

PFC Edward L. Christianson

106th Infantry Division
331st Medical Battalion Co 'C'

My Two Years, Six Months and Twenty-Eight Days in World War II



My entry into the service of my country during World War 2 began quite abruptly in January 1943. In fact, it all started only a few days after I had reached my 19th birthday with the arrival of that expected "Greetings" from the Draft Board. I reported for a preliminary physical in Washington, D.C. as I was working for the federal government at the time. I requested to be drafted from my hometown of Green Bay, Wisconsin with the slim chance of serving along with friends and relatives. I requested leave from my job with the National Bureau of Standards and went home to await my call.

I was drafted on April 17, 1943 and was inducted into the Army one week later at Ft Sheridan, IL. Following more medical exams and aptitude tests I was sent to Camp Barkeley, TX near Abilene, in west Texas for basic training as a Medical Aide Man. My training consisted mostly of first aide treatment of simple battlefield injuries. For instance, I became able to treat and splint broken arms and legs, dress wounds using various types of bandages, etc. and how to move and rescue an injured person under simulated field conditions, sometimes one-on-one, others as a litter carrying team. Later on into the 9 weeks program I learned how to give shots, administer blood plasma and to recognize various side effects of a wounded person. In addition to medic training there were those daily exercise programs, close order drills, marches, guard duty, KP duty, all that neat Army stuff designed to keep the 'troops' busy! I must admit that at the end of those 9 weeks I was in

pretty good

physical condition. The final test of that Basic Training was to complete a 30-mile hike with full pack under the hot dry summer heat of Texas.

After Basic I applied for, and was accepted into the Army Specialized Training Program, a.k.a. ASTP. I spent most of the summer of '43 being shipped to several different engineering schools around the mid west until the Army finally found a school ready to begin a new class of studies for about 100 GIs. I ended up at St Boneventure College in Olean, NY. Olean is in the southwest corner of the state, south of Buffalo and nearly on the border with Pennsylvania. It's a beautiful place. It is peaceful, quiet, great towns- people, and Catholic nuns who were excellent cooks. We had it made. However, there was a war going on and some of us wanted to be part of it. So at the end of the first semester in January '44 I, along with seven others, requested a transfer to the Army Air Corp. We wanted to become flyboys. We took the standard tests and were sent to someplace in NC to begin ground training while awaiting a flight school. Lo and behold, as fate would have it, I ended up at [Freeman Field, Seymour, IN.](#)

In the spring of 1944 the Army decided to abolish the ASTP and Air Cadet programs and assign the men in those programs to other units as needed. (Author's Note: The above series of events is not unique to me as many men of the 106th Inf Div can attest.)

The 106th Infantry Division, a newly formed division, had recently completed the winter maneuvers in Tennessee and had moved to [Camp Atterbury, IN](#) in order to finalize their training in preparation for eventual overseas deployment. In the early spring of '44 I was assigned to the [106th 422nd Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company.](#) As I recall, such a unit operated as a 'mini-engineer' outfit in support of the Infantry. I had no specific training in this type of duty so my 'basic training' began anew. I did know how to drive a car so my first assignment was to the motor pool to learn how to drive a truck. Most of that spring and summer was spent in the field learning to use explosives in

demolition work, making small bridges to cross-streams, or fixing roads. There was also plenty of practice on the firing range; I qualified with the rifle, carbine and pistol. Our unit also had an artillery piece, 37mm I think, but I don't recall ever using it even though it was attached to the 1 1/2 ton truck, which I drove.



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When not in the field there was ample time for weekend leave and short furloughs. I remember that I was home on leave on 6 June 1944. I played tennis with a high school friend who was a Marine pilot also on leave on D-Day. We first heard of the invasion when we stopped off for a cold beer after that rugged tennis match! It was while on this leave that I bought an engagement ring hoping to be able to use it before leaving the states. Much to my delight, I did get a 2- week furlough in September and used that time to travel to Bremerton, Washington to visit my future bride and her family. She accepted my proposal and we were married a year later near the end my Army service. We are still married, over 60 years, but I am getting ahead of my story.

