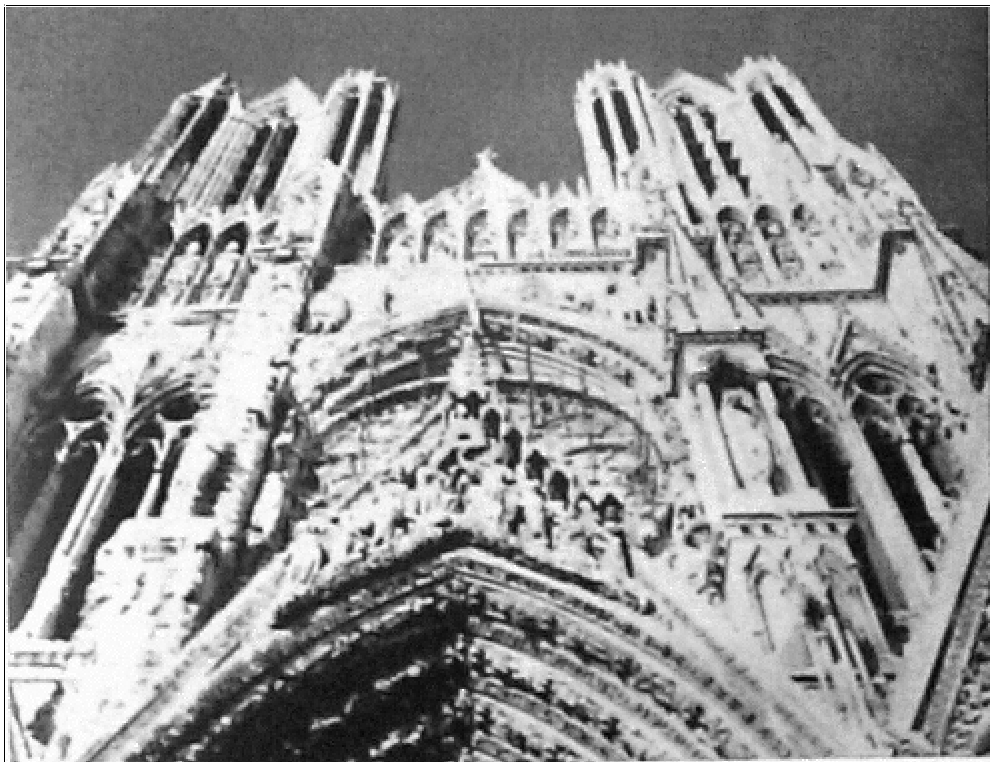


CHAPTER IV

ACROSS FRANCE TO FORTRESS METZ



On the 26th of August, the battalion left Nonan le Pins under combat team control and arrived ten hours later in a rendezvous area four miles south of Fontainebleau, having marched 163 miles. The next day we moved thirty one miles going into position near le Plessis-Hainault. The XX Corps, (90th, 5th, and 7th Armored Divisions) mission was to move on Reims. During the day of the 28th we occupied two positions marching forty six miles to Courboin. At many places along the route, natives did not seem friendly. We found out later that they didn't know we were Americans. After they discovered who we were, celebrations were in order. The battalion moved fifty four miles on the 30th of August via Chateau Thierry and went into position near Cormicy, northwest of Reims. It was on this march that another new tactic appeared: the 1st battalion, 357, was loaded on the 343rd F.A., and the 3rd Battalion, 357 was loaded on the 284th F.A., which was attached to us. Moving on parallel roads, the two Infantry-Artillery Battalions rapidly closed the gap behind the fleeing Krauts. Once more, the "doughs" were in doubt as to just how "rear echelon" their artillery was. We were in this position two days, gas and map supply practically nil. Most of the officers and men went into Reims, the champagne capital of the world, to see the cathedral and quench their thirsts. The first visitors to the fair city entered some hours before the 5th Division "doughs" thus giving birth to the claim that the 343rd liberated Reims.

1 September found us moving to position two miles northeast of Bazancourt. No gas. While in this enforced "rest", word got around that Sedan had been liberated. A strong task force was immediately formed consisting of two L-4 "cubs", Lts. Hicks and Rhein, pilots, and Lt. Colonel Reimers with the mission of verifying this report. Circling Sedan, all appeared well, so a landing strip was selected and occupied. Leaving Lt. Hicks to protect the planes from the curious, Col. Reimers and Lt. Rhein set out to ascertain the situation. As they reached the hedge, they heard an explosion behind them. Looking back, they saw Lt. Hicks crawling towards them, one plane burning fiercely and across a stream a number of Heinies dividing their fire between the crawling Hicks and the surviving plane. Their fire "got" the second plane just as Hicks joined the other two. The ensuing escape from enemy territory involved crawling long distances, wading up streams, crossing mountains, and wild rides in rickety FFI vehicles back to American lines. Once safe, the intrepid trio reported Sedan was definitely not liberated.

