

## BRITTANY - LORIENT

Because this narrative now begins the story of actual warfare as I experienced it, it is time for me to talk of the differences between the grand picture of war, as reported in news accounts and as recorded in history, and the other aspect of combat, from the individual fighting man's point of view. Simply put, one view is from the top down, and the other from the bottom up.

In well protected planning rooms, usually remote from the actual fighting, generals and marshals consult maps and consider weather and available manpower and supplies and decide on large matters. They move pieces representing armies and corps and divisions across table maps, and discuss various attacks and holding patterns and available reserves and the known or estimated locations and potential of the enemy. These men bear great responsibility, for based on their decisions battles are won or lost, and hundreds or thousands of men die or live to fight another day. Usually these men are experts at their work, and history rewards them or disparages them on the outcome of their labors.

I have in my library two books with identical content. They are titled "History of the 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in World War II." The first I bought in the early 50's, at a division reunion. The second, printed in 1976, I bought because the first is showing wear, and I underlined in it the portions which deal with matters in which I or my company were involved. This book, edited by Lieutenant Laurence G. Byrnes, sets forth an excellent account of the 94<sup>th</sup> Division's participation in the war in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) and I recommend it as an interesting narrative.

I will not attempt to tell that narrative in this memoir. It is, you see, written largely from the top down. I was far from the top. My story will be of what happened to me and my squad and my platoon and my company, which is where the bottom was and where my war took place. Just as I was not privy to the counsels of the great, neither were the generals frantically digging foxholes in the hope of escaping death or injury from enemy artillery fire. My war was a personal war, involving men I knew and (mostly) liked, and events not recorded anywhere but in the fading memories of those who still survive. In my war, movement was usually measured in yards, not miles. My great good fortune was that I experienced it without injury, as so many did not.

I have written this lengthy explanation of what is to follow, now that I am in Europe, to apprehend criticism because I omit greater historical events with which you, the reader, may be familiar. To find those, I recommend reference to any of dozens of excellent scholarly works on the grand subject of World War II.

When we waded ashore, the main battle front had receded, after intense and deadly fighting, toward the interior of France. There were, however several very strong German enclaves along the coast, which had been by-passed by the allies and neutralized when the main enemy was forced toward the east. Several channel ports, strongly fortified, remained in German hands. Brest was about to be conquered, and Nantes was freed but not available for Allied shipping because the mouth of the Loire River remained under German control. The ports of Lorient and St. Nazaire, with extremely heavy fortifications built to shelter the U-Boat packs and to refurbish them when needed, had not been taken, and actually remained German bases until the end of the war. To conquer them would

have been extremely costly, and would not have hastened the end of hostilities. Antwerp was now in Allied hands, and that port plus the artificial docks at the D-Day beaches was sufficient to supply Allied forces as they pursued the German army toward the east and north. The 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was engaged in a siege operation around Lorient and St. Nazaire, intended to hold the substantial enemy forces in position, useless to the German effort because the campaign had moved beyond their reach.

Allied planners wanted to free the 6<sup>th</sup> from its static employment, because it was a crack unit and would be very valuable in the ongoing pursuit. Therefore, it was decided to replace the 6<sup>th</sup> with the 94<sup>th</sup>, because we were untested whereas the 6<sup>th</sup> was a known and highly effective force. These last paragraphs are top-down, but necessary to explain why I and my companions, together with the rest of the 94<sup>th</sup>, were loaded on trucks and moved south out of Normandy and into Brittany, where we took up the positions occupied by the 6<sup>th</sup>. Because of shifting circumstances, we remained there from mid-September to New Year's Day, 1945.

During the interim, several plans for our movement to the active front were made and changed. Finally, in early December, the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was scheduled to replace us when it landed. Because of the German offensive on Dec. 16, the 11<sup>th</sup> was sent into action directly from their landing. On the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, a tragedy occurred when a British transport, the Leopoldville, was torpedoed in the channel while loaded with two regiments of the American 66<sup>th</sup> Division, with a loss of 784 enlisted men and 12 officers. Because the 66<sup>th</sup> was now unfit for combat, it was decided to replace us with that division, and send the 94<sup>th</sup> into action at the front in Germany. On the 26<sup>th</sup> our

replacement began, and we were pulled back out of the line to marshalling areas, to prepare for movement to the north. General Malony, of course, wanted badly to get us into action so he could make his mark as a commander. In that desire, however, he did not consult those of us at the bottom, whose performance in his behalf would inevitably end in death and wounds for many of us. So it goes.