When I returned to Atterbury in late September, I was notified by the CO that I was to be transferred to the 331 St Medical Battalion without delay. It seems that, since D Day, the Army had discovered a high turnover rate of medical personal and anyone with medical training would be reassigned accordingly. I vigorously protested this action immediately but to no avail. I didn't want to ship out with men with whom I hadn't trained. Those men of the 422nd were great guys and I hated to leave them.

I reported to the 331st Medical Battalion and was assigned to "C" Company. I was welcomed by Capt. Herbert Blanchard, MC the CO, and 1st Sgt Michael Gabriel. They had heard of my reluctance to this assignment and I was assured of their assistance if anything arose from my protest. In the meantime, I would be assigned as Jeep driver for Capt. Blanchard while I got to know the other men of the company. So my last days at Atterbury were spent driving the Captain to all the meetings he had to attend in preparation for the upcoming move to Camp Myles Standish near Boston. That was to be the final assembly point of the 106th Division before sailing for Europe.

We boarded the ship on November 10, 1944. The ship was named the USCGSS WAKEFIELD, the former luxury liner MANHATTAN, that had been converted into a troop transport ship for soldiers crossing the Atlantic. I will never forget the experience and the procedure for getting the troops on board. First we were assembled on the dock by company units, in my case, 331 St Medical Battalion Company C, then alphabetically in single file. As we approached the gangplank our last name was called and we were to respond with first name and middle initial, loud and clear. So finally, with duffle bag on my shoulder, and slowly shuffling forward, I heard "Christianson", I responded "Edward L" and went aboard into the bowels of the ship to find a bunk and make myself comfortable.

We left Boston harbor late that afternoon so as to reach the ocean after dark in order to avoid any lurking German subs in the area. The Atlantic was quite rough for that time of the year so many of the men suffered from seasickness. Thankfully, it was a relatively short trip; we only had to put up with the lousy food for five days!

We arrived in Liverpool, England on November 16, 1944 and took the train to Cheltenham several hours inland. That was to be our home base for the next three weeks. That time was spent in orientation training for the upcoming move to the continent, drawing necessary supplies to replace missing items and preparing our vehicles and equipment for transport. There was also plenty of time for physical training; some of the men received weekend passes, which enabled them to visit places such as London, Coventry or Oxford. I was the driver for the CO so I got to see much of the local countryside as we traveled back and forth to his meetings. I did get to visit with my old buddies from the 422nd. The weather was typically English. Cold, dreary and wet with little sunshine. I do recall that we were served a very good Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner which put us all in a nostalgic mood recalling past times when families and friends gathered to share similar celebrations.

Then reality set in. It was time to pack up and move out. On December 2, 1944 we arrived at the harbor of Weymouth, England where several LSTs were waiting to take us to France. We had heard that the English Channel could be rough in the winter and that an LST is not a stable ship in rough waters. Both rumors proved very true for the 106th! Because of the weather and the resulting delays at the normally busy port, we could not off-load at Le Havre, France until December 6. After a long wait we finally landed. We then drove to the bivouac area in preparation for a 500-mile drive to our destination in, or around, the vicinity of St Vith, Belgium.

The weather was cold and wet with snow and freezing rain for the entire trip. Needless to say, driving an open Jeep was no picnic, either. As the convoy neared St Vith the various elements of the 106th Infantry Division split away from the main body and went forward to their assigned areas. The primary assignment of the 106th was to relieve 2nd Infantry Division along the German Siegfried Line man for man, gun for gun. The switch was completed within four days after landing in France. We were now on our own: young men, green and without combat experience ready to face the dreaded German Army.

The 331st Medical Battalion opened its Battalion Headquarters and Clearing Station in St Vith, Belgium while Collecting Company "C" set up in a farm house near Steinbruck, or Winterspelt Germany, (I don't remember which), about 12 miles from St Vith. The first three days were rather quiet in our area; casualties were mostly weather-related due to the conditions of the wet and cold travel across France. "C" Company housing accommodations were quite comfortable, although we didn't appreciate it at the time. The men bunked in a warm and dry basement of a farmhouse, while the farmer and his family lived in the upper part. They tended to the farm animals and other chores and we just settled in getting used to our duties. Captain Blanchard kept me busy traveling to the many meetings he had to attend in order to coordinate the medical support to the 424 Regiment Combat Team. Thus ended the routine duties of 13-15 Dec 44!

