

Eygelshoven, The Netherlands

By

John M. Nolan

On September 19, 1944 the 3rd Squad of the 1st Platoon of Company G, 119th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division was dug-in on the forward slope of a field near Groenstraat, The Netherlands. We could look out to the East and see Germany and fortifications along the Siegfried Line called the West Wall by the Germans.

We were in a defensive position in two man foxholes with Edward Knocke and Ernie King in one, Cletus Herrig with David Hedland, Bill Cline and Frank O'Leary the assistant squad leader in another, Vic Kwaitkowski and me in the fourth foxhole. Our squad had arrived here after joining the Company on September 6, 1944 near Tournai, Belgium. We were with a group of replacements that were assigned to fill the vacancies the unit had suffered since the Division's D+4 landing at Omaha Beach in Normandy. Lieutenant Gail Kuhn arrived the same day and was assigned as our Platoon Leader. I was a Corporal and was designated the Squad Leader. Frank O'Leary was a Private First Class so I designated him as the Assistant Squad Leader. The other six "green" replacements were Privates. No squad member had been in combat and we knew that our infantry training would soon be tested on the battlefield.

We remained in this defensive position for about a week. During the day the Platoon Leader ordered our squad to set-up an outpost in a house about a quarter mile away on the outskirts of a town. We later learned the name of the town was Eygelshoven where Lt. Kuhn had taken our squad on a motorized patrol of the town.

Since September 7 we had been transported by truck and marched by foot from the vicinity of Tournai, Belgium to our defensive position near Groenstraat, The Netherlands. Using a road map of Belgium and Limburg Province, The Netherlands, the straight-line (as-the-crow-flies) distance is 187 kilometers or 117 miles. Since we did not "fly like a crow," but used winding roads instead. I estimated that the road miles would add about 20% to the straight-line distance. We had to traverse about 140 road miles through Belgium and The Netherlands to reach the German border. The distance the 119th Infantry Regiment traveled from Tournai on September 7 by truck to Bousval, Belgium was about 55 miles. Therefore, at least an 85-mile march by foot faced us to include the squad's first taste of combat when we moved through Limburg Province. Our foot march began the next day, September 8, from Bousval to an area near Autre Eglise, Belgium a distance of 25 miles. On September 9 after another 25 miles by foot, we arrived at Thys, southwest of Tongres, Belgium. We ended our march on September 10 after 15 miles at Visé, Belgium where we were halted by the water barrier of the Albert Canal and the Meuse River.

When we arrived in Visé our squad was ordered to set-up an outpost at the end of a railroad bridge embankment. The retreating Germans had destroyed the railroad

bridge across the Albert Canal and the Meuse River. This gave us a rather safe place to rest from our 65-mile long march. Some squad members went down the embankment to a house by the Albert canal. This was our first contact with the people of Belgium. There were several women in the house. They asked us if they could wash our feet and it is very difficult to describe how we all felt about such an offer. It was the first time that we came to realize that the people of Belgium and The Netherlands looked upon us as their liberators. When we later moved into Limburg Province, The Netherlands, the company was overwhelmed by the reception we received. It was a particularly a strange feeling when men and women would ask you for your autograph. This was the first and only time in my life that anyone ever wanted my autograph.

The 119th Regimental History provides this narrative of our crossing of the Albert Canal and the Meuse River: "On the morning of the 11th, the Second and Third Battalions ferried the canal and met no opposition on the island. The crossing of the river was made in assault boats and a few small civilian rowboats which were found along the bank... Although a footbridge was built across the canal later in the afternoon, all three battalions had already crossed. As they had only hand-carried weapons, and could not expect to do more than hold the bridgehead, Company G was left on the island to protect the rear around Richelle." south of Visé. Company "G" lost two men killed in action on September 11; Waymon R. Lawhorn and Jacob P. Lauther. William E. Barnett was wounded on September 12 during the river crossing.

