

Reflections on Charles C. Cavender, Colonel, U. S. Army Infantry

by Richard Peterson

I was with him from the birth of his regiment, the 423rd Infantry in Ft. Jackson, S. C. when the Regimental Colors were unfurled for the first time. I was with him in Tennessee, in Indiana, and in England. I was with him when he returned to Europe to face the German again as he had in 1917. And I was with him when the 423rd as we knew it, died.

In December 1944, Colonel Charles Cavender, Texan, West Point graduate, former World War I private, came back to Germany as the commander of the regiment he created and trained. With him into the Ardennes forests he brought men like me, physically tough, individually capable and ready for combat.

Only a few knew Cavender's innermost concerns about the overstretched positions of his beloved 423rd in the Division line when we replaced the 2nd Division. Forty years later in his notes to Charles MacDonald he expressed dissatisfaction with the task assigned. Wide gaps in the defensive line resulted from the blindness of the High Command and its refusal to acknowledge the dangers in the Ardennes. Cavender's thinly stretched regiment was forced to defend without Armor and its reserve battalion. "Good Luck," said the one commander who could help. "If they come, just slug it out with what you have " as he left a frustrated Cavender standing alone in the eleven mile wide Losheim Gap.

A massive and vicious German attack did come through that indefensible Gap. Ordered to attack the German and fight his way out of the noose they had drawn around him Cavender's regiment fought alone. Promised help and supplies never came. With one battalion totally destroyed, he Mopped the charge of his last remaining battalion against overwhelming odds. The 423rd and its sister regiment the 422nd held off the best the German Army could throw at them for three bloody days. Their struggle would only be properly acknowledged by the German whose sensitive timetable of battle was destroyed by the defeated regiments. As he surveyed wounded men needing aid, riflemen without ammunition, and a total loss of communication with Division, he accepted the abhorrent decision to surrender his command.

It meant putting his Army career on the line. The General's star he would probably earn in his second war was not an acceptable trade for more lives of his men. Cavender was a casualty of the battle in the Ardennes as surely as if a German bullet had struck him. The sacrifice he made for his comrades was heroic and unselfish.

Few know of his valiant efforts to alleviate the suffering of his men in the Stalags. The records of his personal battles with the Germans commanders are buried in still classified records. He argued, he demanded, he bargained to little avail. But he never gave up.

How many would have died on that hill outside Schoenberg if Cavender had not the courage to surrender? I know I live today because of him. His example and training served me in battle, in captivity and in the later competition of civilian life. I am alive because he cared.

Not until forty years after I first saw Colonel Cavender did I meet him personally. He was a major influence in my life, and he will always be. Charles Cavender, for the joys of my life I thank you. As an old Sergeant, I salute you.

Richard Peterson, I Co. 423rd Infantry

Charles C. Cavender, Colonel, Commanding

423 Regiment/106th Division
Stalag Oflag 64

The 423rd Infantry Regiment in the Bulge

Created on Friday, 16 March 2018 08:12 | Last Updated on Friday, 16 March 2018 08:48 | Written by Colonel Charles C. CAVENDER |

The 423rd Infantry Regiment in the Bulge

Immediately after Thanksgiving, the units of the 423d Infantry Regiment started moving from their billets in the Cotswolds to embarkation points. Members of Regimental Headquarters and Special Units, on the Empire Javelin, went down the rope nets onto the LST's and debarkation in the vicinity of Le Havre, France, was completed on 1st December 1944.

Closing into the staging area at Red Horse the Regiment was reassembled by 3 December except for one LST containing the vehicles of two battalion headquarters companies and one heavy weapons company. Here, information was received that the division was to be attached to 1st Army and finally, on 8 December, Regimental Combat Team 423, with various attachments, commenced the motor move that will be the topic of conversation by GI's at many a Division reunion for years to come. Following the road markers of the "RED BALL" express, the convoy reached St. Vith, Belgium, a distance of 270 miles, in two days. Rumor had it that the one truck containing part of a platoon of "C" Company, which was corralled by one of Captain Spence's men on 11 December, was detoured through Paris by a British Military Police. It was bitter cold and snowing the second day, roads were slippery and treacherous, and radio silence made control of the lengthy column extremely difficult.