On 16 Dec 44 the Germans opened the Battle of the Bulge with a tremendous artillery barrage at dawn. The surprise attack was even more effective due to the horrendous weather conditions. I cannot comment on the resulting land battles, as a noncombatant medic, such expertise is well beyond my 'assigned duties'. Much has already been written by the men who did have first-hand experiences and I refer you to such sources. Suffice it to say that the German Army was in great need of war supplies if they intended to have any chance of sustaining the war. The Allied Forces had great supply depots in nearby Belgium and the German objective was to get to them quickly.

We started receiving casualties very early that first morning. Being inexperienced to the 'real' war, there was much confusion at first but that didn't last long. Training and good common sense soon put order into our efforts. I was assigned to be an ambulance driver/orderly. The main job was to transport the seriously wounded from our level of treatment to the Clearing Station in St Vith where they would get better treatment. I made several trips to St Vith that day; it sure was an exciting baptism to the real war.

Things didn't go too good for our fighting troops that day. All we knew was that we were in the middle of something big, up against a very big German fighting force. During the night, Company C got orders to pull back to St Vith and re-establish our medical support there. The move was made under total blackout conditions over strange mountain roads without loss of men or equipment. This move also meant a change in transporting the casualties to the Clearing Station.

They had moved back to Vielsalm, Belgium, about 15 miles west of St Vith and thus began a very exciting day in the life of a combat medic. Namely, ME!

I made the first run to Vielsaim carrying four seriously wounded litter patients. We got to the Clearing Station safely and on time. After drawing replacement blankets, litters and other supplies we started back for St Vith. We took the same road we had used to get to Vielsaim.

About halfway back we suddenly, and inadvertently, found ourselves in the middle of the shooting war. We had come upon a small arms firefight at the crossroads in the small village of Poteaux, Belgium between an advance German patrol and the men of the 14th Cavalry Unit. They must have been as surprised as we were when they saw this big Red Cross marked ambulance drive into their midst. We stopped without incident. Someone called from a nearby building to come tend to a wounded man. Fortunately, I was able to back the ambulance to the side of this small farm building. It was now between me and the Germans and gave us some protection. We treated the Cavalry Sgt for a serious leg wound, got him onto a litter and into the ambulance. We were ready to return to Vielsalm. Unbeknown to us at the time, but the ambulance had not been totally shielded by the building so as we pulled away and tried to make a right hand turn to get back on the road we discovered two things. The front left tire was flat and the radiator was steaming. In the excitement I killed the engine twice in the middle of the crossroads before making our retreat. (To this day I am certain that the German respected the Red Cross, and what it meant, and that they withheld their fire and let us out.)

Shortly down the road back to Vielsalm we encountered another ambulance heading for St. Vith. We flagged it down and explained our situation. He took my patient for a smoother ride back to the Clearing Station while we changed the tire and 'steamed back' to the motor pool in Vielsaim for repairs. When the motor pool officer saw the steaming ambulance drive in he went ballistic. He chewed me out for careless maintenance and for anything else he could think. When I showed him the marks of several bullet holes in the radiator and grill and one in the front bumper, he changed his attitude. My ambulance was identified on the front and back bumpers as: 106-33 1 MED C-11. One of those German slugs hit my ambulance right between the two ones! He proved his marksman-ship to me that morning.

Within three days of the start of the Bulge the 106th lost 7,000 men, killed, wounded or captured most of them from the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments. Was it an act of God that I had been transferred out of the 422nd to the medics back in the States?

C Company did not stay in St Vith too many days as the frontlines were very fluid. My recollection is that we pulled back to a place called 'Salmchateau' the day before Christmas. The weather had turned very cold and that, coupled with the deep snow, created additional hardships for the troops. That meant a big increase in casualties suffering from frozen hands and feet. While at Salmchateau Capt. Blanchard received word that there were Germans closing in on the area and we might be in danger of being surrounded. If they appeared, he was ordered to surrender immediately after assuring safe treatment of the injured men. All we could do is sit and wait. About an hour later we got word to load the patients and equipment and be ready to move on a moments notice. Thanks to the infantry who had broken through to us, we got out safely and moved to a new and safer location where the company could function and still celebrate Christmas under more favorable conditions.

