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MESSAGE CENTER



SPRING EDITION

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### **BITS AND PIECES**

We are gratified to be able to tell you that our plea for wartime memoirs continues to bear fruit. Bill Kirk, whom some of you will recognize as a longstanding adoptee of the AT Company, has agreed to try and describe some of his recollections of those bitter days of December 1944 through April 1945. In other words, his are the memories of a surviving member of the Ammunition & Pioneer Platoon, 290<sup>th</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Hq Company. We'll also be including in this issue another of the many memories Bob McElroy has agreed to share with us.

### **MORE GOOD NEWS**

Our Treasurer, Rob Smith, reports that we will continue to be in good financial shape for at least the next two mailings of the Message Center. Special thanks to those of you who have provided the unsolicited windfalls that keep us operating and solvent.

### **EARLY BULGE RECOLLECTIONS - as told by Bill Kirk**

In Bill's words - except for minor editing: My early memories of the period are that we, my platoon and maybe my battalion, were in Lixhe, Belgium about Dec. 17, 1944. But most of the Division's reporting I've seen, seems to begin around the 25th.

We had departed Southampton on a British ship, the Monowai. Channel crossing was rough, crossed at 3 knots/hr. because of acoustic mines. We were dropped from cargo nets into landing craft. You got someone's duffle bag to carry, but not your own. We were taken into Le Havre harbor at night. The only light was caused by the services marking the site of a German ammunition ship with an American ammo ship straddled across it, decks awash. We landed in darkness and I had to run in mud with trucks running alongside, carrying someone else's damned duffle bag while a boot projecting from it was tearing my right ear off. I couldn't stop running long enough even to change my purchase on the bag. We finally wound up near "Blaqueville". In an open mud field where we spent the night. My first acquaintance with Major Manzolillo came when he told me to get 20 bundles of straw for the officers' tents from a nearby French farmer...The mud was a foot deep. He had heard that I spoke some French, and that's what it was: A *little* French. High school French. But the word was passed around, and during the rest of the Bulge, I found myself explaining to some Belgian, or arranging something that I would rather not have gotten myself into using my limited French. That story has more to it -- about the esteemed Maj. Manzolillo. But it was not a good way for me to gain any respect for the man.

We left the mudfield and boarded 40 and 8 cars for what would be by itself enough to get you sick even before you got any combat time. But I sure did have plenty of company sharing the same bad experience, so no use to complain. About three days later we arrived in darkness at Lixhe. Lixhe is north of Liege.

Thirty two men per car, only the water in our canteens, no food, no heat. I don't even remember K's [K rations] being available and we were frozen before we even arrived at Lixhe. Once there, we passed the dufflebags hand to hand and they were put up into the steeple of a church. Then we got into trucks and were driven through a storm of sleet and rain. Our truck's canvas cover was not up on its hoops, so we were under the damned thing with the weather blowing all over us. We drove for hours, and then stopped at the crest of a hill. A motorcycle

rider came to the head of the convoy and we were turned around and again rode for quite a time before finally getting off and continuing on foot.

I remember marching down a sloping road which began to wander through a low area before starting to climb through two low hills. As we marched along, the AA and Artillery outfits we passed told us to "Kill a few for us" etc., which surely served to pick up our spirits. We marched up the road that wound up going through a field on a sunken road, a feature that probably saved some of our lives. As we, (led by me, but that's another story), finally reached a point where I guess the Krauts could see us, they put an 88 right over my head and into the other side of the road, where it exploded and sent dirt and snow all over us...But no shrapnel, due to the sunken road I guess. So then, we crawled on our knees further up that road until we found an abandoned tank revetment at a crossroads, and spent the night there. My memory begins to get thin at this point, so I'm telling this in the hope that another M/C reader can somehow connect with this story.

