step by step knowing I'd be dead after a few minutes, the German couple went into the house and the two soldiers ran around the back. I kept going. When I finally reached the house there was no one there. I waded back and the men came forward and joined me at the house."

By this time it was probably about 1600 and growing dusk, making visibility in the fog even more impossible. We could hear German vehicles in the distance, and coming soon to the main highway from Auw, we cautiously crossed it one by one before the Germans came into sight. In the ever increasing darkness, we could see, off to our left, the small village of Laudesfeld. We had no intention of blundering into the village in the dark. This territory was too busy for us to hang around in. We were next to a fast flowing stream and in we went as quietly as we could, wading across it in water up to our waists, ultimately gaining the woods on the other side. The shock of the cold water was almost enough to do us in, but we continued moving in the woods parallel to the stream until we had passed the village on the other side. We could clearly hear German voices. We moved on about a quarter of a mile, to the top of a nearby hill, where Ike called a halt. We were in bad shape. We could go no further without rest.

Looking to our right, we could see the glow of the German fires 800 to 1000 yards away. Hoping that the Germans would mistake us for some of their troops, Ike gave us the OK to scoop out three or four pits about a foot deep in the frozen ground and start small fires so we could try to dry out. As the fires were lit, we huddled around them trying to hide them from the German view. We melted snow in our canteen cups, shaved some of the K ration bars into the water with our trench knives and got a little warm liquid in our bellies.

[Sam Bordelon] - "I somehow had procured a small can of beef stew Army rations made by Campbell Soup Co. I had it in my field pack and had secretly been protecting it anticipating a future need. I took the can out of my pack because we had not eaten much for about a couple of days with the exception of a few K ration crackers. I took out my bayonet and prepared to punch a hole in the can, surrounded by an eager, drooling bunch of men hoping for a feast. As the bayonet went into the can, there was almost an explosion. The meat was rotten and inedible. I don't know if anybody cried, but I felt like it."

The small fires didn't do much to warm us up. We didn't dare build them up too much for fear we would be seen. We huddled together in small groups hoping the shared body heat would allow us to rest. A couple of the fellows took off their boots to try to rub warmth into their feet but found they could barely get them back on. Their feet were too badly swollen. One of the guys had managed to grab a blanket when we left our jeeps, and we cut it up in strips to wrap around our hands. And so we sat, leaning against the tops of trees knocked off by artillery fire, and tried to rest for a few hours. Our minds were foggy with fatigue. Our only thoughts were of survival.



After the vehicles were abandoned the afternoon of the 19th, the platoon followed this route through the evening and into the night.

Most of the night of the 19th-20th was spent at the site labeled *Campfires*.



1999 Photo

The view toward

Schlausenbach where

Company A mounted their attack



1999 Photo

Sam Bordelons

Farmhouse



St. Vith Online

A creek similar to the one the platoon crossed near Laudesfeld

11

A GAME OF TAG

December 20, 1944

Sometime early in the morning, probably about 0300, we painfully got on our feet again and started moving out. To rest any more would be dangerous, not only because of the presence of the Germans, but because our physical condition was deteriorating more all the time. If we didn't get our blood circulating, the continued below freezing weather would seriously impede our ability to move.

We proceeded north for about half a mile until we saw a road ahead of us at the bottom of the hill. Sounds of tanks and trucks indicated this was a main road for the German advance. We veered west, parallel to the road, along the forward slope of the hill that was covered with scrub growth, looking for a place that would be safe to cross the road. The fog still hung over the area and helped shield us from any German eyes that might be on the lookout. The road below us made a sharp bend to the south following the contours of the hill we were on. At the bend, we could see the lights of the small town of Andler. Another 500 yards beyond the bend, we stopped while Sam went forward to scout out the chances of crossing the road at that point. At the road, Sam

came upon a Belgian civilian walking down the road away from the village. Sam questioned him in French and was told that there was a heavy concentration of Germans in the village and that we should try to cross the road and get into the woods on the other side.

It was getting on toward 0600 and dawn would soon be upon us. The platoon joined Sam at the edge of the road, crossed a barbed wire fence and crawled into a ditch along side the road. No sooner had we gained the ditch than a convoy of German tanks and trucks started to leave the village and come down the road toward us. Since it was still dark, they were traveling under blackout conditions with only small slits of light showing as headlights. They were spaced about twenty five to thirty five yards apart and moving at a fairly slow pace.

After the first tank had passed, Irish dashed across the road and dove into the ditch on the far side. A swift flowing stream ran parallel to the road a few yards from the ditch and Irish discovered a log, eight to ten inches in diameter had been felled across the stream to form a crude bridge. As each tank passed, Casey would send another man across the road and into the far ditch to join Irish. One by one, we ran the gauntlet between vehicles with the last three men making a dash all at the same time. As the platoon was crossing the road, those that were first across were tightropeing across the log and hitting the ground at the far side of the stream. As the last man crossed the stream and dawn was beginning to break, we looked back toward the road and saw a number of German troops coming down the road and along the bank of the stream. We had probably made some noise in our crossing and they were out looking for some "ghost men." We immediately got to our feet and ran the few yards to the edge of the dense woods and made our way quickly to the top of a very steep hill. The Germans came down the stream, going as far as the edge of the woods and then gave up the search.

Lt. McKinley's group had crossed the stream slightly below us and we could hear them coming through the woods on our left. They were making too much noise to suit us and two or three men went back to quiet them down. Most of the bunch had not had the training in patrolling that we had and didn't appreciate the need for absolute silence. The exception was their 1st scout, a corporal by the name of Willard Roper from F Company. The group immediately took off in slightly different direction.

[John Califf] - "Towards morning, Dick Sparks and myself were separated with McKinley's crowd from Longs. Once we stopped for a rest and some German tanks almost ran over us. Finally we had to stop for a few hours rest. As it began to get light, we could hear Germans talking all around us. Luckily they moved off and so did we. We traveled all day in the woods, as much as possible, but at top speed for we knew that if we didn't reach our lines, the German advance would completely engulf us. We could hear artillery barrages all around us. Once, while in the woods, we thought we heard American 2 1/2 ton trucks on a road nearby. They were 2 1/2s all right but loaded with German SS troops followed by tanks, assault guns etc. We had to drop quick and I happened to be on the edge of the woods. One German with a machine pistol came up to within 10 yards of me, but apparently thought I was dead due to the battered helmet I had on."

Meanwhile, the I&R also decided that it would be best to travel during daylight hours. There was obviously a lot of German activity around and, by the sound of the

artillery bombardments, the front lines couldn't be too far away. To wait for nightfall would be too risky.

Jim Mowery's feet were in very bad condition and he was having a hard time keeping up with his load of "grease gun" ammunition. Huck Jones, sensing this, moved him forward in the formation. Irish swapped his rifle for Gnome's "grease gun" and ammunition and moved to the front of the column to take over Sparky's place when he and Rat became separated from the group.

The forest, in this section, was very dense. Mature trees had not been harvested nor the land cleared of underbrush. This made for good cover but also made the going slow and tough. With the ground covered with snow, it was almost impossible to avoid stepping on fallen branches and hearing them crack and snap under our weight no matter how carefully we walked. As we followed the man ahead of us, the lower branches of the trees would snap back and slap us across the face and body. It was like walking in a jungle in the middle of winter. It was easy to lose sight of the man ahead of you, so the platoon proceeded with a pretty tight interval between men.

Since it was so hard to see, Sam and Irish ranged out ahead for greater distances than usual while the platoon waited for the signal to move ahead. After an hour or two, they came to the edge of the woods bordering a broad valley, about 200 yards wide. A small road ran down the middle and it looked like it had been used to recently move vehicles. While Sam cautiously went down the hill, crossed the road and continued to the tree line on the opposite hill, the rest of the platoon came up to join Irish on the near side. On Sam's signal that all seemed clear, the platoon moved out and crossed the valley without incident. Irish waited until the last man was over and then started down the hill himself.

