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Shared Reminiscence

My World War II Experience

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FRANCE AND BELGIUM (Moving up)[1]

It felt good to be on land again. The boat trip had been exciting for me, especially in the beginning, because I had never been on an ocean liner before and had never been out of sight of land; however, after 10 days of inactivity, my buddies and I got bored. The toughest part of the trip was not being able to receive mail. Now that we were on land once again, we were all looking forward to the first mail call.

I didn't know what to expect now that I was in France. The port of Cherbourg had been badly damaged by the fighting before it had been evacuated by the Germans. Before they left, they had tried to make it useless to us by blowing up docks, ships, heavy equipment and anything else that could have been useful to us. After leaving the barge that brought us to shore, we started hiking up a road leading away from the docks and into the countryside. I do not remember passing through any streets that would have been part of the city so I guess that we had been put ashore some distance from the city proper.

We had hiked for some distance up a gravel road until we came to a long line of army two and a half ton trucks. They were empty and had been waiting for us. I for one was very happy to see them, especially when we were told to climb on board that they were going to take us to our camp. By the time the convoy began to move out, it was mid-afternoon and had started to rain. I have two vivid memories of this trip probably because it was the first time that I had seen any French people. There hadn't been any people at the dock area to greet us and even now as our convoy moved up the road, there were only a few people here and there standing along the side of the road waving to us.

My first memory is one of looking towards the head of our long convoy as we were going down a long hill. I could see the men in the trucks ahead of us, some seated and some standing, looking at the countryside like I was. I could also see the long narrow gravel road as it stretched before the lead truck in our convoy. This view reminded me of pictures I had seen in history books of convoys during World War I that were taking American troops to the front. Perhaps I had thought that history was repeating itself and now it was my turn. The emotion it created in me was a strong one because after 60 years, I still can see our convoy going up that gravel road.

The second memory that I have of that ride was of seeing the small groups of people, men, women and children standing on the side of the road waving to us as we passed by. We were happy to see them and as we passed by, we began to throw them small packs of cigarettes, chewing gum, and bars of candy that we all had stocked up on while on the ship. It made me feel good to see those people run onto the road to pick up the things that we had thrown to them; that is, until I saw them fighting each

[1][Editor's Note] This article represents Chapters 7 and 8 of the author's unpublished wartime memoir titled "My World War II Experience" This work traces the author's wartime experiences from induction into the Army on August 3, 1943, through boot camp and further training, combat in Europe, being wounded in action outside Golzheim, Germany in February, 1945, recovery in U.S. Army hospitals, and honorable discharge on March 7, 1946. This excerpt begins when the author's unit, the 104th Infantry Division, lands in France after a 10 day voyage from New York.

other for them. The one incident that really shocked me was when a group of about ten rushed to the center of the road after we passed and started to fight for the items that we had thrown there. One of the men was on crutches and only had one leg. He tried to get to the items but was sent sprawling to the side of the road by the others as they fought over what we intended to be a gesture of friendship. His handicap meant nothing to anyone. We soon learned that those things that we had thrown off, that had meant so little to us, were precious to those on the side of the road who, because of the war, had nothing and could use the candy, gum and cigarettes to barter for other things that they really needed. I can still see in my mind that one legged man trying desperately to retrieve something we had tossed off the truck only to be violently pushed out of the way by others, some of whom might have been his friends. I stopped throwing things to the people after that incident.

Our convoy must have driven 10 to 15 miles through the countryside before we stopped. We had passed wooded areas, unplowed fields but saw no farm houses. I judged that we were not very near to any villages or towns. "G" Company men climbed down from the trucks and assembled in a field that was several acres in size. The boundaries of the field were roughly outlined by trees that grew up each side and across the back of the field. The land in the back had a fairly steep rise that formed a ridge covered with trees and brush. Apparently this was an uncultivated farm field and was now to be our home area. Subsequently, we learned that our bivouac area was located in the vicinity of Valognes, France. It was to be the initial staging area used to bring the various units of our division together now that we had arrived in France. The area was not near any village, although there were several small farm houses nearby.

An advanced party from our company had staked out where each platoon was to be located, where the field kitchen was to be established, where the slit trench and garbage pit were to be dug. We were told that we would be living in two man tents and instructed to pair up and erect our tent. Lines had been established to indicate where the front of our tents would be so that when they were all standing they would be in a neat row. Jerry Wells and I had been buddies since meeting at Camp Carson so we decided to go together and assemble our tent. We had done this before at Camp Carson when we had been out in the field running training exercises. Now we were going to put our training to the test.

All of us were carrying full field packs and in the pack we carried just about everything that we would need to survive in the field. Each one of us carried a shelter half, tent poles and tent pegs that made one half of a two man tent. Jerry and I combined our halves together and erected a pretty good tent that would allow two men to sleep on the ground. The tents were not big enough to stand up in but they did provide fairly good protection from the elements. There were two essential lessons learned very quickly. The first was to dig a deep drainage ditch around the tent to keep ground rain water from getting into the tent and the other was not to touch the shelter halves from inside the tent while it was raining after the tent had been erected. Touching the canvas from the inside created a spot where rain water would drip though. While we were assembling our tents, our cooks had assembled their field kitchen and had prepared a hot meal for us. It was the first of many. By this time there were several large bonfires going so we all went through the chow line with our mess kits in hand, got the hot food, went to a bonfire and ate. As soon as it was dark, since there was no light, Jerry and I crawled into our tent, and each of us wrapped up in our army blanket that we carried in our field pack. We did not take off our clothes, except for our shoes, and from that day until the war ended for me, I don't remember ever taking my clothes off to sleep. Life in this new setting became quite simple. We lived in two man tents, slept on the ground, ate food prepared by our cooks using field equipment, drank water kept in lister bags, washed using our helmets as water basins and never took our clothes off. Sleeping on the ground wasn't so bad because we covered the dirt floor with weeds and straw that we got from a farmer. We quickly overcame our embarrassment of relieving ourselves in the open with nothing offering the slightest privacy. It was cold so we kept warm by building fires and standing or sitting around them. There was not much training at this point, but we did go on hikes through the countryside, were given lectures about German weapons which were displayed to us. We were instructed how to conduct

ourselves with the French civilians. There were no electric lights, no hot and cold running water, no mess hall, no buildings in which to relax. We were in the field and used the training that we had received in the States to make the best of it. In a letter sent home I did mention one taste of civilian life that I enjoyed even though I had to walk 4 miles to take advantage of it. We were told that there was a shower facility that had been set up by a rear echelon unit and if we wanted to hike the 4 miles to reach it we were free to do so. I with several others jumped at the opportunity and sometime during the middle of September, I had my first hot shower in France. We thought that living in the field like we were was a little rough never realizing that what lay ahead for us would make this place seem like a resort.

The army tried very hard to keep our spirits up. One day the Red Cross brought us coffee and doughnuts that girls served to us from a mobile unit. They also gave out cigarettes and candy. It was great to see and talk to American girls. Another day we were able to see a U.S.O. show. A couple of actors that I had seen in the movies put on a small act for us. It was very good and I especially enjoyed the music and the girl singer. To make things more interesting, we had competitive sports between the platoons of our company. We played touch football, baseball and pitched horse shoes. I thought that I was pretty good at horse shoes until I played against some of my friends. I was very quickly eliminated from the competition.

We had very little contact with French civilians; however, sometimes on our hikes we would pass a farm and the farmers would wave to us and we would try out a few French words that we had learned. The farmers, probably all members of the same family, were mostly old people or at least they looked old. There were usually young children helping do the work. It was strange to me that we never saw teenagers or young adults. The reason for this should have been obvious to me and eventually it was.

France had been at war with Germany since 1940. They had been overrun and occupied by the Germans in 1941 and had not regained their freedom until after the allied invasion on June 6, 1944. During those lost years, a whole generation of young men and women had been killed or sent to Germany as prisoners to do forced labor for the Germans and right at this time, there was a French Army serving under the leadership of General Charles de Gaulle fighting the Germans in France not far distant from where we were. Those who had been spared were the very young and the very old. In the short time that I was in France, I don't remember seeing any of the local people who did not look tired, dirty, and bent over.

