



The 314th infantry moving into Germany in March, 1945

The War As I Knew It

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IainMac Publishers

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Preface

A couple of things come immediately to mind about my times in combat during the war. While certain memories are still very clear as are the sights, sounds and smells of war, much of what happened was routine and repetitive. Many moments were spent behind the wheel of a truck on the move, digging fox holes, or setting up our guns in preparation for firing missions which often didn't happen. But when things got hot they got very hot.

Secondly, in thinking about where I was at any point in time and what was going on in a larger sense was very difficult. In retrospect, history provides detailed maps and documents the strategy of battles and entire campaigns across broad fronts often in extreme detail but this was not my perspective. My war was always right in front of me surrounded by fields, woods, inside ravaged buildings, and always through difficult terrain. Each episode and each action took place as a local event with little understanding of what was going on outside my immediate area. This was true for me throughout the war and even relative to the other units associated with the 79th division. Timelines and locations were blurred and it wasn't until subsequent reading of historical accounts years later that I realized where I had been and what the "big picture" really was.

I was very fortunate not to experience and relive the traumatic moments of war over and over again in my mind after the war

ended. I made a conscious effort to put the war behind me as quickly as possible after it ended and go forward with my life. This was not easy for many men. It wasn't until over 50 years later that I began to open up and actively talk about some of the events I write about. This coincided with attending reunions of the regiments associated with the 79th division beginning in the 1990's. My wife Joan and I attended many of these reunions and also made two trips back to France with tour groups. We visited some of the villages and locations from my past in such places as Omaha Beach, La Haye-de-Puit, Mantes-Gassicourt on the Seine, and the Alsace regions near Hatten.

Years later I carried on correspondence with the Mohler family who were residents of Blamont (Lorraine Region, France). They sent me portions of the diary kept by the Mayor of Blamont, France covering the last months of the war before the liberation of Blamont. I have enclosed a translation of this fascinating material in the appendix. Blamont was occupied by Germans for over four years before being liberated by the 79th division in November, 1944. One of the tragedies of war is the toll of deprivation and devastation inflicted on civilians and their communities during these times. The people of Blamont suffered much during the war and no more acutely then during the last weeks of their occupation.

Chapter One

My life before the war

“I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American People” - Franklin D. Roosevelt

Before going into the service I had another life. Looking back on those days and remembering events from that time tell a story, my story, complete with many priceless memories. These few pages are but some of the recollections from my life that spanned the period from the ‘roaring twenties’ through the desperation of the dust bowl years and the great depression of the 1930’s. These were the years between the two great world wars of the 20th century. By the time I turned 18 and had graduated from high school World War Two had broken out in Europe and, in just a few short years, my world would be forever changed.

I was born in 1921 in Bandon, Oregon three years after the end of World War One. My father managed a Pet Milk factory in Bandon. When I was about two years old we moved to Delavan, Wisconsin where I was to spend the next 18 years. My father took a position as an advertising and sales manager for the Delavan-based Bradley Knitting Company. My mother’s family, who were long-time residents of the Delavan community, was a principle in the Bradley Company. Bradley manufactured knitted dresses and sportswear,

and was a successful company with a national reputation until the stock market crash of 1929 devastated the country and threw it into a deep depression. The Bradley Company was to hold on for a few more years but eventually went bankrupt and was sold prior to the start of World War Two.

My Dad's family resided in the East in New York and New Jersey. My grandparents lived in Missouri where my Dad was born in 1896. His family eventually moved to the Chicago area before finding its way East during the World War One era.

Mother, whose maiden name was Tyrrell, had been married for a short time prior to meeting my father and had a daughter by that marriage, my sister Marion. Marion was five years older than me. My Mother and Father were to have three other children after I was born. My brother Jim was four years younger, and sisters Jean and Ann were several years younger than Jim. Ann was the youngest of five children and was born after my sister Jean died of pneumonia around 1930. I have a vivid memory of watching Jean try to come down the stairs in the Latimer house where we lived during the 1930's. She had gotten out of her bed and was trying to negotiate the steps when my mother took her back upstairs. She died the next day from complications of her disease. Later both my Grandmother and Grandfather Tyrrell were to die in our home. These events were especially hard on my mother since she was their only care giver. There were no rest homes or other facilities for terminally ill people

in those days. Families had to take care of their own. Mother's help and comfort during these times came from her friends.

In 1934 when I was about 13 my father decided to go into the chicken business and he did it first class. He installed a brooder house and pens in back of the Latimer house for raising baby chicks which we got by mail. They were big New Hampshire Reds weighing about 5 lbs. when fully grown. We raised them for their eggs and for meat, and had a good little business going. My dad however soon lost interest in the project and I was left with the responsibility of running the whole operation myself. I did this for the next 2 years. Feeding, cleaning pens, culling, egg gathering and butchering were some of the everyday chores I had. My brother Jim helped some too but he was only 9 at the time and not really interested to any degree. At every chance I could, I spent my free time with my dogs of which I had five or six at any one time. I had two hunting dogs, a German Sheppard, a bulldog, a Doberman and finally a Great Dane I named Eric. Eric was a wonderful dog and my personal favorite. He would go everywhere with me.

In 1937 when I was 16, my father bought some property in Deerwood, Minnesota. I remember spending a summer up there helping to build a log cottage on this lovely little lake. I was to drive up there on more than one occasion to spend time on that lake and in the surrounding woods. A few years later, the cottage was destroyed by fire and was never rebuilt.

The depression hit every one hard. Looking back, I wonder how most people were able to survive. The railroad brought a steady stream of “hobos” through Delavan and many stopped at our door to ask for food. They all wanted to work for a meal. My mother never turned any one away hungry. These men, for the most part, were good people who were down on their luck with no jobs. They would travel from town to town by rail looking for any work that they could find. They spent their nights in hobo jungles as we called them. These were places near the railway depot so they could hitch rides when they left. Every town had one that was on a rail junction.

When President Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, one of the first things he did was put in place a public works program, called the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Every able bodied man could work on public projects created by the Government. Most jobs were menial labor but it was a great help. He also started the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for young men. This was a program where they could live in camps, often in remote areas, and help rebuild parts of our infrastructure, and improve and protect natural resources such forests, streams, rivers and dams. These programs did not end the depression, but they did provide hope for millions of people.

Roosevelt also abolished prohibition which had been instituted after World War One. Overnight taverns, night clubs and restaurants sprang up all over the country and signaled the end of

the “bath tub gin” days that had started during the 1920’s. Like magic, whiskey brands immediately appeared on the market. Brands such as Kessler’s, Seagram’s, Hiram Walker, White Horse and others were now available. I always wondered whether these brands were stock piled just waiting for probation to end. Many of these are still around today.

One of my real loves growing up was hunting and fishing. Fishing for bass and trout in many of the abundant streams and lakes in the southeastern Wisconsin area was a favorite pastime. Around the Delavan area there were many opportunities to explore the natural beauty of the woods, marshes and lakes and I took full advantage of it every opportunity that I could. The country side was beautiful and lush with wildlife and vegetation. I hunted pheasants, ducks, geese, grouse, and doves and shot hundreds of crows. At that time, there was a nickel bounty on crows. So if we shot enough of them it paid for our shells. On one occasion, my friend Bob Britt and I shot over 100 crows in one Sunday afternoon.

My best hunting dog was a springer spaniel named Spotty. He was given to me by a friend who didn't hunt but knew the dog loved to go. It was a registered dog and well trained. When I went into the service, I gave the dog to a kennel in Barrington, Ill. They knew the dog by its reputation and wanted it for stud. They said I could have the pick of the litter when I got home but I never took them up on it.

In high school sports were a large part of my extracurricular routine. I participated in both baseball and basketball, and also ran some track. Our basketball team went to the State Tournament when I was a senior. We made through the second round, but lost to Watertown in the semifinals. I never played football because it took my fall away - and that's when the hunting was best. I do remember as a senior I played one game in the spring to help out the graduates in the traditional spring game against the returning varsity players. As it turned out, the varsity was short players so I played half back for both teams. I scored three times on long runs - twice for the seniors, and once for the juniors.

Though times were tough, high school and events were fun. I had many good times especially at dances that were held at various spots after school. Because of the repeal of prohibition, Delavan and the Delavan Lake area became wide open for gaming, slots and night clubs. For some reason, Walworth County became the 'gaming capital' of Wisconsin in the 1930's. I had a job one summer at one of the clubs guarding against slot players 'slugging'

the machines - and some always tried. When I spotted a “slugger”, a bouncer was summoned and he would toss the guy out. It also became common in many business places to sell punch cards to win cash. This was similar to the lottery tickets that are sold today. After about two years though all this changed. Laws and ordinances were passed and the whole gambling era vanished. The dance halls remained however, and were still around when the War was over.

Another one of my loves was cars. I loved to tinker with them and at one point, I owned a Model T Ford, a Model A Ford roadster convertible with a rumble seat, and several other cars during the late 1930's. The Model A was my favorite. I remember that I bought it for twenty-five dollars, used of course, and drove it from 1936 until I went into service in 1942. I had the Model A when I met Joan and we had many fun times with that car.

Halloweens were big in those days, even for high school guys. No tricks or treats, just tricks. Our favorite trick (if you could call it that) was to find an outhouse or outdoor facility. Most everyone had one before indoor plumbing became available and many were still around. In fact there were still a few homes that relied on them even in the 1930's around Delavan. We would locate our target tip it over and put it on a trailer. During the evening hours we would haul it to the public library grounds and erect it on the front lawn. The trick was to not get caught, and we never did. We would also put an old 'backhouse' on top of a pile of burnable material during

Homecoming football games. However, these were always donated.

By the outbreak of the War, my sister Marion was married and living in Madison, Wisconsin. Ann who was about 11 years old lived with my mother who was working for the Government. My father, after undergoing serious back surgery in a Veterans Hospital in New York City, recuperated and joined the American Red Cross. He ultimately ended up running Red Cross clubs in both London and Paris during the war. Our paths were to cross during those years - but more about that later. When I joined the army in 1942, my brother Jim had just finished high school and immediately joined the Sea Bees. He was to spend his war duty in the South Pacific where he contracted malaria. Complications were to dog him for the rest of his life. It eventually caused his kidneys to fail and after two transplants led to his early death.

Chapter Two

The war begins

With artillery, war is made. - Napoleon Bonaparte

I can't remember where I was when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. You can talk to a hundred guys and they can all tell you that they knew exactly where they were and what they were doing. I guess I never thought about it like that. However, I did lose a good friend on the USS Arizona that day. Walter Bovial, a Delavan resident, was killed along with many, many others when the Japanese sank the ship. The City of Delavan named their American Legion post after him. Later they were to add several more names to that memorial.