[Irish Sheehan] - "As I started down the hill and across the valley itself, which was covered with muck and mud, the pack of "grease gun" ammunition on my back kept bouncing up and down and eventually knocked me face first into the mud. Just as I started to get up, a German tank came around the bend. I could see the machine gun turret swinging toward me. Just as that happened, an artillery shell landed on the hill we had just left. The German tank closed down and backed down out of the way. I got up and made my way across the valley and joined the rest of the guys at the tree line. The artillery kept falling on the opposite hill, and we decided it was time we got going and head for St. Vith."

A short time later, Sam spotted a battery of .88s in a small clearing on an adjoining hill. It would have probably been easy to take the battery, but having no idea about troop strength in the area and knowing that the sound of firing would attract the Germans like fleas to a dog, it was decided that discretion was the better part of valor and the platoon made a slight half circle and by-passed the battery without being seen.

Again Sam and Irish ranged out ahead of the platoon to scout out the territory. As they approached a small foot path in the woods, Sam spotted what looked like a Belgian civilian coming down the path.

[Sam Bordelon] - "Irish and I hid behind some trees bordering the footpath the Belgian was using. As he came closer, I stepped behind a tree and spoke to him in French. I told

him who we were and what our problem was. This was risky because some of the Belgians near the German border, were pro-German. He told us we were in the midst of a group of Panzer divisions and even gave us the names of those divisions. He also knew the name of the General of one of them. ... As we left the Belgian and started back to the platoon, we heard vehicles approaching through the forest along a small dirt road. We laid down in some bushes about fifty yards from the road and along came two touring cars, the open convertibles that German officers liked to ride in. For some reason, they always loved to ride standing up holding on to the windshield. In the first vehicle, was a tall, very handsome German, probably in his forties. I could easily have picked him off at that distance but decided to leave well enough alone. He drove on by. Later on, after the war, I recognized his picture from a newspaper photo. He was the Commanding General of the Panzer division the Belgian told us about. After the two vehicles had passed, Irish and I went back to the platoon, ready to move on."

By this time, it was somewhere in the neighborhood of 1300. The platoon continued to head in a westward direction and, after about an hour, again heard more vehicular traffic nearby. Cautiously, they moved up to the edge of the trees, a short distance from the road, to observe. To the left, the road made a swing to the south about fifty yards from where the platoon was hiding. The traffic was moving to the north, left to right, with two or three vehicles of various types in a group and a spacing between groups of about 100 yards. Other tank noises could be heard to the rear and it was evident that the platoon had to get across the road or get trapped. So, using the technique of the night before, they would wait until one group had passed. Even though they were not completely out of sight, two or three of the guys would tear across the road and into the trees before the next group could nose around the bend to the left. Everyone got across. No one was seen, even though it was broad daylight.

Moving on again west, following the noise of the buzz bombs that were constantly flying overhead toward Liege, one of the men heard the sound of foot soldiers in the woods off to the left. Everyone hit the ground. Lo and behold, it was McKinley's group led by Will Roper, that emerged from the trees. Califf and Sparks were with them. The I&R had not known what had happened to the two of them. As the men rested and the officers and non-coms were talking things over, Sam had found a patch of short evergreens roughly fifty yards square. They formed a dense thicket and the lower branches came to within eighteen inches of the ground. Since it was then about 1600 and the activity around was intensifying, it was decided to crawl under these trees and rest until dark before trying to proceed any further.

[Dick Sparks] - "Both McKinley's group and the I&R moved in under the trees leaving as little evidence as possible that we were there. Roper and I moved up to the edge of the northern boundary so we could observe any activity coming from that direction. We were no more than a foot back from the edge and burrowed as deep as we could into the snow. Our weapons were in front of us and we lay with our heads on our arms to try and get a little rest. The snow was cold, but also served as insulation against the the still cold, clammy fog. The rest of the men were spread out throughout the patch of woods, disbursed, but yet close enough to reach out and touch a buddy near them, for this would be our only means of communication.

Soon after we had gotten settled, to our consternation, German tanks and troop carriers began to move into the area next to our "home" and proceeded to establish

a night bivouac around three sides of the patch of trees. As we lay there, a detail walked up the side of the woods where Roper and I were laying and dug a latrine just beyond the boundaries of our woods patch. Throughout the gathering dusk, German officers in two's and three's strolled down this path, deep in conversation. They were close enough that I could have easily reached out and tripped them up. Luckily, they never looked down and we were not spotted. I guess they never expected to have American troops in the middle of their bivouac. As darkness began to arrive, a couple of the guys fell asleep and one even began to lightly snore. A sharp jab in the ribs soon put a stop to this.

After about four hours of lying virtually motionless, the German encampment seemed to be settling down for the night. I soon felt a tug on my boot, indicating that we were pulling out to the rear away from the main encampment. As I started to slide back, I found that my right arm, which had been holding the "grease gun", had fallen fast asleep and was completely numb. I couldn't have squeezed the trigger if I had to.

Roper and I were the last ones to slide out from under the trees and were starting to quietly follow the other men as they headed west, when, all of a sudden, we heard a loud HALT! We had almost literally stumbled into a German outpost manned by a single sentry. Roper quickly jumped into the fox hole, hitting the sentry in the face with his carbine and proceeded to choke him to death. I knelt down beside the fox hole ready to lay down a field of fire if any Germans should appear. The noise of the challenge and subsequent activity alerted both the Germans and our group up ahead, and we all took off, running as fast as we could through the dense, black woods. We could hear the Germans mounting a search, shouting at the top of their lungs and crashing through the underbrush in pursuit. Thank God the Germans were afraid of night fighting and made a lot of noise shouting orders back and forth as they searched. Our group, because of their training, moved more quietly and as rapidly as possible for a half mile or so and, surprisingly, found each other. We formed a defensive perimeter and stayed low for about a half hour until we could hear the German troops moving back to their bivouac area."

Ike and Casey called the men together. McKinley's group had taken off in a different direction. We took a head count and found that Ozzie Spier and Bob Brendlinger were not with us. We waited a few more minutes and then moved out in our usual formation with Sam and Irish out in front.

[Irish Sheehan] - "Sam and I were out in front scouting our way through, working about ten yards from each other, when, all of a sudden I stumbled right into a German machine gun nest. The two men manning the machine gun were as startled as I was. I stood with my "grease gun" pointing at them and they were looking at me with their machine gun pointing at me. I let out a discreet yell for Sam and he quickly came over. He spoke to them in French. He told them we were a heavy combat patrol returning to St. Vith. He told them to move away from their gun, and amazingly they did. They were just kids, younger than I was. Sam went back and got the platoon while I stood guard. The platoon came forward, passed the machine gun nest and headed on to St. Vith. As Sam and I got ready to move

out, one of the German kids said, "Look out for the mines," and told us where we might find them."

It was near midnight by this time and we were about on our last legs. We could hear the distinctive sound of German .88s firing from our left rear, and the answering fire from American artillery from our right front. We were caught in the middle. Nobody knew we were out there and we realized that the most dangerous part would be getting back into American lines.

We soon came to, what looked like, a major secondary road. Sam started to scout it out in a southwesterly direction, when we heard him challenged by a loud HALT! That word sounded the same in both German and English and we didn't know what we had run into. We froze, and when Sam didn't return in a reasonable amount of time, we took off along the edge of the woods in a more westerly direction. Ike took over the point.

