Army of the United States

Camp Kilmer to Victory

By Sgt. S. E. Mestrezat

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Forward

These pages that follow represent in a general sense, the History of our company. But, it is admitted, that to any reader it may seem too general. This is only intended as a background, against which the deeds of any one man may be filled in personally. There are no individual heroes within these pages; it is, instead, the story of the company. In the greater aspect of War, heroes are all too often only a matter of observation. Many heroic thoughts and deeds must of necessity be unobserved. In justice to all, particular commendation cannot be made. Every man in our company has gone through trying times, suffered greatly, and made great sacrifices.

Nor is this grammatically well written. I will not apologize, for this has been written piece-meal under varying circumstances as we waged war. Part of this was written at Elsenborn, Belgium, during the winter, part of it at Colditz, Germany, as we waited for the Russian link-up. This foreword is being written in Czechoslovakia, and the war has not ended yet. Where the History will end, I do not know. As we move into this “Redoubt Area” of Czechoslovakia, all the rest of Europe including Germany has been freed from the Nazi curse. I mention this merely to show that the compilation of the History has been a part time affair subject to many interruptions. Often the facilities for writing have been far from ideal, let the reader be considerate.

No doubt there are many instances where the stress would have been placed differently if the reader had been the writer. It is the eternal criticism of all writings, but it goes to the very essence of writing that there can be many readers, but only one writer. Let us accept that criticism as being inherent in all composition.

But, enough idle words. The History, such as it is, begins on the next page. The writer will feel amply repaid for his efforts if it meets with the approval of a few readers.

S. E. Mestrezat

Camp Kilmer

Of course, certain regulations were laid down. No letters or notes were to be written and dropped off the train. There was to be no conversation with any civilians while en route. No rumors were to be spread. Guards were to be posted at the doors of each car, day and night.

As the train pulled into Dallas, Texas, late that Sunday afternoon, the old discussions arose anew. Was our destination San Francisco or New York? Pulling out of Dallas, the controversy ebbed and flowed, as it seemed we were heading now east—now west. The sun had set in a haze, and it was quite impossible to determine direction as the train sped around the curves, which added to the confusion. But hours later, when we reached Little Rock, Arkansas, the issue was settled. We were going east.

And so the journey continued, with much card playing, reading, and singing, while the train wound its relentless way from Texas through Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Pennsylvania to New Jersey. For many men it was the longest train ride they had ever had, and their first trip up North. As the train rambled through many of the southern states, our route passed within a few miles of so many of the men's homes that it was a wonder that all of the 195 enlisted men were still present when the long ride ended.

Before leaving the train ride fade from memory, there are a few things to be said. First, and foremost in the hearts of all the men, was the subject of food. There never was an army outfit that didn't bitch about the food, but for the sake of the record let it here be noted for all posterity, that Company "A" enjoyed excellent meals during the entire trip. There was not a single complaint, and our kitchen staff rated a solid salute. Second, was the matter of exercise. It was a long trip covering four full days, and dealing cards was not considered sufficient exercise. Hence, we had a couple half hour "breaks" each day during which we scrambled from the cars and cavorted around in the crisp fresh air. As we progressed further north, the air became cooler, and there was some strenuous competition at each "break" as the men tried to jockey for the guard position in order to miss the calisthenics. Last, but not least, we must mention the sleeping facilities. We all

had berths, two men to the lower berths, and one in the uppers. There was quite a scramble to see who would sleep in the upper berths, but in the three nights we slept on the train every man had a night in an upper berth. The words of the colored porter, who cared for us during the journey, best summarize the general tenor of the trip. He said that he had never seen an outfit of men with such high spirits in the many months that he had been making that run.

Near the end of the train ride, north of Washington, D.C., a new marvel appeared - the crack limited trains on the New York – Philadelphia - Washington run. For despite the consistent speed at which we were moving, these trains on other tracks zipped by us as though we were standing still.

As Wednesday evening lengthened into night, we began to wonder if we were to spend yet another night upon the train. But, no, at 2128 hours the train reached our destination. Out into the bitter cold and biting rain we tumbled. So, this was Camp Kilmer!

There was little of the camp to be seen as we stood in the rain while the roll was checked. It was cold and dark, and we were all tired from our four days ride on the train. At last, when everyone was accounted for, we stumbled in column up the dark streets pitted with mud puddles. Somehow, we all found ourselves in the barracks to which we were assigned. It was announced that coffee was available in the mess hail, and “A" Company turned out in force for it. Then, back to the barracks for a good night’s rest - so we thought. But, instead we were confronted with the announcement that we were not to go to sleep because there was to be an inspection first, and, moreover, certain equipment was to be drawn that night. In the meantime, the barracks were so dirty that we could perform our usual task.

So, we swept and mopped the barracks, cleaned our weapons, and cursed the evil genius who had scheduled an inspection for that night. We paused from our labors, and cursing, to draw a new style gas mask. The showers ran constantly as men took advantage of every opportunity to wash up. The inspection had begun in one of the barracks occupied by one of the platoons. It was destined not to be completed that night, for around 3 AM a message was sent to the barracks, which had not been inspected, that, the men could go to sleep, the inspection would be

resumed early in the morning. So, wearily, at last, we crawled between the blankets and sank into blissful slumber.

It seemed that we were awakened the next morning almost before we had closed our eyes. And those whose equipment had not been checked the night before laid out the display. Breakfast was truly a treat! We were fed like kings, all we wanted to eat. Then the inspection of equipment for shortages and serviceability was completed. After this, there was a company formation, and we were marched in column down the road. Rumor had it that we were headed for that certain physical inspection which determined who was fit for overseas duty, and who was not.

For once rumor was right. After a march of well over a mile, it seemed longer than that despite the fact that we passed a WAC detachment area featuring prominently displayed “Off Limits” signs, we halted in front of a huge barn like structure. There were already several hundred men there ahead of us. Some were entering and some leaving the building. We chatted while waiting for our turn, and the general expectation was that this would be the severest and most critical physical check up imaginable. Speculation ran high as to the number of men who would be eliminated from our company. It was cold waiting outside, and perhaps that psychological factor induced us all to suddenly feel long forgotten aches and pains. At last our turn came, and “A” Company filed into the building.

Someone apparently vested with authority stood on a bench in what purported to be a locker room and bellowed at us to remove our uniforms, and to be quiet. Fortunately, it was warm in the locker room where we stripped. Then, there was that man again, bellowing at us to be quiet. We just couldn’t be quiet, and his constant reprimands did little good. After waiting several minutes, we finally began to graduate from the locker room to the main arena. The company filed, splashing through the footbath, and began to run the gauntlet of doctors.

We filed past doctor after doctor; each had his specialty to examine. The entire examination was conducted about as rapidly as the company could file past the doctors, pausing for a moment before each one while he looked or probed, and asked an occasional question. The vast majority of men breezed by with flying colors. A few men were held apart for a more detailed examination. The general

consensus of opinion, as we dressed in the locker room, was that we should have "stood in bed", that it was a waste of time. But, of course, most of us were in better health and condition than we had expected, and those who received special examinations were no doubt benefited thereby. Everyone passed this physical.

After a hearty dinner, enough praise can't be lavished on the meals we received at Kilmer, we faced another ordeal. It was that old army bugaboo, the gas chamber. This time we were going to test our new gas masks. For most of us it was only the old routine of entering a gas chamber with the masks on, standing around for a few minutes in the gas filled chamber, removing our gas masks and slowly filing out of the chamber while tear smarting eyes reminded us how effective our masks are. But for a few men the gas chamber was a possible lifesaver, as it revealed poorly fitted or improperly adjusted masks.

That evening after chow, the company was assembled for "shots". Who doesn't remember the rumors about the various shots one is supposed to get before going overseas, particularly the one that is supposedly administered in the base of the spine? Well, it just wasn't so, for us. We all received tetanus and a typhus shot, and some men received a small pox inoculation. So died another rumor.

We were constantly on the go at Camp Kilmer, for it seemed that every idle moment we were undergoing a clothing and equipment check, or drawing new equipment. In addition to that, our first days in Kilmer had shows sandwiched in on the schedule. We saw training films on ocean convoys, the wearing of life preservers, the safe guarding of military information, and related subjects. Individual needs were speedily cared for, glasses were fitted, and teeth were filled.

At Kilmer we received our last pay in American money, last - for a long time, and the realization settled on our company that from now on money would have little value to us. Practically everyone in the company wished to increase his allotments and besieged the special staff, which the camp maintained for that purpose. But little cash was actually sent home, because there were rumors of 12 and 24 hour passes. New York was only 45 minutes ride distant on the flying electric trains.

Lo and behold, we did get passes! Some men fortunately lived in the area near Kilmer, and they were the recipients of 24-hour passes to their homes. But for the rest of us, there were 12-hour passes available, and there was New York with all of its glamorous diversions. For many men this was their first opportunity to see New York, the world's largest city. There were many fascinating facets to the city, for those who had been there before, and for those who were but neophytes in the ways of a big city. The skyscrapers were awe inspiring, and many were blinded by the bright lights of Broadway. But all good things must end, any soldier can tell you how time flies on a 12-hour pass. Moreover, our time at Camp Kilmer was limited, passes were suspended, and we prepared again for movement. It was sudden, and several men in the company were dazzled by New York and overstayed their passes. Three of them returned that night, three more returned to us at the boat just before we sailed, but we left one man behind.

So early on the morning of the 5th of April, we gathered up our equipment, put the heavy overseas duffle bag on our backs, and started for the train. It was a long half-mile, the air was co1d, there were several inches of snow on the ground and the snowflakes fell in wild flurries, one's load of equipment grew heavy, but spirits were high. Our shipping serial number was on our bags, and our train seat numbers were chalked on our helmets. The train ride was brief; we were soon at Jersey City.

We assembled all our gear and left the train, proceeding in column to the ferry through swirling snowflakes. After we were packed like sardines aboard the ferry, it pulled out. The ride across the harbor would have been more interesting, but we knew it was only a prelude to the big ride. We disembarked from the ferry, and wound our way in file around the interior of some warehouse-like structure. Upstairs we stumbled, and finally turning a corner, we came onto a long, roofed, platform. Anchored beside it, we saw a huge ship and a yawning gangplank. This was it!

Overseas Bound

5 April to 17 April 1944

The 1ong file halted; wearily we dropped our burdens and surveyed the scene. On either side of the long platform a large ship was anchored. Gangplanks were lowered from the ship on the left and at the platform end of the plank stood a small group of officials. Our company was the only body of men in evidence. Captain Harding conferred with the officials for a few minutes. Then, we were on our feet, proceeding in file towards the gangplank. As each man reached the official group his name and serial number were checked against the roster, and shouldering his gear he lumbered up the gangplank aboard ship.

We filed along the deck turned in a door and preceded down two flights of stairs passing strange looking doorways and compartments. We ambled down a passageway of the deck, which we later learned was B deck and came to our "reservations". Those elegant staterooms we did not have! Over a hundred men were squeezed into one compartment and the balance of the company shared equally elaborate quarters in another compartment. For there was a war going on and our good ship the "Ile de France", former luxury liner queen of the Atlantic, was now doing business for Uncle Sam. She had gone all out for the war effort and no semblance of her former elaborate and spacious facilities remained.

But our thoughts were not of such subjects as we began dropping our equipment and surveying our new quarters. The compartment consisted of tiers of steel frames for cots. These frames folded back and between the sections of bunks were narrow aisles, which shrank to about a foot in width when the frames were lowered. With the bunk frames lowered there was approximately two feet between the frames, which were in columns of five. Each man had those two feet between his bunk and the one above for his living space. As we began to cram our bags and equipment into every available nook and cranny, we found ourselves for the first time observing life from the point of view of a sardine.

The first sergeant called for attention and gradually managed to achieve some degree of order out of all the chaos. We gathered around him and he disclosed the purpose of our early arrival aboard ship. For at the time we were the only soldiers present, he said that even aboard ship there were certain duties to be performed and that good old Company "A" was slated to perform those duties: namely KP and guard duties. We had come aboard early in order to become adjusted to our duties. We were stunned but only momentarily, and then the

bitching began which lasted the whole voyage. “A” Company, headed for combat, had to work its way across the ocean.

Headquarters and the third platoon were to be KP’s while the first and second platoons were to be MP’s. No wonder our cozy compartment was adjoining the mess hall. So we cried the blues and made the best of the situation.

We still had the ship to ourselves, so we took advantage of our opportunity to see how she was made. In small groups we scampered back and forth over the various decks, prying into compartments, and in general becoming oriented to our new surroundings. The “Ile de France” was large, had many decks, stairways, and passageways, but gradually we learned our way around from the top deck, or boat deck down the sun deck, to the promenade deck and around A, B, C, D and E decks. Our ship had a tonnage of 43,450 tons, length of 763’ 7”, breadth of 92’ and depth of 55’ 9”. Of course, we did not have these statistics then, but they were not necessary to convince us of her size. She was a former French liner, but her crew and personnel were British.

That evening other troops began to stream aboard and we were restricted to our quarters to prevent confusion. By breakfast the next morning there were a couple thousand soldiers aboard and we began our duties as KP’s and MP’s. The food was lousy, but that practically passed unnoticed in the excitement of our new duties and the speculation as to the hour of sailing.

During that day and evening more and more troops came aboard. The afternoon mess was larger. A rumor spread like wild fire that WAC’s were aboard ship but none were in evidence. After chow had been finished and the mess hall scrubbed and mopped, we gathered in groups around the tables. Some men read, some played cards and still others wrote letters. Practically everyone speculated mentally, if not verbally, as to whether morning would find us on the seas. The general consensus of opinion was that it would, and that our destination was England, but no one was too certain about that for there were still Italy, Africa and outlying bases as other possibilities.