The buildings on the farm were very strange. They were all made of stone and were very old. They looked nice on the outside but inside they were bare and only the necessities were there. The house, barn, stable, and even the dog house were all part of the same building. There were no screens on the doors or windows and it seemed that the animals had unrestricted access to the interior of the house. At best, the farmers of this area lived a pretty primitive life. I don't remember what crops they grew. There were no large fields of wheat or potatoes, such as we had in the States, and I don't remember seeing any tractors or other types of equipment as were used on the farms back home. There were small vegetable gardens near the house and chickens were loose in the yard. There were apple orchards and we learned that the farmers used apples to make a very powerful drink named Calvados, a drink that became quite popular with some of the guys in my company who testified as to its potency. The farmers dressed in worn, typical work clothing which was not surprising but one thing that really did surprise me was that most of them wore wooden shoes. I had thought that wooden shoes were only worn by people in Holland. All in all, the life of a farmer in the area of our bivouac was very hard.

Rumors began to circulate through our company that we would soon be leaving this area. Life here had really been pretty soft and most of us were ready for a change. On September 26th, we were roused up very early and told to take down our tents, assemble our field packs and get ready to leave. We were not told where we were going. Jerry and I packed up, filled our canteens with water from the lister bag and waited. We were given a hot breakfast and then formed up in company formation and hit the road.

We hiked, route step (a normal walking pace, not an in-step march) down the road. We hiked hour after hour, stopping every 50 minutes for a 10 minute break and to eat when the cooks brought us lunch. We hiked through the afternoon; I thought that we would never stop. Finally after 10 hours, we reached our destination. We were so tired when we arrived at the new camp area that we collapsed to the ground. We stiffened up so quickly that not many made it to the chow line even though our cooks, who had come by truck and had set up their kitchen earlier in the day, had prepared a good hot meal for us. I am pleased to say that I made it to the chow line and had a very good meal. We were told that we had hiked 30 miles. Our Division History, *Timberwolf Tracks*, records the event as follows.

> *The division, less the 415th infantry and 1st battalion, 414th infantry moved by foot and motor from the vicinity of Valognes to its new bivouac area in the vicinity of Barneyville Sur Mer on 26 September. The Seagull and Mountaineer Infantry made one of the longest marches in their history, a distance of thirty miles. From our new Bivouac area we overlooked the English Channel and the Jersey Islands ten miles out to sea. Upon the Jersey Islands was located a strong German Garrison, which in the past had conducted raids on the shores of France. The 104th Reconnaissance Troops, under the command of Captain Arthur S. Laundon, immediately established outposts and patrols along the shoreline to prevent further raids by the Nazis—The war was definitely coming closer to the Timberwolves.*

Our camp at Barneyville was better than the one we had left. It was larger and more open. In the center of the camp was a playing field where we played softball, touch football and sometimes soccer. Our living arrangements were like we had at the previous camp and Jerry Wells and I had decided to pitch our tent in our assigned area as we had done before. As at the other camp, there was no hot or cold running water, no electric lights and no privacy when we used the slit trench to take care of our personal needs. Our slit trench was within sight of a railroad track that civilians used to walk into town. They would see us in various stages of dress or undress, laugh and wave to us. After we overcame our embarrassment, we would wave back, never really feeling comfortable with being so exposed. At nighttime we burned candles for light if we could find them or invented other ways to burn grease, fat, and sometimes cigarette lighter fluid if we could find it. I got candles in every package that was sent to me from home.

Our duties at this camp were very light. We had to stand guard duty once or twice a week. Occasionally some of us had to go by truck to a supply depot and pick up food and other supplies for the company. I never had K.P. because our cooks did all of the work. We ate every meal using our mess kits and canteen cups and washed them in a big can of boiling water at the end of the chow line. We were given many lectures concerning German weapons, mine detection, and booby-traps. Many of the lectures were given by men who had been in combat and had experienced what they were trying to teach us. We were taking 5 and 10 mile hikes down country roads throughout the area to keep up our endurance. Our equipment and clothing was carefully inspected and replaced when required. For recreation we played sports and, sometimes in the evening, there would be a U.S.O show or an outdoor movie. Our division had a great orchestra and occasionally they would put on a concert of big band music. Many of the members had been professional musicians in civilian life and had played in some of the best orchestras, such as Tommy Dorsey or Benny Goodman, before joining the army.

Outdoor church services were held every Sunday. Usually the service was held in a cleared out apple orchard. The Protestant services that I attended were conducted by a Methodist minister, Captain Clair F. Yohe. Mimeographed sheets containing the words of hymns were passed out to us and the music was played on a very small hand operated organ. The chaplains stayed with us all through combat. One of our chaplains was killed when we were fighting in Stolberg, Germany and Chaplain Yohe was awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for bravery under fire during his service in our regiment.

One day my friend, Jerry Wells, was instructed to pack his gear and report to our company commander. No reason was given. He packed up and went to company headquarters and that was the last that I ever saw of him. He didn't come back to say good-bye and he never wrote to me or anyone else to tell us what had happened. We heard that he had been sent home, but that was never confirmed. One result of this event was that now I was living in the two man tent alone. Just by coincidence, another guy in our squad ended up occupying his tent by himself when his tent-mate was suddenly transferred to the M.P.s (Military Police). We decided to join forces and from that time on, until the war ended for both of us, Bill Hura and I became buddies and shared many close calls together.

Once again at this camp we had the opportunity, as we had had at the previous camp, to go to a facility that had been set up to give hot showers to anyone who wanted one. This time we learned about the three minute shower. We had hiked 30 miles from our initial assembly area near the village of Valognes, France to Barneyville, France. We had established our camp, put up our pup tents and dug slit trenches for the company latrine. We were sweaty and dirty and had been given only one helmet full of water each day that could be used to brush our teeth, shave, give ourselves a sponge bath and wash our clothes. After several days of this, we were ready for something more. Our company commander must have agreed with us because word was passed that if anyone wanted to take a shower he would have to hike 5 miles to a shower facility. The problem was that we would be almost as dirty after hiking 5 miles back to camp as we were before we had left.

Bill and I and several others decided that it was worth hiking 5 miles (10 miles round trip) in order to feel clean even if it was only for a few minutes. It was at this time that we learned about the three minute shower. I don't remember what the shower facility looked like but I remember that we only had three minutes, after undressing, to get wet, lather up and rinse off, after which the next person took our place The three minute sequence was controlled by a technician who told us to stand under a shower head, then he turned on the hot water for approximately a minute giving us time to get wet, then he turn off the water for one minute while we covered our bodies with soap suds and finally he turned the hot water on again for one minute so that we could rinse off. The water was then turned off and we moved away to dry off. I think that we were given clean underwear but otherwise we put our uniforms back on. I do remember that I felt clean for a little while.

Sometime toward the end of September I got a chance to go into the city of Cherbourg. I don't know what I expected to see but I was very disappointed in what I did see. I described the visit in a letter dated Sept. 29, that I sent home. The following is excerpted from that letter.