We were at the edge of a large, fairly level plain that stretched as far as we could see in a southwesterly direction. The ever present fog obliterated any landmarks and our only guidance were the flashes of the American artillery in the distance. A few hundred yards along the edge of the woods, we came to a slight depression or draw that seemed to bisect the vast expanse ahead of us. Ike decided that this would provide us with some minimal cover and, single file we headed down it. Hank Iversen, who was about the fifth or sixth man in line, suddenly stopped. His boot had nudged a trip wire. Reaching down and carefully exploring it with his fingers, he cut it with his radio pliers that he still had in his pocket. No sooner had we moved on again than the night was suddenly lit up with the brilliance of star shells that turned the night into day. As we had been trained, we froze in whatever posture we were caught in until they had burned themselves out in two or three minutes.

In the bright light, however, we could see what looked like some sort of object on the horizon at the far edge of the plain. Not knowing what it was, Ike told us all to get down as low as we could and wait for him to scout it out. As he moved nearer to the far edge of the plain, he thought he heard sounds of some kind of movement. Taking a big risk, he stood up at full height and yelled, "Ya, Ya!" - or "Ja, Ja!" - since both sounded the same and would serve to call attention to him. What a wonderful sound it was when an American voice asked him for the password. Of course he had no idea what the password was and so he waited, spouting English phrases, until a squad of men came and "captured" him and took him to a Lt. who was manning a dug-in tank with his squad of men. They were men of Combat Command B of the 7th Armored Division. It took him quite awhile to convince them who he was and that those of us, still out in the ditch, were American soldiers. He, of course, wasn't aware that Germans dressed in American uniforms, had infiltrated the American lines the past few days. After convincing them, he signaled for us to come up to his location. As we moved up along side the tank, we passed through a gauntlet of GIs, standing with weapons pointed at us, still not quite sure that we weren't the enemy. This marked a milepost in our history - 0200, December 21, 1944.

The Lt. radioed back to his battalion command post and asked that a truck be sent to take us back to the CP. While we were waiting for the truck to arrive, the Lt. told us that it seemed impossible that we had come across that plain without setting off a mine or trip flare. During the past two days, the plain had been solidly mined with anti-personnel

mines leaving only one path open for purposes of counterattack. Orders had come down in the early evening that, if any mine or trip wire was kicked off, the battalion was to fire all its weapons at that spot. We had hit that one path. As tears of relief rolled down many faces, we knew that someone "up there" had been watching out for us.

The truck soon arrived and deposited us at the CP of one of the 7th Armored Battalions which was located in a house on the edge of St. Vith. We almost literally collapsed on the floor. As Sparky slipped off his field jacket with the pockets filled with .45 magazines, the release of the weight that had been his companion for the past days, caused his neck to go into spasm and he couldn't turn his head until the next day. Most others could barely hobble and some fingers were turning white at the tips. While Ike and the non-coms were being debriefed, the rest of us were given part of a K ration and immediately fell asleep in whatever space we could find. We were home again!

12

ST. VITH

December 20 - 21, 1944

At daybreak, we again were put in a truck and moved to a large schoolhouse in the middle of St. Vith known as "St. Joseph Kloster." This building had become the headquarters of the defenders of St. Vith, under the command of Brigadier General Bruce Clarke, Commander of Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division. We had expected to find the 106th Division Headquarters there, but were told that they had moved back to Vielsalm on the evening of the 18th. But we did find McKinley's group who had come into the American lines within a couple of hours of our arrival. And, also to our delight, we found Sam Bordelon, Ozzie Spier and Aunt Minnie Brendlinger.

After Sam had been challenged back at the woods road, he was taken to a tank stationed in the woods. He, too, was taken to a unit headquarters and interrogated, having quite a time proving he was not an infiltrating German. After spending the night there, he was taken to the schoolhouse in the morning.

Ozzie and Aunt Minnie, realizing that they were lost from the group, knew they had to make their way to the American lines by themselves. Using their imagination and good old I&R ingenuity, they decided to try to pass as Germans. They turned their helmets around backwards and slung their rifles upside down in order to look more like German troops. Soon after they started out, they came upon a German outpost, and, in the dark and in his fluent German, Ozzie, in a very convincing Prussian manner, told the sentries that they were spies ordered to get behind American lines, that he outranked them, and they were to let them pass. Aunt Minnie kept his mouth shut. It worked and they had occasion to again use that ruse before they reached American lines.

We were taken inside the schoolhouse while the officers were debriefed. This was the first concrete evidence known to the higher echelons, that the 422nd and 423rd had surrendered. As we stepped back outside the schoolhouse, we were met by reporters and

photographers from Pathe News, Fox News and an assortment of still photographers. We were heroes that day - one of the greatest stories to come out of the Bulge to date.

Of course we were in horrendous physical shape. Any of us could have passed as Bill Mauldin's "Willie" of cartoon fame. We were sent to the field hospital nearby, which had not been evacuated, and the medics tried their best to help us out. They arranged for us to be fed, and given new boots and clothing if they were available. There weren't enough to go around and the fellows in the worst need, rightfully got them. At least there were enough dry socks and everyone was happy to get them. As we pulled our wet ones off, a couple of guys found that the skin was coming off with the socks. Everyone had a good start at frostbite or frozen extremities. The medical supplies were limited and about the best that could be done was to sprinkle sulfa powder on the worst cases and give the rest of us some foot powder or salve to use. Bob Hirst seemed to have the worst case, so he was kept at the hospital. We didn't know if he got out of St. Vith until we ran into him in March as part of the reconstituted 106th in Rennes, France.

We didn't spend a lot of time at the medics. More serious casualties continued to stream in and they took priority. At least we were still on our feet, even though some were barely able to walk. By this time, it was approaching 1200 and we were told to go up to the third floor of the schoolhouse and get some sleep. We knew we would be needed to fight again before the day was out.

As we tried to rest on some old mattresses and blankets we found there, we could hear the sounds of intense small arms and artillery fire coming from the edge of the village in all directions. The small but effective forces of the 81st Engineers commanded by Lt.Col Tom Riggs, CCB of the 7th Armored plus other remnants of troops that made up the defensive forces of St. Vith, continued to deny the Germans access into the town. At about 1500, "screaming meemies" and .88s started hitting the schoolhouse. We tried as best as we could to scramble into our boots and rushed to the basement, half dressed and lugging our gear with us. Soon the shelling let up somewhat, and we tried the third floor again, only to have the same thing happen. We stayed in the basement after that.

Around 1600, we were told to go to the basement of a building down the street, where a kitchen had been set up, to get a hot meal. It was decided that McKinley's group would go first and, when they were finished, the I&R would follow. The shelling was intense, and we ducked between shell bursts and in and out of doorways on our way to the hot meal. Again, surprisingly, no one was hit. The hot meal consisted of beans and franks, garnished over with, of all things, canned fruit salad. But it sure tasted good - could it be our "Last Supper?" While we were eating, word came down that the Germans had broken through the defenses outside the town and were starting to come down the streets toward the main square at its center. McKinley's group, who had finished their meal, were immediately ordered to join the remnants of Company B, 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion of the 7th Armored and set up a line running south from town along the railroad tracks for about 500 yards. As the enemy pulled up to St. Vith, that position became untenable and the line pulled back.

Before we had a chance to finish our meal, the I&R was called out and deployed around the main square, "An den Linden". There we found four or five tanks and a tank

destroyer assembled and, one by one they were sent out in different directions on streets emanating from the square.

[Major Alva McDaniel, 38th AIB, 7th Armored - combat interview] - "Our TD's at the crossroads fired at the tanks when flares were sent up outlining them, but no results were observed. Shortly afterwards, Major McDaniel met Capt. Britton, 23rd AIB, and as the two of them were going down the street, all hell broke loose on the corner by the TDs. The enemy had infiltrated into that area, and they opened up on the TDs with "burp guns" and other weapons as the TDs were illuminated by enemy flares. Major McDaniel and Lt. Randall of the TDs ducked into the drugstore on the corner of the crossroads."