The 119th Infantry Regiment "...was again the first Allied unit to enter an enemy-held country [The Netherlands] so far ahead of all others this time that our claim was never contested." The Regiment attacked eastward toward the German border with The Netherlands. On September 13, four men were wounded near Hontem; Jay F. Aykens, Jim E. Freeman, John J. Jurkowski, and Richard B. Noel. The Regimental history describes this action "...Company G, on an independent mission, took Hontem, and the rest of the Second Battalion moved from the assembly area near Altembrouck up to Margraten and Termaar. Here began our first supply difficulties which continued to grow more serious as the days continued---short rations, little ammunition, and even less fuel. The lack of supplies and follow-up troops almost stopped our advance. We had advanced so rapidly that supplies were still coming directly from the beachhead in France."

On September 15, Company G moved to seize the town of Sibbe. Carroll F. Durston was wounded in this attack. The next day we crossed the Geul River at Strucht and moved on foot to Kruishoef where three men were wounded: Michael Gerazlunis, Raymond E. Jensen, and Santo A. Volpe. On September 16 the Company moved to Heerlerbaan and on September 18 engaged the enemy in a severe firefight near Schaesberg. In this action two men were killed: Harry L. Stark and Howard W. Benton; and four wounded: Milton L. Inman, Milford C. Stofer, Michael J. Carluzzo and John L. Faris. On September 19, we arrived at Groenstraat where we stopped our journey and dug foxholes facing toward the German border.

We remained in our defensive positions for a week during which we rested from our long march and reflected on our first combat with the enemy. Many of our squad members needed replacement equipment. I had worn out my shoes and asked for a new pair. Since we were at the end of a long supply line, it was some time before being

resupplied. We got our first hot rations since joining the company on September 6. We had been eating "K" rations, which kept us going, but was no substitute for hot food. For each meal, the squad would walk a quarter mile toward the rear to a sheltered position and where the Mess Sergeant Paul Briggs would have the mess line set-up. We always looked forward to the smiling face of Sgt. Briggs and his hot food offerings. However, because we were at the far end of the supply line we never thought we got enough hot food. On the way back to our foxholes from the "chow" line, we would pass a turnip field and usually help ourselves to a turnip, or two, to supplement our hot rations.

We knew that eventually the Second Battalion would have to attack through the line of pillbox fortifications that faced us. About a quarter of mile across the wide valley on the German side of the border a German emplacement was camouflaged as a haystack. The maps we had of this sector identified all the German pillboxes located on the terrain. Therefore, it came as no surprise when a 155 mm self-propelled artillery piece moved behind our defensive position and began shelling the fake haystack. This very lethal direct fire reduced this concrete fortification to rubble. It was quite a sight to see and deafening to hear. During this time, our mail caught up with our rapid advance; this was always a welcome time. I received my absentee ballot for that year's presidential election. This was the first time I was old enough to vote and as an Ohio Republican voted for Thomas E. Dewey, not FDR.

On September 26 Lt. Kuhn, our platoon leader, told me he had selected our squad to accompany him on a motorized reconnaissance patrol into the town of Eyselshoven that was located about a quarter mile away to the right front of our defensive position. The squad got on our company Jeeps and prepared to move into the town. This was the first time we had ridden in a vehicle since September 7 and it seemed quite a novelty except that we felt a little exposed to any enemy fire. Fortunately for us as we moved through the empty streets of the town we saw no one. When our patrol reached the vicinity of Hoofdstraat 77 we encountered a citizen of the town who told us that the Germans had departed across the border behind their fortifications. Lt. Kuhn told me to have my squad set up an outpost in the building at Hoofdstraat 77 and to be alert for any enemy that might return. Lt. Kuhn returned to the company to report the situation. Company "G" then moved the remainder of the company and its Command Post into Eyselshoven. As far as I can determine, the 3rd Squad of the First Platoon was the first unit into the town.

Our squad moved into the building at Hoofdstraat 77 and discovered that it was the home of Mrs. Titine Beckers-Benoedt. We were greeted warmly by Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt and felt at home immediately. She shared what food she had and gave us tea; it was the first powdered tea that I ever had. During the next few days as we took turns standing guard at our outpost position she continued to extend the hospitality that we shall never forget. We remained in her house until we were redeployed on October 1 to prepare for the attack of the Siegfried Line, which took place on October 2, 1944. The Regiment attacked in a column of battalions with the Second Battalion in the lead across the Wurm River at Rimburg Castle. Our squad spent the first night on the castle grounds in an elaborate platoon size pillbox captured that day by "F" Company.

