A TRANS-ATLANTIC CROSSING

By W. T. Block

Every time I swear I will never write another World War II story, I think of something else to write about - like running the gauntlet of torpedoes in the North Atlantic Ocean.

My 78th Division left Camp Pickett, Va. by troop train late in August, 1944, bound for the overseas staging area at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. We were told that we might be there from 2 days to 2 weeks, depending on the availability of troop transports to carry us to England. We loved it at Camp Kilmer because there were no calisthenics, no marching, or inspections there, and the food was superb, quite a contrast indeed to the English food that we fed to the sharks as soon as we were afloat.

My company boarded a troop train late one afternoon, bound for New York harbor, where we boarded a 30,000-ton troop ship, the Caervarvon Castle. Immediately we descended 5 flights of stairs until we surmised we were beneath the water line. Our first thought was that we were only one level above the bilge, where a torpedo could easily welcome us to "Davy Jones' locker."

The next morning we felt the engine's vibration, and my buddy John and I hurried up the umpteen flights of stairs to the deck. Instantly we discovered that we were in a fog bank, so dense that we could barely discern someone standing 20 feet away. Suddenly we heard a "ba-a-a" or blate that I immediately recognized as a billy goat. We were aghast that we might be so close to land, but we had to await the visibility needed to solve that mystery.

We then entered the galley for breakfast, and such bland, untastety, unrecognizable chow we had never before encountered. We hastily joined the throngs at the rail, emptying our trays overboard, and that continued throughout the voyage. We wondered why the army did not take over the galley and feed us food we were accustomed to, and leave the English food in England where it might be appreciated.

Our convoy of 50 ships rendezvoused near Nantucket Island and soon set sail at about 14 knots speed. Our ship carried 5,000 men, mostly from the 309th Regiment, and two other ships carried the remaining 10,000 from my division. As John and I came on deck the third morning we heard a rooster crowing.

"That's uncanny!" John observed. "A couple days ago we heard a billy goat and today a rooster. I wonder where the floating barnyard is."

"It's out there on that old Greek freighter," a crewman beside us said as he stared out to sea through his binoculars. "She's an old World War I rust bucket without any refrigeration aboard. Look through these and you will see the cages where they keep the live chickens and goats."

By the fifth day we were nearing mid-Atlantic. The crewman told us the sub wolf packs were all around us. One day, as I looked through his binoculars, I could see a fast cruiser and several destroyers circling the convoy, and we were so thankful for those defenders who kept the wolf packs at bay.

One day the engine of the Greek freighter quit running, and the old freighter had to drop out of the convoy. The crewman predicted that a submarine would sink it within an hour, and the freighter was torpedoed only 5 miles in back of us. It was the only ship of our convoy that was lost during the crossing.

Suddenly on about the tenth day we were south of the Isle of Wight, and that afternoon we glided up to the dock in Southhampton harbor. Perhaps we had outsmarted the German Navy, but the German Army was still to be reckoned with. A year later, 1,800 of the soldiers who had made that crossing with me had found permament berths in a Belgian cemetery.

ALL QUIET ON THE ROER RIVER

By W. T. Block

In Feb. 1945, soon after the Battle of the Bulge, the Western Front in my vicinity was at a virtual stalmate. The German Army had just blown the big dam at the Schwammanuel Reservoir; and 25 billion gallons of water, which left the Roer River at flood stage, had to flow out to the North Sea. The Roer River was the last hurdle, which prevented our soldiers from invading the German Rhineland; and my 78th Infantry Division could not attempt to cross it until the river returned to normal.

Suddenly our radio team, which consisted of Sgt. George Novy, T5s John Mahe, Tom Doyle and myself, were detached from the 309th Regiment, and were sent up to monitor the flood level on the river and report it twice daily to our division headquarters. As a result, we relieved another radio team, and for the next two weeks we lived in an underground dugout bunker only 200 yards from the river.

On the river's western edge was an escarpment, consisting of a thick fir forest, where the prevailing winds howled night and day. Our dugout in the forest was about 4 feet deep, 7 feet wide, and 11 feet long, covered over with 2 layers of logs, and layers of dirt on the logs. Its 2-foot wide entrance was covered with a piece of canvas. We brought our radio receiver and its remote cable into the dugout, and our 3/4-ton truck was virtually invisible beneath the snow-covered branches of 3 fir trees. Once nightly, we had to run our truck engine to charge the batteries, but the engine sounds were entirely muffled by the howling winds.

We had 2 incoming telephone lines buried under the snow, one of which connected us with Division HQ, and the other line went up to the river, where 2 of our division engineers were also dug in. Each day they read the depth of the river after dark and again before sunup, and called that information to us, which we also relayed on to headquarters.

In a way, our hideaway on the Roer River was a delightful diversion. There were there for me no soldier corpses that had to be loaded into a truck, and no German artillery air bursts to pepper our location with shrapnel. The nights were the longest and most boring. Each of two of us had to work a 6-hour shift on the radio, even though we observed complete radio silence. During the hours before daylight, the American 240-mm. artillery shells droned only a few feet overhead, and when they exploded in the nearby German lines, our dugout shook and shivered.

Sometimes after daylight, we discovered hobnail boot tracks, which signified that a German combat patrol had passed nearby during the night. The 78th Reconnaissance Squadron was dug in on each side of us, and we were supposed to eat at their mess truck, which was located a quarter-mile distant. As often as not, we preferred to prepare our own meals. We carried with us 10 boxes of C-rations, which contained quart cans of bacon, which we cooked on our Coleman stove. We also had a Coleman lantern, a frying pan, and a bushel of Irish potatoes, which our predecessors had liberated at a nearby farm house. They had also taken carpeting, which lined the inside of our dugout.

One day while returning from the mess truck, we observed that some of the adjacent forest was burned out, although everything was snow-covered. Upon

closer inspection, we discovered part of a bomber's fuselage, also the hulks of 4 bomber engines, each with bent propellers. We called division HQ about the wreck, and later they recovered the skeletons of some American airmen.

About Feb. 27th, the engineers told us that the Roer River water level had returned to normal, and we returned to the 309th Regiment in time for our division attack into the Rhineland. Soon we saw once more the knocked-out German machine gun nests as well as fallen American comrades covered with snow. And on March 7th, our truck crossed over Remagen's Ludendorf Bridge over Rhine River on the same night it was captured.

BREAKFAST IN THE RHINELAND

By W. T. Block

It's been more than fifty years now since I promised Mess Sergeant McIlheny that I would never divulge our secret. He had threatened that if I ever did, he would cut my heart out and serve it with brown gravy. And remembering the sergeant like I do, and how he used to bark orders to everybody like a bulldog, I never doubted for a moment that he was mean enough to carry out his threat.

However, since he was fifteen years older than I was, there's only slim chance he is still alive; he's probably somewhere barking our his orders in the 'happy hunting ground.'

The bloody battles in the Bulge and Ardennes Forest had just ended, and then we had to wait a month while the flood level from a blown dam ran out of the Roer River.

Late in Feb., 1945, my division crossed over the Roer, racing forward and generally meeting light resistance. Somewhere in the Rhineland between Euskirchen and Remagen, my company halted in a farm village to allow our gasoline and supply line to catch up with us. Soon after setting up my radio in a large farm house, I began exploring on the second and third floors.

Later that evening, while eating my spam supper on a log, I overheard the mess sergeant tell a cook that he only had enough flour and ingredients left to make one pancake for each soldier the next morning. The sergeant had sent a supply truck back for food, but the vehicle had returned empty.

"Sergeant McIlheny," I intruded. "If you'll follow me, I think I can help out."

"All right, Block," McIlheny bellowed in my direction, "but you'd better not lead me on a wild goose chase!"

A few moments later, McIlheny, who was somewhat stout, was panting by the time we reached the attic floor of the farmhouse. Flues from the fireplaces beneath passed through a large metal cabinet, from whence was emitted the delicious smells of smoked hams, long sausages, and slabs of bacon.