[John Califf - "We were giving infantry protection to a tank destroyer covering an intersection. Nothing much could be seen in the darkness but outlines in the snow, except when the blinding lights of the flares and muzzle blasts made it seem brighter than day. This effect imprinted on my mind the design of an iron fence next to the TD. ... Later I found out that it was located at the An den Linden next to the "Apotheke Schiltz"(Schiltz Pharmacy.)"

Ike made a deal with a tank commander that if he would provide protection from German tanks, we would keep the German infantry off his tanks. Soon, it was reported that a German King Tiger tank, the most deadly of the German tanks, was seen coming down a street heading for the square. The lone tank destroyer (TD) left in the square, was sent out to stop it. Huck Jones' second squad was positioned on the right side to protect it from accompanying infantry.

The streets of St. Vith were typical of the Belgian villages. They were extremely narrow, only enough room for one vehicle, and the houses were built right up to the curb, barely leaving room for Jonesy's squad to go along side the TD. They had barely gone a hundred yards, when the Tiger was spotted about a hundred yards away. The TD stopped and fired first, but only by a split second. The TD shell, luckily made a hit on one of the tracks on the Tiger, making it impossible for it to proceed any further. The shell from the Tiger hit the TD a glancing blow, scattering shrapnel all around. The resulting concussion of the two near simultaneous shots, almost literally blew Huck's squad over a hedge between two of the houses. It left most of the guys somewhat deaf for a period of time. Picking themselves up and with Irish in the lead, they hightailed it through back yards, and, in the pitch dark, straight into a chicken coop, each man piling in on top of the man in front of him like a row of dominoes. Of course Huck told them to get the hell out of there and all backed out - all except Irish, the furthest in. Not that he didn't try. Chicken wire got the best of him, and finally, after putting his head down and plowing through the wire, he caught up with the squad, his face all cut up and scratched and looking like a real mess. Finally the squad found its way back to the square and joined the rest of the platoon.

As we were crouching in doorways around the square waiting for our next assignment, word came to Ike, at about 2200, that all the other defenders of St. Vith that were able, had left town and would try to form some sort of a defensive line to the west. That left the I&R as the only organized unit in St. Vith together with a dozen or so stragglers. The tank commander started to move one of his tanks down the main road, the Hauptstrasse, when from a second story window, a grenade was lobbed into the open turret. The tank came to a sudden stop. Who threw the grenade? An infiltrator? A

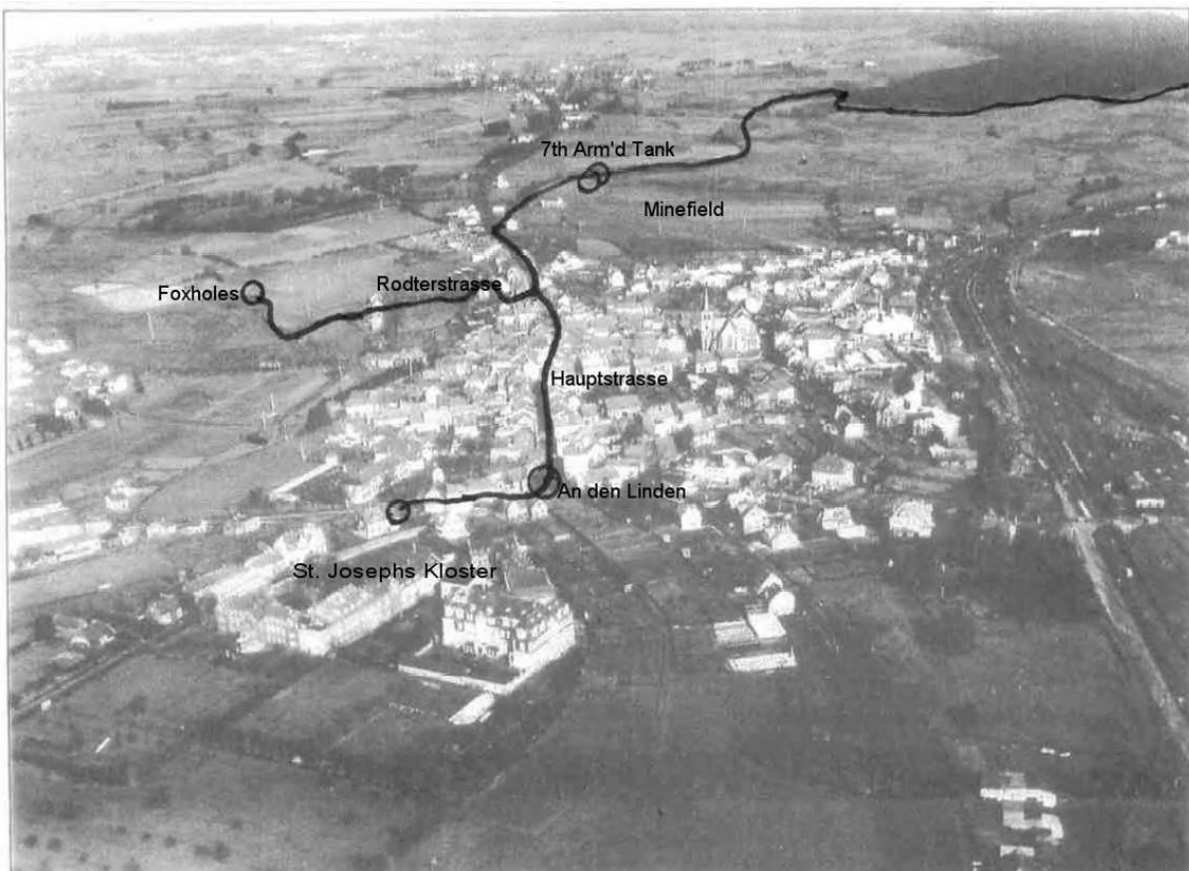
German sympathizer? We never knew. Casey crawled up on top of the tank and dropped down inside. All he found were dead bodies. After he crawled out, the remaining three tanks, with the I&R along side, proceeded cautiously down another street, the Rodterstrasse, that led to the northwest. At the edge of the town, some climbed aboard the tanks, lying as flat as they could, clinging to anything they could get hold of while the rest of the group flanked the tanks on foot. The tanks took off in the midst of a murderous cross fire coming from either side of the road - a cross fire marked by machine guns firing red tracers, scaring the living hell out of us. Luckily, the Germans were firing too high and the tracers criss-crossed safely a few feet above our heads. At the top of a small hill about a mile to the west of town, we pulled off the road. The tanks took up position at the edge of a small patch of woods. The I&R moved down the forward slope of the hill a few yards, spread out and dug in as best we could. We found that one of the guys was missing and Bill Morris went back down the road a short distance, found him, and brought him back to our positions.

Ike, Casey, Morris and Jones went up and down our meager lines all night long making sure we were awake. The temperature had dropped significantly during the evening and it was snowing hard. We expected a German attack at any time. Why they didn't come after us, we never could figure out. They didn't do us in, but the weather almost accomplished the same purpose. We never knew "hell" could be so cold!

St. Vith was in German hands that night. We had ridden the last three tanks out on the last road that was barely open - the last troops to leave St. Vith.

And yet, the unit was still intact! We lost no one! We were still the I&R!

[Brig. Gen. Bruce Clarke, CO, CCB 7th Armored Division] - "When they were told they were going back into the line, their enthusiasm was high, and subsequent reports from the troops with whom they fought indicated that, without exception, these men discharged their duty in exemplary fashion."



After reaching American lines, the platoon was transported down the main street, *Hauptstrasse*, to *St. Josephs Kloster*, the

headquarters of the 106th Division. The battle with the tanks occurred at the crossroads labeled *An den Linden*. The platoon left

St. Vith via of the *Rodterstrasse* to the hillside west of town labeled *Foxholes*.

