

Utah Beach

At eleven o'clock on the morning of June 8th, in the midst of a great display of naval power, the convoy dropped anchor off "Utah" beach on the Cherbourg Peninsula. As far as one could see, the channel was dotted with ships and landing craft of all types and description. All the larger ships had barrage balloons moored to the masts and everywhere one looked there was a panorama of floating "sausages." Overhead, hawk-eyed Allied aircraft hovered and maintained a constant patrol of the skies on the lookout for enemy aircraft.

Debarkation

Landing craft pulled up to the sides of the ships and the troops began clambering down the landing nets and into the smaller boats. Debarkation started at 11:58, and as the crafts rammed up on the beach, the men unloaded and waded through the waist-deep water to the dry sands, and made their way inland. The area near Azeville which the Regiment had planned to occupy was still in enemy hands, so instead the columns moved along a dirt road south of St. Martin de Varreville, and thence north and east towards Turqueville. As the men marched along, a hot midday sun beat down on them with their heavy loads of new equipment, accentuating the unpleasantness of those first impressions of Normandy. Roads were lined with discarded invasion equipment – at frequent intervals, there were signs with skull and crossbones and the letters "MINEN". Carcasses of dead horses were sprawled on the roadside, and occasionally a dead German in a strange grey uniform and black boots stared grotesquely from a ditch. Now and then, the way would be cleared to allow a jeep with wounded soldiers to proceed in the opposite direction toward the beaches.

First Day Ashore

The 358th Infantry was now in the war, and it was not to be long before those heavy unsavory impressions would become actual daily experiences. The day following the landing was spent reorganizing and getting the vehicles and heavy equipment into the hands of the companies and battalions. All the while big long-toms in the area sent artillery shells whistling into the enemy lines. That first night, "Bed Check Charlie", the nightly, low flying reconnaissance plane of the Germans with its recognizable drone, introduced himself to the outfit and received a hot reception. In the distance, over the beach, the sky was aglow with a streak of tracer bullets and antiaircraft fire.

Into The attack

Less than twenty-four hours after the first troops landed on the beach, the Regiment was ordered to attack. The 1st Battalion jumped off and secured the bridge at Chef du Pont, rescuing a battalion of paratroopers, and then moved on to take the town of Picauville by midmorning. Pushing on toward Pont L'Abbe they met fierce resistance and murderous mortar fire. Later in the afternoon the Third Battalion moved up on the right flank of the First and together they attacked toward the town, but so determined was the resistance, they were forced to dig in just short of the town that night. Meanwhile the Second Battalion remained in Division Reserve.

Hedgerows

The three-quarters of a mile from Picauville to Pont L'Abbe was stubbornly defended from hedge to hedge. The famous hedgerow country of Normandy reared itself as the ugly, bitter battle field on which the 358th Infantry was to fight some of its bloodiest battles. Each hedge was another line of defense for the Jerry. Prominent also were the sunken roads where the unforgettable odor of the dank Normandy soil was most noticeable. Also came the hated German "88" and the "Burp Gun", each a nemesis to be reckoned with in Normandy. This, indeed, was a new type of fighting, and for a time the hedgerow proved a difficult obstacle. Soon, however, the Infantry learned to overcome this obstacle and drive the German from his hedgerow home. Normandy exacted its bloody toll and plodding Infantry moved on, day after day, from hedgerow to hedgerow.

Pont L'Abbe

On the 12th of June the Regiment made its final attack to capture Pont L'Abbe. Roaring P47's dove on the town and mass artillery battered it to bits in preparation for the four o'clock "jump off". When they moved in the First Battalion on the left and the Second Battalion on the right they mopped up a completely destroyed village. On the day following, the Second and Third Battalions attacked to secure an important crossroad on the west of town.

Le Calais

On the 14th of June the 82nd Airborne Division passed through the Regiment and drove on to the west. That night the outfit was moved to the vicinity of Amfreville where it attacked the next day toward Le Calais. There were stories of numerous acts of gallantry as the Third Battalion was first to cross an open swampland which Jerry had well covered with machine gun crossfire. They were followed by the Second which had a difficult time too; but their nemesis was an open field on the other side of the swamp. As darkness approached the First Battalion crossed and the three held firm on the other side for the night. Next day all three battalions pushed forward about 3 kilometers to hold a line near La Ham. Through these lines the 79th Division passed to continue on to Cherbourg while reports came that the peninsula was almost cut. The Regiment then moved to a defensive position extending from Coigny to Bauppte, France.

