

THE MEN OF THE 398TH GENERAL SERVICE ENGINEER REGIMENT

By Walter R. Christopher

Field Marshall Von Rundstedt's December 16th breakthrough into the Ardennes gave the European War picture a new significance. What had begun as just as another counterattack was developing into threatening proportions. The Nazi Army was staking all in an apparent gamble and it was up to the Allies to match their stakes...or lose. What followed is best told by Colonel Detzer--an excerpt from his *The Mightiest Army*.

"On the morning of the 18th General Hodges had ordered his headquarters staff to remove all documents and to start north. He kept with him only his ranking officers and some service troops attached to headquarters. Between him and the Germans remained one badly battered infantry regiment which was falling back, taking severe losses and which in the end would seem to disintegrate, leaving an open gate and a broad smooth road to Spa and Liege. Once there, fueled up and equipped with new American guns, the Germans could have raised hell.

"Brigadier General Eddie Plank, a plump, puckish little regular with a shrill, contagious laugh, was commanding the advance sector of communications zone, back here in the Valley of the Meuse. In this sector we had built great supply installations, at the back door of our armies, where they could pick up what they needed of munitions, food and supplies. Northwest of the advance sector lay what was known as Oise Section, another area dedicated to logistics and supply under command of slim, gray little Brigadier General Charles O. Thrasher. For soldiers they had servicetroops...quartermaster and ordnance men, engineer general service regiments, adjutant general detachments, judge advocates, bakers, truck companies, salvage crews. There were military police and medical corpsmen, and chemical warfare depot operators, railroaders and cooks and clerks and telephone linemen.

"Generals Thrasher and Plank had no big guns, nor any units trained to operate them. They had no tanks, no infantry. They had rifles, carbines, pistols, a few machine guns, a few anticraft(?) pieces. And the Germans were rolling forward, only a few miles away. As the situation on the front became more desperate, General Eisenhower called General Lee and asked whether he had any units or any men he could spare. General Lee called General Plank and General Thrasher, did they have anyone they could throw into the lines to back up the infantry? Anyone? Hell, yes! They had thousands of the best damned soldiers in the world. Maybe they weren't all you could ask for physically and they hadn't trained for combat but 'by damned', you could count on them to stand up and fight! So they formed battalions and companies of this collection of pen pushers and truck drivers, of grocers and laundry operators and shoemakers and sent them forward toward the approaching battle line...the German Army swept forward. The service troops along the Meuse could hear the rattle of rifle fire only a little ways ahead. Ordnance companies had moved up and the infantry fell back on them. A battalion of military police had shed its brassards, and looked very tall and trim, as it marched with long, anxious strides, over a little bridge and went exploring for the front. The men of an engineer regiment with honest road building mud on their faces, moved off into a southeasterly direction toward the place where the gunfire seemed the loudest.

"Then a laundry company with suds hardly dry on their hands and, a salvage company, and a bakery company, a little thick around the midriff, and a company of telephone linemen...all moving up...all going to war! Everywhere along that cold and bloody front, servicetroops stood shoulder to shoulder with the weary infantry. Everywhere the enemy surged forward and broke against the stubborn lines of bakers and shoemakers, road builders and clerks and military police. Many of them died in the snow with their boots on and the guns hot in their hands."

The 398th Engineers were alerted at 1500 hours, December 22. Two hours later our Verdun construction projects had been shelved...our tools

put away. By 1800 hours our advance party left Verdun by motor convoy to its unknown destination in Luxembourg. At 2000 hours, 1st Battalion followed in all available regimental vehicles. Upon arrival in Luxembourg City, XII Corps Headquarters was consulted and learned that the 398th had been attached to Task Force Reed, XII Corps, Third Army, and received orders to proceed, with 1st Battalion to an assembly point in the vicinity of Sandweiler. On the 23rd, Company B moved to outrange and Company A to Schrassig. Second Battalion and H&S Company left Verdun at 2000 hours, December 23rd by motor convoy provided by the 12th Army Group. At Luxembourg City the convoy was reformed and guided to an assembly point near Moutfort. Although considerable enemy activity was observed during the moves, no enemy fire was directed at the convoy. Task Force Reed was composed of the 2nd Cavalry Group, 2nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion (less one company), 276th Field Artillery Battalion (105s), 398th Engineer GS Regiment and 372nd Engineer GS Regiment. This task force was divided into two units: Combat Team Costello and Combat Team Hargis. The 398th was attached to the former team which included 2nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Company A of the 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The mission of Combat Team Costello was to relieve elements of the 4th Infantry Division in sector extending from Ihnen to Mertert, and to defend and repel any crossing of the Moselle River, attempted by the enemy, and to prepare alternate delaying positions.

