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Limited Duty Assignment in World War II
424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division



Schober graduated from Northwestern University in 1940, but was classified 4-F by his draft board, because of eyesight. He was drafted into "Limited Service" in December 1942 and spent his time as a typist after taking basic training.

In July 1944 Schober was sent to the 106th Division as an infantry replacement due to the fact that infantrymen from that Division had been sent overseas.

Schober describes his administrative experiences, his lack of opportunity to go to O.C.S and his trip overseas with the 106th in late fall 1944.

Attack on Manhay, Christmas Day, 1944

After a week of fighting in the area of St Vith, Belgium, at the onset of the Battle of the Bulge, German forces had compressed the Americans defenders into an oval-shaped area which became identified as the *"Fortified goose egg."*

My unit, Company "F", 424th Regiment reached a position in the woods well north of Manhay in the area of Werbomont, as darkness approached on the 23rd December. We had not had a decent meal in a week, we hadn't had shelter from the weather and we weren't able to get more than a few hours of sleep here and there during the preceding week. Because we had retreated many miles, we had difficulty accepting the fact that the Germans were still near at hand, not realizing that our withdrawal was largely parallel to the German thrust. At any rate we were miserably cold on that night of the 23rd December – it was cold enough for the drinking water in my canteen to be a solid block, around zero. To get some sleep a number of brush fire were started by the troops, not exactly a brainy decision in a combat area, but nothing came of it and we did get sleep.

Colonel Dupuy in *"St. Vith Lion in the Way"* reports thusly, *"It was a battered, disgruntled, groggy aggregation which finally found billets and bivouacs up in the vicinity of Werbomont during the night of 23 December. But for the 424th Infantry, dead on its collective feet, there was only the windswept, snow-covered wooded area around Houssonloge, north of the Werbomont crossroads. No wonder that Reid, the regimental commander, to this day sets his jaw in bitterness when he talks about it – What did they*

do? They did what might be expected – they chopped down trees and lit fires to bring some warmth into their frozen bones. Damn the enemy! Damn the blackout! After all, there's a limit to what flesh and blood can stand. And Reid approved."

December 24th, Christmas Eve, dawned beautifully. Blue sky was showing and the sun which we hadn't seen in some time, perhaps since we landed on the Continent, was dazzling us by its appearance. The clear weather was extremely important to us because it gave Allied planes an opportunity to bring destruction to the enemy. The German tank columns had been able to make their huge penetrations without the interference of our planes for the entire first week of their attack.

The sun's appearance had a great buoying effect. The next lift was from the opportunity of the first shave since early December. A woman in a farm house near the bivouac area offered "*eau chaude*" (hot water) and the use of her kitchen for shaving. I had barely dampened my face and daubed on lather, when the woman came dashing in screaming, "*La Boche, la Boche, la Boche!*" I grabbed my rifle and ran outside, lather dripping down my face. Overhead a formation of B-17's was moving east on a mission over Germany. And then I noticed several parachutes descending from a very high altitude. What the woman had guessed were German paratroopers were in fact the crew of a B-17 which had been disabled – back to the shaving chore, and all's well on Christmas Eve in 1944, or so I thought!

Later, sometime after dark on Christmas Eve, some higher authority must have taken sympathy on the rugged lifestyle we had been following and had us trucked into a nearby village, probably Werbomont, where we were quartered in homes for our first protection from the weather elements since the German offensive started. We sacked out on the floor, crawling into our sleeping bags. We had barely pulled up the bag zippers and started to doze off when all hell broke loose – "*Everybody up – we've got to move out quickly – the Germans have broken through our lines.*" The absolute disgust of tired men is hard to project. Profanity, cursing, oaths floated through the air. Stumbling outside in the coldness of night, we were loaded into trucks of the 7th Armored Division and headed south in the direction of the important road junction of Manhay. We were dropped off on the highway, perhaps a mile north of Manhay. We walked a short distance down the road and then cut off into the woods on the west side of the Liege highway. Still in somewhat of a stupor and cursing the bad luck and once again being denied a decent night's sleep, we were brought back to reality by Captain Cassidy's screaming that the Germans may be coming over the nearby hills at any moment and we had better start digging foxholes. I was very confused as to what was going on, and it wasn't until months later that I became aware of the fact.

It seems that the 2nd SS Panzer Division had commenced an attack at 9:00 p.m. Christmas Eve in the direction of Manhay. The German tank column had a captured American Sherman tank in the lead. The 7th Armored Division defenders had assumed the column was the American 3rd Armored Division which was known to be changing its positions. When the Germans suddenly began firing the surprise was absolute and the 7th Armored fell back in chaotic state. The Germans captured Manhay; the fear of American commanders was that they would head north toward Liege and, in the process, outflank American positions. Hence the hurry-up alert in bring us to the vicinity of Manhay to thwart a northern thrust from the Germans.

So here we were in the early morn of Christmas Day, 1944, digging foxholes as protection against the German onslaught which never came. We dug and anxiously watched the nearby hills for signs of the enemy. Hours passed, nothing happened and we began to wonder if our leadership knew what was going on.

With such inactivity, we were told to move closer to Manhay at midday and we were treated to a bombing exhibition. We could see American P-38 fighter planes, those with the distinctive twin fuselages, dropping bombs in the hazy outline of the village of Manhay. Our visibility of the targets was poor, but we later learned that the planes were zeroing in on panzers of the 2nd SS Panzer Division.

We didn't know it then, but Major General Ridgeway, our corps commander, had ordered Brigadier General Hasbrouck, of the 7th Armored Division, to retake Manhay by darkness on Christmas day! In the mid-afternoon we learned that our 2nd Battalion of the 424th Regiment and units of the 7th Armored Division were selected for this task. We were given no briefing as to objectives or anything else, but merely told to lighten up for the attack, that is, to leave such things as sleeping bags behind to improve our mobility.

