

November 25, 1944

Derrick headquarters moves to Elsenborn

Upon completion of its motor march from Aubel the battalion headquarters and H/S Co. of the 324th Engineer Combat Battalion set up shop and housekeeping, using the existing and available buildings in the village of Butgenbach. It was soon apparent that it was too close to Division to be efficient. Security problems made it desirable to leave and seek protection of an engineer line company. Although engineer supply, maps, wire, mines and tracing tape were secured by Division, the battalion H/S Company was called on for guards and its share was about twenty percent of the company strength. In addition we had to protect ourselves.

Moving to Elsenborn was eventually approved by the Dauntless G-3 on November 25, 1944. By December 1, 1944, the battalion's headquarters and the H/S company, less its supply section which was to operate essentially as a map supply depot, in the Division Headquarters' supply area at Butgenbach were established in Elsenborn and enjoyed the inexpensive, built-in security provided by its A Co.

In a letter written by JRN to his younger sister, Maryanne - December 6, 1944:

The mail came today again and so there is joy all around. One lives from mail call to mail call with only a slight hesitation for chow calls.

By the bye, the food so far is all right. We get a good selection of food most of the time but for publication we have meatless meals here just as we did in the States. We haven't missed very many meals as yet but enough to appreciate the occasional meatless wonder.

My trip across France was so fast I didn't see a thing so will have to go back after this is all over and see it if I get the chance. Belgium is quite like the US except that most everyone still has cows and they are in barns on the side of the house. I assure you that a kennel has much better odors than this barn lot aroma. But they do have inside water, flush toilets, electric stoves, etc. Of course, about

1929 models of all. Well, good night, Sis. Love, Bud.

December 9, 1944

Col. Warren's visit and the Irish Coffee trip to Co.'s A & B

During the night of December 8, 1944, the first of many snow falls covered the countryside white. It was the first "boxing about" that the Belgium winter would deliver to the 99th. Later storms were much worse. On the morning of the 9th, the weather was clear for a change; crisp and only a little too cool for a wool shirt as an outer garment. It was a bit warm inside the mess hall, the living room and dining room of a farmer's home on the north edge of Elsenborn, so field jackets were being worn unzipped or unbuttoned depending on the age and model. The faint odors of the meal just eaten by the troops mingled with the still fainter odors of the gasoline-fueled field ranges on which the breakfast was prepared. All the weather signs and all of the Dauntless operational signs appeared favorable for a pleasant out-of-doors type of Saturday afternoon. The troops had not been overseas long enough to forget that the army always had Saturday morning inspections and the afternoons off.

What better after a better than average Saturday morning meal?

Little was scheduled to happen before Monday. Derrick had not been included in any of the weekend patrols of Dauntless, even though the G-3 and his staff seldom ignored or overlooked an opportunity to include the sappers in their action plans. This apparent good fortune had to be the result of a G-3 oversight. Capt. Feeney believed that leaving the rest of the 9th and all of the 10th of December free indicated that G-3 was about to restore the days of the week. Since the arrival of the 99th in Aubel, Division Headquarters had pushed, shoved, and force fed all sorts of activity into the operation to the point where sleep at Derrick, if any, was as likely to happen during the day as at night. Someone, somewhere had directed intensive

training in the way of after dark, blackout operations. Capt. Feeney was certain that the pressure drill was more than just routine. There had to be something big about to happen, but his intelligence sources and resources had been unable to develop even a good rumor.

There undoubtedly would be patrols sent into the land of the Hun that day, for Gen. Lauer would not allow the enemy or his troops to relax, not even for a day, and certainly not on a weekend. There had been very few relaxed weekends since the 99th arrived at Camp Miles Standish in early September, and none since the 9th of November when the 395th R.C.T. moved out from the Aubel area to relieve elements of the 99th Infantry Division and others east and southeast of Kalterherberg.

After breakfast, most of the enlisted soldiers drifted out leaving the dining area to a few officers who were finishing their meals with a third or fourth last cup of coffee. Soon they too would drift out into the streets of Elsenborn to visit around. The more venturesome might travel to the south of the 99th Infantry Division's right boundary and visit stateside friends in the 2nd Infantry Division area. This boundary was between V and VIII Corps of the 1st Army, in the center of the American 12th Army Group. The 9th Army was to the north and the 3rd Army to the south.

