

## CHAPTER 4

### FIGHTING IN FRANCE

#### \*\*\* MY FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH THE GERMANS \*\*\*

The 442nd with the 100th Battalion was being transferred to southern France the first week in October of 1944. The docks were all shot up at Leghorn so we had to ride landing craft out to the troopship in the bay. There were rope nets hung over the sides of the ship, and we climbed up these nets to get on the ship. After everyone was loaded, we sailed for Marseille, France. The piers there were OK so the ship docked and we walked down the gangway.

After landing in Marseille on October 10th, we found out we were being sent north to the Vosges Mountains where we were to be attached to the the 36th Infantry Division, a Texas National Guard unit. We were loaded on a deuce-and-a-half, the GI name for a 2 1/2 ton truck, and our convoy headed north. That is where I received my real baptism of fire. I'll never forget the first night I spent in the forest! We hiked into the forest, and it was pitch black. I couldn't see anything so I had to feel around. As soon as anyone found a foxhole, he'd jump right in. I found one, jumped in, and spent the night there. It smelled so bad you couldn't get away from the terrible stench. There were dead soldiers around that no one had had time to pick up and remove to the collecting point. When I got up the next morning there were about a dozen dead soldiers laying around where I was, and the closest was right next to my foxhole.

Now we started moving up and soon we were on the outskirts of Bruyères. There were a few farmhouses, and the boys had to rush across the open spaces before they could get into a house and take it over. The German snipers and infantry soldiers were trying to get us as we ran across the open fields. They got somebody from our platoon and one of the boys in our squad before he could get to the house. After our squad made it into this farmhouse, the German artillery opened up and tried to smash the house down on us so we had to try to escape back into the forest. We tried but the German snipers had us pinned down so we had to wait until dark. All this time the artillery shells were falling all around the farmhouse. The smell was so bad from the

exploding powder that sometimes you could hardly breath. We were very lucky as not one shell hit the house.

I was a BAR gunner at this time and when we had tried to escape to the forest, my assistant gunner had run out of the house ahead of me. I don't remember his name. A German sniper shot at him and barely missed. He got to the edge of the forest but was so scared he didn't move away and go deeper into the forest. He stayed close to the edge where all the artillery rounds were falling and unfortunately he was blown apart by one of them. We didn't know this happened until the next day.

That night our squad was able to walk out of the farmhouse after the artillery stopped firing. We walked across the shallow draw up to the hill where the enemy soldiers were shooting from and attacked the hill. We finally took it. There were still Germans in the bunkers on the edge of the hill, and when they heard us whispering to each other, they started coming out and gave up. There was, however, still three soldiers laying behind a log watching the farmhouse we had been in. They were so close you couldn't miss. They wouldn't give up so I tried to shoot them but my BAR wouldn't fire because some fine sand had gotten into the bolt and it wouldn't work. Besides the sand, it had been raining day and night for the two weeks we'd been there, and that messed up my BAR too. I had to run to my foxhole and take the bolt out and clean it so the weapon would fire again. It only took a couple minutes before it was ready to fire. Meanwhile the three Germans had sprayed the hillside with their machine gun pistols as they ran away. My platoon leader, Lieutenant ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ "Chicken" Miyashiro, was below me on the hill and I yelled at him about the Germans running but he apparently didn't hear me. I never did know why he was called "Chicken" by everybody, but he was a good officer and we all liked him.

The next day after we had taken the hills from the Germans, a Frenchman came over and said that one of our men was dead near the house. We took a stretcher and one of the medics took a red cross flag and he kept holding it up so no one would shoot while we were walking across this open field to get my dead assistant gunner. We finally found him. He had been hit almost directly with an artillery shell and blown into the bushes. He was a terrible sight! It was worse than the first dead man I ever saw. We had to straighten him out before we could put him on a stretcher because he was so curled up in the bushes. We carried him to the gathering point where the dead soldiers were being taken. There were quite a few of them there already. This was the first time

that I had to pick up and carry our own dead. Up to now I never knew fear, but now I began to wonder if my time might come. Being young, that feeling of apprehension only lasted about an hour and then the action picked up and I wasn't afraid anymore.