5 September brought gas and "march order". We marched ninety-seven miles to Lanchères. It was here that the new 90th caught up with the history of the 90th of World War I. During the march, old battlefields of the last war were passed: Verdun, the Argonne Forest, and other places of grim interest. Several contacts had been made with the enemy during the march from Fontainebleau, all minor skirmishes. The FFI were a great help in rounding up stragglers from the ranks of the fleeing Nazis.

On 7 September, the Battalion marched twenty four miles and occupied two positions. Definite contact was made with a strong enemy force. As usual, 357 CT was out in front and needed flank protection. Union, Urban and Undo Able consolidated their CP's in Mancieulles, for better security. The batteries had to cover a sector of approximately 4000 miles. S/Sgt. Davidson, in Fire Direction found himself with two firing charts. One for the area east of north and south, and one for west. Both were in constant use. Charlie Battery fired on enemy guns and personnel using a small hill directly in front of the guns as an OP. The guns were on the reverse slope of the same hill. Undo Able even entered into the furious fighting, as scattered enemy troops tried to flee the sector, by setting up a 40mm on a hill and firing direct fire on a Heinie AT gun. They scored direct hits with AP shells and knocked the gun and crew out.

8 September we broke up a few counterattacks with artillery. Captain "Pappy" Carl Weinrich, our liaison officer to the 357th, 2nd Battalion, came close to adjusting fire on himself in this position.

“Pappy” was adjusting on an enemy OP in a church and not realizing that he was on the opposite side of the church, was calling overs, short, thus bringing the fire closer in. After a little discussion he became oriented and got his adjustment on the OP.

Lt. McDonald, Liaison 1, was killed while almost single-handedly stopping an enemy attack. Awarded a Distinguished Service Cross posthumously, Lt. McDonald perceived the losses which must result should the enemy occupy a hill from which they had just forced our infantry and, “instantly, alone and without regard to his own safety, climbed to the bare crest of the hill in order to secure observation for friendly artillery. Although at times the fire of all the enemy’s weapons appeared to be directed against him, he advanced upon the forward slope and by radio directed effective artillery fire against the enemy, destroying two of their tanks, badly damaging others and decimating the attacking troops”.

A captured German field order indicated that we were on the axis of advance of the German 15th Panzer Division. The battalion moved to the Combat Team flank, away from the probable approach of the enemy. We received notice that our ammunition supply was critically low.

Division Artillery CP was attacked by some German Panzer elements and during the ensuing fire fight received a number of casualties, seriously wounding our agent, Cpl. C. B. Woodson. The 712th Tank Battalion came to the rescue.

Captured German beef was distributed and enjoyed by all. 10 September the Battalion moved to Neufchef. The present mission for the 90th was to move on Thionville and cross the Moselle. The area around the town was fortified. Captain Graf, Liaison3, while adjusting fire on some Krauts that ran behind a haystack, observed some of the rounds bounce off of the stack. “That ain’t hay”, he radioed back. Able FO fired on a novel target, a railroad train. 12 September the battalion moved to Marspich near Hayange, an industrial center. The purpose of the move was to give a greater range across Moselle River. Six target-marking missions for the air force were fired. Plans were changed, and as the infantry jockeyed for a good crossing-site we were obliged to move. The Battalion traveled back thru Hayange to Morhange. The CP was in a beer tavern – no beer!

New orders moved the 90th to relieve the 7th Armored Division. The 5th Infantry Division was to establish a bridgehead south of Metz and relieve the 7th Armored. At 0840, 14 September, the Battalion moved out through Neufchef, Avril, Briey, Homecourt and Montois. The firing batteries went into position south of Montois, with the CP moving into a schoolhouse in Roncourt. As the CP truck stopped, in came a fire mission, no survey data; Captain Ford and Sgt. Davidson outguessed the survey: the initial rounds were only 200 yards from the target. Despite the fire mission, the CP was given “march order”. The mission was completed on the way back to the new CP in the Montois schoolhouse.

This location was to be our home for some time to come. The Tough ‘Ombres were in the vicinity of where the Texas-Oklahoma Division had been at the end of the last war, facing the fortress of Metz. Could this series of forts, moats, tank traps, emplaced guns, all manned by men who knew every inch of the terrain, could they possibly be taken? We were to find out in the weeks to come.

