

April 16, 2001

Dear Chad:

Before I pick up where I left off in my last letter, I want to check some of my reference books and see what was happening during the time I was in the hospital.

You can lay a ruler on the battle map I enclosed with my last letter and see that it is less than 6 miles from where I was wounded on the banks of the Vere river on July 28, 1944 to Jersey sur-Vie.

The Germans had ~~with~~ ^{needed to} drown and ~~the~~ ^{had to wait} ~~had to wait~~ ^{reorganizing} and build up strength before ~~we~~ ^{they} could continue the attack.

My regimental History of the 120th Infantry ~~Regiment~~ ^{Regiment} has this account which occurred the day after Jersey was captured, "on Aug 2 as the 3rd Battalion CP Group was moving forward ~~an~~ ^{an} enemy shell struck a tree nearby killing several of our ~~men~~ ^{men} including 5 officers." one of these was 1st Lt. Carl C. Haraden of Company K who had been an aggressive and frequent patroller in enemy territory since the landing in Normandy. Lt. Joe Ressor was sent to replace him as K Company Commander. Lt. Ressor had been serving on the 3rd Battalion Staff since our training at Camp Blodgett, but I had never met him.

The 30th Division got orders at 2024 hours, Aug 5, 1944 to return to the front. Trucks were waiting to transport them. Some thought they could have moved faster by walking. It took almost nine hours to make the 46 mile journey. ~~at~~ The 30th left their trucks and were

guided to mortar by soldiers from Ft Infantry Div. (English) which had captured the area three days earlier. Since the enemy was retreating there had not been much fighting. The town was running full blast with all normal functions existing. Even the hotels were open. My regiment the 120th Infantry was scheduled to relieve the 18th Infantry of the 1st Division.

The 30th Division had been in the line for over a month. It had fought in the hedgerows, made possible the capture of St. Lo, participated in the breakthrough operation and fought a particularly hot battle at Tessy-sur-Vire. It had received 500 replacements a few days earlier but it did not fill the thinned ranks. Our higher command wanted to give it ^{30th} a few days rest and had picked what they considered a relative quiet mortar for this purpose.

At 2000 6th August 1944 the 30th Division assumed responsibility for the mortar area, four hours before the German counterattack began.

Joining K Longory that day was 1st Lt. Thomas Gossett who took over the 3rd platoon which I had sent back with T/Sgt. Zupp when I was wounded, also Lt. Merle Sheen, Lt. Fisk, and another officer who I do not remember his name.

K Longory along with three other rifle companies from 2nd Battalion of the 120th Infantry Regiment was occupying the most important piece of terrain in the mortar area. (Hill 314 - the number being the number of meters above sea level at the crest) This offers the best view in

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Normandy. on a clear day an observer can see parts of 3 provinces; Normandy, Brittany, and Maine. Avranches and the Bay of Mont-St. - Michel are visible to the west, lush forest spreads to the south beyond the Selune River and the twisted gorge of the See River outlines the Northern horizon.

K Company under the command of Joe Resor was placed on the northern edge of the Knoll that caps Hill 314.

Chad - Keep in mind that my focus on what was happening at the front while I was in the Hospital has been on my unit, all of the 30th Division was involved in the battle at Mortain. Only the 700 men on Hill 314 were surrounded and cut off from supply - etc, for five days.

Before I return to my personal involvement a few comments on the action of the enemy during this period of time. The German situation on Aug¹, 1944 was desperate, they had to stop the withdrawal, for to give up France would force them to fight on their own soil. Exactly 2 months to the day after the Allied Invasion of France in Germany ~~launched~~^{launched} the largest counter attack of the war. It was scheduled to begin at mid night Aug 6, 1944 with out artillery preparation so there would be no advance warning. Code name LUTTICH was used for the German counter attack ordered by Hitler and under Field Marshall Von Kluge who was told to strike like lightning. Four Panzer divisions were provided. They would start at

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Mortain, objective breaches, if successful this would separate the American First from the Third Army.

→ Now back to my personal involvement.

Aug 6, 1944 I was at the 66th Evacuation Hospital waiting for a plane to England. It was a Sunday and I attended Church that day. My first information about K Company being surrounded on Hill 314 came on Aug. 9, 1944 when I was ordered - return to duty! I had expected to go thru a replacement depot but a truck from the 38th Corps looking for any man able to be discharged from the Hospital.

I climbed aboard the truck where I was briefed on some of the things which had taken place in the last 10 days. The truck let me off in a small town named Le Mans Jugh. I reported to 1st Sgt. Smith who was in charge of K Company Rear Command Post. He told me to go with him to the street and he would show me where K Co. was. He pointed to a large stone circling a hill near by. He ~~told~~ ^{told} me ~~when they~~ they were dropping food, bandages, and medical supplies to the men trapped on Hill 314. He told me Lt. Howden had been killed and the Company Commander was Lt. Ranson. He said that they were living off the land but it was getting hard to find anything for food. The farm on the Hill had chickens and rabbits but they didn't last long. They were eating raw vegetables from the gardens. Each man had 2K rations when they were cut off about midnight, Aug 6th just hours after going on Hill 314.

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An even greater need was for Batteries to keep their radios open for communication and to direct artillery fire.

I was at the CP only a short time. They did the necessary paper work, issued me weapons and ammunition and gave me 2 K rations. A guide took me to another part of town where I joined a Task Force of 119th Infantry in an attempt to join the new 5th Hill 314.