Everything really began the morning of April 7th. We were aroused from our slumber before 6 A.M. and hustled to the mess halls for breakfast before the deluge began. Over the loud speaker came a feminine voice: “All troops holding cards for the first sitting proceed to mess hall” — and thousands of soldiers responded. Amid the noise and confusion it suddenly dawned on us that we were underway. We had weighed anchor officially at 0612 hours and were now s1owly slipping out of the harbor. We took fleeting g1impses out of the portholes between

sittings. Some of us saw the Statue of Liberty as we slipped past it an hour later — a never to be forgotten sight.

There were four sittings for chow at the mess halls and we were busy keeping the steady stream of soldiers in order moving through the mess halls, cleaning the tables and setting them up between sittings, and, in general, keeping things humming. Approximately ten thousand soldiers were aboard, and with no interval between sittings it took around three hours to feed them. After breakfast it was necessary to clean the tables and mop the mess halls. The ship's assistant steward was a prissy little Englishman who acted as a spying overseer. He was annoying but harmless. At 11 A.M. came the call for boat drill, our company was exempt, another compensation that came to us for our duties. The afternoon mess began at two-thirty and was merely a repetition of the breakfast mess. There were only two meals a day aboard ship.

In the evening again we gathered in groups about the tables in the mess halls and read, played cards and wrote letters. Our company by virtue of our duties there had exclusive use of the mess halls, which was greatly appreciated for otherwise we would have been confined to our cramped quarters. The portholes were blacked out, and the full realization had settled upon us that we were at sea, destination unknown, and future uncertain. In general, conversations were carried on in more subdued tones, there were no rumors and but little speculative chatter. The WAC rumor had been confirmed, there were seven hundred aboard on A deck, but our first night at sea, they drew but little interest. We retired to our bunks early, and found them not quite so steady as the night before.

The inevitable occurred the next morning — we had our first cases of seasickness. The ocean was calm, but for many men it was there first time on the waves. Then, too, the food had been very bad, and the galley odors were unpleasant for those whose duties took them there. The combination was too much for some men, but most of the company took it in stride. All the days aboard ship followed the same schedule as to the mess sittings and the only noticeable change was that the process was faster. This was in part due to the fact that we had become more efficient in the performance of our duties, and in part to the fact that the food was poorly prepared by the ships cooks and so many men were seasick that they failed to show up for mess calls.

In between performances of our duties we had occasion to wonder the boat deck for fresh air. The sun deck above was restricted to officers and the WAC's who were aboard, but that did not prevent us from looking and thinking. And as days passed we looked longer and thought harder. However, we did manage to cast curious eyes at the ocean, too, upon which we seemed to be quite alone. There

were no signs of any convoy or accompanying vessels. Our ship was fast, mounted anti-aircraft and anti-submarine guns, the crew was vigilant, and we ran the Atlantic unescorted

Yet, there were practically no rumors of any kind in our company. There were no fears apparent, and until the last few days at sea but little comment on our destination. It had become fairly apparent by then from observations of the sun that we were headed for the British Isles. We continued to use the mess halls for club rooms during our leisure hours, as we read, played cards and passed the time away.

During the first few days of the voyage, talent had been recruited from the soldiers and the WAC's and shows had been rehearsed. Our last nights aboard ship these shows were presented in the mess halls in the evening. We, as self assumed proprietors of the mess halls, had no difficulties getting in for the performances. We were there and just stayed. The talent was amateur, but the performance would have done credit to professionals. The audience was highly receptive and the shows were pronounced successes. The WAC's, both those in the show and those in the audience, were enthusiastically received. These shows were about the only occasions on which the barriers of restrictions were lowered and the WAC's and soldiers mingled. Otherwise they were restricted to the sun deck or their quarters on A deck which were guarded by MP's detailed from our company. Needless to say competition was keen for some of those guard posts.

There was a PX on the ship, and it was well stocked. We obtained most everything we desired after sweating out long lines to the counters. It was our first experience of buying cigarettes for five cents a pack, and the men took advantage of it. The Red Cross also distributed some packs of cigarettes free. Incidentally, there was a chaplain on B deck square, who, in addition to conducting regular services, was only too happy to punch anyone's TS card in case of any dissatisfaction.

An undercurrent of restlessness stirred as we neared the end of the voyage. The clock had been moved forward some half dozen hours, advancing an hour almost every night, and we knew we were almost there. The ocean had been much rougher. We were all eager to discard our life preservers, which we had worn constantly since coming aboard ship, and to sleep once more on a cot or anything that didn't pitch and toss all night long. The constant blaring of the loud speaker, with its never-ending stream of messages, which were always for some one else, had become tiresome. We had received shots again. We were fed up with washing in salt water, all fresh water being conserved for drinking purposes, hardly anyone had cared to bathe in the salt water showers available for that purpose. Even the

chaplain on B deck square was tired punching cards. So it was with uniform gladness that we received the news on the evening of April the 14th that we were to dock the next day.

On the morning of April l5, 1944, we slipped through the quiet channel waters along the coast of Scotland, past picturesque islands and came to anchor at 12:30 in the harbor of Gourock, Scotland. We cleaned our weapons and prepared to debark only to learn that we were not to debark that day. So we carried on the KP and MP routine that day and all the next day while the other troops debarked.

On the morning of the 17th we were up early, this was our day to debark. The ship was virtually deserted. But never let it be said that "A' Company left any quarters without cleaning them. In addition to scouring our own quarters we had the doubtful honor of being permitted to police up all compartments where troops had been quartered. So we swept and cleaned up compartment after compartment, while we lamented the fact that the chaplain's quarters on deck square were vacant. We all had cards that needed punching.

Late in the morning, after we had finished our policing up operations, a contingent of homeward bound Canadian soldiers came aboard. They were veterans of several years overseas service, and were to take our place as guards and KP's on the return voyage. They were extremely friendly and cooperative as we introduced them to their new tasks.

Most of us wandered up on the boat deck for a view of the harbor. It was a scene one could never forget. The harbor itself was a large natural basin several miles wide, and there riding at anchors was the most impressive array of Allied power one could ever expect to see. Every few hundred yards of the harbor there was a large ship of some type anchored. Most of them were large transports and supply ships, but there were many destroyers, a sprinkling of cruisers and battle ships, and several baby flattops or escort carriers. No one could view that scene and doubt the outcome of the war.

About two o'clock we assembled all our gear once again and stumbled in file down to a waterline deck. Some minutes later we stepped through a loading hatch, up a plank and unto a trim ferry boat. When the whole company had been packed away on board the ferry -- off she went. Our ocean voyage was completed minutes later as the ferry bumped her slip, the hawsers were made fast, and our company filed off onto solid ground.

Tent Camp in England

17 April to 27 May 1944

The company was hastily drawn into formation and checked, then lugging our heavy duffle bags and equipment, we started off in column. We twisted and turned through the narrow streets of the town and up a torturous steep hill. Panting and breathless we reached the top of the hill only to twist and weave our way among warehouses until at last we reached the train station. It was with genuine heart felt relief that we threw down our duffle bags for the baggage detail to load, and went on to find our compartments in a day coach.

We had no sooner settled in our seats, stowing weapons and over coats away, when a team of Red Cross girls came through the train. They were dispensing cigarettes, chewing gum, coffee and doughnuts. We had been through a rough cheerless day and we were all irrationally sour on the world, but the hot coffee and the warm friendliness of the Red Cross workers did much to shake us out of the "dumps" and our morale soared. We were finishing up the coffee and drifting into sociable conversations when the train started.

Refreshed, we cast curious glances out the windows. Chugging slowly along we passed groups of children who were thronged along the track asking for cigarettes and gum. We were all just G.I. Rockefellers as we tossed cut cigarettes and gum until the black smoke and cinders from the engine forced us to close the windows. Leaving the town behind us we began to pass through the highlands of Scotland. It was rugged hilly country and certainly was a visual feast, especially after an ocean voyage. It was amazing the extent to which the land was under cultivation even the steep slopes of hills.

At every populated area where the train reduced its speed were the groups of children waiting and begging gum and cigarettes. Very few of them were disappointed. A little further down the line we stopped at a station and filed out for more coffee and doughnuts provided by the American Red Cross. Then back on the train we trooped. It was quite cold by now and no one exactly relished the prospects of the night ride on the train.

Captain Harding wandered through the cars pausing here and there. He had told a few of us on the boat that we were going to a "hot spot" where air raids

were a common occurrence. He now took occasion to repeat the warning. It had little effect on us and we went on talking about “the girl” at home while our thoughts were still in America. Thus, passed the evening, and as the train rambled through the night, the windows were blacked out, and we gradually settled into slumber in our seats.

The next morning around six o’clock we ate a K ration breakfast just before the train entered Bristol. It was light out but there was little of Bristol to be seen from the train. It appeared to be quite large and we saw some war soars where German planes had bombed the railroad installations there. We crept through Bristol, and after several minutes ride beyond the city, the train stopped at Flax Burton Station. We piled off the train there and milled around for many minutes. Finally a convoy of trucks arrived and the company scrambled into some of them, while the duffle bags were loaded into other trucks, and we made the last short leg of the journey. When the trucks stopped and we crawled out, we were at journey’s end — a tent camp in Failand, England.

It was cold and hazy at eight o’clock on the morning of April 18th; the train ride had not been restful, so perhaps it was natural that our first impression of the tent camp at Failand was one of disappointment. We had more or less in our idle speculative thoughts anticipated that we would be stationed in a large army camp with modern facilities, similar to the camps in the States. Instead, we saw a couple frame buildings, several. Neisen “tin huts”, and rows of pyramid tents. At a glance it was obvious that only our battalion would be stationed there. The area had originally been part of a golf course, but like many such facilities in England, it had been drafted into the war effort.

We spent the next couple hours locating our duffle bags in the heap, which had been unloaded from the trucks, finding the tent to which we were assigned, and becoming oriented. There were six or seven men to each tent, each man had a canvas army cot in which to sleep. We had adjusted most of our personal belongings when orders came dawn that the tent rows were to be aligned. That meant loosening and adjusting tent ropes, and shifting pegs and center poles for a couple more hours. In the meantime, we learned that the latrine was enclosed; the mess halls, kitchen, and shower facilities were in Neisen huts. But the ordinary washroom was a mere shelter with a roof and a back wall.

We spent our spare time during the next few days improving our tent homes by putting in floors, tables and clothing racks. The training schedule was loose and elastic, consisting of a half hours calisthenics, some close order drill, and classes on various subjects, principally time filling “refreshers”. In the meantime, drivers and mechanics went off to First Army ordnance to draw vehicles, since we had only brought personal weapons and equipment with us. The supply sergeant was deluged with work, not the least of which was drawing our heavier weapons and equipment such as machine guns, bazookas and supplementary supplies. Of course, this did not transpire at once, but in a continuous stream, and there were soon guns to be cleaned and vehicles to be checked. The tent camp had become active.

Around our fourth night there, we were startled from our slumbers, and hustled out into the cold black night. We were told to disperse, five yards apart and lie on the ground. For long minutes we lay there shivering and wondering what it was all about. Gradually the news got around that Bristol, only a scant three miles away, had been under an air attack. The attack had been beaten off before we had been alerted, consequently, we heard only very little anti aircraft fire, and saw no planes. Nevertheless, it was an experience that left a vivid impression with all of us. We were quite aware now that the enemy could strike at us; the war loomed closer, and became personal. From now on steel helmets, gas masks and shoes would be placed before going to sleep at night, so that they could be used at a moments notice. Blackout ceased to be a problem; it was a personal security measure.

One of the first things that took place at our new camp, which did more to bring home to us the realization that we were overseas, was the conversion of our American money to English currency. American bills and silver were taken up. We were handed back pound note, shillings, florins and six pence. It was a little confusing at first, but one night of playing poker did much, for some of us, to fix the value and exchange rate in our mind. By the time we received our first pay in English money, on the first of May, practically everyone understood the value of the various notes and coins.

Passes are a thing dear to the heart of the average GI. and no sooner had we settled in the tents when the inevitable question arose: When do we get passes? Answer - not yet. Day after day passed, and we were officially restricted to the camp limits. But where there is a will there’s a way, and several of our men

possessing strong wills found ways to circumvent the restriction. That the restriction was being violated was well known, but there was no rigid enforcement of it. It was only an automatic quarantine placed on all troops for a number of days after they arrive in the British Isles. Eventually the restriction was lifted on April the 24th, and the orderly tent was deluged with pass seekers.

Nearly all the men were curious to see the English sights, in particular, the English "pubs' and women. We were warned to avoid trouble of all kinds particularly race fights. At a company formation, we were informed that we were an alerted outfit, and certain pertinent Articles of War were read to us, also a letter from Headquarters 5th Corps concerning desertion was read to us. Then passes were issued, the roads to Bristol, Long Ashton, and Failand were lined with soldiers. Some trucks were used to carry the men on pass into Bristol. All passes terminated at 2330 hours.

We now learned first hand how Bristol had suffered from German air raids. We found the English people, conservative to the point of being shy at first, but warm and friendly after their reserve had been broken. The English girls were much like American girls, but more firmly established in their own little circles, more conscious of public opinion, and more sensitive to social relationships. They seemed to lack the artificialities and affectations of the average American girl, displaying more sincerity and enthusiasm.

The English beers and bitters were milder than American beers, were not as effervescent, and were served at room temperature. At first, we generally disliked the beer, because of comparison with American beer, but after a few glasses it became quite acceptable. Whiskey was difficult to obtain, aside from Scotch, which was not too plentiful. Most English servicemen were cooperative and friendly with American soldiers, and the English ATS, service girls, were quite attractive. The cockney accent was difficult to understand, but the precise pronunciation of the words by the average Englishman was music to the ears. All in all, passes were quite pleasant in England.