I also have memories of our platoon being on temporary duty with the 5th Division, (Red Diamond patch)...In a town with a name that sounds like, maybe Heidelberg. We went with some 5th Div. unit to a Gestapo headquarters building, where the 5th had just taken some Gestapo officers prisoner. We went inside the building and saw letters signed with "Heil Hitler" but saw no torture rooms. Then we, along with our 5<sup>th</sup> Division companions, marched these mostly older officers with no helmets but long, expensive, mostly unbuttoned gray overcoats, down the street of the town with the ladies of the town throwing things at, and spitting on them. There were quite a few of them. I have the feeling that this was before the battle for the town of Wy...Another puzzle. We had just been fed hot coffee, and frozen Spam sandwiches by a roadside outfit, and started marching down a road which turned out to be a "ridge". The nearby town was Magoster, We stopped by a group of 6 British "Churchill" tanks and spoke to the tankers. This was an unusual situation, like a panorama. To one side of this ridge was a valley, the whole situation being lit up by searchlights. We were told it was "Artificial Moonlight", the lights being bounced off low hanging clouds. As we watched this drama, they told us that in the dark area to our left was a crippled "King Tiger II tank. Looking below to our right, were British soldiers marching into a woods. We could hear the sounds of machinegun fire and rifle shots, and over it all, the sound of bagpipes, echoing up to us as we watched. We could see British soldiers fall, but they kept on going into the woods, standing up, not crouching, which we had already started doing. Then the Churchills started going down the hill. We could follow them visually, because each had a rear trapdoor or hatch with a dim light that could be seen as they went down. Then we heard the Churchills firing, and their shells ricocheting off the Tiger, some flying right by us. Then, sickeningly, we saw flashes and loud gunfire and one by one the Tiger picked off all six of the Churchills.

Capt. Rudy always argued with me that were no Brits in the area. I thought this battle took place before "Wy" but he said that we had come from the north, and Magoster is south of "Wy". His statement about "no Brits" doesn't fit with the signs I saw where the "Pildner" tank incident took place...Where I saw the tank blow up and saw [nearby] *British* signs saying "Attention at the Verges" meaning "Watchout for the mines at the Roadside" and "Achtung Minen" in the same area, meaning as far as I knew, Brits, and Germans had been there. *[In all likelihood, the tank incident to which Bill Kirby refers, was the one actively researched in 1991 and thereafter by the tank commander's brother-in-law, John J. Hoyer. The destroyed Sherman tank had been commanded by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt George C. Connealy a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division's 66<sup>th</sup> AR, Company H. On 3 January 1945 it was traveling (possibly hurrying) along a narrow, icy road, rounding an elevated curve that would have led them off the hill and a half-mile eastward into the town of Melines, Belgium. It and the leading tanks of the column had already passed through elements of the 75<sup>th</sup> ID on their way to a tank battle with the enemy. It failed to negotiate the icy curve and skidded onto the road's right shoulder. As it did so, it rolled over a daisy chain of live mines...American mines from an earlier action that had been swept from the road but left piled in the snow at its side -- remaining armed there, because frozen spiders had prevented them from being disarmed. The resulting explosion blew the turret from the Sherman, killing all five of the crew including its commander, Lt. Connealy.]*

One thing further of which M/C readers should be aware: The Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon of which I was a part, was not supposed to take on the enemy as a "rifle company"

would have. We were expected to return fire when fired upon. But the "Bulge", was so chaotic that some rules just didn't always apply, and we found ourselves in all kinds of "not so normal battles". And the fact that we functioned as separate squads -- sometimes not seeing the rest of the platoon for days or more -- found us responding to any situation that might confront us. Such as helping whoever we encountered and whomever we thought needed help. It produced situations unusual for our group. Our experiences at the battle for the town of Wy was a case in point.

The truth is that I (like most of us) went into combat with very little knowledge of what our service duties to the battalion might be. However, we *did* know that we were to supply the battalion with ammunition and other supplies and arms that were carried on our trucks. We had three, 8-man squads plus squad leaders, each squad with a truck, complete with a trailer. Each truck/trailer could carry about 7 tons of supplies, mostly high explosives. We carried all types of rifle and machine gun ammunition. We also had flame throwers, at least one 50 caliber machine gun, mines, mortar rounds, grenades, mortars that could be fired from the base of a tree, mine detectors (later), Bangalore torpedoes, 57 mm. AT ammunition, bazookas, pickaxes, shovels, axes, TNT in blocks, rifle grenades, etc. As an added bit of information, in case you don't know, the Headquarters Company had 4 platoons. Three of them had as a secondary mission, the protection of the Battalion HQ. Most of us didn't know of this responsibility until sometime during the Bulge. Sharing it were the Headquarters platoon, the Communications platoon, the AntiTank platoon with its three 57mm guns, and finally, the A&P platoon.