We found ourselves in a rather hilly country, with farms scattered about and villages located only a few kilometers apart. The terrain was divided into fields which were of varying size, but all very small by comparison with those in the rural United States.

These postage stamp parcels of land were surrounded by hedgerows. These took the place of fences, and were the result of piling rocks from the fields around the perimeter.

These rocks had through time accumulated dirt, and were of varying height, from as little as three feet to six or seven feet high. Many of them had brush or even mature trees growing from their crests.

This division of land into such small areas was the result of a peculiar inheritance law, which divided an estate physically rather than by value. Land owned by a man who died leaving three sons as heirs would be divided equally among those sons. The result of division and hedgerows was that each field served as a mini-fortress, since small arms fire could not penetrate the embankments, and a defender could fight with advantage from their shelter. The farm roads wound between hedgerows, and in places had been worn and eroded until they were sunk below the level of the fields between which they meandered.

When we arrived in this area of Brittany, we were moved in small units into positions occupied by the men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, who had established a containment, or siege, line to cut off the entrapped Germans from the remainder of the country. During their time in the area, the men of the 6<sup>th</sup> had created some excellent dugouts, using hedgerows and road embankments as solid protection, and covering them with timbers from ruined buildings or trees cut from the tops of hedgerows. The replacement

operation went smoothly, and the platoon I was in assumed a well developed line of resistance. The dugout I and three others occupied was furnished with two sleeping benches, a couple of chairs from houses that had been destroyed, and other amenities not to be expected in a frontline position.

One of the men in our position discovered a live electric circuit in a sort of barn behind which we were located. The power was from lines fed by the power plant in Lorient. My buddy decided that we needed electric lights in our dugout, so he located wire and fixtures in various ruins, and ran the line to the dugout, and we had lights. Ironically, the power was furnished by the German occupants of the city, and we joked that if they had the temerity to send us a bill, we wouldn't pay. We were in that dugout for a couple of weeks. Never again, in combat, did we have the luxury of electric lights at night.

The hedgerows had proved to be formidable obstacles for the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored in the drive to the south out of Normandy. Tanks tended to run up the embankments, instead of penetrating them, and as a result these vehicles were often trapped, overturned, or just stalled. During their preparations for repelling the invasion, the Germans had placed thousands of obstacles on the tidal flats to stop and sink landing vessels. These were made of heavy steel bars welded into an open pyramidal shape. Confronted by tank failure to breach the hedgerows, an ingenious GI mechanic took these beach obstacles, and with minor modification welded them onto tanks, providing the vehicles with a sharp pointed prow. When these modified tanks hit hedgerows their noses plowed into the barricade, and the tanks were able to burst through instead of riding up the barrier. This enabled the 6<sup>th</sup> and other armored units to function effectively during the consolidation of

the landing and through the breakout campaign in Normandy and Brittany.

Now we found ourselves in a strange sort of war. The countryside where we were located was peaceful. The nearest enemy were at varying distances from our lines, but none were closer than two miles. French farmers were going about their regular work around us, harvesting and fertilizing and plowing in preparation for spring planting. Inhabitants of the villages went about their business in peace. The only reminder that there was a war going on was the enemy habit of firing a few artillery shells on an irregular basis, just to let us know they were still out there. Our artillery, located to our rear, would usually answer with a few rounds of their own. Generally, these exchanges passed over our heads in either direction, without causing any difficulty on the ground.

Enemy forces in Lorient and St. Nazaire were powerful. In Lorient were at least 21,000 troops of different units, and in St. Nazaire were an estimated 35,000. In other words, our division of 15,000 men with one or two thousand attached units was facing a combined enemy force of more than 56,000 men, equipped with a great number of artillery pieces of all sizes including huge coast artillery pieces capable of firing far to sea against naval forces. At Lorient the enemy was commanded by a lieutenant general, with a staff containing a rear admiral and several colonels. At St. Nazaire the commander was a brigadier general, who was assisted by a rear admiral, a major general, and some colonels.

All during the ensuing siege the pockets were supplied by U-boats and by occasional air drops. The leaders instituted intensive training in infantry combat, and converted their

motley armies , composed of all military specialties and naval personnel, into well trained and well equipped fighting units. We knew we were facing a difficult time indeed had they attempted to break out of their positions and fight to rejoin the main armies, now located far to the north. Happily, they never tried, and finally surrendered only after the war in Europe ended with Allied victory.