Now as a consequence thereof, and the fact that transportation was a serious problem, bicycle racks filled and all kinds of bicycles began to pop up in our camp. Almost every pass-going soldier learned to ride a bicycle. The English people all rode them, and many of us bought bicycles. Later, just before we left Failand camp orders came to dispose of the bicycles. Despite the rigid

enforcement of this order, the bicycles were still in our company after we left Failand.

There was an evening every week dedicated officially to the visiting of the local countryside, when the company assembled with full field packs and weapons for a hike. The evenings were cool, the pace was fast, the course was hilly, and there was little enjoyment of the country views. No wonder bicycles had become so popular as a means of transportation.

For days we had watched the British Home Guards stand retreat across the road from our camp in front of the Green Tree Inn, which was closed. The snappy well-executed routine was impressive. But, now that we were firmly established in our camp, the Green Tree Inn was opened as a local club for the neighborhood and the soldiers. In the evenings the local belles came with their families, of course, and there were dancing and refreshments. Many a soldier passed a pleasant sociable evening there.

We had long marveled at the fact that we had come overseas without any training or instruction on the indirect fire use of our 3-inch guns. In fact, that argument had been the main point in favor of those who had contended back in the "States" that "this outfit will never go overseas". Yet, notwithstanding this brilliant logic of the latrine lawyers, we had come overseas. But the situation had to be remedied, and from a field artillery unit came a group of instructors headed by Captain McCollum to give us this vital training. A schedule was drawn up, and in two weeks time we were to learn the many intricacies of indirect fire.

A fire direction center was organized, consisting of a Vertical Control Operator, Horizontal Control Operator, and three computers. These were trained in their new duties, at the same time, the officers were taught: observation, range calculation, fire direction, laying of batteries and other allied duties. Gun commanders and gunners learned the sights, fire commands and their various duties. A surveying crew was formed, given instruction and practice in the event that it should ever become necessary to survey in our own positions. Recorders were selected for each platoon. Nearly everyone had to learn and familiarize himself with new duties. We spent long days on these new subjects, then came the test, we were going to the range.

Early in the morning, we left for the range. We passed through Bristol and Exeter, westward into the wild high moor country. At the range, the surveying crew went to work, the FDC was set up, and a wire was run to the platoon positions. The gun crews arrived an hour later, and moved the guns into position. The surveying crew reported their calculations to the FDC, which went into operation. The guns were laid in, observers went out to the command post. The firing began, it was observed fire, and was very satisfactory. Our instructor and our battalion commander, Col. Joseph M. Deeley, spent the next morning at the command post observing our fire. They were both well pleased with the results. That night we returned to Failand tent camp full of confidence in our ability to handle an indirect fire mission.

We had spent only one night on the range, but upon returning to camp we learned that Bristol had undergone a severe air raid that night. Some 15 German planes had been shot down, and there were pieces of shrapnel all around our camp. Several of our tents had been torn by shrapnel from the anti aircraft fire. We had missed the big show, but climatic events were coming. In a few days we were alerted, and frantic preparations began.

Officially we had been alerted before we ever got off the boat at Scotland, but now began the grim preparations for movement again. Our gun crews had already fired direct fire at targets in Bristol Channel, indirect fire was behind us. Orders came down for vehicles and guns to be water—proofed. Some drivers had been given training and practice in water—proofing a few weeks before, they now assumed charge and directed the other drivers. There was much to do, everyone worked on the waterproofing. No longer could we play those carefree afternoon baseball games of a few weeks before. Time was of the essence——and time was now running out.

Racks, handles, and various ingenious gadgets were welded on the vehicles to facilitate the loading and stowing of equipment. All the vehicles were to carry extra gas and water. Rations had to be loaded. The basic allotment of ammunition for personal weapons and machine guns was issued. Telephones and remote control units had to be carried. The supply tent was emptied.

Camouflage nets for vehicles, 3-inch guns and machine guns had arrived. These were issued, the colors on the nets were found to be unsatisfactory. So, feverishly, we began stripping the nets of the improper colors and breaking up the

patterns. It was slow, it was very tedious, but it had to be done. We worked from early morning, in fog and cold, until after nine o'clock at night, when the daylight became too dim to see well. We had to be ready.

The feverish tempo of activity gripped us all. During those days there was no time for speculation as to the why or wherefore, but at night, when the work was done, we wondered and we talked. We all more or less felt like this was the real McCoy and, yet, we had heard so many stories of other outfits dry running the invasion even to the point of loading aboard ships and putting out into the channel, that we weren't sure. Then, too, the army was famous for its "dry runs" on everything. We didn't know what to think, so taking no chances we worked frantically by day and wondered at night.

In the midst of this activity, we received shots again. This was routine, but the visit of Ernie Pyle, noted war correspondent, was not. He stayed with us for a full day, talking to all the men about home, about our guns, about our life, and about the war in general. He was so friendly and homespun that we felt that he was one of us.

In the meantime, the company had been broken up into forward and rear echelons. Some 27 men were in the rear echelon. We could see no reason for this. And, then, abruptly on the 26th of May there were no passes. We were told that we were to depart the next day, secrecy was ordered. We prepared our personal equipment.

On the morning of May the 27th, we completed loading our personal equipment into the vehicles. We ate lunch, checked the policing up of our area. At 1330 hours the forward echelon loaded up in the vehicles. Machine guns were half loaded, and at two o'clock the convoy moved through the gates of the camp. Our activities had drawn attention, and the neighborhood folk lined the road as we left. Then Failand faded behind, we sighed wistfully, turned our thoughts to the future. Our destination was still unknown to us.

Failand To France

27 May to 16 June 1944

Our convoy stretched out along the road, vehicles at regular intervals. The roads were very narrow, as are most English roads, and we drove on the left hand side as English law provides. There were practically no civilian cars on the road, in fact we saw very few while we were in England, and those that we did see were small cars like the Willys and Bantam cars in the States.

Six o'clock passed and still there was no sign of our destination. Our general direction had been eastward. Finally at six thirty we turned in a gate from the highway and found ourselves in a camp. A glance showed us several brick buildings, frame huts, and a large paved motor pool. There were already many vehicles parked there and many American soldiers were standing around. Our vehicles lined up and stopped while our captain bustled off to confer with someone. After several minutes delay, during which we were uncertain whether we were to stay or not, he returned and told us to assemble our bedrolls, packs and prepare to stay. In the meantime we had talked with the other GI's at the motor pool. They were all from the 9th Infantry Division, which was stationed there.

As we trudged along to our quarters, we mulled over the items of information that we had gleaned from the 9th Division boys. The camp was Barton Stacey, supposed to be an old English army camp. There was no place nearby to go on pass. In fact, there was no indication that we would be there long. The 9th Division was prepared to move out, their passes had been suspended. Perhaps this was the division to which we were to be attached. It had many combat veterans from the African and Sicily campaigns, and perhaps it was invasion bound. We might be going with them!

We came to our barracks. They were old frame buildings and the sleeping facilities consisted of wires stretched across a bed frame. They did not look like they would be comfortable and they weren't. The barracks were all littered with trash, and by the time they were cleaned up it was time for sleep. So we drifted into confused dreams of "dry runs" and invasion landings.

The next day we saw more of the camp. The mess hall was a large brick building, and the food was good and plentiful. There were hot showers, and this was almost a novelty since, we had seldom been able to get even warm water in the showers at Failand. Around, and near every building at Barton Stacey were zig zag trenches, fully six feet deep for use as air raid shelters.

We had set up the company owned commercial radio, and in our leisure hours we tuned in on the continental radio broadcasts. It was here that most of us heard our first propaganda broadcasts in English from German controlled stations. It was with amusement that we learned that the war was being fought for Jewish interests in Moscow and Washington, but we soon tired of this monotonous silly tirade. The only broadcast that held our interest was the one conducted by a fascinating wench whom we called “the Berlin Bitch”. Her voice oozed sex appeal, and her specialty was to play upon sentimental attachments of soldiers for their loved ones and the pleasures of home. She spoke briefly and then played a good recording of popular music, a few more words and more music. We listened to the program, enjoyed the music, laughed at her futile attempts to soften us, for her propaganda was a failure.

We fired our personal weapons, test firing, to check that they functioned properly. In the afternoons we played baseball tapering off with a good hot shower before chow. There were four-hour passes in the evenings, from seven ‘til eleven, but there was no place to go, so few men applied for them. All in all we passed the first few days of June taking it easy while we waited for developments. The 9th Infantry Division had pulled out. No one seemed to know what was expected of us. The officers and a few fortunate enlisted men were able to spend a day in London.

On the morning of June 6th, we awoke early to the continuous drone of aircraft passing overhead. There were many bombers and long trains of gliders. We gazed and we wondered. Turning on our radio for news, we heard broadcasts repeated in many languages, including English, all warning fishing craft and small vessels along the English Channel to stay in port and wait there for further instructions. Something was up but we did not know what. It wasn’t until a couple hours later; around nine-thirty that we learned that it was D Day. We clustered around the radios to hear the repeated announcement, “The Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces has issued a communiqué that allied forces are being landed on the coasts of France”. The very magnitude and suddenness of the shock left us without emotional reaction.

We all had become quite sober—— this was it—— long awaited D Day. Forgotten was all else as we hugged the radios for hours waiting for news of the invasion. We silently prayed, these were the critical hours. The news came slowly, but it was good to hear: progress was being made, beachheads were being expanded, and casualties had been officially described as light. For long hours, we, still in England, “sweated out” the invasion. The news continued to be good. The invasion was made.

But with the actual invasion of Europe launched our activities took on a more, sober aspect. The captain informed us that we were scheduled for early

action, in a few days, and for once he didn't have to add, "Get on the ball". We had classes on a new radio procedure, and classes about the German Panzer divisions. These latter classes were studiously attended, for all of us wanted to know about the enemy's organization and how he operated.

Most of the men got short haircuts. Some shaved their heads like Indians. Clothes were washed and equipment was packed up. The radios were waterproofed and the waterproofing on the vehicles was checked. We were preparing to move again, and this time we expected to drive our vehicles directly onto the boat. On the evening of June 11th we were told we were leaving early the next morning, and we spent most of the night making last minute preparations. There was little sleep that night.

Breakfast before five o'clock on the morning of the 12th, we were prepared for an early start, and at 0600 hours the forward echelon left Barton Stacey, Hampshire. The rear echelon had rejoined us several days before, but again they remained behind. Once again our convoy rolled along the narrow highways of England.

The convoy moved slowly, and it was eleven o'clock before we stopped in Brockenhurst. Vehicles were parked at the side of the road in town, one man was left in each vehicle, and the company filed through town, into a concentration camp on the outskirts of Brockenhurst. No, it was not actually a concentration camp, but it had all the appearances of one. It wasn't a large camp, would probably accommodate around a couple thousand men, and it was completely surrounded with barbed wire. Strand after strand of barbed wire enclosed the area and ran all through the camp in various patterns, between the pyramidal tents that were to be our sleeping quarters. Near the tents were deep trenches for air raid shelters. In the town we had seen several signs warning civilians not to talk to soldiers, now, in camp we saw signs warning soldiers not to talk to civilians.

We were no sooner settled in our tents, drawing blankets from the camp supply, when we were instructed not to leave the immediate company area without permission, that we could expect movement orders on short notice. Conversation was strained, no one felt like talking, there was nothing to discuss. We had very vague ideas about the future, and no one cared to express them. We had been advised to rest while we could, but we were all restless.

In the meantime ordnance teams had checked the water proofing on our vehicles, and pasted American flag stickers on the windshields. One man remained at each vehicle all of the time. We turned in whatever English money we had left and wished to convert into invasion money. We received a four-dollar partial payment in invasion money plus the amount each of us had turned in for conversion. It was all paper money, even, down to the five-franc notes, and it

seemed more like stage money than the real thing. Most of us never did learn to consider it as having value like “American money”.

We were issued the latest style life preserver that consisted of two tubes that formed a belt around one’s waist. With them were issued capsules which when inserted in the tubes and crushed automatically inflated the preserver. We were given demonstrations and instructions in which it was also pointed out that it was possible to inflate the tubes by blowing them up, also.

Fortunately, at the camp there were shows in the evening, and a PX where one could obtain warm beer. It was at the PX that many of us parted with our remaining English silver and notes. The shows were great relaxation, and the beer furnished varying stages of relaxation depending upon the individual and his financial status.

The company was broken down into several groups, with an officer in charge of each. It was uncertain but what the groups might sail in different vessels. A rendezvous spot was designated to take care of any contingency. In the event of separation or accident, everyone was notified that the rally position would be at the church in Colley Sur Mer in Normandy, France.

Time passed, we were constantly tense, nothing unpacked, awaiting “March Order”. We read the news bulletins and studied the charts posted on the camp bulletin board showing the progress of the war. Everyone carried at the captain’s suggestion, small maps of the invasion area clipped from the newspapers. We had thus somewhat familiarized ourselves with the region in which we expected to fight. The 12th, 13th, and 14th of June passed, and at midnight of the 14th it came, March Order!

Hurriedly we tumbled from our beds, rolled up the blankets and turned them in. Assembling our weapons and personal gear, we fell out and fumbled our way through the dark to where our respective groups were assembling. We were a few minutes checking to see that each group, as previously arranged, had all of its men accounted for, then we marched out of the camp. Through the seemingly ghost town, for it was deserted at that hour of the night, our column wound its way. We reached the vehicles which had the day before been marked with serial numbers, and loaded up. At one o’clock on the morning of June 15th our convoy began to move out of Brockenhurst.

We moved slowly, led by MP’s. It was cold that morning, very cold, and no one was very happy. After creeping along the road for hours, and stopping often for no-apparent reason, we finally had a break. It was around 4 AM, and the column halted, everyone dismounted for coffee and doughnuts. They were furnished by the Red Cross, and served from a truck at the side of the road. It was

truly a pleasant surprise, and we got all the coffee and, doughnuts that we wanted. It was a long stop.