They Broke Through First



The first group of Lionmen to break through the German encirclement in December were members of the I & R Platoon, 425d Inf. Their first rest after six days of travel through enemy lines came at St. Vliet, Belgium, location of the Division CP.

Yank—1945

Morris (L.Ctr) Long (Ctr) Casenhiser (R.Ctr)



Fox Movietone News Photo

Sheehan, Bordelon, Long



1999 Photo

This section of *St. Josephs Kloster* was HQ for the 106th Division until Dec.18th. The I&R was brought here after returning to American lines.

It is the only section of the Kloster remaining after the fall of St. Vith on Dec.21st, 1944



1999 Photo

An den Linden where the platoon fought the tank battles.



1999 Photo

Hauptstrasse, the main street of St. Vith

St. Vith



1999 Photo

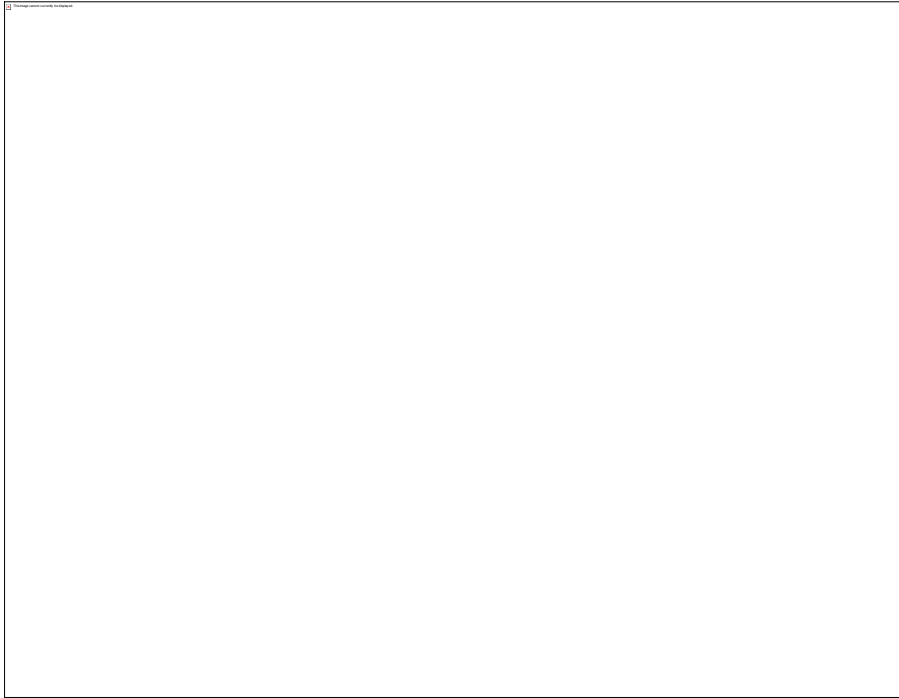
The intersection of *Hauptstrasse* and *Rodterstrasse* where the platoon left St. Vith



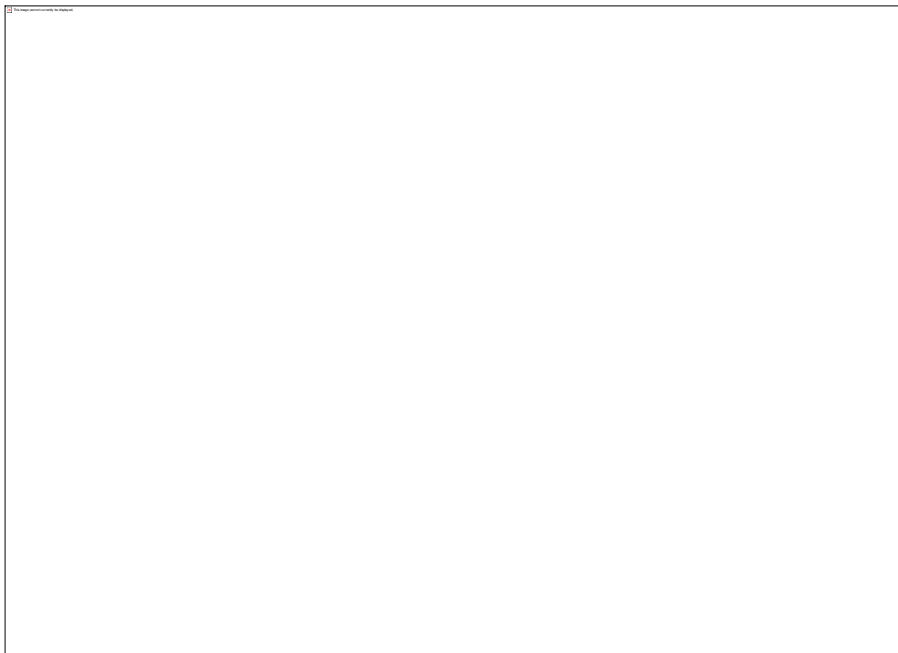
St. Vith - 1940



St. Vith - January 1945



Hauptstrasse - 1945



Hauptstrasse - 1999





FERRIERS

December 22, 1944

The sound of American tanks moving in the patch of woods to our rear in the early hours before dawn, alerted us that something was up. Upon investigation, we found that all the tanks that had left St. Vith with us, had been ordered to pull out and move to the rear. Those in charge of the tanks obviously never thought to let us know - we who were supposed to be their supporting infantry. When Ike made contact, he was ordered to enlist us as rear guard for the retreating tanks. In no uncertain terms, he told them where to go and, from now on we would fend, once again, for ourselves.

We crawled wearily out of our makeshift foxholes and gathered together in the edge of the woods. Some of the guys had to be supported as they tried to stand, and to a man, walking was painful. Our legs had stiffened up over night and our near frozen feet had become more swollen as we crouched in our defensive positions.

The retreating tanks, of course, made quite a racket as they moved onto the St. Vith-Vielsalm road. By the sound of things, they were drawing a lot of enemy fire from both sides of the road. It was obvious that the Germans were between our hillside positions and Vielsalm and that the road would not be the smart place to be. So, again in the cold wind and snow, we started cautiously southwest through the patch of woods.

As we approached the edge of the woods about 1000 yards away, the sky began to lighten somewhat and we could see open fields ahead of us and hear intense fighting in almost all directions with the heaviest concentration to our northwest around the small town of Rodt. We could only assume that our tanker friends had run into a hornets nest in the village and we thought it best that we make a wide swing, bypassing that action. Taking advantage of scrub growth and the ever present fog, we made our way further southwest over country lanes until we came to the small village of Neundorf. Approaching the village over a small bridge, we came to a cluster of farmhouses at the edge of the village.

[Sam Bordelon] - "As we crossed this bridge, we were met by a large number of Belgians - men, women and children. I explained who we were and what had happened in St. Vith. I shall never forget, as long as I live, the actions of these people. There they were in front of the advancing German armies and in the midst of the fleeing American army. And what did they do? They very quickly divided us into small groups and took us into their homes. The group I was with, was taken to the home of a wonderful Belgian lady. I don't know how in the world she did it but it seemed, in minutes, she had a long table loaded with food. There was a huge pot of stewed meat, two large pitchers of milk, boiled potatoes, and loaves of hot bread. You can imagine what happened. We just gorged ourselves. There was a fire going in the fireplace, and it wasn't long before Irish was asleep in an old rocking chair in front of the fire. We no sooner had finished eating than we heard the sound of German machine guns a short ways behind us. As we scrambled to leave, we took all the money we had been able to salvage, out of our pockets, and put it in the middle of the table. We could do no less for these wonderful people."