“Beaucoup” artillery was attached to us. The infantry probed around the various forts and found that a frontal attack was next to impossible. Some progress was made north of Mazieres les Metz but that was as far as the Doughs could go without artillery and plenty of it. Strange as it seems there was more artillery around Metz than we had ever had before but the ammunition was not available in quantities to support a large scale attack.

Most of our ammunition was spent on TOT's and marking targets for our dive bombers. Because of the absence of full 5th sections, all TOT's were fired on definite information that the target was worthy of the ammunition expended. Frenchmen infiltrating through the lines, and Germans who had decided it was better to be alive in an American prison camp than a good German, one who had died for the Fuehrer, furnished most of the data for our targets. These TOT's had a demoralizing effect on the Germans and induced many to surrender, that is, those that were not killed or injured in the shelling.

One enemy gun emplacement, our concentration Number 33 C, will be remembered by all. Countless rounds were spent trying to silence these guns but they were still firing when we left the area some weeks later. 105's, 155's, 8-inchers, 240's all tried, the place was marked for bombing a number of times but still they fired back. Yes, 33 Charlie will long be remembered.

In an effort to substitute for lack of artillery ammunition, Task Force Higgins was formed. Headed by Lt. Higgins, Baker executive, the task force consisted of 10 Sherman tanks from Motor Charlie, Company "C", 712th Tank Battalion; set up as three batteries with a central fire direction. The tankers were unused to indirect firing, but under Lt. Higgins expert tutelage were soon slamming those "75" shells right where the FO's wanted them.

Much captured enemy artillery material was put into action against the enemy. 10 cm and 88 batteries were set up and manned by various units in the Metz perimeter. Ammunition for these guns was plentiful as vast stores were captured in the Argonne Forest. It was a pleasure to send the Kraut Ammunition back at them, especially when they received it the hard way.

This developed into more or less of a holiday mission. Rest centers were set up and every effort was made to get movies, Clubmobiles and other forms of entertainment. Despite the fact that government officials at home were assuring the "home front" that there was an abundance of ammunition, we were still limited to a very small daily expenditure.

17 October Brig. Gen. J. A. Van Fleet assumed command of the division succeeding Gen. McLain who had earned himself the command of a corps thru his brilliant leadership and the exploits of the famous Fighting 90th. It was during the time of Gen. McLain's reign over the Tough 'Ombres that the title of the "90th Panzer Grenadiers" was bestowed on us by our enemy. The Krauts had the highest respect for the division and feared it greatly.

During October the infantry continued to inch into Maiziers le Metz and after bitter fighting for every little section of the town, they managed to get a good solid foothold. A large slag pile near the city had proven to be a great obstacle, as was a chateau on the other side of town. Both proved to be a big help to the enemy in holding their position and as vantage points for observation.

The latter part of October orders were received to take Maiziers. In preparation for the attack a 155 mm SP gun was moved into a factory near an enemy strong point to fire at point blank range. The strong point – the schoolhouse, the range – 150 yards. Artillery ammunition ceased to be rationed for the attack and everything was in readiness on 28 October.

0730, October 29, all artillery opened up with a preparation that was to initiate the attack. A few false preparations had been fired during the previous 24 hours and the Krauts, thinking that this was another, failed to respond until it was too late. Many were caught flat-footed and found it useless to resist, while in other parts of the town bitter fighting resulted.. The town was systematically cleaned out and at 0845 the next morning the schoolhouse was all that remained in enemy hands. Later in the day

all of Maiziers was in the hands of the Union men and patrols had reconnoitered the cemetery where concrete mortar emplacements were found. The lid was again clamped on the ammunition.

31 October the 95th Infantry Division began moving in, to relieve the 90th; the 920th F.A. Battalion taking over in our sector. Orders were that the 90th Division was going back for training, this after five months of practically steady combat. The move turned out to be only the setting of the stage for, in the words of the army commander, "the greatest feat of World War II".

1 November, the battalion moved to Mercy Le Haut and for the first time since the beach, the covers were left on the guns. All of the battalion was clear of the old position except liaison. FO parties, Captain Ford, and Sgt. Davidson who remained behind to orient the 920th on the situation and turn firing charts over to them.

The period, 1 November to 6 November, was spent in care of material and ordnance inspections. The Battalion CP was set up in the house of the last President of France, Albert Lebrun. Some of the men were quartered in his old schoolhouse.