We were not far from our destination, for when we resumed our crawling journey it was only a short drive. It was around six o'clock in the morning, night had faded into dawn, when our convoy moved out on the pier along the bay, and the lead vehicle halted near the anchorage of a L.S.T.

She was a rugged looking craft, L.S.T. 542, in the early morning light. Moored to her fore and aft by wire cables were barrage balloons, and they bobbed and tugged at their cables in the fresh breeze. Our convoy had halted, and we spent more than an hour parked by the bay watching activity aboard the vessel and contemplating the future. Someone had a practical thought for they passed up and down the line of vehicles handing out pills for seasickness. At any other time this might have disturbed us, but now the mere possibility of seasickness was of minor importance.

We were not yet aboard the boat, but we had already had our first casualty. Just the night before one of the men had accidentally shot through three fingers of his right hand while cleaning his gun.

The stern of the L.S.T. was to the pier where a paved runway led down to the water's edge. We watched as they opened a yawning hatch in her stern just above the water line, and dropped a runway from the ship into the water. Inside the stern of the ship we could see a large ramp being lowered into place. Preparations being completed, our convoy was notified, and one by one the vehicles drove down the runway across the few feet of shallow water, through the large hatchway, and up the ramp to the deck above. On deck, the vehicles were parked close together, utilizing all available space, and then locked in place with chains to prevent sliding about in the event of a rough crossing. When the open top deck was full, the ramp was raised, and the same procedure was applied to the lower deck. In approximately an hour our vehicles were all on board and locked in place.

American sailors manned our craft and it had made two round trips across the channel since D Day. They told us some interesting stories about the beachhead, and we chatted a while about our homes in the "States". Chow aboard the L.S.T. was good. We rode at anchor all day. The sailors had told us that we would probably sail after dark. Around dusk we began to make preparations for sleep. Most of us slept in our vehicles, wrapped in overcoats and blankets borrowed from the ship's hold.

It was around midnight when we pulled anchor and moved down the bay to a rendezvous point where we were to meet other vessels. The breeze became a spanking wind, the sea was choppy, and mist or fine rain swept all over the top

deck. We spent the night in troubled sleep, keeping dry and warm as best we could.

The morning showed us many other L.S.T.'s on either side of us, all moving towards France. Like our L.S.T. they were jammed with vehicles, equipment and men. Around noon we sighted the coast of France, and as we slowly drew closer, the details of Omaha Beach began to make themselves apparent. We threaded our way between many ships: L.S,T.'s, L.C.T.'s, mine sweepers, warships of all kinds, and a large hospital ship, to our particular anchorage. It was an impressive scene to see so many ships of all types, barrage balloons fore and aft, bobbing about like large banners above them. To see this huge artificial harbor and floating dock with all these ships brought home the realization that our army had tremendous backing. And ever our planes droned overhead.

We spent a couple hours riding at anchor there, watching amphibious "ducks" and smaller crafts moving back and forth. No one seemed to know when we would land, whether we were waiting for the tide, or for priority to unload at the pier. All field glasses were in use, and we scanned the beach. Along the water line were ships stranded by low tide, they had unloaded and were waiting for high tide to sail. There were also some battered skeletons of boats that had been blasted on D Day. Some craters were evident where bombs and shells had tried in vain to check the invasion. We were told that German planes still raided the beach, but we saw none, although allied aircraft were constantly in evidence.

Shortly after three o'clock our L.S.T. weighed anchor and slowly moved past other ships to an unloading pier. Here, the large stern hatch was opened, the ramp was lowered, and our vehicles began moving off the L.S.T., down the ramp, through the hatch and onto the floating pier. All our waterproofing had been in vain. We never touched the water. Our vehicles rolled along the few hundred yards of the pier to the beach, and then the wheels churned the hard sand. We had crossed the English Channel, something Hitler could not do.

The date was D Day plus 10; "A" Company was in France.

Normandy

16 June to 19 August 1944

Our convoy wound along the beach road as vehicle after vehicle rolled off L.S.T. 542, down the pier, and into column. The road turned up hill, and we soon left the busy beachhead behind. We stared in awe at the fields along the road for they were pitted with foxholes where our infantry had won the battle for the beaches. There were many fields marked with signs, “Achtung Minen!” and these fields had very naturally been avoided. But everywhere there were craters where the shells and bombs had left their marks. All trees and posts were battle scarred with shrapnel gouges. In this country there had been few houses and buildings, but what few there had been were nearly completely destroyed. All wires were down. We drove only a short distance before we turned off the road into a field marked with white engineer’s tape. Vehicles were parked, dispersed under trees, and as an added precaution the camouflage nets were put up. We hastily removed as much of the waterproofing as we could. The halt in this assembly area was brief, we soon had “March Order”, and we rolled our nets, and moved out onto the road again.

This time our route took us through the first real French towns. We passed through battered Formigny and Treviers. They were only small villages, but they had been unmercifully pounded by artillery. There were only a few French civilians around, and they seemed to be principally concerned with their personal problems. After all, the war had passed them by more than a week before, and they had no doubt seen many thousands of American soldiers and vehicles since then. Still, I think we were all a little disappointed that we did not receive a more enthusiastic welcome, such as had greeted the first soldiers to arrive.

Here, we saw railroad lines that had been thoroughly bombed, and many knocked out railroad cars bore mute testimony to the effectiveness of the allied air forces. The weather had been warm but cloudy, and now as late afternoon approached the air became quite chilly. As we moved further southward, a soberness descended upon us. We were ever moving closer to the front. We passed destroyed German vehicles along the road, and we saw for the first time the hastily made graves of the German dead. They were little mounds of earth, topped with rough wooden crosses, from which hung the now useless helmets of the dead.

Darkness began to settle, and we felt none too secure. Nothing had happened yet, but we did not know what or when to expect it.

Just before dark, we turned off the road, and our convoy moved into a bivouac area on the fringe of a woods. All drivers were very careful to drive in the tracks of the vehicle ahead. As soon as the vehicles were parked, dispersed some fifty yards apart, the camouflage nets were spread. The area had been used before, some men were lucky enough to find slit trenches while the rest of the company found deep ditches in which to bed down. We had been warned that although the front was still some distance ahead, we could expect strafing from enemy planes if they could spot our bivouac. But, the night was quiet.

Early .the next morning the captain went off on a reconnaissance, and it was shortly after 10 o'clock that we got "March Order". We passed through the little French town of Cerisy-la-Foret, which was only about a thousand yards south of our bivouac area. The town had not been hit by the war. The Germans had not made a fight for it. Our company moved into the general area of Couvains, around six miles to the northeast of St Lo. Our first combat disposition put the first platoon in position for direct fire as an anti-tank defense, the second platoon went into indirect fire positions, while the third platoon remained in reserve near the company command post. We learned that we were with the Second Infantry Division. We spent most of the day either digging foxholes or slit trenches, or improving the ones that were already there. Our sleep that night was far more troubled. Not only were we on the front now, but also the night was filled with the roar of artillery and mortar fire. Our own guns made most of the noise, but at this time few of us had yet acquired the ability to tell the difference. At any rate, no enemy fire fell in our positions.

During the days that we were in these positions some of the bitterest fighting of the Normandy campaign was in progress. One of the key defenses to the vital communications center of St Lo was Hill 192. The Germans who were well aware of its importance fanatically defended this hill. It was studded with foxholes, machine gun nests and expertly camouflaged emplacements. It was a regular network of hedgerows. Every crossing and road in the vicinity had been zeroed in by enemy artillery emplaced on the back slope. One rifle company had succeeded in reaching the crest of the hill on June 16, but had been beaten back by withering counter attacks. From then on, until July 11 when the Second Infantry Division finally took the hill following a tremendous artillery and aerial

bombardment, the hill and all of its approaches were the scenes of constant skirmish and attack. Our positions were all within the area dominated by the hill, and many reconnaissance trips were made among the hedgerows at its base.

The fighting in this sector was typical of the fighting in Normandy. The terrain was characterized by rolling hills. Fighting throughout this sector was very fierce. This was the battle of the hedgerows, and at times the combat flared more fiercely than at others, but it was never quiet. Mounds of earth, sometimes as wide as three feet and almost as high as a man's head, divided the sprawling fields. Behind and between these mounds the Germans dug in and waited to spray machine gun and automatic weapon fire on the first American to try a crossing of the field. Most fields were no larger than the average house lot in the "States". Sunken roads weaved in and out of the fields, providing excellent cover for enemy operations. Little patches of forest, here and there, concealing snipers, added to the maze confronting the advancing Americans. The 3rd Parachute Division defended our sector fanatically, and the terrain had been thoroughly utilized by the Germans in establishing here their main defense line to contain the American beachhead.

We remained in these positions for several days, during which many of us became better adjusted to our new type of life. One night some enemy shells fell in our area, and after that we did not need a lecture on digging in deeper or in utilizing the back slopes of the hedgerows for carving out our "homes". At first, there was a tendency for the men on guard to be "trigger-happy" and sometimes men fired at the branches that fell from the trees at night. This is common among unseasoned outfits, but as time passed our men became veterans and there was no unnecessary firing. We learned to guard against snipers, most of the squad leaders and officers went on many reconnaissance parties along the front where small arms fire was just over the next hedgerow, and sniper fire was to be expected everywhere. It was during this same period that we learned to prepare our own food, and to look out for our blankets and equipment during rainy weather, for it rained often. Here, too, we first sampled cognac, and a drink called calvados, which turned out to be the Devil's own fire water. Hence, our first few days enabled us to obtain valuable knowledge, which was to serve us well in the days to come.

It was here too that we had our first real taste of enemy fire. Our second platoon began firing indirect fire at one o'clock on the morning of June 19th, and just after dawn that same morning they drew counter battery fire from the enemy.

Approximately a dozen rounds were thrown into their area. Fortunately, the men were all well dug in, and they all took cover at the whistle of the first shell, which hit a little over their positions. The other rounds were much more accurate, and one of our 3 inch guns was knocked out by a hit scored almost directly on the gun. We suffered no casualties, so the price we paid for that lesson was cheap. The guns had been placed too close to the front, and had been dug in on the forward slope of the hill. It had been too easy for the enemy to pick up their location, and to throw back accurate counter battery fire.

The next day the company command post moved to a position one mile south of Cerisy-la-Foret, the first and third platoons going into direct fire positions, with the second platoon in reserve. Again we remained in these positions for several days, during which the first and third platoons underwent spasmodic shelling and mortar fire. The first platoon was set up in anti-tank positions on the main crossroad of the St Lo and Cerisy-la-Foret roads, which at that time was well known along the front as “88 Corner”. German artillery had zeroed in with great accuracy on this much-used intersection, and hardly a few hours would pass without shells landing nearby. The enemy fire was not effective, however, and we had no casualties. In the meantime we continued to gain experience in scouting, camouflage, reconnaissance, and other valuable combat points. On the 26th of June the rear echelon rejoined the rest of the company.

On the 28th of June, the company moved to new positions one half mile north of La-Platiere, or three miles southeast of Cerisy-la-Foret. The second and third platoons were in position for indirect fire; the first platoon was in battalion reserve. For two days they fired in-direct fire, most of the missions being fired at night. On the third day the first platoon moved into position, and joined in the firing. Altogether approximately 1400 rounds were fired from these positions and everyone had an opportunity to gain combat experience at their duties in indirect fire.

On July 3rd, the company command post moved to a position just south of Littcau, and the platoons took up direct fire positions covering the St Lo-Caumont highway approaches in the sector just north of St Germain d’Elle, a strong point in the German defense line. We remained in this area with no substantial change in positions for the next eighteen days. Our platoons underwent some artillery fire, but it was all ineffective, and no harm resulted. During most of this time, the front remained comparatively unchanged. No substantial gains were made. The weather

was not kind to us, it was seldom warm, and it rained almost daily. We did our best to stay warm and dry, but, in general, we were annoyed with the weather and disgruntled that our armies did not record any material advances. But, unseen by us, the men and supplies were pouring into the beachhead, and soon all Hell was going to break 1oose.

We had our own private preview, of Hell on the 21st of July. The third platoon had just moved into the field north of the company command post, the guns and vehicles were dispersed, but no shelters had been dug, when at six o'clock in the evening heavy German artillery shells began to fall on us. The shells came screaming in, sounding like freight trains on top of us. The second shell scored a direct hit on a half-track, exploding the gas tanks, and killing the gunner who was inside the vehicle. Most of the men had immediately scurried for cover, but so sudden was the barrage that three other men were wounded before they could reach any shelter. After the first barrage of around twenty shells lifted, many men surged from their holes to go to the aid of the wounded. It was this prompt attention that saved the lives of at least two of the wounded men. The half-track was hopelessly afire, nothing could be done about it as the ammunition it carried began to explode.

No sooner had the wounded been given first aid and started on the way to the aid station, when the second barrage began to whistle in. By now it had become obvious to the enemy that his first barrage had been successful, for a great pillar of black smoke was rising from the burning half-track. Again there were frantic dives for the foxholes and the slit trenches, the few that were in the area. Many of them sheltered four or five men. This and the succeeding barrages failed to catch anyone in the open, and no more harm was done. Colonel Deeley, our battalion commander, arrived in time to sweat out the last barrage with us. None of us who were there will ever forget the whistle of those shells, everyone of which seemed to be personally addressed. Around 100 shells had fallen, we had one man killed, three men wounded, one half track burned, and one 3 inch gun damaged. It was with relief that we got 'March Order', scrambled into our vehicles, and moved to a new location several hundred yards away.