We had to fight our way in and did not get there until almost dark Aug. 11, 1947. I reported to Lt. Joe Kenner who surprised me by saying they were expecting me - Battalion had called and told them to put me to work. He took me up to the road block and put me in charge with instructions to fire on anything which came up that road even if dressed in American clothes and driving American vehicles. That was the only time I was issued an order like that but I did not say anything. He told me his men were exhausted but that he would join me if trouble developed, otherwise it would be dogfight before I was relieved.

That was a long night! Nothing tried to come up the road but we were shelled all night. Most of it was from "Screaming Minnies" as we called the Nebelwaffer multi barreled mortar. (Sketches enclosed). They were fitted with a ~~short~~^{sight}. They come in 3 sizes - 150mm (75 lb. bombs) with 7300 yard range, 210mm (248 lb. bombs) with a 8,600 yard range and 300mm (277 lb. bombs - 5,000 yard range.

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They had us ^{zeroed in} ~~traced~~ but most of them were falling in front of us so we must have been almost out of range. We didn't know at the time but the Germans were withdrawing and using the noise to conceal it, as I listened and watched as they exploded in the area my mind ~~was~~ filled with images of the battlefield as we came up the Hill. It was the worst sight I ever saw, both American and German bodies littered the landscape. Some of them had been there for 5 days in the hot August sun. An unusually large number of them were medics with the red cross on white arm bands and helmets. Some were shot down as they carried wounded on their stretchers. We saw the ruins of the Battalion Aid Station which had been captured along with the Chaplain assigned to it.

When I was relieved from the road block I went back to a relatively sheltered spot where the Rocky cliffs offered some protection and ate one of my K rations, drank some water and went to sleep. When I woke up Aug 12, 1944 they were moving the wounded out - both American and German. I started looking for some one I knew but could not find a single person!

I met Sgt. Hossard who was in charge of 3rd platoon. He told me T/Sgt. Zugg, Sgt. Beck, Sgt. Krime and the men who had been with me on my patrol were overrun and captured almost before they knew we were under attack. He felt bad about being called to the Co. CP just before the attack and not there with them.

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I could understand his feelings, losing a whole platoon within hours of receiving the assignment, I tried to make him feel better, I told him even though Sgt. Zung was a replacement that I had seen him in some tough spots and that he was capable and dependable. If he had been there the chances were good that he would have been killed or captured. He introduced me to his friend, Ft. Mark Sheel who came to K company at the same time (Aug 6, 1944) while we were talking a runner came with instructions for me to come to the Command post.

K company commander, Ft. Joe Bossard informed me that Battalion had informed him that they wanted me for one of their officers, if I was willing to accept a battlefield commission, I was to go to Battalion CP and be sworn in. I asked how long I had to decide, I wanted to talk it over with Ft. Bossard and Ft. Sheel. He told me not over a couple of hours, for replacements were on the way and they had to reorganize and be ready to go the next day or so.

By this time a head count had been made. ~~Of the 700 Americans on Hill 314~~ K Co. had a hundred left we had lost over 100 men in the 5 days on Hill 314. Later we found out we had paid better than the men from 2nd Battalion. Four rifle companies had been trapped. If they had been full strength, that would have been over 800 men. The closest count estimated 700 men at the start of the counterattack, only 300 of them were survivors. The 30th Division had

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lost nearly two thousand men between 6 June 44 and 17 June 44. German losses were worse!

I wish I could remember things that happened to me last week, last month, or even last year as well as I ~~remember~~ ^{remember} some of the thoughts that ran through my mind before I decided to turn down the Battlefield Commission. Sgt. Hossard and Sgt. Sheer pointed out some of the pros & cons but made me realize it had to be my decision. They pointed out that there was little difference at first in a 1st Sgt's pay and a 2nd Lt. but that a promotion would make more differences in time as promotions were received. Since I was not planning to stay in service after the war ended I disregarded that. They also thought I would get out sooner as a ~~1st Sgt~~ ^{enlisted man} but I wasn't sure. The thing that decided me to turn it down and stay as Hossard's Platoon Sgt. was the awesome responsibility. I know the orders were to hold at all costs. I was not sure I ~~could~~ ^{could} fight a company of 200 men down to 8 as ~~the~~ ^{the} company did on Hill 314! The thing I overlooked was that as Platoon Sgt. I was next in command and expected to take over if the Platoon leader became a Casualty. This happened when we left Mortain and encountered the enemy again at Romfront.

I have a letter I wrote Tibby 13 Aug 44 where I told her of the offer of the Battlefield Commission. It was approved by Sgt. Hossard. It is postmarked Aug. 24th because of the ~~the~~ delay in the mail clerk getting the note to AFOS#30.

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13th Aug 44 - The Kitchen crew brought us a hot meal. The company clerk delivered the mail. I had a cablegram for my Aug. 15th Birthday and 2 letters. I had time to write Tibby the letter which St. Goswold censored. Before it was posted he was in the 30th General Hospital with a gun shot wound but that's better in the next installment. This closes my account of the Battle of MORTAIN.

When I wrote Heather a short Thank you for the pictures I may have enclosed a copy of an editorial by Marlee Ales "Listen for the Heart beat". I'll enclose another to make sure. Marlee is a daughter of my combat company Commander, Marvyn Smith of Sisters, Oregon. I liked what Marlee said about story telling being one heart sending a message to the next generation.

Enjoyed your last letter with the account of some of your experiences in the air force. Your mother + father enjoyed reading them.

Thanks for the anniversary card + Tape - Picture of you with George W. Bush as a candidate. Thanks to the support of our family, Tibby and I had a good 58th Wedding anniversary and a good 30th.

Your Grandfather - John