After the war, I maintained correspondence with Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt for some years. For a time, I had no contact with her until I read a notice in the November 1989 edition of the 30th Division Newsletter that Marie Thelen of Eyselshoven was searching for a member of the Division. I wrote Mrs. Thelen to ask her to contact Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt for me. Mrs. Thelen replied and later I received a letter from Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt. Several years later Mrs. Thelen informed Rosemary and I that Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt had died at the age of 90 years on November 27, 1992.

In August of 1995, Rosemary and I visited Mrs. Thelen in Eyselshoven and met two of her three sons, Patrick and Hilaire. Again, we were made to feel at home in The Netherlands. After lunch in their home at St. Hubertstraat 20, they took us on a tour of some of the places our unit had been in September and October 1944. First, we went to see our outpost position in Eyselshoven at Mrs. Beckers-Benoedt house at Hoofdstraat 77. We found out that the street name had been changed to Veldhofstraat. Otherwise, it was the same except it looked a bit strange to see a Chinese restaurant was doing business in one part of the first floor.

The remainder of our battlefield tour was in Germany. We first went to Rimbürg, where we crossed a bridge leading to the castle area. The pillbox where we spent the first night in Germany was gone as well as the trenches surrounding it. We then traveled to where we fought at Herzogenrath, Bardenberg, and Würselen in October 1944. We visited the Aachen Cathedral where Charlemagne was crowned as the leader of the Holy Roman Empire. His throne and remains are in the Cathedral. We returned through Kerkrade where we saw the preserved "dragons teeth" tank obstacles that we remembered when we were billeted in that city in 1944.

We were pleased when Marie Thelen accepted our invitation to attend the 34th reunion of Company "G" in Fredericksburg, VA on September 16-19, 1999. It will be the 55th anniversary of World War II and our entry into the town of Eyselshoven in September 1944. The "G" Company family is looking forward to meeting Marie and welcoming her this year to our annual reunion in Fredericksburg.

Note: First Sergeant Howard "Top" Crawford kept a Journal of where the company was every day with the location named and map coordinates. Also included are the daily strength reports of the company and a list of casualties. He gave his journal to James Wernicke after the war was over. Jim retained the Journal and at our reunion in Sioux City, Iowa City in September 1997, he gave me a copy of the Journal. This is a valuable record of the company's location each day.

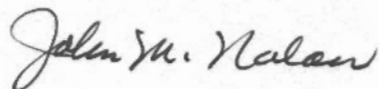
The names and 1944/45 hometowns of the members mentioned in this narration were obtained from a copy of roster that was kept by the company Mail Clerk Richard Johnson. He distributed copies to members at one of our reunions several years ago.

Names as listed above with home towns.

Edward W. Knocke	Warsaw, Illinois
Ernest H. King	North Wilberham, Massachusetts
Cletus W. Herrig	Lamote, Iowa
David A. Hedland	Kindred, North Dakota

William T. Cline
Frank O'Leary
Victor A. Kwaitkowski
John M. Nolan
Gail C. Kuhn
Waymon R. Lawhorn
Jacob P. Lauther
William E. Barnett
Jay F. Aykens
Jim E. Freeman
John J. Jurkowski
Richard B. Noel
Carroll F. Durston
Michael Gerazlunis
Raymond E. Jensen
Santo A. Volpe
Harry L. Stark
Howard W. Benton
Milton L. Inman
Milford C. Stofer
Michael J. Carluzzo
John L. Faris
Paul K. Briggs
Howard C. Crawford
James R. Wernike
Richard E. Johnson

Columbus, Ohio
Pawtucket, Rhode Island
Saginaw, Michigan
Bowerston, Ohio
Washington, D.C.
Jellico, Texas
Cincinnati, Ohio
Gendel Sweetwater, Tennessee
Steln, Minnesota
Beauford, South Carolina
Manville, New Jersey
San Diego, California
Chicago, Illinois
New Kensington, Pennsylvania
Ozone Park, New York
Brooklyn, New York
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Suffolk, Virginia
Seattle, Washington
Mount Vernon, Ohio
Buffalo, New York
Rock Hill, South Carolina
Lincoln, Nebraska
St. Charles, Illinois
Elkhart, Indiana
Auburn, Indiana



John M. Nolan
Colonel, U. S. Army
Retired