> *I visited Cherbourg not long ago. It is a big city but it doesn't begin to compare with our cities. None of the buildings are over three stories high and they are absolutely without shape except for being square. The buildings are unpainted, due to the war, and it is hard to find one that has not suffered broken windows. The fighting that took place here was centered at certain points thus saving most of the city from destruction, but some places are in ruins. The streets and sidewalks are terrible. The sidewalks are no more than two feet wide from store front to the street. The curb is only a couple of inches high from the street bed and people are always getting splashed by mud. The streets are not wide enough to allow two cars to pass going in opposite directions and they are made of cobble stone or dirt. Everything is just bare, no porches, no window displays or anything that we are familiar with.*
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> *I guess you have heard stories how the people have public relief stations on the street that hide only a part of a person's body. The stories are very true and it is even worse because sometimes the side of a building serves the purpose. The French are used to this but it isn't for us. The best way that I can describe what I have seen is to say that they are about one hundred and fifty years behind the times. I am really disappointed in this country so far; maybe the next to come will be better.*

I suppose that I had expected Cherbourg to be something similar to glamorous Paris as presented in movies or magazines. It is obvious that I was disappointed. I remember that there were not many people shopping or walking on the streets. Everything was so dreary; there was no joy or brightness anywhere. I did go into one store to purchase some post cards. It was difficult because I could not speak French and the store attendant could not speak English. I did find two or three cards and when I paid for them I just held out a bunch of French coins that I had and the attendant took a few of them. I didn't know the value of the coins so I trusted the attendant and I am sure that I was not cheated. I was very glad to get back to our camp that afternoon.

Life at camp was becoming pretty routine. Mail and packages from home were being received almost daily and that really made a difference in our attitude. When I received mail from Mom and Pop, the distance between us seemed not to be so great. I received letters almost every mail call from friends and relatives and it amazed me that they would take the time to write to me. It was their way to support the war effort and they will never know how much it helped us. The letters that I received from Peg really helped my morale. I would read them over and over again because they made me feel so near to her. I became very cheerful after receiving one of her letters and my buddies would kid me about that.

Rumors began to spread that we were going to move again and as usual the rumors were right. We had no way of knowing that Division Headquarters had received orders to prepare to move to a new location. The Division History "*TIMBERWOLF TRACKS*" describes the pending move as follows.

> *The seventh day in October 1944 was the day that the Timberwolf Division became earmarked for combat. At 10:30 Division Headquarters received the following warning order from III Corps. "Be prepared to move the Division by rail and motor forward on or about 15 October. Immediately the warning order was dispatched to all units and the troops knew that combat was near. On 11 October the Commanding General III Corps communicated with Major General Terry Allen, informing him that the division would move on 15 and 16 October by rail and on 16 and 17 October by motor; La Haye Du Puits had been designated as the entraining point.*
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> *On 15 and 16 October, 6,523 Doughboys from the 413th, 414th, and 415th Infantry Regiments and from Division Special Troops boarded dilapidated 40 and 8 freight cars at La Haye Du Puits.*
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> *On 16 and 17 October the balance of the division moved by motor following the route—La Haye Du Puits, Carentan, Bayeux, Caen, Lisieux, Evereaux (first night bivouac), Rouen, Beauvais, Amiens, Cambrai (second night bivouac), all in France and then Mons, Charleroi, Brussels, and Vilvorde in Belgium. The division closed on its new bivouac area in the vicinity of Vilvorde and Mechelin on 20 October.*

On October 17th, I left Barneyville. In a way, I was sorry to leave. Duty here had not been difficult and the war seemed far away. Most of the men in my company had packed up and marched to La Haye Du Puit where they boarded trains that would take them to our new location. The cars of the train that they rode in were dilapidated freight cars and were known as forty-and-eights, a name given to them in WWI when they were used to transport our soldiers to the front in that war. The cars were named forty-and-eights during World War I because they could carry eight horses or forty men. There were no seats or other amenities in them. The men that had to ride in them had a rough trip. Sadly, the last thing that I saw as I left the camp was several French people digging through the garbage pit that our cooks had used and covered over with dirt when they closed the kitchen. This was another indication of the deprivation the war had caused these people.

Fortunately for me, I was assigned to make the trip riding in a jeep as part of a big convoy of two and a half ton trucks. Unfortunately, some of my buddies in my squad had to ride in the trucks. The convoy transported other men from our battalion as well as equipment and supplies. I got to ride in a jeep instead of the trucks because I was a machine gunner. There were quite a few jeeps in the convoy. They were disbursed throughout the convoy for protection and for defense against the possibility of attacking aircraft. My machine gun was mounted on a stand in front of the seat next to the driver. I made the whole trip sitting next to the driver; it was the best place to be and much better than being in the trucks.

We saw much destruction recently made. The people we passed seemed friendly. The groups of temporary crosses on the side of the road and in the fields caused the silent reflection in our minds of wondering if they were for the fallen enemy or for our boys. The possibility of death had not entered my thoughts yet and now I began to realize that the ground that we were traveling over had been fought over just a few weeks before and that the death and destruction that we were passing through was real.

The trip took three days. The convoy would stop every hour or so to allow us to relieve ourselves and to stretch and walk around. We ate C rations which were handed out to us when we stopped to eat. We heated them over fires that we made. At night, the convoy would stop and we would bivouac in a field. I don't remember if we put up our two man tents or not. The trip took us through many villages and several big cities, the most notable of them were Caen, in France, and Brussels, in Belgium. I will always remember the destruction that we saw in Caen.

Caen had been a primary objective of the British on D-Day. However, it had been a tough nut to crack and it took the British 6 weeks to drive the Germans from it. It had been bombed repeatedly from the air, shelled by artillery daily, overrun by tanks from both sides and fought for building by building until finally the Germans withdrew. The destruction that I saw was beyond belief. The buildings looked as though they had been lifted and then dropped from a great height smashing into just a pile of rubble. A path had been bulldozed through the streets that we traveled over. I could not conceive of any way that the destruction could ever be removed and the city rebuilt. (In the year of 2004, my wife Peg and I traveled through Caen and there was no sign of the devastation that I had seen in 1944. The city had been rebuilt much to my amazement.) Finally, in the early evening of the third day of our trip, we reached Vilvorde, Belgium, which none of us realized at the time was to be our final staging area before we went into combat.

Our bivouac area was a large, flat field covered with overgrown weeds and grass. In earlier days, it could have been a small airport. Bill and I, along with other men of "G" Company who had traveled in the truck convoy, pitched our two man tents and settled in for the night. I remember sitting around a fire with some of the guys, eating C rations and listening to a local man who could speak English tell us a little about the Germans who had been there a few weeks before.

The next day the rest of "G" Company men, who had traveled by train in the forty-and-eight cars, arrived at our bivouac area. It was good to see them and to hear of their experiences traveling by rail. We thought that they might have stopped in Paris but they reported that they did not see Paris even though the rail route passed close to it. It was while a group of us were discussing the experiences that we had had, while traveling by truck convoy or by the forty-and-eights, that I had my first direct contact with the war as it was happening. As we were sitting there, I saw a German Buzz Bomb (a large bomb with wings propelled by a jet engine) for the first time as it flew over our camp on its way to Brussels or Antwerp. It did not fly at a very high altitude and was plainly visible. Its pulse jet engine made a loud buzzing or popping sound. We were told and quickly learned that if we could hear the flying bomb, we were safe. If the engine sound stopped, it meant that the bomb was diving to its target and we should dive for cover. None fell close to us; however, several fell near enough so that we could hear the explosion when they hit the ground. Quite a few of them flew over our camp while we were there. Now I began to realize how close we were to the actual fighting.

On October 20, I wrote a letter to Mom and Pop telling them about the trip that I had just made. The following is excerpted from that letter.