What happened at Wy was probably due to a lack of communications. We had *nothing* in the way of communications gear. Typically, we would get a personally delivered request that a squad go and perform some requirement for a rifle company, or bring them some ammo or special equipment. We'd do the job only to find on the way back that we were snowed in, or the rest of the platoon had gone off somewhere on some other duty, or due to some quirk, you couldn't find your way back. So, frequently we were off on our own with no food for two or three days, except for what one might have saved from earlier issue of K or C rations. We frequently begged food from artillery and armored outfits. So that's why the situation at Wy worked out as I recall that it did for my squad. Sometimes we did get together, almost by accident, as we did with our kitchen.

As I remember, my squad was in the line of GI's going into Wy, probably told to attach ourselves to the rifle company in the line ahead of us. Now, somewhere in Al Roxburgh's books there's the story of some officer ordering ammunition to be brought forward to the Wy area for the attack. I've searched, but have been unable to find it again. However, it fits. As we stood in line on a sunken road, a few mortar rounds were dropped on us, killing and wounding several guys. I remember it distinctly because a nearby GI had his head nearly blown off. Next to me, Sergeant Lorentzen bent down and took a beautiful, large-bowled "Kaywoodie" pipe from the mess. After cleaning it up he used it himself for as long as I can remember.

To go on, as we were about to enter the last few yards before going into Wy, an officer came up to the Sergeant, spoke to him and we were then ordered to come out of the line and go back. Perhaps it was two squads. Following the Sergeant, we went back until somehow a truck appeared and we got in and started going back to where, I don't know, but to a Quartermaster shed somewhere. Once there we began to load up with all kinds of ammunition. The Sergeant woke everyone up by firing a couple bursts in the air, and others came running to help us load up. Then we went back to Wy.

We began digging in on a 45 deg. slope, about (believe me) 150 or 200 yards from the center of Wy. There was a gentle slope from the main street down to where we were digging in. Beginning in darkness, we dug large deep holes (we had shovels and pick mattocks), for the ammunition and for ourselves. We had so much stuff that we had to spread some of it out in the field behind us. Meanwhile, the battle for Wy was going on in front of us. We had GI's coming in for bandoleers and hand grenades, sometimes crowding into the holes with us as we were being shelled, and also had bullets flying all over the place from some Germans trying to come through us from the right. The ammo in the field was being hit, some of it exploding or popping off. Then, me and a buddy, Hector Casares, were sent back, only a short distance to a crossroads. We were to guide any jeeps seeking ammo into the dump we had established. We were there for 6 hours, getting shelled regularly. When a jeep would come in, Hector would

jump on the hood and guide them, while I stayed there waiting for any more business. If I am not incorrect, this is where Bob McElroy had a gun set up and to use his own words, he "wondered what the hell those two nuts were doing there," meaning me and Hector...While we were there, the hedgerows and a cattle fence were blown down by the shelling, all I could lay in were vehicle tracks covered with ice. Somehow, Hector and I were not hit, but the netting on my helmet was shredded and my boots were filled with little wire curlycues. After 6 hours we got up and went back to the dump, but had to hit the ground several times as we went. Surprisingly, platoon Sergeant Hudson, was there. While at the crossroads, I believe we had every kind of shell that the Germans made dropped on that intersection. Shells skipped on the snow/ice and went over us, making funny sounds before exploding or just fell on the ground. Shrapnel fell on us, some of it hot, dirt and snow and ice and earth was falling on our backs. In the flash of one explosion, I saw a piece of metal hit a tree and bend it halfway to the ground. The noise was unbelievable. I kept saying, "No more...No more" during pauses in the shelling. Later, in other shellings, I would learn that my pleas didn't stop the shells. Later, a tanker asked me if I had been shelled by "screaming meemies" I said "yes" because I thought we had experienced everything the Germans had. Of course, later when we *did* get hit by them, I discovered that I had been wrong. However, Hector did get hit while on guard at the top of the slope, and received 27 wounds on his right side. Nobody was killed, though others were wounded. My friend "Brownie" whose legs were black up to his knees, was sent to find the medics. Before he left, I had dug a double foxhole for the two of us. After he was gone I was left with this big hole when what I wanted was as tight a fit as possible. Every time we had to hit the foxholes, I lamented about all that open space in mine. After the town was taken, we moved up into Wy, and there were dead GI's, and Germans and cattle frozen stiff all over the place between our position and the center of town. The HQ was set up in the town, and we would go out of the town in patrols and set up guard positions outside of town to be sure the area stayed free of Germans. The town still continued to get random shelling, creating more wounded and dead....the story could go on!