My memory of the next week or so is quite vague so it must have been that our company continued to provide medical support to Combat Team 424th (CT424). They were the only remaining element of the 106th still able to mount a defense against the German troops. Where ever they moved we moved with them.

The following are excerpts taken from the Unit History, Headquarters 331st Medical Battalion dated 5 February 1945 and depicts our activity for mid January:

Jan 12, '45 (my 21st birthday). Light patrol action continued with casualties light, only 3 wounded being treated.

Jan 13, The 106th
Infantry Division jumped off at 0600 in an attack, and with intelligence that resistance would be light, and progress rapid, "C" Company moved up to Trois Ponts, Belgium at 0830 but due to longer distance to the front "C" Company set up an Ambulance Relay Point (ARP) at Aisimont to expedite the handling of casualties. On this date from 1400 to 2400 "C" Company handled 140 battle casualties. Evacuation from the front was complicated by heavy snow, icy roads and narrow roads. But except for the ditching of an army ambulance during blackout driving, the evacuation of patients was uneventful. The road between the "C" Company ARP at Aisimont and Wanne was under constant observed enemy artillery fire, but since it was the only road usable, ambulances ran the gauntlet of fire. Three ambulances were hit by shrapnel, and one patient with a wound of a finger, riding in the ambulance was struck in the leg. First aide was given to him by the ambulance orderly. (I was that orderly that day!)

During the action from the 12th through the 17th of January, 1945 the Division took every objective assigned, and on time. 1,172 cases were handled by the medical Clearing Station during the attack!

Thus ends the excerpts from the "Unit History".

With a lull in the action, Capt. Blanchard ordered an examination of all his men for signs of frostbite. A few of us showed such signs and he ordered us evacuated to the hospital for treatment. I was transferred to several hospitals before I finally ended up in one in Cheltenham, England. It was the same town we had been in before the 106th moved to France in December '44. Small world, isn't it? My condition must have been borderline because during one of the early exams at this hospital there was a discussion of whether they should amputate my right foot or not. They decided to wait and watch for gangrene. If it set in they had no choice but to operate. Thank God, it was a wise diagnosis and I still have both feet!

I was released from the hospital in early March and was sent back to my unit in Germany, happy to be with the men again. The Division was now up to full strength and its primary duty was to guard the thousands of POW's who had been captured and the great number of displaced persons awaiting return to their homelands. We were in the vicinity of Bad Ems, Germany when the war ended. It was an unbelievable happy occasion for everyone even though we didn't have the means to celebrate.

In August I was transferred to the 110th Medical Battalion of the 35th Infantry Division for return to the United States and possible additional deployment after 30 days leave. We sailed from England on the Queen Mary on 5 Sep 45 and arrived in New York on 10 Sep 45. There was no great fanfare, we were just happy to be home again. I spent two days at Fort Dix, NJ, then moved to Camp McCoy, WI for processing and leave. I called my future wife that I was coming home. We set our wedding date right then and there for two weeks hence— September 22, 1945.

I was discharged November 13, 1945 thereby ending my 2 years, 6 months, and 29 days of military service to God and my country.



**EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS
UNITED STATES ARMY**

This
CERTIFICATE OF MERIT

is awarded to

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS EDWARD L CHRISTIANSON 36 817 143
Company C, 331st Medical Battalion, 106th Infantry Division

IN RECOGNITION OF CONSPICUOUSLY MERITORIOUS AND OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE OF MILITARY DUTY
ON 13 JANUARY 1945, IN BELGIUM

Citation

Over an exposed route between Aisomont and Wanne, Belgium, under direct, observed enemy artillery fire and cluttered with disabled vehicles, Pfc Christianson, without regard for his own safety, assisted an officer and eleven men of his company in the evacuation of fifty-six casualties. Traveling over the slippery road and impeded by the deep snow, three of the ambulances were hit by shell fragments as the patients were being evacuated. Pfc Christianson showed exceptional bravery and devotion to duty in evacuating patients under these conditions.

3 June 1945


R H STUMPF
Colonel, Infantry
Commanding, 424th Infantry

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