December 10th was spent in reconnaissance of positions down to and including Platoon Sergeants. On the morning of 11 December the regiment moved out of St. Vith through Auw and Schönberg, names which were to be stamped indelibly in the minds of all in only a few days. Just prior to departure from Red Horse our 1st Army "Expediter" Lieutenant Colonel Throckmorton, talked by phone to 1st Army G-3 and was assured that the missing LST would unload our men in sufficient time to join their units before departure. The landing was finally completed and the convoy, under Major Carl H. Cosby from Atlanta, Georgia, Executive Officer of the 1st Battalion, made the entire trip From Le Havre to St. Vith without stopping except for refueling. The vehicles arrived in time to join their units which were moving into the lines.

Favored by snow and a low ceiling the daytime relief of the famed 38th Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Infantry Division was completed at 1700 hours and Colonel Boos and his "Rock of the Marne" boys were on their way to "position" from which they were to launch their attack against the Roer River Dams. *"It has been very quiet up here and your men will learn the easy way,"* Colonel Boos said upon departure.

During the move into position the Regimental Motor Sergeant, Master Sergeant William C. Deviney of Niagara Falls, New York, was critically injured and had to be evacuated. Joining the regiment from the 80th Infantry Division, "Sarge" Deviney was a capable and efficient soldier, who was the idol of all the jeep drivers in the regiment.

The Regiment, less 2nd Battalion in Division Reserve at Born and Medell, Belgium, with Troop "B", 18th Cavalry Squadron attached, occupied and took over the defense of a Sector of the 106th Infantry Division Area. The Sector included a portion of the former German fortified area approximately twenty miles east of St. Vith, Belgium. Due to the extreme width of the Sector approximately seven and one half miles frontage, the position could not be occupied in depth, and reserves, except for Service Company and Clerks were not available. Orders were, to take over, man for man, and job for job. The period 12 to 15 December was spent in familiarization and readjustment.

Preceded by intense artillery and mortar concentrations, the German Infantry supported by armor, attacked the right of the Regimental Sector prior to daylight, 16 December, using search lights. This Sector extending from Winterscheid to Bleialf, both towns inclusive, was defended by a composite Battalion commanded by Captain Charles B. Reid of Richburg, South Carolina, consisting of Troop "B", 18th Cavalry, Anti-Tank Company, 2nd Platoon Cannon Company, fighting as riflemen and one composite rifle platoon from 3rd Battalion. A wedge was immediately driven between Troop "B", on the extreme right, and Anti-Tank Company, in the vicinity of the Railroad Tunnel and contact with Troop "B" was lost by the Battalion Commander and never regained. Barrages were laid down in front of our positions in Bleialf and accurate Cannon Company fire along with the stubborn resistance of our GI's succeeded in breaking up repeated attacks of the German Infantry.

The 106th Division Reconnaissance Troop, which occupied the town of Groslangenfeld between the right of our Sector and the left of Colonel Reid's 424th Infantrymen was overrun and Captain Fossland's Troop "B" was forced back giving ground slowly. A counter-attack at noon of the 16th by Company "B", 81st Engineers, 3rd Platoon and Headquarters Group of Cannon Company and all available cooks and clerks from Headquarters Company and Service Company restored Bleialf and partially closed the gap between Anti-Tank Company and Troop "B". In order that Captain Reid could devote all of his time to his company, the Regimental Executive Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick W. Nagle of North Dakota took command in Bleialf. Throughout the night pressure against our men, who had taken up a positions in front of Bleialf increased. By noon 17 December, Germans overrun our thinly held lines and units of the composite Battalion isolated into small groups.

Although Colonel Nagle's C.P. was taken and he was critically wounded he reformed the remnants of Anti-Tank and Cannon Companies on the right of the 1st Battalion. A small group of Troop "B" under Captain Robert G. Fossland regained allied lines on 21 December. Company "B", 81st Engineers, under Captain William J. Hynes of Great Neck, Long Island, New York fought their way back to Schönberg where they were surrounded and captured by German Armor on 18 December. Captain James L. Manning of South Carolina, Commanding Officer of Cannon Company was killed in Bleialf.

On 17 December, about 1600 hours, the 2nd Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Joseph F. Puett of Eastman, Georgia, joined the Regiment on Schnee-Eifel Ridge. Upon completion of a Division Mission to extricate the 589th Field Artillery Battalion, Colonel Puett found his return to St. Vith blocked by German armor which now fully controlled the Auw-Schönberg-St. Vith road. Lieutenant Colonel Vaden Lackey of Nashville, Tennessee, also moved our combat team artillery, the 590th Field Artillery Battalion, onto Schnee-Eifel and a perimeter defense was formed by darkness, 17 December.