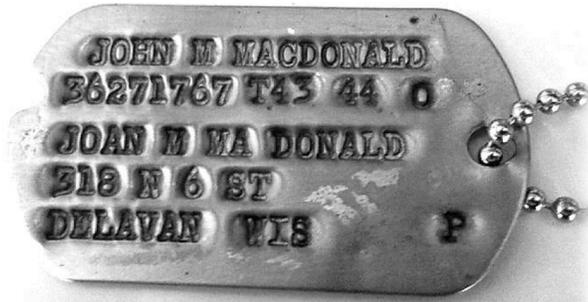
After the bombing and over the next few months a lot of guys enlisted in the service. Of course the draft was also in full swing and men were being called up every day. I immediately tried to enlist in the army air corp. I had gone into Milwaukee for my qualification testing and passed the mental part of the exam in the morning. After lunch I failed the physical part because it was discovered I had a degree of color blindness and they would not take me. It had something to do with not being able to see ground color patterns clearly from the sky. At that time I had already accumulated fifteen

or so hours in a single engine Piper Cub and I thought they were nuts for not taking me. I was never to fly a plane again after that. Needless to say, I was very disappointed but knew I would be drafted in the very near future anyway so I decided to wait to be called.



John and Joan - summer, 1942 – Wisconsin Dells

I met my wife Joan in the summer of 1942 and we got married in September, 1942. It was what a million kids about to be drafted did at that time. After receiving my draft notice, I returned once again to Milwaukee for my draft physical. There were about twenty-five of us from the Delavan area including Howard Bovial, Walter's brother. Howard and I graduated from high school together. I can still remember his army serial number because it was just one number higher than mine. After passing my physical, I was officially inducted into the army on October 5th, 1942.



My military identification tags or “dog tags”

The army immediately gave me a two week inactive leave so I wasn't officially placed on active service duty until October 19, 1942 after reporting to Ft. Sheridan, Ill. I was only at Ft. Sheridan for three days during which time I was issued my army clothing and supplies. I also learned a valuable lesson during those three days – which was that the non-commissioned officers (NCO's) really ran the show. If you wanted to stay off fatigue duty, like kitchen police, you had better not screw up when they were around. On my second day, I received my notice that I was to report to Fort Bragg, NC for basic training to become an artilleryman.

Ft. Bragg was a training center for artillerymen. The 82nd airborne division and an army ranger battalion also trained there. The basic training was not really too tough for me physically. I was in good shape when I went into the service and stood the “gaff” pretty well. Basic training did amount to a complete overhaul of my civilian

way of thinking and was good preparation for what I was ultimately to face in combat.



Basic Training – Ft. Bragg, NC - 1942

After 13 weeks of basic training at Ft. Bragg and just prior to when I was to be shipped out to a regular unit I got into an incident with another recruit. It really changed my whole future while in the service. It seems this particular recruit liked to go over to the PX after mess in the evenings and drink a lot of 3.2 beers (called near beer). One night he came back to the barracks in a rotten mood after one of his drinking bouts and started picking on an Indian friend of mine from Nebraska named Rainwater. Rainwater was only about half his size and didn't stand a chance against this guy. I didn't like this guy any way so I pushed him off Rainwater. He took a swing at me and we got in to it. I landed a lucky punch, staggered him, and cut him up pretty bad. Finally, when I knocked him down the

platoon Sergeant, who had been watching the fight, stopped it. They took him into the shower to clean him up before taking him to the medics at the post hospital. I never saw him again and learned they transferred him to another unit.

The next day I was summoned to the command post (CP) and had to face the Captain. I thought I was going to be sent to the stockade. Much to my surprise after the Captain questioned me about the fight he asked me if I would stay at Fort Bragg with the responsibility for training the next group to come into the battery. I accepted the offer and he promoted me to corporal. Before I left Ft. Bragg, he was to promote me to buck sergeant. Joan came down for a while during my second stay at Bragg. Joan's brother Allen who also entered the service as an artilleryman was ultimately to take his training at Bragg before being shipped overseas.

My next stop after Ft. Bragg was Ft. Meade, Maryland. The 29th infantry division trained at Ft. Meade and I was to have some connection with them later on. Meade was actually a marshaling area for troops before receiving assignment to a regular outfit. I liked being at Ft. Meade. Joan was living with my mother in nearby Hyattsville Md. and my first son John Jr. was there with her. We had many good times and met several people who were to stay life-long friends. Trips into Washington were especially fun because there was much to see and many places to go. I remember our favorite hangout was a place called the 400 Club. They had

entertainment, good food and featured big bands. The dancing was great plus you could always find someone you knew to buddy up with.



My Staff Sergeant Insignia

My Captain at Meade was a great guy. After I was there for a short period, the Captain promoted me to Staff Sergeant. I was to spend a lot of time with him and two other young line officers. They taught me a lot about gunnery and leadership, and wanted me to go through officers training and get my commission. To me being a NCO and a Staff Sergeant seemed like the best job in the army because you had control over a lot of situations. Only one other NCO in a battery out ranked you and that is the First Sergeant. After much thought, I decided not to pursue officers training.

Chapter Three

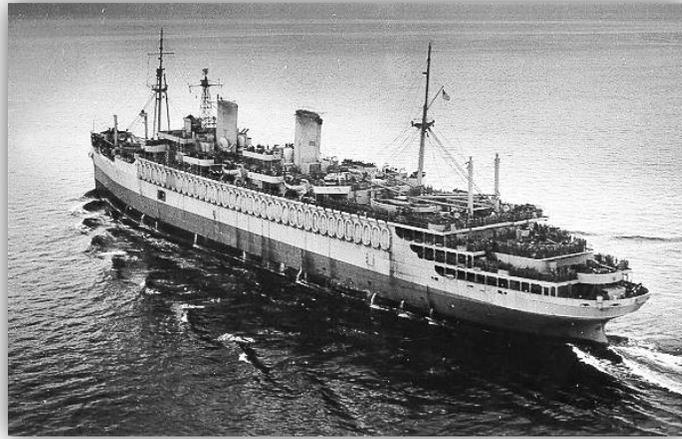
Shipping out

"The Guns, Thank God, The Guns..." - Rudyard Kipling

In May of 1944, I got my overseas orders and was immediately sent to Norfolk, Virginia where I boarded the USS Wakefield the same day I arrived. There were about 15,000 GI's crowded onto the ship when we left port. We filled the various decks and were stacked like cordwood in hammocks which were slung six deep, one on top of the other. I ended up on the highest sling on one of the rows right next to a loud speaker. The sound from that speaker about drove me nuts because it was always blaring in my ear.

The only time I had ever been on the sea prior to this was on a fishing trip with my uncle Ted – my dad's brother. I got seasick then and I did this time too. From the time the ship got out of the harbor until it docked in Liverpool, England, I was uncomfortable. The Wakefield had been converted from being one of America's largest luxury liners to troop carrier before the war started. However, the conditions on the ship were lousy. You couldn't use the head because all the johns were plugged up with two feet or so of foul water sloshing around on the floors. The stench was overwhelming! I found ways to relieve myself after I discovered what my steel helmet was really for. I can't remember eating much

on whole seven day trip over because I had to stay prone most of the time to avoid getting sick.



The USS Wakefield - Between April, 1944 and February, 1946, the Wakefield transported 110,563 troops to Europe.

One stormy night with rough seas, I got caught out on the deck. I had felt ill and couldn't make it back to my bunk so I headed for the rail. There was another guy in the same predicament that I was in standing next to me on the rail. After a bit we noticed each other. Talk about coincidences, there stood Harry McSorely who was also from Delavan. Harry and I had known each other all of our lives having grown up together. We were both pretty sick but we promised to meet up later on when we got to our destination. It never happened though and I wasn't to see him again until after the war was over.

The Wakefield landed in Liverpool, and after debarking, we immediately boarded trucks for a long drive through Wales and into Southern England to our marshaling area near South Hampton. We were quartered in metal dome shaped huts for about three days when I received a message to report to the dayroom. Standing there to my surprise to greet me was my dad. I hadn't seen him for a long while and had lost track of him. My mother and father had divorced a few years earlier and my father had remarried. I found out that he had tried to enlist in the service but was turned down for being too old (he was in his late 40's at that time). So instead he joined the American Red Cross and was assigned to run a large club in London. I never did know exactly how he located me but it was a happy time for me to say the least. Dad got me an overnight pass somehow and we painted the town red that night!

On June 5th, 1944, all the men in my replacement encampment were loaded onto English Lorries and trucked a short distance to the coast of England where we were immediately loaded onto British transport ships waiting in the harbor. At the time none of us knew where we were going and no one told us what was about to happen. That night the ship left the dock and sailed out into the English Channel. We thought we were heading for the French coast. Early the next morning our transport was anchored about 2-3 miles from the French coast. Those of us who had field glasses and were allowed out on deck were able to gain some measure of perspective of what was unfolding on the beaches throughout the morning.

Later, in the afternoon, we got the word to get ready to embark. I do not remember hearing an announcement over the ship's intercom, nor officially being told that we were actually headed onto Omaha beach. Only later was I to learn the events of that momentous day in our history.

Chapter Four

Normandy and Northern France

Above Omaha Beach - June 6 1944

"Our artillery . . . The Germans feared it almost more than anything we had." - Ernie Pyle "Brave Men", 1944

We were all digging foxholes as fast as we could now because we had no idea what was going on except for the noise and reality of war all around us. An hour earlier, on the morning of June 6th, 1944, a Higgins boat had brought us ashore in about the 6th wave to hit the beach. The boat held about thirty men or so. We got on the boat from our transport ship by climbing down a rope net with all our personal gear. When the Higgins boat hit the beach the front end was dropped and we scrambled ashore as fast as we could. There was only moderate fighting on the beach at this point because it had been secured. The first waves of the infantry had fought their way up and over the bluffs capturing the German pill boxes and bunkers above on the bluffs before moving inland a few miles.



The scene above Omaha Beach – June 6, 1944

I was an artilleryman replacement with the 29th infantry division along with the others who had not received assignments to a regular outfit. We had no idea what to expect now that we were here at a replacement depot that had only been set up a short time earlier. Since my training was as an artilleryman, I realized quickly that I would have to learn the hard way if I was to survive. As we moved off the beach, I saw firsthand the price we had paid to secure it. I have always had somewhat of a guilty feeling about what I saw that day and made a conscious effort to really not reflect on it - but of course that was impossible. Others have described this horrific scene in great detail and much better than I would ever want to do.