As a scout, I now found myself employed, and was in "action" even while the remainder of our squads and platoons were quite inactive. Because there was that extensive "no man's land" between our lines and the Germans, it was necessary to regularly patrol, to maintain knowledge of enemy positions and activities. To that purpose, the battalions established patrol groups that prowled forward almost daily and returned with any information collected. I was a member of that group in the third battalion. It was not bad duty. We were given intensive training in our operations, including shoe sole patterns of German foot ware, and known patrol activities of German units, which, of course, were also patrolling the same territory, between the lines.

We learned to use explosives to demolish buildings and to drop trees across roads, blocking the road completely. In some of this training we used ordinary TNT blocks, but the army had a new explosive compound called RDX, which handled like ordinary putty but erupted with a mighty blast when a cap was stuck into a blob of it and a fuse detonated the cap. Experimenting with this stuff was sort of like big boy Fourth of July. An advantage of being a scout was that we didn't have to perform regular guard duty of two hours on and four off, around the clock. We were off duty except when preparing for patrol missions, or actually going out ahead of our lines to find out what was there.



Of course, with the extra training, and the freedom from routine duties, came the fact of patrolling. Although working as a separate unit, the members of the patrol group remained with their regular units except when in training or on a patrol. I have been asked whether serving as a scout was not quite dangerous, and whether I was worried about what might happen. To the first question, the answer is yes. Armies have always employed scouts, and the duty has always been dangerous. Often, the first hint that an army has that there are enemy forces in an area is the presence of scouts exploring ahead of the enemy troops. Scouting may be carried out by one or two men ahead of a squad of ten others. On the other hand, at times whole companies or even larger units may be engaged in probing or intelligence-seeking operations in the face of or behind enemy lines. During the days of horse cavalry, these units were used primarily in combat scouting ventures, and sometimes their missions extended for days, depending on swift maneuverability and great skill to survive and return with critical information.

We did not have horses, or large units. Usually, battalion or regiment would decide there was need for current information about a certain sector between our lines and the enemy. Orders would come down detailing the point of departure, the extent of the mission, the time, and point of return. It was usual to inform the units at points of return that we were going out, and should return in a certain time frame. This was a precaution to prevent front line units from opening fire on a returning patrol in the belief that they were confronted by an enemy unit.

We would assemble at a designated time and place; meet with the officer who would be in charge; go over the maps and points of particular interest; check to make sure our

weapons were loaded and ready; sometimes blacken our faces; make sure anything that would make noise was eliminated; check for first-aid kits; fill canteens; use the latrine; eat a ration; go over the intended formation; and at the appointed hour move out.

The answer to the question about worry is no, I didn't really worry because at this point we were reconciled to the fact that we might die or be wounded and that worry would be pointless. I was, however, nearly always scared. There was something about going into the unknown, knowing that doom might await just around the bend in the road, that was frightening. Fright can be beneficial. It certainly, in my case, sharpened all my senses and made me very cautious. I don't believe it never hampered my performance, and the fact that I survived without injury seems to me to be evidence of success. Somewhat paradoxically, the feeling of relief and satisfaction at completion of a mission, which I felt when we crossed our lines in returning, was made more intense because of the hours of apprehension during the patrol.

Despite the fact that I regularly took part in patrols, fortune smiled on me and no operation I was part of ever ran into enemy fire, other than random artillery rounds. That is not to say there was never anything of interest. I became quite adept at identifying enemy footprints or crushed vegetation or other signs of enemy passage. On occasion we would visit and interrogate some of the farmers who lived between the lines, and they would usually report recent visits by German patrols. One beautiful autumn morning we were at the outermost point of our designated circuit, and about to begin our return to friendly lines, when the resident of a quite large chateau called to us as we passed on the road in front of his property. He told us that we had just missed a German group that had

spent a few minutes with him, asking whether he had seen any American soldiers in the area. He said they had headed away in the direction of the city. We thanked him for the information, and started to leave, but he asked if we would like breakfast. Surprised, we agreed among ourselves that it would be okay, so we accepted, and he proceeded, with the aid of a servant, to serve bacon and eggs and toast, with real butter, washed down with wine from his cellar. When we were finished, we thanked him and went back to our lines. War, indeed, can be a very strange business. That morning was strange.