As to the rest of HQ Co., the Communications Platoon had high casualties, dead and wounded from running communications wire back from the front line rifle companies. The AntiTank Platoon got very few targets that they could do much about, as you guys know. Headquarters Platoon consisted of G1, G2, G3, maybe G4 personnel. G2 had high casualties also, but I'm not sure about all the others, such as cooks, bakers, etc. I remember one cook named "Rider", who, while we were in Rheinberg, Germany, angrily left the chow line as we were being strafed, got into the cab of a 6x6, swung the 50 Cal. around and shot down the strafing plane.

I'm not sure whether this stuff is appropriate for future M/C publications. Please don't feel obligated to use it as such. It's just nice to be able to share some of these experiences with you guys, though some of them seem like a dream now...Things that couldn't really have happened. Who would believe that it could have been like it was? It doesn't seem logical, so maybe the thinking will be that it must be just some old veteran's exaggerations. With me, it seems that there are some memories of the war that for some reason stay blank for me...Periods that I can't seem to remember, while others remain quite clear in my memory. I think that in trying to put things together, my mind reacts by shutting down memories of some of the very bad situations whenever I try to connect to them. I'll pick up on some of them another time, so for now, thank you for listening. There are so many other things that come to mind from time to time, but there's only my wife to listen. But she's already heard enough and doesn't want to hear any more!

Bill, thank you for your courage....May God bless both you and Peg....Ed.

#### **THE REPLACEMENT'S STORY -- Bob McElroy**

Having read stories and seen TV documentaries about how replacements were treated by the Army when they were on their way to a combat unit in the ETO, I was interested in talking to someone who went through the experience. At a division reunion I spoke to George Sosebee,

from Canton, Georgia, who became a member of B Company 291st Infantry in February 1945. He became a member of the 75th Infantry Division after we were sent to Holland following our second battle where we took part in the liberation of the French City of Colmar in Alsace.

George joined us when the division was in a defensive position on the west bank of the Maas River and Canal after we relieved the British 6th Airborne Division in the vicinity of Panningen, Holland. It was a relatively quiet front, so the division was able to lick its wounds and receive the many men returning from the hospitals after recovering from their wounds. The division infantry regiments also received replacements for those who would never return. His story gives one some idea of how desperate was the need for infantry replacements after the heavy losses suffered by all the divisions that fought in the "Battle of the Bulge". When George graduated from high school he was immediately drafted into the Army and was sent to an infantry basic training center. Basic training lasted for thirteen weeks. After that the soldier was usually assigned to an army unit for further training as a member of a squad, platoon and company unit. In George's case he and his group were shipped overseas without receiving any unit training. He landed somewhere in Scotland where he and his comrades were immediately put on a train that dropped them off in the south of England. There, they boarded ships to cross the English Channel for France. George said that everybody got seasick during their channel crossing and they all were very happy to get their feet back on dry land.

They were sent to a Reinforcement Center (called "Repple Depples" by combat veterans) to await assignment to a battle weary line outfit somewhere on the continent. These "Repple Depples" had a bad reputation among battle veterans. Recovered wounded men waiting for transportation back to their units after hospitalization would go AWOL in order to get away from these hated centers in order to return as rapidly as possible to their outfit, even if their unit was engaged in combat. Their outfit was home and family while they were overseas. These centers were first named Replacement Depots and the Army thought that they could eliminate their bad reputation by renaming them Reinforcement Centers. Of course, this didn't change the GI's opinion of them one iota and neither did the GIs stop calling them anything but "Repple Depples". The thing that veterans of the combat arms resented the most, were the petty rules, put in place and enforced by rear area non-combat commanding officers. My own personal experience in rear areas was that veteran infantry combat officers tried their best, whenever possible, to allow the men to enjoy any free time whenever they were away from the front lines. The petty rules so annoyed combat infantrymen that they chose to go AWOL to escape from these chicken rules and return to their units even if it meant facing the dangers and discomfort of front line foxholes.

