

My Adventures in Europe - 1944/1945

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I don't remember exactly how I felt on November, 10th, 1944, as I anticipated leaving for Europe and the possibility of never coming back. I certainly was not frightened, because "never coming back" was far from my expectations. At nineteen you think that death and severe injury only happens to other people, at least that's what I thought at that time and all during my early youth. I guess that I thought of it as an exciting new adventure that would end before I got bored. About that I was both right and wrong.

As we loaded I made an "X" on the concrete and said to the man behind me, "I'll make another 'X' when I come back". The Wakefeld seemed to be a large ship, but I had never been on an ocean-going vessel before so how could I judge. I don't know many decks we went down to our bunks, but I think about four below the main deck. There was a space of about 20' x 20' at the bottom of the stairway as you entered, and the rest of the room was packed with bunks. A narrow passage-way connected this 60' x 90' room with others of about the same size.

The bunks were made of pieces of canvas stretched over a rectangular frame made of pipes about 3' x 6' 6" in size, arranged side by side and end to end in groups six. These were stacked vertically with only 2 feet clearance for our bodies to go. This made it impossible for anyone to sleep on his side or even to turn over without getting out and re-entering. No blankets were provided but it was so warm in the room they were not needed.

We ate in another room in shifts and were allowed on deck if the weather permitted, as well as a limited range of other places. Entertainment was scuttlebutt about rumors and occasional schools of flying fish performing with flights that were surprisingly long-distant.

Groups of us were collected to do chores each day and called on the speaker system with the message, "Army sweepers, man your brooms. Clean sweep fore and aft." At least it broke up the seven days of boredom before we arrived.

We arrived in darkness at Liverpool and boarded a train, then trucks to our destination at Seisincote, England. We slept in corrugated steel small buildings that were located on a country estate. A large formal garden was located in front of the masters house, but we were billeted in the back. We did have freedom to wander the garden and enjoy.

None of us had ever seen anything like it in the U.S. Training was at a minimum. We went into towns in the area and some got permission to go to London. These were lazy days; just waiting to be shipped to the continent. It wasn't long until it happened.

At Weymouth on December 3rd, we boarded a large landing craft. It had the typical drop-door at the bow of the ship. It was designed to carry vehicles and vehicle personnel. We backed our vehicles into the ship and got out. We then went to the area where we ate and slept on the journey. After we got underway at about 4:00 AM, I went to my vehicle to get something and found that the vehicles were standing in about two feet of water....normal, I guess. The door in the bow through which we had backed our vehicles

was not waterproof. But the water never got any deeper during the trip.

We arrived at the port of LeHavre, France, but it was so badly destroyed we couldn't land there. We went up the Seine River to Rouen. We arrived late in the afternoon so we spent the night there. There were all kinds of equipment and supplies on the dock and as we looked it over from the deck of the LSV, a small group of us got an idea. We had no sleeping bags, only wool army blankets and tent halves to protect us from outdoor sleeping. The sighting of some small tarps piled on the dock gave us an idea that turned out to be a god-send thru the rest of my life living in Europe.

There were guards walking posts through each section of the depot to prevent theft. We had to avoid them in order to acquire a couple of the tarpaulins for our use. We timed how long it took our guard to make a round, and when, during that tour, he was in a position to see the tarps we were going to steal. At the appropriate time two of our men went down the cargo net and after hiding under the tarps for the next of his rounds, returned with the stolen goods safely. We cut the material in pieces that measured 7' by 6'. Folded and sewed, they were made into an envelope the shape of a bed that held our blankets. We would be warm and dry through the rest of the war, if we ever got time to crawl in.

The next day, December 6th, we unloaded our vehicles and started on our trip to our destination. We weren't told where. It was snowing lightly. My companion in the truck was Harold Swanson (we called him Swanee). He was a Sergeant and the 2nd in command of our wire team (I was in a communications unit). Sergeant Heatrick was the team leader. Eventually the team was divided. Heatrick took half of it and Swanson took the other half. I was chosen to be a part of Heatrick's team, as his driver. That fact turned out to be a great stroke of luck because Swanson and a group with him were killed in the early days of the Bulge.

We traveled for 3 days, the 6th, 7th and 8th of December. Our convoy was very slow because of all the trucks and equipment we had with us. The total 106th Signal Company was made up of the Radio section, Radio Repair section, Message Center, Telephone and Telegraph, Headquarters and Supply, and my group, Construction Section. Construction Section was made up of four teams, often men who worked together on assigned tasks. Since Sergeant Heatrick and I were always present to help install the wires and cables from 106th Division Headquarters to one of the Regimental Headquarters, we had the job of repairing them if they went out of service at anytime. Sometimes we had to lay the lines from regimental HQ to Battalion HQ and continuing as far as Company HQ which was usually the front lines where enemy soldiers could often be visible. We were ordered never ever to fire on enemy troops except to defend ourselves and always concentrate on the job to be done.

At that time my vehicle was a 3/4 ton, four wheel drive truck, so each night Swanee and I slept in the back of the truck as we all stopped for the night. (Later the truck was replaced with a Jeep) Most of the time we were in the north of France and we had light snow daily but the temperature was not very cold. I heard my first French spoken by a native when three children were standing on the side of the road where we had halted. One of them said to a companion, "Brussez rnoi." (Brush me) another said, "Et moi." (And Me). I was fascinated by the fact that he didn't say "Me too" (Moi aussi) as we would say. Sometimes we stopped along the road for "piss call" which everybody did in the ditch.

I don't remember how many nights we stopped to bivouac but the convoy traveled only at about 25 to 30 mph most of the time. The larger trucks took a lot of time, particularly on hills, which held us all up. The smaller, faster vehicles were put in the back of the column so that they didn't run away and lose the rest of the convoy.