> *A lot has happened to me since I last wrote to you. I am now stationed somewhere in Belgium. I wish I could tell you exactly where I am but that will have to wait, probably until after the war. In traveling to our new location, I saw much destruction caused by recent fighting. I saw towns destroyed by artillery and by bombing and also both. The bombings were by far the worst, at least the artillery left some walls standing. I saw many smashed German tanks and other vehicles and also some American tanks too. It is really a sad sight to see some people trying to rebuild their torn houses. Many just leave them and go somewhere else to start over. In most cases, that is what I would do.*
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> *The towns at night are all blacked out. No one goes on the streets and the only sign of life is the light that slips out through cracks in curtains or doors. Even with as much as the people of the USA have put into the war, they can't even begin to feel the war as it is felt and lived here.*
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> *Belgium is really different. It is a more industrialized nation. The people are so much cleaner and the buildings almost knock me over. They are made out of this expensive yellow brick with big sweeping windows and they are of the most modern design. They are really beautiful. The streets and highways are made out of cobble stone and concrete and they are very good. The people are very friendly and try to do everything for us. They are so clean looking; they even take their shoes off when they go indoors. We have to get our money changed again and I am going to try to go into town. The people speak French, German, Flemish, Dutch and English. The stores look very good but I don't know what we can buy. It is the old story here that the Germans took all of the food they could from the people and now the people have very little food. So far I like it very much and I am going to try to see as much of it as I can.*
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> *It really made me feel good when we went through some Belgium towns on the way to this place to see the American flag hanging from buildings along the way along with the Belgium flag and the British and French flags. They have President Roosevelt's picture all over too. Members of the underground walk the streets with rifles slung over their backs. They really have played a dangerous game here.*

On October 22, 1944 (Sunday) I wrote another letter home telling Mom and Pop about my experience of going into the nearby town that was within walking distance from our bivouac area. The town's name was Mechelin but I could not put that into my letter. This letter like the previous one gives a good account of what I saw and thought while it was fresh in my memory.

> *Yesterday I had about the best experience of my life. I got a pass to go to a town near where we are. Three of my buddies went with me to see what it was like.*
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> *It was early in the morning and everyone was cleaning their houses or stores. They were scrubbing everything, even the sidewalks, and some of the floors we could see in the houses looked clean enough to eat off of. Every person that we passed said hello and gave us a big smile that showed nice white teeth and that is unusual from what we have been used to. The little children ran up to us, grabbed our hands and walked with US. They are all so friendly and industrious.*
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> *We passed one home with a big black Nazi sign painted on it and the people told us that the people who had lived there had been German sympathizers and that they had been*

taken and hanged.

The first store that we went into was small but it had what we wanted; writing paper, ink, candy, pipes, cards and etc. We were doing our best trying to make the clerk understand us when an English lady came in and translated for us until we were finished. The prices were very reasonable and the thing that we liked is the way the people laughed and put up with us when we talked to them. It is surprising how many people know enough English to understand us.

We walked on into town and it was really swell. It was more like our towns with its five and tens and clothing stores, restaurants and even ice cream stores. As soon as we saw the ice cream, we bought it. It was the first that we have had in a long time. It did not compare with our ice cream and it wasn't very sweet but we ate it and enjoyed it. We went to see a big, old church but the doors were locked.

A policeman saw us looking at it and he said that he would try to find a key for us: After looking in quite a few houses, he told us that the church would open at two o'clock so we waited. It was a very beautiful church and inside the Priests or Bishops were chanting to each other. On another day I saw a church that had been built in the tenth century.

The only thing that we could not get was something to eat. These people only have a little food and all they live off of is fruit and vegetables. They are allowed an ounce and a half of meat and one ounce of fat a day. We did find a bakery and there we bought cookies and pies. The people inside understood German and Bill Hura can speak German so we did all right there. The cakes were not too sweet but they were good.

After eating, we had the big thrill of going to a movie. All of the pictures are American films and the actors speak English with French and Flemish written out at the bottom of the screen. It was a very old picture with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers but it was well worth seeing. I bought some Colgate toothpaste. All of the writing on the tube was foreign but it was Colgate.

We were talking with some sort of big shot of the town (he could speak English) and he told us a lot of interesting things. He gave us a souvenir of the underground. It was a piece of steel, like a long nail, that had been bent into the shape of a "Z" so that one point of the "Z" was at right angle to the other so that no matter how it landed when thrown, one point was always pointing up. The whole thing was covered with rubber so that when they threw it out in the road during the night it didn't make any noise. He said that when they heard a German car coming down the road at night they threw a handful of them on the road and they were very effective in causing a flat tire. The underground still walk the streets with their rifles. He said that the Germans took all of the food that they could find and sent it to Germany; that is why the locals have no food now.

These people are really glad to see us and it is a treat and a thrill to be received the way we were. I hope that I get the chance to go in to town again.

This letter dated October 22nd was the last that I wrote before our division went into combat. When I wrote this letter I had no idea of how soon we would be moving against the Germans in Holland.

HOLLAND, THE BEGINNING OF COMBAT

TIMBERWOLF TRACKS, the Division History, states on page 47 that "Our division had been attached to the Canadian First Army and was part of the British 1st Corps. Our short stay in the Vilvorde assembly area had been enjoyable. It was here that Final preparations for combat were made."

The Division History continues with the following, relating to our introduction to combat:

> *Major General Terry Allen, our division commander, informed his staff that 'our mission is to be prepared to relieve elements of the 49th infantry division (British) within the next few days'. —"Lieutenant General Guy G. Simonds, Commander of the First Canadian Army, pointed out that while allied troops held the city of Antwerp, the great port was not available for use because the Germans blocked the northern approaches. The mission of the First Canadian Army was to clear the northern approaches and to throw the Germans back north of the Maas Estuary". —"it was imperative that the Canadian First Army accomplish its mission in order that the largest port on the European continent be cleared for use as a supply base for all Allied Armies on the western front."—"Canadian troops were heavily engaged east of Antwerp.—The 104th Division would be used in relieving the 49th Infantry Division west of Wuestwezel, Belgium."—"The Timberwolf Division was soon to be launched into combat in one of the most vital operations of the war. (page 51)*
>
> *The front to be occupied by the division faced north to the Maas-Waai Estuary twenty two miles away, and in width extending approximately 8000 yards on each side of the main highway running northeast from Wuestwezel to Zundert and Breda (Holland). The land was flat with an imperceptible slope to the northwest. Under the sandy surface, impervious clay prevented standing water from draining and necessitated ditching not only of the roads but of the fields. Grain, sugar beets, turnips and potatoes were grown where the ground was not too marshy. Elsewhere was rough pasture and small but numerous planting of pine woods in various stages of growth. Vehicular traffic was road bound. The principal highways were of stone construction and were good. All others were narrow and incapable of two-way military traffic. The buildings and steeples of numerous villages provided the only observation. (pages 51-52)*

On the afternoon of October 24th, the 414th Regiment moved into the line. I remember walking in a route march column of twos up a dirt road through a lightly wooded area headed to relieve the British 147th Infantry Brigade. As we moved towards our area, we began to hear the explosion of artillery shells. On the other side of this dirt road walking in the opposite direction were the British troops we were relieving. They looked weary. As we passed each other, we wished each other good luck. It did not seem real to me that we were actually going into combat. I thought that this just can't be happening to me.

We came out of the wooded area, near Wuestwezel, Belgium to a flat field that had no cover. There were some shallow fox holes previously occupied by the British troops that we were relieving and we occupied them. All was quiet except for an occasional rifle shot and exploding artillery shells. We soon learned which were ours or the Germans.

It was late afternoon and I remember looking across the flat field to the woods in the distance and there in the middle of the field was a farmer with his team of oxen plowing the field. He was between us and where we thought the Germans were and paid no attention to what was going on around him. It amazed me and seemed incongruous.

A few German artillery shells came overhead and exploded quite a distance from us. We all dove for our foxholes and felt foolish after seeing how far away they had landed. It didn't take us long to learn when or when not to hit the ground when we came under fire. We did assume the infantryman crouch (my term) that day as a normal reflex to the unknown and I still had it after being discharged from the army after the war was over. The crouch made me think that I presented a smaller target to the enemy and put me in the position to be able to hit the ground instantly when we came under fire.

The "front" that we occupied had no definition. There were no trenches, barbed wire, or shell hole pocketed earth in front of us. The German line was nowhere to be seen. We didn't know where the Germans were. It was nothing like the pictures of the World War I battlefields that we all knew (Thank God that it wasn't) and it was nothing like I had envisioned it would be. I did not realize it at the time but I had passed over an invisible line that separated the rational world from the irrational.