Patrols And "Guts"

While in this location, meager comforts were made available to the fighting men. Some were able to use a blanket in their foxholes, the first bit of cover since the landing on the Normandy beach; and some received hot "chow" for the first time. However the gallant and courageous actions did not cease, for many patrols were dispatched to penetrate deep into enemy lines. The patrols that came back were frequently badly mauled, but vital information was obtained, and the great courage of the officers and men who fearlessly entered enemy lines is beyond description. At night there was the familiar drone of "Bed Check Charlie", and frequently – almost always, the chronic harassment of enemy artillery came screeching and screaming overhead and detonated with a loud, terrifying explosion that shook the very earth.

The Rains Came

The preceding battles in the Normandy Hedgerow country had been rough but the ensuing battles were to be equal tests of the mettle of the fighting men of the 358th Infantry. On the July 3rd, a memorable day in the battle of France, the Division launched an attack southwest against a strong enemy line defended by determined, fanatical paratroopers and SS men. On the first day of the attack, the rains came and the damp dismal weather of the succeeding days made the battle one of the most unforgettable in history. Casualties were heavy and communications and supply were hampered by heavy enemy shelling. The 2nd Battalion charged through to Les Sablons, bypassed it, and continued south, while the First Battalion fought for St. Jores. The Third Battalion, initially in reserve, moved up to Les Sablons to clean out the town and tie in with a Second Battalion. These were days that put a man's courage and strength to the most severe test – days that did not end with nightfall, but dragged on incessantly through daylight and darkness, with rain and mist that apparently would never cease. Hard fighting continued until the Division faced a great hill covered with deep woods, that rose from the land like a powerful giant and engulfed all who were so bold to enter.

Foret De Mont Castre

This was the formidable Foret de Mont Castre the famous Hill 122 that looked out on the English Channel and the very beach in which the Regiment first set foot. Here was to be the supreme test. For the great courage and tenacity displayed here in routing enemy from his mighty wooded fortress, the Third Battalion was to be cited by the President of the United States.

The First Battalion was committed in the Division sector between the 357th Infantry and the 359th Infantry Regiments and launched a successful attack against the eastern nose of the Hill 122. Success was short lived, however, for on the first night the Battalion was pushed off the hill by a furious counterattack, and Division Engineers were hurriedly moved up to help bolster the line. The rest of the Regiment was committed on the following day. The Second Battalion was moved to the extreme right flank of the Regiment and temporarily went to the control of the 359th infantry while the Third Battalion went into action on the left of the Second Battalion. Meanwhile, the enemy increased his desperate efforts to retain control of the important hill. He plastered the reverse side of the hill incessantly with mortars and artillery. He sent small groups of paratroopers infiltrating into the lines to attack from the rear.

Hand To Hand fighting

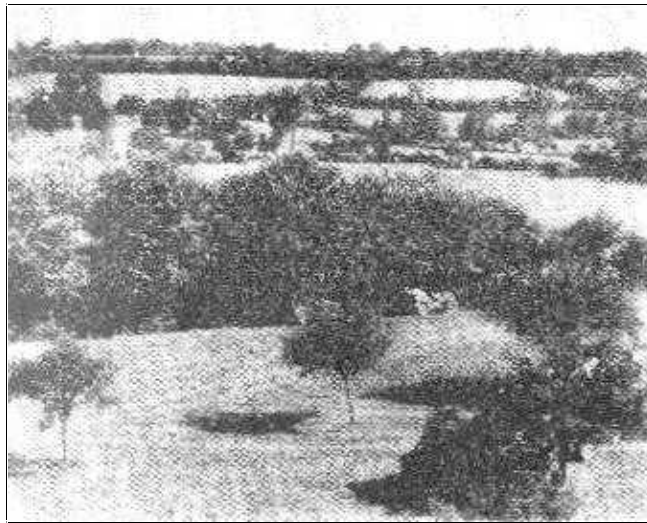
On the 11th of July the Third Battalion executed a bold, hazardous flanking maneuver cutting in rear of the hill, hitting an enemy nerve – his main supply line. Instantly the battalion was hit from all sides by frenzied enemy paratroopers. The most bitter hand to hand fighting the outfit was ever to see took place as the battalion fought against vastly superior numbers of the enemy's best troops. In the thick brush of the mighty forest a man could see only to the next bush. Casualties were extremely heavy as the battle became a fight to the finish. Meanwhile, the First Battalion had finally seized and regained control of the eastern nose of the hill and the Second Battalion thrashed on through the thick brush along with the 359th Infantry Regiment. On the 12th of July, the entire Regimental front moved as the enemy withdrew leaving his dead in the once impregnable forest. This was the day they finally emerged from the jungle-like woods after cracking the Mahlman Line – one of the enemy's greatest defensive positions.