We arrived in the St. Vith area, our destination in Belgium, late afternoon. The 2nd Infantry Division which we were replacing still occupied many of the places we were to take over so we had to camp in the woods west of town. The farther north that we had gone the colder it got. We had no thermometer but it was cold !! Swanee slept in the front seat of the truck where it was warmer so Albert, the lowly PFC, was allotted the ice cold bed of the 3/4 ton vehicle. I couldn't stop shivering and I couldn't sleep for about an hour and a half. Then, suddenly an amazing thing happened. The surface of my skin all over my body became colder, but not uncomfortably cold, and at the same time I felt warm on the inside. This was an experience I had never had before, and no one I have talked to about it has had that experience either. But ever since that time through all the time in Europe, and even sometimes to this day, I have the same experience under similar conditions.

One of the following days we moved and took over our new position in St. Vith. The construction section, as well as much of the rest of the 106th Signal Company, was given a brick school building, one in a group of three arranged as a "U". I found a spot in the basement to plant my stuff. When it was delivered it contained my canvas bedroll that I made aboard the LSV in Rouen, France. Was I happy!!! I noticed that the floor above us was solid concrete. I discovered that many of the buildings in the eastern part of Belgium were built the same way. The villages had all been a part of Germany before World War I when the houses were re-built after that war, I guess they were expecting another one. I learned to always choose the basement when choosing temporary housing in a combat zone.

THE BEGINNING OF ACTIVE COMBAT

I have delayed writing this section of my story for many reasons. I was puzzled about how I should set forth a series of happenings that lacked sequence. I could not remember the sequence of the most frightening events even after the days they had happened. My recall was, and still is, like flash-backs in a movie. The only thing that separates the days is when I had relocated my temporary home from which events seem to have a beginning. These temporary homes changed often, sometimes hourly, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly and sometimes constantly in a group of moving vehicles. I was never in control of my moves. They were controlled by my team Sergeant, Sergeant Heatrick, whose first name I have forgotten because I never used it. I called him Sarg, if verbal brevity was necessary. Of course the chain of command controlled all of us. The only time I was able to be in control of me, was when personal life threatening situations existed. Then, "every man for himself" became the rule. But that rule was "not in effect" when a buddy needed help.

So I begin.

The first day Sergeant Heatrick and I were assigned to repair a telephone line to one of the regimental command posts. Later in the day the whole 5th team (that was us, 10 GI's) laid a new line to substitute in case of damage to another line. The following days, members of the team explored the front, learning where the different Regiments were located and how to get there by road. We serviced many auxiliary, attached units, but

eventually we were responsible for the 424th Regiment. The main lines from 106th Division HQ to the regimental command post were our responsibility. But often we extended it to the command posts of the in-line battalions, and sometimes to the company command posts. That was where the fox holes were, and active rifle and artillery fire was often going on. To get to the regimental command post we took the road to Steinbruuk (which was on the Our River directly east of St Vith.) About 11z mile after passing over the bridge on the Our River we took a right on the road that went to Hechhallenfeld the 424th regimental headquarters was set up. I mention this because the little town of Steinbruuk became a big part of my life for a few disturbing days. Eventually we laid the new line to the 424th. We were the ones that had the responsibility of trouble-shooting and repairing that line.

To the north of the 424th a small section of the front lines were occupied by the Reconnaissance Troop. This group was not a part of any regiment and was assigned to sending out patrols into enemy territory looking for information, and sometimes capturing German prisoners for interrogation.

Further to the north were the 424th and 422nd Regimental Teams. On our division north flank the 99th Division adjoined us and on the south the 28th Division was our neighbor. As I continue I will write about the 106th Division. It was the center of the German attack, but the 99th and the 28th were pretty badly beat up also.

The first day I remember coming under fire was before the 16th of December (the day of the beginning of the Bulge). A few members of the team went up to Grosslangenfeld to check on the Recon Troop. We checked their switchboard and the way that the field wire entered the location for future reference. When we were finished we asked if they had seen any of the enemy. One of them handed me the glasses and said if you want to see some Germans, look at that village across the valley. Sure enough a few could be seen walking on the street of the town. We asked if any shots had been fired and were told that a few mortar barrages had occurred, but recently they only fired a return shot if one was sent over at them. One of them said, "Wanna see", and someone said, "Yeah." A mortar shot was fired, and we watched it explode in their territory. Nothing happened for quite a while. One of the men said, "Guess they are all asleep." "Don't count on that." someone answered. Suddenly we heard the flatter sound of the fins on a mortar shell overhead. We all hit the ground except for the gunnery crew who dove in the foxholes beside their weapon. The shell exploded about 75 yards away doing no damage. We waited, still on the ground, for a second shell to arrive. Someone said, "I guess we woke the bastards up." Moments later a member of the team said. "Lets get the hell out of here!" and we did.

Another day before the German attack, a small group of us went in search of an abandoned stove. The 2nd Division men, who we replaced, had taken all of their stoves with them, so scouring the countryside for a vacant house with a stove became our chore. As we looked someone in a vehicle on the road told us about an abandoned town near the front line might be the place to find a stove.

They said that the 424th Cannon Company was set up there and about 40 houses were in the towns that were not badly destroyed. We knew that the cannon companies were usually well behind the front lines so we headed there. We had to go up a hill and around a spot in the road named "dead mans curve" as we followed the map to the town. It was named Bleialf. When we arrived there was nobody in the town, not even any GI's that we saw. We found no stoves. There was a beautiful church and we took a look in admiring its

beauty which had not been messed up to any degree. Years later, at a reunion of the 106th, I met a member of the 424th Cannon Company who was at Bleialf at that time. He told me that the cannon company were the only ones that occupied that sector of the front lines and that they were set up with the town between them, and the enemy. They had to chase snipers out of the church steeple every morning and sometimes several times during the day. I guess that was our lucky day. Before we left the town, finding no stoves I went down a sparsely settled street. Part of the way down the street I saw a message scribbled on a make-shift sign saying, "Do not go down this road unless you want to join Mr. Hitler's army." It took me no time to spin my vehicle around and head west in a hurry! I did not know that we had spent an hour or more in the space between our front lines and the enemy's front lines, a space called "no man's land", until 40 years later.