After we dug in the officer in charge called the NCO's together and we were instructed to form squads to go out on patrols to secure the area. Since I was a Staff Sergeant, he assumed I knew what I was doing and sent our squad toward where the fighting was. Other

squads went out in different directions. We immediately moved out and after going a short distance came to a thick, near impenetrable mound of dense entangled vegetation, called a hedgerow. I was later to learn firsthand these were a dominant feature of the Normandy countryside. I was the first one over and immediately came upon the bodies of two dead American GIs. In the middle of the field in front of me lay the body of a dead German soldier. As I looked down at the two fallen GI's, I thought how small they looked in death and how still they were.

By now the other members of the patrol had joined me and I split the patrol into two groups moving up along the flanking hedgerows. We were fully alerted to reality of where we were by now and on the lookout for the unexpected. An hour or so later we returned to the camp area and reported the location of the dead American soldiers and that our area was all clear.

I have often reflected on what I had seen during these first hours. It made a lasting impression on me and to this day whenever I think about the war, seeing the carnage on the beach and those two dead soldiers are some of the first things I remember. At the time, it seemed to trigger a different reaction in me about the situation I was in – a sort of ‘it’s either them or me’ attitude which never fully left me even to this day. Thinking like this prepared me for survival and I knew I could and would shoot a man in a combat if and when faced with this situation.



The French Cross of Lorraine - symbol of the 79th

After about two weeks, I received orders of my transfer to the 79th division and the 311th field artillery battalion. Whereas I landed as a replacement in the 29th division on June 6th on Omaha Beach, the 79th landed on June 15th on Utah Beach. They quickly deployed and moved immediately into combat in the Cotentin Peninsula (also known as the Cherbourg Peninsula). It took me several days to catch up with the 79th by jeep and I joined the 311th field artillery right after the fall of Cherbourg around June 27th.

My first thoughts were concerns for how I would measure up. I knew I was to take over command of a gun section where their gun sergeant had been busted for leaving his duty post and dereliction of duty. The only artillery experience I had to date was through my training in the States. I did know gunnery and was well trained while at Ft. Bragg and Ft. Meade and this placed me in good standing - for I quickly found out that most of the members of my new section were not as well versed on the subject.

The battery executive officer took me down to the gun section when I arrived and introduced me to the men. I sensed that besides the normal reservations anyone would have under the circumstances, there was some animosity as well. So after the officer had left I held a brief meeting with the men. I put it to them like this. They could ask for a transfer to another section or stay put with the men they knew and had trained with but only if they accepted the situation as it was. There was to be no undermining or club-house lawyering. If this happened, I would make the decision for them and they would be gone. They all agreed to stay and after this initial meeting it was smooth sailing for the duration. The gunner corporal had thought that he should have been promoted to section chief since he been in charge while the previous sergeant had been goofing off. He had a point and he was an outstanding gunner and leader, well-liked by the men. However, the war went on and after a short period of time it seemed as though we had been together from the start.

At the onset the 79th was attached to the First Army. After liberating Cherbourg, we moved south along the right flank of the First Army's push into the heart of Normandy. We immediately became bogged down in the thick hedgerow country making the going slow and tough. My first fire mission occurred just outside of La Haye-du-Puits in Normandy. The battery was laying down fire so that our infantry could push forward and capture the town. There was extremely heavy fighting here as the Germans put up a stiff

resistance and had defenses set up at most every hedgerow. Casualties were high with the 79th infantry bearing the brunt of the battle.

We had heard a rumor that a Frenchman on a bicycle had pedaled through the lines out to one of our other artillery positions and reported that the enemy had been using a church steeple in the village as an observation post. Their guns supposedly blew the steeple off the church. I never knew if the rumors were true or not but 56 years later, in July of 2000, Joan and I visited the village. We were touring with other members of the 79th division. This church was still standing and one of its twin steeples was indeed missing. I asked our guide why they didn't repair the steeple. His response was startling. He said they wanted to leave it that way as a reminder that the Village was liberated by the Americans, and as memorial to the 79th infantry division. Could those rumors about the bicyclist have been true?



The missing steeple – La Hayes-du-Puits

In La Hayes-du-Puits, I saw my first French village in total ruin from the severe aerial bombing and artillery shelling. To this day, it is amazing to me that we were welcomed as liberators. This scene, unfortunately, was to play out numerous times before the war ended.

Background: After several weeks of hard fighting in Normandy, the 79th was reassigned to General Patton's 3rd army. Patton's mission was to push forward at a rapid pace using his tank corps to drive hard and fast into the heart of France. In quick order, the 3rd army broke out of the hedgerow country of Normandy. The 79th division was to earn the respect of friend and foe alike after liberating town after town in the race to the Seine River. When it became known that the Germans were vulnerable and had no reserves to protect their southern flank, Patton split his army sending part of it west toward Brest to cut off the Brest peninsula and the other half east along the German flank capturing Laval and Le Mans in quick succession. The Germans were late to see the trap being set and their Army was in danger of being encircled and cut off by Patton pinching from the South and the British, Canadians and the American 1st army from the North. Some of Patton's troops, including the 79th division, continued flanking the retreating German forces and moved at a rapid pace toward the Seine River reaching the key crossing junction at Mantes, north of Paris.

The combined Allied forces shut the door on the trap and decimated much of the German army before capturing tens of thousands in an area known as the Falaise Gap. The remaining German forces that escaped were in full retreat back toward Germany.



The 79th division – first unit to cross the Seine River - pontoon bridge
on the Seine at Mantes – August 22, 1944

Crossing the Seine River at Mantes

After the breakout, we moved at such a rapid pace that frequently we would barely be able to set up our guns when orders came through to pull out again and move forward. When we reached the Seine, the Germans had blown out the bridge just ahead of our arrival. Our engineers quickly constructed another one so we could get our infantry and artillery across. There were long lines of tanks, trucks, half-tracks and every kind of equipment imaginable waiting on the only road leading to the bridge waiting to cross over. The road had only a single lane so progress was very slow. Immediately, German aircraft arrived in force to blow out the bridge again. Our columns were strafed continuously by their planes as we waited in line. A German ME109 fighter plane hit our column just as we were about to go over the river. We all jumped out of the truck and hit the ditch. The German plane scored a direct hit on an ordinance truck directly behind us in the column and it exploded. He missed the bridge though and we scrambled over safely.

Once across the Seine our battery was located in an open field about a mile or so from the bridge. We didn't have a clue as to what was going on or where our lines were. The position we were in was exposed with no cover whatsoever. The German planes kept coming trying to knock out the bridge. They would make a pass, drop their bombs then turn and run for cover. The skies overhead were filled with planes. By now our P51 Mustangs and P47 Thunderbolts were

in the action as well as our anti-aircraft batteries which were located on the other side of the river. The trouble was the German planes were making their runs then turning right overhead before heading out. The spent rounds from our anti-aircraft 'ack-ack' were landing on our position and we took several minor casualties.

The air battles over the Seine were ferocious. We saw several ME109s go down. The one I remember the most happened right over our heads. A P51 got on the tail of ME109 and chased it until we almost lost sight of the planes. Then we saw black smoke as the ME109 peeled off and went down. The Mustang returned back over us and wagged his wings as he passed over. We all stood up and cheered. In July of 2000, when Joan and I visited the area, I learned that the French had recently recovered a German ME109 in a heavily wooded area near where we were at that time and where we saw the ME109 go down. It was still mostly intact and the remains of the pilot were still in the aircraft.

While the fighting above the Seine was intense, the Germans had fortified their positions so that they could prevent us from getting our material across the river. It was a massive defensive effort on their part. The Germans were outstanding at setting up holding actions and it was never demonstrated any better than on the Seine.

After the incident with the air battles, our gun positions were moved closer to our lines in a more protected area. We were now in

a partially wooded setting but only a quarter of a mile or so from our infantry with the river immediately to our rear. We had just got our howitzers set into position when we received our first fire mission. The ensuing battles were intense and didn't let up for three days. We were using only two or three powder bags per each round fired where normally we would have used at least five or seven. The reason for this was because the enemy was so close that our shells were being lobed over our own infantry mortar style. By the end of the first day we had a mountain of clipped off powder bags that had been thrown behind our gun. It would have been curtains for the crew if an enemy shell had burst on the pile. We cleaned them up as fast as we could and when we could. The pile of brass casings left over from fired rounds was also moved as best as we could. I didn't keep count of the number of rounds fired but would estimate our gun fired at least three hundred. We fired so fast that the barrels of the howitzers glowed from the heat generated by the blasts. By the end of the second day the heat caused the barrel of my gun to break down. The rotating bands on the shells were coming off causing the shells to wobble and go off course. So I had to pull my gun out of action. Our crew pitched in and immediately helped out the other sections until the action subsided at the end of the third day.

When the battle ended there were lots of prisoners taken. We could see them being marched to the rear back across the river but it was time to clean up our site which we did. We used the powder from some clipped powder bags to make smokeless fires and wash

out our socks and underwear in our steel helmets. After we did this one of our guys who was supposed to have been on guard duty returned with a dozen eggs and we took what grease we had saved and started cooking scrambled eggs in a helmet. About that time the Colonel showed up and I thought he was going to bust me for sure. It seems there was a no fire order out and he took exception to the cooking. I explained to him that the powder burned smokeless and that we did it all the time mainly to keep our socks clean to prevent fungus infections and other maladies. I was stretching it a bit but about that time the eggs were ready so I served him a helping out of my mess kit. He liked them and later told the Captain as much.

The steel helmet each soldier was issued was supposed to be for protection. The most popular use however was for sitting on during breaks. We used it for heating water, doing laundry, taking sponge baths, and of course cooking. One thing we never did was to keep the chin strap on the helmet fastened. I never saw a front-line soldier with his fastened. The word was that if you took a close artillery burst, the concussion from the blast would lift your helmet up with your head. I never tested the theory but did see dead German soldiers with their helmet straps fastened.

My gun was damaged and the only way to fix it was to replace the tube. The Ordnance depot in the rear would have parts so they ordered me to take the gun back which I did. I was gone for three days during which time I found a new tube and had it retrofitted on

my gun. I got back to the battery just as we were ready to move out again and make another dash across northern France all the way to the Belgium border. There were only pockets of opposition at this point as the bulk of the remaining German forces had retreated back to their border. We covered the distance in record setting time in what was to become the fastest troop movement up to that point in history. We were only forced to stop because Patton's tanks had reached the end of their fuel supply. At this point, many of us were given passes to Liege and Brussels and we took advantage of it. I went into Brussels and spent time visiting several museums.

Chapter Five

Lorraine Campaign

August to November, 1944

The work for giants...to serve well the guns! - Walt Whitman

After a few days to retrofit we were on the move again, this time toward the south and west in the direction of Nancy and Metz. The city of Metz was a mess and was in shambles. Heavy tank battles and infantry engagements resulted in its' destruction. Our unit did not get in there, but we heard the stories from some of the men that did.