Then, for several days it was comparatively quiet. On the 26th of July, the Company Commander's group moved forward to the vicinity of the 9th Infantry Regimental command post, and we all knew that the long awaited, often postponed, rush against the German lines was imminent. Our platoons moved into

closer support positions. Then, on the 28th of July, following an artillery and heavy machine gun saturation barrage on the enemy positions, the infantry jumped off. The long stalemate was broken. The battle of the hedgerows became a battle of movement too. For the next twenty days the fighting Second Infantry Division drove itself deeper and deeper into France, forcing the German defenders back, step by step, hedgerow by hedgerow, never giving the enemy a breathing spell, never once letting the enemy set up defenses. Weary American soldiers fell from exhaustion only to pick themselves up and press on again. They were dirty, unshaven, with battered uniforms and battered bodies. They certainly did not look it, but they were unquestionably the finest soldiers in the world, and day after day they cracked the stubborn enemy defenses.

Many stubborn rearguard actions were fought, but we pressed ever on to the attack. Through mine-infested areas we battled, making our own roads and supply lines across the fields, blasting and bulldozing openings through the hedgerows. The enemy lobbed in heavy artillery, but nothing could check the advance. Our platoons and CF were ever on the move, right behind the advancing infantry. Our guns were ever ready to stop any German armored counter thrust, but none materialized.

Yet, we paid a price too. On the 2nd of August, the captain led a reconnaissance party across the Vire River. The party ran into what they thought was sniper fire. Instead, it turned out to be a sizeable pocket of Germans entrenched in a wooded area. One of the party was wounded, and in attempting to rescue him the rest of the party ran into intense small arms fire. A very hot skirmish ensued, and in addition to the captain and the wounded man being missing in the action, we suffered one other casualty before the party could withdraw. Lt. Groff immediately assumed command of the company, and we continued our efficient cooperation with the infantry. We were under artillery fire many times during this drive out of the beachhead, and we suffered five other casualties, and had several of our vehicles knocked out.

The Second infantry Division spearheaded the attack of the V Corps south through the ruins of Vire and on to Tinchebray, which was taken the 15th of August. The next day the division was drawn out of action. It had completed 70 straight days on the front, eclipsing its World War I record by 14 days. This service had been climaxed by its hard breakthrough drive which had carried it 40 kilometers in 20 days, and the steady pressure thus exerted had aided materially in

preventing a large scale withdrawal of the enemy, making possible the creation of the Falaise pocket. We, as attached unit, had done all that we could to contribute to the success of the division's efforts.

Although in the greater sense the battle of Normandy in our sector was a dogged infantry battle, nevertheless, we were there undergoing the hardships and the risks. During the breakout drive, we were constantly on the move. We moved several times a day, and our 3-inch guns were usually set up within a few hundred yards of the front. There was little rest for any of us, our days began at daybreak, before six o'clock, and frequently lasted until well past midnight. Several times we had to dig ourselves in while enemy artillery was shelling the area. On a few occasions the German air force made appearances, usually a few planes at night, dropping flares and some bombs. Normandy provided us with our combat training. It was here that we saw and experienced that man made Hell called War. None of us who were there will ever forget the hedgerows of Normandy, the bloody battered hedgerows, and the price men pay for a nation's victories.

We withdrew from action on the 16th of August, and the company was assembled. For the next couple days we devoted ourselves to the sorely needed maintenance of our guns, vehicles, clothing and. ourselves. The breathing spell was most welcome. Rumors began to circulate to the effect that we were going on a long motor march. The American Third Army had broken loose, and was driving on Paris. Were we going to join this drive? Visions of Paris danced in our dreams. Every town and village that we had driven through in Normandy had been battered by combat. Civilians had either been evacuated or fled before the battle. "Off Limits" signs had sprouted so fast everywhere that many of us suspected the retreating Germans of putting them up. The towns were off limits to allied troops almost before they had been taken!

But, Paris was not for us. Early on the morning of August 19th, our company moved from the assembly area, and fell into place in the long column headed in the opposite direction. We were on the long trek to Brest. Our armies needed this great French port, so the stubborn German garrison there would have to be eliminated. That was our mission.

Brest

19 August to 27 September 1944

The trip to Brest began in the usual army fashion. We started to leave early, and then spent several hours along the side of the road waiting our place in column. Then, finally we were off. It was late afternoon before anything unusual happened, and then, the ride took on a memorable character that we will long remember. For then we began to pass through the area that our 3rd Army had swept through a few weeks before. French civilians lined the roads everywhere, cheering and waving as we passed. It was a tremendous reception, and the people were so obviously overjoyed to see us that it was heart touching. We felt like we were part of a big Victory parade. For weeks back in Normandy we had all accumulated excess supplies of cigarettes and candy from our rations. Now, as we passed the assembled throngs, we threw them cigarettes, candy, and chewing gum. Even the spasmodic showers that characterized the day could not dampen the French enthusiasm. And as evening began to settle and we drove deeper and deeper into Brittany, our receptions became more and more enthusiastic. Only American armored units had rolled through these places before our convoy came. We were far back in our convoy, and these people had lined the roads for hours watching and waving. They all seemed to know that we were on the way to Brest, and their cries of “Vive la Amerique” were so sincere that it made us feel like those agonizing days of trial in Normandy had been worth while. We were so appreciative of their attitudes that most of us gave away our last cigarettes. We saw many of the FFI armbands, and everywhere it was “Vive la Amerique” and “Boche Kaput”, the latter cry always accompanied by a slitting of the throat gesture.

At last night fell, but still we drove on and on. It was very chilly. Past the early hours of the morning we drove, and it was nearly four o’clock when we halted at the side of the road. Two hours later we resumed the march, and at nine-thirty we arrived in our assembly area, 1000 yards west of Ploudainel, France. We had traveled approximately 225 miles, and we were 12 airline miles from Brest. Reconnaissance was made immediately, while the company rested and performed maintenance. It was Sunday, and the local inhabitants came to our assembly area in droves, walking about looking at the guns and vehicles, and attempting to converse with us. The next day, we halved the distance to Brest by moving to Kerlin. During the following eight or nine days the platoons were generally in anti-tank positions, and they moved forward as the infantry moved. In its early stages the battle for Brest was not so fierce.

Brest was important for two reasons: it housed the submarine pens from which raids were launched against Atlantic shipping, and the Allies needed the port through which to bring supplies to the growing armies in France. The German High Command had ordered the Brest garrison to hold out for at least 90 days. Pill boxes and well constructed emplacements of steel reinforced concrete, plus the bitter defense by the paratrooper garrison showed their intentions of full filling this order. Three divisions, with much supporting artillery and special troops had been given the assignment of vetoing this order. The plan called for the 2nd Infantry Division to drive south through the eastern part of the city to the harbor. We were now officially in the 3rd Army.

On the 26th of August, the company command post moved to Kernoas, on the fringe of Brest airport, where a fierce struggle was taking place. For several days, progress was measured in yards as the enemy in strong concrete emplacements contested every inch of ground. These emplacements had been heavily shelled by artillery for three days, but it still took flame throwers and every trick that could be mustered to crack the stubborn defense. This was also that tricky hedgerow country which is so easily defended, and the going was rough. Sniper fire even licked about our company command post during these hectic days. Casualties were heavy in the rifle companies, as the enemy resorting to every possible device for slowing the attack, even dynamited one of their concrete emplacements just as a platoon was about to close on it. Huge pieces of concrete sailed hundreds of yards through the air to batter the surrounding area.

On the 30th of August, we accepted a new kind of mission when our third platoon fired direct fire on enemy strong points, machine gun nests, and emplacements. Some 60 rounds were fired, including 20 rounds of concrete piercing. The missions were accomplished. The next day they fired similar missions, knocking out one enemy pillbox inflicting an estimated five casualties on the enemy. The same day, our second platoon fired over 500 rounds of HE on indirect fire missions. During the next five days, the second platoon fired over 1600 rounds on indirect fire missions, while the third platoon continued to fire direct on enemy machine gun emplacements and strong points, inflicting casualties estimated at 15 and knocking out 1 AT gun and a machine gun nest.

On the 5th of September we were released from support of the 9th, and assigned in direct support of the 38th Infantry Regiment. All our platoons went into direct fire positions, and the command post moved into an area 2500 yards southeast of Guipavas. The next day the first and third platoons fired 250 rounds direct fire on enemy strong points, knocking out several houses occupied by Germans, also an AA gun and a machine gun nest. The next day all three platoons continued to fire direct at enemy installations, firing nearly 600 rounds. On the 8th

of September, the three platoons fired 350 rounds direct, bagging 2 machine gun nests, 3 AA guns, and inflicting an estimated 20 casualties. This completed our firing for a week. Our platoons received much commendation for the fine role they had played in softening the enemy resistance. A general, on a tour of the front, was amazed that we could put our 3-inch guns so close to the enemy lines, and fire upon them with such devastating effect.

On the 9th of September the company command post moved to a field one mile northeast of Brest. From there we could see pillars of smoke rising constantly from the city where fires burned from the never ending artillery shellacking and the aerial bombardments. It was here that we witnessed the first close aerial support that we had ever seen. The fighter-bombers dove just beyond our lines dropping bombs and strafing. Nor was this just an isolated attack or two. There were many planes used and they made repeated attacks. In the meanwhile, the heavy bombers made several large-scale raids against the city and the harbor. We certainly had the aerial support at Brest.

By this date, the infantry had swept into the outskirts of the city. But final victory lay beyond a maze of streets and buildings, fighting much different than hedgerow warfare. School solutions of street fighting were useless. The streets were death traps swept by machine and flak guns set up at intersections. New methods of approach were designed. Positions were gained by the ladder method, through back doors, gardens, up and down ladders, and over walks and hastily improvised catwalks. Another method was by boring through the interior walls from building to building by blasting holes. It was a slow process but it reduced casualties to a minimum. Naturally, with this type of fighting in progress, there was little that we could do with towed 3-inch guns.

Still on our northeast sector the fighting was at the outskirts of the city, so our first platoon moved into direct fire positions on the 15th of September and fired 750 rounds in two days of close support there. It was during this firing that an artillery shell fell in the platoon area setting off 3 rounds of HE and wounding four men, one being seriously wounded. This concluded our active part in the battle for Brest. The division had reached the old wall of the inner city. Patrols probed the ancient moat searching for a weak point. The wall measured 60 feet across in some places, much too thick for demolitions. But an unguarded weak point was found, and a company filtered through, while the rest of the battalion overwhelmed the guard at an entrance near the river and entered. The last big barrier having fallen, the fight for the city was virtually over. Our company moved to an assembly area one mile from Landerneau, on the 18th of September, the day on which Brest actually fell.

We had nine full days of rest at Landerneau, including passes to the town. For once we were able to go somewhere that wasn't off limits. You could get cognac, and if you could Parle a little Francaise, there were some girls that would listen. During this period we were also permitted to visit Brest. Many of us had already seen part of the city while the fighting was in progress, but this was an opportunity to visit the inner city and the harbor. In block after block only skeletons of buildings remained, blackened by fire and hollowed by the blasts of concussions. Here and there were buildings that through some quirk had remained untouched. Piles of debris still choked many streets. It was a battered city! It was a touching sight, watching the French families returning to their city. They drove and pushed carts along the roads to Brest, carts that contained all their earthly possessions. They were tired and war worn, and they dared not hope that their homes had been spared. Yet, at last they had achieved a certain measure of tranquility, and they knew the war for them was over.

It was pleasant sitting in the peaceful fields near Landerneau. For the first time in months we were able to indulge in luxurious thoughts——the war was far away! Aside from the actual time consumed in traveling to Brest, we had not been beyond the range of enemy artillery since our first day in France. We were able to pitch tents, and to sleep above the ground safely——a real treat! The summer had not been very warm, now summer had passed, and the air even at noon was chilly.

The prospects of combat during the coming winter months were too much for us, so we indulged in wishful thinking that the war would end before long, perhaps before we could be taken into action again.

And now, as never before, rumors were rampant in the company. For while we had been engaged at Brest, Paris had been liberated and the American armies had driven far beyond it. Another American army had landed in southern France and swept rapidly northward. The Allies were driving through Belgium, through Holland, and through Germany itself. The end of the war was being predicted momentarily by nearly everyone. While the fighting for Brest had been in progress, we had been removed from the command of the 3rd Army and had been placed in the 9th Army, which had once been semi-officially described as the Army of Occupation. One could take his choice of rumors. We were to be occupation troops, we were to be MPs, we were to ship out of Brest for the Pacific, we were to become infantry, we were to mop up the other pockets of resistance in Brittany, we were to do practically everything but what we did. We went to the German front.

Manderfeld

27 September to 12 December 1944

We left our assembly area near Landerneau at one o'clock on the afternoon of the 27th of September, heading for that "Western Front". The first two days were uneventful, as we covered around 300 miles, stopping at dusk by pulling off the main road. We slept beside our vehicles, by the side of the road, wrapped up in our blankets. We had been traveling in the direction of Paris, and on the third day we left our bivouac near Chateauneuf and passed through part of Versailles towards Paris. It was an event we had all long anticipated, but not like it happened. Our convoy whistled through Paris at better than 40 miles per hour. It was an attractive city, the Mademoiselles looked very nice, but who can say for sure when moving as fast as we did. At any rate, Paris did not show any battering from the war, although some airports which had been used by the Germans had been unmercifully pounded, with many planes of all types left destroyed on the ground. As we were leaving Paris we did catch a glimpse of the famous Eiffel Tower in the distance. In regard to the speed with which we went through the city, three of our half-tracks overheated, and had to stop in the city. That night we halted near St Quentin, France. We drove all the next day from early morning until past midnight, driving by blackouts as we approached enemy territory. It was after one o'clock in the morning of the lst of October when we reached our ultimate destination, a bivouac area near Steinebruck, Belgium, practically on the German frontier. We had made the long trip with no accidents, and only one vehicle, a half-track, had fallen out en route for repairs. It arrived one day later. We learned with relief that we were back under the command of the First Army.