On another day we went to Division Rear HQ in Vielsaim. It was a quiet town about 10 miles southwest of St. Vith. We checked the field-wire lines and their placement routes. One of our company members was on duty at the switchboard, so we shot the bull with him. We learned that Division Rear HQ was a pretty dull place with not much activity. That was to change in the near future.

We had calls every day when a land line had ceased to function. We immediately went to find the break in the line. Many things often had caused the break. Vehicles running over the lines, overhead lines being struck by tall antennas on tanks and trucks, artillery strikes, small arms fire, and improper placement were some of the causes. But one of the enemies tricks that we had to worry about was always possible. An enemy patrol would cut a line, and then lay in wait for someone to come to repair it. Fortunately, no one in our group was ever victim of this ambush technique.

The Start of the BATTLE OF THE BULGE, December 16, 1944

We were sleeping in the cellar of a school house where we had been living since we arrived in St Vith. Day break was beginning, when suddenly we were awakened by the sound of very loud explosions in a nearby area. Somebody called down the stairway, "They are shelling the town." We all awakened and I was the first one up the stairs. Since I had never been in a town that was being shelled before, I rushed outside to watch.

First lesson: Never try to get close to a place where artillery shells are exploding and always hope that they don't start exploding closer to where you are. A close look is not fun. I found that out about three minutes later when a shell hit the house across the street from where I stood.

Many bricks and much debris sailed high in the air and much of it looked like it was going to land on me. I realized that this had not been covered in my infantry training at Ft. Benning, Georgia, (during my stay in the Harmony Church area.) Very close to me was a 2 1/2 ton truck. I was well protected when I quickly wrapped myself around the tire and under the fender of the left front wheel. I stayed there as bricks, mortar, glass and pieces of roof fell around me.

Second lesson: When you hear artillery shells exploding close to your position, jump, or dive head-first, into any place near-by that seems to be below ground level, and if possible a fox hole.

I choose to immediately return to the cellar which, of course, was not a good choice when

I had just seen what had happened to the house across the street. It was, however, better than being wrapped around the front tire of a truck.

The shelling stopped a while later and then the fun began. All three regiments had lost wire communication with 106th Division Headquarters, and we had to repair or restore the wires ASAP.

Our Team of 12 men were responsible for the 424th regiment. We had familiarized ourselves with the route and placement of the wires and cables that connected 106th Division HQ with the HQ of the 424th. There were also wire communications that ran to the adjacent regiments of our division and also to the adjacent divisions on-line regiment. The 28th division was on the south and the 99th division was to the north.

We learned immediately after the shelling stopped that there was no wire communication with our regiment, So Sgt. Heatrick and led the rest of the team, us in the 3/4 ton truck and them in the work truck, a big 4x4, 2/12 ton fully equipped wire laying vehicle.

We first tapped in to the 2 lines that connected division with 424th and found it was good to division from where we were, but no contact with 424th, We were to follow these lines, tapping in to them every half mile until division contact was lost and then work back to find the break in the line and repair it. With 12 men spread out it along the line, it was as fast and efficient as it could be. We were about halfway to the regimental position when we found the first break on the line to division and repaired it. We were about 3 days constantly repairing because more breaks constantly happened as the battle went on.

During these days several incidents occurred. I do not remember in what order they occurred nor on what days, so I will recount them as individual stones. In each of these incidents, I was alone in my vehicle because Sgt. Heatrick had assigned me with the task of running back and forth on the road to give help and supplies to parts of the team as they were needed.

I had come under mortar attack along the road. I was very near to 424th HQ dug-out. I knew that mortars had a short range and that the German troops that were firing them could not be any more than 500 yards away .Many vehicles had been stopped as the barrages became more intense. So I stopped and got away from the road by running to a house and flopping on the opposite side from which the mortars were coming. I heard another GI arrive behind me. A few minutes after the barrage had stopped the GI behind me said, "What are you doing lying on the ground?" Without looking I replied, "What the hell do you think, STUPID? Taking a nap?... I'm smart enough to know that the barrage might start again any second. And I don't want my F-ING ASS blown off ! ! !" As I followed that GI as he was walking back to his jeep, I discovered he was a two-star General.... Fortunately, he didn't ask for my name, rank and serial number.

The road on which our lines to the 424th were laying were on the St Vith — Steinbruck highway which continued to the 424th HQ dug-out, located in Hechhallenfeld. Along this road tanks and half-tracks of part of the 10th Armored Division had arrived at the time this incident happened. A large column of them had pulled over to the right side of the road and I was I was parked on the left side in a shallow ditch waiting for Sgt. Heatrick. Suddenly the road was shelled by 88mm guns, probably on tanks of the attacking Germans. All of the shells were long or short of my position, (you never hear the ones that hit you.) I was watching a half-track driver digging the accumulated mud out of the tracks on his vehicle. As I watched a shell exploded exactly where he was standing. I was

knocked flat! Laying there looking at the sky, the only thing that entered my mind was "am I wounded" I had heard that when you are hit the place where you get hit feels numb so I didn't look at myself. I just continued to look at the sky and as I did I mentally reviewed my body.....are my toes numb.....are my feet numb.....are my legs numb,.....is my groin numb.....is my back or tummy numb.....my chest or shoulders numb.....my face or skull..... nothing seems numb LOOK!!!... Nothing is bleeding. Get up and RUN !! But run where? Into the woods get under a fallen log.

So I ran and ran and ran. But there were no fallen logs anywhere. The shells were still exploding so what should I do? Hit the ground and lay still, this I did. And about the same time the shells started hitting the forest. There were tree-bursts permeating the area. When a tree-burst happens, all of the shrapnel and broken tree trash cover a large area of devastation did I go to the wrong place??? YES, I did. So I got up and ran again, this time back to the truck. I ignored the destroyed half-track. I crawled under my abandoned truck until I was directly under the engine and between the big front wheels and tires. With these to protect me on the top and on the sides, and my heavy steel helmet to protect me from the front of the truck, I then buried my face in the muddy hard ground and felt as safe as I thought I could be under the circumstances. I guess I was right because I don't recall what happened next, but I know I didn't get the Purple Heart.