We passed through Rheims the champagne capital of the world. Needless to say we stocked up plenty even though I personally never really liked the stuff. Outside of Rheims, our prime mover (a truck that carried our ammunition) developed a vapor lock and just stopped on the road atop of a hill. There we sat while the entire column moved on. I was told where the battery was going so we could find them after we got our truck moving again. Some of the guys started in on the champagne and after a while began shooting the insulators off the telephone wires with their M1 carbines. Here we sat with a load of ammo on the truck and half the men getting loaded. Out of nowhere a ME109 appeared and took a pass at us. We all hit the ditch expecting the worst but except for one or two

machine gun bullets that hit the side of the truck he missed us clean and made no more passes at us. Shortly after that, the truck started again and we took off.



The “deuce-and-a-half” was the “prime mover”
for the 105mm howitzer.

It was too late to find the battery that day so we holed up in a vacant French school which was also occupied by a British re-con unit of three men. We didn't have any rations but noticed that the Brits were eating some of our lend lease chow. We asked them to share it with us but they didn't want to do it at first. So we broke out the champagne and made an exchange, alcohol for “K” rations. They still had “C” rations and didn't go hungry. The next morning we saddled up and took off again finding our outfit about noon.

When we got to Joinville we got much needed rest, showers and new clothing. Also replacements for the infantry were brought up to

fill out the ranks to division strength again. We had a few days of free time so we went into the local Red Cross club which had been set up shortly before we got there. I signed in and the name on the roster just before mine startled me. It was Meredith Knilians, a boy from Delavan. I looked all over but couldn't find him anywhere in the club. Meredith was a tanker in Patton's armored corps. On the second floor of the building I heard some music and went up to investigate. A GI was playing the piano and boy could he play! All the great tunes we all knew just kept rolling off his fingertips to a great ovation from the packed room full of soldiers. He stayed on the piano for about a half hour then left in spite of the pleadings from the audience to keep playing.

During this lull I was to run into my dad again after several months of combat in newly liberated Paris. He was now running the biggest Red Cross club in Paris. He finagled a three-day pass for me and at that time it was just what the doctor ordered. This happened just before what was to become the Vosges campaign in Alsace Lorraine. He had kept track of me all the way through the war somehow and even knew that our unit had been cut off which was something I didn't know. Dad introduced me to Bill and Mary Widney in Paris when we were invited to a party at their apartment. Mary Widney (whose maiden name was Mary Latimer) was also from Delavan, Wis. and was my mother's cousin.

It was Mary's house in Delavan that our family lived in during the 1930's. We always referred to it as the Latimer House. This home had originally been built by Mary's parents and was located adjacent to the Tyrrell family home.

The full story of the Widney's forced confinement in Paris for four years under German control after the fall of France is a fascinating one that I'll save for another time. Suffice it to say, they were captives along with about 4,000 other American expatriates. The Widney's threw a grand party that evening with plenty of musical entertainment and later took us out on the town. For a brief moment in time, the war had stopped for me. Upon my return to the firing battery, I was well stocked with bottled goods which I shared with my gun section.

Our division was now attached to the Seventh Army commanded by General Patch. We resumed our advance from Joinville heading northeast through Luneville, Foret de Parroy, Blamont, Sarrebourg, and eventually through the Saverne gap in the Vosges Mountains. The fighting through these small towns and areas was intense and some of the most vicious we were to face. The Germans fought fierce defensive holding actions before retreating to their next positions. During this time our infantry was engaged in numerous battles the worst of which were in Luneville and in the Foret de Parroy.



Destruction near the small towns of Croismare and Marainviller
Foret de Parroy – October, 1944.

The fighting to clear the Foret de Parroy lasted nearly a month. The Germans tenaciously defended every foot of this forest because this area was special and personal with Adolph Hitler himself. He had fought in the Parroy forest during World War One and demanded the Germans hold it at all costs.

Throughout this period, our unit was on the move constantly setting up fire mission after fire mission. We lost Sergeant Knight and a wire corporal who were captured during this period. One of our forward observers, Lieutenant Keys, was wounded. He never returned to the battery so we didn't know how he came out. Our infantry eventually liberated Knight about two weeks later when they overran an enemy prisoner holding camp. He was in pretty good condition, but needed to go back for observation and rest to get on a schedule again. He was to return to the unit and took over

his old job as section chief on the number 2 gun. During his absence the company had brought in a replacement for him since they had no idea Knight would be liberated and returned. The Sergeant they brought in was from Ft. Bragg and I had known him while getting basic training there. He was to stay with us for the remainder of the war.

One of several small villages we liberated during this stretch was Blamont. We could clearly see the village spread out below us on the other side of a field. I was with a forward observer team attached to Fox Co. 314Th Infantry. We were there to support our infantry with artillery fire as a prelude to an attack on the village that was held by the Germans. The enemy had an unknown number of heavy weapons to support their troops. Fox Co. was dug in below us and spread out along a wooded area and they had plenty of good cover from which to mount an attack.

We got the word from the infantry to start the barrage and the Lieutenant called in the fire mission. The heavy high explosive shells sailed in over our heads. The barrage lasted about five minutes or so and after that our infantry started to move in. We were using our field glasses to assess the damage done by the artillery when we observed the enemy leaving the village in a hurry. The towns' people were coming out of their homes waving to the Germans as they ran out the other end of the village.

Soon thereafter our infantry entered the village and the villagers were greeting the Americans much the same way as they had said goodbye to the Germans, waving and cheering. It was an amazing sight and we reasoned they were glad to see us but the feeling did not last for long. Much to our surprise, the enemy mounted a strong counter attack and after an hour of hard fighting re-took the town. We could not lay down any artillery fire for fear of hitting our own men and we had no tank support. When our troops were vacating their positions and leaving the town some of the people were actually waving goodbye to us!

At first I thought this was odd but then I reasoned that these poor devils in the town were caught between a rock and a hard place. They were not sure whom they would have to deal with, the Americans or Germans and they were covering all the bases so to speak. Later on, after our infantry retook the town and drove the Germans out for good, the same scenario played itself out again. So my assumption was probably correct.

Chapter Six

The 311th
79th Infantry Division

A battery of field artillery is worth a thousand muskets.
- **William Tecumseh Sherman**

I spent most of my war in Europe assigned to Battery C of the 311th Field Artillery Battalion. In the several weeks prior to joining the 311th, I was assigned to a replacement group leading patrols to capture prisoners just a few miles inland from Omaha Beach. My 'wave' landed on Omaha Beach in the afternoon of June 6th, 1944.

The 79th Division landed on Utah Beach on June 15th, 1944 and immediately swung into action in support of the push up the Cotentin Peninsula toward the port of Cherbourg. Shortly after the 79th landed my orders came through for reassignment to the 311th FA. I set out by jeep transport to find and join my new unit. By the time I caught up with them around June 27th or 28th, Cherbourg had fallen and the big push was about to begin down the Eastern side of the Cotentin Peninsula.

Division Organizational Structure and Artillery Operations

The 79th Infantry division was made up of three infantry regiments; the 313th, 314th and the 315th. In turn, each infantry regiment consisted of three battalions of infantry. These were numbered the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd battalion in each regiment. An infantry battalion (consisting of about 900 men or so) was in turn made up of several infantry companies, and a light weapons company with small mortars and machine guns. The infantry regiments also had other support groups including heavy weapons groups consisting of large mortars, heavy machine guns, and artillery units including short howitzers, 105mm howitzers and the “long toms” or 155mm howitzers.

My unit, the 311th field artillery (FA) battalion, was attached to the 314th infantry regiment. The 311th consisted of three firing batteries (A, B, and C) with each battery containing four 105mm howitzers (a total of twelve guns in all). Each firing battery was divided into four gun sections (numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4). My gun section was the #3 gun section of C battery. Our gun was used to adjust fire on targets for the rest of C battery during a fire mission. C battery was also the primary artillery support for the four infantry companies E, F, G and H of the second battalion of the 314th regiment. However, if called upon we would support other battalions or the entire regiment if need be.

Two other 105 mm FA battalions, the 310th and the 904th FA battalions, were attached to the 79th division and supported the 315th and 313th infantry regiments respectively. In addition, the 312th artillery battalion consisting of twelve larger 155mm howitzers supported the entire 79th division.



A 105mm howitzer gun section in action

When a battery of 105mm howitzers was placed in position to fire, each 105 was staggered to prevent being wiped out in the event enemy artillery reached the gun sites. Usual spacing between guns was about 25 to 30 yards. Ammunition was stacked behind the gun and was usually dug in time permitting. There were three types of artillery shells used; armor piercing for frontal attacks by enemy armored units, high explosive shells for contact against enemy troops and air burst shells programmed to burst over the heads of oncoming enemy troops, scattering the shell fragments downward.

Hardly ever did a battery fire at close-in targets and typically fired at ranges of one half to three miles over the heads of our own infantry.

Artillery targets were selected by the infantry to support an initiative, take out an enemy fortification, or stop an enemy offensive. Each firing battery furnished a forward observer party to go up front with an infantry unit to direct the fire on the target. The forward observer party usually consisted of the forward observer (FO), an assistant observer, a wireman and a radio operator, and sometimes one or two other men to help lay wire or relay information.

The FO picked an observation site often at or forward of the front lines to be able to see the targets and send fire commands back to a fire-control center, which in turn sent the information to whichever firing battery was needed. The battle area was previously mapped by photos from air observation and potential targets were numbered on the maps making it easy to adjust on a target when need be. If for example we spotted a German 88mm gun behind a building, the FO would find a numbered target on his map near the subject target then call for a fire mission of one round. When the shell would land he could make whatever adjustments up or down, right or left that he needed to hit the target. Once the gun got the range, the entire firing battery could lay down a barrage on top of the target.

Besides being the gun chief of the # 3 section of C battery, I was also a FO on numerous occasions throughout the war. On one such mission, the German artillery had zeroed in on our observation position and laid down a withering barrage that must have numbered into the many hundreds of rounds. The noise and destruction was unbelievable and almost unbearable. Surprisingly there were few casualties, but after the shelling the company was forced to retreat to a more defensible position. On yet another occasion the FO was badly wounded and I became the FO in his place until a new FO team came in a day later. The FO party was dangerous duty and always vulnerable to enemy guns because the observation posts were usually visible to the enemy by necessity to allow observation of the enemy movements. During the course of the war, one officer was killed and five were wounded, along with one sergeant and one officer captured from battery C of the 311th Battalion. Our Battery C Captain was wounded on two occasions and spent time in recovery areas.