There in our assembly area, we rested and performed necessary maintenance, as much as we could in view of the highly inclement weather. It rained daily, the mud was thick, and at night it became so cold that the mornings found frost on the ground. On the 4th of October the company command post moved to Lanzerath, and our platoons took up positions along the front in that area. This was memorable for it gave us several new experiences. The company command post had been in a house once before, for a week on the outskirts of Brest airport, but aside from that we had carved our homes from the ground ever since we had come to France. Now the entire company was located in houses along the front. It was a new and most welcome policy for the weather had become quite cold. Then, too, we had always operated in support of the infantry,

but now there was no infantry or any other troops, the sector was defended by just our company. Most of our 3-inch guns were put in barns. A few were put in possible firing positions. Everything was hidden or camouflaged. Squads of men were placed along the front of our sector as outposts in houses. Our company, in effect, was the long thin line of the front. Machine gun posts were established, patrols were made daily into enemy territory.

In the next 19 days until the 23rd of October, we remained in these positions. Most of this time we had a couple officers and 36 enlisted men from the Belgium Army attached, however, they were not very active.

During this period, principally as a result of our patrols, we took 13 enemy prisoners, killed 1, and wounded 3. Many of the patrols ran into enemy fire, but we suffered no casualties in our company. One of our attached Belgium soldiers was missing in action. The company command post was shelled by heavy enemy artillery on the night of October 8th but no damages or casualties were suffered, and aside from that our sector was quiet. We had one man missing during this period, He had been attached to us from “C” Company, and he insisted on going deer hunting in “no man’s land”. He was not seen or heard of again. On the 23rd of October, the company command post moved to Manderfeld, and all the platoons shifted positions also.

When the move was made to Manderfeld, the Belgium forces were all released from attachment and our own lst Recon Platoon was attached. Manderfeld was only a few kilometers from Lanzerath and although we had fully withdrawn from the Lanzerath area, a few days later, our second platoon moved back and set up outposts in that sector. The new positions we had taken up were the same as we had withdrawn from, namely, outposts and machine gun emplacements. The platoons continued to send out patrols, and a constant vigil was kept over our sector. In addition to maintaining our sector of the front, we had two of our 3 inch guns set up in anti tank positions at Roth, Germany, as support for the defending unit there.

As a result of the patrols our company bagged another 14 prisoners and killed 2 of the enemy while in these positions. There were no real skirmishes or actions of any size although several of the patrols ran into fire fights. From these patrols came much information as to the strength and disposition of the enemy. Up until the 12th of December, when we were relieved, there were never any indications of enemy concentrations of power. From our outposts in Lanzerath, the Germans could be seen moving about in Loshiem, Germany, on the hill across the

way, the frontier being just between the two towns. From observations and patrol reports, the coordinates of several enemy machine guns were obtained, but due to some strange policy, our artillery, whose quota of rounds was very limited, was not allowed to fire on these targets.

Yet the German artillery was evidently not under the same restriction for they shelled us from time to time. On four occasions they threw barrages of shells into Manderfeld, some of which landed uncomfortably close to our command post positions. The gun crews at Roth, Germany, underwent spasmodic artillery and mortar fire. The platoon positions, particularly the third platoon's, were subjected to enemy artillery fire on several occasions. During this period we suffered three battle casualties, all lightly wounded, and had a couple vehicles knocked out by shrapnel.

The enemy also made patrols, several of which were beaten back only after they had encountered machine gun fire from our alert outposts. One such patrol on the 31st of October managed to slip in close to one of the third platoon's outposts. They threw hand grenades at the house in which the post was located, and knocked out the half-track with two of their "potato masher" grenades. The patrol was driven back by small arms fire from the house, and it was not known whether or not any damage was inflicted on the patrol, due to the darkness of the night.

It was in October that we had our first experience with Hitler's V-1. We saw the flame from the jet moving rapidly across the sky at night, and as it drew nearer and passed overhead, we could hear the irregular sputtering of its jet propulsion. At first, the sight of these buzz bombs was quite a novelty, but they soon became commonplace, as many of them passed overhead directed at targets deeper in Belgium and France. So many of them passed over our sector that anti-aircraft outfits were moved into the vicinity. We were soon dodging our own ack ack fire, as low bursts of shells would go astray. The V-1 was an exceedingly small target and moved tremendously fast. It seemed to us that the ack ack fire was useless, but we were told that it was not necessary to hit the buzz bomb, that near misses had the effect of turning it from its course. Nevertheless, we did not like our friendly ack ack fire, for some of the rounds knocked holes in the nearby houses. And to tell the truth, we were not any too anxious to have any of those infernal machines detonated in our immediate vicinity.

On the 30th of November a buzz bomb crashed into a house on the outskirts of Manderfeld, just 150 yards south of the command post. We felt the concussion, and we saw what was left of the house, which was practica1ly nothing. It had

been scattered over a 75-yard area. Only the battered remnants of three walls remained, it was impossible to tell that it had been a three-story house before. Several other V-1s had fallen within a radius of a mile or so. We had heard the blast and the concussion had shaken the windows. We had all continued to believe, however, that the ones falling in our area were defective and not directed at us. But early in December, one crashed into the house on the corner less than 100 yards from the company command post. Fortunately, it did not detonate, the area was immediately evacuated within a several hundred yard radius until a bomb disposal unit arrived and disarmed the contraption. From then on when we heard the irregular throbbing of an approaching buzz bomb, we would pause from our activities, and wait until it had passed over. We were sweating them out.

The first snow fell on the 8th of November while we were in Manderfeld. It snowed for three days to blanket the ground by a good two feet. Since the weather was consistently cold now the snow lasted for over two weeks. Some lively snowball fights ensued. There were some civilians in the town, and a few of the more comely young ladies were the attractive and not too unwilling targets for the missiles. Actually they did a little more than take care of themselves, for these girls were strong from hard labor, they could dish it out too.

We had stayed in Manderfeld so long that we really felt quite at home there. The town was in Belgium, Malmedy province, but the people, although theoretically citizens of Belgium were nearly all of German birth and descent. For the province had been German until given to Belgium after World War I, and it had been one of the first provinces retaken by the Germans in this war. The people spoke German, and we were never too sure where their sympathies were in this war. St Vith, a larger town to the west of us ten miles, had been strongly pro German. However, the civilians never gave us the slightest bit of trouble in the Manderfeld area, and indeed, they were extremely cooperative.

Early in December, S Sgt. Brannon, the platoon sergeant of the third platoon, received a battlefield commission and became 2nd Lt. Brannon. “Sleepy” Brannon had been a very capable and popular leader in “A” Company since its organization, and news of his commission was received everywhere with approval. He immediately was given the leadership of the third platoon, which he had helped train and lead for two years.

We really had it made in Manderfeld. All the men in the company were stationed in houses, where they were warm and comfortable, despite the rigors of winter outside. Each man had his own individual bed. There was ample living

space for all. We had much leisure time, duties were relatively light, and we all more than caught up on our reading and our correspondence. We ate very good, for not only were we drawing good rations, we were also supplementing our regular diet with succulent steaks. The Germans had deserted the area in “no man’s land” leaving many cows behind. Our informal volunteer patrols would go out from time to time and return with choice beef cuts on the hoof. To top it all off, the last few weeks that we stayed in Manderfeld the electricity was restored and we were really living in luxury. What few radios we had were brought into use. We heard the AEF broadcasts, and it was a genuine pleasure to hear a radio again. The comfortable surroundings in which we were established gave many of us our first opportunity to indulge in a card game since coming to France. All in all, the time we spent in this area was the most pleasant that we had ever spent in the army. We had at last found a “home in the army”. These things we remember best about the Manderfeld sector, and it was with genuine regret that we heard disquieting rumors about leaving there.

During this time passes to Paris were authorized and we sent our first men in November. We were permitted to send a man at intervals from then on until we reached Kassel, and the distance became too great. Rest camps had also been set up by division and by corps, and we were given regular quotas for both camps. Every man in the company had an opportunity to go to the division rest camp at Vielsalm, Belgium. The rest camp provided warm showers and a change of clothing, in addition to USO shows and recreational facilities. In the town of Vielsalm, the bars were open, and they did a thriving business from the thirsty men. It was something different, and provided excellent relaxation from the humdrum routine of our daily life.

Yet many times we had idly speculated upon the ease with which an enemy attack could roll through our lines in this sector. We were alert, but we had neither the strength nor the weapons to check any large force, and we knew there were no reserves behind us to call upon. Our lines were so thin, it was so far between our posts that it would have been possible to march a company through our posts without it being detected. We were not, however, alarmed because we had every reason to believe that the enemy was just as weak as we were in this sector. We were therefore; very disgruntled at being withdrawn from our positions on the 12th of December, although subsequent events showed that it was the best thing that ever happened to us.

Hofen

12 December 1944 to 3 January 1945

It was a cold bleak day on the 12th of December when, having been released from Task Force X, our company pulled out of the positions we had occupied for so long in the Manderfeld sector. Snow was falling, and the roads were coated with ice as we drove some 20 miles back through St Vith, then north to Sourbrodt, Belgium. We arrived there early in the afternoon, billets were crowded, but it was only for one night. We slept on the floor, crowded, but anything was better than the biting cold of outside. The next day the company moved from the battalion assembly area at Sourbrodt to Hofen, Germany, where the platoons took up direct fire positions. We viewed the seemingly quiet town askance as we moved into it, for it represented the first time that our company had completely moved its operations onto German soil. Then, too, we had heard rumors that we were to take part in a big drive to crack the Siegfried Line. All during the autumn months the First Army had been hammering at the German line in the sector just north of Hofen, and had made slow progress against fanatic resistance. It seemed that it was the mission of the Second Infantry Division to flank these defenses that had proven so troublesome.

Our first few days in Hofen were deceptively quiet. The infantry, one battalion of the 99th division, which occupied the town, had been there for a month and seen no action on the part of the enemy. We got all our positions set up, and became comfortably established in houses. We had just become relaxed in our new surroundings when all Hell broke loose. Early in the morning of the 16th of December, the Germans rocked our little town of Hofen with a heavy artillery barrage, throwing shells all over the area. The infantry called us to warn us of an enemy attack, and just at that time small arms fire sounded from one of our outposts manned by a squad from the third platoon. It was pitch black. The hour was 0530. The air was filled with the whining and crashing of shells as our artillery went into action to answer the German challenge. Everyone was officially alerted, but it was unnecessary for we were all up and in arms.

The third platoon post, which had opened fire, now had a machine gun in operation also. The post was near the crest of a hill, about 200 yards from the company command post, the tracers were plainly visible, but due to the extreme dark and the slope of the hill, the command post was unable to contribute supporting fire. Another squad of the third platoon nearby moved their machine gun out of the house to the road where they could fire supporting fire. The beleaguered post was under heavy small arms fire, nearly surrounded, and the

reinforcement was badly needed. There were so many of the enemy attacking that it seemed that our thin infantry line must have been broken or withdrawn. A call to the battalion command post assured us that the infantry line was still intact, and that they would not withdraw. The machine guns were still chattering and small arms barked continuously.

The situation was extremely grave, not only for the hard pressed outpost, but for the entire sector, for if the Germans succeeded in cracking into town, their initial striking force could be swelled to a thousand or more men in a few minutes, and then all our defenses would be flanked and could be attacked from the rear. We could not have held the town, and it is doubtful if any of us could have escaped.

We learned later from German prisoners that such was their plan, that a large force was waiting to wade in if a wedge could be driven into our lines.

As the battle raged around our outpost, our artillery continued to pour shells into the draw up which the enemy was attacking. The enemy artillery was still active, but it was far outnumbered now by the tremendous amount of American artillery, for it seemed that every piece within miles was firing on our sector. It was at this stage of the battle that we received one of those rare “breaks” that turn the tide. An artillery shell set fire to the house directly in front of our besieged outpost, and as the flame swept over the house, it threw illumination all over the scene to the great aid of the defenders. They could now see the area they were defending, the attackers were forced to take cover, and they sought refuge in a house further down the slope. There they were pinned down as our men poured fire into the doors and windows. We all sweated out those incredibly long minutes until daylight. As darkness waned and streaks of gray began to show in the East, the battle subsided, then ceased entirely. The bid by the enemy had failed. We had held the town!

Around seven o’clock when it was light enough to move, several of the men led by Lt. Brannon, covered by the machine gun from the outpost, went down to the house in which the enemy had sought cover. They dragged 18 prisoners out of the house, 6 of whom had been wounded. In the house they also found a couple infantrymen who had been taken by the Germans in the attack when they over ran the infantry post. In addition, there were 10 dead German soldiers counted in the immediate area. There was no way to estimate the number of German dead and wounded that had been taken back by the withdrawing enemy, but there was every indication that a considerable number of casualties had been evacuated. We did not escape Scot free in the battle, for we lost one man who was wounded by small arms fire.

Although, the third platoon had borne the brunt of the attack, every man in Hofen had felt the strain, for the artillery barrages had been the heaviest we had ever undergone. Every area had been subjected to fire, but fortunately we suffered no casualties there- from. A one-man volunteer patrol from the first platoon had toured the front just after daylight, and he returned with 3 German prisoners whom he had taken from a machine gun and mortar position. He had compelled them to carry the mortar back to our lines. He also reported that “no man’s land” was littered with German dead and wounded, that the entire area was completely torn up from artillery fire.

And even as we relaxed and considered the battle won, that afternoon around 1730 hours enemy artillery shells began falling in the company command post area. The houses adjoining the command post were hit several times, but our command post was not touched. We suffered no casualties, although two jeeps in front of the command post were knocked out. The communication wires were cut, and the wire crews went out to repair them. As night fell, we argued the advisability of sleeping in the cellars; they were cold and damp, but much safer. Many men moved to the cellars that night.

