

William Milan Thaelke

*A & P Platoon of HQ Co, 1 BN
423rd Reg., 106th Div.*

William Milan Thaelke was from Elkton, SD. His father was a rural mail carrier. He was Methodist. He had a sister and 2 younger brothers (I don't know anything else about them).

We met at **Camp Atterbury** in March, 1944. He had basic training at Ft. McClellan, AL and then attended the Univ. of AL as an ASTP student. We were both assigned to the **A & P Platoon of HQ Co, 1 BN, 423rd Reg., 106th Div.** We had adjacent bunks and hit it off real well. We went to the PX, movies, etc. and talked a lot. When we were allowed overnight passes, on Sat. night, we went to Indianapolis, rented a hotel room, ate a good dinner. Sometimes on Sat nights, after the last show, one of the Big Bands would play, live. We had to go back to camp Sun. afternoon.

I was sent to the motor pool, as asst. truck driver, so was out of Company all day but was not accepted in the Motor pool as I was temporary. I was in limbo. For our first overnight camp, I drove out, while everyone else had to walk. I pulled "D" Co's 37 mm anti-tank gun. I caught the eye of the motor officer who sent me to Mechanic's school, at Fort Benning, GA for 13 weeks. When I returned, the Div. was preparing to go overseas.

Everyone had been promoted to PFC, been awarded the Good Conduct Badge, and given a 2-week furlough. I missed out on all this. In preparing to go overseas, Thaelke had been helping the Supply Sgt.

I got my furlough before we departed Atterbury. Arriving at Camp Miles Standish, Mass. we got a pass to go to town to eat and see a movie. I'm not sure we were in the same cabin on the Queen Elizabeth. Arriving at camp at Andoversford, near Cheltingham, we again bunked adjacent to each other. I was assigned to the pump that supplied the camp. We crossed the Channel on the night of Nov. 30, 1944. After we were driven some miles we got off the trucks and climbing a fence we put up our tents together in a cabbage patch, in the rain. The next morning, we had to tear them down and line them up. It rained every day. While here we were paid. After about a week we were loaded on trucks and driven 2-3 days to the front near St. Vith.

We were in the same squad with the duty of guarding Co. HQ, in a German bunker, 2 hrs. on and 4-6 hrs. off. On the morning of Dec. 18th, after breakfast, we were told to leave our bags beside a tree and line up. By this time it was after lunch. Our BN was the last BN to move out. Our Co. was the last Co. to move out. Our Platoon was the last Platoon to move out. We were on the tail end of the line. After marching a ways the front of the column came under German machine gun fire. We hunkered down. Soon it became dark and we moved out again. We were going across fields, and climbing hedge rows. We hadn't known where we had been, except on the front line, nor where we were headed, Schoenberg.

As the boy ahead of me climbed up a hedge row, I was half way up behind him. He whispered, "I think they went that way," pointing. He, I, Thaelke, Betts, and a couple more went over there and we were alone. No one else were there. We tried to continue

going the way we had been, as well as we could without knowing where we were supposed to be going, without a map or compass.

Near dawn, we came to a road, with a house on the other side. We lay low until it got light enough to see. There were American troops in town, I think now it was Oberlascheid. We joined up with them, I now think that it was Lt. Ike Long and the I & R Platoon of 423rd Reg. HQ CO and some others. They led and we followed. We moved out toward St. Vith but came under artillery fire. We dove into a patch of woods. Dividing the larger group into 2 smaller groups, with a Lt. in each group, we moved out, one to the right side and the other to the left side of some woods. We were in the group to the right side. The other group came under enemy fire, we weren't. We continued for a ways, trying to avoid the enemy instead of encountering them.

The line became broken several times and, on the morning of the 21st, Thaelke, Betts, and I came to the American lines, in a group of 13, near St. Vith to the 7th Armored Div. They called for a truck to pick us up and take us into town. We were taken to HQ, which had been the Div. HQ initially, before they moved back to Vielsalm. We rested for awhile, trying to thaw out. About 4 pm we were told to go down the street to the kitchen for food. We dodged in and out of doorways as shells came in. After eating we returned to HQ and was told to go to the basement. Later we were taken out to the N. side of town to the RR tracks on a fill. We lay on the town side of the fill for a couple of hours until 2 tanks came back through the underpass, when we followed then into town.