At a bit past 1230 hrs. the coffee cups were empty and the mess hall was too, except for the 324th's CO, the ExO, the 2, the 3, and the H/S Co. commander. All of these were more or less young Americans. Some were not so young as others. Capt. Eble was past forty and Maj. Perrine was approaching it. Capt. Feeney was barely twenty-two. I'm twelve days past my thirtieth birthday.

T/5 Tosk, entered the mess hall. Tosk's home was "Lon'g Gi-land," His father was a naturalized Russian and his mother was Jewish, German but

American-born. He appeared very young, but was old enough to be deferred to study to become a Rabbi. But after two years he neglected to re-enroll. His draft board took a dim view of his oversight and ordered him to the Army. He could read, write and speak German, but his feet were too flat for walking. Therefore, he was utilized as as an S-2 assistant and as my orderly, even though a colonel could not have an orderly. Even in this difficult environment he was very clean and very neat. His M-1 was slung up-side down, sling forward, grasped in his left hand precisely below his right arm pit. His short stocky body was topped by a helmet that was too large and set very square and deep. His very short neck made it appear that the helmet's outside edges rested squarely upon his high muscled shoulders.

As he arrived at the table where the group was seated he started talking as he came to a stop at attention. "Col.-sir, Capt. Talbott is in your quarters with a white-haired colonel of Engineers. He sent me to get you."

"Oh, all right, I'll let you take me back, the coffee is gone, I won't resist. What's his name?"

"Don't know sir. Couldn't read his name tag. Officers don't usually introduce officers to soldiers."

"Anybody know a white-haired Colonel of Engineers who would be apt to be on the prowl on a beautiful Saturday?" As usual, my question was ignored by all present; no one answered.

Tosk found his voice again.

"Sir, the Captain seemed kinda jumpy, his every other word was 'Yes Sir'."

The short, block-long trip south on Kalterherberg Strasse took very little time and we barged into Derrick Six's operation room. Capt. Bill Talbott (ADE) was at the map where Derrick-Six often pondered his battalion's fate and what-if exercises, talking to a very white-haired Lt. Col. of Engineers.

The map covered all of the north wall of the dining room of the house. (A picture of the house is on page 56 of Battle Babies.) It presented the unclassified portion of the engineer picture of the Dauntless Division area. Near the ceiling, a heavy, nearly horizontal line with two X's indicated the 99th's north area boundary. Above the line, "38 Cav" identified our neighbors to the north around Monschau. Near the bottom of the map, about waist high above the floor was a second line, more or less parallel to the first, with three X's. Below the line was marked "VIII", for VIII Corps.

Other markings indicated that B Co. was at Honsfeld, C Co. in Kalterherberg, with A Co. and H/S Co. were in Elsenborn. The map gave no other divisional unit locations. There were additional markings but only I knew they represented the locations of the engineer troop projects.

Capt. Talbott was speaking as Tosk and I entered the map room. The first audible words were, "...There is no road net in this north area." He saw me and without so much as a vocal dash in the conversation switched tracks: "Col. Warren, Sir, my commanding officer, Col. Neale."

With that introduction I knew I was the junior and the Indian Head patch on his shoulder spoke loudly and clearly--2nd Division Engineer. My not so off-handed response to Capt. Talbott's formal introduction, as I remember it was, "For what purpose is the Engineer of the 2nd Division honoring our humble CP on this beautiful Saturday afternoon?"

"Just an informal look-see at your Dauntless area. We are going to take the dams and will start from south of the Hofen area, up north."

Capt. Talbott looked knowingly at me but said nothing. I said nothing.

"Air can't seem to get the job done and Corps can't move east with all the high-up water south of it. So V Corps has decided that the 2nd Division will do it

for them. We are, or will be in the woods west of here. We'll move on Route One from Butgenbach toward Bullingen, then to Wirtzfeld and north through Krinkelt."

"That's our MSR (main supply route). It's not really adequate for one let alone two divisions." My tone of voice must have transmitted a 'you can't do this to us' message.

"You will just have to find something else. Corps has given us priority on the Route One network." His eyes twinkled and a trace of a grin seemed to indicate his satisfaction with his position.