The sergeant warned that the cabinet might be booby-trapped, but I assured him I had already looked inside. His nose and countenance flowered and grinned as he savored the sight and smells of the smoked meat, but again he warned that the contents may be poisoned.

"Sergeant," I countered. "What farm family would poison a 6-months supply of meat? And if German soldiers had found it, the cabinet would be empty!"

I finally convinced him, but he added, "Block, you keep your mouth shut about this, or the old man will have both our heads on a platter like John the Baptist! Do you promise?" So I promised to keep quiet.

He and I worked another hour, hauling smoked meat in barracks bags back to the mess truck. The next morning, each soldier had one pancake and a heaping slice of ham. Later for other meals, we enjoyed succulent sausages and bacons, and the old man inquired why Sergeant McIlheny couldn't obtain such tasty meat more often.

"If you're still alive, Sergeant McIlheny, I've kept our secret as long as I can. I just had to tell somebody, even if you cut my heart out!"

Christmas week in Simmerath

The baptism of fire of the 309th Infantry Regiment

By W. T. Block

Published in *The Flash*, publication of the 78th Infantry Division Association, January 2000, Vol. MM, #1, pages 90-97

Up ahead, the snow-covered trail veered to the right, its center darkened and churned by a thousand tire chains, contrasting sharply with the clean, driven snow on its edges and glistening in a meek, mid-morning sun. An army jeep was parked near the turn ahead, from which a military policeman stepped out to flag the lead vehicle in our little convoy. As he spoke to our radio platoon officer, Lt. James Lyons, in a low voice, the men in the other five trucks sensed the beginning of another of the army's well-known "waits." Gradually, each vehicle came to an abrupt halt, keeping a 50-foot interval in between as a precaution against a possible strafing or bombing attack by some German fighter plane. Near the end of the column was a large, 2.5-ton truck, loaded with reels of field telephone wire and stringing equipment. A weapons carrier behind it, its long antenna identifying it as a 78th Signal radio truck, was the last vehicle in the convoy.

"What the hell's holding us up?" bellowed some soldier in the canvas-covered rear compartment of the weapons carrier, his southern drawl cutting the icy air like a bayonet.

"I dunno yet," Sgt. George Novy, a radio communications sergeant sitting up front, yelled back to his teammate. "Lt. Lyons is heading this way now."

Two sharp explosions from bursting 88-millimeter German artillery shells rang out far off to our right, and their echoes resounded down the valley. Novy jumped up at that moment, his face frozen in surprise, and slowly he sat down again on the truck cushion. For a moment, he looked quite somber as he stared out across a snow swept landscape that some months earlier might have been a farmer's hay field. A column of smoke began to rise above the distant timberline across the valley, outlining the location of the German town of Simmerath, a farm village of only 114 houses, nearly all of them nestled along the tree-lined main thoroughfare. The low, muffled staccato of small arms and machine gun fire once more broke the stillness that had followed the artillery explosions. Earlier that morning, infantrymen of the 309th Regiment had driven the German soldiers back to a point only 400 yards outside of the village, where they dug in and began shelling the American positions. And near one end of the thoroughfare, the tall spire of the town's lone church invaded the snow-studded skyline, its bell tower soon to become a haven for enemy snipers.

"It sure sounds real enough," remarked Corp. Tom Doyle, our driver, his eyeballs aimed at the distant village, a half-mile to our right, and his raspy voice betraying all of his thoughts and fears.

"One thing's sure—it ain't the infiltration course at Camp Pickett," Sgt. Novy responded, commenting about the Virginia army camp which had been the 78th Division's staging area before embarking for the European theatre of hostilities. At that moment, the radio platoon officer arrived beside him, and Novy inquired of him, "What's the

matter up ahead, Lieutenant?"

"The military policeman says that "Eighty-eight Junction" up ahead has been under heavy shell fire most of the morning, and that we will have to wait until he gets the all-clear for us to advance," the platoon leader responded. "You can get out and stretch and smoke if you like, but stay in the roadway. He says the sides of this road have not been swept clean of mines as we will soon see about a hundred yards up ahead."

"What does he mean by that?" Sgt. Novy queried. "And where's this "Eighty-eight Junction" located?"

"I was asking him that when those shells started exploding over there, and we all hit the snow," Lt. Lyons answered. "Then I started eating snow with the M P and forgot about my questions. Eighty-eight Junction is the crossroads at this end of Simmerath, and there is another one on the far end of the thoroughfare in town. I'll honk whenever he gives the 'all-clear' for us to proceed." With that remark, the lieutenant turned and started back to his jeep. The distant noises died out for the moment, as though everyone were out to lunch. The stillness that followed seemed to be reinforced by the soft blanket of white, which covered everything. Sgt. Novy stepped down and began to stretch. Then he ambled around to the rear of the truck, a match stem dangling limply from one corner of his mouth, his trademark that all of us had grown familiar with.

"Gimme a weed, Mac," bellowed out another of Novy's verbal trademarks that he directed to one of the two faces that were gaping through the rear curtain of the weapons carrier.

Left-to-right: W. T. Block, George Novy, John Mahe, and Tom Doyle.

A hand poked out between the canvas curtains quickly produced a pack of Camels, and Novy removed a cigarette from it. He tapped it against the palm of his hand, another of his idiosyncrasies, and after removing the match, placed it in his mouth. And after the sergeant tossed the spent match into the roadway, he stared toward some snow-draped fir trees, the traditional Christmas trees of both America and Europe, which were supposed to be emblems of peace and good will to all men.

"Boy, ain't that a sight? You don't ever see anything like that around New Orleans!" drawled Corporal John Mahe as he climbed down from the rear of the truck. Mahe was a French Acadian with a delightfully slow and resonant

voice, but Sgt. Novy loved to tag the big Creole descendant with an Irish "Mac" for a nickname. At about the same moment, Corp. Block, Mahe's companion in the rear of the weapons carrier, climbed down and began stretching his legs as well.

Sgt. Novy said nothing in response to Mahe's comment. The unlighted cigarette continued to hang from his lips like a snake's tail, while his left hand ran over his pockets in search of a box of matches. Finally, a light flared in front of him, and automatically his head dropped to the level of the lighter. Instantly, his eyes returned to the panorama of frozen forest, and a peculiar gleam or twitch of his eyes signaled the advent of one of his witticisms that was sure to follow.

"You know, it kinda makes you feel like an intruder here, don't it—like a burglar or a gambler in church?" he finally emitted, his lips puckering at intervals from the sharp chill in the air.

Block responded almost immediately, "It sure does. I ain't seen too many sights like this in all of my life."

Mahe laughed and retorted, "Aw, come on, Block, you're just like me. The only time you ever saw a sight like this in South Texas was on a Christmas card."

As a sudden silence fell once more upon them, the soldiers' faces became solemn and pensive, and their thoughts turned homeward during that month of December in 1944. For each of them, it would be a third Christmas far from home. The majestic, crystalline panorama of the Ardennes Forest in mid-winter paralyzed their conversation until a lone machine gun's staccato of sounds broke the silence across the valley. Novy turned around just as a patch of snow fell from the truck's canvas roof onto Mahe's shoulder. The sergeant brushed it off, baring a streak of white lightning, emblazoned on the blood-red, half-moon patch or insignia of the Ardennes Forest's most recent arrival, the U. S. 78th Infantry Division.

The lieutenant in the lead jeep eventually gave a forward gesture with his upraised hand and sounded the vehicle's horn. Doyle, the driver, started up the weapons carrier and waited for the other lead vehicles to move forward. Slowly he inched around the corner ahead, only to see the telephone wire truck come to an abrupt halt.

"What now? Another wait?" Doyle asked in disgust or typical soldier exasperation.

"I guess they're looking at whatever it was the lieutenant was talking about," Novy replied. Each truck in turn pulled forward and stopped. The sergeant watched as soldiers in the wire truck pointed into an open field off to the right.