As I said before I don't remember when these incidents happened or the sequence of their occurrence. They all happened on the 16th, 17th or 18th of December. I think the following experience occurred on the 18th.

I was waiting in Steinbruck for orders when a group of my platoon members arrived. I was asked to go with the two other trucks to try to establish wire communications to the Recon Troop located in Grosslangenfeld. As we traveled on the selected road along the Our River suddenly Burp Guns on the wooded hillsides to the right and left began firing at us. We all halted and jumped out of our trucks to the roadside ditches. After a short time the firing stopped so I decided that I would try to run back to Steinbruck. A bad decision. As I started to run one of the guns started firing. I knew he was firing at me because I saw a bullet hit the road just before my foot landed in the same spot. I made a flying escape to the ditch and lay there. After a short time I heard a vehicle approaching. I was sure that it was the gunners coming to finish us all off.

I raised my head to look. I still had my submachine gun so I thought I had a chance of killing whoever was going to kill me. BUT WHAT A GREAT SURPRISE.....it was a signal company officer and his driver. They stopped when they recognized me and the Lieutenant said, "Reed, what are you doing in the ditch?" "I replied." "They're shooting at us, Sir." At this time the men from the other trucks started joining us SECOND GREAT SURPRISE.....the burp guns quit firing. Lt. Corbet told us to climb in and on his jeep and we would go back to Steinbruck for some reinforcements. We went back but the only reinforcements we could get was another Signal Company truck, a 2 1/2 ton 6X6, three men and a bazooka. I shouldered the bazooka since my sub-machine gun was smaller than the rifles carried by the others. We all climbed in the 6X6 and went back for our abandoned vehicles. THIRD GREAT SURPRISE We were not fired upon and recovered all the vehicles. We went back to Steinbruck. Lucky that I didn't have to fire the bazooka because the backward recoil flash, from the launching of the rocket would probably have burned anyone behind me. I never gave that any consideration because of my youth and inexperience. I knew how to fire a bazooka but I never had fired one.

We all went back to St Vith. Just outside of the town we found that two men from the

Engineer Company were preparing to blow up the bridge that we passed over to prevent the German tanks from entering St. Vith. When we arrived at the Signal Company H.Q., we were told that we were going to evacuate the town and retreat to Vielsalm where 106th Division H.Q. had re-located.

The 7th Armored Division and Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division were arriving to support us. The 7th Armored Division was arriving from the south and apparently Co B of the 9th Armored Division from the South also, on the road that led to Vielsalm. We were to load our vehicles immediately and wait until after dark before we joined the convoy for Vielsalm. This was the 18th of December.

THE WITHDRAWAL

At dusk the convoy of 106th Division HQ and units of other specialized troops, including the Signal Company, headed on the road to Vielsalm. The armored column had jammed the road with tanks and other vehicles causing complete confusion. The oncoming vehicles often crowded our vehicles off the road. I was driving a 3/4 ton 4 wheel drive vehicle which was easier to control than our 2 1/2 ton 6x6 larger trucks. We in the convoy were helping those who got stuck whenever we could, but in the complete darkness it was very difficult. Some vehicles had to be abandoned because they had been pushed off the road by the on-coming tanks. Many times I could not move forward with my truck for ten to twenty minutes. I am sure that I could have walked the 8 mile distance to Vielsalm in much less time than I drove it. At times the drivers congregated among our trucks and talked while we waited. At one time some Belgian people came out of their houses with a hot beverage for some of us. It tasted something like Postum but it was more pleasant.

As daylight broke we slowly arrived in Vielsalm, dead tired, but with work to be done, starting immediately. The Construction Platoon found a place to store our stuff in a part of what looked like a Belgian Army installation. Our wire team was immediately pressed in to service laying wires. Two of our three regiments, the 422nd and the 423rd, had been captured and killed. The 424th Regiment was the only one left. We were told where to find them. We located the 106th Division HQ where we found Sgt. Hunter. Sgt. Hunter always controlled the place where all of the wires from our combat and service units came in to the HQ of the division. This was called "the zero board". All of the wires started there. Sgt. Hunter knew when a wire was disabled and informed us. As we started trying to find the wire line in trouble we would tap in to a wire and ring it. Sgt Hunter would identify the wire, which we would follow and inspect for a break or damage. Periodically we would tap in to the wire. If we got Sgt. Hunter it meant that the break was farther away from him. If we got the unit that we were trying to connect to Zero Board, it meant that the damage was between that spot and the last spot we had contacted him. To save time we often laid a new piece to wire between those spots rather than look for the damaged place in the wire. We began our work immediately because finding a break in the wire is almost impossible to do after dark.

Almost all of our work was laying new lines because the front line of combat was so fluid that they changed completely almost every day. (We ran into Minturn Wright with his Signal Co. radio team while we were at the 424th regimental HQ several times. He and I had been good friends when we both went to radio school at Camp Atterbury, Indiana.) After 2 or 3 days I was puzzled because we had put in new lines in four different directions - the west, north, east and south. There is no written record of this but we were apparently surrounded. I told Sgt Hunter about it and he said, "We are surrounded, but don't tell anybody." So I didn't. I suppose he didn't want anybody to panic.

I didn't know it then, but I later figured out that I was, for two days, affected by "Combat fatigue". It is now called "Post traumatic syndrome". It affected me in these ways: I did not speak to anyone, even if they wanted to carry on a conversation. I could not register an opinion to myself about anything or make any decisions. I always stared straight ahead with my eyes, never moving them to the side. To see anything not in my direct line of vision I would turn my head until my eyes lined up with what I wanted to see. I could not willfully stop any of these things that went on. There were others but I cannot remember them. They were too weird.. Sometimes one of them pops fleetingly in to my mind but is immediately forgotten

On the evening of the 23rd of December we were told we were all going to move our location. We were to form in a convoy line close together. No lights would be allowed, not even "cats eyes", the lights we used to travel after darkness to avoid enemy observation. There was no moon. To see in the dark was nearly impossible, but most of us were 18 to 20 ears old. Young eyes see more that older eyes. Because I had been on all the roads in the area for three days I knew exactly where I was all of the time.