One evening, shortly after dark, one of the outposts along our lines reported a suspicious light, at a considerable distance away and between the lines. Some of us were sent to that position to observe it, and saw it quite plainly, seeming to blink, almost as a signal code would blink. It moved a short distance across our view, disappeared, and then later reappeared moving in the opposite direction, and blinked out. An observer from battalion headquarters came to the site the next evening, and the scene was repeated. That officer concluded that a German spy was using the light to send information to a spy in our vicinity, and he indicated that he would request an artillery concentration on the light if it continued, which it did.

A battery of 105 howitzers was moved into position, and carefully aimed to fire and eliminate that situation. Someone wiser decided that it might be appropriate to send out a patrol to find out as much as possible before blowing the signal sender into oblivion. I was on that patrol, and we carefully ventured forth, not knowing exactly what we would find. I have ever since been glad that we were sent out before the cannons opened up.

The light was a lantern carried by a farmer between the lines, as he moved from house to

barn, to milk his cow in the evening. It blinked because his walking legs interrupted the beam as he carried the lantern at about knee level. The lieutenant in charge of our patrol told the old man how close he came to being blown away, and advised him to milk earlier, or at least to forego the use of the lantern. We returned to our lines, and reported our finding, and the artillery returned to their previous location, with not a shot fired, and one old French farmer continued to live and work on his farm, with armies on both sides of him.

Not all patrol operations were so fortunate as those in which I took part. At one point, regimental Headquarters decided that it would be a good idea to send out a fighting unit to show the enemy that we were ready to do more than sit and wait for them. A platoon from K Company, with suitable radio support and artillery backing, ventured into an area between our lines. Somehow, the enemy learned of the plan, and sent out a much larger unit to ambush the K Company force. The surprise was complete, and the first sign that the Americans were surrounded was the two rifle shots that killed both scouts, out ahead of the platoon. A battle began, which ended with the death and wounding of several Americans and the capture of the entire patrol, who were taken to Lorient and held prisoner until several weeks later when a prisoner exchange was arranged by the Red Cross, with German captives from Britain traded for our men, at a bridge over a small stream between the lines.

The men from K Company who had been captured reported that they had been treated well during their captivity. The wounded among them had received good medical care and had no complaints. They described the pandemonium which had ensued when they were attacked, and said they were surprised that not more of them had been killed or wounded. One man reported that he found himself all alone, in a small field, and had no idea where anyone else was. He spotted a gap in a hedgerow, and surmised that if he sprinted through it he might find some of his platoon. When he ran through the gap, he veered to his left, and stepped in a large fresh cow pie. His feet flew out from under him; his helmet rattled down the slope, his rifle flew from his grasp, and he fell flat on the ground.

The normal reaction when one falls is to look around to see if anyone witnessed the fall. He did so, and was horrified to see a German peering over the next hedgerow, with a machine gun pointed at him, roaring with laughter. The German's trigger finger was crooked at him, beckoning him to surrender, instead of pulling on the trigger and killing him. Needless to say, he surrendered.

While in Brittany, we alternated between duty on the front line and being a few miles to the rear, in reserve. During my time in the war, the triangular organization normally functioned with two units at the front and one in reserve. This applied at all levels, from armies through divisions to regiments and battalions. Companies and even platoons held part of their force in reserve, ready to respond swiftly to trouble. At Lorient, we spent a third of our time in battalion reserve, at a location near an abandoned German facility which had apparently been used as a training camp for submariners when they were

ashore. In the area were various items of equipment, probably used to train in their use aboard ship.

My former roommate from Ole Miss, Harry Pappas, was a member of the platoon I was in. He spent time at this German camp, and conceived a devilish scheme to cause consternation at higher levels of command. He took a massive item, probably a sort of telephone used for ship intercom, from the wall, and carried it to our bivouac area. He scrounged through wreckage and came up with a length of heavy cable, and many yards of German field communication wire, which was vastly superior to that used by our army for wire communication.

There were four trees growing in our area, very nearly in a square about 50 feet on a side. Harry climbed these trees, and fastened wire to them at a considerable height above ground. He then, with eager assistance from many of us, suspended the heavy phone item in the center of the square, hanging from the wires from trees at each corner of the arrangement. He then attached one end of the cable to the bottom of the phone, and buried the other end carefully, replacing the sod and eliminating any evidence of recent disturbance. He then strung wire from tree to tree at waist level, as a warning barricade to keep anyone from inadvertently entering the area.

