



FROM
BRUYERES
 TO
BRENNER

William A. Sexton



"THE COMBAT STORY
 OF THE FIGHTING 411th"
 FRANCE, GERMANY,
 AUSTRIA, ITALY, 1945

WRITTEN BY
 The Fighting Men of the 411th Infantry

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DEDICATION

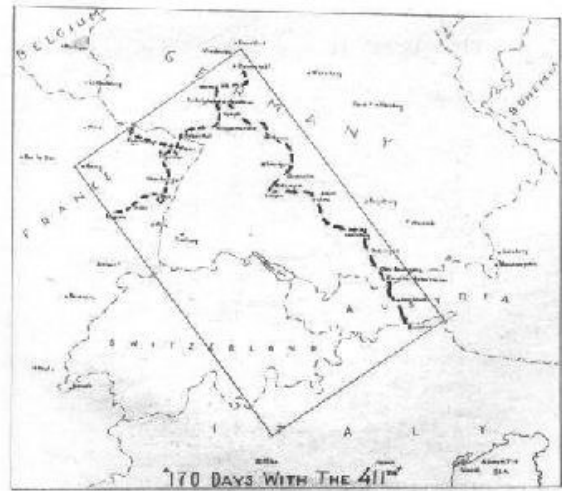
To the 135 Officers and 3221 Enlisted men, dead or wounded of the 411th Infantry Regiment, heroes all, who made this story possible, this combat record is respectfully dedicated

INTRODUCTION

This little booklet is written for the bereaved of our killed and for the wounded who have not returned to us. Nothing can take away the pain that you have suffered and are suffering. I know, for I suffer with you and the pain of my son lost in Normandy is always with me. It is hoped, however, that the knowledge of the glorious record that this Regiment has made will in some way alleviate your pain. Our dead and wounded helped to do this; they will always be a part of us.

Donovan P. Yeuell

DONOVAN P. YEUELL,
 Colonel, 411th Infantry,
 Commanding



VICTORY THROUGH THE VOSGES

Little did anyone think when the 411th Infantry Regiment put ashore amid the bombed wreckage of the old French port of Marseille, 20 October 1944, that the training which had been received at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, and at Camp Howze, Texas, would mean so much, and paradoxically, so little. The Regiment debarked as a well equipped, well trained, well-disciplined organization, confident of their commanders and of themselves. The test of these preparations was yet to come; the "Fighting 411th" was to be weighed in the scales of combat, the balance between victory and defeat, fickle enough to be altered without warning; the men were ready to tip the balance, eager for successes, but the final decisions were to be made on the slopes of the Vosges Mountains, through the Siegfried defenses, in the Valley of the Rhine, and finally back to the mountains — the historic Alps.

On the 11th of November 1944, at 1100, exactly 26 years after the termination of World War I, under the command of Colonel Donovan P. Yeuell, the 411th Infantry Regiment moved from Docelles, France, into an active combat zone to make final preparations for H-hour. Under overcast, wintry skies, the Regimental Command Post was established at Rout du Dessous, with the Administrative Command Post opening in Bruyeres.

"Ready To Strike"



H-hour struck at 0900 on 16 November! The Regiment attacked, waging its initial battle in the narrow strip of land between the thick woods and the muddy banks of the Taintrux River. Company "L" brought in the first German prisoners of war an hour later. Fighting was heavy. The bulldozer of Nazi resistance in the Vosges was not easy to roll back.

Throughout the day the ferocious encounter raged; Company "I" was the first to cross the swift Taintrux. Ground was gained slowly, and despite heavy casualties, the enemy was reluctantly driven from a series of well-prepared positions across the Meurthe River, the next natural barrier. From now on it was to be a steady drive against a determined but faltering enemy.

Arriving before the old Roman Fort, high on a hill, northeast of Combrimont, the Regimental Commander recalled that day in June, 1918, when as a commander of an American machine gun company, he defended this same hill against German attack. After a brief struggle, the hill was taken and the Regiment moved forward to Maisongoutte, which was captured by Lt Colonel Charles L. McMackin's First Battalion after a gruelling 6 mile march over goat trails through the mountains. The rapid advance caught the Nazi troops completely by surprise, as attested by the large quantity of abandoned enemy equipment. How like the scenes to be found later by the Regiment, inside Germany!