We were on the road to Baraque de Fraiture, (later known as Parkers Crossroads) directly south ever so slowly and silently. After a little while, as we were approaching a bridge the convoy turned right, off the road and into a field. I thought, "why?" then decided probably the bridge had been destroyed. . I learned later that it had been held by German troops that later, that night, nearly wiped out a company of 82nd Airborne Division men. (That company lost a lot of men.) After we crossed the stream we did not get back on that road but entered another road that went west. At one point flares from a flare gun showed up over our position. There were two reds and one white flares which indicated that this was a signal for an action to take place. When we looked up the signals that were in effect for that day (the signals were changed every day to indicate a different action) it ordered "Zero in and fire artillery here." We just continued on the road hoping to leave the area before the shells from our artillery started landing. We never heard any shells explode.

At some point we stopped and got some rest in a hay barn along the road. Toward morning we stopped the convoy near Bra, Belgium, at a farming complex that was surrounded by a brick wall about five feet high. The Belgians often built these walls and they looked like they had been there for a long time. I don't know their purpose. We spent the day there reorganizing and getting some rest My group was assigned to a part of the hay barn to bed down in that night I was chosen to be one of the guards that night. My duty was at 12 midnight to 2AM at the front gate on the highway passing by. I learned that this was near the village of Bra, Belgium. I was awakened by someone calling my name just before midnight. I grabbed my weapon and flashlight and relieved the man at the main gate. I was instructed to stop any person or vehicle that came through the gate and get the password of the day.

The relieved guard said that he had had very little activity during his two hours. I had the same experience. After about a half hour later an ambulance stopped across the road. It stayed about 45 minutes with the engine running, then slowly pulled away. There was no need for me to challenge the driver because he did not try to enter the gate.(There was no gate, just a paved opening in the wall.) My relief came at 2AM and I went back to the haystack to sleep again. It seemed like no time at all when I was awakened by someone calling my name. I answered and told him that I already did my two hour guard duty. He said, "Did you challenge an ambulance at the gate for a password?" I said, "No, he didn't

try to come in. He just sat there with the engine running." He said, "You were lucky you didn't. That ambulance was full of armed Germans looking for isolated GI's to attack and kill. I guess they decided there were too many of us to tackle." I quietly thanked God for my luck.

We awakened to a bright sunshiny day, the first since we arrived in Belgium. We were on the way to Awan, Belgium, we were told. As the convoy started to move we began to see B-17 aircraft in the sky above us. The first we had seen since we had arrived on the continent. (The weather was too bad) A few minutes later there were American aircraft filling the sky as far as we could see, from horizon to horizon, it seemed... A very few of the planes were shot down by anti-aircraft guns as they were crossing the front lines. We would have been able to rescue survivors, but the prevailing westerly winds swept their parachutes into German held areas. We learned later that the 8th Air force had most of their bomb groups in the air that day. It helped us to recover the ground lost during the battle and did a lot for everybody's morale. We had not had anything to eat in a few days except "D" rations, which were chocolate bars. I only had one of the 1)-bars. At noon time, I suddenly remembered a #10 can of pineapple that I had hidden in my truck. We opened it and shared it with our buddies in the two trucks forward and behind us. What a feast for the afternoon before Christmas Eve.

We arrived in the Awan area after passing through Webermont Belgium, later that day. We were there to re-organize. We were also looking forward to some sleep and some warm food which we got in the few days we stayed there, the 25th to the 28th of December. For the first time since the German attack this gave me some time to think about how lucky I had been on the 16th of December and the days since. Swanee Swanson, whose driver I was when we arrived in St. Vith had been killed, Lt. Ford our Platoon leader had been killed, Sgt. Rose had been wounded but returned to the company in a few days, all the men who were with Lt. Ford on his mission had been killed, except one. Sgt. Joe Remetta, who had been my team leader, escaped and rejoined the company in a few days. Lt. Ford's three truck group were attacked by a Tiger tank which sprayed the trucks with machine gun fire killing most of the men. Joe ran from one of the trucks to a house standing near by. Keeping the house between him and the tank, he ran again toward the woods, swam across a half frozen stream and into the forest. ... Then.. He headed West, staying in the forest most of the time, until he encountered some other GI's who were a part of the 106th Division. He joined them and eventually they all found their way to elements of the 106th and found a way to get back to their units. I do not remember why I was switched from being Swanson's driver to Sgt. Heatrick's driver, but I think that a larger team, that I was a part of, was split in half with Heatrick and Remetta each taking half of the men....LUCKY ME. If I had been with the other half I probably would be buried with Swanee Swanson in Belgium .I visited his grave when Audrey, my wife, and I took a trip to Europe a few years ago...

The next move was to Anthisnes, Belgium. Where we stayed from December 29th until January 11th, 1945. We repaired equipment and vehicles and replaced equipment and vehicles that could not be repaired. This is where the 3/4 ton truck, that I had been driving, was replaced with a jeep. The jeep was a much more efficient vehicle to do the jobs that we usually had to do. We couldn't carry much in it but it was small and could get into places that the 3/4 Ton truck couldn't. It would carry four people, but most of the time one other person was enough to do our jobs of trouble shooting and repair. I immediately loved this vehicle and from then I called it, MY jeep. Its number was 2016 7570. I have always remembered it like one would remember the name of an old friend. (Many times it was the best friend I had because I was all alone with it.

While we were in Anthisnes many of us were billeted in a large room at the top a circular stairway on the second floor. The windows could be covered with light proof blankets so that with our flashlights and candles we could read when it got dark outside. Our bed rolls and personal possessions were all placed on the floor with isles between them. Although we didn't have any heat, we were very comfortable. The building was called the Ouhar Châteaux. It had a stairway tower which held the circular stairway to the second floor where we bedded down at night. On the first floor there was an apartment for the caretaker with an entry on the far side of a large foyer. The well cared for building and tower were constructed of stone and looked like it had been there for centuries. The stair treads were made of thick flat single stones, each of which about seven feet long and each six or seven feet thick. The central area of each stair tread had a worn down scooped out area of about one and a half to two inches. (I guess that tread wear is what made it look like it was centuries old.). At the top of the stairs there was a landing and a very heavy wooden door at the entry to our big room.