Doyle stopped the weapons carrier as we stared off into the distance. The partially snow-covered body of an American soldier about twenty feet from the road was easily recognizable, primarily by his helmet and boots which were exactly the same as we were wearing. A short distance farther lay another snow-covered body, identifiable primarily by the Nazi helmet and jackboots he wore.

Mahe, looking out the back of the truck as I did, asked, "Whatcha reckon happened here? It don't look like there's been any fighting going on around here."

"I don't know," Novy responded, "but they must be lying in a mine field. See the hole by each body. I guess the second one got trapped in his own minefield 'cause those jack boots he's wearing shore ain't American-make. The G I laying there must have been just curious or else hunting wrist watches and Luger pistols when he triggered a German mine. Take a good look, boys, 'cause there ain't no Luger pistol worth paying that price."

We stood there and stared for what seemed an eternity, but surely was no longer than thirty seconds. But the lesson our radio team learned there that morning was not lost during the next 142 days of combat, and in fact, was a valuable part of our battlefield "education," which enabled us to survive the war with all limbs intact.

The convoy moved forward again at something of a turtle's gait. The roadway gradually left the timberline and moved at a slight downgrade, perhaps fifty feet, into the valley beneath. The din of small arms fire grew ever louder, but for the most part the German artillery fire had ceased. As part of their continual effort to save ammunition, the Germans would often fire ten rounds of 88 mm. artillery into the town or road junctions and then halt the firing for the next 30 minutes. On a crude sign beside the road, some American had scrawled: "88 Junction--1,000 yards." Beyond it a few yards, a permanent road marker read: "Simmerath, 1 km," revealing the German's propensity for measurements in kilometers rather than American miles. The outline of the wooded farm village loomed hazily ahead of us, crowned by two columns of smoke creeping heavenward, which indicated that two houses were afire. From that point onward, the roadway ascended gradually until it entered the village. Sgt. Novy turned to his driver and remarked rather nonchalantly, "Tom, my boy, I shore hope those Jerry shells don't start poppin' again till we get through "88 Junction." I got a feeling the Krauts can see every truck coming up this road!"

On the outskirts of Simmerath, the convoy passed a pile of smoldering embers beside the road. A chimney and steps were all that was left standing of the farmhouse. Near the road junction, the tire marks veered off the roadway in order to avoid some deep shell holes. Our trucks soon passed through the junction without mishap and entered the lone, cobblestone thoroughfare, which was lined, on both sides with snow-covered oak, fir and linden trees. Broken limbs and debris littered the street. Near the intersection, several large houses were reduced to roofless shells, some already burned out, while artillery explosions had wrecked others. Near one of them stood the remains of a wrecked German 75 mm. field gun with wooden wheels, its gun crew dead in the snow beside it. The din of machine gun fire emanating from the German defenses a bare 400 yards outside of the town was loud and incessant. On the sidewalk to our right, two American soldiers, with lightning patches, lay only a few feet apart, blood-spattered and bootless, blood still flowing from a wound near the ear of one of them. As we looked, our nauseated stomachs reflecting the queasiness of our first day in combat, I could not help but think how long the two soldiers must have trained, hiked, and run infiltration courses, only to die during the first ten minutes of combat.

As Doyle moved our radio truck to the side of the road and parked, he asked, " I wonder why anybody would take their boots off?"

After a pause, Sgt. Novy responded, "You got me, Tom. It sure don't make sense that Americans would do that to their own dead, and there shore ain't no German soldier and civilians left in the town."

From a nearby doorway, a rifle company dogface interrupted in a loud voice, "That's what you think! Better get those trucks moving and get under cover! The town's full of snipers, and we're trying to flush some of them out of that church bell tower right now."

Lt. Lyons came running toward us, stopping only a second at each truck. At that precise moment, a rifle shot rang out, soon followed by a second, and we heard a bullet whine past us and imbed itself in a nearby oak tree. The lieutenant shouted to Doyle, the driver, "Pull that truck in between those two houses there and get under cover!" At about the same time, a bazooka shell burst in the bell tower, wiping out the nest of snipers.

As we dove for cover in the front room of a house, we noticed great quantities of buttons, spools of thread, and other sewing accessories on the floor around us. On the shelving in the room were bolts of cloth, dress patterns, and other items common to a sewing establishment. As it turned out, the front room of nearly every house in town had been some sort of mercantile firm, and across the street was a sign that read "Eisenhandler," or hardware store. The lone rifle company dogface was in the same room with us, standing at a broken window, his Garand rifle still pointing at the church's bell tower. Finally, he turned his head and bellowed out, "I think they got them. I saw mortars or bazooka shells exploding at the top of the bell tower. A bunch of German snipers slipped into town last night under cover of darkness, and my platoon from F Company got called back into town to clean 'em out."

Novy and the rest of us each chambered a bullet into the barrels of our carbines, fully believing we would be killing snipers, or be killed, before we could get our radio into operation. The sergeant glanced out of a window and finally inquired, "What's going on out there?"

A loud whine from an incoming shell penetrated the broken window. The rifleman hit the floor and the rest of us followed suite. A crashing explosion reverberated down the street, soon followed by two more, but not near enough on that occasion to pose much of a threat to us. The house shook and shivered, and more glass fell in shattered, tiny fragments from the broken windows. After a few moments of anticipative silence, during which we had expected more shells to explode around us, the Co. F dogface finally remarked, "I guess that's all for now. Whenever you can hear them shells whine, you don't have to worry. The one that don't whine is the one with your name on it. That ought to hold them snipers fer awhile. They hate their own artillery as much as we do because it kills German snipers too." With those remarks, the rifleman got up, disappeared out the door, and we never saw him again.

Since none of us had any special yen to go "house-hunting," the thought of setting up our radio in the same house we were hiding in struck us all in the cranium simultaneously. About that time, Lt. Lyons appeared in the doorway (we forgot to ask where he hid out during the shelling) and shouted, "Come on, Sgt. Novy, and let's check the cellar. And if it's not booby-trapped, you can set up your radio down there. This house looks good and sturdy, with thick concrete walls, and certainly better than most I've seen. I'll get the wire boys to run you a telephone line to regimental headquarters, which is about one block down the street." I might add that we were to maintain strict radio silence with the communications load being handled entirely by telephone. And as we were to learn from the foolishness of one of the regimental radio operators about a month or so later, the German radio direction finders were operating all up and down the front lines, and their "findings" could get you a German 88 shell down your windpipe. Lt. Lyons and Novy disappeared into the next room in search of the cellar door.

Fire and smoke billowed up from the roof of a house down the street, where the last half-dozen German shells had exploded. Everything grew strangely quiet after the last 88 barrage ended, including the German snipers, who had been flushed out and either killed or captured. After a few moments Sgt. Novy and the radio platoon lieutenant returned, and Major Paul Stokley from the Division Signal Office, who had been over at the 2nd Battalion headquarters, soon joined us. The two officers left to check out the neighboring cellars for a desirable location for our radio, and after some time, they returned and reported that the cellar of the house we were in was as good or better than those they had visited. "We'll be set up and in business in fifteen minutes," Sgt. Novy responded.

"Good," Lt. Lyons replied, as he mounted his jeep and prepared to return to 78th Signal Company headquarters, which were about 10 miles away at Roetgen, near Aachen, Germany, on the Belgian border. "I'll have Sgt. Claycomb's wire boys run you a line and hook up a field telephone for you in the cellar." His last word of caution before driving away was, "Remember! Complete radio silence! If those Kraut direction finders pinpoint you, you're goners!"

We all went into the cellar to check out the best location for our radio. A set of stairs led down from the kitchen area, and we quickly discovered that the cellar walls were solid concrete, about twelve inches thick, which would certainly protect us from everything except a direct hit by a bomb or large artillery shell. The cellar windows were very small, about fourteen by twenty inches in size, and we could easily bring our remote control cable and receiver through one of the windows. Tom Doyle, our driver, went outside and moved our weapons carrier to a new position beside one of the windows. And we spent the next 30 minutes unloading our truck and "refurnishing" our cellar, which was to become our home for the next ten days.