Battle Of Gorges

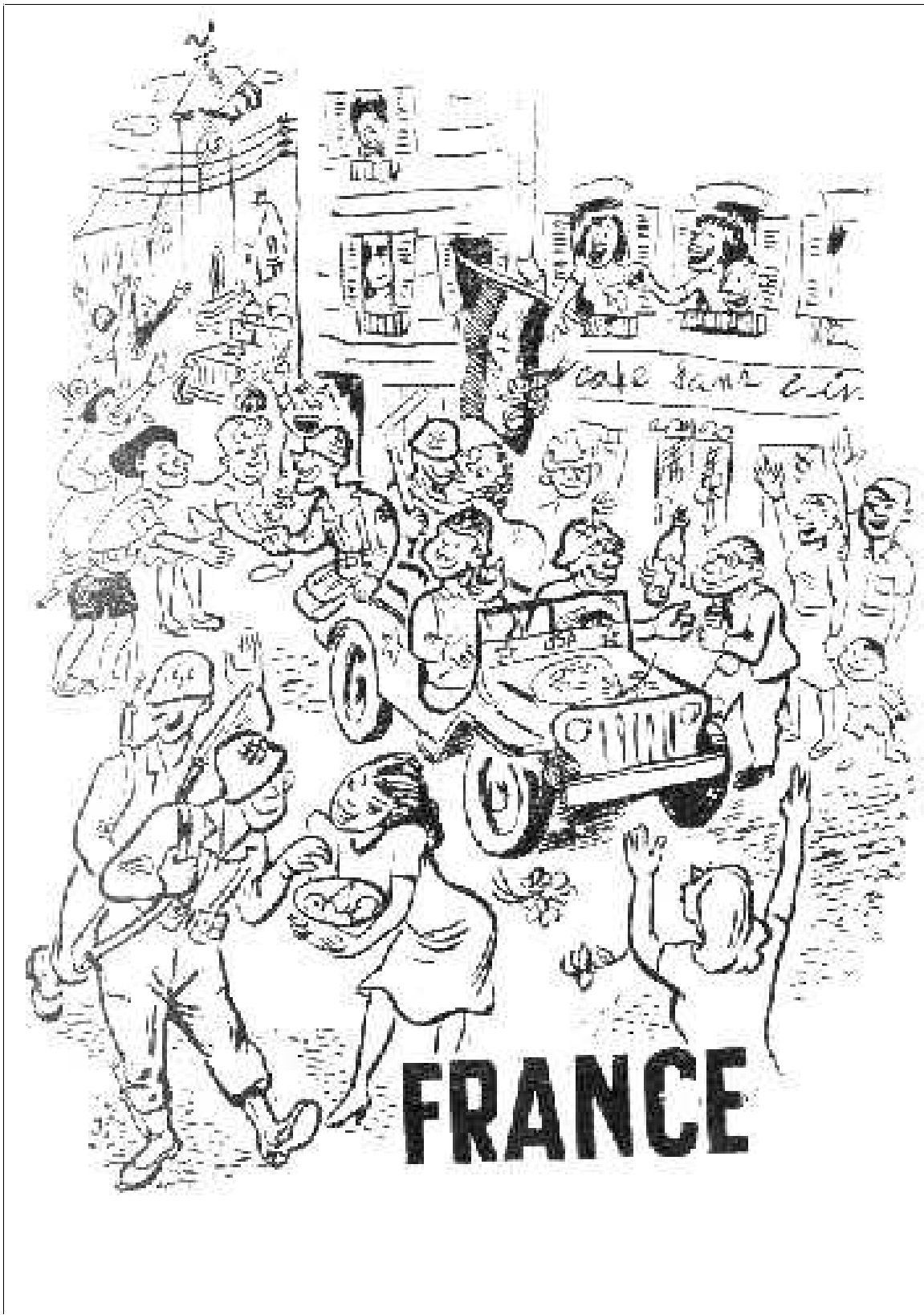
Continuing the advance the First Battalion hit another strong enemy line in the vicinity of the town of Gorges. The battle of Gorges was hard fought, but the enemy was forced to relent and withdraw to still another line along the Seves River. The Third Battalion moved up to the river to a defensive position while the rest of the Regiment was allowed a few days rest in Gorges – rest that was disturbed by extremely heavy enemy artillery.