Officers from battalion visited reserve units regularly, to ascertain readiness for action, to talk to our officers, and generally to make nuisances of themselves. Harry was now ready for them. When the next officers came to observe us, Harry asked if he could show the major something quite mysterious. The major followed Harry to the location, and began

asking questions. Harry said quite seriously that we didn't know what the installation was, but that it was obviously German, and was apparently dangerous because of the barrier wire around the area. He said that we had stayed away from the area, and that the major had better avoid it also.

The major returned to the group of officers, and soon led the battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel, to observe the situation. There was much conferring, and wondering why we had been told to camp in that area with such a potentially dangerous installation to threaten our lives. It was decided that the Germans had probably created a booby-trapped explosive device, rigged to wipe out curious American soldiers when they moved to examine it. Harry had done his job well, and it did look quite menacingly mysterious there, hanging from the wires.

The contingent from Battalion immediately went into action. They summoned an engineer unit, trained in disarming mines and other explosive equipment. They issued orders that until the area was cleared and declared safe nobody should approach it. The next day, the engineers entered the area, and dismantled Harry's creation, and the area was declared safe again. As far as I know, the engineers did not report the fact that the whole thing was a hoax, because that would have negated their own brave and expert attention to the problem. In the end, everyone got what they wanted. Battalion staff dealt with an unusual situation with great confidence and dispatch. The engineers had a chance to demonstrate their skill and bravery. And above all, Harry amused himself for several days, fooled the experts, and had the satisfaction of providing entertainment for all the enlisted men in our company. Our officers, of course, were not in on the secret, because

we decided they would not have appreciated it.

I should point out that our American troops were not the only fighting force in our lines. The French Maquis fighters were there, independently holding several sectors and also interspersed among us. These brave people, both men and women, had carried on a guerilla war against the German occupiers of their country. They were supplied by air by the British, who maintained liaison personnel among them all through the occupation and during and after the D-Day invasion. They had assassinated key enemy officials, blown up trains, destroyed bridges, and sabotaged German operations in every way possible. On occasion, the Germans had wrought terrible vengeance on whole communities after attacks which really hurt their operations. Nevertheless, the Maquis fought on. There were two major organizations, called the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) and FTP (French Partisans.)

These French troops were ill-equipped and ill-trained, but were in their own country and were willing to defend it. The FTP was basically a communist organization, and the FFI men did not like them very well because of their politics. Because I could speak some French, courtesy of Professor Mary Cummings at Sheldon Junior College, I was assigned to work with the FFI personnel attached to our company. I soon found that, while I could understand when they spoke French, they could talk with each other using Breton, their ancestral language, and I was completely in the dark.. Breton is derived, not from Gallic speech, but from Celtic roots closely related to Welsh, still spoken in western Britain. From the earliest Roman expansion to western Gaul and to Britain, there had been interchange of peoples between the island and the continent. On several occasions during



the last days of the Roman Empire, invading armies had moved from Britain across the channel to the continent, and brought with them language as well as weapons.

The FFI men with us were villagers from the coast, mostly fishermen. They did not have uniforms, and had a wide variety of weapons. The leader of the contingent I worked with was named Jaques Micquiliac (I hope that's spelled right.) He wore a beret, and wooden shoes like those commonly associated with the Netherlands. He was a decent fellow, and I enjoyed chatting with him when the occasion arose. One evening we were watching a beautiful sunset, and he said something in Breton. When I asked him what he had said, he told me it was an old sailor's proverb, and went like this: "If the sunset is the color of blood, it will rain tomorrow. If it is the color of shit, it will also rain tomorrow, so it doesn't make any difference." I have since wondered what might have become of him, and hope he lived well, back in his village, with his boat. He was a brave man among brave men, and deserved the best life could give him.

When we were at the front, we developed the habit of walking a quarter mile back of our position to a French bakery, or boulangerie, in the mornings to buy the delicious loaves fresh from the oven. That bread was baked in large round loaves, with very thick and hard crust, and splendid interior. On Sundays, when the villagers were dressed for church, they would sometimes pay visits to our dugouts, to sell eggs or fresh vegetables. On some occasions they would bring calvados, the local apple brandy which tasted vile but had a terrific kick. All told, this really was quite a strange war we were fighting.