George and his fellow recruits waited a week or more at the Reinforcement Center before their names were finally called out to proceed to their new assignment in a line outfit. One day they were loaded onto trucks, some time after dark. As the trucks traveled toward the front they became aware that they were hearing the distant sounds of artillery getting closer and closer. Sunset was rather early due to Europe's latitude. They arrived somewhere unknown to them when the column of trucks finally came to a halt and an officer, most likely from division headquarters, welcomed them to the division with a speech about the proud unit that they were joining. These poor guys still had no idea where they were. They were told to stay in the trucks until they received further orders.

While they nervously waited in the trucks, there was suddenly a tremendous amount of artillery fire not too far away that seemed to be coming closer and closer to their location. The artillery fire was from enemy anti-aircraft batteries firing at Allied bombers returning from a raid over Germany. The enemy anti-aircraft guns along the bombers' route opened fire when the planes came within range of their gun batteries. This led them to believe that the firing was coming closer and closer to their location. George said that no one showed up to tell them what to do. When this kind of thing occurred the veterans, knowing what it was, usually ignored it, but this was the first time these green recruits were anywhere in the vicinity of enemy fire and they had no idea what was really happening or what they were expected to do. There was nobody in sight to give them any guidance. They were strictly on their own. It wasn't until later that they were told what all the shooting was about.

It was still dark, when a sergeant showed up who was to take them to their newly assigned unit. They got off of the trucks when ordered to, and were marched along a road until

they finally were introduced to their new company commander who welcomed them and told the First Sergeant to assign them to platoons and squads. It must have been close to dawn because George remembers seeing some GIs and being told by the sergeant that they were now a member of what was their assigned unit. They had been assigned to B Company 291st Infantry Regiment. Of course, these newcomers were curious about what the future held for them. The veterans had very little to say to these new guys and when they were asked what combat was like the only answer was "You'll find out." Other than that, the veterans had very little to say. I asked George what he thought when he was told that there were only about forty or so men in the company that had an authorized strength of one hundred ninety-seven men. His reply was that he had no idea how many men were in a full strength company. As a result, George was totally ignorant of how high the casualties had been or might be in the future. George said it was more than a week before he knew the name of his squad leader. He never got to know the names of most of the new men who arrived with him, because they didn't last long enough for him to get to know them. George also had no way of knowing that this was a very quiet front. He had no reference to enable him to size up the situation. His story of his first patrol will give the reader some idea as to how unprepared he was for combat.

One night, he and several of the new men were assigned to a patrol led by one of the veterans. They were to cross the Maas Canal, the front line boundary between their unit and the enemy, to gather intelligence about the enemy's positions and activities. They were instructed to watch the patrol leader and to do whatever he did and to follow his orders. Shortly after they were across the canal all hell broke loose. There was a lot of shooting and as George describes it, the rookies all froze in their tracks and had forgotten what they had been told at the start of the patrol. Suddenly, George remembered to watch what the patrol leader did. The patrol leader had hit the ground and George quickly did the same. It's times like these that a guy learns real fast. This could be called on the job training. Fortunately, the entire patrol returned safely to the company area.

When I asked George how he greeted new replacements after he became a veteran, he admitted that he now understood why the veterans that he first met acted in the way that they did. When he was asked the question about what combat was like he gave the new recruits the same answer that he received when he was a green recruit. He now knew that it was beyond words to describe what combat was like to someone who had not experienced it.

Today George is a highly successful funeral director in his hometown of Canton, Georgia. He is an extremely generous man who gives a lot to the 751b Division Veterans Association and takes no credit for his generous gifts. He always says that the gifts are from all the members of B Company 291st Infantry. It's a pleasure to be in George's company. He has a great sense of humor and his jokes and stories are very funny. They are all the more enjoyable because he makes it a rule not to belittle any person or ethnic group.

## CLOSURE

That's all there is for this time -- with special thanks to Bill Kirk and Bob McElroy for bailing us out with their invaluable contributions. Your editor's job was made a lot easier by them. I only hope that the necessary editing in no way detracted from, or materially altered your respective messages...I certainly learned a lot from sharing your memories and I have to believe that you, our readers, will experience the same enrichment.

Your staff,

*Ray Smith*, Editor

*Rob Smith*, Treasurer and Publisher