We got back to the hill and then hiked to still another hill. By now we were closer to Bruyeres. We rushed into that little village and found it was made of all brick buildings; there were no frame houses at all. After our company moved into town, the German artillery started the worst barrage that I ever experienced in all my combat days. It was really something!! We stayed in a stone house all night and didn't come out until the next morning. Since Lieutenant Miyashiro was in the same house, we called it the "Chicken Coup." Fortunately our squad survived with no casualties.

The following morning our company started walking to another area. While walking out of Bruyeres, we saw a Frenchman skinning out this dead horse. There was nothing to eat there so they had to eat whatever they had. We couldn't stay there and finish watching him skin that horse out as we were walking back to the mountains again. We didn't know it at the time, but we were heading for another fight in a little town named Biffontaine just a few miles east of Bruyeres.

While hiking along the side of a mountain, we could see a shallow valley with a highway below us, and on this highway was a column of our tanks lined up. There must have been at least 50 of them just parked there, right down on the highway. They didn't belong to the 442nd as we didn't have tanks so they belonged to some other unit. All of a sudden we heard this fighter plane coming in low; we were above the fighter plane as our squad was in the forest up on the mountain side. We watched as this German fighter plane came straight through the valley above the tanks. He came right over every tank in the column and went up and turned around and dove, and we thought he was going to start strafing, but he never fired a shot. He just came down and flew over every tank on the highway and then took off. We couldn't figure that out. I don't know why but it seemed like there was a truce. We saw that German fighter plane come across the valley and go back without ever firing a shot. I could have fired my BAR but I didn't. No one fired; we just watched.

As soon as the German fighter plane left, we asked the tanks to get away. Since they made so much noise in the forest, all they did was draw mortar and artillery fire. We asked them to

move and "Don't Come Near Us!!" That was the last of the tanks, the first and last time.

A strange thing happened while we were in the forest. I happened upon an officer that was under a tree with a funny look in his eyes and shaking uncontrollably. He didn't belong to my company, but he started talking to me anyway. I learned that he was Lieutenant Johnson. He told me he'd been shaking for the last few days and couldn't stop. I figured he had battle fatigue and would probably be medically evacuated before it was all over. I'd already seen a couple cases like this. I had to move on and didn't see him again for a month, and when I did he was a captain. I was really surprised to see that he had been promoted and was still around. After this, I never saw him again.

We kept walking up through the forest. Finally we turned and moved in another direction over this high mountain. We tried to stay on the side of the mountain as we went towards Biffontaine. The little village of Biffontaine sat in a deep valley, a horse-shoe sloped valley where the highway came into the village and went out the same way it came in because the horse shoe mountain was too steep to make a road over it. It took us two or three days to walk over this mountain range. Anyway, one night when it was almost dark we came to a fork on the top of the mountain so we set our company machine gun up there. We were all set up watching everywhere. We kept very quiet. Then it started getting real dark, and we could hear the German soldiers talking and laughing way down at the bottom of the mountain. There were a lot of them down there.

We just kept quiet and pretty soon a horse drawn delivery wagon came down the road towards us with two German soldiers driving the horses. They had five gallon milk cans all full of food for their troops. The two Germans soldiers kept driving towards us and then must have heard us as they stopped, jumped up, and instead of just raising their hands they started running away. Our machine gunner opened up and when he did that he killed the two horses and never touched the soldiers who kept running down the steep mountain into German lines. They got away safely. After the soldiers fled, we got up to see what was in the wagon. In it, we found many, many cans of hot macaroni and cheese, I don't remember how many. Well, we had ourselves a hot meal, the first we'd had in a month. There was so much, we couldn't eat it all. It was really good! After this nice hot meal, we went back to our observation posts. Surprisingly, the Germans in the valley

below never came up to see what was going on in spite of the machine gun fire.