Our movable radio equipment consisted only of the receiver, remote cable, and telegraph key. The radio transmitter and battery bank were mounted permanently in the truck, and once daily we had to start the vehicle engine to charge the batteries, the radio's source of power. We left barracks bags and unnecessary equipment, except bedrolls, in the truck. With the German lines only 400 yards east of the town, we must prepare to evacuate at a moment's notice, destroy our equipment, or even defend our lives if the occasion arose. Hence, we never moved without a carbine in hand, and we even slept with hand grenades pinned to our coats. We did bring three boxes of "C" rations into the cellar with us, since for the moment none of us were anxious to sample the cuisine at the battalion mess kitchen. And always, there was the constant staccato of machine gun fire on the edge of town to remind us of where the Germans were.

For the remainder of the first afternoon, we never ventured outside for fear the sniper fire might commence again. We soon discovered that the German 88 barrages came thirty minutes apart, at which time it was a good idea to be in the cellar. The Germans had developed a nasty weapon in an artillery shell that exploded in mid-air, and which we dubbed "tree bursts" or "air bursts." These shells rained shrapnel all over the ground, and it was eventually on our tenth day in town that one of those shell bursts rained scrap iron all over our truck and cut our remote cable.

By mid-afternoon, we began exploring inside the house. From that first day, we arranged that two of us would take turns monitoring the radio for 24 hours, in four 6-hour shifts. Since Novy and Doyle took the first day, that left John Mahe and myself free except that we had to prepare our food. The "C" ration boxes contained a quart can of bacon packed in lard, and this became a staple part of our diet if we were under constant shellfire. We quickly discovered that the house we were in was about 100 feet long, although otherwise quite narrow, perhaps 30 feet wide. In back of the large merchandise room there were two or three bedrooms, a parlor, and a kitchen. The back door of the kitchen opened directly into the milk stall, with concrete floor, for the cows, and behind that was a huge barn with much hay in it as well as wagons and farm implements, with store, house, and barns all under one long roof.

Inside the barn, we discovered a large stock of Irish potatoes, which we soon put to good use making French-fried potatoes, cooked in bacon fat. We found an aluminum skillet inside the house, which we "borrowed" and kept with us during the next five months of combat. We already had a small Coleman stove, which was fueled with gasoline. We used the stove for both heat and cooking, and with the skillet and supply of potatoes, we were in business. There was also a large stock of red apples stored in the barn.

Upon entering the milk stall that afternoon; I heard a cow lowing outside of the barn door. I opened the door a little, and there stood a poor Holstein milk cow, standing in six inches of snow, in apparent good condition except that her utter was almost dragging in the snow. Milk flowed freely from the four teats, indicating that she had not been milked in perhaps two or more days. I let the cow inside, locked her head in a milk stall, and fed her some hay and a few apples, which she began to devour. I soon found a cooking pot in the kitchen, milked it full of fresh, warm milk, and took it back to the cellar.

"I found this farmer's supply of booze," I informed my comrades before they had a chance to see what was inside the pot.

"Block, we don't want to be drinking no alcohol while the Germans are just outside of town," was Sgt. Novy's response.

"Don't worry!" I answered, "there's no alcohol in this—just warm cow milk."

They could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the pot actually contained milk, and warm or not, they gobbled it down like it was so much beer. I filled the pot about three times, emptying it into their mess cups each time, before we all had our fill. And then I had to milk the rest of the cow utter's contents on to the floor to give the poor beast some relief. I milked the cow until the ninth day we were there, and since C rations contained a small box of dry cereal, I think we were the only dogfaces on the Western front who enjoyed cereal and fresh milk for breakfast. By the ninth day of our stay, our house was about the only one of the 114 left standing intact, a fact which the German artillery spotters could see, and that morning we took three direct 88 shell hits, one of which struck the barn, setting the hay on fire; a second struck above the cellar, bringing the roof down over the stairs; and the third struck the cow barn, bringing the roof down, which killed "my" cow. So much for my dairying activities in Simmerath.

I saw another odd item when I opened the barn door and let the cow in out of the weather. There, only a few feet from the side of the house was a grave covered with snow, a cross-mounted over the grave, and a German soldier helmet on top of the cross. I didn't see how the dead and buried German could have anything to do in any manner with our capture of the farm village of Simmerath. Besides, nothing about the grave seemed "fresh" or recent.

"Boy, they don't waste no time burying their dead around here," John Mahe commented, apparently not sharing my opinion that the grave had nothing to do with our recent capture of the town.

"There's gotta be something fishy about that grave!" I responded. When I finally got up enough courage to run out to check the inscription on the cross, it read "Gefreiter So-and-so (name not recalled), Gefallen in Frankreich, Juni 1940," which meant, "Corporal So-and-so, Killed in France, June 1940." On our ninth day there and during the same barrage that destroyed our house, another shell exploded in the center of the grave, leaving remnants of the soldier's skeleton and coffin scattered about in the snow. It was an ironic twist of fate, although unavoidable, that one German soldier's grave should be desecrated at the hands of other German soldiers.

I recall Mahe adding, "Sure seems funny though, burying him here in the yard beside his home, rather than in a cemetery somewhere." I didn't answer him, believing it was only one of many strange practices we might encounter if we ever got out of Simmerath with our tail feathers still intact. With that final remark, Mahe and I returned to the cellar to prepare for the first of several long nights that followed, ever mindful that the Germans were dug in only 400 yards from us and could overrun our position almost at will.

As the first arc of sunlight punctured the horizon the following morning, dawn arrived with a "crash-bang," a barrage of 88 mm. air bursts overhead in the trees, raining shrapnel into the freshly-fallen snow beneath and onto the clay tiles of our roof. The four of us sat muted in silence, dreading only the direct hits that we felt were inevitable, that is, if we remained in the burning village long enough, Already, we noticed through a cellar window the sizzling flames and a new column of smoke from an adjoining house. The 12-inch walls surrounding us were indeed reassuring, but I'm sure we often wished in silence that they had been built two feet thick.

"Darn that banty rooster outside!" Sgt. Novy coughed out when the first shell burst overhead. Although he never knew it, his sense of humor was welcomed and often disarmed us of the fright swelling within. "But that's life on the farm for you though. Boy," he added, "how I'd love to be back on the streets of old Chi-town right now!" About that moment our field telephone from the battalion switchboard began to ring, and Novy answered it, as he would often do, with his favorite telephone expression, "Engine room---Tugboat Annie speaking!" After a few moments of listening, he responded with "O. K.," then hung up.

"Battalion says they have got some mail for us that arrived this morning. Also," he continued, "they want to brief me about something. It seems they're expecting an all-out attack to throw us out of Simmerath." With those comments, Sgt. Novy picked up his carbine and started up the cellar stairs.

"Bring me a pint of ice cream from the P X," I said.

"Ok, wise guy, that's enough of that!" he hurled back at me as he slammed the door to the cellar stairs.

"So what the heck!" I thought, "I'll just make my own ice cream," knowing that the temperature was way below freezing outside. I gathered up four canteen cups and headed up the stairs toward the cow stall. As I opened the kitchen door into the barn, I noticed that the Holstein cow was lying down on the concrete floor, chewing her cud in apparent bovine contentment. I fed the cow some hay, and then I filled each of the cups and returned with them to the cellar. Afterward, in true Texas farm boy fashion, I chopped up some apples and what appeared to be sugar beets for the cow. Then I fired up our Coleman stove and melted a bucket of snow so the cow could drink.

After an hour and another artillery barrage, Novy returned, carrying a parcel and some letters, from the battalion-regimental headquarters building down the street, and he frowned a most glum and somber expression on his face.

"It's real bad news down south of us. Marshal von Runstedt, the German commander, launched his entire army yesterday in a major drive about ten miles to the south. His panzers or armored columns have already overrun a reserve American division, the 106th Infantry, in the thick Ardennes Forest around Malmedy, Belgium, and it shore looks like the Germans are headed for Antwerp. Already our supply lines are cut off, and if he drives through to the coast, we're sunk. That means the First British and First Canadian Armies will also be cut off." Novy passed out the letters to faces that expressed little interest in them. After a while, he added, "The Germans retook Kesternich last night that we had only captured from them yesterday morning."