Soon after leaving the village, we ran into some artillerymen from the 424th and piled into their trucks that were heading toward Crombach. From there, the trucks headed north, through Hinderhausen and eventually gained the major St.Vith - Vielsalm highway

a short distance west of Poteau. It was almost unbelievable the amount of traffic on that small two lane road. Tanks and trucks carrying the men that were pulled back from the St. Vith perimeter were lining the sides of the road all heading west. Trying to head east down the center of the road, were the tanks and men of the 7th Armored and the 82nd Airborne moving up to fight the Germans surrounding St. Vith.

But we were again with American troops, our sister regiment, and felt a small degree of safety. Emotionally we were beat and, as we sat in the rear of the slow moving convoy, an occasional tear would run down a face. We looked at Bob Waddail sitting near the tailgate and saw a tear turn into an icicle as it hit the end of his chin.

Between 1800 and 1900 that night we finally pulled into Vielsalm. Much to our disgust, we found that division had again moved back another fifteen miles to a small town of Ferrieres. There were one or two liaison officers from the 106th in Vielsalm and they arranged for us to be put up in some Belgian army barracks in the town. We were given some warmed up beans to eat and some warm water so we could scrape off some of the dirt and grime we had accumulated over the past few days. There were cots and blankets and we were soon dead to the world, feeling that maybe we had outrun the Germans at last - after all we were at least twelve miles back of St. Vith.

DECEMBER 23, 1944

Near 0200, we were suddenly awakened and told to again get into the trucks of a convoy heading west. The German forces were approaching the outskirts of the town. When could we ever get a rest?

We spent a good share of the day getting to Ferrieres and when we arrived in mid afternoon, we finally caught up with division headquarters. We found some of the guys from the company there - only a few. Eddie Shannon from the I&R first spotted us. He had been sent back on an errand to division on the 16th and couldn't get back to the outfit. Charlie Sartori, a staff driver was there, along with Joe Curtis, Company Clerk, and Sgt. Maj. Dave Givens. Herb Heidepriem and Eliot Annable from Commo platoon, had worked their way out of the encirclement and had shown up shortly before we did. The rest of the men from the company were either presumed Missing in Action or Prisoners of War. All told, only about sixty men from the 423rd were accounted for out of the full regiment of three thousand.

After hot coffee and donuts courtesy of the Red Cross, we were assigned to a schoolhouse in the middle of the town run by two Catholic Sisters. They couldn't have been more caring. They turned the large schoolroom over to us, started a fire in the pot bellied stove,

and helped us bring in some straw to put under the blankets that we had been given. We hung our few grenades, our cartridge belts and other gear, in the hallway on pegs meant for children's coats and caps. We were told to get settled in and then, as the first order of business, disassemble and clean our weapons. After our experiences of the past couple of days, it seemed like the smart thing to do.

[Dick Sparks] - "Irish Sheehan, Bill Morris and I were sitting on the edge of a small raised platform at the far end of the room. The other guys were spread around sitting on benches or the floor. We were all starting to get our weapons in shape. Suddenly there was a rifle shot. Someone, in his fatigue, had forgotten to take the round out of the chamber of his rifle and had, by accident, pulled the trigger. The bullet went through Slick Hendrickson's arm, ricocheted off the tile floor and hit Bill Morris in the forehead. With a startled look on his face, Bill looked toward me and then, gently, fell back on the floor as if he were going to sleep. The next thing I remember, I was outside in the snow, sick to my stomach and bawling my head off."

Joe Curtis ran to the nearby aid station and the medics came immediately. They quickly gave first aid to Slick and then, gently, carried Bill outside and placed him on a long bench under the roof of a lean-to at the side of the building. We all moved back into the schoolroom. We had to be together. Only we could comfort each other. One of the division Chaplains tried to help. "Bill has served his purpose on this earth," he said. "God needs him now more than you do." Why did this have to happen after all we had gone through? We had no real answer.

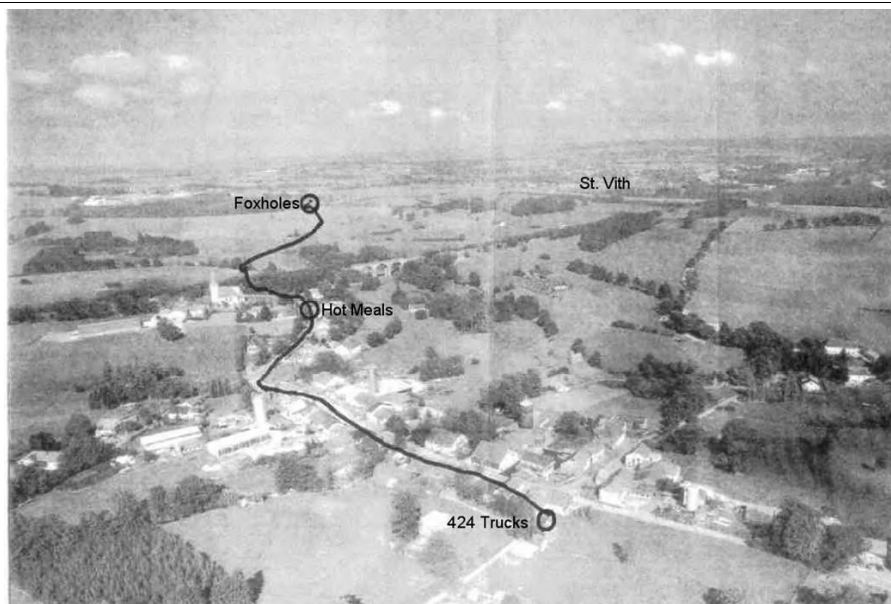
We tried to sleep, but all night long, in ones and twos, we would walk outside and stand beside Bill and remember him and what he was to each of us. Never, during the night, was Bill alone. It was as if we spontaneously wanted to provide him with an honor guard.

DECEMBER 24, 1944

At first dawn, we went to the aid station to say good bye to Slick. He was being moved to the Army hospital at Liege. As we left the aid station, we heard the sound of planes and, at the same time, a brilliant sun came up over the hills, shining on a day with no snow or fog. Soon the sky was filled to the horizon with planes of every description - B-17s, B-24s, P-38s. We could hear bombs dropping on the German positions in the distance and the clatter of machine guns as the fighters strafed the German columns. A few German Luftwaffe were in the air and we watched numerous dog fights as our fighters took them on. Some of our planes were hit by anti-aircraft fire and small specks, with parachutes above them, floated to the ground. What a sight it was.

During the day we visited the medics, were issued new clothing and, for the first time in days, had three hot meals. Most welcome of all, we were able to take quick showers. That day, we were told that we were now attached as an excess platoon to the 424th. We would be together.

That evening we went to a Christmas Eve service in the local Catholic church. Leaving the church, we glanced toward the heavens and saw a myriad of stars sparkling in a cloudless night. Christmas Eve took on a new meaning. We felt secure.



Califf/Rikken

On the morning of the Dec. 22nd, the platoon left the foxhole area and proceeded in a southwesterly direction to the village of *Neundorf*. They were met on the outskirts of the village by residents who took them into their homes and gave them a hot meal. Soon after, the platoon was forced to leave when German troops were heard nearby. The men boarded trucks of the 424th which were headed for *Vielsam*.



Califf/Rikken

Scene of the approach to *Neundorf*



1999 Photo

The entryway led to a long hall where the students hung their coats. To the left of the hall was the schoolroom where the I&R was quartered. It was in this room that Bill Morris was accidentally killed and Felix Hendrickson was wounded.



1999 Photo

There was a lean-to on the right side of the building where Bill Morris body was placed the night of Dec. 23rd. It was removed in 1997 when the building was remodeled.