That first night was uneventful. Our officers told us to stay in our foxholes and to remain alert. There were two men in each foxhole. The difficulty was to stay awake. My buddy, Bill Hura, and I shared the same foxhole (digging the first of many) and we decided to take shifts at staying awake. Each shift would be for two hours. One of us would sleep in the foxhole while the other stayed awake and on guard. Soon we learned that it was almost impossible to stay awake for fifteen minutes when a person is staring into the darkness. There is no darkness that compares to the night when the only light is the moon light, if the night sky is clear, or the light from a burning building in the distance.

Bill and I soon changed our schedule to one hour sleep and one hour awake. Even with this schedule there were many times when we both slept at the same time. Each foxhole was occupied in the same manner so theoretically there were always some of us awake and on guard.

The officers told us to stay in our foxholes to prevent us from being shot by our own troops. Everyone was on edge the first night. We did not know where the enemy was and any movement probably would be fired at. When staring into the darkness, the mind plays tricks on a person. There were many times when I imagined seeing forms moving in front of my foxhole. When that occurred, we were supposed to softly call out "who goes there?" and ask for the password. If the proper password was given, all was well but if there was no response we were to defend ourselves. In many instances, because of the nebulous shadows, the password was not asked for; it was hoped that the form would go away. There was always the fear that the request for the password would be answered by the enemy with rifle fire or by a potato masher, the name for a German hand grenade. There was also fear that the shadow fired at might be one of our own men. During the next few nights, there were instances when shots were fired at shadows, real or imagined. On several occasions, our own men were hit.

Somehow we got through the night. I don't remember any casualties in our company during the first night. I thanked the Lord when the first light of the dawn could be detected on the horizon. Somehow the daylight eased the fear I felt when darkness came. This is a little ironic because our training had made us specialists in making night attacks. It was now Wednesday, October 25th, our second day in combat.

With the dawn came orders for "G" company, my company, to get ready to move out. We ate our K rations for breakfast and moved back to an assembly area where we were told to start moving across a field. "G" company was to be the point of our first advance against the enemy; the rest of the 2nd battalion would follow. We were to proceed until we reached an objective that had been assigned to us by higher headquarters. Our officers knew what the objective was, but the rest of us had not been informed. When we reached this objective, the rest of the battalion would move up to us.

We started across the field spread out as we had been trained to do. We came to a wire fence that separated one farm field from another and it presented us with our first problem, a struggle of doing the right thing. We still could not understand that we were on the battlefield and that the rules of the

peacetime world did not apply. The problem was deciding how to get over the fence. Should we climb over it, crawl under it or cut it down. It seemed wrong to cut it down because some farmer had constructed it. After some hesitation, it was cut down. Our innocence was beginning to break down.

As we moved forward, I began to hear snapping sounds in the air. I quickly realized that the sounds were caused by bullets passing nearby. I had heard the same sounds back in training when we had to crawl under machine gun fire to get us used to the sound of live bullets. I now hit the ground and began to crawl. Even at that time, the full realization that this was for real and that the unseen enemy was shooting at me did not penetrate my thinking. I tried to crawl in such a way as not to get my clothes dirty. I clearly remember sort of crawling on my hands and knees and going around piles of cow manure so as not to get it on my clothes. As we continued to advance across the field, the snapping sounds increased and now I realized that I was in danger so I got down on my belly and really started to crawl through the cow manure and all. A lesson I learned when crawling was that my cartridge belt would twist bringing my 45 pistol, which hung in its holster on my belt, under my stomach making it even harder to crawl.

As I crawled, I also had to move my machine gun without getting up and this proved to be difficult. Finally in desperation, I decided to move forward in short running dashes as we had been trained to do and this proved to be much more effective.

Finally we reached a raised road, which might have been our first objective, and stopped at the embankment on the side of the road and waited for instructions as to how to proceed. I still had not seen any Germans. To my right about 50 yards away was a house and we thought that enemy fire was coming from it. Some men from another platoon went up to the house and supposedly cleared it. To my left about 75 yards away was another building and I later learned that Lt. Meyer and some of his platoon were checking it out. Instinctively, we began to dig into the embankment for protection. We suspected that the enemy was in the wooded field on the other side of the road.

It was now late afternoon and Ed Planinc from our platoon was sent back to a wooded area behind us to deliver a message. He passed me going to my right towards the house. He wanted to go that way because there was a row of small trees and weeds leading back to the rest of the company and it provided some cover for Ed. As he passed us, we wished him luck. He was killed by a sniper who was in the house that we thought had been cleared. Ed Planinc was our first casualty. Later when the rest of the company moved up to us, the house was cleared and this time the men went inside and checked it out room by room. No enemy was found. On our left, Lt. Meyer, who had been pinned down in the other house, made it safely back to our side of the road. Our mortar section fired several mortar rounds near the house. As dusk fell, we were told to dig in for the night.

At about ten o'clock, word was received that we were going to move out. We were told that there were no enemy in front of us. We formed up in a column of twos by platoon with the first platoon in the lead and our company commander, Lt. Sommerville, up front. We headed to our left, crossed the road near the building that Lt. Meyer had been in earlier and proceeded to almost march across the field in front of us. It was pitch black and we were pretty close together so as to keep contact with one another. Suddenly German machine guns opened fire in front of us and the sky was filled with flares. We had walked right up to a hidden German bunker and at least two German machine guns were firing at us. The men in front were no more than 20 yards from the bunker when the firing started. We immediately hit the ground. The bullets were snapping over us (a sound very much like a cap pistol being fired) and some were coming so close that they made a hissing sound as they passed by missing us by inches (the most accurate way for me to describe this fearful sound is by comparing it to the sound made by a red hot wire being plunged into cold water).

The German flares hung in the air over us and illuminated the area almost as bright as sunlight would have. The flares, when fired into the air, reached a height of several hundred feet and floated in the air on a small parachute. They seemed to stay in the air forever. They slowly floated to the ground where many of them continued to burn until they went out. We had been exposed to flares during our training and had been instructed to become motionless at the instant a flare went off. Even though the flare gives off great light, it is hard to distinguish a man from his surroundings when illuminated by the light if he is motionless.

The firing continued and I tried to press myself into the earth and to crawl into my helmet. Several of the flares landed on the ground so close to me that I wanted to reach out to push them away but did not because of the fear that any motion would be picked up by the Germans and I would be shot. We all lay there not knowing what to do and hoping that our officers or non-coms would tell us. No one was thinking clearly at this time; it was the first time that we had come under heavy enemy fire in the open.

Lucky for us, the fourth platoon, my platoon, had been in the rear of the company column so we were 30 to 40 yards from the German bunker. I remember thinking that I should load my machine gun and start firing at the bunker. I couldn't see the bunker but had a general idea where it was, but firing at it was impossible because of all the men lying on the ground between me and the bunker. In addition, I did not have a belt of ammunition for the gun nor did I know where Bill, my assistant gunner, or the ammo carriers were. They were trying to be invisible as was I. There were no sounds coming from any of our men. I lay there praying to God, afraid to move and not knowing what to do. I guess I fell asleep, for how long I do not know, but some of the others who also fell asleep thought it was for about a half hour.

Suddenly I woke up. It was as though all of the men in front of me had jumped up at the same time and begun running to the rear away from the machine gun fire. Amazingly, the firing stopped. The Germans must have thought that we were charging them and they did not know what to do. I picked up my machine gun, got up, and joined the stampede to the rear. I came to a ditch, and not being able to see it in the dark, fell into it. There was water, waist deep, in the ditch but I did not care. The ditch offered protection. The Germans began to fire again. I still had my machine gun and once again thought of firing at the bunker. However, now we were so scattered that I did not know where anyone was and I still didn't have any ammunition for the gun.

Slowly I moved down the ditch with others, working our way further away from the bunker. Finally we were out of the line of fire and climbed out of the ditch into a field where some of us proceeded to dig foxholes in some sort of a defensive position. It was still pitch black so we did not know how many of us there were or where the others were. We spent the rest of the night peering into the darkness, not knowing what to expect. The Germans did not attack us and in fact they moved out of the bunker and withdrew to their rear.