German troops came in behind us and we evacuated town around 11 pm, with all the other troops, being followed by the Germans. After a mile or so the tanks stopped and told us, who were walking, to dig in in front of the tanks. I found a hole already dug but most had to dig their own. The Germans were firing their machine guns at the tanks with the tanks firing back. Later it became quiet and later a Major came by and told us to get up and get on board the tanks as they were moving back. We did but they only went back another mile or so. They lined up again, but Thaelke, Betts, and I kept going on down the road hunting our outfit. We stopped in a house with a T-5, Co. Clerk, who kept talking to someone on his phone. He was waiting for a Jeep to come pick him up.

We moved out on the road again as a convoy of vehicles came by from the 424th Reg. and we hopped on. We reported in to the Bn. Adj. but he failed to report us in to Div. HQ, so we were reported as MIA, even though we were with them. We joined on with "A" Co. Around Jan. 5th the MIA list came out and we found our names on the list, and let them know we had been with them all the time.

About Jan. 9th, Thaelke, Betts (Perley F. Betts of Augusta, Main) went to sick call with frozen feet. Thaelke's and my toes were white, but Betts' were black. They sent him to a hospital and finally back to the states. Thaelke and I stayed with "A" Co. and fought in the Battle of Coulee on Jan. 13th. On the 14th, Sgt. Rifleman told us we were transferred to Anti Tank Co .

We were taken to Anti Tank Co. and stayed with them until we moved back to Rennes, FR to reactivate the 2 missing Regiments. Bill was made Staff Sgt. and Supply Sgt. of **HQ Co, 1 BN, 423rd Reg**. I was told I would be a Buck Sgt. in Supply Co. as a mechanic. I asked to be put back in the same Co. with Thaelke, our old Co. I could go as Asst. Mechanic, with the rank of T-5, so I said OK. Another new arrival already had the rank of

T-5 so I never got the rank but stayed PFC till I was discharged. Thaelke and I stayed together sleeping in the Supply Tent.

The officers and Noncoms didn't like Thaelke and I, a PFC, staying together but we did anyway. After VE Day, we moved up into Germany to train for the Pacific. I was a mechanic and Thaelke was Supply Sgt. After VJ Day, they didn't need to send us to the Pacific so they moved us, lower point men, out to the 118th Inf. Reg. and filled the Div. with high point men and sent the Div. home to America for them to be discharged and the Reg. deactivated. Thaelke went home with the Div. and thus after 17 months together, we were finally separated.

After coming home, we corresponded and in Sept., 1952, My wife and I went to Iowa City, Iowa to visit Thaelke and his wife. He was a graduate student at the Univ. of Iowa in Speech Pathology. Betts was working with Montgomery Ward, in Minneapolis, and came down so the 3 of us could get together again. I never saw either again. We finally quit corresponding.

Around 1999 I looked Thaelke up on the Internet and got an address and Tel. No. I called and his wife said he had died the month before. I was so shocked I couldn't say anything. I later got it together and located one of his sons. He said his mother had Alzheimer and was all confused. Thaelke had died of lung cancer in 1991 and his wife died in 1998. I also had contacted John Kline with some of my story. Later, Betts daughter-in-law contacted the Div. and Kline, asking info about her father-in-law. He remembered the names in some of my story and referred me to Richard Sparks, a member of Lt. Long's I & R Platoon of 423rd Reg. HQ Co. I got her address and sent her our story.

Betts had never talked about his war experiences and was also dead. She was getting a packet together about her father-in-law for her husband's Father's Day present. They appreciated this info very much. We still communicate. They live in the Seattle, area.

Thaelke's son is Todd Thaelke, 2600 S. Minnesota Ave. Suite 202, Sioux Falls, S D 57105.

BY Fredrick Smallwood (Army Serial No. 3482 4595)



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