During our stay in Brittany, we had ample opportunity to observe the rural life around us, and also to visit the small villages and the one cathedral city - Quimper - in the vicinity. Houses on the farms were generally quite squalid, from a rural Iowa point of view. They were built of stone, and were very old. Usually the barn and the house were combined in one structure, with a connecting split-level door between them. One had only to observe the free exchange of flies and other insects between house and barn to wonder about sanitation. In the late autumn we began to see and smell farmers driving a sort of tank wagon, with a spray mechanism at the rear, through the plowed fields. The stench was really horrible. We learned that there were catch pits beneath the barns, into which all liquid waste from the livestock drained, and which were pumped out at the proper time and the contents sprayed on fields as fertilizer. Solid waste was also applied, in about the same fashion as in Iowa farms.

I have already mentioned the inedible apples which were in small orchards everywhere. Apparently their only use was in making juice which was fermented into cider and then distilled into calvados brandy. The result was a very potent drink. Use of alcohol by our troops was discouraged, but that did little to deter those among us who were habitual drinkers. There were tales of poisonings, but as far as I know none of them were true. I do know of one case when a private began raving after drinking too much, and then used his rifle to threaten four other men into doing close order drill at his command. When this was reported, attempts were made to stop the event, to no avail. Finally, he had a major, a lieutenant, a couple of non-coms and two privates in his little army, all obediently marching around his chosen parade ground as he shouted orders at them. The

incident was ended when a sniper was brought up, and a bullet was put through his elbow. He dropped the rifle, and was taken in by the MP's. We later heard that he was sent back to the states, court-martialed, and sentenced to dishonorable discharge and a short term in the penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth.

Clothing worn by the farm population was serviceable, and shabby, and didn't look very clean. As is true in a lot of places in Europe, bathing was not frequent and some of the local people were not exactly fragrant. A crude joke in circulation was that one could determine the age of a peasant girl by how high farmyard soil rose on her legs. There was, however, a startling exception on Sundays and feast days. Traditionally, women in that region made extremely intricate and beautiful lace headware, which was starched stiff and worn on those special days. Patterns and techniques were family lore, and had been passed down through many generations. These ladies made a splendid showing.

Between our lines and Quimper was a village named Quimperle. On a day off, several of us went to the village, and began drinking wine at every café, or bar, around the church square. In the center of the square was a public latrine, an open square with neck-to-knee panels for privacy, and a series of troughs around the interior into which one could (there is no other way to say it) piss. After drinking for several hours, we all felt the need to visit this place and relieve ourselves. It happened that this was a feast day of some sort, and the church was filled with devout women, all decked out in their splendid head pieces. While we were answering nature's call, the services ended and a stream of women passed by the latrine, which caused some embarrassment on our part. Not knowing what else to do, we began tipping our helmets with our other hands, and greeting

them with a "Bonjour, Madame" and a smile. Some of them even smiled back at us, and that was the end of that episode. Yes, this was really an odd war we were in.

Since landing on the continent, we had learned that the steel helmet is a marvelously versatile piece of equipment. It served well as a stool, as a handy receptacle for temporary storage of papers, and as a bucket to be used for carrying drinking water, or for shaving, or bathing. Of necessity, baths confined to the water in a helmet were skimpy and left much to be desired (and cleaned.) Thus, we were pleased when an army quartermaster shower unit was put into operation in our area. We could now take hot showers, in a useful canvas structure that contained ten shower heads, with water drawn from the adjacent river upstream, heated, used for bathing, and drained into the river downstream. The problem of putting dirty clothes back on was solved by a group of French women who stood knee deep in the river, taking clothes from soldiers who stripped naked, handed the clothes to a woman, entered the shower for a long soak, and emerged still naked to reclaim clothes which had by now been beaten and soaped clean with a wood paddle on a flat rock. For this service, a fee of five cigarettes or a chocolate bar was charged and gladly paid. Soldiers left the area dripping wet but clean, and the clothes dried on the wearer.

Toward the south end of the Lorient sector, the Germans retained control of a slender neck of land that jutted into the Bay of Biscay, named the Quiberon Peninsula. Not far offshore was Belle Ile, also in German hands. At the land end of the peninsula was a German strong point, with hardened pill boxes originally constructed by the enemy to repel invasion forces. These positions were important to the enemy, because they

allowed land contact between the main force in Lorient and the troops on the peninsula.