The next morning, October 26th, men from our company began to assemble around us. It took most of the morning to get organized again. Our second night had been a disaster for us. "G" company had taken many casualties. Lt. Robert G. Sommerville, our company commander, and Lt. Balk had been killed. Several others had been killed or wounded. Some had been taken prisoner. We now knew the horror of war and we were changed forever by that night. Fear now became a part of my life whenever I was in combat.

One of the men killed was Edmund Wielgosh. He was in the third platoon and had bunked across from me when we were in Camp Carson. Ed was married and while at Carson he would take K. P. (kitchen police) for us if we paid him five dollars. He wanted the money for his wife. He told us that he would not make it back from the war and he wanted to give his wife as much money as he could. He did K.P. for me several times. He was one of the two men that I knew that had a premonition of being killed in battle and was.

At the division's forty-ninth reunion in 1994, I met George F. Kirkpatrick, assistant B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) man, who had been in the second platoon and was up front on that night. When we walked into the German bunker he had hit the ground like the rest of us. While lying there, the German machine gun fire hit both of his legs. When we broke for the rear, he could not move and was left lying on the field. Sometime before dawn, the Germans came out and took him prisoner. They patched him up and sent him to their rear where his wounds were cared for and eventually he was sent to a prisoner of war camp. He remained a prisoner until the end of the war.

By the afternoon of the 26th our scattered company had come together and we were really happy to see one another again. Up to this time we did not know who had escaped injury or been taken prisoner. Later in the afternoon we received word to get ready to move out. Once again we put on our field packs and waited for orders.

"G" Company moved out in a column of twos spread out in a loose formation that allowed a lot of space between men. We came to a road and proceeded down it. I am quite sure we passed the German bunker, now deserted, that we could not overcome on the previous night. We came to a farm house on the left side of the road. Remembering that Ed Planinc had been killed on the previous day by a German sniper firing from a farm house that had not been properly cleared, some of the men from one of the platoons scouted the house and the barn in the back. There were a couple of cows near the barn. I don't like to admit it, but after only two days of combat we were losing our sense of right and wrong and were rapidly succumbing to the brutalities of war. We were scared, mad, and wanted to get even for the losses of the previous night. The easiest way of making sure that there were no Germans in the farm house was to burn it down, which is what was done.

Now we proceeded down the dirt road until it was almost dark. I don't know how many miles we walked. We were told to get off the road and move into a field and dig in. Our squad leader told us where to place our machine gun, so Bill and I dug our foxhole. The field had been planted in sugar beets and since we had not eaten anything except C rations for two days, we experimented by eating raw sugar beets. They were pretty good.

During the night, Bill and I took our hour shifts of being on guard while the other slept. There was no light, we made as little noise as possible and smokers lit their cigarettes cupped in their hand in such a way that no light was visible. This became a great skill. The consequences of a lighted cigarette seen by the enemy could cost the smoker his life and the lives of those who were around him.

Sometime before dawn, a Sergeant wanted to make sure that we were awake so he fired off several shots. He is lucky that he was not shot on the spot. Our previous night experience had made us very jumpy. We were scared and still not used to combat and were ready to shoot at anything. It was a stupid thing to do and he did not win much respect that night. Even after fifty years, many of us still talk about that incident when we get together.

The next morning, October 27th, we continued down the road and could hear firing in front of us. We came to a small group of houses, in a small village, I think, and German artillery shells started landing near us. In front of us and across a field we could see some of our battalion's men attacking something. We couldn't see what it was, but men were running and falling to the ground, getting up and charging again. Artillery shells were landing near us. This was the first time that we had come under heavy artillery fire and it really made me press against the ground. We could hear the shells coming through the air. When they hit the ground there was a very loud explosion and the air was instantly filled with shrapnel that sounded like a million bees buzzing as the small pieces spun in the air. The buzzing sound diminished as the pieces fell to the ground. The larger pieces did not create a buzzing sound but a deeper fluttering noise. These pieces were the last to fall to the ground making a thudding sound. When the buzzing stopped and there were no more thudding noises we knew that it was safe to

get up and move on. As this barrage continued, I remember crawling into a large drainage pipe that passed under the road that we had been on in order to get protection from the shelling.

There was a dog in the yard of a house near us. It was tied to a long leash and kept barking at us. It seemed that every time it barked German shells came in. Self-preservation is a very powerful emotion. We were all hugging the ground and pointing to the dog. We yelled to our platoon leader and pleaded with him to shoot the dog. He hesitated, did not want to do it, but finally did. It may have only been a coincidence, but soon after that the shelling of our position stopped.

We moved out again down the road to the place that we had watched being attacked. We now saw that the attack had been to cross a stream to get to a road on the other side. The attack had been successful and we were able to cross the stream over a bridge. The men who had been in the attack were nowhere to be seen except for those who had been left behind, dead beside the road. We passed them in silence and thanked God that we were not among them.

We continued advancing down the road as night came on. I remember talking to Wally Harvey, the gunner on the first squad machine gun, as we walked. Wally said that he had the feeling that he would not make it to the end of the war. He was the second man that I knew that had the premonition that he would not survive the war. Wally was a strapping guy from the state of Washington. He had the appearance of a rugged cowboy, as I pictured them. He was married and his wife had just had their first child. Wally was my age and was a great guy. He was killed a few days after our talk.

As darkness came on, October 27th, it started to rain. We continued to hike down the road until finally we were told to go off the road into a field and dig in. The night was black, it was raining hard and it was cold. We were all soaked to the skin by now and miserable. Shortly after we stopped, a big surprise occurred. For the first time since we had started combat three days before, our cooks brought a hot meal up to us. They set up on the road and we all took out our mess kits and canteen cups and went through the chow line in the rain. We were happy to see the cooks and they were happy to see us. The food was piled into our mess kits and hot coffee was poured into the cup. We ate sitting on the ground, in the downpour, miserable but happy to have a hot meal.

I always felt safer when the cooks brought us food because they came up from the rear and when they reached us I felt as though we were in a fairly safe position. This was not always the case because our cooks tried to bring food to us if it was at all possible. Many times they came under fire with the rest of us.

After eating, we continued down the road not knowing where we were or where we were going. The only thing that we knew was that we were out in what appeared to be a wilderness. There were no villages or towns and definitely no cities that we could see. Occasionally, off in the distance, we could see a burning building or a couple of buildings on fire. This told us that our artillery had been at work. We continued to move down the road and across fields for the next several days pushing the Germans before us. I have learned by referring to the division history that the area we were in was near the cities of Zundert, and Rijsbergen, which was the objective of one of our attacks near Breda; however, my platoon never went into Breda.

It was during our advance, probably during the night of October 28th, that our company had a very eerie experience. Our advance had taken us to the outskirts of a village and as we proceeded to move through the village, orders came that we should stop and dig in. It was very dark and I could not see much so I picked a spot, but before I started to dig I began to notice what appeared to be monuments all around me. Bill noticed the same thing as did others around us. It turned out that we were in a cemetery and I was about to start digging my foxhole next to a monument. Needless to say, I didn't dig a foxhole but instead scratched out a very shallow depression in the ground. I felt as though I was desecrating someone's grave and I was. Talk about a weird feeling, it was scary enough advancing against the

Germans during the night, but this topped that. Orders soon came to us to prepare to move out; a mistake had been made by someone reading a map and we were not where we were supposed to be. We were very happy to move out of there and let the ghosts go back to sleep.

On October 29th, we moved out again and advanced toward a waterway which was the Vaart Canal. "G" Company advanced over wet muddy fields towards the canal that we could see in the distance. When we were about 1000 yards from the canal, we were told to stop and wait where we were and that we would be attacking across the canal, which was fairly wide at this point, and that we would begin the attack as soon as boats were brought up to carry us across the canal. The plan was that we would get into the boats and row across the canal while under fire by the Germans on the other side. This would be our first river crossing and none of us were too happy about the plan.