The fight through the Vosges was reaching the half way mark. Moving through Hohwald to Barr, the first large city to be entered, the Command Post personnel had first to go "sniper-hunting" before unrolling their maps.

Then the story so familiar to the soldiers of the "Fighting 411th" began to unfold: Ebersheim, where enemy mortars whistled in on the average of two per minute and Mittelhausen where the Regiment was briefly rested and reorganized. A change of mission, ending the battle of the Vosges! The troops had fought their way over and through the mountains, pushing the enemy back against the borders of old Germany. It was the first time in the history of modern warfare that successful combat was waged in the Vosges! The 411th had developed into a skillful, hard-fighting regiment, ready to pursue the next mission — Into Germany!

INTO GERMANY

Driving deep into the heart of German-influenced Alsace, the 411th Infantry pursued an enemy whose resistance strengthened as he neared his homeland, taking full advantage of long-prepared and strongly tested positions, a friendly civilian populace and shortening supply lines.

Forstheim, Uttenhoffen, Schirlenhof, Griesbach, Eberbach, fell before our onrushing forces. The severely cold weather added to the difficulties of the fighting. At Woerth, the Nazis seemed to be fighting only a delaying action. The shout was "Through the Maginot — on to Germany!"

Task Force Blakshear, commanded by Lt Colonel John P. Blakshear, was organized to break German defenses at Climbach, key-point of the enemy defenses in the Maginot Line. Plans called for a frontal attack by the Task Force in the direction of Climbach, with the First Battalion, commanded by Major (now Lt Colonel) Robert L. Crouch, and the Third Battalion, commanded by Lt Colonel Waldemar M. Mueller, making simultaneous attacks on the town from opposite sides.

Jumping off at 1023 on the morning of 14 December, the Task Force met terrific resistance from enemy small arms fire and direct artillery fire. Mortar fire was very heavy. The tank-riding infantrymen, supported by tank destroyer units, broke through the hail of fire to capture the town, only to be met by a determined counter-attack employing tanks, bazookas, artillery, mortars and long range rockets which bounced into Climbach in groups of ten and twelve.

The flanking Infantry Battalion seized the high ground surrounding Climbach; the Task Force ploughed ahead. The counter-attack was repulsed. Stripped of armor, the Force then moved through the town advancing to the northeast where they dug in for the night, and prepared to continue the attack in the morning.

On the morning of 15 December, the long awaited hour had come for the 411th Infantry. At 1305, elements of Company "I" and Company "L", crossed over the old German border, bringing to the "Fighting 411th" the honor of being the first troops of the Seventh Army to fight in the German Fatherland. The infantrymen had moved through the famed Maginot Line and were squarely before the Siegfried Defenses.

To the men of Company "G" and the Second Battalion, commanded by Lt Colonel William J. Kasper, the days before the Siegfried, will ever live as a nightmare of torture. The repeated attacks of a numerically superior enemy, attacking over favorable terrain, inflicted terrific casualties along the Battalion front. Company "G", under the command of Lt John L. Tanner, repulsed the German counter-offensive for over twenty-two hours, before additional support could be given to the battle-weary officers and men. During those blood-filled twenty-two hours, the company sustained 40 percent casualties, from enemy fire, plus the indescribable agonies of battle strain and fatigue.

The enemy hit the Regiment with everything he had. It was attack, attack, attack, throughout the 19th and 20th of December. Some pillboxes of the vaunted Siegfried Line were blasted open.

But then something happened elsewhere. The Von Rundstedt offensive against Allied positions in the Ardennes sector was launched. The time-table of the western front campaign had been upset, making necessary the shifting of forces all along the front. The 411th Infantry moved from their positions to take up defenses farther north to protect the flank of General Patton's Third Army which began a drive to relieve pressure on the Belgium bulge.

Christmas and New Year's Day found the men in a sufficiently static situation to permit them to enjoy, in a small measure, the blessings of the holiday season.

SESSION AT SESSENHEIM

Having failed in the Ardennes offensive, like a wounded animal that will strike back savagely despite the self-inflicted pain, the German High Command launched another major offensive against Allied defenses. This time to the East, in the Strasbourg—Bitche area. As the counter-offensive gathered momentum, the entire supply route of the Seventh Army through the Saverne gap was threatened to a degree which

"Ready To Strike"



THE IDES OF MARCH

necessitated a reshifting of units to the south. The 411th Infantry was rushed to the endangered sector in an attempt to dam the onrushing tide.