It was decided that the strong point should be eliminated, and the third battalion, 301<sup>st</sup> Infantry - my battalion - was designated to make the attack on the night of Dec. 7-8, 1944.

During that night, engineers of the Company A, 319<sup>th</sup> Engineers, crawled across the wide expanse of sandy seashore, probing to locate buried mines in the extensive mine fields surrounding the fortifications. When a mine was located, two half-pound blocks of TNT were placed above it. All these blocks were connected with a long strand of primacord, or explosive rope. Primacord was a very useful item, because it could be used to tie together scattered explosives, creating havoc when used properly. On this occasion the plan went exactly as desired. When we began our attack, precisely at 8:33 AM, the engineers set off their blasts and immediately we had nine separate pathways to follow leading right up to the pillboxes.

We sprinted across the sand, following the safe paths, hoping to reach the forts before the enemy recovered from the pounding they were getting from antitank guns and began firing back with their machine guns. We reached them safely, and began reducing the fortifications with satchel charges and flame throwers. Because of our rapid attack, the enemy didn't have a chance to use their guns. In fifty minutes the entire attack was over. 59 prisoners were captured, the positions was taken, and the enemy land channel between Lorient and the peninsula was broken.

Only two Americans were killed, when a German shell fired from Lorient hit an antitank gun that was providing cover fire for our attack. The only casualty in our company was

suffered by a little Irishman who had joined the company at Chippenham, and who was assigned as a runner, to maintain contact between our platoon and the company. When we had accomplished our goal, Lieutenant Tuchman told Flanagan to go to company headquarters and notify the captain of our success. Flanagan headed out, but on the way flung himself over a hedgerow into a dense briar patch, from which he emerged with deep bleeding scratches over much of his body. He made his report, and then was sent immediately to the medics, who cleaned his wounds and bandaged him where needed. Because he was injured in the course of a battle, he was awarded a Purple Heart Medal, the first in our company.

This day, December 8, 1944, was the first real taste of active warfare I experienced, and I was glad that I was able to perform as expected. Despite all the training I had been exposed to, I had never been sure, until now, that I would be able to do my duty when the chips were down. Now, I knew I could.

On December 16 news reached us of the huge German offensive in the Ardennes, which became "The Battle of The Bulge." We were far from that battle, but knew that we would soon be in it. On New Year's Day, 1945, we began our move to the real war, far to the north. Before that, though, there was one last memorable event at the Lorient front that has remained a strangely beautiful memory through the rest of my life..

On Christmas Eve, 1944, I was assigned on a patrol, to begin at midnight, to probe to our front. The assembly point was a chateau in the area, unoccupied, and with most of the windows blown out during the allied attack months before. There were twelve of us,

under Lieutenant Dixon, from the first platoon. The moon was full, and the night was very cold. In the salon where we waited for midnight was a grand piano. As time passed slowly, Dixon walked over to the piano, sat down, and began playing a Christmas carol. Someone began to sing, and we all joined in. For the next while, (and I don't know how long it was,) we sang in the frigid moonlit night, an impromptu chorus far from home and in peril, momentarily back home with our loved ones. Midnight came, and Dixon led us out into the night, on one last patrol in Brittany.

Our stay in Brittany had not been entirely useless to the major war effort far to the north. We had contained 60,000 enemy troops, denying their use by the German high command. We had inflicted 2,700 casualties and captured 566 POWs. The 94<sup>th</sup> Division had lost 100 killed, 618 wounded, and 1 missing. We had furnished material assistance to the French Maquis fighters who shared our assignment. We had further sharpened our warfare skills, and that saved lives later, in the Saar Moselle Triangle, in Germany.

After leaving the United States, all our letters were censored by company officers, usually our platoon leader. Lieutenant Tuckman was a forgiving censor, but was adamant about keeping our location hidden. Of course, this meant we could not tell wives or other correspondents we were in Brittany, or even in France. I was able, however, to sneak my location past him. On a visit to Quimper, I bought a lovely little souvenir spoon, with an enamel picture of the cathedral in the bowl and the name "Quimper" beneath the picture. I wrapped it carefully, and sent it to my wife Pat. After consulting an atlas, Pat and her mother were able to determine where I was located. Score one for the ASTP.