**\*\*\* THE SCHOOLHOUSE SHOOT-OUT \*\*\***

Now it was time for another day of hiking up the next mountain. We could see the little village of Biffontaine below us, so our squad walked slowly down to make sure we didn't meet any enemy soldiers out there. My squad didn't but some of our unit took a few casualties, like our platoon leader, Lieutenant "Chicken" Miyashiro. He was wounded when he got shot by a German soldier whose bullet hit the ammunition pouch on his pistol belt. The bullet exploded some of the lieutenant's bullets, and he had bullet cases in his side and stomach.

Another casualty was Victor Akimoto who was still a platoon sergeant. I never did learn how badly he was wounded. His younger brother Johnny has been my tent mate back in Italy before he died of a ruptured appendix. Victor was captured by the Germans when he was being evacuated to a medical facility. He later died in a German POW camp. It was a tough year for the Akimoto family!

While most of C Company stayed behind, our squad rushed across the road and into a house which turned out to be a country schoolhouse. It was a four room, two-story building made of solid rocks and cement. It had a wall of solid rocks with iron spikes on top of it. No vehicle could drive up to the house because there was no driveway, just two narrow gateways where people could walk up to the schoolhouse. While we were rushing into the schoolhouse; our platoon leader had to be evacuated.

I think there were six of us that rushed inside the schoolhouse. To our surprise, we found it was a German headquarters. We caught a German major, a captain, a lieutenant, and three NCOs in there. They didn't even know any Americans were anywhere near this town, so when we rushed in, they were really surprised and just threw up their hands instead of trying to fight.

We searched the Germans fast and then instinctively searched the whole house. We did find some rifles and ammunition including some big mortar shells. We couldn't figure out why they were in the schoolhouse as there were no mortar tubes anywhere. There wasn't anybody else other than our prisoners so we started to search them more thoroughly. We lined them up, and I guarded the men with my BAR while a guy named Spike searched them down. The

other men, meanwhile, went and took up defensive positions in all the different rooms on the second floor.

As I guarded the Germans, Spike continued to search them and he kept taking some of their nice looking wrist watches and rings. Now this was against the rules, but Spike was sort of a loner and did it anyway. I have no idea of what he did with the stuff. I wouldn't have taken any of it. One German was adamantly protesting when Spike tried to take his ring and kept repeating, "No! No! That's from Mama." Even though he spoke in German, we understood what he was saying. Well I was young, only 19, and I'd lost a lot of friends so I went up and jabbed my BAR into this German's stomach and told him, "Shut up!" Of course I didn't want any hassle from the other prisoners about to be searched. When Spike finished searching all the prisoner, I took out a pack of cigarettes, gave one to each of the Germans, lit it for them, and let them have a smoke. After that, we led them to the basement where we could more easily watch them. We left one of our riflemen down there to guard them.

While we were taking care of the prisoners, the other guys went throughout the house. Later a couple of us dismantled the weapons we'd found earlier so no one could use them.

The sun went down, and it slowly got dark. Each of us had one room to watch, and I watched the road that came off the highway: that was the road that came into town. I had the wooden shutters on this window tightly closed so no one outside could see me. I poked my rifle out the shutters just a little bit. At first there had been another guy on the window. He had dropped a German soldier from a contact action patrol, an infantryman on foot. The Germans didn't know where we were, but the wounded man kept crawling and crawling. I told my squad mate, "We can't afford to let anyone know where we are so you have to drop him for good." I kicked my buddy off this position and I took over. Now here comes another German infantryman; he's not more than 100-150 yards away, and he is coming straight at me. I dropped him for good with one round from my BAR. After awhile, a Frenchman ran out of the house and took a pistol off this German soldier's hip. I was sure it was a P-38 pistol, a German sidearm that we ALL wanted as a souvenir to bring home. I was trying to make up my mind whether to shoot that Frenchman or not for taking MY pistol, but I didn't and he got back into the house before I could have shot him anyway.