The next morning early we were alerted for an enemy attack, and the artillery barrages began to thunder again. The enemy threw many shells into Hofen, but our artillery sent them back ten for every one they threw. The attempted attack was beaten back before it reached our lines by the deadly accuracy of the American artillery. All during the day the enemy threw in harassing artillery fire. We suffered no damages or casualties, but the communications were severed often and the wire crews were very busy.

There was little sleep the night of December 17. Most of us by now were sleeping in the cellars where there was no heat and the temperature was below freezing. Moreover, the cellars were crowded and damp. But, perhaps the main reason there was so little sleep was that by now we were all fully aware of the grim situation confronting us. Late that afternoon we had learned that the Germans attacking on a broad front had made a major breakthrough in the lines just south of us. Not only were we faced with a possible loss of our supplies, but we faced the grim prospect that we might be surrounded. Many German panzer divisions were sweeping westward on a wide front below us. Then, too, we knew that we were squarely in the way of one of the major German drives, that they wanted Hofen at any cost, so that they could drive into the Eupen-Verviers-Liege area, which was the supply area for the First Army. If they could get through our defenses, there was nothing but artillery behind us and they could not check an attack, they could cut the link between the First and Ninth Armies, and seriously cripple the First

Army. We must hold at any price, we knew the Germans would attack again. Guards were doubled. The night was never quiet, shells fell every few minutes, and many of our own shells so close that it was almost impossible to tell if they were incoming or outgoing.

The enemy artillery barrage opened at 0330 hours on the morning of the 18th. It was heavy, and while it was still in progress the enemy attack began. This time the enemy threw in armor too, for approximately 20 tanks were estimated to be supporting the attack. Our artillery opened up, by now we had learned that we had one battalion of 155's and four battalions of 105's in direct support of our sector, it was easy to see that we had, for the air was mad with screaming shells as they battered the attacking enemy. Our artillery hammered away for hours, the German armor was driven back, but many of the attacking paratroopers managed to reach our lines. There was much small arms fire all along the front, so we sweated out those long hours of darkness every man at his post.

The German tanks tried a flank attack, and again our artillery drove them back. Some of the enemy infiltrated our lines. The tanks that had been unable to reach the town now began firing direct fire at the town. One could hear the muffled boom of the gun, a shrill whistle, and a blast as the projectile struck. Evidently the enemy had decided to shoot the works for they unleashed their rockets against us now. It seemed like hundreds of them at a time would come screaming at us. In the distance they made a humming noise, which increased in pitch to a screaming whistle as they approached. It was a grand gigantic Fourth of July celebration when they crashed and cracked all over the area, but considerably more deadly. But, despite the enemy's barrages of artillery, rockets and direct fire, all their attacks were beaten back. None of us who weathered the stormy days at Hofen can ever give too much praise to the American artillery. We loved them!

Again, as daylight approached the fury of the attack subsided. As we counted noses and checked up, we found that we had one man killed by small arms fire, and two men lightly wounded. We had one 3-inch gun knocked out, and two jeeps hit by enemy shells. Not long after daylight, we suffered a further blow when Lt. Penton, platoon leader of the second platoon, and one of his men were wounded by small arms fire. Daylight made possible the mopping up of the paratroopers who had infiltrated our positions. The first platoon killed one and took five prisoners, while the third platoon killed one in their area. The forces that had attacked were estimated to be of regimental strength.

This day passed much like the proceeding two days, but in addition to the harassing artillery and rocket fire, our day was made further miserable by spasmodic bursts of direct fire from enemy tanks. They moved into concealed

positions about the town, fired a few rounds, and then moved to another position to fire again. The rockets fell all over the town from time to time, they always came in great numbers. Telephone lines were severed, and repaired many times. Checking the lines became a dreaded ordeal, for a barrage was just as apt to fall while the line was being checked as not. Several times the line crews were caught in the open, but no one was hurt. We checked all the houses in our vicinity for paratroopers who might have infiltrated, and as long as we remained in Hofen this check up became part of our daily routine.


Prisoner of War Medal

During the afternoon of the 18th, we received very bad news. Company "B" of our battalion, with our 1st Recon Platoon attached, had been surrounded in Bullingen, Belgium, by a superior force of enemy panzers, and had been compelled to surrender. They had just moved into the town, and many of their 3-inch guns were still coupled to the half-tracks. They did manage to get one gun in action, and it accounted for two tanks, before the sheer hopelessness of the situation induced the surrender. They were suffering casualties, and they were unable to make a defense. A few men made a run for it and escaped to tell the story. The men had filed out of the houses with their hands raised. The Germans had lined them up, and then opened fire on them with machine guns from their tanks. It was not known how many men were thus butchered, or how many were taken as prisoners, but more than a month later when the area was retaken, the bodies of several of the men were found where they had been shot down. Over a hundred men were lost there, including nearly every man in two of the gun platoons, part of the headquarters section, and nearly every man in our 1st Recon platoon. Many of us had good friends in "B" Company, and for all of us it was a tremendous shock.

The overall picture was gloomy too, for the German offensive was still driving westward unchecked. The weather had been cloudy and overcast, so much so that our superior air force was unable to help. In our general area, the veteran Second Infantry Division, which had launched a successful drive into the Siegfried Line a few days prior to the German offensive, had been compelled to give up its hard won emplacements in the line and fall back into defensive positions. Despite the confusion and the fact that their right flank had been turned, the division had done a masterful job and was now presenting a strong line to the enemy in our south. We were confident that they would hold, that was the only cheerful note in all these troubled hours. In view of the importance of our position, and the fate of "B" Company, we were determined that we would hold. There would be no surrender or retreat.

By now the terrific strain was beginning to tell on everyone, faces were drawn, we were all tired from lack of sleep, and coffee and cigarettes were inadequate nourishment. An estimated 500 rounds of enemy artillery fell in our company area on the 18th, and the constant battering affected us all. Houses in Hofen were hit many times and shell bursts in the front yard were no novelty. The night brought darkness, but little relaxation as spasmodic shelling continued. There were reports of enemy patrol activity to increase the tension. Our own artillery was very active. We constantly prayed that they would not run out of ammunition.

The next morning we received bitter news. During the night an enemy combat patrol had penetrated the lines, and surrounded one of our posts. They had attacked it with automatic weapons and grenades. One man escaped to tell about it. The machine gun had been jammed when a bullet had bent the receiver and put it out of action. Several of the men had been wounded. Further defense being futile, the post had been compelled to surrender. We suffered eleven men missing in action, some wounded, but all prisoners. This was the heaviest single blow that our company had ever had to take, and we all felt deep personal loss.

There had been an attack by the enemy, but it had been beaten back. The shelling continued throughout the day, and approximately 600 rounds fell in the area but no casualties resulted. The strain had been terrific; two of our men showed signs of cracking up and had to be evacuated. The rest of us gritted our teeth and reflected on how much worse it would have been had we remained in the Manderfeld-Lanzerath sector that had been completely overrun the first day of the German offensive. We looked at the sullen gray skies and low clouds that held our air force on the ground, and cursed our evil fortune. The German drive into Belgium was still unchecked, and we began to wonder.

Another attack was beaten back on the 21st of December, but by now it began to appear that the Germans no longer had the confidence of their first attacks that had swept almost into town, and at one time had threatened to surround us. They seemed more content to sit back and hurl their rockets and artillery at us. We suffered no casualties or damages, other than the severance of communications, which kept the wire crews busy. Some paratroopers had been dropped during the night, and our third platoon killed four, while the second platoon killed one and captured one. We had no good news to cheer us, but we were becoming expectant, we felt that the tide was turning.

There was no attack on the 22nd of December. As on the day before, only about 50 rounds of artillery fell near our positions. We had one man lightly wounded. The news was all good, the German drive had been slowed

considerably. The skies had cleared, and the allied air forces were out in great strength hammering the enemy. The tide of battle had turned.

The next day approximately 150 rounds of artillery fell in our areas, and although the second platoon command post was hit twice, we suffered no casualties. A buzz bomb fell about 150 yards from the first platoon but inflicted no damages. Two days later we had one man lightly wounded, but the fight for Hofen was over. The Germans did not attack again, nor did they throw much artillery until the day we left. On the morning of the 29th of December as we were preparing to move out, the first platoon was shelled and we had one more casualty.

It was with genuine relief that we departed from Hofen. We had been through hectic days there, and our company had suffered much. These had been days of trial for the American armies; they had stood the test and were now hammering the enemy back to where he had started from. We left our 3-inch guns behind us, in the positions where they had been dug in, and there they were taken over by the TD Company that relieved us. The 3 inch guns were of no use to us now, although they had served us well as we had served them, for we were withdrawing from the front in order to effect a reorganization of our battalion, from which we were to emerge as a self propelled company.

It was a long cold 24 miles from Hofen to the chateau, around three miles east of Verviers, Belgium, where we were billeted while the steps necessary to our reorganization were taken. Living conditions were cramped, as most of our battalion was assembled within the one large building that constituted the chateau. For two days we waited while the necessary paper work was done, and then we received our new weapons, the M-18's. They were light, highly maneuverable, fast tanks. They weighed about 18 tons, mounted 3-inch guns, and were capable of terrific speeds even in reverse. For a few days we had classes on the guns, interphone and communications system, driving, and other orientation sessions. Then, on the 2nd of January 1945, we moved out of the chateau. Through swirling snowflakes, and over icy roads we made our way back to the front.

Elsenborn To The Rhine

2 January to 21 March 1945

The company moved into the town of Elsenborn, Belgium, with the second platoon at Nidrum, a few miles away. This sector of the front was already heavily defended, since it was the northern pivot of the First Army's line during the battle of the bulge. Our mission was to select positions along the front from which it would be possible for us to check a tank attack should one come. It had been snowing for several days. The snow was deep; the days were cold and dark. We all lived in houses, and everyone stayed indoors as much as possible. The civilians had been evacuated from the town, as they had been at Hofen. Still, we made the necessary reconnaissance trips, and all drivers and tank commanders familiarized themselves with the routes to our selected positions, the terrain in general, and possible enemy approach routes. Aside from this, and any necessary maintenance on the vehicles, we devoted all our energies to keeping warm. The entire month of January was characterized by snow and biting cold.

On the 10th of January, enemy mortar shells fell in the area of the command post and the platoons. There were no casualties, although, one jeep was damaged by shrapnel. On the 12th of January, two men were lightly wounded when they set off a "booby trap" while on reconnaissance in Germany. The very severe weather hampered any would be operations, and the front on our sector was comparatively inactive. On the 20th of January, the company command post and two of the platoons moved to Camp Elsenborn, slightly over a mile away. We had only bare buildings for barracks, and we jokingly called it our "concentration" camp since it was surrounded by barbed wire, but it was considerably better than staying outdoors. While we were there, each of the platoons had an opportunity to fire indirect fire. They alternated at the positions, firing several hundred rounds each. In the meantime the Russians, who had not launched any large attack for many months, suddenly burst through the German lines, which ran roughly north and south through Warsaw, Poland, and began to drive with great power towards Germany. For weeks they recorded deep advances, before they were finally checked at the Oder River, less than 40 miles from Berlin. During their drive, we eagerly awaited every bit of news. It was grand for our morale, and for the first time we felt a true appreciation for our allies on the other side of Germany.

On the 26th of January, while moving into a direct fire position, one tank hit an enemy mine. One man was lightly wounded when it blew a track. The next day, the company command post moved to Nidrum, Belgium, only two miles

away. The same day the second platoon positions were shelled, and shrapnel lightly wounded one man. On the last day of the month, the infantry pushed off again. We were once more headed into the German defenses, and into Germany itself.

On the 1st of February, the Company Commander's group moved forward to an advance command post beyond Bullingen. The platoons were already on the prowl in support of the infantry. To the Second Infantry Division, the route was an old one, for they had fought their way into the Siegfried Line here, just before the German offensive in December had turned their flank and they had been compelled to withdraw. In another day they had driven into the Monschau Forest, and retaken Heartbreak Crossroads, almost without a fight this time. In the vicinity of this vital crossroads were 27 large steel reinforced concrete pillboxes, which had been a costly and difficult line to crack some six weeks before, when our infantry had taken them the hard way. We all breathed much easier when the resistance was light this time.

Driving beyond Heartbreak Crossroads, so named by the infantry for obvious reasons, we passed through the major defenses of the enemy lines. On the 3rd of February the platoons and advance command post reached the Schlieden-Harperschied sector. Here, the German defenses stiffened, and we checked our attack to wait for the forces on our flanks to catch up with us. We had spearheaded the First Army drive for an advance of approximately twenty miles. We had suffered one casualty, but we had come through some intense artillery fire, and we had been fortunate that we had not had more casualties. The third platoon had fired 4 rounds of HE and several hundred rounds of 50 caliber at German personnel, killing 15 of them.

The area we had advanced through had been heavily pounded by our air forces as they had struck at retreating enemy columns withdrawing from the "Battle of the Bulge". Nearly all of the buildings had been partially destroyed, and there were very few good roofs if any within twenty miles. The house that served as the company command post at Harperschied had a shattered roof, and rain or snow dripped through. The front view from the house revealed nothing but a shambles where the buildings in front had been leveled to the ground by direct hits.

Aside from minor changes in positions, we remained in this sector until the 24th of February. The biting cold weather of December and January had passed; and it was becoming much warmer. There were a few snow flurries, but the

winter's snow had melted and the spring thaw had set in. The platoon positions were shelled from time to time. On the 9th, the first platoon had one M-18 and one M-2O damaged, but no casualties. On the 16th, we had one man killed by enemy artillery fire when the second platoon was shelled at Bronsfeld, Germany. We had one other man lightly wounded by enemy artillery in this sector.