We moved out along the edge of the tree line in a single file on the high ground. In the process of this movement, the activity was noticed by the Germans who started some machine gun firing, not too intense, but enough for a couple of men to receive leg wounds.

It was late afternoon, in twilight, that we reached the positions from which we were to begin our attack. Word was given for us to emerge from the woods and begin our race downhill across open farmland toward houses along the main highway. As we began our attack and picked up running speed, not a shot was fired by the Germans. Our confidence increased as momentum picked up, and whooping and hollering started, with the troops firing wildly to the front. It was as if we were playing a game of *"cowboys and Indians."* The open area that we were traversing was 300-500 yards in my recollection, and the only cover provided along that route in our area was a sunken farm road cutting across the fields. I remember running down on to the road and up the mound on the other side with barely a pause. Still no fire from the enemy. But then, about 30 yards behind, it started. Rapid fire machine guns began their stutter and traversed the field from my right across my front. It wasn't difficult to spot their source because of their use of tracer bullets whose entire trajectory could be followed.

Forward movement stopped as if by command, and we hit the ground. Thirty or 40 feet ahead my squad leader, Mike Jerosky, was hit as he reached a wire fence 100-150 feet behind the house toward which I was moving. George Evansco, close to Jerosky, also was hit but much more seriously. I'll never forget his screams for a medic followed by the words, *"I'm dying!"*

As I lay on the ground trying to be as inconspicuous as possible in the absence of a hole to crawl into, many thoughts go through my mind – What do I do now? – Do I docilely take the enemy's fire without retaliation – Isn't it my duty to fire my rifle – After all, I

know where the enemy's fire is coming from because of the tracers. So I slowly bring my rifle to firing position and fire the eight rounds in a clip toward the source of the tracers. By now it is quite dark and I have no idea of the effect of my fire, but then the Germans fire a flare high into the air. It looks as bright as the morning sun and seems to take an eternity to descend to the ground to be extinguished. I guess it drops on a parachute principle to extend its life, but at any rate it appears so bright that I feel certain that all enemy eyes are focused on me and that I must even minimize breathing to appear completely motionless, expecting the "*coup de grace*" at any moment.

When darkness again settles over the area, I feel I have to do something to improve my position. But then an artillery barrage starts, and I didn't know if it was German or American fire. I'm now convinced it was so-called "*friendly fire*." The shells land behind me and they are not coming from my front. Fear again enters my heart as I lie completely exposed. I don't know how close the shells are landing but the ground is trembling as I hug it as tightly as I can. When the shelling subsides I crawl over to the only soldier I see. I don't remember his name, but he is in the same squad as I. He says that he felt something hit his shoulder. I look at it and see that his field jacket is tattered at the shoulder but no bleeding is in evidence. I ask him if he swallowed any "*wound tablets*." He says "*no*," so I give him some, along with water from my canteen.

Then I suggest that we make a run for it back to the recessed dirt road that is some 30 yards behind us. He agrees and we get up and run as far as we can, expecting machine gun fire to sweep the area; it doesn't happen as we reach and collapse on the sunken road. We see no other men from our company and learn later that the order to withdraw was given which never reached us. Dozens of wounded men are on the road and the medics are doing what they can to alleviate their pain. We assist in moving the men on makeshift stretchers to bring them closer together for eventual evacuation. It is very cold out and the wounded keep asking for blankets or something to keep them warm. I have no idea where the rest of our company has gone but I suggest to my fellow squad member that we walk toward the area and see if we can find anyone. No one is in sight as we come to a road, but a short distance away we spot a house. We have no idea who might be inside, friend or foe. We rap on the door and see the front window shade slowly curl up as a soldier's face appears. Thank God, it's an American. The door opens and we see perhaps eight or ten men sleeping on the floor. We prostrate ourselves, alerted periodically by the sound of vehicles passing in the night, wondering who they might be. We hardly give thought that this is our observance of Christmas as we fade off to sleep.

Manhay had not been captured by us, but the Germans withdrew, so for the night it was a "*No man's land*." One of our wounded who rejoined our company months later, said a German patrol came through the area where the wounded were lying and an English-speaking member of the patrol told them the Germans were withdrawing and that they could expect help from the Americans soon. This seemed rather remarkable to me since our opponents in this area were an SS panzer division, and compassion is something not generally associated with the SS.

The 106th Infantry Division history describes the action at Manhay in this manner:

"Colonel Reid of the 424th Infantry, called upon on Christmas Day for a battalion to work with CCA, 7th Armored, immediately chose Lieutenant Colonel Umanoff's 2nd Battalion which had come out of the previous fighting in better shape than the others... The battalion attacked in a column of companies... It was a nasty business. From cellars turned into pillboxes in both Manhay and Grandmenil, the Krauts were throwing a knee-high crossfire of machine guns. The attack got within 50 yards of Manhay, could go no further. As darkness fell the battalion was ordered to withdraw on the high ground on hill 522, 2000 yards north of Grandmenil... Umanoff's outfit was badly mauled. 'Thirty-five percent casualties' is the estimate of Lieutenant Robert Logan, Battalion S-3. What had been the strongest battalion in the regiment was now cut to ribbons."

Today, if you visit the northern edge of Manhay on the main highway to Liege, you will see a marker which indicates the furthest point of German penetration in the Bulge and I have the satisfaction of knowing that I contributed to the location of that marker.

Source: Bulge Bugle May 2002

*<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/592-attack-on-manhay-christmas-day-1944.html>
Henri REGISTER, webmaster*