



FRANCE: Maritime Alps, Franco-Italian Border

## CHAPTER 6

### THE CHAMPAGNE CAMPAIGN

**T**HE 100th Battalion had already been in the lines for several days when the rest of the unit arrived. It was spread over several miles of front high in the mountains north of St. Martin Vesubie where the winter snows had already set in.

The 3d Battalion now had its dreams of a quiet Thanksgiving Day shattered when orders came through directing that the relief of the 19th Armored Infantry Battalion be effected at once. Armored infantry was badly needed for the battle of Strasbourg. Accordingly the battalion moved into the little Franco-Italian border town of Sospel on November 23. From there the men headed for the mountains. Where there were border forts on the peaks, they rode in trucks. Otherwise, they climbed the 4000-foot peaks, trailing their mules and equipment behind them.

November 28 saw Company G move into the lines on the right of the 3d Battalion, relieving parts of the 1st Special Service Force. At the same time, the 100th Battalion came down out of the snow country and relieved the remainder of the 1st SSF on the coastal sector, taking up positions just east of the coast resort of Menton. The remainder of the 2d Battalion moved from St. Jeannet to L'Escarene, where it trained and formed a mobile reserve.

The mission of the Combat Team was to protect the right flank of the 6th Army Group and guard against a possible enemy breakthrough down the

southern coast of France. Although such a move on the part of the enemy was improbable, it was not impossible. Had he attacked in sufficient strength, there was nothing between the 442d Combat Team and Marseille to stop him. However, the German 34th Division, across the border, did not seem disposed to go anywhere. A few patrols poked here and there and artillery fire fell from time to time, but never was there any indication of a concerted drive. Our own troops had orders not to cross the line into Italy except for patrols.

One of the most important jobs the regiment had was the eternal spy-hunt that went on in the Riviera area. This was one of the favorite places for Germans and Italians to cross into France for sabotage and espionage. Conversely, it was almost impossible to walk around the block without encountering a secret agent from one of the United Nations. These men spent quite a bit of their time interrogating line-crossers the infantry Joes picked up. Among them they found a few enemy agents, always enough to make the continual vigilance worthwhile.

Combat and reconnaissance patrols roamed back and forth between the lines, sometimes making enemy contacts and sometimes not. There was an extensive use of mines in the sector to cover the wide gaps between strongpoints. One drawback to that was that the battalions had very little record of what fields had been laid by units which had previously



*Readying a mule train for the trail*



*Manning an observation post in the Maritime Alps*



*Pfc. George Marihiro, Company I, at Christmas party with child from St. Joseph's Orphanage, L'Escarene, France*

held the sector. As a result, many men were wounded by our own mines.

The 2d Battalion relieved the 68th Armored Infantry Battalion in the lines near Peira Cava on December 1. This put all three battalions on line with the 2d Battalion on the north flank and the 100th Battalion on the south flank. The regiment was spread over a front of some eighteen miles.

On December 19, just for the sake of variety, Antitank Company captured a submarine off Menton. An observation post had spotted the baby one-man sub making for shore in the bay of Menton. AT Company's outpost covered the craft with a 57mm gun and dispatched a squad with a BAR and a couple of can-openers to pry the operator loose. The German corporal who was manning the sub had thought he was coming into the bay at Ventimiglia, on the German side, but had become confused and put into the wrong harbor.

The submarine was of miniature size, with a plexiglass turret and facilities for firing one torpedo.

The operator was equipped with an oxygen mask. The 232d Engineers pulled the tiny craft ashore and turned it over to the Navy with some regrets. It would have made a wonderful souvenir.

On December 21 the 2d Battalion, which had been relieved by the 65th Infantry on the 14th, relieved the 3d Battalion in the vicinity of Sospel. The 3d Battalion moved back to L'Escarene in regimental reserve in time for Christmas. The companies got together and staged a Christmas party for the children in the vicinity.

The same pattern was maintained during the rest of the Combat Team's stay in the Maritime Alps. The 100th Battalion remained in the coastal sector, while the 2d and 3d Battalions either alternated in the Sospel area or held positions on the line at the same time when the Peira Cava area was again included in the regiment's zone of action. The only exception to this policy was during late December and early January when von Rundstedt's push in the Ardennes seemed to have repercussions along the

entire front. At this time the 3d Battalion moved from mobile reserve and took up positions along a regimental reserve line behind the 100th and 2d Battalions. In this way, the Combat Team could have made stiff resistance to any breakthrough that the Germans might have made.

The Combat Team stayed in the Maritime Alps until the middle of March, 1945. It wasn't all fun; the patrols had to go out, and the Germans still tossed in artillery just to let us know they were still there. Once in a while a man would run afoul of a mine. Even so, four months on the French Riviera was still one of the best deals a combat soldier ever had. Although the weather and the mines were not conducive to lolling on the beaches, there was plenty of entertainment to be had. Night spots were open all along the coast. There was music and light and dancing. GI rest centers opened in Nice and Cannes. For those who didn't get to those, one-day passes to Nice were available. Almost every company managed to acquire some place to hold dances in its own area, usually featuring the Combat Team's own 206th AGF Band and the belles of the surrounding towns.

A great many of the Nisei made lasting friendships there and a few acquired fiancées. The rest just had fun when they could and sometimes wondered what was going to happen next, on the principle that winters on the Riviera do not last forever, especially for combat infantry. They soon found out.

In the middle of March, word got around that the outfit was moving out. Inasmuch as the destination was labeled "Top Secret," the rumors flew. CBI? Italy? Back to the States? After a great deal of speculation the 1st French Motorized Infantry Division took over the Combat Team's sector as of March 16, 1945. Here the Combat Team as such came to a parting of the ways. The 522d Field Artillery was ordered back north to help with the Seventh Army's jump across the Rhine. The Infantry Joes regretted the loss, for they had come to depend on the shooting of their mates and the ability and gallantry of the forward observer parties.

Colonel Charles W. Pence, who had commanded the Combat Team since the day it was activated, was still suffering from an injury he had received in the fighting in the Vosges Mountains. He was sent to less strenuous duties and replaced by his Executive, Colonel (then Lieutenant Colonel) Virgil R. Miller. Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Singles, veteran CO of



Col. Virgil R. Miller assumed command of the Combat Team

the 100th Battalion, was also transferred to a new command in the Seventh Army. Lieutenant Colonel (then Major) Jack E. Conley took command of the 100th Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel James M. Hanley was appointed regimental Executive Officer, and Major Robert A. Gopel took command of the 2d Battalion. Major Ivan F. Kovac took over as regimental S-3 and Captain Orville C. Shirey became S-2.

Under the new management the 442d Infantry and the 232d Engineers arrived at the brand-new Marseille staging area in relays, March 17, 18, and 19. For some reason, as yet obscure to the men, there seemed to be a great urgency in getting the Combat Team to wherever it was going. In three days all equipment except the men's individual gear was turned in, and the first unit boarded LSTs on March 20. The remaining two shipments pulled out of the harbor on the 21st and 22d. Destination: Italy.