I think I remember those stairs so vividly is because of a very strange and unforgettable experience I had there: I had been reading and writing letters during the evening by candle light. I was very tired, probably because I had never caught up with the lost sleep of previous nights and days. I had to pee before I could sleep. Many candles lighted the way to the door so I didn't need a light. I knew the way well from my many visits during the days we had lived there. The men's room was through a door on the left at the bottom of the stairs. The room was about ten feet square with only a trench at the bottom of each wall to carry the urine from each wall outside and into the ground. You didn't have to aim carefully.....just at any of the walls. As I went down the stairs the heavy wooden door I had opened when I left slowly swung shut. The bottom one third of the stairs was plunged into total darkness. I had no worry. I knew the way. But when I finished I opened the door of the totally dark men's room, there was nothing but jet black nothingness in front of me. I carefully slid my foot along the floor until I found the first step. The going was slow but I progressed up the stairs one at a time by placing each foot in the scooped out place in each step. Suddenly someone was shining a spotlight on the step in front of me. I yelled, "Thanks", as he lighted each step that I stepped on as I went. I looked to see where the light was coming from, but I could not see the source even when I reached the landing at the top. When I opened the door the light went out and candle light still was lighting the room. I have never discovered the source of the light that guided me that night.

I do not remember any celebration then New Years Eve came and went. I did hear some shots ring out at midnight and some after midnight. Someone in our group mentioned that somewhere in the town they were celebrating, but we all stayed indoors where it was warmer than the outdoors. Our lack of a furnace was the warmth of the body heat from about 40 men in their late teens and early twenties.

On the 11th of January, the 106th Signal company left Anthisnes and went to Moulin de Ruy. This town was an assembly area for our motor march to return to combat. Our team holed up in Stavelot, Belgium, in the cellar of a small municipal building. It was very cold and a foot of snow covered the ground.....no place to get warm. The 106th Division was assigned a new regiment to augment our division. The 517th Parachute Regiment, a so called "bastard" regiment because they were not assigned to an airborne division (like the 82nd or the 101st). They were placed where needed and we needed them. With only 1 of the original 3 regiments left, we were severely short of fighting men. My team was assigned to furnish wire communications to this new regiment. As we began to spend a

lot of time with them, we found another reason for their other name. They were mean bastards in combat situations. To digress from my on-going story I will give you an idea of some incidents. I took a wire line to a phone in a provisional dug-out that overlooked the Kraut foxholes. There was no activity at the time except for alert observation on the part of the paratroopers. As I watched with them, a Kraut soldier crawled out of a foxhole. He was obviously going to take a crap and thought he could not be seen. One of the paratroopers grabbed his rifle, but another trooper stopped him from shooting. He grabbed a rocket propelled grenade launcher (called a Bazooka) and said, "Wait a minute and I'll wipe his ass for him with a grenade", which he did. When I walked back to the group of farm buildings, they were questioning some prisoners they had captured. When one of them refused to answer a question they would bring another prisoner out to listen to him. Then they would walk the refuser around in back of the building to another shed. One of the G.I.'s would let out a scream, and then another ear-piecing scream which seemed to stop in the middle of it.

If the next prisoner refused to answer a question he would be taken behind the building where he would see a tree stump covered with blood and a bloody axe stuck in it. The prisoners then would tell them anything they asked. After that, they would lock him in the other shed where the previous prisoner had been placed. The whole thing seemed like a rotten trick, but war is war and it got information that could save our lives. Just before we left a trooper asked us if we had a place to cook extra food and when we told him that we did he produced two live chickens from another barn. He said, "Dead or alive ?" when we said dead, he grabbed the heads of each chicken and spun the bodies around until the heads came off He threw them in the back of my jeep and that evening we all dressed and cooked them on our portable stove in the government building in Stavelot Now, the rest of the story of Stavelot, Belgium.

As I mentioned our temporary home was in a small government building. It was located on one of the wider and longer streets in the village that sloped down to a bridge crossing a stream just below our temporary home just below our temporary home. As we began to lay our new wires in the area we encountered some interesting things.

When I went to the second floor of a warehouse to tie a wire, I looked around the mostly empty large room. A lot of debris was scattered around but in a clear space in the center of the room lay a human hand. It had been severed at the wrist and was palm side up. The fingers were curled as if it was relaxed. How creepy and weird it looked. The temperature was about zero degrees so it was perfectly preserved. I had the shivers as I wondered if the owner of the hand was alive or dead. Presuming he was dead didn't stop the shivers.

The windows of the warehouse were all blown out and as I was leaving the building I heard what sounded like a drum beat. I discovered that it was a Belgian boy about 8 to 10 years old taking turns with his little friends with their fun for the morning. A dead German soldier, completely frozen, was laying on his back on the side of the road going over the bridge. They were jumping on his chest rhythmically and the frozen empty chest sounded like a bass drum. They were all laughing. I got more chills up and down my back. How horrible.

Just after the road crossed the bridge it split into a fork. A destroyed German Tiger tank sat in the jaws of the fork as if it was about to be swallowed. I learned just what happened to that tank, but it was over 35 years later. With a casual look at the tank, I presumed that the tank had run out of gas, as did many German tanks. That was not the case with

this tank as I learned about 35 years later from one of my patients.

Richard Robb became a patient in about 1961. He and I had many interesting conversations. He had many interests and was a college teacher as well as being a consultant for large companies. He and I were scuba divers, both interested in oceanography, rockets, photon propulsion. He wrote about 100 pages on Manatees and knew more about them than anyone I had ever talked to. He was an artist 'de scrimshaw and brought in several whale teeth on which he had done the delicate hand etching. I knew he had been in Europe during WW II, but we never had discussed combat until he came in the office for an appointment around December 16, the anniversary of the beginning of the German attack.