Chapter Seven

My gun section

God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best. - Voltaire

Throughout the war I was responsible for seven men that made up our 105mm gun section. After I joined the section immediately following the fall of Cherbourg, we were to stay together for the entire duration of the war. These men were superbly capable and skilled in the operation and function of the 105mm howitzer. Our 105mm howitzers were used primarily as anti-personnel weapons so speed to the target was needed at all times. As such our number 3 gun was the lead gun in Battery C.

Herbert Arndt, gunner corporal

Herb was the best gunner in the entire C battery in my opinion. He could set up the gun site faster than any of the other gunners and that's why our number 3 gun was used to zero in on the target. Here's the way it worked. When the battery got a fire mission, one gun would actually adjust to the target. The other three guns would follow all the commands until the target was hit, then all would fire as directed. Herb was from Minnesota, around the Twin Cities area. He was with the battery from the beginning.

Harold E. Smith, number 2 man

Harold's nick-name was "high explosive" a natural because of his initials. His duties were to set the elevation of the gun when a fire command came in. He could do this very quickly working as a team with Herb who was setting the deflection at the same time. After the gun was loaded, it was his job to close the breech on the gun then pull the lanyard to detonate the shell. The lanyard was the trigger on the gun only it was actually a rope. He was good, had swift reactions to commands and was extremely accurate in his gun settings.

Bert Whitehead, number 3 man

We had a lot of older guys in the section and Bert was one. Bert was thirty-four at the time as I recall. His job was to load the shell into the breech on command and boy you couldn't make a mistake here and slam the nose of the projectile against the side of the gun or the shell would explode. That would have been curtains for the crew. Bert knew his job and did it well. He was also a good gunner and could fill in for Herb in case we ever needed a back-up.

The Rest of the Crew

WR Whitehead: WR was no relation to Bert and didn't have a first or middle name. He was just WR. A real southern boy, WR was from North Carolina. He worked hard and did everything from uncrating the shells to preparing them to fire to passing them along to be loaded in the gun. One of the things I remember about him the most was a penchant he had for keeping clean. He was always washing things out during lulls in firing.

Henry Mallory: Henry was also from the south somewhere and one of the older men. He never said much and just did his job without complaining which were all the things that WR did. Since there were eight men to a section, we doubled when it came time to dig in. Henry and I often were paired up during these times.

Joe Mullins: Joe had the distinction of being the only guy without teeth. The army gave him false teeth but he didn't wear them very often. During these times when the races were segregated, Joe was always harping on this issue. He was a staunch supporter of separation of races. His jobs were the same as Henry's and he did them all well.

Michael Shanahan: Michael did all the jobs with the exception of those done by the number 1, 2 and 3 men. He was the oldest man in the unit at the age of thirty-eight. He probably shouldn't have been

in the army but his age didn't hurt his efficiency. He did a good job and performed his duties well. He was always singing World War One songs. His favorite was 'It's a long way to Tipperary'. He learned it from his father who had been in the First World War. He smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes and was always trying to trade off other brands for 'luckies'. He also saved war souvenirs and traded them for stuff he didn't have at every chance.

I guess souvenirs were big items with some men though not as much with front-line men. Men picked stuff up and would trade for smaller items they could carry. Because we were on the move most of the time, most of the stuff was left on the field. It was the rear echelon guys that picked up the majority of the spoils. We used to joke how these guys would go home and brag about how they took stuff in hand to hand battle. If you had a luger (prized German handgun), it was worth a bundle to the support troops. I had both a luger and a P38 pistol but was to lose them later on.

Other Men I Knew

Melvin Duke, Travis Barnes and Irvin Cartee were all buck Sergeants that were sent to Battery B when we were finishing up in Alsace-Lorraine. All were regular army men and were at Fort Bragg when I was there. Barnes was my Platoon Sergeant and I took basic training under him. Cartee and Duke were also platoon Sergeants in the same battery. There were few openings for these

guys to head up a section since they all had arrived in the ETO (European Theatre of Operations) in late December of 1944 and our battalion had only lost one section chief at that time. Barnes took over that section, and Cartee and Duke pitched in and helped wherever they could. We had some good times together whenever we could find the time to talk. I always thought it rather ironic that I ended up out ranking these guys since they were all fine men and excellent NCO's - luck of the draw I guess.

Chapter 8

Events in Alsace

November, 1944 – February, 1945

Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them, cannon in front of them, volley'ed and thundered.

- *The Charge of the Light Brigade*

The Lorraine battles and the fighting in the Vosges Mountains that separated the Lorraine Region from the Alsace Region were intense, and often up close and personal. The 79th division was the spearhead division leading the push through the Saverne Gap in the Vosges Mountains and out onto the plains of Alsace. The Alsace region bordering the Rhine River was the last territory separating France from Germany. By late November, 1944 forward units of the 79th reached the German Siegfried Line near Lauterbourg, France and the Rhine River on the far northeast border between France and Germany before halting. Strasburg, the capital of Alsace was captured and the German forces were retreating all along the Alsatian front. There was much hard fighting along the way.



The 315th regiment of the 79th division was one of the first units to cross into Germany in December, 1944.

I drew forward observer duty during this stretch. On one such occasion I went forward with a new Lieutenant who replaced Lieutenant Keys who had been wounded earlier. I have forgotten his name now but I hardly knew him at the time since he joined the unit a few days before we went up. The first day out, we were walking along a narrow roadway in two columns, one on each side of the road when we came under intense machine gun fire. A tracer clipped through the front of my field jacket about stomach high and blew the zipper off of my field jacket. The man behind me was wounded in the leg and the man in front of me was killed. We kept moving and ran off the roadway into a wash on the down slope of a hill that had just enough defilade to shield us from the fire. Bullets were zipping inches above our heads. There were two machine guns firing crossfire so they really had us pinned down. The whole platoon made it into the wash and as soon as we did the Lieutenant

raised up with his field glasses to try and spot the machine gun. He wanted to get a fix on its position and call for artillery support. As he did so, a bullet struck his right hand severing part of his hand and his thumb. He quickly went into shock. No medic had made into the wash with us so we took care of him the best we could.

In the meantime, the Germans brought up an 88mm gun and tried to blow us out but the ditch was just deep enough to protect us. They fired four or five rounds at us then switched targets to one of our tanks which had come up to support us. They quickly knocked our tank out and we could see black smoke pouring out of the tank. I tried to get a position fix on the 88mm gun but the machine gun kept hammering away at us. When I did locate the gun I realized it was too close to our own troops to ask for artillery support. In the meantime one of our airplanes, called up when the tank was knocked out, spotted the 88mm and swept in and blew it up. The machine guns went silent so we figured they had retreated and this proved to be the case. We moved out of the ditch and keep moving with our wounded until the medics picked up the lieutenant and the others and took them back to the aid station. It was by some miracle no other casualties occurred while we were hunkered down in that dry wash. I stayed with the infantry for the rest of the day until a new forward observer crew came up and relieved us.

There were often a few lighter moments in the war while all this was going on. Alsace has a large population of rabbits or hares as

they were called. They came out at night and since it stayed lighter over there than in the US, we could see them moving around. On one occasion, we began shooting some of them with our M1 carbines. We got quite a few before the 'brass' made us stop the shooting. We had gotten enough though to cook up some stew in our helmets. I can tell you it tasted a whole lot better than the K rations they gave us on a daily basis. On yet another occasion we went hunting for roebuck deer. They were quite small, about 40 lbs. or so, but were very good eating.

A Thanksgiving to Remember - November, 1944

The rumor came down that every unit would get a turkey dinner for Thanksgiving. At the time we were moving pretty fast so we discounted it as just that, a rumor. I recall the situation clearly since on this occasion the rumor turned out to be true! Our guns had been silent for a few days since the enemy was on the run, and many of their units were cut off so we did not have any defined targets to shoot at. Thanksgiving Day arrived and sure enough the army brought up a mobile kitchen mess truck carrying a hot turkey dinner for all. We had a real feast to say the least. However, about an hour later most of us became terribly ill from eating the dinner. I don't know whether it was the turkey that did it, the cranberries or the dressing but I suspect it was the latter. Anyway, I was knocked out for the rest of the day and still felt queasy that evening.

We still had to keep up our routine even when not feeling well. As I recall it was my turn to go on guard duty that evening about midnight. Shortly thereafter there was a commotion out in front of my gun. At the time, German troops were cut off and lost all over the area and some were trying to come through our position. They were calling out to each other since it was dark and the grass in the field they were in was about four feet tall making it easy for them to get separated. I shouted out for them to halt but they kept moving around. Not knowing whether or not they were coming through our gun position, I opened fire with my M1 firing about 5 rounds. Immediately after that all was quiet for the rest of the night. When daylight came we proceeded to cautiously advance into the field calling for any Germans to surrender. Several stood with their hands up. One of them, a SS trooper had been shot by me in the arm and another had a leg wound. The German SS troops were elite troops attached to regular army units. We did not know the SS were in our area until this incident. We took several prisoners and the wounded were tended to by our medic. I didn't think much about this event at the time. Today, I wonder what my reaction would have been had the bullets I fired killed the man. Over the years I have been asked on occasion if I ever shot an enemy soldier face to face. I guess you would have to say I did even though it was dark when I shot him.

During this period in December, 1944 the Germans were frequently trying to penetrate our positions by sending some of their troops behind our lines dressed in captured American uniforms.

Many were captured or killed but a lot of them were not. Their main purpose was to gather intelligence in advance of their main offensive which they called Operation Nordwind. The German offensive in Alsace started shortly after midnight on January 1, 1945. The Battle of the Bulge had been making news in The Stars and Stripes (The official GI newspaper) and many units assigned to the 7TH army in Alsace had been transferred to Patton's 3rd Army in late December, 1944 to help stem the enemy offensive in the Belgium Ardennes near Bastogne leaving our lines stretched pretty thin along a wide front.

In late December, we were on alert and doing patrol duty around the clock to keep a handle on the situation. I drew a patrol during this time with the object of determining enemy strength in a small village located about a half a mile from our gun site. We went through the village going building to building and found nothing. When darkness set in we decided to return to our battery when all hell broke loose. The Germans started pounding us with their 88mm guns and mortars so we took refuge in the basement of a brick building. A local family and their children were also in the basement with us. Several direct hits on the house caused us to believe that they had spotters in the town directing fire for their artillery. At the height of the shelling, a shell landed in the barnyard behind the building and hit a pig causing it to squeal out in pain. A fellow named Bill Cobb (his nick name was Ty naturally) ran out of the building before anyone could stop him. A few minutes later he

returned with a hind hock from that pig. We built a fire in the basement and cooked the ham. It took a couple of hours but the wait was well worth it. Later when the shelling trickled off, a second squad was sent out to check on us. When they found us, they joined in on the feast. When we finally vacated the house, we drew some small arms fire from another part of the town so we high-tailed it out of there but not before determining that only a few of the enemy were actually occupying the area. I don't think the brass ever figured what had taken us so long on patrol and I neglected to mention the culinary details in my report.