I kept watching the area in front of my window and pretty soon it got dark. Then a courier came marching through the court-

yard of this school right up below my window, and I said, "Halt!" He dashed off, and it was so dark I couldn't see where he went. After about a half an hour, it got so dark you couldn't even see the outline of anybody outside. Here comes a German soldier walking very slowly. I let him get close and then said, "Who is there?" He answered, "Kamerad", German for friend. We had already stacked all the school room furniture like desks and chairs against the the doors on the first floor so nobody could rush in. Like I said, we had six German prisoners in the basement and being dark, we didn't know who else belonged to this house. We didn't have any choice since we couldn't go out to catch this guy and bring him in. He could have had a pistol on him. If I'd gone out, he could have shot me since it was so dark. I couldn't see clearly so the squad leader said, "Well, we don't have no choice, drop him." I had to shoot three bullets at him and I dropped him. I felt very, very sorry for him because it took him a long time to die and there wasn't anything we could do for him.

Right after that, we heard a tank, a huge tank, start up right next to this building where we were in. It sounded like a Mark VI, a big, famous German tank known as a Tiger. It came out of the garage and drove right in front of the building where we were in. It stopped not more than 50 feet in front of us, traversed its turret, and started shooting tank shells at the house. The crew would shoot and then yell, "Come out, hands up!" We'd keep real quiet and then the tank would shoot a few more rounds at us. The gunner was blowing a hole in the wall right next to the door on the first floor. He never shot at the second floor where we were. The tank couldn't get us to come out and it finally ran out of ammunition so it backed up all the way around and kind of behind the schoolhouse. Then the gunner fired all his 7.92 mm machine gun bullets against the building. Mostly the bullets hit the roof and that was lucky for us. The roof was a ceramic tile and kind of close to my head since I was in a room on the second floor. Every time the German gunner would fire, the bullets would go, "Pow, Pow, Pow" right above my head. That went on for about 45 minutes and then he ran out of ammunition and the tank took off. We couldn't hear the sound anymore, so we thought we'd have peace and quiet the rest of the night. Unfortunately, we were wrong!

Within fifteen minutes a big self propelled (SP) artillery gun was sent up to try to get us out of the building. It drove on the highway right up to the front of the house where the tank had stopped when it shelled us. The artillery was reinforced by

about two squads of German infantry riding on the hull. They jumped off yelling and talking. We could hear them running around the house we were in and at the same time yelling, "Come out. Hands up. You're surrounded!" One was even talking briefly to our German prisoners in the basement through a ground level window. When I heard all the talking, I fired one short burst of two or three rounds out the window at the artillery gun. After I did that, it backed down the highway a bit before it started shelling us.

I could hear footsteps below me as the infantry rushed up to the house trying to get through the barricaded front door. When they got to the door, I pulled a pin on one of my three grenades and counted, one-two-three, and then I dropped it because it took five seconds before it would explode. As soon as I heard the grenade hit the ground, I could hear the German soldiers run away just before the grenade went off. After this, the big SP gun would fire a few rounds against the house and the house would go "Boom" and the dust would start coming down. We had to take our undershirts off to cover our noses and mouths so we could breathe. We had already taken off our shoes when the infantry appeared so the Germans couldn't hear us walking around upstairs.

This contact action with the artillery and the enemy infantry went on from about 6 p.m. until 11 p.m. that night. The fighting was so continuous that we never even thought of eating. During the fight, our ammunition was starting to run low. I found some jelly in jars on a shelf and decided to use them to help save ammunition, particularly my remaining two grenades. When the Germans would creep up to the door, I'd open the shutters and drop a jar of jelly down, just like it was a grenade. In the dark, they couldn't tell the difference. When I dropped it, they'd run away. They'd come back and I'd drop another jar of jelly. After a couple false alarms, they come up and stay. That's when I'd drop a real grenade. The fighting kept going on and on. Ammunition was running low, and I started thinking that I wished we hadn't taken those German rifles apart. There was plenty of ammunition for them, but the bullets were too large to fit into our rifles. I was also thinking that I'd like to have a couple of those mortars shells we'd found in the schoolhouse. I knew exactly where they were, right at the bottom of the stairs, but it was pitch dark and there were too many Germans running around outside the house for me to leave my window, even for a short time. Meanwhile, all that pounding by tank and artillery shells was destroying the bottom of the house.