He told me that he was in the Bulge battle and I asked him what outfit he was in. He said, "A parachute infantry regiment that most GI's never heard of, called the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment." I excitedly said "I was with that outfit for several days furnishing wire communications when they were attached to the 106th Infantry Division." Then began the conversations about where and when we each were at what place. The village of Stavelot came up and he told me about the Tiger tank on the east side of the bridge at the "Y" in the road.

His company was on the West side of the road when the tank suddenly appeared and attacked them. During the attack his platoon leader, a lieutenant, was killed and he got a battlefield promotion to take his place. He said that after several of his platoon members were killed or wounded they disabled the tank with a bazooka shell and then baked the occupants with several gasoline fire projectiles thrown by hand. I asked him if he went in the warehouse next to the bridge. He did and saw the Hand laying there and one of his platoon members had been the one that killed the German soldier on the bridge - small world !!!

During the time Rick Rob was a patient I had asked him if I could buy one of his scrimshaw carvings on a whales tooth. He said that he would never sell any of his work. In later years, he presented me with one of his latest works showing a whale harpooner and a part of the poem by Joseph Conrad about his youth. He said that it was in appreciation for all the years I had treated him and all of his family.

After spending a few more days in Stavelot, we were told that a new move was to be made. We were headed to Nandrin. The 424th regiment had been attached to another division for a short time but it would be returned to the 106th as soon as the rest of the division was re-organized. In transit we stayed two nights in Spa, Belgium, a resort town being used by the army for R&R for the troops. We didn't have time for the resort experience, but our team had an experience that was almost as good. We were assigned to spend the two days we would be in the area to a private home that was vacant. What a place! Total luxury! It was a deluxe three bedroom one story house with living room, dining room, kitchen, and garage. The garage had about 2 cords of fireplace wood in it to be used in the living room fireplace. One of the bedrooms had the first king sized bed I had ever seen. None of us knew what it was called. We referred to it as a football field bed. Four of us planted our bedrolls on it and slept there together for the two nights that we were there.

We started a fire in the fireplace and cooked our stock of our "ten in one" boxes of food that we had been given because the company did not have a kitchen set up. We had several boxes of "Ten in One" rations which were VERY GOOD. They were much better

than "C Rations" which consisted a box with two cans in it, one containing scrambled eggs, beans, or beef hash and the other four biscuit-like crackers and two envelopes of a powdered beverage to be diluted with water. We sometimes had "D Rations". They were very good chocolate bars, about 4 X 2 1/2 inches in size. The D rations were a last resort to be used because they took up very little room and could be easily carried in the large pockets of your uniform So, we were comfortably warm for the first time in many weeks, full of food for the first time in many weeks, sleeping in a bed which was soft and comfortable for the first time in many MONTHS, and we felt safe.

That all ended the next day when Sgt. Heatrick and I had to pack up and locate a wire line break in a line to the 59th artillery of the 106th division. It had been re-equipped with 240mm howitzers to replace the loss of all their cannons during the bulge. They were located in Trois Pons. We were faced with finding the line that we had never seen. We only knew that it was laid on the road to Trois Pons. So we had to go to the location of the 591's, find the troubled line, and then follow it, tapping in every little ways to find the break After hours we found and fixed the break. But it was dark by that time and our team had moved out so we had to wait until morning daylight so that we could locate them by phone and then go to their new location. We had packed our duds when we left so we had no sleeping rolls, (I still had the one I made). We decided we needed company so we stayed near one of the big guns where it was quiet. A big mistake !!! After about an hour they started firing that lasted sporadically for about three hours. Each time one of the big guns went off it was not only deafening but my whole body was bounced totally off the ground about two inches. Did I get any sleep? Do you think I did?

I remember very little about Nandrin, the village in which we were to stay during re-organization of the 106th Division and the 106th Signal Company. I remember that three of us made friends with a Belgium family in a town near there called Cairirer en Condroz. The fathers named, Gaston Ondre, his wife was Lucy And they had two children named Maggie about 5, and Jeaninne, 16. Jeaninne was a very immature 16 year old. Maybe because of her exposure to war for about 4 constant years with very little schooling. Anyway, none of us made any amorous moves toward her. We visited them 4 or 5 nights. They had very little firewood to keep their fire going so we collected some for them which included a telephone pole that we knocked down with the truck and cut up to fit their kitchen stove where we all sat in the evenings. I also remember firing a Thompson submachine gun that I had found in Stavelot. What an experience that was. The constant recoil from firing it backed me up about 6 steps. It was a great weapon. It was stolen from my Jeep later, when we were living in Bad Ems, Germany, probably by a GI. The truck was under guard all the time so I suppose one of the guards took it.

Our next move was to Hunnengen, Belgium on about the 10th of February, 1945. Back into combat with the 424th Infantry Regiment again a part of the 106th Division. The weather had warmed up a bit but not to our advantage. The roads were all seas of sloppy, slimy mud so all of the vehicles were constantly getting stuck. Traveling in convoy was very slow and we only traveled about two miles an hour. Both the division and our Signal Company were billeted in the town. All the residents had left because most of the houses were uninhabitable. The Division HQ was in the center of town as was the kitchen facilities.

We were on the edge of town on the side toward the battle front. Our team and another team of our platoon were in what was left of a brick residence. We were in the basement and they were on the first floor of a two story house. The second floor was exposed to the elements because the roof had been blown off by artillery. The other half of our basement

had also been exposed to the weather during an attack but we nailed a make-shift door in place that served our purpose very well. The chimney to the two areas we occupied were still functional so we both installed our little stoves so we were comfortable at night. I also ran a wire from my jeep battery to the cellar. Connections to a couple of old headlights removed from an abandoned vehicle gave enough light to read our mail and our daily army news in the evening, if we had time. It was the warmest housing we ever had during combat. But it was hell when we had to drop our pants to do #2 outdoors in the freezing wind. It did not take any of us very long.