Island Of The White Witches

On the 22nd of July, the 358th Infantry was ordered to attack and seize the Island of Seves – the Island of the White Witches, by an age old superstition, located in the Seves River little more than a mile northeast of Periers. As the entire invasion front remained momentarily static, the First and Second Battalions attacked against overwhelming odds, gaining a foothold on the island, only to be severely counterattacked, with the enemy throwing in everything he had in an all out effort to retain control of his main line of resistance. Eventually, after butting against impregnable enemy defenses and being subjected to unusually large concentrations of enemy artillery and tank fire, the attack was repulsed amid heavy losses. However, the stage had been set for the historical Third Army breakthrough. In the following days, the 358th Infantry was to reap the benefits of a bloody past in the many victories that were to come. The battle of the Island of Seves proved to be the last major encounter of the 358th Infantry in the Normandy hedgerow country.



Normandy Hedgerows



The Race To Le Mans

The Normandy defense had been cracked, Jerry was broken and running, and the sky was filled with friendly air power as the tanks of the Third Army rolled toward Avranches. The prison like hedgerows of Normandy were left behind and before them lay the open, rolling terrain of interior France. The ensuing days brought lightning fast maneuvers, and the 358th Infantry became a leading element in the 90th Division's race across France.

On the 2nd of August, the Third Battalion, led by "K" Company, raced to St. Hilaire du Harcouet, captured the town and secured a vital bridge. The First Battalion followed to seize the high ground east of St. Hilaire, while the second battalion occupied the town. In the days following, the race continued to the banks of the Mayenne River, where the doughboys stripped for a dip in the cool waters while engineers repaired a bridge. Then came a long, grueling three day march to the east, to St. Suzanne.

Le Mans Captured

On the 8th of August, the outfit loaded on trucks and hit the road toward Le Mans. Detrucking and moving under the cover of darkness the First and Second Battalions circled northeast of the city. Shortly after daylight on the next day, the Second Battalion utilizing rowboats gathered together by the civilians crossed the Sarthe River northeast of Le Mans. The remainder of the Regiment following closely behind completed the encirclement of the city, and the resulting capture of Le Mans by other elements of the Division put the 90th farther into France than any other Allied Force. "A" Company alone at one roadblock northwest of the city surprised and captured, Jesse James style, two large enemy motorized columns. The 358th Infantry was beginning to get revenge for the hard fighting during its early days in combat.

The Jaws Close

After Le Mans, the division cut north in clouds of dust towards Alencon, following the Second French Armored Division and blocking to the west any effort of the German 7th Army to escape the inevitable and fast closing Falaise trap. No time was lost as the outfit proceeded by foot and motor through Alencon and Sees, and then swung west and attacked through Almeneches and Le Bourge St. Leonard. The First and Second Battalions pushed against bitter resistance to the Foret de Gouffern; while the Third Battalion attacked to seize control of the roads leading northeast from Chambois. The First Battalion captured Bon Menil and pushed west to two more villages, while the Second Battalion after capturing St. Eugenie, moved into Bon Menil.

The Rim Of The Bowl

It resembled a bowl with the troops in position around the rim. This was the picture on the 20th of August, 1944 – when all hell broke loose! The bowl became a valley of death. The Germans, caught helplessly in the trap, ran around crazily, in tanks and on horseback, on every

conceivable means of transportation, attempting to escape from the iron jaws. From vantage points along the rim of the bowl, the voluminous fire from TD'S, tanks, machine guns, and rifles continuously sprayed the valley. Cub airplanes from the Regiment's supporting artillery kept their hawk-eyed vigilance on the meleé below – hence the classic remark by one pilot, irritated by the delay in firing, “Quit computin’ and start shootin’”.

Now and then a temporary truce was called to allow great numbers of beaten Krauts to surrender. One N.C.O. alone accounted for 800. Drove upon drove were herded along roads to Prisoner of War Camps in the rear.

The Third Battalion, at the top of the trap, bore the brunt of several German attempts to break through an escape route north of Chambois. A fierce battle raged, but though outnumbered by far, the Battalion stood its ground.

When the smoke cleared from the valley, there was wreckage and debris strewn for miles and only the charred ruins of those who refused to surrender remained in what was, in reality, a valley of death. As the vaunted Seventh Army was being annihilated in the bloody pocket, there came welcome news that American Forces had entered Paris. Upon relief by British forces in the Falaise Gap area, the 358th Infantry assembled north of Sees and awaited further orders.