The sector of Combat Team Costello was further divided into two sub-sectors with a troop and one platoon of C Troop of the 2nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and our own 1st Battalion. These troops occupied the southern subsector between Ihnen and northern Wormeldange, a total front along the Moselle of 9.6 km. The northern sector extended for 15 km from Grevenmacher to Mertert inclusive, and was occupied by Troop B of 2nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and 398th's 2nd Battalion. Immediately following a reconnaissance made by battalion and company commanders in conjunction with 2nd Cavalry Troop commander, defensive positions were agreed upon and we began digging in. By 1800 hours on December 24th (Christmas Eve), the 4th Division was relieved. Practically all of our positions were under direct observation of the enemy making it necessary for reliefs to change after dark. Nights when there was a full moon it was impossible not to be detected, consequently we received frequent mortar and artillery shellings. Also, the Town of Matchum within the 1st Battalion sector was occupied by an enemy force of unknown strength at the time we moved on the line.

Weapons? Another matter! We had carbines and 1903 Springfield Rifles. Our 30 DNd 50 caliber machine guns and rocket launchers had been taken away from us by Normandy base section while we were rebuilding Cherbourg's harbor. About all we had for defense were the guns 4th Infantry left in established positions. A few days later requisitions for additional machine guns were filled and we felt more secure. Ten days later we were issued M-1's in place of our O-3's.

Her is a list of locations set up as headquarters on the 24th of December: Regimental headquarters was located near Biwer. First Battalion Headquarters at Niederdonven, 2nd Battalion Headquarters at Manternach. Company A's Headquarters was Atlenningen, while it's platoon headquarters and positions were: First at Ihnen, Second at Lenningen, Third at Oberwormeldange. Company B was held in reserve at Gostingen. Company C at Oberdonven, Companies D, E, and F were located at Manternoch. Christmas Day found us improving our first line of defense between Ihnen and Ahn, shifting some OPs (Observation Posts) because of heavy artillery fire. CPs (command posts) were set up at Munschecker and Syre. On the 398th's first patrolling mission, one engineer was wounded by an exploding booby trap near Syre. December 26 was another day of improving and shifting...always closer to the Moselle with an eye toward clearing its west shore of enemy troops. Flaxweiler was chosen for Company B where it could undergo special combat training. Costingen was under 88mm artillery fire from 0600 to 0900 hours, without casualties. *(Continued on Page 14)*

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Oberdonven was also subjected to 88's from 0400 to 0630 hours, also without casualties. Enemy mortar and artillery fire continued intermittently along our regimental line. Each night patrols operated out of Mertert. On the 27th, a night patrol into Machtum was pinned down by enemy fire, but managed to escape during a brief lull, without casualties. Another 398th company was assigned the task of booby trapping an area over which enemy patrols operated out of Gravenmacher "Moselle Ghost Town."

During the early hours of the 28th, German night patrols out of Mertert, Machtum and Gravenmacher as well as positions on the east bank of the Moselle, operated within our lines...obviously in search for information. In retaliation, joint 398th and 2nd Cavalry Reconnaissance patrols invaded German held positions on the 29th at 1900 hours and returned at 2345 hours with necessary information pertaining to enemy positions on the Moselle's east side, vicinity of Wincheringen. At 1900 hours on the 31st, a 12-man patrol crossed the thinly iced Moselle and penetrated three miles into enemy territory, again in the Wincheringen area. Here they encountered a nest of five enemy machine guns. Four men of the patrol (three from the 398th) were cut down by a lethal spray of lead. Remainder of the patrol dispersed and upon completion of the mission, returned to friendly areas. The four who had been shot down were beyond reach and evacuation was impossible. Later we learned only one man had survived. Earlier in the day, efforts were begun to dislodge enemy holdings within Machtum. Friendly artillery laid down a moving barrage on the town and followed with 2nd Cavalry light tanks. A 398th Platoon occupied a hill overlooking Machtum at 1630 hours where a Jerry prisoner was taken for interrogation. Meanwhile the 2nd Cavalry forces withdrew from the town. A 398th squad attacked an adjacent hill overlooking Machtum and removed an enemy strongpoint.

The Germans laid down a 3-hour 88mm and mortar barrage, pinning down the squad, and followed up with attacks by three patrols. At 1300 hours on the 1st of January, our squad withdrew because of lack of sufficient tank support. The tanks were unable to maneuver steep slopes near town and had to be withdrawn. However, the 398th suffered no casualties during the operations. At 1140 hours began a 10-minute air attack on Wecker, a nearby road intersection and an open area immediately north. About 30 500-pound bombs and numerous incendiaries were dropped, setting fire and demolishing buildings within Wecker. The road intersection and adjacent area were heavily cratered, temporarily delaying road travel, and several telephone lines disrupted communications for a period of not exceeding an hour. Road repair was easily and rapidly accomplished by dozers, and 398th personnel repaired the telephone lines.