"Where's Kesternich at?" one of us piped.

"Oh, 'bout a half-mile up the road from us," the sergeant responded. "E and F Companies got out in fair shape, dug in again right outside of the village, at which time the German attack ended. It appeared that the Germans just wanted to hold the village in order to protect their supply lines. In the valley below Kesternich there is a road that is a major supply route from Cologne into Belgium.

"Do you know any more about the 106th Division?" I asked him.

"No," Novy replied, "Why? Do you know somebody in that division? I think the whole division surrendered."

"Yes," I told him. "I know dozens of soldiers in that unit. Most of the Camp Wallace cadre, where I used to be stationed, is in that division."

My thoughts immediately returned to Camp Wallace, Texas, and Christmas of 1943. I had been assigned to anti-aircraft basic there and eventually to Headquarters Co. of the 28th Battalion, which operated the camp communications schools. I had taught in the radio operating and radio repair schools there for 15 months, and when the camp closed up, each of us was given the choice of joining the 78th Infantry, then on Tennessee 2nd Army maneuvers, or the 106th Inf. Division, stationed at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. I chose the 78th, not regarding it as being much of a choice, about like "swapping the devil for the witch." The entire radio cadre except me chose the 106th, believing they might continue to stay together in that unit. As it turned out, only two regiments of the 106th, still uncommitted to battle, surrendered to the Germans, but that was still the largest American surrender to the enemy, barring the surrender of the defeated Bataan-Corregidor forces in the Philippines, of World War II.

"2nd Battalion HQ says we are to be ready to pull out at a moment's notice," Novy continued. "The Krauts could be breathing down our necks in no time flat. Let's stop and get our excess gear back in the truck." After a moment, the sergeant shouted at Corporal Doyle, our driver, as he started up the stairs. "Tom, bring me that box of grenades down here while you're upstairs."

The rest of us shuffled back and forth to the weapons carrier until the cellar was nearly empty again. Novy took a roll of tape and taped a phosphorus grenade to the radio receiver. Soon he remarked, "If we should have to pull out in a hurry, this set of division SOI (Signal Operating Instructions) will have to be burned. Although this set expires today, we don't dare let 'em be captured by the Germans."

"When does Second Battalion think the Kraut attack might come? Mahe inquired.

"Who knows?" Novy responded. "The rifle companies have orders to hold their line at all costs, but they're spread out pretty thin up there. If an all-our attack comes, it will probably be with great strength and at night like at Kesternich. As you know, with only 400 yards separating us from them, they could be on top of us and staring down those stairs before we knew it. So you'd better pin some frag grenades onto your coats as well as keep your rifle and ammo clips real handy."

The 88 barrages came in at regular intervals all day, and once in a while, a new column of smoke would start moving heavenward, signifying another house set ablaze. Since most of the houses, like our own, had hay barns attached, they quickly burned themselves down to empty shells once they were set ablaze. Doyle spread a bedroll on the floor and taught us a new card game, called whist, whom he said was popular around his home. And for many days thereafter, we were to while away the excess hours while playing the game we quickly grew to love. And on that particular day, Novy and Doyle were "on KP" as well, it being their turn to peel potatoes and fry the chips and strips of bacon.

All that day, we expected the attack that never materialized, and by nightfall our worst fear was that the attack would come while most of us slept. The previous night, three of us slept at one time while Tom Doyle stayed on the radio from midnight until dawn. Sgt. Novy decided to "play it safer," and he worked out a schedule for the next night whereby one man stayed on the radio, another stood guard in the rooms upstairs, each on two-hour shifts, while the remaining two slept on two-hour shifts. I drew two guard shifts upstairs that night. On the first one, five artillery shells came in to sing their final lullabies, after which it became almost deathly quiet outside. For the remainder of the night, only the high winds and snow flurries howled their way through the broken windowpanes to remind me how comfortable it was in the cellar beneath.

Again, daylight arrived on the wings of two barrages as shells began exploding in each of the "88 junctions," located on each end of the town. About 7:00 A. M., Sgt. Novy was called to battalion HQ to pick up the mail, and when he returned, he brought us a pot of powdered eggs and ham from the battalion mess truck. In a way, I too was on KP duty that morning, having tapped "my" milk cow for four more canteen cups of warm milk. I found the Holstein much as I had the previous morning, laying on the floor and chewing her cud in a contented fashion. After milking her out thoroughly, I fed her some hay before returning to the cellar with the canteen cups. Upon reaching the stairs, I looked out a window just as two rifle company dogfaces marched six German prisoners down the street in the direction of Lammersdorf. At about the same moment, Lt. Lyons; his driver, Henry Isley; and our assistant radio platoon sergeant, Sgt. David Mowat, drove up, dismounted, and entered the house just as I started down the cellar stairs.

After the customary greetings, Lt. Lyons handed Novy a packet of papers and said, "Here's the new SOI for this week, sergeant, and don't lose it. Also you need to change the colored identification panel on the top of your truck in case some of our P-47 fighters begin bombing or strafing in this area. Anything happen last night?"

"Nothing much," Novy responded, "but we kept one man on guard all night. What's the news from the "Bulge" battle?"

"There's not really a great deal known, the bulge salient being still so fluid and constantly changing," the lieutenant replied. "We do know the Germans are murdering American prisoners and leaving their bodies lying in the snow around Malmedy. The Germans have driven to and surrounded a Belgian town named Bastogne, which is occupied by the 82nd Airborne Division. Von Runstedt has demanded their surrender, but the airborne commander, Gen. McAuliffe's, answer was only, "Nuts to you!." I wonder how that translates into German?"

"What was all that shooting we heard at daylight?"

"Second Battalion retook Kesternich a couple of hours ago. I think the general is curious to know if it's just Kesternich that the Germans are anxious to hold on to or what. If so, they'll probably counter-attack the town and try to take it back before long," Lt. Lyons answered. Then he turned in my direction and asked, "Block, do you still have your Holstein cow locked up in the barn?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Well, keep 'er there! The 78th Signal Company might be reduced to eating her in a few days if our food supply keeps dwindling. Right now, most incoming supply space is being allocated to shells, ammo, and gasoline." With those remarks, the lieutenant mounted his jeep and drove away. My stomach felt kind of empty as I envisioned my Holstein going into the 78th Signal stew pots, and for the moment I lost my appetite.

We concluded it must be about December 17th or 18th; no one seemed to neither know nor care. After our noon meal, again eaten to the harmony of 88 mm. airbursts, Tom Doyle once more spread out his bedroll on the cellar floor and dealt out the cards for another game of whist. We bid our hands and trumped and kept score until a drooping sunlight in the cellar window told us that twilight was approaching. And again, we chose up two-hour shifts of either monitoring the radio or standing guard upstairs throughout the night. During the long night, I stood one shift on the radio and two guard shifts upstairs, and again, we awaited the German attack that never came.

Ach day thereafter bore a marked resemblance to its predecessor, beginning with a bevy of shell bursts to usher in the morning sun and punctuated at thirty-minute intervals with more of the same. About the 21st of December, the Germans counter-attacked and retook Kesternich for the second time, but no general attack along the entire length of the 309th Regiment or division front ever materialized. And daily, more of the houses in town caught fire from the constant shelling and burned to the ground or into blackened stone shells. One of the first houses to burn was the solid-stone house that housed both battalion and regimental headquarters. The upper stories simply burned out and fell in, but neither headquarters deserted the huge cellar that had stone walls twenty inches thick.