While we waited, we milled around and quietly discussed what was about to happen. Bill Hura and I were standing together talking about the coming attack. It was a clear sunny afternoon and suddenly Bill and I saw a glint of light pass between us. Shortly thereafter we heard a shot and immediately dove to the ground realizing at once that a German on the other side of the canal had taken a shot at us and the bullet had passed between us, waist high, missing us by just a few inches. The flash of light that we had seen was the sunlight reflecting off of the bullet as it passed between us. As a result of this near miss, we learned very quickly that it is a deadly mistake to stand in the open and mill around no matter how far away you think the enemy is. From this time on, whenever I stopped, even though it was only for a very brief time, I immediately dug a fox hole. Needless to say, I dug an enormous number of fox holes thereafter.

Fortunately for us, we never did make the assault across the Vaart canal. I don't know if it was because the boats never arrived or because our orders were changed. We were now directed to move out again and head towards the Mark River. We did cross the Vaart canal further down across a bridge that had been captured by one of the other battalions of our division. We were now moving north again and shortly after daylight on October 30th we seized a new objective which was a village named Etten. We dug foxholes in the railroad embankment on the outskirts of the village. We must have stayed in this area through October 31st and probably moved out on the 31st and continued our advance on through November 1st in order to reach our position on the Mark River. In a letter I wrote home on November 2nd, I indicated that I had received mail on November 1st, which must have been on the day that we reached the Mark River.

On November 2nd, we were told to dig in new positions in preparation for the coming attack to cross the river. Our position was on a huge dike that rose above the flat land by maybe ten or twelve feet. This dike at the top was approximately twenty feet wide, wide enough to serve as a road for horse and wagons used by the local people. The far side of the dike sloped down to the flat land leading to the Mark River. The river was fairly wide at this point, probably 100 yards or more. Our job was to dig our foxholes on the side of the dike away from the river near the top so that we could fire over the dike into the village of Standaarbuiten located directly in front of us on the other side of the river. That was to be the focal point of the attack to be made by a company in the 415th Regiment. Our assignment was to fire into the village, supporting the attacking company on our left as they attempted to cross the river without crossing the river ourselves. The attack was to be made the next day, November 3rd.

I dug my foxhole and sighted my gun on the village across the river. It was now in the afternoon and there was nothing more to do, so I decided to write letters to Mom and Pop and to Peg before it got dark. Settled in a cramped position in the bottom of the foxhole, I reached into my left hand field jacket pocket where I kept a few sheets of writing paper and a pen. I also had a bible in the pocket, as well as a hand grenade. In order to get the paper out, I had to remove the bible and the hand grenade first which I did. I immediately saw that the pin that holds the handle to the body of the grenade was almost completely out of the handle. Shocked and in a near panic I held the handle against the grenade body, pushed the pin back into the hole securing it to the body and bent it so that it would not slide out of the handle without a strong pull by me when I wanted to use it. The pin securing the handle to the grenade

is really a carter pin with a ring in one end which is pulled to remove the pin from the grenade before the grenade is thrown. When the grenade is thrown, the handle flies away thus arming the grenade which explodes three to five seconds later. I now sat in the bottom of my foxhole, slightly dazed, realizing that one more dive to the ground or any other form of jar to the pocket would have caused the pin to fall out and the hand grenade would have exploded in my pocket. To this day, I thank God that to get the writing paper I had to remove the bible and the grenade first. I feel that the bible saved my life that day. I pulled myself together and wrote two letters, one to Mom and Pop and one to Peg both dated Nov. 2nd. I still have the letters that were saved after they had been received. This all happened one day before my 20th birthday.

The next day, Nov. 3rd, was my birthday. I turned 20 and the experiences of that day were far different than the usual birthday celebration. I will remember the events of that day forever.

The attack on the village across the river by the 415th Regiment on our left had started late on the night of Nov. 2nd and continued throughout the day of Nov. 3rd. My battalion's diversionary fire began on the afternoon of Nov. 3rd. Our fire was an effort to deceive the Germans across the river into thinking that we were going to cross the Mark River at that point so that they would bring their forces to our front and pull them away from the attack being made on our left. I didn't know it at the time but have since learned by reading our division history that the name of the village across from us was Standaarbuiten.

While we were firing into the village, two British Spitfire fighter planes flew at a low altitude over the village as though they were looking it over. They circled around the village and approached again going into a shallow dive and began strafing the village. They pulled up and came around again on the same path as the first time and again went into the shallow dive to begin their strafing run. The planes couldn't have been more than 500 feet above the roof tops when suddenly we could see one of the pilots struggling to climb out of his plane. We could not see whether or not the plane had been hit by enemy fire but obviously it had been. The pilot succeeded in bailing out of his plane and as he fell his chute started to open but he was so close to the ground that it never fully opened and he plunged into the village.

The second plane flew on around and passed over us as though it was leaving the action. We were more or less standing in our foxholes watching the planes and as the pilot passed over we all waved to him and he waggled his wings acknowledging our friendly gesture. He continued on but circled around again and passed over the village but this time when he went into his shallow strafing dive he wasn't aiming at the village but at us. He passed over us and strafed behind us hitting a cannon company antitank gun and crew just a few hundred yards from where I was standing in my foxhole and then he flew off. If he would have come around over us again we would have made every effort to shoot him down. We will never know why he came around and strafed our unit. The battlefield is a very confusing place. The pilot might have become disoriented and thought that the antitank gun was a German gun firing at us. We will never know, but his mistake cost us dearly.

We continued to fire into the village for quite some time. I directed my fire towards the area of the village that the planes had been strafing. I don't know if we ever received return fire from the enemy. If we did it was not artillery or mortar fire but could have been small arms fire. In the heat of the moment, I wasn't too aware of what was going on from the other side of the river towards us. As the evening came on, we were told to cease fire and to prepare to move off the dike.

It was now dark. We moved off the dike and proceeded to move away from the dike across the fields not knowing where we were going. Finally we were told to stop and to dig in, which meant to dig more fox holes which we proceeded to do. Things settled down pretty much and Bill and I started taking our turns on guard in our fox hole, one sleeping and the other trying to stay awake.

It was my turn to be awake and on guard. It was so dark that I could not see 10 feet in front of me and it was very quiet as was customary when we dug in at night. Sometime later I heard a soft sound or rustling noise coming towards us from the field we were in. I couldn't see a thing. The sounds got a little louder as though someone was moving very quietly in front of us. Our company was spread out covering a pretty big area, but it was so dark that I could not see the guys in the fox hole nearest to me. I quietly put a round in the chamber of my machine gun thinking that maybe a German patrol was coming towards us or Germans were walking towards us not knowing we were there. Then I thought that if they were, some of the other guys in the company would also hear them, but nobody was saying anything so I didn't fire. I waited and waited and the sounds got louder and very distinctive as though people were walking but I couldn't see anything in front of me. As the sounds got louder, I thought to myself that it can't be the enemy because if it were, they were in the company area now and no one was saying or doing anything. Suddenly, when the sounds were almost on top of me, I could begin to make out the dim shapes of these things coming towards me. As they got right on top of me, I could see about a half a dozen horses that were wandering through our company position looking for new grazing fields or something.

The Germans used many, many horses to pull their vehicles and artillery pieces and also the Dutch farmers had horses so they might have been horses from the Germans or from the Dutch farmers. The horses walked through our company area and kept on going. Needless to say, for the time that this incident was taking place, my heart was in my mouth, but it turned out well. I was pleased by my reaction that night and learned that even in wartime under these stressful situations I could reason things out and not panic. I was very, very pleased that I didn't fully arm my machine gun and start firing in the direction that the sounds were coming from. One of the great fears that an infantryman has is that of shooting a buddy. It was now November 4th. I had celebrated my birthday in quite an unusual manner.

Once again we were told to move out. The attack by the 415th Regiment the previous day had been successful and they had crossed the Mark River and had captured the village of Standaarbuiten. We now crossed the Mark River on a bridge that had been constructed during the attack and proceeded through the village and continued to go north. We did not know what our next objective was to be at the time and it turned out that we were to continue north to the Maas River and assault the town of Moerdijk.