No Gas

Early in the morning of the 26th of August, 1944, the Division hit the road again and moved eastward one hundred and seventy miles to secure bridgeheads across the Seine River near Fontainebleau. Famous World War I battlefields, Chateau Thierry being the most notable, were fought over again as they continued to advance to secure the bridgehead at Rheims. Lucky “A” company guarded the bridges of the beautiful city, while the remainder of the Regiment carried out security missions to the east near Warmersville. Due to a severe gasoline shortage the advance bogged down and held up movement until the 5th of September when the Third Battalion moved to the vicinity Verdun. The remainder of the Regiment followed the next morning. Meanwhile, transport planes flew in large quantities of gas to relieve the critical shortage.

Rout At Mairy

On the following morning the Regiment attacked again to pursue the enemy towards the Moselle River. The situation, however, remained extremely fluid. During the night of a of the 7th of September, an enemy armored column launched a surprise attack, hit the Division Command Post near Mont, and then turned toward the First Battalion in the town of Mairy, where heavy fighting ensued. In spite of his formidable armor, the enemy was stopped again; the attack was routed and the force severely beaten. The First Battalion knocked out seven tanks and blew more than 48 armored vehicles to kingdom come. Cannon Company accounted for itself in the meleé, taking a devastating toll of enemy personnel with direct fire of its 105's.

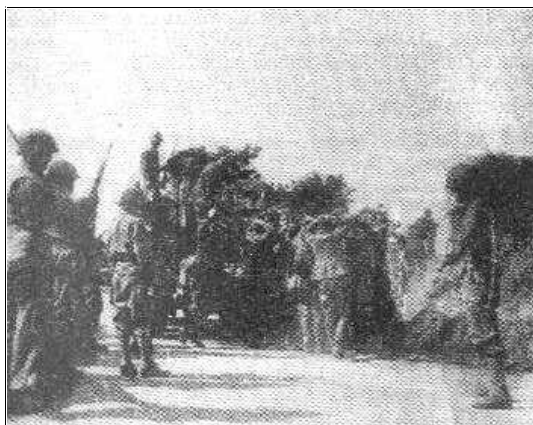
Thionville Captured

The enemy fought a withdrawing action as he was pushed back through Fontoy, Hayange, and Marspich to the Moselle River. To the Second Battalion fell the task of capturing Thionville, an industrial city on the banks of the Moselle. House to house, door to door fighting took place in the town as the enemy was made to relinquish his threshold on the formidable river barrier. Withdrawing during the night he destroyed the last remaining bridge over the river. On the following day the First Battalion was sent in to mop up the north half of the city and together with the Second cleaned it out to the west bank of the Moselle.

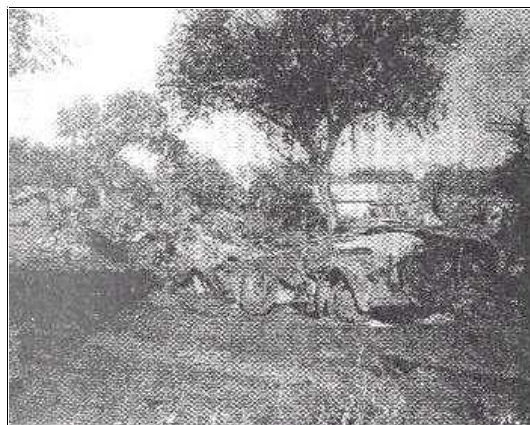
Fort Driant

The Third Battalion was transported south along the Moselle, near the renowned fortress city of Metz, to St Marie Aux Chenes. They were followed in a few days by the rest of the Regiment. They took up the defensive position opposite the gates of Metz, facing the historic forts of Fort Driant, Jeanne d'Arc and the so-called Verdun group of Forts. This defensive position was maintained throughout the month of October. During this period, some of the men left the muddy banks of the Moselle for a few days to rest and cleanup in an improvised rest center at St Marie Aux Chenes. The Paris pass policy was instituted in the Regiment at this time and some fortunate officers and enlisted men visited "Gay Paree" for the first time.

Early morning on the first day of November began an epic that will long be remembered, it saw the front line battalions slip out from under the eyes of Fort Driant and the other mighty forts to move to a concentration area near Morfontaine, France. Election day in the United States found the 358th Infantry embarking on a momentous military operation – an assault crossing of the Moselle River.



A load of PW's near Le Mans



Smashed German equipment
in the Falaise Gap