On the morning of the 23rd, it soon became our time to desert a sinking ship. In rapid succession, four shells struck our billet in the manner previously stated. The first exploded in the roof of the hay barn and tool shed, setting the hay on fire. The second one exploded in the milk barn, killing the cow and bringing down the roof on top of her. The third exploded directly above us, bringing the roof down over the door to the cellar stairs. A fourth shell exploded nearby in the yard, digging up the German soldier's grave and scattering his bones. The explosion above us shook the cellar walls so severely that we feared the concrete ceiling might cave in upon us. The windows shattered, and plaster fell from the cellar walls. Heavy timbers and bricks fell to the floor above us. We sensed immediately that the cellar door would be blocked. After several seconds, Novy climbed the stairs to try to open the cellar door, and it wouldn't budge. The sergeant quickly cleared away the jagged edges of a broken windowpane. Then we helped Tom Doyle through the window so he could examine the situation outside. He quickly informed us that the house and barn were ablaze and we needed to evacuate as quickly as possible. We then shoved bedrolls, overcoats, weapons, grenades, C rations, the radio receiver and other gear through the window, after which Novy helped Mahe and myself through the narrow opening. After loading everything aboard our vehicle, Doyle drove the weapons carrier about 200 yards down the street and parked it in back of battalion headquarters while we awaited instructions.

I entered battalion headquarters through the outside cellar door and soon found a beehive of activity and confusion. For a few minutes, Novy and I stood motionless near the door while a score of officers and men scurried about between the cellar's rooms. Finally, Novy sighted a sergeant talking to the adjutant, a captain whom Novy had met during his previous trips to the headquarters cellar.

"Was he hit bad?" the sergeant queried.

"Yeah, plenty bad," the captain replied. "They're on the way back to the aid station with him now, but I don't think there's much that can be done for him."

"Who's hit?" Novy interrupted.

"The colonel," the captain answered. "A sniper got him in the chest a while ago."

"Reckon we can set up shop in here, sir? Three of those 88's hit our billet and it's burning up. Or do you want us to go looking for another cellar?"

"No, sergeant," came the reply, "set your radio up in that room in the corner, but you'll probably have to clean it out first. The major and I have plenty of other problems to deal with first. E Company never got out of Kesternich—all of them apparently killed or captured. At least, none of them have reported in so far."

Just as we were bringing in the radio and remote cable about an hour later, a lieutenant came in, followed by a sergeant from E. Company. The battalion major began questioning immediately. "You say there are about forty of you holed up in the cellar there?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the sergeant replied. "Maybe a few more. At least six of them are litter cases. And most of the rest of them are frost bitten, and maybe some of them have frozen feet. At least, mine feel like they're frozen they hurt so much."

"Are they all together and where are they?" the major inquired.

"In a cellar near the edge of the village," the sergeant responded.

"And how many German troops do you think are in Kesternich now?"

"I don't know, sir," the sergeant replied, "but the town's full of them. We heard them all day yesterday and all night last night, but luckily none of them know there's an outside entrance. Before daylight, when I slipped out, I covered the opening with a small fir tree that had been cut down. The upstairs entrance was covered with rubble when the roof of the house caved in."

"Did you see any sentries when you slipped out?"

"No, sir, but I could hear two of the Krauts spouting German," the infantry dogface answered.

"Could you lead a rescue team back there and do you think there's any hope of getting them out?"

After a moment, the captain and the major discussed the situation together, after which the battalion major asked, "Captain, if you really think you can save those men and you want to have a try, take whatever men you think you need and try to get those boys back here. Be sure and take six or eight litters along. Don't take more than five men in with you at first until you can neutralize the sentries. And good luck!"

Novy nudged the adjutant as he walked past him and said, "Sir, we found something in that store room you probably could use to silence the German sentries without making any noise. See here. It's a German steel crossbow and a supply of arrows."

The adjutant's face lit up as he sized up the crossbow. Finally, he put a steel arrow in it and cocked the bow until it was ready to shoot. Then he aimed at a point near the ceiling, pulled the trigger, and the arrow struck the concrete abutment with a loud twang.

"This just might be the thing to take along," he observed, and a few moments later, the captain and sergeant disappeared out the door, to locate weapons, snow suits, and other gear for about 25 men and to await darkness which was still two hours away.

In the meantime, things got pretty hot in old Simmerath as twilight approached. Upon feeling the call of Mother Nature, I went outside with my shovel to dig me a cat hole some fifty feet away from the cellar door entrance. Just as I returned to the concrete porch from whence a set of stone stairs led down into the cellar, I heard a brief whine or whistle move past me, then immediately a blinding flash and explosion as an 88 shell hit the very spot where I had been relieving myself a moment earlier. At that instant, an infantry lieutenant was walking in front of me, and a blast of concussion knocked me into the lieutenant, and he into the wall, blowing my helmet fifty feet away into the snow, and bruising the lieutenant somewhat as well as knocking the breath out of him. I helped him to his feet and down the cellar stairs, each of us being most grateful not to have been hit by shrapnel. Later we found jagged

pieces of shrapnel two inches long that had struck the wall beside us.

Earlier, a large truck loaded with land mines parked in front of battalion headquarters while the two soldiers came inside for instructions. Suddenly, another explosion shook the cellar so violently that there were none of us who were not convinced that the walls would cave in around us. Later, we learned that another 88 shell or a mortar shell had struck the truck and exploded the mines, and the following day, two or three bodies in the streets were found to be so obliterated that they had to be picked up in baskets.

That night, I took the midnight to six shift on the radio, and things in the hectic battalion-regimental headquarters leveled off during the early hours before dawn. That is, it remained quiet until about four A. M. Shortly before daylight, the adjutant and Company E sergeant returned and began removing gloves and brushing freshly fallen snow from their clothing. At that instant, the battalion major, himself being for 48 hours without sleep and his unshaven face looking haggard and tired, walked in from the outside. "We got 'em out, Major, all forty-six of them, right out from under the Krauts' noses, and without one shot being fired. Boy, that crossbow sure came in handy. We killed one sentry with it and another one with a bayonet, with neither of them making a sound. They're all in bad shape though, seven of 'em are on litters, and several are frost-bitten or perhaps have frozen feet."

"You did a jam-up job, Jim. Was Captain Ford among them?" the major asked.

"No, one of them said he was killed night before last," the adjutant replied. "No officers left that I know of, and only two sergeants. They are mostly from second platoon. Those Krauts have an uncanny way of picking off our officers and non-coms, even tho they're wearing no insignia."

"Get them back to the aid station as quick as you can, Captain," the battalion commander answered. "And go along and question as many of them as you can. I want to know everything that happened in Kesternich."

"Yes, sir," the captain responded as he started up the cellar steps.

At six A. M., Novy prodded Tom Doyle in the ribs and bellowed out, "Up and at 'em, Tom, Boy. It's your turn on the radio until noon."

Doyle rolled over, yawned, and stretched out his arms in a typical boarding-house reach. "What day is this, George? Is it Christmas yet?" he mumbled.

"No, not yet," Novy responded, being unsure of the date himself. "Must be about the twenty-fourth, I guess."

As daylight approached, four 88 airbursts exploded outside, one of them almost directly over the headquarters, and again the cellar walls rattled and reverberated to the concussion. Almost immediately, the pilot light on the radio went out.

"Sure looks like they got our truck this time," Mahe commented. After the shelling ended, Novy and I went outside to inspect the damage. A tire was flat, ripped open by a large piece of shrapnel. The truck canvas had several holes in it, and another piece of shrapnel had cut our remote control cable in two.

We returned to the cellar, and turning to John Mahe and Doyle, Novy said, "I guess the lieutenant or Sgt. Penrod is gonna have to send up a replacement radio team so we can go back for repairs. I'll call the Signal Company from Diehard Switch (code name for the 309th Regiment) and see what they want to do."

Novy then went to the telephone switchboard operator in another room and told him, "See if you can get me Dipole Switch (code name for 78th Signal Co.). I want to talk to Lt. Lyons." After a short delay, he was able to reach Master Sgt. Clyde Penrod, our radio platoon sergeant, who informed Novy that Sgt. Charles Yates' radio team would be dispatched to Simmerath shortly to replace us. Novy then returned and informed us, "They're sending up "Pappy" Yates and his team to replace us so I guess we'll be eating Christmas dinner back at the Signal Company in Roetgen after all. Yum! I can almost smell the turkey and dressing simmering."