Because of low clouds with few breaks, identification of the planes was difficult. However, from evidence left by fragments and unexploded shells, and collected observations, the general belief was that the aircraft was B-17s who were confused as to target. We suffered no casualties. But, this was beginning to be a nasty habit. At 1020 hours on the 1st, a squadron of the P-38 fighter bombers taking advantage of the bright clear weather, again attacked Wecker and vicinity. They made two runs, the first a dive bombing mission upon the western portion of the town. The second consisted of 50 caliber machine gun strafing of the same area, including an outlying portion of regimental headquarters area. Fortunately, there were no casualties.

At 1100 hours, two 398th platoons, supported by a platoon of 2nd Cavalry light tanks again attacked the enemy's hill position outside Machtum. An undisclosed number of Germans were killed and wounded. The position was overtaken and the 398th personnel manned former Jerry installations from that time onward. Our casualties during the mission numbered nine wounded, seven seriously. During patrol operations across the Moselle on the night of January 2nd, another 398th man was wounded and listed as "missing in action." About the same time this was taking place on German soil (2300), a Nazi patrol attacked one of our outposts and wounded two 398ers while they were in their

foxholes. However, one Jerry was wounded then the patrol dispersed without any further action.

On January 3rd, regimental headquarters moved from Biver to a position atop a hill near Bucholz. Because of icy conditions, Colonel Douglass received internal leg injuries and was hospitalized. Lt. Colonel William S. Kingsbury assumed command. During our entire Luxembourg Campaign, our popular chaplain conducted services whenever and wherever possible. Barns, factories, cellars and deserted houses were locales for numerous worship services. We shall never forget the portable organ which accompanied the chaplain and his assistant wherever they went. On this day, services had begun and the assistant was leading the singing of "The Old Rugged Cross" which carried well across the river. With a sideward glance the organist looked toward and beyond the Moselle only to see a Nazi prying around a building corner to learn where the music and singing was coming from. Possibly he respected the Christian service for instead of firing (which would have been easy as not), he lingered a while and then returned to whatever he was doing on the building's other side.

Another German patrol operated within our lines on January 6th and attacked one of our company's machine gun positions, killing two 398th men and seriously wounding another. With the ground now completely covered with snow, detection of white-clad German patrols became more difficult...snow on the ground measured from 14 to 18 inches our men were requisitioning curtains, tablecloths and sheets to compare with German snow-suits. For camouflage, 398ers were utilizing white cloth to conceal the dirt of foxhole parapets..."any damned thing, just as long as we can remain unseen"! On January 9th, another attack was made on Machtum by 2nd Cavalry and a platoon of 398th men. Beginning at 0200 hours, a marching barrage was laid down by friendly artillery. One attacking force entered the town from the east and established outposts in cellars and were pinned down by heavy mortar fire at daybreak. The remaining force set up positions between the hill and the river, south of the town, to intercept possible retreating enemy. At daylight, all our positions were under direct German observation and fire from nittel. Consequently, our forces were compelled to move out only to resume the attack on the 10th which resulted in Machtum's fall!

During the next two weeks, many small skirmishes were encountered. Many memories never to be forgotten. Many memories have come out of Luxembourg. The cold snowy nights of guard duty; patrols into Germany across the Moselle; shellings and bombings; inadequate food, munitions and clothing; church services in cellars and barns; actions caused by fear and courage; and many, many more! Until we were relieved by the 1252nd and 1258th Engineer Combat Battalions on January 23rd, after 31 successive days on the line, activities were becoming compared with what had already gone before. No longer were we "green" for which tutelage we have the 2nd Cavalry to thank.

During the period January 20th to the 23rd our activity along the Moselle and beyond was intense. Targets on the east side of the Moselle from positions opposite Ahn to Wesserbillig and eastward toward Saarsburg were repeatedly bombed and strafed, all in connection with a drive northward by the adjacent 42nd Division. Elements of the 398th participated in creating a diversion in the vicinity of Ahn to Ihnen to assist in simulating preparations for crossing the Moselle River. This sham was aimed at diverting the 11th Panzer Division which was somewhere in the Saarsburg locality, to this area. And away from the drive being prepared for the north front at Echernach various amplified sounds of starting tank motors, grinding gears, running vehicles recorded on records were thrown across the river. Our attempts to manufacture a "dry run" assault were successful and the 42nd Division made its northward drive.

Our combat mission in Luxembourg completed, the entire regiment was moved by motor convoy and train by 0600 hours on January 24th. Our new mission in construction was again in the rear--at Sissone, France, with our work orders beginning in Oise base section, Reims.

Thus the 398th Engineer General Service Regiment did become a part of the greatest battle of all time..."The Battle of the Bulge." ■