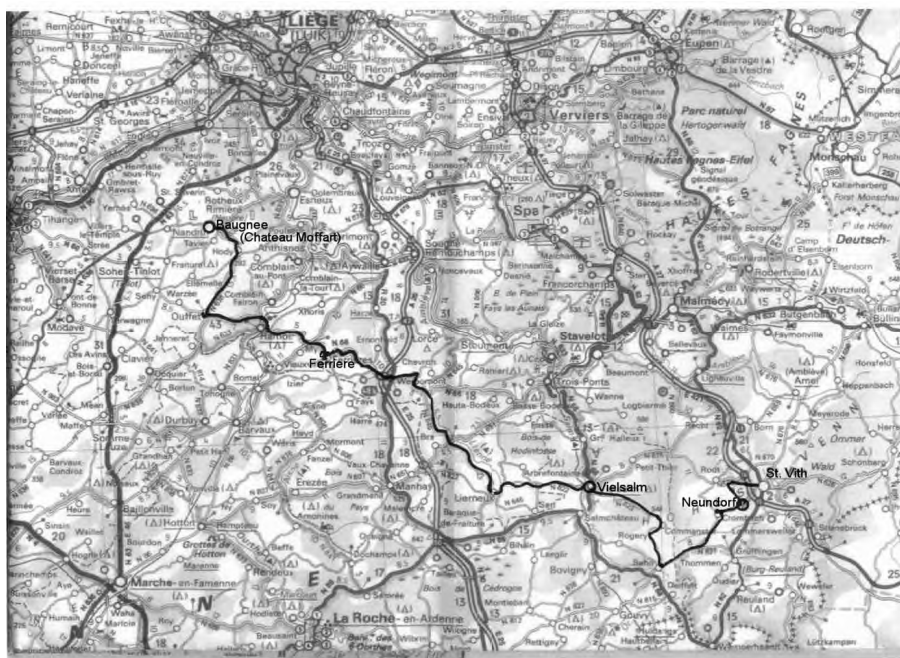
1999 Photo

Bill Morris Gravesite



1999 Photo

7989 American soldiers are buried in this serene setting.



From *Neundorf*, the I&R Platoon was transported to *Vielsalm* on Dec.22nd.

Just a step ahead of the Germans, the platoon was evacuated from *Vielsalm* and arrived at its final destination of *Ferrieres* on Dec 23rd.

On Dec. 31st, the platoon was in *Chateau Moffart* in *Baugnee*. The next day, the platoon was split up to units of the 424th Regiment.

14

FINALE

December 25 - 31, 1944

On December 25, we joined the 424th Regimental Headquarters Company at the small crossroads town of Harre, about three miles from Manhay, where the line companies were fighting. Sam Bordelon, had reported to the medics the afternoon before with severely frost bitten feet, and was immediately sent back to the base hospital at Liege. We didn't even get a chance to say good-bye. Even though Sam successfully recuperated, we never ran into him again. He was ultimately assigned to SHAEF headquarters and, after the armistice, spent time in various administrative units helping reconstruct the German civil organization.

We were an excess platoon - no one seemed to know what to do with us - and for the next few days, until the regiment was pulled back to reorganize, our duties consisted mostly of guard duty with occasionally one or two men designated as messengers or liaison with the various commands of the regiment. We were billeted in the homes of Belgian civilians, two or three to a billet, and had a chance to rest up and get our fighting spirit back. We continued to hear rumors that we would soon be broken up as a unit and assigned to various commands of the 424th. Ike spent a lot of his time trying to find reasons for us to stay together and defined all sorts of missions we could perform as a platoon. Yet the rumors persisted.

The next few days are hard to document. Very few incidents occurred to the platoon as a whole, what there were left of us. A number of incidents have been related that are typical of these days.

One of our duties as a security platoon was to enforce a curfew that existed in the small village where we were billeted. There were still rumors of German paratroopers dressed as Americans. As we patrolled the outskirts of the village, we came across a small barn that housed some cattle. It was still bitterly cold, so, as half the platoon patrolled outside, the other half snuggled down in the hay next to the cows to keep warm.

On an open plain that extended for at least half a mile, a line of tanks and howitzers were lined up, almost literally wheel to wheel. They extending in a straight line across the entire length of the plain. Soon a Piper Cub that had been flying observation over the German lines, came in out of the fog and landed in a field nearby. The pilot and observer

ran back to the officer in command to report, and immediately the order to fire-for-effect was given. The whole line of big guns opened fire at once and continued the barrage for the next fifteen or twenty minutes. It was ear shattering and we were glad that we were no longer on the receiving end.

The news of the massacre at Malmedy, where so many surrendering American troops had been lined up in a field and shot by the German Panzers, had just reached the 424th. The line troops vowed that no prisoners would be taken in their sector. Two of the platoon, on liaison to one of the front line companies, were visiting the front line fox holes of one of the rifle platoons. Across a fifty yard gap in the woods, a white flag appeared, whereby a Sgt. stood up and motioned the Germans to advance. About twenty men emerged out of the woods. After they had advanced closer to the line, the Sgt. gave the command to open fire. No prisoners were taken

One of the battalion command posts was located in a large farmhouse just off a main country road. Two large stone posts were located on either side of the lane leading up to the farmhouse. A couple of the I&R were sent up to this location on some errand or other. The battalion wire section had been stringing telephone wire along the road and up to the command post. Most of the wire had been strung along the tops of rather low bushes. It was necessary, however, to get the wire higher off the ground at the gateway. A dead German had fallen on his back there, and, due to the extreme cold, had frozen in that position with his right arm extended above his head. Using American ingenuity, the wire section boys had propped him up against the gate post and had run their wire through his extended hand where he dutifully kept the wire off the ground for days. As our troops would pass on the way to the CP, they would briskly salute as they passed him.

Sparky and a couple of guys were billeted with an elderly and wonderful Belgian couple and their granddaughter in one of the small villages we occupied at that time. In a couple of days of meager cross communication in French and English, the idea that Sparky was a music student and amateur piano player finally got across. With much excitement, the lady hurriedly scribbled a note on a scrap of paper and sent the granddaughter running down the road. It seems that they had a daughter that lived about a mile down the road at a crossroads of three or four houses and that she had a piano. After dark, we were shepherded down the road to the daughter's house where we found the neighbors had gathered. Even though it was a few days late, Sparky ended up playing Christmas carols with fifteen or twenty people singing them simultaneously in French, German, Flemish and English. Music was truly the universal language.

On about December 30, 1944, the 424th was pulled back to reorganize and we found ourselves in the small town of Ohey, some ten miles west of Ferrieres. As usual, we were

on our own, and soon located a large two storied barn where we set up headquarters for the platoon.

Rather than depend on the company kitchen, we proceeded to scrounge our food from a wide variety of sources and came up with a few K rations and a couple of cans of grapefruit juice. We also quickly made friends with the family in the nearby farm house and, with the basics we had "requisitioned" from company supplies, they kept us supplied with delicious Belgian waffles.

The next night was New Year's Eve, and Ike determined that we just had to have a typical I&R party to celebrate. But our eating and drinking supplies were meager - no fit fare for the I&R. So he called on Irish and set out to find suitable supplies.

[Irish Sheehan] - "We went out and walked about a mile down the road to a supply depot. We went in and Ike requested two cases of C rations from the Corporal in charge. The Corporal told us he couldn't give us any C rations, or any other supplies, without a requisition form. Ike slapped his carbine down on the counter pointing at the Corporal and said, 'This is my requisition form!' The C rations miraculously appeared. Then, as an afterthought, Ike said, 'And where is my officer's liquor ration?' - and suddenly he had two bottles of gin. We started to walk back to the barn. We saw a jeep parked along side the road and the keys were in it and, since the C rations were pretty heavy, we loaded them in the jeep and returned to the platoon."