Even with all this going on, some men would still sneak away from their gun positions to go into neighboring villages to hunt for wine and cider. We were constantly sending people after them so they wouldn't be AWOL and get tossed in the stockade. Our officers were pretty lenient along these lines so no one got cited. On one occasion I found one guy who had gone into a village passed out on top of a manure pile. He was drunk as a skunk and unable to walk so I went back to the battery for a jeep and fetched him back to his section.

Operation Nordwind (Northwind)

January 1, 1945

Background: At the beginning of January, 1945, the German army mounted a major offensive in the Alsace region of France. The American army forces were spread thin along a 100 mile wide front bordering the French Maginot line. This push by the Germans came on the heels of the German Ardennes offensive of mid to late December, 1944 (the Battle of the Bulge) and was to be the last offensive by the German army in the west during World War Two. The ensuing battle came at a time when it was bitterly cold, snowy and plain miserable across the entire Alsace region. The goal of the German offensive was to destroy the American defenses and retake the Saverne Gap through the Vosges to buy time for Germany to negotiate a favorable surrender.

I remember one day in particular when it was gently snowing. It was one of those times when the flakes were large and seemed to drift lazily to the ground. I was sitting on the trail of my howitzer watching the gun crew digging their foxholes. I was thinking about the next day and what would happen. It was my turn to go up front with the forward observer crew. We would be with an infantry company of the 42nd rainbow division. Our artillery was supporting them because their artillery units were still somewhere in France and had not caught up with them. Our own 314th Infantry was badly

chewed up and was pulled off the line for rest and re-outfitting. The 42nd was a green unit having never been in combat before.

After a while my Lieutenant came over to our gun site and we talked about the next day. Lieutenant Bernie Delap was from Viroqua, Wisconsin and commanded all of Battery C. He and I became close friends during the war and kept in touch for many years after the war ended. On this occasion, he brought a bottle of Black and White scotch with him. It was his monthly officer's ration but he didn't like scotch so he gave it to me. After he left, I broke open the bottle and the crew and I drank it. Eight guys, pulling on the jug in turn, finished it in one big hurry!

I took the first watch that night and about an hour later I heard tanks moving around. The Germans did this to bother us but we were used to it by now. However the tanks seemed to be moving in from our rear so by now the whole battery was aware of the situation. We were ready to swing our howitzers around if need be so we could fire, and we broke out the armor piercing ammo just in case. As it turned out, the tanks belonged to a French armored unit that had gotten off course. Why they were moving at night was a mystery but they passed through and the rest of the night was uneventful.

I was up early the next morning and packed my gear in preparation for when the forward observer group was ready to move out. I was eating a "K" ration when my phone rang and I got the

call. I turned my gun over to my gunner corporal and joined the forward party group at the command post. Lieutenant Delap was our forward observer and I was his back up. We had a radioman (who drove the jeep) and a wire sergeant also in our party. The wire Sergeant's name was Majewsky. I remember on another mission he was on he was awarded the bronze star for bravery in action.

We drove for about 30 minutes before leaving the jeep to walk down what appeared to be a fire lane in the thick woods. We passed a small pillbox (casemate) which was on the Maginot line. It was empty but we stopped and looked it over anyway. It was probably just an observation post. After a brief pause, we started to hear small arms fire and as we neared the forward infantry positions it got louder. The firing was sporadic and seemed to come from an infantry unit just ahead of us. We passed by an American tank destroyer dug-in just inside the wood line. It was a half-track with the new 105mm anti-tank gun mounted on its deck. This gun had replaced the original 75mm which had not been very effective against the frontal armor of the larger German tanks. There didn't seem to be any one around so we kept going until we met up with the infantry.

We quickly oriented on our situation and picked a spot from which we could survey the potential field of fire. It was located on the edge of a wood about 2000 yards across open fields from a town we later learned was named Hatten. There was a large casemate

complex to our right on the other side of the field and we could see a few of the buildings in Hatten on our left front. We dug in the best we could but the area was swampy so we ended up piling some logs from downed trees around us. I couldn't help but notice how casual the 42nd infantrymen were acting. They didn't seem to be too concerned at all and most of them had not even dug in. The small arms fire that we had heard before soon subsided. The rest of the day passed with no more firing. That night, we heard enemy tanks moving about in what was just a prelude to what was to come the next day.



Maginot Line Casemates (bunkers) located near Hatten - note the Sherman tank on the roof in the bottom photo.

Shortly after daylight the Germans mounted a sudden massive offensive sweeping in from the direction of the large casemate complex with tanks and infantry. Four tanks were out from us and moving directly toward our positions with the German infantry tucked all around the tanks. They started pounding our front with their 88mm guns and the shells were hitting the trees around us spewing shrapnel onto the ground. These tree bursts as they were called caused a lot of casualties. By now, we had called for battalion artillery support which was starting to come in hot and heavy raining “posit” shells over the heads of the enemy infantry and the tanks. These shells had a major impact on enemy infantry inflicting heavy casualties but the tanks kept on coming.



Our shells were landing only about 300 yards in front of us when I ran back the way we came in to find out why that anti-tank gun we saw earlier was not firing. When I got there, I noticed a hole dug

under the rear of the half-track and their crew was all in there. When I alerted them to the situation they immediately cranked up their unit and moved rapidly forward to engage. They knocked two enemy tanks out in quick succession and it turned the tide forcing the remaining German tanks and infantry to withdraw. The crew of this tank destroyer was made up of black soldiers, the first that I had seen, and they were very good. I never could understand though why when they heard all the shooting going on they didn't crank up their gun sooner. The next two days were quiet with only light small arms firing along the edge of the woods. Our infantry pulled out and another forward observer crew relieved us.

When Joan and I revisited this area on a tour in 2000, the large pill-box bunker was still there. An old American Sherman tank now sat on top of the bunker and the local people had turned the complex into a memorial. I could still see the tree line of the woods in which we set up our forward observer position during that battle of Hatten so many years ago. Our guide on this 2000 trip and throughout the tour in Alsace was Lise Pommois, a French school teacher and the author of an acclaimed historical account of the war in Alsace. She offered to take me over to the exact site where I was dug in during the battle for Hatten over 54 years ago if I was to come by again later on.

While we were engaged at the front during this action, a tragedy had occurred in our Battery. The weather had changed and instead

of snow, it had been sleeting and raining off and on. The Battery had received a fire mission with the number 2 gun to adjust fire on their target. Ice had apparently formed on the brass part section of a shell that had been inserted into the howitzer prior to firing. When their number seven man tried to ram the shell into the breech of the howitzer, the shell wedged against the breech and wouldn't move. Someone picked up a trail hand spike (used to open and close the trails on the howitzer), placed it against the rim of the shell and struck it with a shovel to drive the shell into the breech of the gun. Instead of hitting the rim of the shell, he struck the cap on the shell and it exploded. The gunner Corporal was killed instantly and three others of the crew were wounded including the section chief who lost his right leg. How he managed to survive I'll never know. The projectile was still in the barrel of the gun when I got back to the Battery. No one seemed to want to remove it. I had a device we called a bell in the back of our truck so I got it and screwed it onto the end of a ramrod. I inserted the ramrod into the tube of the gun pushing the shell back out of the breech of the howitzer. The bell was brass and shaped like a cone to fit over the nose on the shell. I think the men thought that the fuse on the nose of the projectile had been activated when the gun had been fired. For this to happen however, the shell would have had to strike an object which was not the case.

This was one fire mission no one would ever forget. We expected and received enemy fire as a given and you expected casualties but

we were never hit by incoming German artillery before at any time. When we received replacements for the lost members of section two, one of them was a gun Sergeant who had given me my basic training in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was regular army and a career man, and I owed him a lot for the training he gave me. As it ended up, three of our gun Sergeants were replacements from Fort Bragg and all from the same training battery of the same battalion – a testimony to the great training we all received. What were the odds that all of us would end up together in the same battery in Alsace, France. It goes to show you what a small world it can be sometimes.

Many of our units were depleted from the German offensive and spread pretty thin, and it wasn't until near the end of January, 1945 that the situation was pretty much in hand. The Germans along our front were whipped and it was just a matter of rooting out the die-hards. Thousands surrendered including many young boys that had been pressed into Hitler's army. Kids twelve and thirteen years old and old men in their 60's were coming over in droves.

On one patrol, we captured more than forty prisoners and many of them were in their teens or younger. All these years later I am so glad we did not have to shoot them. They had been led to believe by their propaganda that they were going to be killed if they were captured. It was on this occasion that we captured a German command post. There were three officers and several enlisted men

in the post. The officers wanted to surrender but did not want to give up their side arms unless they did so to an American officer of equal rank. As a Sergeant, I was the highest ranking American present. I wouldn't go for it and insisted they turn over their weapons. They kept saying that according to the Geneva Convention this was customary. Finally, I was tired of debating and took out my 45 caliber automatic side arm laying it alongside the head of one of their officers. That ended the standstill. We marched the whole bunch to a marshaling area and turned them over to the MP's. I learned after the war that some German officer POW's were allowed to keep their pistols.

Chapter Nine

The Ruhr and aftermath

March - October, 1945

I do not have to tell you who won the war. You know, the artillery did. - General George S. Patton

Background: After the Alsace campaign, the 79th was pulled from action and sent to eastern Holland to begin training for the coming Rhine River crossing. They were expected to be one of the lead units in this campaign. The Russians were closing in on Berlin on the Eastern front while the Americans, British, Canadians and French were on banks of the Rhine River in the West. There had been fierce resistance from the German defenses in the areas between the Roer and Rhine Rivers during late February and early March, 1945. In March, 1945 the 79th division and the majority of the Allied forces in the West mounted successful Rhine River crossings. Once across the Rhine, the Allied armies split up and fanned out across western Germany moving rapidly east toward Berlin. The 79th along with several other units was sent in to seize the industrial heartland of Germany in an area known as the Ruhr. The goal was to completely surround the Ruhr area as quickly as possible, shut down remaining German industry and capture as many German soldiers as possible. These initiatives were successful within a few short weeks and the entire German army in defense of the Ruhr,

some 300,000 men, was trapped and captured. The last month of the war was to see fierce fighting by pockets of the German defenses as the Allied forces pushed to the Elbe River just west of Berlin. The Russian forces entered Berlin finally capturing the city in early May, 1945. On May 7th, 1945 the Germans unconditionally surrendered ending World War Two in Europe.