Belated orders to withdraw to the line of the Our River were received about midnight 17-18 December. A subsequent message directed the Regiment to take up positions south of the St. Vith-Schönberg road with information that one of our Armored Divisions was to attack down this road. Moving out of positions in Schnee-Eifel under cover of heavy fog, the 2nd Battalion, which was in the lead, encountered enemy groups which were pushed back to Radscheid. Previous orders were revoked and we were now ordered to move against

the main German strength at Schönberg, thence west towards St. Vith. The 3rd Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Earl F. Klinck, moved to the east of the 2nd Battalion with orders to cut the Bleialf-Schönberg road. At 1600 hours the 1st Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel William H. Craig attacked on the left of the 2nd Battalion and by nightfall had pushed the Germans back, relieving the pressure on the 2nd Battalion.

The last message received from Division at 2000 hours stated it was imperative that Schönberg be taken. The 1st and 2nd Battalions were moved into positions in rear of the 3rd Battalion by daylight, 19 December. All efforts to establish contact with the 422nd Infantry Regiment on the right failed. At 0830 Battalion Commanders were assembled and orders issued for attack on Schönberg at 1000 hours. At 0930 heavy artillery concentrations started falling on the entire regimental area. Lieutenant Colonel Craig was mortally wounded. Captain James L. Clarkson, Company "D", and Captain James H. Hardy, Company "M", were killed.

Company "L", on the Bleialf-Schönberg road, ran into heavy opposition and by 1300 hours had been knocked out. In the 1st Battalion, Company "A" had been unable to withdraw the preceding evening and the following morning Major Sanda B. Helms, Regimental S-4, from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, took over command of "A" Company and other small detachments and fought his way north of the Schönberg St. Vith road, before being surrounded and captured. Company "B" pushed forward to the same road where they forced a German armored column to deploy before they were knocked out. By 1300 the 1st Battalion had been eliminated. The 2nd Battalion moved to the right and attached themselves to the 422nd Infantry. The 3rd Battalion, less Company "L", pushed forward to within 200 yards of their objective but were hopelessly pinned down by fire from 88mm cannon emplaced on the high ground just north of Schönberg. By 1600 hours it was apparent that further resistance was a useless sacrifice of life and the remnants of the Regiment were surrendered. Small groups of men were selected to endeavor to infiltrate through to St. Vith.

Although isolated and cut off from all resupply of ammunition and food and evacuation of wounded for four days, all elements of the Regiment fought stubbornly and heroically against overwhelming odds.

All contact with Division was lost early on 16 December except for the Division Command radio set, which worked in spite of enemy interference and unfavorable climatic conditions, until it was knocked out by enemy action early 19 December. Adverse weather conditions prevented our aircraft from dropping desperately needed ammunition, food and medical supplies.

The Regimental Supply Sergeant, Master Sergeant John L. Hall of Port Allegheny, Pennsylvania, was enroute from Division D.P. with rations on the morning of 16 December. Encountering enemy small arms fire at Schönberg he set up a machine gun in a German farm house. He was finally captured when tanks appeared on the scene. Breaking away with Pvt. Edgar M. Decker of Lee, Massachusetts, he returned to St. Vith, secured trucks and an armored escort and again started back with the rations which he knew would be desperately needed. His trucks were knocked out by German armor but he and Pvt. Decker again returned to Division D.P. loaded trucks and waited in vain for armor to clear the road to Schnee-Eifel.

The stubborn resistance of the 423rd Infantry Regiment delayed the Germans in their seizure of the necessary road point at St. Vith by four days thereby materially slowing the flow of German armor into the communication routes of Division, Corps and Army. Many heroic acts of individuals have been acknowledged by awards, many of them posthumous awards. Many acts can never be recognized and the individuals concerned given a suitable decoration, because the necessary facts to substantiate the award cannot be pieced together. Each and every member of the 423rd Infantry Regiment joins in extending heartfelt sympathy to the families of those of us who

did not come back. To the 106th Division Association and the splendid start they have made, we extend our very best wishes.

Every soldier of the Regiment can be justly proud of the fact that because of his actions. The Regimental Colors and Company Guidons of every unit of the reconstituted 423rd Regiment were decorated with Combat Infantry streamers at a fitting ceremony in France, shortly after publication of General Orders No. 52, 106th Infantry Division, dated 1 August 1945, announcing such awards. Quoting Major General Gilbert R. Cook at the Critique of the First Division Exercise near Camden, South Carolina, after the Regiment had made a line of departure on time during a blinding snow storm - "I like the 423rd - in spite of all obstacles they get there on time."

Source: The CUB, 106th Infantry Division Association, November 1946

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/905-the-423rd-infantry-reqiment-in-the-bulqe.html>

Henri ROGISTER, webmaster