Our location was only about a thousand yards from the existing German artillery emplacements, but we were never fired upon. We could hear shots from small arms and machine guns, but we never knew whether it was ours or theirs. My optimistic attitude assured me that it was ours. We were served warm food three times a day usually using my jeeps hood as a dining table. On cold days the heat from the engine under the hood kept the food warm. We laid new telephone lines when they were needed and repaired existing lines. It was almost like having a regular civilian job except for having to be constantly alert for danger.

One night I was assigned to do guard duty at division HQ. Our encrypting machine that was used by all elements of the army for encoding top secret messages was located in the building. I was carefully instructed about the machine and that I should do anything to make sure that it did not fall into enemy hands, even sacrifice my life. I never saw the machine, just the door to the room it was being kept in.

I was to call HALT to anyone who approached the building and if I did not recognize the person, ask for the password which changed daily. If the person did not know the password he was told to throw his weapon to the ground at least 6 feet away and throw his identification card toward you. Then he was to be told to lay flat on the ground with his hands stretched in front of him.

I had no problem until about twenty minutes before my duty was to end. It was then complete darkness. A jeep pulled up and with my flashlight I could see a person I had never seen before. He had the insignia of an officer, a common German trick to gain entrance. I called for him to halt and asked for the password. He sounded pissed off that I was asking for a password and told me he was Colonel Smyth and that he had not gotten the password yet. "They will know me inside. You can follow me in." I was scared to death but I said, "If you take one more step I am instructed to shoot" Then I told him what he must do... all the way to the laying on the ground.

Remember, the slimy mud was everywhere, and he was on his stomach in it. I picked up his card and said, "I'm sorry sir, but I'm following orders." as I picked up his .45 hand gun and gave it to him with his identity card. Years later I met Lester Smyth at my sister's home and was entertained at his home with my sister. The third time I met him, again at my sister's, I told him the story. He said he could not remember the incident, and then he changed the subject.

We were in Hunnengen from about February 10 to March 13. Much of the time the enemy was retreating. With so little resistance our troops did not encounter the daily small battles to which we had become accustomed. Our team had very little to do, but we had to be ready when needed. The "Stars and Stripes" army newspaper which was circulated to all the troops was being delivered daily and our daily mail was quite regular. I read in the Stars and Stripes that furloughs were being given to some combat troops, so I went to my company commander and asked if he would consider me if a furlough was made

available to a member of the Signal Company.

I told him that I had not seen my brother in three years and that he was stationed in England with the Air Corps. (That is what it was called at the time) He told me that very few furloughs would be available to the whole division but he would keep me in mind. I thought, "Not a chance of me going" and forgot it.

As the front moved back our team was assigned one morning to lay a double telephone line and to establish a switchboard in a small town near the front. We started the lines at Division Headquarters from the "Zero Board" (that is the board that Sargent Hunter ran and all of the Division telephone lines ran in and out of there) We were given a map with the towns location and we were on the way with the big wire truck. Sergeant Heatrick and I were in the jeep leading and the rest of the eight members of the team were working with the wire keeping it away from vehicle traffic that would tear it up. After a while the Sergeant said that we would go ahead and pick out a building in the town that would be a good place for the switchboard.

When we approached the town we discovered that there were only about 25 to 30 houses and several out buildings there. We immediately noticed that every house had a large white flag hanging out of a 2nd story window. I said to Heatrick, "I guess they wanted the American troops to know for sure that they had surrendered." We did not see even one person outdoors. We did see some window curtains parted with someone peeking out. We choose a building on the street for the switchboard. It appeared to be some kind of a store or meeting house for the residents. By choosing that one we did not have to interrupt a family in their home. Then we went to show the rest of our team what we had chosen. As we rounded a bend on the road back we saw a whole batch of helmeted GI's. They all hit the ground with rifles pointed at us.... What a shock!!! I stopped the jeep and almost stood it on its headlights. We both waved both arms and yelled, "Americans!!!, Friends!!!, 106th Division!!!! Don't shoot!!!" and anything else that entered our mind to let them know who we were. They quickly recognized that we were not the enemy and that put a smile on our faces.

In the lead of the company were four men with mine sweepers who had been sweeping the road for mines. It turned out that this town had never been re-taken by American troops. This company was told that the Germans had planted hundreds of mines every where as they retreated. They were carefully sweeping the road and shoulders before anyone walked on it. We told them that if the jeep hadn't hit any there probably weren't any, but as we drove away their sweeping continued.

We encountered our wire truck a short distance down the road. We all had a big laugh about the fact that Sergeant Hetterick and Pfc. Reed had single-handedly re-captured the town. A fact that is still my only "claim to fame" to this day.

I did not know it at the time but my combat experiences and fears of violent death ended at Hunnengen, Belgium. A few days later I was called by my company commander and told that I was to have a furlough to England. I would be picked up on the 13th of March. It took me no time to pack and get ready.

The continuing tale of my trip to England and the rest of my adventures in Europe with the 106th Infantry Division will probably be continued in another document.

I am sure that some mistakes in dates, places, and circumstances that I have written

about are inaccurate. It may be because I was misinformed at the time about some of the happenings. Contradictory rumors were spread every day. A story told to me long ago and repeated as "You Are There" may have been exaggerated by those that were there. But both you and I must remember that all that I have written about happened in 1944 and 1945. That is 61 years ago. As I finish this story today is the 15th of December 2005. Exactly 61 years ago tomorrow was the 16th of December, 1944, the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, and day one, of my war experience. I can count four times in Belgium when the ending of my life was postponed. Whether it was by the grace of God or luck, cannot be determined, but I knew each time it happened and I was only 19 years old.

Most of my story was from my vivid memory. It was supplemented only by a list of dates and places written in a booklet 3 1/2 by 4 1/2 inches that I found when my company was billeted in a hotel in Bad Ems, Germany. It was originally supposed to hold photographs and was very flimsy. I don't know how it stayed together and readable. I carried it in my pocket with other folded papers all the rest of the time I spent in Europe, from May to October 1945.



Page last revised

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