Shortly after crossing the Rhine, our Battery no longer was needed to fire our guns so we parked our howitzers. German resistance had been reduced to isolated pockets and our unit was now fighting with the infantry as we advanced into the Ruhr valley near the major industrial city of Essen. We were on patrols constantly and the enemy was surrendering in droves. Most of the POWs were older men pressed into service and young boys many no older than 12 and 13 years old.

When our unit crossed a canal and went into Essen, we were moving house to house. On one foray we rounded up a hundred or so prisoners that were ready to surrender. I remember one incident in particular that stands out during this time. The patrol I was leading came upon a house on the outskirts of the city. I saw a white flag being waved and I proceeded under cover from my men up onto the porch with my pistol drawn. A German corporal with the flag came out followed by several others and finally a German officer, a colonel. I asked him to surrender his side arm but in perfect English he told me that he would only surrender it to a

ranking American officer. After some discussion, I told him to give it up or else I would shoot him. He quickly complied.

We spent the time immediately after the Ruhr campaign ended on hold in a camp near the area when the war officially ended in early May, 1945. A few weeks later, our unit was re-designated as a Military Police outfit and we were sent to Czechoslovakia near Plzen (it was referred to as Pilsen at that time) where we were put in charge of a displaced persons camp. We had to sort out the people that the Nazis had imprisoned or had used for slave labor from SS troopers and other German Nazis who hid among the masses of displaced persons in these camps to escape detection. There were two German concentration camps in the area. One of them was used to gas people and the other I believe was sort of a holding stockade. I was always thankful that I didn't have to draw duty in one of these. We were also very near the Russian troops in Czechoslovakia. At first there was much fraternization but this changed abruptly, and when the word came down, all contact ceased at once.

Background: By this time, most of the American troops were in limbo waiting for orders to go home or to be sent to the Pacific. A points system had been devised by the army to determine the order for shipment home or to the Pacific theatre depending on one's score. The system was based on several factors including, months in

the service, months in combat, number of campaigns, number of medals/awards, number of dependents under 18 and so forth.

When the Japanese surrendered in August, 1945, I was one of the first ones in my outfit to be sent home based on the points system. I was transported to Marseilles, France where I departed in late August and arrived in Norfolk, VA in September. From there, I traveled by train to Fort Sheridan, Illinois where I was honorably discharged on September 25, 1945 almost three years to the day from my induction. Joan, John Jr. and my Mother were living in Madison and it was only a short trip home from Ft. Sheridan to my joyous homecoming. I never returned to Delavan to live after the war and I never really wanted too either.

I was awarded the Good Conduct Medal plus the African-Middle Eastern Theater ribbon with 4 battle stars. Later, under separate proclamation, I was awarded a 5th battle star for the Battle of the Bulge-Alsace Lorraine campaign. This award replaced the 4 battle stars with a single silver star representing all 5 of the campaigns I was part of. These were; Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Central Europe and Alsace-Lorraine. Later I was also to receive a medal for the occupation of Germany and a French unit citation.

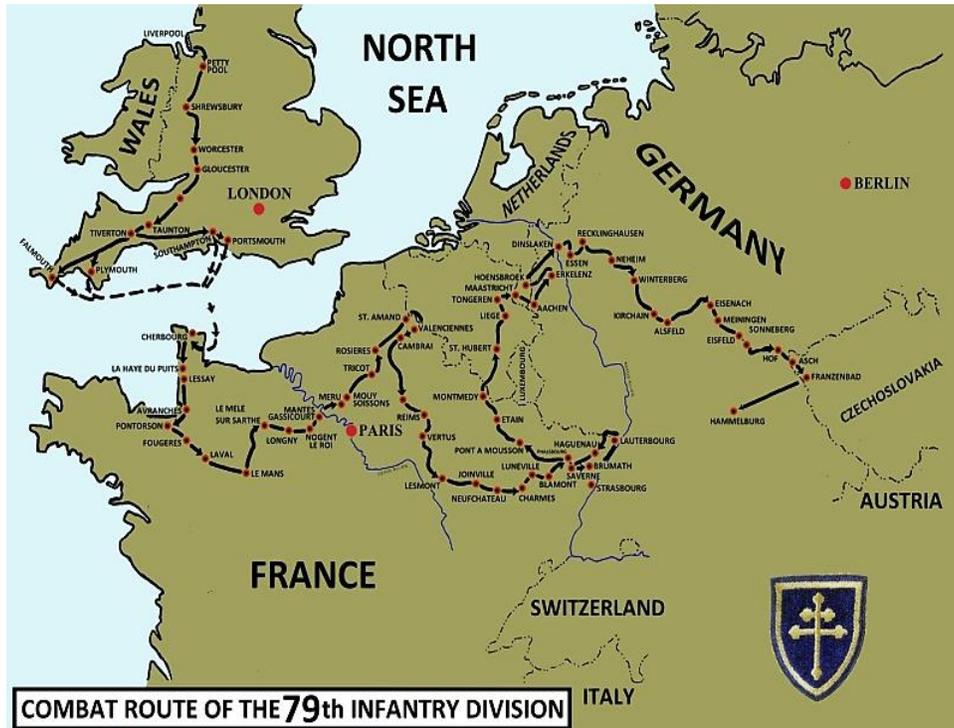


Awards and ribbons for my military service in World War Two

Appendix A:

Combat route of the 79TH

June, 1944 – May, 1945



Appendix B:

Mayor of Blamont's Diary

Blamont, France

September - November, 1944



Village of Blamont today – pop. about 1,200

This historical account is from a diary kept by the Mayor of Blamont covering the time period of September through November, 1944 when the 79th division liberated the village. These diary pages were part of a larger document and were given to me by Mrs. Jean Mohler, a French historian, and a resident of the area. The Mayor's writings were in French and were translated for me by Mrs. Mohler with additional assistance from my niece Mrs. Susan Kramer. The translation of the text contains only minimal editing with some minor formatting modifications.

BLAMONT TOWN HALL MEETING, 12/5/44

Before starting the dailies meeting, Mr. Mayor (Jean Crouzier) says how happy the population has been about Blamont's liberation happening on Nov. 18th after more than four years of a hard occupation; especially the last 8 days particularly were noticeable, due to an intensive shelling which destroyed or heavily damaged all the town houses of the city, killing 16 people and wounding 20 others. He cheered the memory of the 16 victims (dead during the bombardment) and in the name of the municipal council addressed to their families his sorrowful condolences. He wished a complete recovery to all the wounded citizens. After that, the mayor gives a lecture to the council, which was addressed to the Department of Just Affairs about Blamont's liberation. The mayor then reported about the time period of isolation from the other French liberated areas from Sept. 1st to Nov. 18th, 1944.

First Chapter...population revitalizing (food)

Month of September

The normal "alimentation cards" having been distributed to the consumers before applying the distress plan, show the quotas of usual rations could be maintained at the normal level and the population revitalizing assured in the same conditions as during the preceding months. Furthermore special allocations of bread, meat and cheese are made in favor of the men and women "employed" by

the enemy in trenches (digging) works. Nevertheless, I ask on Sept 4th by circular letter to my colleagues of the district to take one immediate useful measure in order that especially the milk deliveries would be made regularly and I gave them the advice to assume the transports by means of oxen or carts. Anyway, it was a matter of fact that following the requisitions and the irregular functions (robberies) at the producer level, the daily milk incoming to the ST. Hubert dairy in Blamont were of 450 liters instead of 2200 liters before the present events. The eating of corn was effected difficultly because of troops (German) invading farms and barns, and because of the lack of electrical energy.

Month of October

The alimentation cards of “S” type (safety) valid for three months but the front being stabilized exactly at the limits of the district, the following villages would not be reached: Ebermenil, Leintrey, Buriville, Reclonville, Ogeviller, Bleimerey, Reillon, Freminil, Veho, Domjevin, Housse, Vancourt and Remoncourt. The normal usual rations are generally maintained. A special allocation is made in favor of people owning the cards of “national supplements” (vegetables, jam, pastas). An allocation of pastas is also delivered to owners of cards of “national supplements”. Those different goods are taken out from the grocers stocks or from a safety stock managed by the wholesale grocers in Luneville. The special bread ration allowed to corn producers is suppressed from October 11th

and reduced down to 4500 kg from 10350 kg each day. The cattle requisitions (by the Germans) are becoming more and more numerous and heavier. 90% in the majority of the villages, deliveries of milk to industrial dairies are non-existent and the small quantity of butter has been requisitioned in Blamont as well as in Cirey. This in particular was made by the Gestapo. Butchers are asked to push at the maximum to collect greases (Meats) and distribution of the collected items is made through the grocers. The Germans continue the requisition of potatoes in the whole district. For its contribution, Blamont is obliged to provide a quota of 6 metric tons (totally supplied). In view of this, the town hall committee decided to requisition all collective plantations in Blamont's territory. The first deliveries started on October 4th and the "standard" family's stock of 50 kgs will finally be formed for November 2nd.

Beatings are becoming more and more difficult (common) in the few villages not under the German directive. This in spite of the facilities we had been able to offer.

Month of November

Quotas of bread rations are fixed as follows, by category. Baby (E) ok 100 kg.: young children (j1) ok 200 kg.: adolescent adults (j2a) ok 200 kg.: adults (j3) ok 250 kg.: hand workers (t and c) ok 250 kg. The quota of meat is fixed to 250 kg (vital minimum due to the lack of greases). This allocation (meat) remains possible due to the constitution (saving) of a herd of oxen at the beginning of our isolation time, this having been asked by the executive commission, and effected by the purchase commission, Nov.5. A last distribution of pastas is made by deduction of the safety stocks. The existing 1000 kilos of sugar from the same stocks are also divided between the detailing grocers, which enables to help a number of unexpected refugees as quotas were already set before Sept. 2 for people already registered in Blamont. The commission decided to create a municipal warehouse for the milk under the control and responsibility of Mr. Renee Bal, a member of the executive commission.

After many pressing proceedings, I obtained from the German military authorities to put aside 20 cows for the milk as to feed Blamont's population and 20 other cows belonging to Mr. Claude of Repaix (near village) in order to nourish the 110 babies in the maternity (originally an American Red Cross Foundation).

During the week of the 12th to the 18th of November the town was submitted to a strong bombardment (day and night) however the bread and milk services were affected every day.

Second Chapter

This chapter on the financial administration was not copied. It covers the payments due to the occupying Germans and how Blamont handled the situation. Also covers more financial hardships due to the evacuation of Ebermenil and Herbeviller.