Already I didn't like the guy.

I continued, "Are you delivering a message? How come Dauntless-3 hasn't told me?" I looked straight at Bill and he was blank. "Will your people help us open a road to the north of Krinkelt from here?"

Col. Warren looked away and to the wall map calmly responded, "No to the first; no to the third, and I can't speak for your three. I'm just on a personal recce. I figured you would have all the scoop and poop by this time. We left the south of the south boundary over a week ago. Didn't you know?"

"I guess I'll have to remonstrate Walter and Leonard (CG 99thID and CG V Corps). They seem to be playing loose with the 101-FM or whatever the number of the operations manual is. It seems impossible, but they are not keeping the troops informed."

Capt. Talbott finally found his voice. "Col. Warren came into the ADE closet and asked for you, just after 1200 hrs. I guided him here. Nothing, absolutely nothing has been whispered about this in the Three Shop--yet."

Derrick-Six, "Tosk, Pop, come in here!" I spoke with my most military voice, reserved for expressing authority in the presence of ring knockers. There were two present.

"Here Sir," Tosk.

"Here," slow and low from the kitchen area. Pay grade "Pop" Simmons entered with three cups of coffee. He was a most unusual soldier. He remained in Germany after WWI in the Army of Occupation until 1923 when he returned to the United States and was stationed at Ft. Dix while awaiting discharge. The discharge was slow in coming, so Pop went AWOL and went home to his family in Alabama or Georgia. Being short of funding between WWI and WWII the Army made no effort to locate or apprehend Pop. On December 10, 1941, Pop turned himself in to the army authorities stating that he was ready to serve his country as an ordinary soldier. Pop arrived at the 99th Infantry Division, then training at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi, as an Engineer Battalion filler. As the training progressed, he received less and less training, unless you count barracks guarding, latrine orderly kitchen training, and don't forget the sick book, he was an expert at riding it. By the time the 99th Infantry Division had participated in the 1943 Louisiana Maneuvers and closed into a new home, Camp Maxey, Texas, Pop was right at the top of the C Co. elimination list. The removal of Pop from the army was not to be. A medical discharge? No way. A medical board could find only good health. He passed the P.T. tests and his teeth were most acceptable.

Derrick-Six, "OK. So the first rumor of a rumor and both of your hearts get cut out. From now until I tell you differently, you have heard absolutely nothing, nothing of anything of this discussion or these conversations. You understand?"

"Yes, Sir," Tosk. "Y-E-S," Simmons.

"Carry on." Directing my attention to my guest, "Colonel, understand we'll do what we are told to do. We'll give you and your people all the help we can; we always have and always will. But, we'll do nothing with the troops until the three pushes the button. No road work or rear area work until all the troop shelters are

finished. Dauntless has stated too many times that the Old Man is determined to zero out trench foot."

Col. Warren's voice was low, slow, and serious. His eyes were fixed on mine. "Hell, I'm not trying to tell you what to do, now or ever. Just a bit of advice. You better be thinking about how you'll provide a MSR when you don't have the one you're now using and your Old Man says, 'Get me one, now!'"

"Colonel, what are your plans for the rest of this beautiful afternoon?" I hoped he was not going to suggest I travel with him, for I now wanted to get quickly on the road to Butgenbach.

"Oh, I'll just ride around a bit and look the country over, I'll not impose on you. I'll just look around, an informal bit of road and map reconnaissance."

The Colonel set his canteen cup of coffee on the window sill and grasped his walking stick with his right hand. Then, deliberately shifted it to his left hand and shook hands with Capt. Talbott and then with me. He thanked no one in particular for the coffee, transferred the walking stick back into his right hand and informally saluted the room in general as he moved to the door. I returned his salute, informally, and followed him out the door. Without a backward glance he moved quickly to his jeep, which was sitting in the shadow of the building across the street. The motor started; the vehicle moved out. The shiny black spare tire cover stated: "The Second, Indian Head, Division, The Engineer."

It had been an uncomfortable, edgy twenty five or thirty minutes. There was something about the white-haired Lt. Col. from the 2nd Division that this Reserve Lt. Colonel of the 99th Division just didn't care for, yet his presence demanded respect.