Mahe and I went outside to check out the truck and change the tire. Miraculously, despite holes in the canvas, none of the shrapnel hit the motor or other vital parts. Within two hours, Sgt. Yates arrive to replace us, bring more letters and a couple of packages. After a few minutes conversation, Novy finally turned to Doyle and said, "Tom, Boy, you'd better warm up the truck and get it around in front. We want to get on the road before the next barrage of 88's start coming in."

Tom picked up his carbine and went outside to start and warm up the truck. We already had all of our gear loaded. Novy shook hands with a few of the battalion and regimental personnel and remarked to them, "Good-bye for now. See you after Christmas or as soon as we git repaired."

Novy and I walked out in front of the billet to see the large crater left from the land mine explosion. Parts of the truck had been blown in all directions, and two nearby trees had been turned into matchsticks. Novy lit a cigarette and turned his head in the direction of the front lines where short bursts of burp gun and machine gun fire shattered the icy stillness.

"You know, Block," he remarked, "we're not doing half bad by being in division radio communications. Maybe it ain't like having a draft deferment or being 4-F, but it sure beats manning them infantry fox holes out there where the riflemen are."

"I don't see where we're all that different from them," I commented. "Sure, they get most of the bullets, but it looks like we end up with most of the artillery and mortar shells. And besides, what if that Kraut attack had come while we were still here. We'd have been up to our necks in fighting in no time flat."

"Well, that's an "if" that ain't developed so far. And besides, they're up to their necks in bullets all the time," Novy turned to me and said. "To me, them fox hole dog faces are the real heroes around here because they're the ones who separate us from Nazi tanks and machine guns." After a moment, I remarked, "I still say that ------."

A German shell whined and exploded in "88 Junction" at the far end of the street, but the two of us fell to the snow by instinct. About that time, Doyle drove up and shouted, "Let's get the hell out of this hot spot!"

The three of us jumped into the truck, and Doyle ploughed and skidded through the snowy street in the direction of Lammersdorf, and he didn't slow down until the weapons carrier had passed through "88 Junction" en route to our home base. After a while, Novy stuck his head through the hole in the canvas and bellowed, "Block, I still say them fox hole dog faces are the real heroes and the only heroes. They're the ones on whom we depend to keep old Kraut von Runstedt's hordes from rolling in on top of us!"

No one responded to the comment about the fox hole dog faces that Sgt. Novy mentioned as the weapons carrier turned left into the valley and headed for the Division Signal Repair and a Christmas turkey dinner at the 78th Signal Company in Roetgen. As we reminiscenced - so ended our two weeks vacation as 88-mm fire burned up our first underground signal post. Soon after we were lodged in a large concrete cellar with walls 30-inches thick. About Dec. 23rd, 1944, an American truck, - loaded with about 2,000 American anti-personnel mines, were parked in front of us; and about midnight a German shell hit the truck loaded with land mines and it made the loudest sound I every heard as the load of mines blew up, and the concussion, we feared, would bring the concrete walls down on top of us, but it did not. The next morning body parts from some men that were killed painted red the otherwise beautiful snow that surrounded us.

Anyway we were glad to get out of Simmerath, and although six months of that terrible war still remained to be fought, we felt already as if we were survivors.

Remagen Bridge, showing German prisoners captured by 78th Infantry Div. being marched to POW camps in the west, March 8, 1945.

Wolfgang Nitsch, a German friend of the 78th Division veterans, pointing to the huge bronze plaque at Remagen, honoring the role of the U. S. 78th Division in fighting in the Remagen Bridgehead.

CROSSBOW STILL HAS PLACE IN WARFARE

By W. T. Block

I recently received a letter from Mr. Al Price in Tulsa, OK., and he wrote as follows:

"...Bill, I recently read your long article in FLASH about the baptism of fire of the 309th Infantry Regiment, and I never thought I'd ever read again about the use of a crossbow in World War II."

"...I came ashore on D-Day+1 with the 2nd Inf. Division in Normandy. I drove a jeep and trailor, hauling ammo up to the front for 20 hours daily. I stopped to sleep in a farm house one night, where I met 8 or 9 other dogfaces, who carried crossbows and arrows. I asked them, 'Boys, ain't you all fighting in the wrong war?' I was going to question them more the next morning, but they left before I woke up."

What Mr. Price referred to was the use of a crossbow to kill German sentries silently without alerting anyone else. About Dec. 22-23, 1944, I and 3 other men were operating a radio in a huge cellar in Simmerath, formerly a farm village of 114 houses in the Ardennes Forest near the Roer River. The last of those houses had been struck and burned out by shellfire, but we continued to use the cellars as bunkers.

We had been cut off from supplies for several days and were being supplied by airdrops, because of the German Army's invasion into Belgium a few days earlier. Despite little pressure upon the 78th Division at large, we had twice captured and twice lost the neighboring village of Kesternich, which overlooked a main supply route into Belgium being used by the Germans.

By the morning of the 23rd, everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Snipers had slipped back into town during the night; we remained under intense shell fire, and E and F companies had been driven out of Kesternich. While we were cooped up in the cellar, my buddy George Novy had become intrigued with a medieval crossbow that hung on a wall. He loaded and fired it several times, and the arrows struck the concrete sidewall with devastating effect.

Near midnight, an E company sergeant in a snow suit came in and reported that a platoon of about 30 men were holed up in a Kesternich cellar and 6 men were suffering from wounds and frostbite. The Germans had not discovered their presence, although two of their sentries were on guard in the snow-covered street in front. If the men in the cellar were to be led to safety, the sentries would have to be killed silently. The sergeant was preparing to lead a combat patrol, wearing snow suits made of bed sheets, back into Kesternich.

Outside a bright moon reflecting off the snow provided some light for movement. Novy demonstrated the crossbow to a captain, who quickly foresaw that the weapon could kill silently. The sergeant used the crossbow to kill the sentries, and just before daybreak, the patrol returned, bringing with them the weary and hungry soldiers, 6 of whom were wounded or frostbitten and were carried on litters.

"You'll get a medal for your bravery, sergeant!" the battalion major said as the last of the victims arrived safely in the cellar. "Did the crossbow do its job?"

"Yes," was his response, "and so silently that they never knew what hit them, and no one else was alerted. They'll be plenty surprised when they find the sentries face down in the snow with arrows in their backs."

Although it was true that the ancient crossbow belonged to the wars of medieval times, I wondered like Mr. Price how many times they may have been used in our recent wars.

THE LIMESTONE CAVERNS OF LIMBURG, HOLLAND

By W. T. Block

In Nov., 1944, shortly before the Battle of the Bulge, my company passed in convoy through Maastricht, the capitol city of the Dutch province of Limburg. We were directed to continue to Valkenburg Mountain, where limestone caverns have been hollowed out since Roman times. Our entire convoy of 65 vehicles drove into the mountain, thus occupying only a small niche, where electric lighting illuminated huge limestone arches and walls 80 feet high. I soon noticed that there was much graffiti on the walls, usually containing a name, rank and home town of other soldiers who had preceded us.

We were mesmerized by the interior of the mountain. There were sculptures and painting on the walls, some from medieval times, and animals carved out of huge blocks of limestone. I recall one that was either a huge crocodile or some mythological creature about 30 feet long. There is even a much larger man-made cavern, Mt. St. Peter. The entire town of Maastricht sits above 22,000 catacomb-like tunnels, totalling 155 miles in length, and extending far into both Holland and Belgium.

During World War II, many of Holland's national treasures, including Rembrandt's "Nightwatch," were sealed up there, hidden from the German army. Sometimes refugee Jews either were allowed to live there, hidden in the passage ways, or were ferried back and forth to safety in Holland or Belgium through the tunnels.