Third Chapter

Relations between the townspeople and the occupying authorities, the requisitions, robberies, arrests, obligatory restraints, forced workrelations with the German Authorities were sometimes difficult due to the increasing exactions and demands. Retreating troops are flowing through or staying in Blamont (night and day) and they ask for quartering. Some units suffer from lack of food. They requisition cattle (illegally) and steal poultry, rabbits and all kinds of food. Individuals steal bicycles, small trucks, horses...in some cases I obtain restitution of the stolen objects. Around Sept. 5, an important group of young people (1800 Hitler Jugend) come to Blamont lead by members of the Nazi party. The houses, orchards, and gardens are plundered. The mentality of the group is hateful. We are frequently threatened and insulted. Irregular requisitions are

being multiplied; blankets, mattresses, sheets, household utensils, stewpans, etc.

On Sept. 12th, members of the Nazi party requisition a number of cars and leave Blamont with their group, leaving the quarters in a ruined state impossible to be described. The same day the town military commander issued a written order asking to bring to him available bicycles specifying that they were only being loaned and would be restored to their owners, of course. All the bicycles leave Blamont the same day. On Sept. 14TH, a Gestapo unit orders me verbally to bring all private radios to the town hall. 125 radios were brought in by the citizens. During 6 weeks this will bring a total plundering by the troops passing through Blamont or staying in the city.

From early Oct. until Nov. 13th 1500 civil workers (German and Alsatian) commanded by the (party) will be quartered in Blamont and the vicinity of which they did different defense works. From this last date, about one company (50 to 100 German soldiers) and their small headquarters were permanently in the town.

From the beginning of Sept. about 20 members of the Gestapo and some Militians (French Nazis) are quartering in Blamont. On Oct. 6th, they arrest Mr. Alphonse Parmetier the town hall interpreter. The reason for this arrest was for the sale of clothing. On Oct 10th, Maredal des Coupee, a Staff Sergeant in the gendarmerie is also

arrested. His dead body has been found later in a forest near Ciry. He was buried in Blamont on the 25th of Nov. Dr. Thomas and I could establish that Mr. Coupee had been killed by means of a ball shot in the eye. Also in Oct. the Gestapo comes to the house of Paul Zeliker and Gilbert Bechrich to seize them. Not finding them, they take Christian Zeliker (son) and Mrs. Bechrich (mother). These people will be liberated days later. Mr. Raymond Andre has been arrested same day. Those last four arrests are presumed to be connected with the resistance activities. The steps I took with the Gestapo in favor of the arrested persons remained useless of course. I add that during the night of Sept. 12th to 13th Mr. Albert Bertrand (hair dresser) has been witness of two summary executions...from his house located in the outside of Blamont. He was also witness to their inhumation. These two dead bodies will be exhumed shortly and their identification will be effected...if possible.

Constrained Works

On Sept. 8th, 1944 the German Blamont commander orders me by letter to take at his disposal all the vacant workmanship (men and women). After a long discussion I obtain that only the men from 16 to 60 years old and bachelors and women unmarried from 15 to 40 years old will be conscripted for this measure. These conscriptions were in fact difficult to apply and several times I was menaced of arrest to be arraigned before a council for sabotage. The effected works consisted of trenches, antitank ditches and shelters made in

the vicinity of Blamont, Barbos and Fremonville. At the beginning those works were not paid by the Germans. Therefore, the town made wages to the workers not owning the minimum of resources. Rates the workers were paid regularly were 100Fr. per day. On Nov. 6th a very strict listing of all men from 16 to 65 years was made by the Germans themselves with an order for departure the next morning in direction to Cirey. By chance a delay was communicated to me during the night, so was avoided a measure which was looking like a deportation of all the men.

Fourth Chapter - Administrative binding of Blamont to Saint Die.

On the 19th of October the prefect of St. Die (Vosges) paid me a visit and communicated to me a written order and decision taken by him saying that all towns and villages isolated in the Luneville area would depend now on the sub-prefect of Saint Die/Vosges. On the 21st, I sent the sub-prefect of St. Die a different report about the forced labor and payments and about the evacuation of the villages in the district. On the 31st, I go to St. Die where I have talks with Mr. Sub Perfect. I tell him, as already made by letter, the critical situation in which the populations of different villages of the district are evacuated and displaced to Mosel area and perhaps even to Germany. Furthermore, I ask him to do his best with the German commandant of St. Die whom we depend on for all possible proceedings in view of avoiding evacuations from Blamont.

Fifth Chapter – War Events

In the present expectation and due to the proximity of the front I already made early Sept. a census verification of the cellars and shelters of the town and assured myself that all the population could find a refuge in them. A nominating listing of the sheltered people was established for each cellar. On Oct. 13th, 1944 about 50 shells fell on Blamont and near vicinity. We had to deplore one dead person (Mrs. Premy) and three wounded, two of them (Mrs. L'huillier and her daughter) expired a short time after. On October 15th the town suffers from a lack of electricity since Sept. 18th and receives no more water from the mountain, this due to the breaking by shell of the conduit between Fremonville and Cirex. Public fountains fed by the source of Repaix, however, enabled the population to receive water. The damaged water line was repaired some days later. During the night, from Oct. 14th and 15th, a violent fire caused by imprudence by evil disposed German troops threatened to destroy completely the Donevre Street. A quick and determined action of the fire brigade limited and stopped the fire and only two houses are destroyed. A volunteer fireman falls from a deck but is not seriously injured. On Oct. 16th at 23 hours and on the 18th at 20 hours and on the 21st at 7am some shells fall at the south and west entrances of Blamont. On the 23rd during the night, the church is shelled and some stained glass windows are damaged.

Since several days I started talks with Mr. Heller, Cirey's mayor assistant in view of obtaining the electrical power produced by the Boura saw mill as to feed Blamont. A first try made on Oct. 23rd gave poor results. However, after several days of talks, 1/4th of Blamont receives some electricity from Cirey.

On Oct. 27th in company with Mr. Gilet, chief of the "general victualing" of the district and Dr. Thomas I pay a visit to the cities of Igney-Avicourt and Amenoncourt. This last one is especially heavily damaged but in spite of the destruction and the departure of the displaced men by the Germans, the moral level of the inhabitants remains high. I evacuate several families without shelter and wounded people and I give the necessary orders for the re-victualing of the village, especially as regard to the bread. From Oct. 29th, many refugees from diverse parts and villages of the district, being evacuated by the Germans, pass through Blamont or stay in our town. That complicates heavily the problems of lodging and food because the population of the town grew over a few days from 1700 to 2699 inhabitants.

On Nov. 1st at 5AM then on the 8th at 4PM bombardment of the south of the town damaged the church steeple but it is really on Nov. 12th at 6pm. that the bombardment started a shelling which remained constant until Nov. 18th at 10 am. There was some light shelling during the day. (During this period) about 3000 shells caliber 105 and 155 and perhaps heavier fell on the town destroying

or damaging 90% of the buildings killing 16 people and wounding 20 others. I will establish later an inventory of the destroyed and of the damaged houses. The first shells destroyed partly the hospital wounding slightly two people. I ordered all pensioners and old people and hospitalized people to descend in the cellars (people who due to their health condition or according to their wishes were still in their rooms). This measure promptly executed, avoided possible further accidents in the hospital, which received later about 30 shells. Hospital occupants were evacuated to Nancy on Nov. 23rd by means of American trucks. At 11 hours pm someone let me know that the maternity is on fire. I go immediately “on the spot” under a heavy bombardment in company with my eldest son and 5 to 6 other devoted people. I realize immediately that the building on fire cannot be saved or preserved.

The 110 children of the establishment stay already in the underground of the maternity (a big nursery). This building communicates with the nursery via an underground tunnel. Due to the persistent fire menace in the maternity building, its partial destruction by artillery shootings and also the asphyxia's danger, I order the immediate evacuation of the cellars of the near private houses. The door of the maternity being closed (damaged), we succeed to take the children out of that building. Through air holes the flames are so numerous that the swaddles of several children start to burn. Here you are witness to a hallucinating spectacle. Furthermore, the shelling does not stop and the above building on

fire seems to be the main target. At last after an hour of efforts, all the children as well as the nurses and the management people whose coolness and courage must be underlined, are in a safe place. I add that with the evacuation of the maternity, no deaths have been registered among the children of that foundation.

The same night from Nov. 12th to 13th at 5 AM, the spacious building of the Bon-Accueil Association received many shells and was on fire (Bon Accueil was a foundation of the American Red Cross from WW1). The fire men and volunteers are successful in saving the surrounding houses as new battles of important fires were quickly mastered. It must be noted that a main part of the fire pipes or tubes which were at the disposal of the Blamont fire gate has been destroyed by the bombardment during the different fires.

During the night, from the 15th to the 16th of Nov., I am informed that a shell perforated the vault of a cellar and exploded. It was the Cascaille house. I make calling the two doctors as the chief of the emergency shifts of the Red Cross and I go to the spot of the accident with my two sons and some benevolents who leave their cellars. We number nine dead and a dozen wounded (one of them expiring the next day). The bombardment still continues. I order the dead corpses to be buried in a nearby trench, which was dug in advance for safety reasons. Because the hospital was totally useless, I make transfer of the wounded people to some other cellars, still

intact. They would be evacuated by American ambulances on Nov. 25TH to Luneville.

On Nov. 16TH at 7AM I receive the visit of two German gendarmes who order me to make our town evacuated in the direction of Sarrebourg the same day at 6PM. After consulting with the executive committee and those of the municipal council and getting their unanimous advice, I explain to the field gendarmes the impossibility to evacuate the population due to the heavy bombardment to which we are submitted and also because of the presence of wounded and old people from the hospital and the 110 children in the nursery establishment. I wrote this in a report and submitted it to the gendarmes who seemed to be satisfied with that argument. The same day at 9PM two new gendarmes came to meet me and gave again the order to evacuate the town the next day at 6PM with the exception of the nursery and the hospital. I went to the cellar where the German commander was staying and explained to him the situation as explained above. After waiting for an hour I am pushed outside but another meeting is fixed for 11PM. I came to the meeting but it was not until the next morning at 9AM that I was received. The German Captain seemed to be in agreement with our request and at 1PM he let me know that he had just obtained from his general the permission to leave all the population in place. I signed a paper discharging him from all responsibility.

November 18, the end

The same morning, Blamont received the last shells. A refugee from Herbeviller who was staying in our house since October 30TH was killed by one of these shells. We inhumed him in our garden. At noon the first American soldiers (79TH infantry) entered the town, which was completely destroyed but happy to be at last delivered. The Germans had blown the bridges and then withdrew during the night.

December 5th, 1944 Addendum

The city hired extra workers to dispose of all the dead horses killed during the bombardment. The city council voted to allow 10,000 Francs to pay the workers.

Appendix C:

Photo Memories

