

REGIMENT OF THE CENTURY

the story of the 397th Infantry Regiment

the 397 Book Council

~1945~

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PHASE IV – VOSGES

INTRODUCTION

"Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before. . . ."

Was it the cold, the fear, the letterless days, the dark, the not knowing where or when, or was it all of these? Maybe it was the sight of the first dead, the casualties due to exposure, the enemy artillery, the sniper fire on supply routes, the one long and one short and the waiting for the middle one. Whatever it was, wherever and whenever, we were scared because we were strictly on our own. Except for the few basic things that we learned in the States, like blackout and water discipline, all this was new and different, the situations never seemed the same, there was no rule to apply. We were constantly challenged by the weather and the enemy. The answer that would keep us alive was not in a book we had read or a lecture we had heard but in our own courage or dread, or just knowing that we had to live to get back home. Ernie Pyle said the soldier does not worry as much about getting hit as he does about dying because above all else he wants to get back and not miss the wonderful things that life will hold for him when it is all over. "To live," that's it, and we never knew whether tomorrow would be the day that might be our last "tomorrow". What else could you think about when two hours ago you left two friends dead in the melting snow, in the stinking mud, just left them there?

Move out, move out, move out! Get on the road! We were men on a chess board being pushed around by people we never saw, by orders we never read, going to a place we didn't know the name of, not knowing where the front was, or the rear or the flanks, praying that the "old man" knew what he was doing. At the end of our first day, too tired to dig fox-holes, we didn't worry about it. But that was the first day only. Let it come in, the works, too weak to care, and if you did get one dug and it felt like home, "Move out, Move out, Get on the road." And then there was that same horrible anticipation more awful than the actual thing. Climbing a hill and not seeing anything but expecting a shot at any time was just as exhausting and frightening as the fight itself, that slow grind, the strange noises, the darkness, the drizzle.

This was the first campaign and the worst. New troops thrown into the thick of it in killing weather and in a day coming up against the worst the enemy had, 88's, mortars, sniper fire, mines, road blocks, automatic weapons, and terrain we knew nothing about. The enemy had every conceivable advantage but he lost and maybe it was because he was home and we had to get there.

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