I recently contacted Dr. Willem Renooij in Holland, concerning the limestone mountains, and he directed me to Rik Willemse, who has worked for years as a guide in Mount St. Peter. Willemse has made a systematic search in the caverns for soldier graffiti; and he has now recorded more than 400 names, which read like "W. Seims, Freeport, N. Y." or "PFC Woodrow Jones of Georgia." For years Willemse has been trying to contact the former soldiers after their return stateside, and he has enjoyed phenomenal success.

He also suspected that some of the soldiers had been killed in action, and that their remains might still be resting within the shadows of Maastricht. PFC Jones was killed near Aachen on Nov. 29, 1944, and is buried in Henri Chapelle cemetery, a few miles south of Maastricht. PFC Larry Lanahan was also killed on Nov. 29, 1944, and his remains rest 6 miles east of Maastricht in Margraten cemetery.

The German army also used the caverns to shelter men, armor, and munitions from air attack. However, their soldiers remained close to the entrances, ever fearful of getting lost in the labyrinth of tunnels.

The U. S. 30th Infantry Division liberated Maastricht on Sept. 14, 1944, but the limestone caverns continued to be a safe haven from the many German V1 "buzz bombs," that were passing a few hundred feet overhead. Among the 400 graffiti names carved into the limestone walls are those of 4 army nurses.

One graffiti writer, Sgt. Ed Wiersema of Fulton, Illinois, survived the war, but died of pneumonia 5 months after returning home. Robert Brewster of Utah, Woody Bienfang of Wisconsin, and Robert Steiner of Washington were all buddies, stationed in Maastricht to guard 9th Army HQ. When Willemse wrote

them, he discovered that Steiner and Brewster were still living, but Bienfang had died in 1984.

Willemse's duties sometimes take him to Margraten cemetery, where 8,300 Americans, killed during the Battle of the Bulge, are buried; there are 7,900 more buried in Henri Chapelle cemetery. The German offensive of Dec. 16, 1944 was finally defeated, but at such a high price in American blood.

The limestone caverns at Maastricht remain a must-see site for the American tourist. And they played an important role during World War II also.

THE SUBMARINE FACTORY IN LAMMERSDORF

By W. T. Block

I remember Dec. 12, 1944, when my radio team passed through Lammersdorf on the way to my division's first day in combat at Simmerath. Lammersdorf was a small German town on the Belgium border, and as we passed through town, an MP pointed to and referred to the largest building I had ever seen as the "submarine factory." The building was 4 football fields long, 1 field wide, and stood 100 feet high.

Upon reaching the hotly-contested farm village of Simmerath, we felt safe in a cellar with 12-inch thick concrete walls. Ultimately after 2 weeks, 3 artillery shells hit our house, one of which exploded above us and brought the roof down over our stairway. A second shell set our house afire; and the third was an air burst, which wrecked our truck and radio, forcing us to be towed back to rear echelon for repairs. We were lucky to extricate ourselves through the small cellar windows.

Three days later we were assigned to radio duty inside the submarine factory. We chose to set up in one end of the building, mostly filled with 40-feet long metal lathes, where propellor shafts were turned. As soon as we entered the building, 3 more 88mm. shells exploded inside the building, and we soon realized the enemy artillery would be shelling our building, 3 shells every 30 minutes, 144 shells every 24 hours.

We quickly noticed that at the inside top of the building, there were huge chain hoists and overhead cranes, moving on rails and capable of lifting loads of several tons. There were also many sheets of 1-inch steel near us, and we used the hoists to lift and cover the top and sides of 2 lathes with the steel sheets, until we had a neat "steel igloo" to protect us from the shell bursts.

The 30-minute intervals between the exploding shells gave us time to explore inside the factory. We soon discovered that submarine sections were indeed being built in assembly line production. The end result was a circle of steel plates, more than 20 feet in diameter and about 12 feet long, with a mass of unattached wires and pipes sticking out of each end. Each section was then placed on a barge and shipped through Germany's internal canal system to the shipyards in Bremerhaven, where final assembly of the U-boats took place. The sections were then welded or bolted together and wire and piping hooked up until the submarine was finished.

Germany's internal canals connect with all major rivers, and during the war barge shipments through them took a great load off the railroads.

We did our own cooking inside of our "steel igloo.," and we tolerated the constant shell explosions as best we could. Since we carried several boxes of C raions with us, we fried bacon and French fries in a skillet over our Coleman stove. The bacon was stored in large cans of fat, and we looted 100 pounds of Irish potatoes from the farm house in Simmerath.

One day another air burst wrecked our truck and radio again, and once more we were towed to the rear for repairs. It seemed we were knocked out at 2-week intervals.

Three days later we were back at the front with the 309th Infantry and were assigned with the regimental radiomen in a captured German pill box. And soon there were dozens of shell craters surrounding us. Luckily no shell hit the pill box, but 12 days later, another air burst knocked out our truck and radio, forcing us to return for repairs again.

Our truck and radio were to be knocked one more time in the Remagen Bridgehead, at which time our driver suffered a minor shrapnel wound. I credit the thick concrete cellar walls, our "steel igloo," and of course God Almighty, with bringing us back safely from the war.

THOSE OFFSHORE BLIMPS

By W. T. Block

Another story that would date anyone who remembers them was about those bulky anti-submarine blimps that patrolled our beaches and offshore waters during World War II. To the best of my ability to remember, they were nearly identical to the Goodyear blimps that on occasion have visited Beaumont.

Along with the disasters at Pearl Harbor and Bataan Peninsula early in the war, two other incidents alarmed coastal residents in the spring of 1942. German submarines were sinking our tankers within sight of the beach, and they also brought ashore two groups of saboteurs with explosives on the Atlantic coast. Hence the need to patrol our beaches and offshore waters became distressfully necessary.

That task was at first assigned to the Coast Guard, who leased the Seaview Hotel at High Island, from whence they dispatched beach patrols on horseback to Sabine Pass and Port Bolivar. Southeast Texas was considered especially vulnerable to saboteurs because of the refineries and shipyards located at Beaumont, Galveston, Port Arthur, and Texas City.

The Navy soon let contracts for the building of both anti-submarine blimps and blimp bases, with hangars large enough to house them. Early in World War II, I was assigned to anti-aircraft training at Camp Wallace, one mile north of Hitchcock, Texas, and very quickly we had a ringside seat to the blimps and to the erection of two large hangars at the blimp base across the highway from us.

Within a few months, blimps in the air near us were a common sight. Each morning one blimp flew east to Port Arthur and Louisiana, and the other blimp flew southwest, patrolling along Matagorda and Padre islands. They looked so slow and cumbersome that they became the butt of many jokes; none of us realized how fast they could really fly, which was a top speed of 125 miles an hour.

By 1943 Sgt. Harry Rogers of Beaumont and I were assigned as camp radio instructors, and another soldier there was our battery supply sergeant, Sigmund Greenberg of Beaumont. We all enjoyed weekend passes that permitted us to visit Beaumont and vicinity.

One Friday afternoon Harry and I met Sgt. Greenberg on the Bollivar ferry, and he invited us to ride with him at the exact moment an east-bound blimp was passing overhead. At first we only sought to keep pace with the blimp as it lumbered along the beach. As the blimp increased speed, so did we until the speedomoter read 90 miles an hour and more.

Harry and Siggy enjoyed the race, and they got the greatest kick out of my imploring them to slow down. They finally did when it became apparent that I was going to claw out the car's interior cloth lining. In the meantime the faster blimp flew away as if we were standing still.

I remember another occasion in Florida when a patrol blimp was flying in a fog bank. Suddenly it reached a clearing in the fog, where it saw a German submarine afloat, charging its batteries. The blimp descended and dropped a bomb on the submarine at the same moment that the U-boat's deck gun fired an explosive shell into the blimp. Both of them were destroyed with a considerable loss of life.

As long as I was at Camp Wallace, it never fell my lot, thank goodness, to race the Bollivar blimp again. The next time you see the Goodyear blimp, remember that her sister ships and blimp pilots did a superb job of guarding our beaches and offshore waters during World War II.