The days that followed took their places on the calendar as some of the Regiment's bloodiest. A crisis was imminent. Decisions had to be made quickly. They were. There was not opportunity for sufficient reconnaissance of the situation or terrain.

Sessenheim, a small German-held Alsatian town surrounded by the thick pine forests of Hagenau, had become a focal point in the newly launched enemy counter-thrust.

Into this active sector, the 411th Infantry, now acting as a combat team, was ordered to move on 18 January 1945. Colonel Yeuell, calling together all of his subordinate commanders, issued a verbal order for the attack and oriented them on the situation of which little was known. The enemy strength was undetermined.

On the following morning, 19 January, at 0630, the combat team jumped off; the Third Battalion, under the command of Major Lloyd W. Hanes, was to seize the town, secure it, then pass on through to the next town, a second objective, where they were to contact the First Battalion of the 410th Infantry Regiment. The First Battalion of the 411th, was to attack Sessenheim with the Third Battalion, and then pass through to seize a town to the west, thus forming a line across the bend of the La Moder River, squeezing the Germans into a shallow pocket.

Attacking in column across the open ground, the Third Battalion drove toward Sessenheim where they met a hail storm of enemy artillery and direct fire from Tiger Tanks. Company "I" penetrated 75 yards into the town before being forced to withdraw, suffering heavy casualties. All of the eight supporting tanks were knocked out; 7 completely destroyed. The Germans were peppering the town with everything they had. Plans for a renewal of the attack were cancelled and the troops ordered to dig in their present position when reports from the Commander of the attached tank unit advised against further assault.

At the end of the brief but bloody battle, lasting only two and a half hours, Company "I" listed only 28 men on the company roster; Company "L", 50; food prepared for one company fed the battalion. The badly battered Third Battalion reverted to Regimental reserve. As dusk fell, defensive positions, minefields, and wire were placed to thwart the expected German counter-blow.

These attacks came. Several were aimed at units to the right of the Regiment during the night and all day of the 20th.

The overall picture revealed that the position of the entire Seventh Army was untenable and a general withdrawal was ordered. During the night, the Seventh Army withdrew from their positions, to march along roads blanketed with swirling snow.

No one who took part in the session at Sessenheim, that memorable night in January, will ever forget it. Soldiers were made from recruits; men out of boys. After 67 days of continuous contact with the enemy, the "Fighting 411th" was ordered into Division reserve for a well earned rest. After 18 days of rest the Regiment again moved into the line at Ingwiller.

On March 15, 1945, the world awoke to the startling news that the entire western front had suddenly become a blazing fury which was destined to break the back of Nazi resistance. Also destined to play an important role in this maneuver was the 411th Infantry.

Launching into a drive from Ingwiller, France, that was to culminate with the breaching of the Siegfried defenses and the reaching of the Rhine River, the "Fighting 411th" treaded its way through treacherous minefields, and long prepared German positions, levelling Bischholtz, Muhlhausen, and Rothbach. So intense was the unexpected assault, that the enemy was forced into a disorderly withdrawal. He took refuge behind his Siegfried wall.

Going through familiar territory again, the infantrymen reached the German border at 1535 on 19 March, crossing in practically the same places as they had visited back in those gray December days. Again it was the Third Battalion, 411th Infantry who led the 103d Division into Germany.

Bobenthal, one of the strong points of the Siegfried, fell to the Third Battalion at 1703 that same day. The Regimental Command Post was established in a building almost identical to the one occupied three months previously. How different was even the thinking of the men at this time. Everyone seemed to feel that "this was it; we would go through!"

Without pausing to catch its breath, the 411th Infantry Regiment launched another blow at the vaunted Siegfried defenses, this time at Nieder Schlettenbach, on the morning of 19 March 1945. The blow, directed on the city and the hills to its flanks was an effort to crumble the strong defenses and effect a break through to the Rhine Valley — the highway to Berlin. Nieder Schlettenbach was hit and hit hard by the battle-proven infantrymen who succeeded in taking the strong point after 26 hours of furious battle. The Germans from their long prepared defenses resisted with a fanatical fury bringing down a wealth of artillery and automatic weapons fire on the attacking Regiment. Casualties were heavy but the 411th was not to be denied; they had entered the fringe of the German defenses. "We'll not be turned back," cried the officers and men — they weren't. Nieder Schlettenbach fell to the First Battalion, now under the command of Lt Colonel Seymour B. Satterwhite, Regimental Executive Officer. A breach had been effected and, in the words of Colonel Satterwhite, "The rat race was on!"