Moerdijk was four or five miles from where we were. We continued to advance across the fields, marsh lands and sometimes a road, mostly during the night, pushing the enemy before us. Bill and I dug many foxholes during this time. Most of the foxholes were very shallow because they would fill up with water if we dug too deep. We didn't know at the time that the Germans were falling back towards the village of Moerdijk to cross the Mass River there. Since that time, I have read in our Division History, *TIMBERWOLF TRACKS*, that there was a bridge at Moerdijk that the Germans were trying to reach to cross the river.

For the next several days we continued to fight our way across the fields and finally got to the outskirts of the village of Moerdijk. As we approached the village, our officers told us that the Germans had crossed the canal. From where we were, which was on the side of a dike, we could see a very large building on the far side of the canal. It was three of four stories high and could have been a hotel or a factory. The side of the building facing the canal was filled with windows. We were told that we would have to cross the road at the top of the dike and run down the other side in order to reach the positions assigned to us and that we would be under fire as we crossed the top of the dike. We were to cross the dike, one at a time, at the signal of an officer on the other side. The officer would call out "it's your turn" and that guy would dash across and so forth. It came to be my turn and I grit my teeth, overcame my fear, and ran as fast as I could across the dike and tumbled down the other side. I had made it.

We all got across safely and moved down close to the canal. The dike that we had crossed extended

on our left to the canal. In front of us now were fields of high brush, weeds, and vine entanglements leading to the canal edge. We could see the canal and in front of the canal was a high wall, but I could not tell which side of the canal it was on. It was only a few hundred yards away.

We were told to dig in and that one of our platoons on our left was attacking towards the wall and that we were to give them supporting fire. Wally Harvey had set up his machine gun to my right and we opened fire. I had no obvious target and was firing into the brush in front of me. Suddenly I realized that I was shooting into the brush and I didn't even know where our men were. I stopped firing, looked around and thought that if I were a German I would be in the big building on the other side of the canal shooting down from those windows. So I trained my machine gun on the windows in the big building and traversed back and forth shooting out the windows. I didn't know if there were any Germans in there or not but it seemed to be the safest thing to do without the danger of hitting my own men and at least, if there were, it would make them keep their heads down and stop them from firing on our attacking men.

Looking to my right, the road in front of us went to the canal and about 400 to 500 yards down that road there was a small building, resembling a customs house at a road crossing requiring a check of credentials, and I thought that if there was someone in that building they could start shooting up our flank so I zeroed my gun in on the building and started firing. I could see that I was hitting it and after a few bursts two Germans came out with their hands held over their head. I saw this and several other fellows in their foxholes on my right saw it and we started to wave and yell at these guys signaling for them to come towards us. They didn't move and just stood there and we were waving like idiots for them to come towards us. We were still thinking, like we did when we were kids, that they had given up and should come to us. Suddenly, they dashed off the road towards some brush to their right. I fired a long burst into the brush but I doubt very much if I hit anything. I think they had been talking to each other while we were shouting for them to come to us and said to each other "let's make a dash to that brush and get out of here" which is what they did.

Shortly after that, we came under an intense mortar barrage; mortar shells were landing all around us. We were in foxholes and were scrunching down into them as best that we could to keep from being hit by the shrapnel from the mortar shells. During the barrage, Johnny Martin, the assistant gunner of Wally Harvey's machine gun came crawling towards our foxhole exclaiming that machine gun number one was out of action and that Wally had been killed. In a machine gun section, there are two machine guns, gun #1 and gun #2. Wally was the gunner and Johnny the assistant gunner of gun #1 and I was the gunner and Bill Hura the assistant gunner of gun# 2. Johnny, terrified, crawled to us and kept saying that Wally had been killed. Bill and I yelled for Johnny to get in our foxhole with us and he packed himself into the hole as best as he could to get away from the mortar shrapnel falling all around us. We stayed that way for quite some time and finally the barrage stopped and we told Johnny to crawl on to some other foxhole where there was more room because we couldn't do anything packed into the foxhole like we were and he did. Wally Harvey had been hit in the forehead, probably by a German sniper, and I often thought maybe when we were waving our hands like idiots at the two men 400 to 500 yards from us, to come to us and surrender as they had indicated they wanted to do, that other Germans had watched us and noted where we were and selected Wally as a target to be picked off at a later time. It could have been any of us. We gave our position away like untrained, inexperienced veterans even after our week in combat. We still were not ruthless enough and still carried with us that which had been instilled in us as children, that fair play was to be honored at all times. We were slow to learn, but learn we did, that this was not a game and fair play was no longer respected.

Nighttime came, all was quiet, and we were in our foxholes trying to keep warm. Suddenly, we heard noises and voices above us and these guys came up with flashlights shining them into our foxholes. We yelled for them to turn off the ##@@# flashlights because the Germans were out there a couple hundred yards and that they were going to get us all killed. They did and it turned out that they were British soldiers who were relieving us right then in the middle of the night and that we were to

turn our positions over to them and start walking back the way we had come into our positions. We did. We couldn't believe that we were going to leave that scene of action. We started walking and slowly, "G" Company, what was left of it, began to form up and move down a road; we didn't know where we were or where we were going. Someone was leading us. We got farther and farther away from where the fighting was still going on and we couldn't believe it. The sounds got more distant with every step we took away from there. After a while, we began to believe that we were actually going to leave the field and that we were going to be safe.

One of the first things that the British did, which we did not do, was to call in artillery on the large building that had been in our front and set it on fire. The last picture I have in my mind of that night, after walking a few miles away, is the sight of that building burning and lighting the sky.

We continued on down the road for many miles, and finally came to a farm. It was still night time, and our officers came up and told us to go into the farm yard and find a place to sleep, that we were to be there for the rest of the night and that in the morning our cooks were going to bring some hot food up to us. So Bill and I and some of the other guys climbed up into the loft in a barn and slept up there in the straw. It was the first sleep, without fear and inside a building that we had had since starting combat on October 25th. It was now Nov. 7th. We slept all night in the straw. The next morning we climbed down from the loft and went into the barnyard and there our cooks had set up a chow line for the hot food they had brought up for us. We ate hot food for the first time since the night of October 27th that I previously described, when we ate sitting in the rain on the side of the road in the darkness of the night 10 days before.

Shortly after we finished eating, trucks arrived and we were loaded in 2½ ton trucks and driven out of Holland down to Aachen, Germany. Our adventures in Holland were over. We had left a lot of our guys there. We were no longer inexperienced infantrymen. We were dirty, unshaven, hardened and changed forever. Now as we dismounted from the trucks and walked around, I was able to see and walk among the Dragon Teeth in the Siegfried Line, that just a few months before, I had read about back home. Dragon Teeth are tapered four sided concrete forms put into the ground in rows to form anti-tank barriers. These blocks formed part of the German defense system that passed through Aachen. We then were formed up and proceeded to advance into Aachen, most of which had been overrun by the U.S. 1st Infantry Division a few days before we got there. We did not know where we were going or what we were going to do, but we were glad to be out of Holland. We did not realize that the toughest combat was still ahead of us.[2]

[2] A few years ago, while attending our division annual reunion, I learned that the platoon attacking Moerdijk as I described above, was our second platoon and they had suffered many casualties before the attack was called off and the platoon withdrew back to the protection of the dike. Many of the wounded could not get back and were still lying in the field in front of the canal. John Light, sergeant in the first platoon, with several others, volunteered to go out and bring the wounded back. John and his buddy made several trips, while under heavy German machine gun fire, and rescued several of the wounded men. For this brave and heroic action, John was awarded the Silver Star Medal, a very high honor. John, now a good friend of mine, recounts his WWII experiences in his book, AN INFANTRYMAN REMEMBERS WORLD WAR II. In this book, John describes the incident above on pages 70-72.