On the 24th of February, the entire company moved to Dreiborn, a distance of six miles. Here, we performed whatever maintenance was required. We remained at Dreiborn until the 4th of March. We were expecting to move daily, and we had the feeling that our next move would be an all out drive on the Rhine. The Germans had been compelled to withdraw some troops from our front to check the Russian drives, which they had finally been able to do. But, now, the entire American front was beginning to erupt, and on the 4th of March we moved into action.

We had one platoon with each battalion of the 9th Regiment, and we began the series of moves that took us to the Rhine in one week. Our route twisted and turned through one small German town after another, but ever we drew closer and closer to our objective. Most of the towns were taken without much opposition, and the white flags flew from every building, even the barns. This was the vaunted Fatherland of the Nazis but the people had no stomach for a fight. They were thoroughly whipped and they knew it. We moved several times a day, and our days were long. We had two men wounded by artillery fire on this advance. On the 7th of March, the second platoon knocked out 9 general vehicles killing approximately 100 Germans. While on the same day, the third platoon ran into some opposition: knocked out one Tiger Royal tank, 4 FA Guns, 3 AA guns, 1 machine gun nest, and 4 general purpose vehicles. In addition, the third platoon captured 4 vehicles and some 30 prisoners. On the 10th, the second platoon had another inning with the enemy and fired 11 rounds of HE and 700 rounds of 50 caliber to account for an estimated hundred Germans.

Until we had begun this drive we had seen few German civilians, since they had either fled before our attack or been evacuated. During our push to the Rhine, we lived in houses with German civilians. They were segregated in one section of the house for security purposes, and all conversation with them was forbidden. Yet, it was impossible to avoid all speech and to see their attitudes. They were shocked at the swiftness of the American advance, a little afraid of us but curious about us, and relieved that the long war was over for them. Their minds had been poisoned for so long by German propaganda, that despite the fact that we were conquerors, they were still arrogant and could not conceive of themselves as being

losers in a total war. They would argue and wheedle until the American soldier raised his voice or showed anger. It was obvious that the average German thought that he was a superior being, could not understand that we insolent Americans could order him around, but had sufficient respect for force to obey. They knew the war was lost, and would give us no forcible resistance, but they were still German and it took a show or threat of force to remind them that they now occupied a subordinate position.

Our drive to the Rhine halted in the vicinity of Waldorf, the company command post being located there on the 10th of March. In the meantime, the entire American front had been active, Cologne had fallen to the First Army, which had closed its front all along the west bank of the Rhine. The company was assembled in Burgbrohl on the 12th where we performed maintenance and prepared for the next move. It was while we were there that we learned that the First Army had seized intact a bridge over the Rhine at Remagen, and had succeeded in establishing a firm bridgehead over the Rhine. This was remarkably good news and we didn't need a crystal ball to see that the Remagen Bridge led to the end of the war. We felt that we were destined to join the bridgehead forces. The bridgehead was just north of us along the river, and we saw several of the German planes, which attempted to bomb the bridge.

As we waited for the orders that would take us over the Rhine, we reflected upon the swiftness of the drive that brought us to the Rhine. Would we move as rapidly into the Germany beyond the Rhine, would the white flags continue to wave, and would the war end soon! We wondered much, but not many opinions were expressed. Even as we sat in the warm spring sun at Burgbrohl, the platoons brought in six German prisoners including an officer. And on that first day of spring, the 21st of March, we were alerted for movement to cross the Rhine.

Victory

21 March to 8 May 1945

Victory in Europe Medal

It was well after dark when we crossed the Rhine at Sinzig on a bridge erected by army engineers. For all of us it was a memorable occasion. As we crossed, we could see spotlights playing over the river on both sides of the bridge, and hear the bark of small arms as the ever vigilant guards fired at all f1oating objects in the river. Every precaution was taken to insure that the Germans did not destroy any of our precious bridges with floating demolitions. By now our efficient engineers had thrown several bridges across the Rhine, but every bridge was vitally needed to maintain the steady stream of men and supplies that were pouring across to the east bank. The bridgehead had been slowly expanded up and down the river, and we now controlled both banks of the river for many miles. It was early in the morning when we bivouacked at Rheinbrohl.

The company command post had a lovely front view of the Rhine. The weather was ideal, and we sat on the bank of the Rhine finding it difficult to believe our own eyes. We had hardly expected to see it, even as little as a month before, yet there it was in our front yard. Many of us had formerly expected Germany to capitulate when the Rhine was breached, but now we had no idea where the war would end. Judging by the fanatic German attacks on the bridgehead, there was no indication of German collapse. We knew that here on the bridgehead we were the focal point for the eyes of the world, and that it was the most coveted few square miles on the earth.

We wondered how long we would sit here before the breakout effort would be made, recalling our days of waiting in the Normandy beachhead. The Rhine bridgehead was being slowly expanded daily, and we had the idea that it would be some time before a major push was made. We were pleasantly surprised when we got “March Order” much earlier than we had anticipated, on the 25th of March.

We swung south along the east bank of the Rhine for many miles into the industrial town of Neuweid, and then turned eastward to Weis. The platoons were carrying all the infantry that it was possible to carry on the tanks. On the 26th, the company command post moved to Hohr Grenzhausen, six miles to the southeast. Each of the platoons was operating directly with a battalion of the infantry, and with their infantry laden tanks they were spearheading the drives. When opposition was met, the infantry piled off, the 3-inch guns blasted away, and the infantry mopped up. Most towns and villages were taken without opposition, but it

was impossible to foresee where or when the enemy would resist. The white flags flew from every building, and it was a heartening symbol of victory for us as we swept down the streets of the German towns with the white flags prominently displayed everywhere.

We stayed at Hohr Grenzhausen for two days, then we rolled some thirty miles northeastward to Hadamar. The big drive was on. The next day, our tanks swirled down the dusty roads for a distance of thirty-five miles. The company spent the night in Giessen, a fair sized industrial city where some of the best binoculars in the world are made. The following day we stormed another thirty miles deeper into Germany to Rudighiem. And on the last day of March, we rolled a distance of sixty-three miles into Elleringhausen. We had come a distance of one hundred and sixty miles in just four days of our dash into Germany. We were near the large German city of Kassel, and the Wesser River, where observers had predicted that the Germans would try to hold us. Our tactics had been simple, we had merely driven through the opposition and down the road, fighting where it was necessary, and then driving on again, never giving the Germans behind us a chance to retreat, and never giving those in front of us a chance to organize a defense. The German High Command never knew where we were. No attempt was made to mop up the areas on our flanks, we were spearheading down the road, and the consolidation of the areas passed was not our problem.

As we advanced, we had liberated thousands upon thousands of prisoners who had been held by the Germans. Principally, they were French, Polish, and Russian, but all nationalities were represented. Many had been soldiers against the Nazis, and they now wore their old uniforms. The roads were jammed with these waving, cheering, motley arrayed, legions of the damned who had been saved. They had been beaten, overworked, and starved, but they at last had been freed and they were happy as they made their way past our advancing columns. In Germany there were approximately twenty million of these slave laborers, and no protestation of innocence by the German peoples could remove from the minds of the American soldiers the memories of those freed slaves, and the treatment they had suffered, not at the hands of the German army, but from the German people. The war guilt of Germany rests not only on her armies, but also on all her peoples.

In the meantime, the entire front was blazing! The American Third Army had forced the Rhine, and was throwing armored spearheads far into Germany to our south. The American Ninth Army and the British Second Army with the aid of airborne forces had stormed the Rhine also, and were engaged in bitter fighting above the Ruhr. The opposition had been stronger there, but the American Ninth Army had shaken a strong spearhead loose and it was on a rampage driving towards Kassel from the northwest. The American First Army turned northwest to

meet them and around the 2nd of April the link up was made at Paderborn, twenty miles northwest of Kassel. The mighty industrial Ruhr, with some quarter of a million German soldiers was completely ringed with steel. It was lost to Germany, and it was only a matter of time until it could be mopped up.

On the 2nd of April, the company minus the third platoon moved to Korbach, several miles west of Kassel. Here we remained for a few days, enjoyed a breathing spell while the ring around the Ruhr was being reinforced and strengthened. It was quiet, although the first platoon brought in two prisoners. On the 5th of April, we moved to Immenhausen, six miles north of Kassel, near the Wesser River. The First Army had secured a bridgehead over the river, and two days later we crossed it. We drove twenty-five miles to Volkmarshausen. The drive was on again.

On the 8th of April, the third platoon suffered one casualty to enemy small arms fire. The platoons were once again spearheading the drive with their respective battalions. The company command post advanced 15 miles to Oberjessa, and the next day added 15 more miles to the vicinity of Gunterode. The next four days were occupied with movement as we drove forward for gains of 28, 20, 30 and 43 miles. Our direction was generally east, and although the roads weaved about, we moved ever towards the great German city of Leipzig. On the 14th of April, we halted the prodigious drive at Mucheln, around twenty miles due west of Leipzig.

Again, we had caught the German High Command napping, and they had been unable to organize any serious resistance to our advance. It was almost a parade as we dashed down the streets of the towns all draped with large conspicuous white flags. But in the vicinity of Leipzig, the German resistance stiffened as they made an effort to hold the city, and at the same time keep their escape gap open from the north of Germany to the “Redoubt Area” in Czechoslovakia, where they planned to make a last ditch stand.

The next few days we were content with smaller gains, but we did advance daily. The city of Leipzig was ringed with hundreds of ack ack guns. These guns were of very large caliber and were placed in well-prepared entrenchments. The Germans threw some artillery against us, and used their ack ack guns for point blank fire, but nothing could check the momentum of our drive, and Leipzig fell to us. On the 19th of April, the company command post and platoons were in Eythra, a few miles south of Leipzig. We did not actually take part in mopping up Leipzig, but on the next day we drove thirty-five miles to the southeast, crossed the Mulde River and entered Colditz. This was the end of our drive, and we sat down and waited for the Russians to join us.

In the meantime, the long awaited Russian drive had begun. Berlin was being encircled, and the Russians were driving towards us all along the front. The British and Canadian Armies in the north had after a slow beginning driven hard and fast into Germany, pocketing hundreds of thousands of Germans against the North Sea. The American First and Ninth Armies had mopped up the Ruhr pocket, taking several hundred thousand prisoners, in less than two weeks. The American Third and Seventh Armies were threatening the German troops in Czechoslovakia and Austria. The Italian front had collapsed and the Allied armies there were driving northward. Germany was disintegrating rapidly.

The German people by now did not fear the American soldiers; they did obey us, although they knew we would not molest them. However, they had a deep dread of the Russians. The German civilians were apparently ignorant of the atrocities of their armies in other countries, yet they knew the Russians would repay them in kind. They were very surprised to learn that the Americans were not going to fight the Russians, and that we truly considered the Russians as comrades and not as enemies.

On the 24th of April, we withdrew from Colditz, back across the Mulde River to its west bank. This was done in order to establish a clear-cut front to prevent confusion between the Americans and the advancing Russians. We waited in vain for the historic link-up. It was made on the 25th of April when Russian forces from Torgau met the American forces from Wurzen, just about 15 miles to our north. We sent some of our tanks out daily in support of strong patrols that had as their mission contact with the Russians if possible. On the 26th of April, two of our officers, Lt. Brannon and Lt. Bruner, platoon leader of the attached recon platoon, were captured by the Germans while on one of these patrols. Fortunately, they escaped that night, but the enemy had destroyed their jeep.

On the 1st of May, we learned of our next move. We were going to Czechoslovakia to take part in whatever action was necessary to mop up the Redoubt area. On the 2nd of May, we began the long trip southward. We passed through Borna, Altenburg, and hit the main autobahn to Nurnburg. It was a freezing cold day, and flurries of snow and hail pelted us as we moved through the high hill country. We left the autobahn at Bayreuth, and turned east to Weiden. We reached Weiden just after dark, but we continued to drive on to the southeast. It was a rough blackout drive until we reached Eppenried, Germany, about three o'clock in the morning. We had traveled a distance of over 210 miles.

On the 3rd of May we moved to Neukirchen, Germany, a distance of thirty miles. Neukirchen was almost on the Czechoslovakian frontier. We passed

through a mountainous area to get there, and some of the gaps were defended by artillery pieces, which pointed both north and south. It was still quite cold, and some snow fell. For three days we remained in Neukirchen, days filled with glorious news. The German armies were surrendering unconditionally to the allied armies on all fronts except Czechoslovakia. All of northern Germany, Denmark and Norway had given up. The German armies in Italy and Austria had capitulated. Only our sector resisted, and here the crack German 11th SS Panzer Division surrendered unconditionally. Our men acquired pistols by the dozens from the prisoners who brought in all their arms and vehicles.

On the 6th of May, we moved out of Neukirchen, and crossed the Czechoslovakian border at nine o'clock in the morning. It was immediately apparent to us that we were in another country, for the people lined the roads cheering and waving. The Czechoslovakian flag which had been hidden during the six years of Nazi tyranny, floated proud and free from every house. Everyone waved enthusiastically, we could not figure out where all the people came from, as they jammed the sides of the roads. We stopped at Kdyne for most of the day, and it was a national holiday to the people. They dressed in their picturesque national costumes, and performed their national dances. They were overjoyed to have us in their town, and they all turned out to see us depart. We were truly liberators to those people!

And here in the happy little town of Rockzany, let the history end. We received notification that our company had been awarded the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation for our performance of "duty in action against the enemy", during the period 16th December to 19th December 1944. It was for the repulse of the German attack at Hofen in the "Battle of the Bulge". It was a great honor to receive this formal recognition for our actions.

The Army just released the details of the system that will be used for discharge, and the future of Company A is not definite. Where we will go and what we will do, we do not know. The men of A Company have made an excellent record, the men of A Company, always will.