Continuing to advance through the darkness the Regiment penetrated deeply into Germany. Erlenbach, another strong point, fell to the Third Battalion, who included in their prize: 3 officers and 114 enlisted men of the highly touted German army. And so the story went — town after town was overrun, until a junction was made with the American Third Army, closing the Saar Pocket, entrapping over 80,000 Krauts. Like the arms of a huge octopus, this pocket was slowly squeezed into nothingness. For days the major activity for the troops was rounding up German prisoners. The Prisoner of War cage swelled to new proportions.

In 15 days, the Regiment had arrived at Klingenmunster, Germany, and had accomplished one of its most brilliant successes of the war — breaching the Siegfried Line and laying open the Rhine Valley to the Allied sweep. The 411th had another spearhead on the field.

"Ready To Strike"



BRENNER AND VICTORY

After a brief taste of occupational duty, the Regiment was taken from SHAEF reserve and committed to an attack which ended with the junction of the Fifth Army from Italy in the Brenner Pass.

Driving southeast from Nieder Ramstadt, the 411th, mounted on trucks, many of which were captured from the fleeing enemy, penetrated with lightning effectiveness, deep into the Valley of the Danube River. Sulzbach, Oberndorf, Kirchheim, Mentzingen, Eningen, reaching Albeck the morning of 25 April. The Regiment crossed the Danube River at 2015, over a pontoon bridge on the Albeck — Ettlis Hoffen road.

Next to fall to the swift drive was the cradle city of "Mein Kampf", Landsberg. The men who had fought so hard and continuously could now see for themselves at the big Concentration Camps at Landsberg, the mute results of sadistic Naziism. Here was the infamous Concentration Camp of Kaufering and the notorious Landsberg prison where Hitler had nourished the idea of world conquest and penned the articles of National Socialism. Here the Regimental Commander ordered the leading citizens of Landsberg to bury more than 750 unfortunates who had starved to death under Nazi brutality. Here, also, a Lt. Colonel, two Majors, several Captains, and more than 200 soldiers of the German Army, cleaned the camp and became orderlies for the emaciated survivors, some of whom died of joy while we were caring for them. The large bronze plaque, commemorating the "Hitler Cell" and the Hitler flae were claimed by Colonel Donovan P. Yeuell, as prizes of war, and were added to the Regiment's list of war trophies. Another Nazi shrine had fallen!

Turning to the south and the Bavarian Alps, still motorized, the "Fighting 411th" Infantry passed through Oberammergau, home of the world renowned Passion Play, and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, scene of the 1936 Winter Olympics. How different were these white-capped Alps to the green, rain-soaked Vosges Mountains!

Colonel Yeuell was invited by the Commander of the Sixth Corps to give his Regiment the signal honor of linking forces with General Clark's Fifth Army which was driving for the Brenner Pass.

Victory was in sight! The Regimental Combat team, mounted on tanks and trucks, headlights ablaze, sped over the snow-crueted Alpine roads. At 0150, in the bitter cold of the night, 4 May, the Regiment entered Brenner, famed meeting place of the Axis dictators. A strong motorized patrol was sent 10 miles into Italy. As the sun rose over the mountainous peaks heralding a new day, elements of General Clark's Fifth Army were joined at Colle-Isarco by elements of the 411th Infantry Regiment's First Battalion, now under the command of Major John E. Rhea, in the name of the 103d Division and the Seventh Army. The last combat mission of the 411th in the E.T.O. had been completed.

The scales had swung to the Victory indicator! The Regiment had been weighed in the balance and found lacking in none of the qualities that make up a winning, hard-fighting infantry unit: confidence in themselves and in their commanders. When the "cease fire" order was issued, all that had jumped off on that wintery day in November were not present to grasp the wreath of laurel; some had made greater sacrifices than others — 135 officers and 3221 men had fallen in the six months of fighting. But all knew that the result achieved more than compensated for the sorrow and the suffering. Peace in Europe, in America, the prospect of a free world to be torn again by tyrannical gangsters garbed in military uniforms would never be possible. The "Fighting 411th" Infantry Regiment had done its part in crushing the most ruthless regime of military terrorism the world had ever known —

THIS IS OUR REGIMENT!