And what a party it was - maybe not quite as sophisticated as some in the past, but surely in the spirit of the I&R. We had C rations, Belgian waffles with jam and jelly that we had been hoarding from our ration packages, some cheese, and grapefruit juice liberally spiked with Ike's gin.

And then Ike broke the news. He told us that the next day we were to receive our individual assignments to units of the 424th. We could no longer stay together as a unit - a big, but not unexpected disappointment.

The next morning, January 1, 1945, we moved to Baugnee with the 424th Regimental Headquarters and into a chateau, that we found in our reconnaissance, was owned by a Baron de Moffarts. The chateau was a few miles south of Liege, right in the middle of "Buzz Bomb Alley."

[John Califf—"Return and Remembrance"] - "The chateau was set in a landscaped park featuring specimen trees, an artificial lake and a summer house. It was a tall, two story mansion with a high roof and lower wings housing the kitchen, stables and servant's quarters and forming an entrance court. At the rear, arched French doors opened onto a terrace which overlooked the lake. Inside, a large entrance hall with a wide staircase with faux marble walls and columns, led past several rooms to a salon across the rear from which the arched doors went to the terrace. In this room was a grand piano and large prints and memorabilia of the Napoleonic era and one of the other rooms off of the hall had a huge cabinet of dark, heavily carved wood."

[Ozzie Spier] - (Letter to Dick Sparks October 30, 1991) - "I remember the buzz bomb that came toward us the same night that Brendlinger demolished the plums or prunes. Its motor cut out signaling that it would soon nose down and explode. We were right in it's path and would have all perished. A second or two later the motor pulsed on again and we didn't die then after all."

Ike brought us our assignments that afternoon and told us we would be dispersed the next morning.

The majority of the guys went to 1st Battalion. Ike was made Battalion S-2 (Intelligence) and Casey went with him. Company A got Irish Sheehan, Willie Bulman, Ed Dentz, Ozzie Spier and Johnny Califf, who were all immediately made squad leaders. Johnny Johnson, Gnome Mowery, Sy Fox, Bob Brendlinger, Eddie Shannon, Hank Iversen and Charlie Sartori, who had been assigned to us, were spread out throughout the 1st Battalion. Bob Waddail was assigned to the 2nd Battalion. Dick Sparks and Huck Jones found homes in the 3rd Battalion, Sparky with the Headquarters I&R and Huck with a section of the Anti-Tank Platoon..

We had a fair amount of food left over from the New Year's party and we certainly couldn't leave it behind. So, that evening we polished it off. In the reaches of the chateau, we had found a home-canned jar of prunes. What a delicacy! The jar carefully made the rounds, each person taking just one to be sure everyone had a taste. It ended up with Aunt Minnie Brendlinger with three or four left. In the hubbub of conversation, we heard his voice say, "Does anyone want some prune juice?" Aunt Min never came as close to death as at that moment.

In the morning came the "good-byes" and "good lucks" and "see you in the States." The I&R saga had ended ----- the I&R as we knew it.

Chateau Moffarts





Epilogue

The guys, in their new assignments, fought valiantly. Irish Sheehan, John Califf and Johnny Johnson were seriously wounded and evacuated, first to England and then to the States. The others of us fought on with the 424th until the division was pulled back to St. Quentin, France for reorganization on March 14, 1945. Hank Iversen and Bob Waddail were given battlefield commissions for outstanding leadership during combat with the 424th. On April 6, 1945, the division moved to Rennes in Brittany, ostensibly to clean up

the remaining pockets of German resistance at the submarine pens at St. Nazaire and Lorient. The 422nd and the 423rd also had the major task of integrating nearly six thousand replacements into the "new" 422nd and 423rd Regiments. Cadres were made up of the survivors of the original units.

On April 15, 1945, in a very solemn ceremony on the airstrip at Rennes, the 422nd and the 423rd were formally reconstituted. The sixty or so of us from the 423rd were lined up, almost in single file on one side of the runway facing the newly arrived replacements at full regimental strength on the other side. On command, we marched across the runway carrying our company guidons and the regimental flag, thus formally inducting the men into the new outfit. The I&R had the greatest number in line.

The new I&R platoon was organized around a cadre consisting of Bob Casenhiser, Bob Jones, Dick Sparks, Ozzie Spier, Eddie Shannon, Bob Hirst, Ted Slaby and Mike Zorovich, under the command of 1st Lt. Bird, who had served his combat time as an MP officer in Paris.

On May 6, 1945, the European part of the war ended. On May 27th, the platoon, as part of the reconstituted 423rd, moved back to the vicinity of Mayen, Germany to continue training and to assist in manning the camps housing thousands of German prisoners of war and other homeless refugees.

On September 1, 1945, orders came down that the 106th Division was going home. During September and October, all units, except the two reconstituted regiments embarked for the States. Those of us in the I&R stayed on, collecting the points that assigned priorities for discharge. All members were back home and civilians by early 1946.

Through the efforts of Ike Long and with the support of Senator Alan Cranston of California, a letter was received by Ike from the Department of the Army dated February 5, 1987 about his inquiry with regard to the award of a Presidential Unit Citation.

"It is a pleasure to inform you that Lieutenant Colonel Long, [AUS Retired,] and other members of his [I&R] platoon who served with CCB, 7th Armored Division at St. Vith, are entitled to wear the PUC (Army) emblem on an individual basis based upon their informal attachment to the CCB for a portion of the period cited in the PUC (Army). [December 20-21, 1944]."

And now, as I write this in 2003, I can report the I&R has not really been disbanded. During the past years, a major attempt has been made by a number of us, to locate and stay in touch with the members of the platoon. All of the guys have been located or accounted for and, all of us that are still alive, try to keep in touch and get together whenever we can..

What of these remaining guys? We all report having had good lives --- successful marriages --- successful families --- relatively good health. What more could we expect?

Over the years, many of us have gathered at reunions most every year. It is a sentimental time catching up on the past and finding out about each other and what we had accomplished as civilians. And it is a time to reflect, after so many years, on what that bunch of individuals called the I&R really meant. I think we agree that, at times, we were completely crazy and out of our skulls -- and that we had not really changed much through time. We also know that there is a special bond that still ties us together - a bond that kept us going in combat - a bond that provided us with many good times - a bond that made us know we could count on each other and depend on each individual to stand beside us. And we silently pledge that, as we move on in our lives, we won't forget. We won't forget the past. We, especially, won't forget those that are no longer with us. But --- we will always remember ---

WE ARE THE I&R

Sparky



January 2, 1946

Author, Scribe, Historian, Story Teller - Take your pick!

This is memory of a member of Sparky's I and R Platoon and comes to you from:

John C. Johnson, Jr.
106th Infantry Division
I and R Platoon

I received Army Specialized Training at Vanderbilt. Sparky, I believe, was in a similar program in a southern university. Then the Army decided we were needed more overseas, so we ended up at Camp Atterbury. There, Sparky and I and a third man from Seattle were given training in Morse Code.

Later as we were headed toward Europe and reached the eastern seaboard of the U.S.A., we stepped off the train. There Sparky and I were among a group picked out solely on the basis of our I.Q.'s. We were destined to be in the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon- the I. and R. Platoon. The rest is history as recorded by Sparky in "A Walk in the Woods", the compilation of the I. and R. group's memories of what happened to the I. and R. when the 106th Division surrendered in the Battle of the Bulge.

Sparky was part of the glue that held the I. and R. together during the war and after. He had excellent communication and computer skills. His writings give us a record for ourselves and for our offspring to envision how we survived and existed during that terrible war experience.

In a real sense, Sparky was one of the best friends I ever had.

I know it's not manly to cry, but I did so when I heard that Sparky had died.

John C. (Chris) Johnson, Jr. - known as Johnny during World War II



Page last revised

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